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The Post-Crisis Legitimacy of the European Union

Policy Brief

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Shaping public support

National governments' discourse on Europe

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Summary

Europe is transforming quickly, a process which can only be sustained if there is enough public support for it. Yet, national governments face diverging incentives in communicating their position on European events to its national public. In positioning themselves, they have the incentive to portray the EU as a more dominant, imposing force than it is. But while potentially electorally profitable, such a strategy risks to hurt public support, both in the short and the long term. If the EU is constantly portrayed as a dominant force that should be fought against, it will risk an erosion of support, which in turn decreases possibility for debates about Europe that create optimal outcomes.

This policy brief argues that such a strategy is based on a perception of public opinion that overestimates the salience and stability of opinions. Based on an original study on public opinion, the author argues for a different perspective on the meaning of citizens' attitudes. Citizens are ambiguous, inconsistent and undecided, and this opens up different strategic perspectives. Hence, the following recommendations for national governments:

1. Focus on shaping public support rather than presenting themselves as mere servants of a pre-existing public will; show leadership and make clear what exactly is at stake.

2. Take serious the side effect of pursuing short-term interests and how these might hurt their self-interest as well as the national interest in the longer run.

3. Take the current crises as an opportunity to reframe the domestic discussion on Europe; instead of portraying it as a game between member states with national interests, frame it more as a community with shared interests.

Introduction

Europe is transforming quickly, a process which can only be sustained if there is enough public support for it. Yet, national governments face diverging incentives in communicating their position on European events to its national public. In positioning themselves, they have the incentive to portray the EU as a more dominant, imposing force than it is. But while potentially electorally profitable, such a strategy risks to hurt public support, both in the short and the long term. If the EU is constantly portrayed as a dominant force that should be fought against, it will risk an erosion of support, which in turn decreases possibility for debates about Europe that create optimal outcomes.

> *Citizens are much more ambiguous, inconsistent and undecided than it seems*

This brief argues that such a strategy is based on a perception of public opinion that overestimates the salience and stability of opinions. It argues for a different perspective on the meaning of citizens' attitudes. The more nuanced image is that citizens are much more ambiguous, inconsistent and undecided than it seems. This opens up different strategic perspectives for national governments. They should acknowledge their ability to shape public opinion, and create support, rather than presenting themselves as mere servants of pre-existing public will.

This of course does not mean that national governments by definition should be pro-European, and cannot be critical on the EU. It might well be that national governments themselves are negative about particular elements of European integration.

But it emphasizes the responsibility that comes with shaping the public discourse. Because of its undetermined character, national governments have an important role in the shaping of public opinion. Their task is therefore to make a bigger effort in educating citizens in what is at stake, rather than telling them what they think they like to hear, and what seems to be electorally profitable.

The need for solidarity

Rarely has the need for European cooperation been more debated than in 2020. Years of 'America first' have made clear that the EU can no longer rely on the US, and the rapid rise of China has raised doubts about the stability of the global multilateral framework. Many think the time has come for the EU to become more independent in areas like defense and industrial policy – 'strategic autonomy' has become the buzzword in EU debates. On top of that, the Covid-19 pandemic has pushed EU countries to close cooperation. Most importantly, however, the economic impact of the pandemic makes unprecedented solidarity between member states a necessity if the block is to survive.

For all such cooperation, public support is essential. While most national governments may be more or less convinced of the need for such cooperation, these policies only seem viable if they are backed by citizens' approval. Long gone are the days in which citizens' tacit approval was sufficient. In a direct sense, public disapproval easily leads to severe contestation in media debates. In the long term, growing discontent with the speed of European integration might lead to backlashes like the 2005 constitutional referendums in France and the Netherlands, or Brexit.

> *The economic impact of the pandemic makes unprecedented solidarity between member states a necessity if the block is to survive*

Yet, the relation between national governments' positions on European affairs and public opinion on these items is a difficult one. On average, governments are much more positive towards European integration than the public,[1] which has more difficulties in seeing the benefits of integration and is more fearful for its effect on national identities.

European cooperation and domestic electorates

As a consequence, national governments face diverging incentives. On the one hand, they have the incentive to create support for the policies it deems necessary. This entails to explain what is at stake, why European cooperation on these items could be beneficial, and how the nature of intergovernmental negotiations creates the need for compromises that limit the maximization of direct national interest.

On the other hand, they have the incentive to satisfy domestic electorates, which is usually portrayed as contrasting with the former incentive. After all, it appears much more attractive for governments' own popularity – especially in cases where public support seems lacking – to portray the EU as imposing particular policies, with national representatives doing everything they can to protect the national interest. But while this might appear to work as a legitimating strategy for governments themselves, it decreases support for the policies at stake, as well as the long term support for the integration project as a whole.

This divergence of incentives applies more in some situations than in others. It is less relevant when dossiers are less politicized and backed by more public support. In more politicized issues where national interests are more pronounced and trade-offs more visible however, such as in discussions on the EU coronavirus recovery fund, it applies all the more. How can national governments deal with these diverging incentives?

How the public thinks about European politics

Over the last decades, a whole wealth of academic research has emerged that studies all sorts of attitudes and opinions. From support for integration to people's position on migration policies. From trust in the European Central Bank (ECB) to support for European solidarity.

> *Public opinion is more indifferent and ambivalent than often realized*

Such research generally is understood – by media, politicians, and even most of the research community – as revealing the will of public. Taking the opinions expressed in such surveys and polls at face value, an image appears of the public as holding clear opinions and having particular preferences. Subsequently, politicians are increasingly likely to act according to the desires expressed in such polls, fearing that not doing so would lead to a backlash.

Yet, this seems to mischaracterize the nature of people's opinions. For we should ask if the opinions expressed in polls are actually as strong as they suggest. According to several researchers, they often are not. In fact, public

[1] Thomas Raines, Matthew Goodwin, David Cutts, The Future of Europe - Comparing Public and Elite Attitudes, *Chatham House research paper*, June 2017 | https://www.chathamhouse.org/2017/06/future-europe, M. Haller, Divisions on Europe between elites and citizens. Review of Sociology, 14(1), 67-92, 2008; Müller, W. C., Jenny, M., & Ecker, A. (2012). The elites–masses gap in European integration. The Europe of Elites. A Study into the Europeanness of Europe's Political and Economic Elites, 167-91.

opinion is more indifferent and ambivalent than often realized. Research[2] studying groups of citizens discussing Europe finds that public opinion on the EU is mostly characterized by the distance citizens experience towards it. Rather than being outspoken, most citizens find it difficult to express a clear opinion on European politics because of its complexity, the limited amount of information they receive, and the little connection it seems to have to their daily life concerns.

Particularly since the start of the euro crisis in 2008, we have seen a heating up of the public debate on EU affairs, which might have led to an increased interest among the public, and a polarization of opinions. But how much evidence is there for this? Did citizens acquire more pronounced opinions?

European politicization in context

A recent original study strongly nuances this claim.[3] Focus was on public opinion on Europe's shared currency, the euro, one of the most salient, polarized elements of European integration. It became strongly contested during the euro crisis for its negative economic effects (particularly in terms of north-south divergence and hampering the crisis response), for the way it demanded inter-country solidarity, and eroded democracy by limiting member states' policy choices. Political parties all over Europe argued for their country's departure from the euro zone. In my PhD project, I invited citizens in three different countries – the Netherlands, Italy and France – to discuss the euro and its political implications.

> *I invited citizens in three different countries, the Netherlands, Italy and France, to discuss the euro and its political implications*

A first central finding is that citizens mostly take the euro itself for granted. Their own evaluations of it do usually not go beyond its impact on daily life in terms of purchasing power and traveling convenience, combined with a more abstract sense of its effect on national economies (generally an assumption that is has had a positive effect). Most people have difficulty in understanding the political questions behind it, such as questions around solidarity and democracy, and often don't see a link between these and the euro.

Not that people are entirely indifferent to such questions – they might have stronger feelings on a topic like European solidarity on itself. But at the same time, they are generally far from having strong, pronounced opinions. Most people just find it very difficult to express a clear opinion on European issues. Rather than exchanging strong, crystalized opinions, discussions are often on a meta-level, 'how should we make sense of these issues', 'what kind of metaphors can we use to discuss them in the first place?'

Likewise, opinions do not seem to be very stable. In the Dutch groups for example, many people express some frustration with transferring funds to southern states. But when a videoclip brings the Greek euro crisis perspective in, some people easily change their minds, and express more understanding for

[2] See for instance S. Baglioni and A. Hurrelmann, 'The eurozone crisis and citizen engagement in EU affairs', *West European Politics*, 2016, 39(1), pp. 104–24; S. Duchesne, E. Frazer, F. Haegel and V. Van Ingelgom, *Citizens' reactions to European integration compared*, Palgrave Macmillan 2013; V. Van Ingelgom, *Integrating indifference,* ECPR Press 2014; J. White, *Political allegiance after European integration*, Palgrave Macmillan 2011.

[3] J. Melman, 'Between politicization and indifference: studying attitudes towards the euro using focus groups', ECPR General Conference, University of Wrocław, 4-7 Sep 2019. https://ecpr.eu/Filestore/paperproposal/12da37af-afe3-4576-86b6-173bd2981ca2.pdf

the south – especially when they framed Greek people as 'people like us'. Lower educated people expressed solidarity with 'the common Greek man', who is also suffering from elites like 'the common Dutch man' is.

At the same time, the findings did hint at a growing sense among citizens of the increasing importance of European politics. Instigated by Brexit, the perceived threat brought about by the rise of China and a more hostile US, as well as the general political instability associated with the rise of populism, people seem to feel that important things are happening, and the EU has to play a role.

Yet, it is important to place this increasing interest of public in context. Even if this is true and the public's interest in European politics grows, it is important to note that this development still takes place in the context of a more general distance most people feel towards the EU, if not politics in general. People might have some awareness of particular developments, but they are still perceived as far away. They are still complex, unconnected to their daily lives, and happening in an arena that is far away from their influence. As a consequence, even those who have a growing sense of the EU's importance might find it difficult to form an opinion on it.

Opinions are diffuse, embedded and moldable

It is crucial to appreciate this, and grasp the consequences it has for understanding public opinion. What it particularly draws our attention to is not the content of people's opinions – are they in favor of or against the EU? Do they like its policies? – but rather the form of their opinions, the type of opinions they have. When looking at opinion in this way, a couple of observations are particularly relevant.

Firstly, how public opinion on the EU often is embedded. That is to say, how attitudes towards the EU are absorbed in more general political considerations. Because the EU is seen as too distant and complex to form a clear opinion on, it is likely that opinions are a derivative of more general orientations. In other words, opinions on the EU are not necessarily opinions that are actually based on the EU.

It is crucial to grasp the consequences it has for understanding public opinion

In turn, we should realize how much of public opinion on the EU is diffuse. Most people do not have clearly demarcated opinions on the EU, based on conscious reflection on the pros and cons of integration. Instead, their attitude towards the EU can better be seen as a vague orientation.

The consequence of this diffuse, wavering public opinion is that it is highly moldable. While people might have general orientations towards project of European integration, their actual opinions are very sensitive to what they hear from elites: politicians, political parties they sympathize with, media they trust. It is not unlikely that it is precisely this 'moldability' that, more than strong opinions about Europe, made events such as Brexit possible. Indeed, it is no coincidence that people steering Brexit campaign, such as Dominic Cummings, are known for their obsessive use of focus groups.

This has bearings on how we should understand and interpret public opinion on European affairs. Rather than as firmly held attitudes, public opinion should be seen as diffuse, embedded and moldable, thus being sensitive to elite discourse. Public preferences are not a given. While the functional importance of the public might increase, this does not mean that the public actively demands its representatives to take particular positions

and actions. It is still mostly a passive actor, responding – often ambiguously – to processes at the elite level.

Last summer's negotiations on the coronavirus recovery fund serve as an example. These negotiations were dominated by the 'frugal four' (Austria, Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands), whose leaders mostly seemed to speak only to please their citizens. Rather than explaining to the public why and how solidarity was needed, the main message of Dutch Prime Minister Rutte was that European cooperation was now demanding too much solidarity,[4] and that he would be as tough as possible in the negotiations[5] to protect the national interest. While apparently appreciated by the public – over 70% supported the governments' stance,[6] the side effect of such discourse is that both the short and long term willingness of the Dutch public to show solidarity decreases, and the image of the EU as imposing costs increases.

Germany's example makes clear that fear for public opinion is indeed unnecessary. In general, the German public is seen as very critical of European solidarity. In the euro crisis, it seemed to favor a hard stance against Greece, indicated not only by the polls but also the fact that 12,000 ordinary citizens took to the Constitutional Court[7] to complain about the rescue fund (ESM) that was established to weather the crisis. However, Chancellor Angela Merkel managed to change things around during this summer's negotiations, seemingly without problems. In an impressive speech,[8] she argued that Germany could only thrive if Europe did. The result was a remarkably high support[9] for this position which serves as an illustration of how moldable public opinion is, and how leadership can serve the shared European interest.

Conclusion

This all suggests that national governments should rethink their perspective of public opinion on European affairs in their public communication. Governments should not be overly afraid of public opinion in negotiating European issues. Instead of behaving as if they are only following what the public demands of them, they should recognize and acknowledge that it is their own stories that determine how the public thinks in the first place. Rather than being afraid of the public and telling it what they believe it wants to hear, politicians should show leadership and make clear what exactly is at stake. Rather than relying on public support, they should focus on forging it.

Of course there are caveats here. It is difficult for single actors (politicians or parties) to alone

[4] J. Melman, 'Zo solidair is Nederland in de EU echt niet', *Trouw*, 8 April 2020. https://www.trouw.nl/opinie/zo-solidair-is-nederland-in-de-eu-echt-niet~b151cd18/ English translation: 'The Netherlands doesn't understand Southern Europe's pain', *Post-Crisis Democracy in Europe blog*, 20 April 2020.

[5] J. Melman, 'De vrees voor Europa', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 29 May 2020. https://www.groene.nl/artikel/de-vrees-voor-europa

[6] Kiezers solidair met zuidelijke landen, maar niet tegen elke prijs, I&O Research, 12 June 2020. https://www.ioresearch.nl/actueel/kiezers-solidair-met-zuidelijke-landen-maar-niet-tegen-elke-prijs/

[7] 'Nuisance' German court may exact price for euro approval, *Reuters*, 11 July 2012. https://br.reuters.com/article/eurozone-germany-court-idUSL6E8IB4S320120711

[8] See State Secretary Steffen Seibert on Twitter: https://twitter.com/RegSprecher/status/1262433442031185921

[9] Mehrheit der Deutschen für EU-Wiederaufbaufonds, *Der Spiegel*, 21 May 2020. https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/corona-krise-mehrheit-der-deutschen-fuer-eu-wiederaufbaufonds-a-a51b787a-3845-49cf-9e55-b9eda3ba98fb

shape the public discourse. There is always the risk of counter-narratives, for example by Eurosceptic parties and media, which could in turn hurt governments' capability to shape public opinion. Also, how convincing elites are depends on their already existing base of support. Especially because people find it difficult to form an opinion on Europe, they are likely to follow partisan loyalties when forming their opinion. But these can also be read as reasons why governments should not be afraid to shape the discourse. Provided they have some pre-existing basis of support, and their narrative is convincing, there is more space for this than they assume.

> *From portraying it as a game between member states with national interests, European cooperation can be framed more as a community with shared interests*

Second, national governments should take serious the side effect of pursuing short-term interests in balancing incentives. Evidently, national governments have the right to do what is electorally profitable, or what helps them in negotiations. But in making the calculation of their self-interest, they should take into account the side-effects of their actions, and how this might hurt their self-interest as well as the national interest in the longer run.

Telling the public electorally profitable stories in which Europe is portrayed in an overly dominant fashion might help legitimate the national government in the short run. At the same time, it can squeeze the European negotiation space, as the public polls will turn towards stances that focus on protecting national interests against European dominance. Subsequently, it will hurt the governments' credibility when having to settle for European compromises in a later stage.

In the long run, it will also make it more difficult for national governments to relate to the European debate. When national publics – who still receive a large majority of their information from national sources – will mostly be fed with a discourse in which the national interest has to be protected from European dominance, support for the EU will decrease, and so will support for European policies that are deemed necessary by national governments.

The current crises then can be taken as a particular opportunity to reframe the domestic discussion on Europe, as the public seems to increasingly perceive Europe through the lens of external pressures. Recent research for example found that even in the often hesitant Netherlands, a large majority favors more cooperation with European partners in light of Brexit and Trump's America first-policy.[10] On this basis, there is potential for a discourse aimed at forging support, rather than relying on it. From portraying it as a game between member states with national interests, European cooperation can be framed more as a community with shared interests.

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[10] R. Korteweg, C. Houtkamp and M. Sie Dhian Ho, 'Dutch views on Transatlantic ties and European security cooperation in times of geopolitical rivalry', Clingendael Alert, Sep 2020. https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/Alert_Dutch_views_transatlantic_ties_September_2020.pdf

The Post-Crisis Legitimacy of the European Union (PLATO) investigates the legitimacy of the EU's responses to the financial crisis and generates new understandings of the EU's legitimacy crisis. It uses the example of the financial crisis to build and test theory of what would amount to a legitimacy crisis in the case of a multi-state, non-state political system such as the EU.

As part of PLATO, 15 PhD researchers study the legitimacy of the EU's crisis responses in a number of different areas. They are enrolled in nine universities across Europe as part of a 20-partner consortium coordinated by ARENA Centre for European Studies at the University of Oslo, with Prof. Chris Lord as scientific coordinator.

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