

The Future of the European Union

This article was reviewed by Tobias Bauer and Chiara Pfaffenzeller



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The Status Quo

The biggest successful peace project in history. A strange mechanism that turns money into bureaucracy. Both descriptions can be heard when people are asked about the European Union (EU). However, many Europeans are traditionally neither fans nor haters of the EU – they just feel indifferent because of their perceived distance towards it (Baglioni and Hurrelmann, 2016). Lately though, a shift in public opinion can be detected. While a recent survey shows that a record high of about two thirds (65%) of Europeans are in favor of an EU membership of their country (Eurobarometer, 2022), numbers also show that the vote share for Eurosceptic parties has more than doubled in the last two decades (Henley, 2020). This combination signifies that the EU has become a polarized topic and a reason for heated debates in parliaments as well as

pubs. At the same time, current developments in different parts of the world demand the attention of European leaders. They must decide if they want to compromise and take a joint European stance or follow their own agenda. Thus, the question of “more or less Europe” becomes ever more pressing for the future of the Union. Which way will the fate of the EU turn? In this article, we will outline three possible scenarios for the future of the bloc. While many factors play a role for the direction in which the tide will turn, conventional wisdom tells us that “communication is key”. This communication is transported by people, in particular the national leaders. The OECD shows in its survey (2021) that the perception of government commitment is one of the pillars of trust for political institutions – like the EU. This is why we will first have a look into the mechanisms and missings of communication and examine possible pitfalls created by personal egoisms.

Membership Approval vs. Eurosceptic Votes

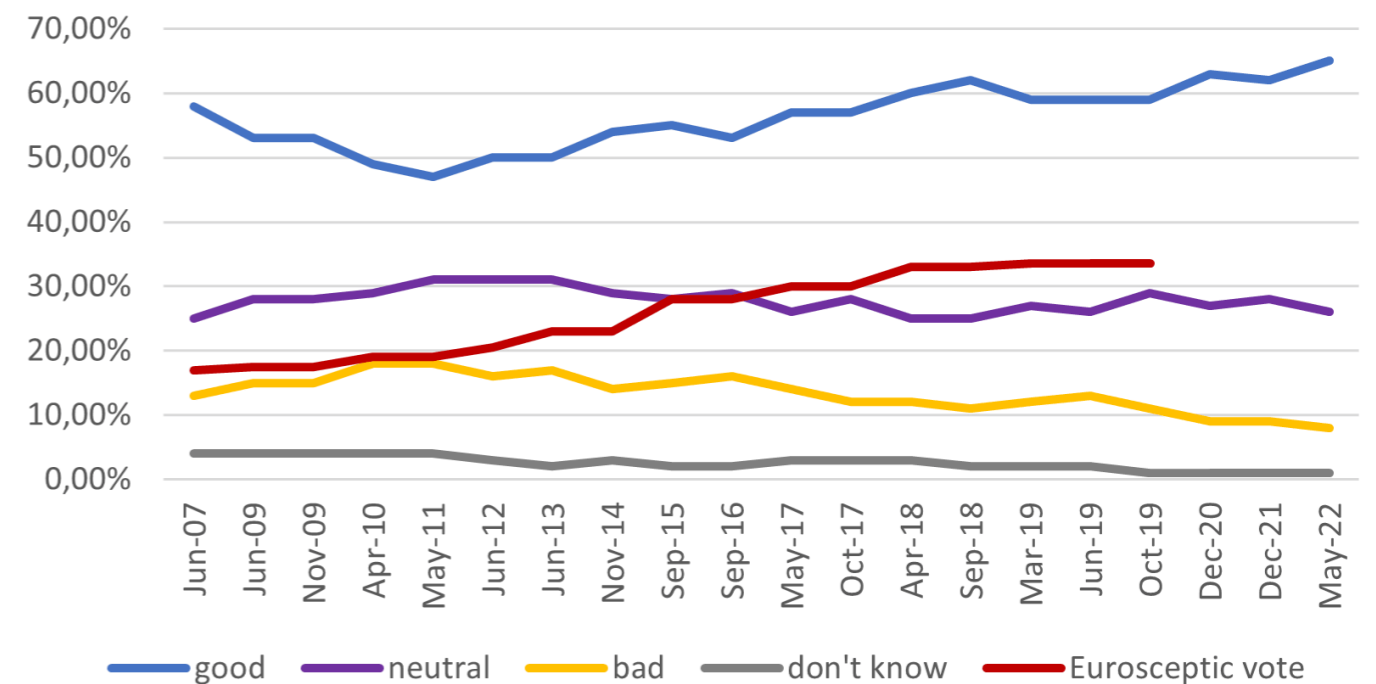


Chart 1: Approval rates for EU membership vs. the votes for Eurosceptic parties in the EU.

Sources: Eurobarometer, The PopuList

After the failed EU referenda on the European Constitutional Treaty in 2005, the EU commission set up a dedicated communication strategy called “Plan D” (D stands for democracy, dialogue and discussion). Its aim was to make the EU more visible in the life of the average citizen, e.g. through visits of Commission members to the regions of the member states or in the national parliaments. These parliaments were also asked to participate in pro EU media campaigns. Shortly after, in 2006, this first reaction was boosted by the so-called “White Paper on a European communication policy”. In this document, additional steps to reach the goal of more visibility for the EU were mentioned, like the use of digital technologies and the widening of the Eurobarometer-surveys (Seeger, 2006).

Both documents had been brought forward by Margot Wallström, who was dedicated EU commissioner for communication strategy back then. This portfolio was however canceled in 2009, because it had no powers due to missing resources and missing cooperation with other commissioners and heads of national governments. The strategies laid down in Plan D and the White Paper failed for these reasons as well. Nowadays, there is no dedicated manager for media and public communication. These areas are managed by the office of the president of the EU commission and always fall short because of the huge tower of tasks that are to be handled by the office.

“The question of ‘more or less Europe’ becomes ever more pressing for the future of the Union.”

Another problem is the sheer number of relevant media: because there are 24 languages spoken in the EU, getting input into the different media channels is a huge task of its own. And even if that is successful, the EU commission is missing a connection to the smaller, local newspapers that the average Joe reads at the breakfast table.

The biggest challenge for a positive and influential EU policy and the communication about it might however be the following factor: political leaders often have narcissistic traits – it seems to be part of the job description. They want to get the most media attention and will

try their best to steal the spotlight from the EU Commission. Especially when there are results to proclaim – then their personal engagement has brought forward an agreement. For bad news however, the guilty party is the EU and its organs by default. That these egoisms can have dire consequences could be seen during the gas

crisis and the search for new sources. Manfred Weber, chief of the European People’s Party (EPP), postulated that the isolated negotiations of national states for supplies weakened the union and let gas prices rise, because every EU country government tried to trump the others (der SPIEGEL, 2022). Short-sighted actions like this do not only weaken European solidarity amongst each other, they also fail in achieving an advantage for the countries that ‘win’ these negotiations – because the direct and indirect political and economic costs are far higher than the benefits. When



Figure 1: Quo Vadis, Europe? © Daniel Gerjets, 2023

EU countries act with uniformity on the other hand, their impact is significant – as can be seen in the case of sanctions against Russia, which have hit the Russian economy hard (Stamer, 2022).

So, having looked into the status quo, there is a question that is looming above all: How will this be going? How will European cooperation develop? We have imagined three hypothetical outcomes and will sketch out these scenarios in the following.

A) “It’s time for the next step!” - The European Power Scenario

The European Project is – at heart – still the same thing it always was: an effort to create a deeper understanding for each other. Understanding is the first step in the pro-

cess of improvement, of finding solutions that work. However, people need to be open to really listen to what others have to say and to mindfully process these bits and pieces of information, hopes and fears. Only then a true connection can be established. Sometimes, external pushes are needed to create this openness. Four deep crises in very short sequence – first the financial crisis, then migration crisis, the COVID pandemic and lastly the Russian open war against a European country – are these pushes. Europeans begin to finally really understand that they are only together strong enough to face today’s world full of autocrats and oligarchs. After short backlashes into nationalism in several European countries, people in the EU see and feel a negative impact in their daily lives and begin to voice a desire for an integrated

Europe. Civil movements promoting “more Europe” gain traction and become very visible in the streets. Media coverage and social networks become more international, slowly forming the nucleus of a European society. Political parties promising to support a stronger European approach get more votes in more and more countries. This leads to the transfer of executive powers onto the European level. It will take some time of course and the European voters will need to bring in some new faces to replace several old leaders that are not able to understand the need for a new level of cooperation. It starts – as so many things in the EU – with a new answer to the fiscal question of how to finance the EU. In order to evade the heated and energy-sucking discussions about the EU budget for the future, leaders from smaller EU countries bring up the old idea to create an “EU tax” as part of the value added tax (VAT). This would end the endless debates and the logrolling – and make the EU household independent of the goodwill of national leaders. The fiscally strong countries, who are to pay a lot more into the EU budget with this reform, agree to it under the condition that the EU commission gets the last say on national budget planning and a veto power for changes to this planning in order to discipline those countries with a history of spending sprees. Until then, the national budget had already to be sent to the EU for screening, but the assessment of the EU had only been non-binding advice. With this assessment becoming binding, the EU gains a lot of new power at once, shifting the balance towards the commission. The EU tax authority is rebuilt and gets a new high representative who becomes part of the commission, turning it more and more into a proto-government for Europe. The new rules also lead

to the Euro becoming a currency in all EU countries. With the center of governmental power now shifting to Brussels, foreign leaders turn their attention more towards the EU and less towards national leaders.

Acknowledging this, pro-European governments start a voluntary transfer of foreign politics to the European level with the creation of an EU foreign office. Like the Schengen rules for free travel inside Europe, it gains more and more countries supporting this movement. The countries behind this movement finally get enough support inside the European Council to vote for the announcement of a new European Convent, where bigger changes to the European Treaties can be discussed and proposed to the national parliaments. This convent had already been demanded by the “conference about the future of Europe” in 2021. The result of the convent is an EU Constitution that would promote the EU to become a new national entity and the member states to become federal states inside this new country. There had already been a try for a European Constitution in 2004, which failed because of the rejection by voters in France and the Netherlands. Therefore and because of the knowledge gained during the Brexit period, it was decided that all the countries in favor of this Constitution would form this new entity together in any case, with the possible nay-sayers becoming second level countries in a then diminished “old EU”. With the fear of harming themselves like the Brits with Brexit, the new Constitution was voted for unanimously. With the EU now suddenly a real state, more reforms like the one to harmonize military forces and other decisions of statewide importance were swiftly taken. The new structure of the EU leads to streamlined processes and faster political decisions, also giving the new EU much more clout in the ev-

erlasting international quarrels for power. It therefore leads to something that was very unlikely in the past: Europe becoming a third “world power” between the USA and China.

B) “Let’s give ourselves some space...” – the breakup scenario

The European Union is held together – at its core – by the promise of creating wealth and economic security for its members and thus guaranteeing a peaceful coexistence. This promise has extended into other areas of life and politics, but the economic cooperation is still the very basic fundament that the European project is built upon. The British vote for Brexit was mainly successful because the Brexiteers were able to sow serious doubts about the economic membership benefits for Great Britain and promote the view that the country and its people would be more wealthy and more competitive outside of the EU (Minford, 2016). With the ongoing multiple crises affecting the EU, this view gains momentum in other European countries as well, although Brexit never became a success. Inept PR management of the European Commission and ineffective policy handling at the European level unsettle national leaders and voters alike. National governments start to make unilateral moves without consulting their European partners. Fiscally strong countries have more possibilities to maneuver, so their nationalist actions are seemingly more successful than coordinated measures, that are always too late and too little to unfold in a significant way. This encourages a “go it alone” mentality. The gap between the wealthier and the less wealthy countries deepens, minimizing the willingness to compromise in the European council. This creates an ongoing policy blockade at the European level, further dam-

aging the image of European politics in the public eye. During one of the endless fruitless household discussions, a country with a high monetary deficit escalates the situation by threatening to default on their obligations in the Euro transfer system in order to put political pressure on countries like Germany that have an export surplus. This threat causes several “donor countries” to announce public votes on their membership inside the European Union. Once this political stunt was publicized, it develops a life of its own and there is no turning back. When the first results come in and signify a goodbye to the European Union in these countries a shockwave ripples through the EU. Because these countries are members of the Euro area, their separation of the EU raises question marks about the modalities of the mutual debts and thereby about the future of the currency itself. More and more countries fear that they have been entangled in something like a Euro ponzi scheme and hasten to cancel their membership. In the end, this political turmoil reaches even France and Germany, once touted as the “engine of Europe”. They are forced by their mood at home to split apart. The European Union is in shambles and with it, more than 70 years of economic cooperation and political rapprochement. The legal and political issues of sorting out assets, debts, obligations and contracts tie down the continent for decades, leading to a worldwide recession and an impoverishment of many European countries.

C) “Let’s talk about it later...” - The murky muddling in the middle scenario

Power needs legitimacy. Since the victory of democracy in those countries forming the European Union later, this legitimacy is

formed by the will of the people. With acceleration and spreading of media coverage, this will be measured ever more detailed and continuously also in between elections. European leaders have observed that during the crises, the peoples of the different European countries have turned to their respective governments for leadership. These governments were quick to take up that trust and act on their own. This however meant that fighting these crises became easier for financially potent countries while making it harder for those that were already in a weaker economic position. This created unrest among the Union, which was built on the promise of unity and cooperation. As a response, the development of more European measures is agreed upon and the European Commission is trusted to deliver those measures. As it turns out however, the Commission is mostly overwhelmed by these tasks. The difference between the means needed to accomplish solid solutions and the powers granted by the national governments is just too big. Seeing the need for basic cooperation and wanting to avoid too much responsibility for their own actions, the national governments forge basic compromises out of the blueprints the Commission creates. However, these compromises often involve the creation of new bureaucratic bodies controlled by the European council instead of the Commission. Thereby, the governments are able to keep more competencies in their own hands at the price of internal transparency and coordination. The whole situation is further complicated by the actions of the European Parliament whose members fight against national egoisms with a plethora of laws and initiatives. All this keeps Europeans occupied with themselves, with the additional bureaucracy binding power and attention that would be

of use for foreign political initiatives instead. With the European focus turned towards the inside, Europeans disengage themselves from world politics and become less and less important for the rest of the world. With the dwindling political power starts the loss of economic power, rendering Europeans less wealthy in comparison to other regions of the world. However, Europeans are rather content with their “European middle way”, diluting power and responsibility with the aim to create a feeling of safety and ignorance for citizens and governments alike. This whole process occurs over a long period of time, with its impact only becoming fully visible over decades.

Conclusion

By drawing different images of future Europe, it can be shown that “more Europe” is the scenario that creates all in all the most value for European countries. This surplus value might be unevenly distributed however, creating the desire for new balancing measures that will in return spark debates about the distribution of political power. The currently more probable “everything stays more or less the same” scenario leads to a slight decline of European significance, while a deconstruction of the whole European Union – which is the aim of left- and right-wing extremists – would have catastrophic consequences not only for European countries, but for the whole world. Europeans therefore should focus on more cooperation and try to untangle national and European politics more clearly, thereby creating more prosperity and safety for the continent.

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