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THE CONTINENT-WIDE RISE OF EUROSCEPTICISM

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It was once seen as a British disease. But Euroscepticism has now spread across the continent like a virus. As data from Eurobarometer shows, trust in the European project has fallen even faster than growth rates. Since the beginning of the euro crisis, trust in the European Union has fallen from +10 to -22 percent in France, from +20 to -29 percent in Germany, from +30 to -22 percent in Italy, from +42 to -52 percent in Spain, from +50 to +6 percent in Poland, and from -13 to -49 percent in the United Kingdom.

What is so striking is that everyone in the EU has been losing faith in the project: both creditors and debtors, and eurozone countries, would-be members, and “opt-outs”. Back in 2007, people thought that the UK, which scored -13 percent in trust, was the Eurosceptic outlier. Now, remarkably, the four largest eurozone countries have even lower levels of trust in the EU institutions than Britain did back in 2007. So what is going on?

The old explanation for Euroscepticism was the alleged existence of a democratic deficit within the EU. Decisions, critics said, were taken by unaccountable institutions rather than elected national governments. But the current crisis is born not of a clash between Brussels and the member states but a clash between the democratic wills of citizens in northern and southern Europe - the so-called centre and periphery. And both sides are now using EU institutions to advance their interests.

In the past, there was an unwritten rule that EU institutions would police the single market and other technical areas of policy - from common standards for the composition of tomato paste to lawnmower sound emissions - while national governments would continue to have a monopoly on the delivery of services and policymaking in the most sensitive areas on which national elections depended.

Since the crisis began, citizens in creditor countries have become resistant to taking responsibility for the debts of others without having mechanisms for controlling their spending. With the fiscal compact and demands by the European Central Bank (ECB) for comprehensive domestic reforms, Eurocrats have crossed many of the red lines of national sovereignty, extending their reach way beyond food safety standards to exert control over pensions, taxes, salaries, the labour market, and public jobs. These areas go to the heart of welfare states and national identities.

To an increasing number of citizens in southern European countries, the EU looks like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) did in Latin America: a golden straitjacket that is squeezing the space for national politics and emptying their national democracies of content. In this new situation, governments come or go but policies remain basically the same and cannot be challenged. Meanwhile, in northern European countries, the EU is increasingly seen to have failed to control the policies of the southern rim. The creditors have a sense of victimhood that mirrors that of the debtors.

If sovereignty is understood as the capacity of the people to decide what they want for their country, few in either the north or the south today feel that they are sovereign. A substantial part of democracy has vanished at the national level but it has not been recreated at the European level.

In a fully functioning national political system, political parties would be able to voice these different perspectives - and hopefully act as a referee and find common ground between them. But that is precisely what the European political system cannot deliver: because it lacks true political parties, a proper government, and a public sphere, the EU cannot compensate for the failures of national democracies. Instead of a battle of ideas, the EU has been marred by a vicious circle between anti-EU populism and technocratic agreements between member states that are afraid of their citizens.

Is the rise of anti-EU populism here to stay? The hope is that as growth picks up, Euroscepticism will weaken and eventually recede. But the collapse of trust in the EU runs deeper than that. Enthusiasm for the EU will not return unless the EU profoundly changes the way it deals with its member states and its citizens.

Bulgaria

Trust in the EU has actually increased slightly since Bulgaria joined in 2007: 60 percent “tend to trust” the EU now compared to 54 percent in 2007 (although distrust has also slightly increased, from 21 to 24 percent). Citizens trust Brussels because of the unpopularity of domestic institutions (the most recent Eurobarometer poll suggested that 74 percent distrust the national parliament and 79 percent hold a negative view of political parties). The EU continues to serve as an external corrective for dysfunctional politics at home - illustrated by the wave of mass protests in February and March that triggered snap parliamentary elections. But although popular anger was directed at Bulgarian elites who were blamed for poverty and rampant corruption, the EU was no longer invoked as the cure. Private investors from other member states also came under fire, suggesting a shift to economic nationalism that might also provide fertile ground for Euroscepticism in the future.

Czech Republic

There has been a steady decline in support for the EU in the Czech Republic: net support fell from +29 percent in 2007 to -26 percent in 2012. Czechs have a pragmatic rather than idealistic attitude towards the EU: they see EU membership as a “marriage of convenience” that provides prosperity and security. However, the crisis has tainted the image of the EU

as a community of the prosperous. Czechs are glad that, unlike the Slovaks, who joined the single currency, they were not pressured to contribute to the bailouts of southern eurozone countries that are seen as relatively rich, irresponsible, and profligate. Meanwhile, Czechs do not see any looming security threats that might make them think they need the EU for protection. Recent Czech governments, which have been led by moderate and even die-hard Eurosceptics such as former President Václav Klaus, have also contributed to the general anti-EU mood.

Denmark

Although 2012 is the fortieth anniversary of Denmark’s accession to the EU, there seems to be little for Danish pro-Europeans to celebrate. Net trust in the EU declined from +36 percent in 2007 to +2 percent by 2012. This fall in popular support matters because Denmark sits outside the most integrated part of the EU and cannot integrate further without referendums. Two of the six referendums held on Europe in the past were lost by the pro-EU camp: the *nej* to the Maastricht treaty in 1992 led to opt-outs on defence, justice, and home affairs and the euro, and laid the legal foundation for a two-speed Europe. Because of growing Euroscepticism, Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt has postponed the referendum on Europe that she promised in her election manifesto. This means Denmark would be unable to follow the eurozone countries into a banking, fiscal, or political union.

Finland

Attitudes towards the EU in Finland are slightly contradictory: while levels of support for Finnish membership of the EU and the single currency remain high, levels of trust in the EU are much lower and there is little sense of a European identity. The economic crisis has polarised Finns and the bailouts of indebted eurozone countries have been particularly controversial. The sharp rise in Euroscepticism in Finland gave a boost to the True Finns party, which became the third-largest party in parliament, with 39 seats, in the general elections of 2011. But the increase in criticism of the EU has also led to some strengthening of pro-European sentiments among its supporters. This suggests that while the True Finns will be able to gain political capital by mobilising latent dissatisfaction with the EU, they are less likely to be able to undermine the broad, deep-rooted support for the EU that exists in Finland.

Figure 1
 EU-13. Trust in the EU - Net Support* (2007-2012)



Source:
 Standard Eurobarometer 67, Spring 2007
 Standard Eurobarometer 78, November 2012

* "Net support in the EU" has been calculated by subtracting the people who "tend to trust the EU" from the people who "tend not to trust the EU". A methodological note including a detailed table summarising the data for 27 EU member states can be found on ECFR's website: http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the_continent_wide_rise_of_eurosepticism207

France

For once, France is no exception: since the crisis began, trust in the EU has diminished and its image has worsened. In 2012 the number of French respondents who “tend not to trust” the EU rose to 56 percent from 41 percent in 2007. This negative judgment about the EU’s response to the crisis has already had an impact on French politics: it is undoubtedly a factor in the even deeper entrenchment of the violently anti-EU, far-right National Front in France’s political life and an equally significant factor in the political and media success of the radical left leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon. However, if the French people are able to identify a visible, resolute, and accountable leadership at the EU or eurozone level that gives economic recovery priority by focusing on debt reduction as much as on investment strategies and growth policies, and indeed takes the first step towards pan-European welfare models, then the anti-EU trend could be reversed.

Germany

Germans see themselves as the victims of the euro crisis. They feel they have been betrayed and fear that they will be asked to pay higher taxes or accept higher levels of inflation in order to save the euro. But the jury is still out in Germany on the EU itself. The Eurobarometer data shows that 56 percent of Germans have “no trust” in the EU while only 30 percent have a “fairly positive” image of the EU. At the same time, however, populism has so far been contained: the mainstream political parties all support the euro and recent polls show that three quarters of Germans are against leaving the euro. A new anti-euro party, Alternative for Germany, has just been set up but is so far projected to get at most two percent of the vote in September’s general election. Germans may not love the euro anymore but that does not mean they want to leave it.

Greece

Before the crisis began in 2012, EU membership was associated in Greece with economic progress, prosperity, and modernity following totalitarian rule. But since then, Greece has gone through severe recession, harsh austerity, structural reform, and humiliating bailouts. Unsurprisingly, this traumatic experience has led to a precipitous fall in Greek support for the EU: in 2007 net support was +26 percent; by 2012 it was -63 percent. Support for the two biggest political parties, New Democracy and PASOK, has also collapsed. The main beneficiary has been the radical Syriza party, which opposes the austerity programme agreed with the “troika” of the IMF, the European Commission, and the ECB but wants Greece to remain in the single currency.

As Greece has experienced widespread civil unrest and anti-immigrant violence, support for explicitly anti-EU parties such as the communist KKE and the far-right Chryssi Avgi (Golden Dawn) has also increased.

Italy

Austerity is changing perceptions of the EU among Italian citizens - especially among the young, 40 percent of whom are unemployed. The recent Italian election showed that Italians have lost their faith in, and patience with, Brussels and Berlin and no longer believe that the end of the crisis is around the corner. But although trust in the EU has decreased in Italy, a majority of Italian respondents still see themselves as European citizens and identify with Europe. In a recent poll, only 1 percent wanted to leave the EU. Instead, a large majority - especially among the business community - wants to move ahead to a real political union that is more democratic and more social than the current EU. The election did not show that Italians want less Europe. Rather, they want a different Europe: one that is more flexible and more symmetrical, less focused on austerity and more focused on investment in the real economy.

Netherlands

Dutch support for the EU fell from +44 percent in 2007 to -8 percent in 2012. The main reason was the perceived weak performance of both the EU and eurozone countries in dealing with the crisis. In particular, the Dutch see the EU as part of the problem rather than the solution. The Greek bailout in 2010 followed newspaper stories about deceit and mismanagement in debtor countries and was heavily criticised in the media. Populist parties took advantage. Politicians have also been suspected of using the imposed 3 percent deficit target to justify unpopular budget cuts. Although Europe was an issue in election campaigns in 2012, its actual impact on results was limited. The (moderately Eurosceptic) liberal VVD and the (pro-European) centre-left PvdA won, while the anti-European parties failed to profit from the growing Euroscepticism of voters. Recent opinion polls indicate that the Dutch still support EU membership.

Poland

In May 2012, for the first time since Poland joined the EU, the percentage of Poles who “tend not to trust” the EU (46 percent) was higher than the percentage of Poles who do “tend to trust” it (41 percent) - a remarkable development for a country that has traditionally been pro-European. To be sure,

the EU still has higher approval ratings than the national government, parliament, or public television. However, the EU seems to have lost its reputation as the anchor of stability for a country undergoing a huge social and economic transformation. In particular, the Poles are sceptical about the future of the common currency and only 29 percent of them now wish to join it. These public attitudes pose a dilemma for the country's political elite whose ambition is to be at the centre of power in Europe. Poland's objective in the years ahead will be to stay as close to the core as possible while defending the integrity of the whole EU project.

Portugal

The pro-European consensus at the heart of Portuguese politics has been shaken by the euro crisis: net support for the EU has declined from +41 percent in 2007 to -24 percent in 2012. The three main parties had all pushed for Portugal to be at the heart of European integration, which was associated with economic progress and political stability. However, this also led to stagnation after Portugal joined the single currency despite relative disadvantages in economic productivity and competitiveness. Harsh austerity measures and reforms following the onset of the crisis at first led to relatively few violent demonstrations and little political upheaval. But the deepening recession has led to more public unrest, with anger at Portugal's situation directed at the EU member states believed to be imposing austerity – above all, Germany. The government of Pedro Passos Coelho now hopes to get more leeway over budget targets to avoid exacerbating this public anger.

Spain

For decades, Spain saw its relationship with Europe through the eyes of José Ortega y Gasset's prescription: "Spain is the problem and Europe is the solution." The dramatic and unprecedented decline in trust in the EU since the crisis began is not simply a result of austerity. After all, Spain went through painful reforms in order to join the EU, and later the euro, and overcome its difficult past. Now, however, the lack of a clear vision about either the national or European future means there is no consensus or legitimacy for the sacrifices that are being demanded of them. Spaniards do not blame Europe for the crisis and do not want to leave the euro. What has eroded their loyalty to, and trust in, Europe is that they have no voice and cannot challenge policies that are clearly not working. Spaniards have not become Eurosceptics – but they have turned into fierce Eurocritics.

UK

Perceptions of the EU in the UK have changed less dramatically than in many other member states: even in 2004 there was a relatively low level of trust in, and a relatively negative image of, the EU. The percentage of those who "tend not to trust" the EU has gone from 48 percent in 2004 to nearly 80 percent in 2012. But this increase began long before the crisis started and is unlikely to be reversed even if and when the crisis is resolved. Given that the UK is unlikely to join the single currency in the foreseeable future, it will be in the third tier of the emerging three-tier Europe (the first made of eurozone members, the second of would-be "ins", and the third of eurozone "outs", in other words those who would not join the eurozone even if they could). Thus the question from a British perspective is how the UK can retain influence from the margins of Europe. In particular, there is likely to be a demand for a new settlement that guarantees the rights of eurozone "outs".

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