



# The European Union Facing Massive Challenges – What are Citizens' Expectations and Concerns?

A representative 8-country-survey

politik für europa  
#2017 plus

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## SUMMARY

- This report is based upon the findings of a representative 8-country-survey conducted by policy matters on behalf of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung .
- For the purpose of this survey, interviews were conducted in Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic.
- The European Union has been facing massive challenges regarding a) the threefold economic, financial and Euro crisis, b) international tensions over Ukraine and in the Arab world, as well as c) the refugee crisis. In order to dig deeper into citizens' attitudes toward this difficult situation, *policy matters* has conducted representative surveys in eight EU countries on behalf of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
- Respondents' reactions to current challenges are as diverse as the political realities in their respective countries. While concern is widespread, its causes vary considerably among countries. Citizens in the Mediterranean region are mainly worried about their countries' economic wellbeing and the future of the labor market. In economically stronger countries, respondents emphasize the risks of state debt at home and abroad.
- The EU as such is not being questioned. On the contrary, there is a range of issues that citizens would like to have dealt with at the European level. This is the case with foreign and security policy in particular, yet also with corporate taxation, data protection, energy policy and refugee policy – with, however, one important veto: citizens in Eastern European member states strongly reject a pooling of sovereignty in these areas.
- Across countries, citizens fear the impact of international turmoil in the EU's neighboring regions, i.e. the massive influx of refugees fleeing war and instability. The political quest for a common European approach to this challenge, however, has been complicated by the fact that fears are strongest where immigration is lowest, as in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.
- The ongoing economic crisis in many EU countries has led to a loss of reputation for the EU. Also, the notion that a country's EU membership automatically triggers growth and prosperity has visibly eroded. The same goes for the notion that the EU's benefits outweigh its costs. In five out of eight countries nowadays, citizens associate the EU more with disadvantages than with advantages, with members of lower social strata being particularly skeptical. Unsurprisingly, willingness to transfer further national competences to the EU level is low, especially in the area of social policy.
- Diverging economic paths among member states have certainly shaken and transformed the balance of power within the EU. Thriving Germany has gained influence, primarily – yet not exclusively – in economic matters. Citizens of other EU countries seem to acknowledge this shift without regrets as intra-EU trust in Germany is strong – often, it is stronger than people's trust in their own country. In Italy only, Germany's new power is met with strong mistrust; a reaction that Italy's population and its political leadership seem to have in common.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: NEW CHALLENGES AHEAD FOR THE EU – HOW DO CITIZENS RESPOND?

Before 2008, economic integration within the European Union was heading mainly into one direction: upwards. Despite regional disparities, all member states had gained at least some economic momentum and the European integration process was advancing fast.

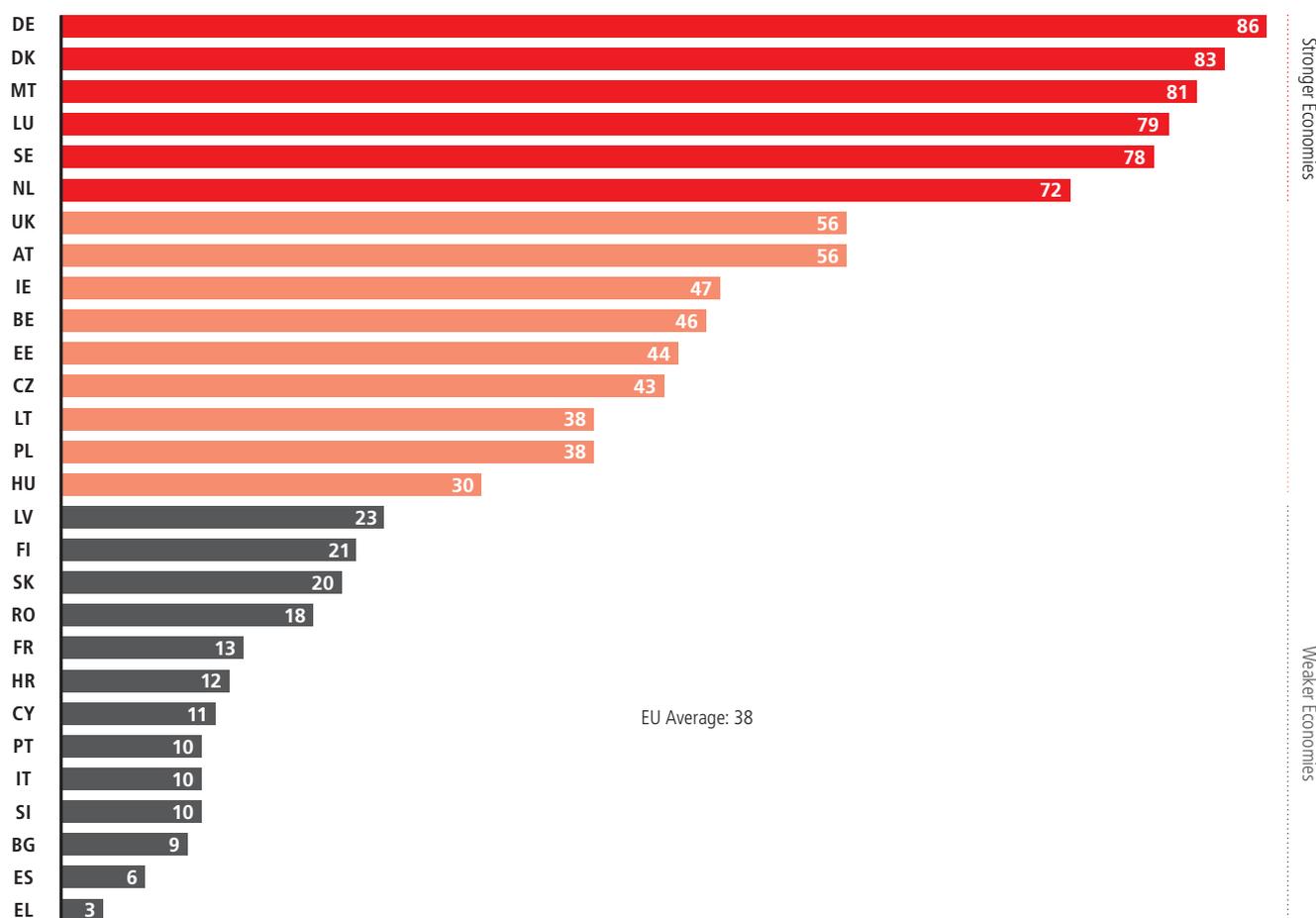
The financial and economic crisis brought this common European train to a halt. Yet even though its impact was to be felt everywhere, the crisis did not ravage all countries to the same extent. Whereas some member states were shaken but moved on, others were completely cast off the rails.

Therefore, by now, the European Union has evolved into a three-class society. A handful of countries, e.g. Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, Luxemburg and – most notoriously – Germany, stabilized surprisingly fast. A second group of countries, e.g. the UK, Austria or Poland, are still on their way towards complete recovery. A third group, however, was struck particularly hard: recession kept deepening and countries like Ireland, Spain, Portugal and – most of all – Greece

were facing imminent default. EU founding members like France and Italy have been suffering from economic stagnation for years. The consequence thereof is that the state and economic outlook of different EU member countries has never been considered more unequal by EU citizens than over the last years. Evidence for this disparity can be drawn from the current datasets of Eurobarometer.

Although economic stress has decreased in the meantime, political change has kept accelerating. EP elections in May 2014 have brought about a massive transformation of the political landscape. Both right-wing and left-wing populist parties have gained considerable support for their partly Eurosceptic, partly overtly Europhobic agendas. In France, Great Britain and Denmark, nationalist parties like *Front National (FN)*, *UK Independence Party (UKIP)* and *Dansk Folkeparti (DF)* even achieved outright victory over established parties. They were able to feed off widespread concern regarding the European Union. Whereas formerly, the EU had been met primarily with indifference, as shown by dramatically low turnout at EP elections, straightforward rejection has now become a new dominant attitude towards the Union. This trend has also taken its toll on Europe’s Social

Figure 1  
Assessment of National Economic Wellbeing («very good/good«)



**Question:** How would you assess the current situation in the following areas? State of the (national) economy  
 Figures in per cent | Gap between figures shown and 100 percent is the equivalent of categories »rather bad«/»very bad« and »do not know«

Source: Standard Eurobarometer 83 / Spring 2015

Democratic parties, even though some were hit worse than others. In Greece, the *Panellinio Sosialistiko Kinima (PASOK)* was obliterated, whilst Italy's *Partito Democratico (PD)*, led by Matteo Renzi, even managed to gain considerable ground. In Germany, the number of *SPD* voters defecting towards the right-wing populist *AfD* was relatively small at the time of the EP elections. Regional elections during the following months were characterized, however, by a strong flux of voters towards the *AfD*, increasingly at the expense of the *SPD*.

Not only is the rise of Eurosceptic forces a problem for established parties, it also hampers the functioning of EU institutions. An additional strain has thus been put onto the integration process, particularly at a time when European solidarity is already under pressure given the massive influx of refugees from Arab countries and Eastern Europe. Demand for national isolationist policies has grown in large parts of the population. Also, current tensions along the Eastern borders of the EU, while certainly highlighting the EU's importance for freedom and economic prosperity, have led to the collision of national interest among certain member states. Recent EU-wide surveys provide evidence for a double phenomenon: on the one hand, people's view of the EU has slightly recovered; on the other hand, Eurosceptic parties are still on the rise.

In this context, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung has ordered a survey in order to gain reliable insight into the »expectations and fears that people in a selected number of EU member states have regarding European integration.« A particular goal will be to identify those policy areas in which a deepening of European integration is called for, and those in which demand for national solutions has the upper hand. A special focus shall be put on both labor market and social policy: both have evolved quite differently across countries during the crisis.

For this purpose, representative surveys were carried out in a total of eight EU member states. The sample comprises Germany as well as another three founding members of the EU: France, Italy and the Netherlands. It is completed by two Western countries that joined at a later moment in time (Spain in 1986, Sweden in 1995) as well as two Eastern countries that joined in 2004: Czech Republic and Slovakia. In five out of eight countries, Social Democrats are the governing party (France, Italy, Sweden, Czech Republic, Slovak Republic). In two countries (Germany and the Netherlands), Social Democrats are junior partners in governments led by a Conservative and a Liberal, respectively. In Spain, which is the only country in the sample without any Social Democratic share in government, the Conservative party was in power at the time of the survey.

Economic conditions vary strongly throughout the sample: Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands are countries with a very good economic outlook – according to their citizens. Meanwhile, France, Italy and Spain suffer from bad economic conditions, whereas the Czech Republic and Slovakia find themselves in a mixed situation.

## 2. DIFFERENT ECONOMIC REALITIES

Despite the economic turmoil of recent years, EU member states can still be considered middle-class societies – at least in the self-perception of a majority of citizens of those eight countries examined in our sample. Respondents were asked to assess their own social status. Almost two thirds of them described themselves as members of the middle class, with only minor variation among countries. However, variation can be found in national ratios of higher and lower strata. In four out of six Western European countries (Germany, the Netherlands, France and Sweden), the number of respondents describing themselves as members of the upper strata is considerably higher than the number of those identifying as members of the lower strata. The pattern is inverse in the Southern countries of Italy and Spain: here, between twice and three times as many citizens describe themselves as living within the bottom strata of society as those claiming to live within the top strata. Socioeconomic imbalance, however, is even harsher amongst Czechs and Slovaks. 31 percent of respondents from the Czech Republic, as well as 34 percent of those from Slovakia see themselves as part of the lower classes: with the exception of Spain (28 percent), none of the other countries examined comes even close to these figures. Conversely, only 7 and 6 percent of respondents in these two countries, respectively, consider themselves members of the upper strata.

The economic crisis – triggered by the financial crisis of 2008 – has led to a level of uncertainty that can be detected in people's perception of their personal situation. When asked whether or not they felt economically secure in their lives<sup>1</sup>, only about a third of respondents gave a thoroughly positive answer. 45 percent said that they felt somewhat secure at best, and another 16 percent said they were clearly feeling insecure. Interestingly, there is no perfect correlation between people's feeling of security and the overall perception of a nation's economic situation. In Sweden and the Netherlands, more than half the population (52 and 51 percent respectively) feel secure, whereas in even better-performing Germany, the share of the population that feels secure (40 percent) is just as low as in neighboring and economically troubled France. Citizens of the Czech Republic feel least secure (36 percent of them feeling insecure), followed by those of Italy (22 percent). Slovaks, on the other hand, do feel as secure from social decline as Germans and the French do – despite their country's difficult economic situation. (See fig. 1)

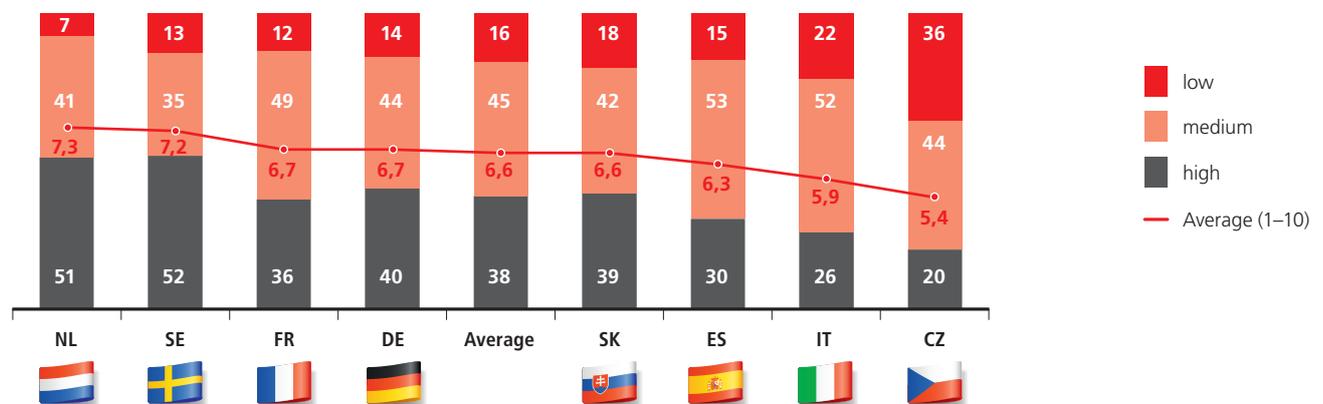
Unsurprisingly, individual social status and the perception of one's own level of economic security are closely linked. For instance, about a third (37 percent) of respondents self-describing as lower class also feel economically insecure, compared to only 5 percent of those claiming membership of the upper class. Roughly two thirds of upper-class respondents (68 percent) are not worried about their own social decline at all. This pattern exists in all eight countries examined, even though the spread between feelings of insecurity vs. feelings

<sup>1</sup> Respondents were asked to position themselves on a ten-step scale where »1« meant that one belonged to the »bottom« of society and »10« meant that one belonged to the »top«.

Figure 2

**Personal Situation – Economic Security**

Dutch Feel Most, Czechs Least Secure



**Question:** Let us talk about your personal situation first. How economically secure do you feel in your life? Please indicate your feeling of security on a scale from 1–10, with »10« meaning »totally secure« and »1« meaning »not secure at all«.

Figures in per cent | Gap between figures shown and 100 percent is the equivalent of categories »do not know« and »prefer not to say«  
Basis: Eligible voters

Source: policy matters

of security<sup>2</sup> varies among countries. The spread is widest in the Czech Republic, where average security among lower-class respondents scores at 3.8 – only half of the average of upper-class respondents (7.7). In Germany, however, the gulf between insecurity amongst the lower classes and security amongst the upper classes is almost as wide (4.3 to 7.9).

### 3. CITIZENS' CONCERNS IN EIGHT EU COUNTRIES

The last years have been characterized by a series of crises which have affected EU countries directly or at least indirectly. This has surely had an effect on the general mood of Europe's population. Citizens have had to watch their countries struggle against considerable problems. They have been concerned about developments in crucial policy areas. Out of seven policy areas examined in this survey, there was not a single one that a majority of respondents did not find worrisome. Citizens have been concerned most about labor-market prospects (68 percent) as well as about the sudden rise in the number of non-EU immigrants during the summer of 2015 (68 percent). However, the economic development of respondents' respective home countries has been subject to similar concern (64 percent), followed by foreign policy and social cohesion (both 63 percent) as well as social security (62 percent). Surprisingly, concern regarding the Euro, which had been dominant until the summer of 2015, has shrunk in

the meantime (51 percent). This shift demonstrates the new dynamics of European reality, with crisis after crisis passing by. Policy areas which had been at the center of public attention until recently, are being pushed into the background within weeks by new, even more urgent issues.

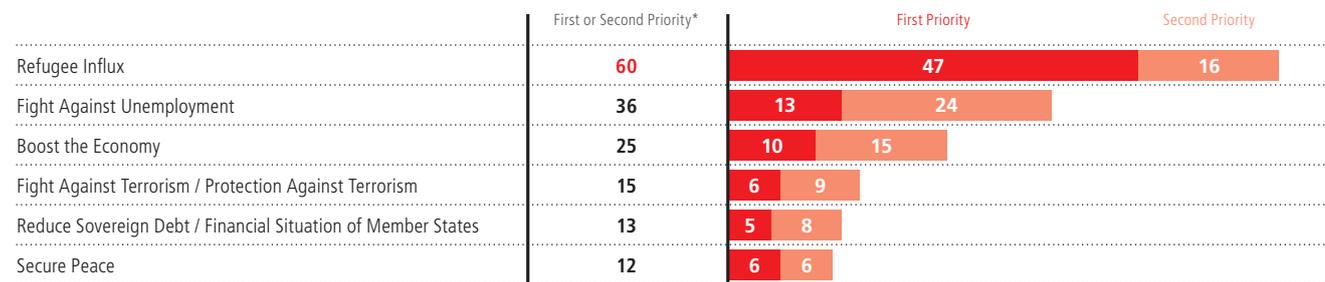
Whilst current problems as a whole weigh heavy on all eight countries examined, the perceived importance of issues varies among nations. Some policy areas have caused concern in all countries equally, e.g. foreign policy, social cohesion, social security or refugee migration. In the case of immigration, however, worries seem detached from actual reality: in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, which are hosting a very small number of refugees only, concern is more widespread than in most other countries examined. Three out of four respondents in these two countries say that they are concerned about this issue – a share of people considerably higher than in those countries hosting the largest number of refugees, Germany (64 percent) and Sweden (57 percent).

Differences are bigger still regarding the economy, with countries divided into a »three-class society«. Respondents are particularly worried about their national economic outlook in Spain (82 percent), Italy (80 percent) and France (75 percent), i.e. in member states where the current situation is considered very bad already. In countries like Germany or the Netherlands, where respondents consider their national economies strong and stable, the outlook on the economic future causes much less concern. In both countries, a slim majority of respondents remain optimistic about the economic future. Nonetheless, the fact that 44 percent of German respondents and 46 percent of Dutch respondents are indeed concerned shows that doubt is growing with some people.

Across countries, some common socio-structural features are noticeable. For instance, 18-to-29-year olds generally assess their countries' future in more positive ways than is the case with older respondents. Also, men describe themselves

<sup>2</sup> Respondents were asked to indicate on a ten-step scale, how secure they felt in their life. Step »10« translates into »thoroughly secure«, while step »1« translates into »not secure at all«. This spectrum can be divided into three zones: steps 8 through 10 represent high security, steps 5 through 7 represent medium security and steps 1–4 represent low security or insecurity. Also, average scores may serve as an index for the level of security experienced in different parts of the population.

Figure 3  
**Policy Priorities of the EU**  
 Refugee Policy by Far Most Urgent EU Issue



**Question:** Which tasks should the European Union tackle most urgently?

Figures in per cent  
 Basis: Eligible voters  
 \* Multiple responses

Source: policy matters

as less concerned than women do. The starkest pattern, however, is to be found in the differences between social strata. There is a negative proportionality between the expression of concern and social class: the higher up one lives within society, the less concerned one is. This equation is valid especially in terms of economic expectations. Socially privileged people are less worried both about the future of their national economy (48 percent) and the labor market (56 percent) than are members of the lower strata (80 percent with both issues). Even in thriving Germany, respondents from the lower strata neither share the upper classes' economic optimism nor their trust in the labor market. Meanwhile, members of the middle classes are torn and split when asked about the future of their national labor markets.

There is one particular issue that triggers unequivocal pessimism everywhere: the question whether or not Europe's political systems are capable of coping with current problems. Across countries, seven out of ten respondents have their doubts. Skepticism is strongest in Italy and Spain (both 80 percent) and weakest in the Netherlands (62 percent). This lack of trust in politics might be worsened by politicians' inability to offer sustainable and consensual solutions for the refugee crisis in particular. Both acceptance and distribution of refugees are European issues yet to be solved.

Refugee policy has become a top priority for citizens. When asked openly – i.e. without any answering options offered – to name the EU's biggest problem, one in two respondents said »refugees«. Another 13 percent consider this issue to be the EU's second-largest problem. When it comes to refugees, underlying attitudes differ considerably: demand for a »limitation of the refugee influx« is a more dominant motive than the demand for appropriate housing and integration. The importance of refugee policy is higher in the Visegrád countries of the Czech Republic and Slovakia than it is in Germany and Sweden, although so far, only a tiny fraction of all refugees have asked for shelter with the former.<sup>3</sup>

Far behind refugee policy, the fight against unemployment is considered the most important or second-most important issue by a total of 36 percent of respondents. Demands that the EU prioritize this policy area are widespread in France (44 percent), Italy (45 percent) and Spain. The latter is the only country where unemployment is considered more important than migration (55 vs. 32 percent).

On people's EU agenda, boosting the economy ranks third (25 percent total). Demand for a stronger role of the EU in this area is strongest in Italy (42 percent) and Spain (36 percent). Further down the list, one finds issues such as the fight against terrorism<sup>4</sup> (15 percent total), debt reduction (13 percent total) and securing peace (12 percent).

Interestingly, social status has barely any impact on respondents' prioritization of EU policy areas. Refugee policy is the dominant issue among all social strata and differences regarding economic policy are quite small as well.

#### 4. PROBLEM-SOLVING COMPETENCES

Alongside policy areas as such, respondents were asked which party they would trust most in dealing with the issues in question. The main finding here is that trust is spread across the entire spectrum. Any traditional concentration of trust upon Conservative and Social Democratic parties has given way to a new kind of complexity.

In terms of refugee policy as the EU's most urgent challenge, there is a wide variety of parties that different groups of respondents hold to be most capable, respectively, of dealing with the issue. On a cross-country average, Social Democratic parties – as united under the roof of the S&D parliamentary group – are trusted most (17 percent of respondents). This result is largely due to a strong trust in Slovakia's *sociálna demokracia* (SMER), whilst high problem-solving capacity is also attributed to Social Democratic

<sup>3</sup> A comparable phenomenon can be observed in Germany, where resistance against refugees is strongest in Saxony. In this federal state, the share of foreigners is lower than in most parts of Germany.

<sup>4</sup> Please note that this survey was carried out prior to the Paris attacks on 13 November. In the aftermath of the ISIS strikes, this issue has probably become more important for European citizens.

parties in Germany, Italy, Sweden and France. Conservative parties – i.e. members of the EPP – rank second with a total of 13 percent, with Germany’s *CDU/CSU* and Spain’s *Partido Popular (PP)* leading the field. Another seven percent of respondents put their trust in the Liberal parties of the *ALDE* group, while the *European United Left* as well as the *ECR* group led by British Conservatives receive three percent each.

The explosive force of current refugee policy is evident, given that a remarkable eleven percent of respondents put their trust in the xenophobic position of *ENF* group (*Europe des nations et des libertés*) led by France’s *Front National*. Another seven percent are in favor of the barely softer policy position held by *EFDD* group led by Britain’s *UKIP*. Those respondents who think of refugee policy as a matter of limitation rather than of humanitarian shelter, are even more likely to put their trust in right-wing populist parties. French *Front National* and Sweden *Democrats (SD)* are considered competent in terms of refugee policy by 45 and 50 percent of national respondents respectively – figures higher than those of all other French and Swedish parties combined. Things are similar in the Netherlands and Italy: right-wing populist parties *Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)* – led by Geert Wilders – and *Lega Nord* are trusted more than their political opponents. In Germany, *AfD* scores a weaker, yet remarkable six percent.

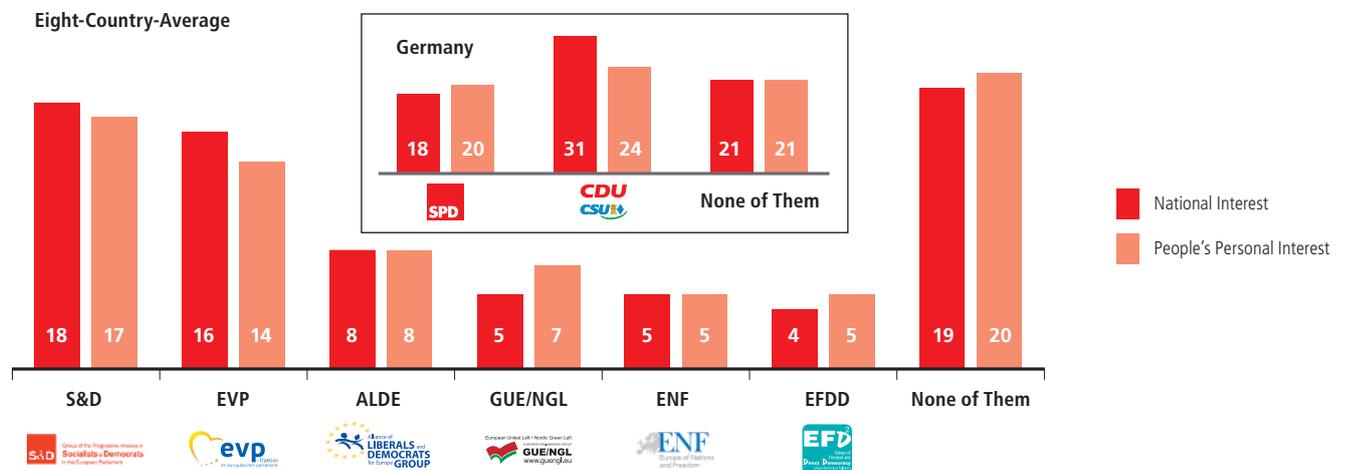
Among those respondents who prioritize the fight against unemployment, a plurality put their trust in Social Democratic parties (19 percent), followed by Conservatives (14 percent). Those voicing a primary demand for boosting the economy, however, do have a tendency toward the *EPP* (20 percent), with Social Democrats following behind (17 percent) and Liberals playing an important, partly even dominant role (Netherlands, Czech Republic). Conservatives do beat Social Democrats once again in the realm of anti-terrorism policy (16 vs. nine percent). At the same time, however, a full 16 percent of respondents would rather entrust *ENF* or *EFDD*

parties with fighting terrorism. Even in terms of unemployment and economic policy, one respondent out of ten puts her trust in those right-wing parties.

In each policy area, finally, there is about a third of respondents saying that they do not put their trust in any single party. Some of those respondents think that no party is actually capable at all of coping with the issues in question, others believe that parties can solve problems through cooperation only.

Additionally, all respondents were asked which party represented best their national interest as well as the interest of »people like yourself«. On a cross-country average, *S&D* parties are awarded more popular trust in both questions than are other parties. 18 percent of respondents are willing to entrust Social Democratic parties with national interest and 17 percent consider them the best representatives of their own personal interest. Conservative parties, however, are not trailing too far behind with 16 and 14 percent of respondents respectively. Liberal parties reach relatively good scores as well: eight percent of respondents entrust them with their national and/or personal interest, respectively. Socialist and Communist parties united as *GUE/NGL* have the trust of five percent of respondents in terms of national interest as well as that of eight percent of respondents regarding personal interest. Once again, trust in right-wing populist parties is quite high. When it comes to national interest, nine percent of respondents put their trust in *EFDD* or *ENF* parties. With respect to personal interest, figures even climb up to ten percent. This is particularly remarkable since Germany’s *AfD*, as a member party of *ECR*, is not even included. Four out of ten respondents, however, did not name any single party at all, neither regarding national interest nor personal interest. Amongst those without trust in any party, members of the lower classes are particularly numerous.

Figure 4  
**Representation of National and Personal Interest with the EU**  
 Trust in Social Democrats is Highest across Countries. Conservatives Trusted Most in Germany.



**Question:** Which party does, in your opinion, best represent your country’s national interest with the EU?  
**Question:** And which party in your country does, in your opinion, fight most for the interest of people like yourself at EU level?  
 Figures in per cent | Gap between figures shown and 100 percent is the equivalent of categories »do not know«, »prefer not to say« and »other parties«

Source: policy matters

Patterns of trust vary considerably among countries. Within the Social Democratic ranks, Slovakia's *SMER* generates the highest level of trust. In terms of national interest, 32 percent of Slovaks trust this party most – an overall record. With respect to people's personal interest, *SMER* has the trust of 26 percent of respondents, far more than other Slovak parties. Social Democrats also rank first in countries that currently have a Social democratic head of government, such as Italy, Sweden and France. The only exception to this rule can be found in the Czech Republic, where *Česká strana sociálně demokratická (ČSSD)* is trailing behind Liberal *ANO 2011*. Within the Conservative camp, Germany's *CDU/CSU* has a lead role, especially regarding the defense of national interest. In that respect, the party has the trust of 31 percent of German respondents, leaving its Social Democratic coalition partner far behind (18 percent). Regarding people's personal interest, however, trust is spread more evenly between *CDU/CSU* (24 percent) and *SPD* (20 percent). In Spain, a plurality of 25 percent prefer to have national interest dealt with by *PP*. Regarding personal interest, however, the Conservatives only reach a trust level of 17 percent. Since *Podemos* does not score any less (17 percent) and *Izquierda Unida (IU)* achieves an additional four percent, left-wing socialist parties currently enjoy a higher level of popular favorability (21 percent) than does the governing party. Meanwhile, *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* lags behind with eleven and 14 percent respectively. In the Netherlands, Prime Minister Rutte's *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (VVD)* ranks slightly ahead of its political opponents with 16 and 13 percent of respondents respectively.

Within the camp of right-wing populists, popular trust is strongest with France's *Front National* and Italy's *Movimento 5 Stelle*. The latter commands the same level of popular trust as does Prime Minister Renzi's *Partito Democratico (PD)*. Also, right-wing radical *Sweden Democrats* can rely on a remarkable level of trust among Swedish voters: 12 percent of

respondents trust that party regarding national interest, 14 percent of respondents trust it regarding their personal interest.

### 5. OVERALL ATTITUDES TOWARD THE EU

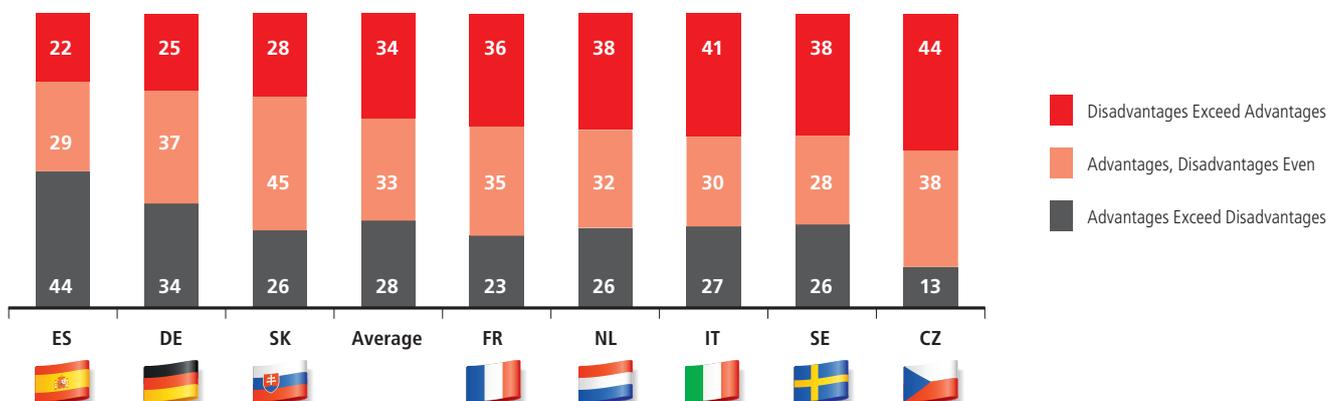
When the European Union and its predecessor, the European Economic Community, were founded, hope was great and alive. The idea of economic and, later on, political integration for a rising number of European countries was a beacon of hope, peace and stability for a continent that had seen the terror and devastation of two world wars. From the beginning, the European project had been linked with the expectation of an economic prosperity creating large middle classes. In addition, unrestricted travelling and a common currency for most member states were to change people's everyday lives.

Nonetheless, the European integration process has always been accompanied by skepticism and a range of concerns. For instance, many citizens have feared losing their country's autonomy. Also, they have associated the EU with excessive bureaucracy and inefficiency.

In former days, however, there had always been a net ›surplus‹ of hope, as documented by data from Eurobarometer. This optimism only turned into widespread skepticism during the financial and economic crisis. Whilst recent Eurobarometer figures do hint at yet another turn towards more positive feelings, skepticism has had the upper hand ever since.

This shift is confirmed by the findings of the 8-country-survey. On cross-country average, there are more people concerned about the risks than there are people praising the advantages of their countries' EU membership. One third of respondents (34 percent) say that their countries' EU membership is rather disadvantageous, whereas roughly a quarter of them (28 percent) are convinced that benefits outweigh costs. Another third think that benefits and costs are more or less even.

Figure 5  
**EU Membership – Cross-Country Comparison**  
 More than a Third Associate Their Countries' EU Membership with Net Disadvantages; Spaniards See Net Advantages in EU Membership



**Question:** When thinking of your country's EU membership, would you say that advantages outweigh disadvantages, or that disadvantages outweigh advantages, or that advantages and disadvantages are even?

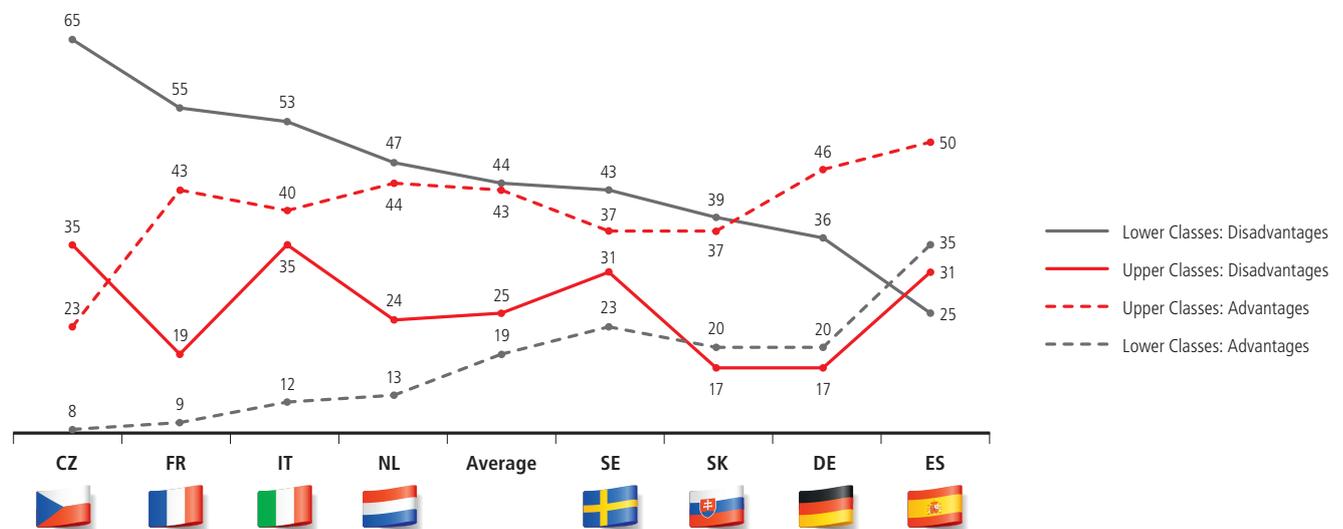
Figures in per cent | Gap between figures shown and 100 percent is the equivalent of categories ›do not know‹, ›prefer not to say‹  
 Basis: Eligible voters

Source: policy matters

Figure 6

**Advantages, Disadvantages of EU Membership**

Advantages, Disadvantages According to Upper Classes and Lower Classes in eight Countries



**Question:** When thinking of your country's EU membership, would you say that advantages outweigh disadvantages, or that disadvantages outweigh advantages, or that advantages and disadvantages are even?

Figures in per cent | Gap between figures shown and 100 percent is the equivalent of categories »do not know«, »prefer not to say«  
Basis: Eligible voters

Source: policy matters

Below the cross-country average, disparities among countries are massive, with Spain and the Czech Republic defining the spectrum. In Spain, a large plurality of respondents (44 percent) are convinced that their country has benefited ever since joining the EU in 1986, while barely one quarter (22 percent) of Spaniards think the opposite. In the Czech Republic, a country that joined the EU as late as 2004, opinion goes the other way round: 44 percent think that costs outweigh benefits, while only a mere 13 percent believe in a net surplus of benefits. This negative stance is echoed by a plurality of citizens in Sweden, Italy, the Netherlands and even France. Among Slovakia's population, the balance seems rather even. Apart from Spain, however, Germany is the only country left where people see more benefits than costs: 34 percent of Germans believe in net benefits, 25 percent claim the opposite.

Here, the fact that Germany pays the highest share in EU contributions seems to be compensated by the notion that export-oriented Germany has benefitted more than others from the European internal market.

It is not very easy to find conclusive reasons for these differences in people's views of their own countries' EU membership. Apparently, they are neither a function of a country's date of joining, nor of its economic condition, nor of its geographic region. For instance, Slovaks have built a much stronger relationship with the EU over the last ten years than Czechs have – a nation they once shared a country with. Likewise, economic distress is certainly just as bad in EU-friendly Spain as it is in Eurosceptic Italy. Also, economic prosperity does not keep the Swedish from showing more skepticism towards the EU than people do in Germany, another economic powerhouse.

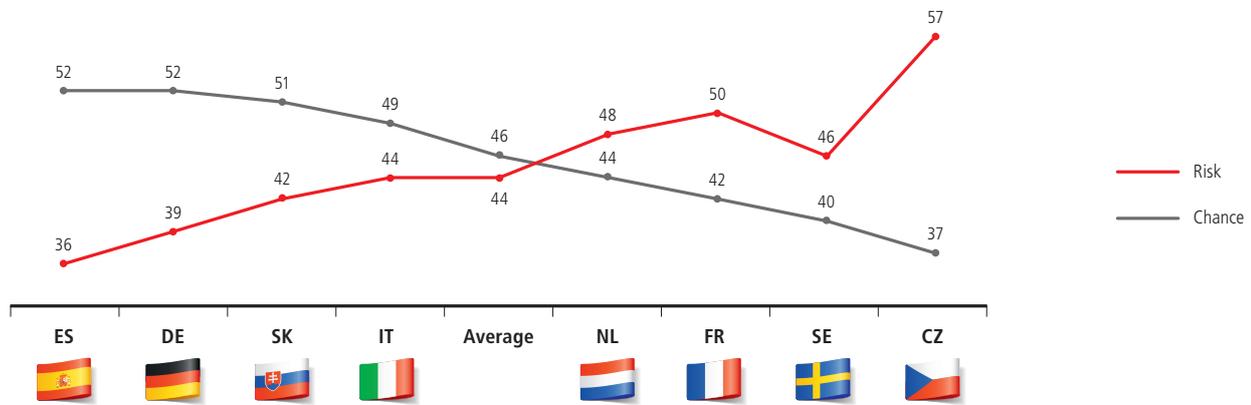
Despite this complex pattern, one common feature is to be mentioned: those respondents describing themselves as upper class have a tendency to see more benefits than costs in EU membership. Czechs are the only exception to this rule, as here, even the economic elite sees more costs than benefits. On the other hand, those belonging to the lower classes generally express more skepticism toward the EU, with Spain being the only exception. This social divide is strongest in France, where more than half of respondents from the lower strata are skeptical of the EU, whereas a majority of upper-class respondents praise the benefits of France's EU membership.

## 6. HOW CITIZENS VIEW THE EU: MAKING ASSOCIATIONS

Ambivalent attitudes toward the EU become evident in the qualities that citizens associate with the latter. Respondents were confronted with eleven pairs of opposite terms and then were asked whether they would rather associate the EU with the positive or the negative term. In four cases, a cross-country majority picked the positive term; in another four cases, a majority chose the negative term. Eventually, in three out of eleven cases, positive and negative views were even.

The EU is still seen in a positive light regarding two values that have been part of its founding code. On cross-country average, six out of ten respondents describe the EU as peaceful, and a majority of 52 percent consider it democratic. This being said, a full 29 percent of respondents do consider the EU as rather aggressive and 38 percent even qualify it as anti-democratic. These negative associations are strongest

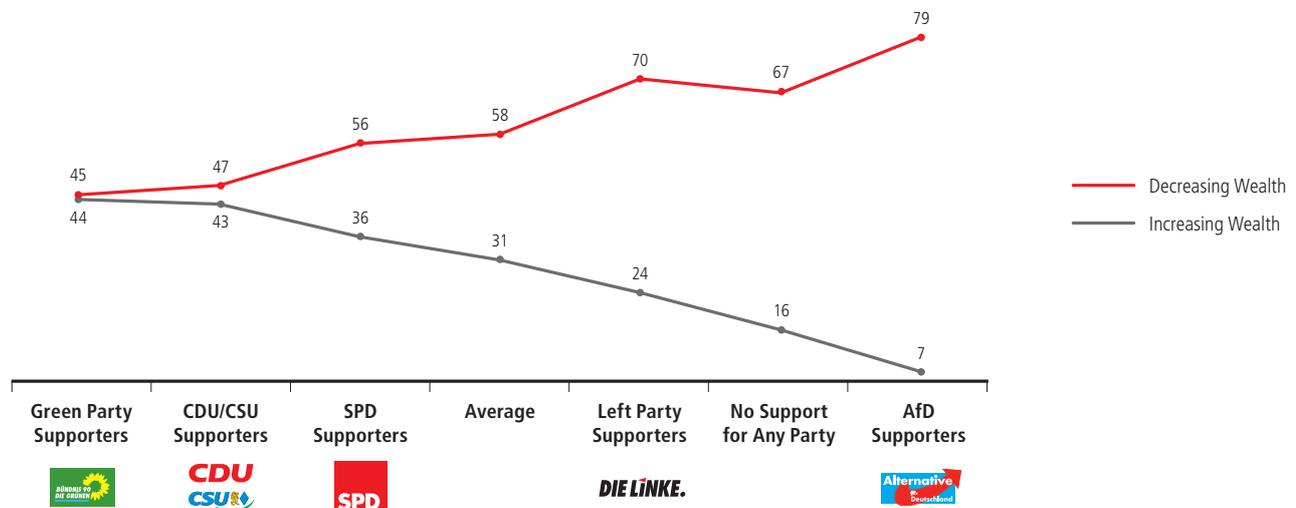
Figure 7  
**Associations about the EU**  
 Citizens Split over whether the EU Rather Poses a Chance or a Risk



**Question:** I am going to read pairs of opposite terms to you. Please tell me which of the terms you would rather associate with the EU  
 Figures in per cent | Gap between figures shown and 100 percent is the equivalent of categories »do not know«, »prefer not to say«  
 Basis: Eligible voters

Source: policy matters

Figure 8  
**Associations about the EU**  
 Greens Torn about whether EU Leads to Increase or Decrease in Prosperity. Supporters of Other Parties Tend to Associate EU with Decreasing Wealth.



**Question:** I am going to read pairs of opposite terms to you. Please tell me which of the terms you would rather associate with the EU.  
 Figures in per cent | Gap between figures shown and 100 percent is the equivalent of categories »do not know«, »prefer not to say«  
 Basis: Eligible voters

Source: policy matters

in the Czech Republic (42 and 47 percent), followed by the Netherlands (35 and 47 percent). In Spain and Germany, positive views are more dominant than in the other countries examined. Across countries, a majority of respondents consider the EU more environmentalist than anti-environmentalist (54 vs. 32 percent) as well as more social than anti-social (52 vs. 38 percent). In Sweden, however, doubts about the social character of the EU are particularly strong, which may be due to Sweden's unrivalled social standards.

Respondents are split over whether the EU works rather as a job machine or as an obstacle to new jobs. They are also

torn about whether the Euro is a solid or a weak currency, and whether the EU is rather to be considered a risk or a chance. Variation among countries is strongest with this last pair of opposite terms. In Spain and Germany (both 52 percent), Slovakia (51 percent) and Italy (49 percent) the EU is more strongly associated with the term »chance«. In Sweden (46 percent), the Netherlands (48 percent), France (50 percent) and, in particular, the Czech Republic (57 percent), a majority associate the EU with the term »risk«.

Skepticism towards the EU is visible in some important aspects where associations made do have a clear and strong

negative tendency. For instance, citizens in all eight countries examined do concur that the EU is more wasteful than economical and that it is more employer-friendly than it is employee-friendly. The former is hardly surprising as this negative cliché has been around since the founding days of the Union. The latter, however, is rather remarkable as it is a dominant view both in countries with a Social Democratic government and in Conservative countries like Germany and Spain. On another note, it must be considered a heavy blow to Europe’s founding principles that nowadays, it is less associated with the idea of freedom than with that of tutelage. This verdict is strongest in Slovakia and the Netherlands, weakest in Spain and Italy.

Given that Europe was founded upon the promise of prosperity, European cohesion may suffer most from the very pessimistic assessment people make about the EU’s economic perspective. Just one third of respondents are still willing to associate the EU with rising prosperity, whereas six out of ten citizens associate it with shrinking prosperity. (See fig. 8)

Differences amongst countries may be neglected in that regard. Disparities between social strata are larger and thus more interesting for analysis. Amongst members of the upper classes, a majority of respondents still believe in the EU’s promise of prosperity, whereas the lower classes no longer share that belief. Even within the middle classes, the EU is no longer associated with a bright economic future: roughly six out of ten middle-class respondents are rather afraid of further economic demise.

In Germany, belief in the EU’s economic core promise is strongly linked to political preferences. *Green* and *CDU/CSU* voters are split between optimism and pessimism, whereas supporters of *SPD*, *The Left* and *AfD* are more likely to asso-

ciate the EU with shrinking prosperity. Pessimism also is the dominant view amongst non-voters, as is the case in many other policy areas.

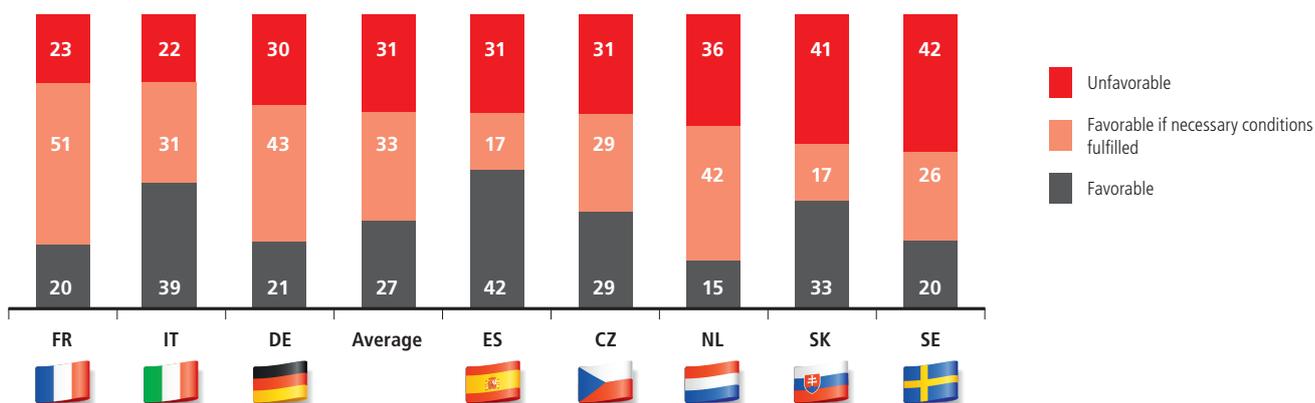
## 7. WHICH KIND OF EUROPE?

With Croatia having joined in 2013, the European Union nowadays comprises 28 countries. Another five countries – four Balkan countries and Turkey – have sent in their demand for admission and are currently considered candidates for enlargement. Another two countries – Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Kosovo – have been declared potential candidates by the EU.

When asked whether they are in favor of further enlargement, only a cross-country minority of respondents (31 percent) reject the idea straightaway. At the same time, only a quarter of respondents are wholeheartedly in favor of additional admissions (27 percent). A plurality of citizens are not opposed to an enlargement of the EU as long as »the conditions required are fulfilled«. <sup>5</sup> Since this conditionality was expressed spontaneously, i.e. without any given answering options, it should be taken very seriously. Apparently, many citizens did not appreciate all former admissions so far. Eurobarometer findings show that the current candidate countries are perceived quite differently and that willingness to let them join varies accordingly. Skepticism is currently largest with Turkey and Albania. (See fig. 9)

Refusal of any further EU enlargement is particularly strong in Sweden (42 percent) and in Slovakia (41 percent), whereas respondents in France and Italy are most willing to accept new member states. This being said, one should also

Figure 9  
**EU Enlargement**  
Six out of ten Citizens in Favor of Enlargement, with One Third Insisting that Conditions Be Fulfilled Prior to Accession

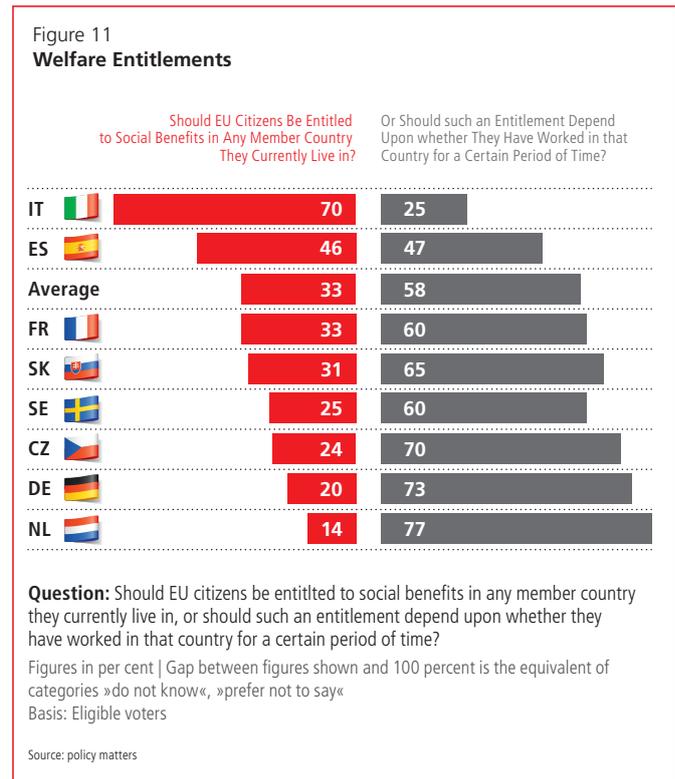
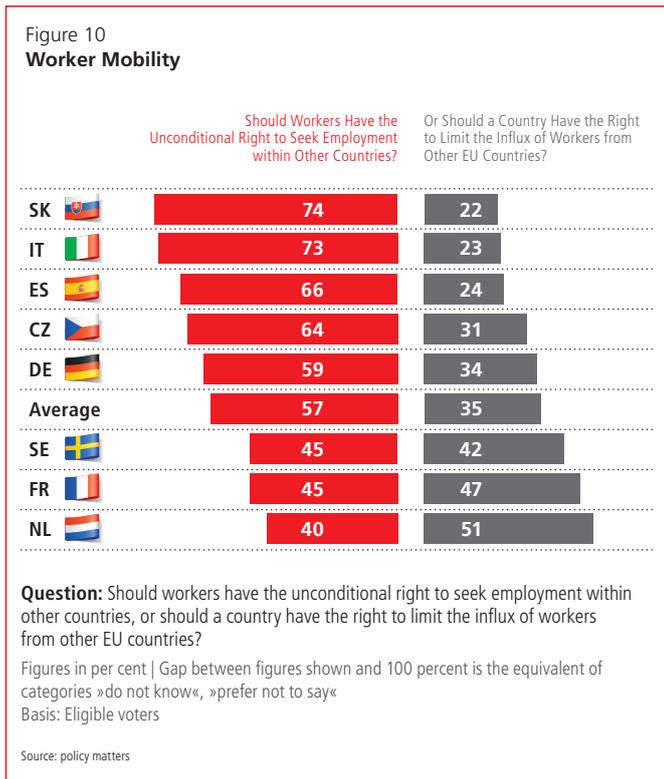


**Question:** A number of countries is planning on joining the EU over the coming years. What do you think: Are you in favor of such an enlargement or are you opposed to any additional accessions?

Figures in per cent | Gap between figures shown and 100 percent is the equivalent of categories »do not know«, »prefer not to say«  
Basis: Eligible voters

Source: policy matters

<sup>5</sup> Eurobarometer has recently shown a majority of people opposing any further enlargement. In that survey, however, this third conditional and spontaneous answering option had not been available.



note that the French insist more than others on candidate countries fulfilling all conditions required.

A desire for binding rules becomes evident in the fact that 77 percent of respondents are in favor of banning countries from the EU in case of violation of fundamental rules and values – with only 13 percent against this option. Support for this approach is highest in the Netherlands (83 percent), Germany and Sweden (81 percent each), countries which had taken a tough stance in the Grexit debate already. Resistance against a banning option is stronger in Italy, France and Spain.

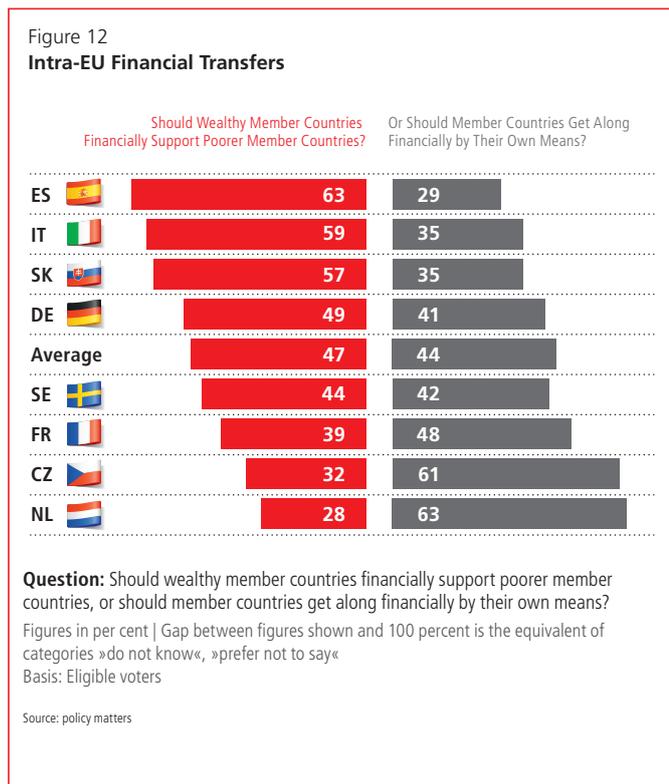
Worker mobility is certainly one of Europe’s most controversial principles. The right to free movement had temporarily been suspended in the past, as after the joining of Eastern European countries in 2004. Yet recently it has been defended quite fiercely, especially against British plans for a limit on migration to the United Kingdom. Free movement for all employees is indeed supported by a majority of citizens in those countries examined. 57 percent are in favor of any working person’s right to go and look for a job in another member state. Meanwhile, 35 percent of respondents do support the UK’s demand for national control of worker influx from other EU countries. The British proposal is most popular with the Dutch (51 percent), the French (47 percent) and the Swedish (42 percent). On the other side of the spectrum, 74 percent of Slovaks, 73 percent of Italians, 66 percent of Spaniards, 64 percent of Czechs, and 59 percent of Germans, whose country is a main destination for EU workers, wish to preserve free movement. (See fig. 10)

The far-reaching support of free movement goes hand in hand, however, with the demand that this fundamental right shall not lead to any automatic entitlement of EU migrants within national welfare regimes. In that regard, a

clear majority of 58 percent think that a person should only have a right to social assistance in a country where she has worked and paid contributions for a certain amount of time. Only one out of three respondents is in favor of European citizens’ unconditional right to welfare in any country they choose to live in. Response patterns are quite similar in six out of eight countries examined, with large majorities rejecting unconditional welfare for EU migrants. Resistance is strongest in the Netherlands and Germany, which are both countries with highly-developed welfare states and numerous workers from other EU countries. Opinion in Italy and Spain stands apart from this conditionality consensus. In Spain, the camps are even with 47 percent on both sides, while 70 percent of Italians actually do support the notion of unconditional welfare throughout the EU. (See fig. 11)

When asked about financial transfers between countries, people’s opinion is quite favorable. A slim majority of respondents think that wealthy countries should support poorer countries – one of the EU’s founding principles. Almost as many respondents believe, nonetheless, that each country should get along on its own. Once again, there are considerable disparities among the countries examined, which, surprisingly, are not a function of whether a country is a net contributor or a net recipient of European funds. A no-transfer Europe is supported by a majority in net receiving Czech Republic and net contributing France. Intra-EU solidarity, on the other hand, has many supporters within net receiving Slovakia just as well as within net contributing Germany and Sweden. (See fig. 12)

In all eight countries, there is a majority for national fiscal autonomy: member states are to decide freely about their budget. Across countries, a total of 60 percent of respondents support this kind of autonomy, 29 percent oppose it.



Defense of national budgets is strongest in the two Visegrád countries, with little opposition only. In Western European countries such as Germany, France and Spain, strong minorities actually do demand limitations on national budget autonomy.

## 8. NATIONAL VS. EU COMPETENCES

The balance of power and competences between nation-states and Brussels has always been at the heart of many European quarrels. Until recently, there had been a traditional tendency toward deepening integration, with more and more competences being shifted onto the EU level. Over the last months and years, however, momentum has reversed itself: member-states have been trying to take back power, e.g. Britain trying to put an end to free movement. Given this development, it is important to check how citizens would build an appropriate balance of competences. In this survey, respondents were given a list of eleven policy areas and then were asked to assess whether these policies should be dealt with on the European or the national level. (See fig. 13)

In four out of eleven policy areas, a cross-country majority are in favor of national sovereignty, with budgetary policy ranking first (73 percent). This position rests upon a majority in all eight countries, with support being strongest in the Czech Republic (87 percent), Slovakia (82 percent) and the Netherlands (79 percent). Re-adjustment toward the European level has its strongest support in Spain and Italy, where roughly a quarter of respondents can imagine a stronger budgetary role of the EU. When it comes to social policies such as unemployment benefits or retirement, respondents share a strong trust in the nation-state (66 and 64 percent). In six out of eight countries, between two thirds and three quarters of respondents are in favor of the current status quo in social policy, regardless of the actual quality of their national welfare state. Defense of national policy-making is strongest in traditional welfare states such as the Netherlands (76 percent) and Sweden (72 percent), but also in rather market-oriented Czech Republic (75 percent). Demands for a deeper integration of unemployment benefits and retirement schemes – which would logically follow from a stronger

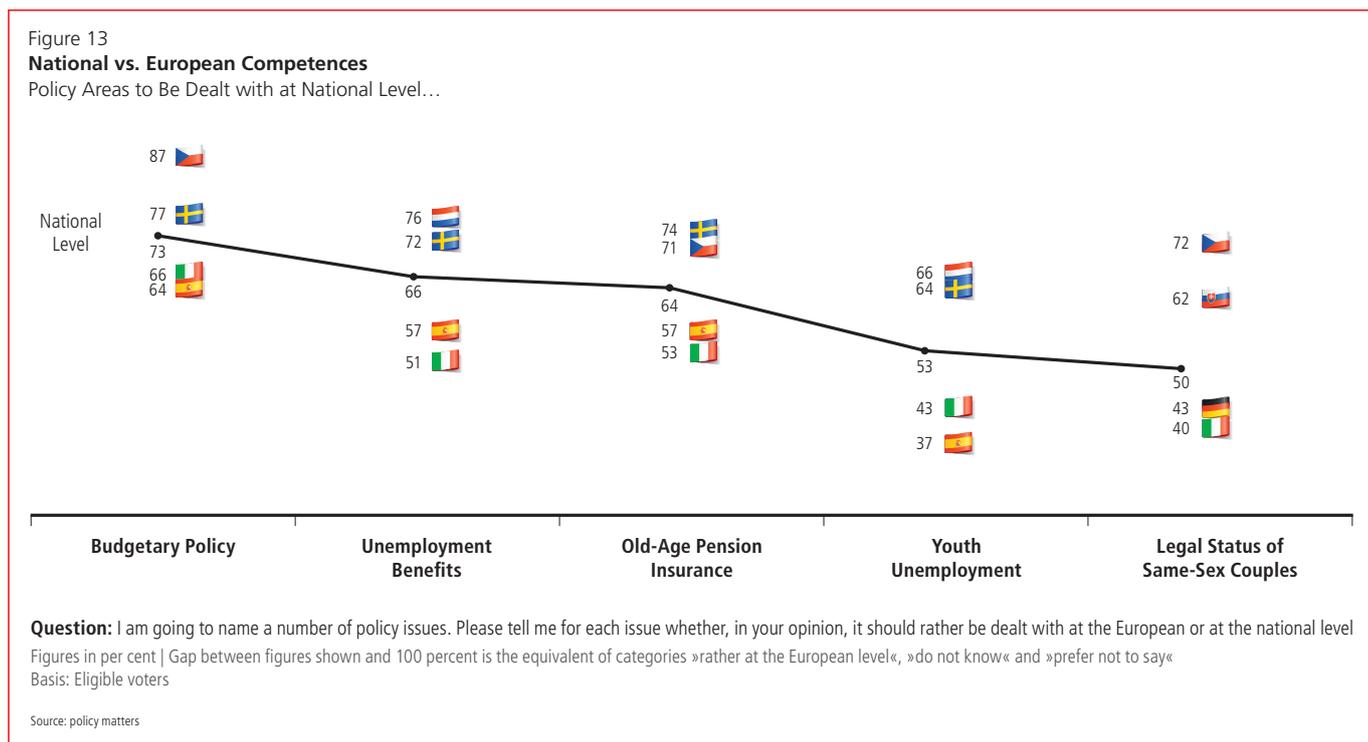
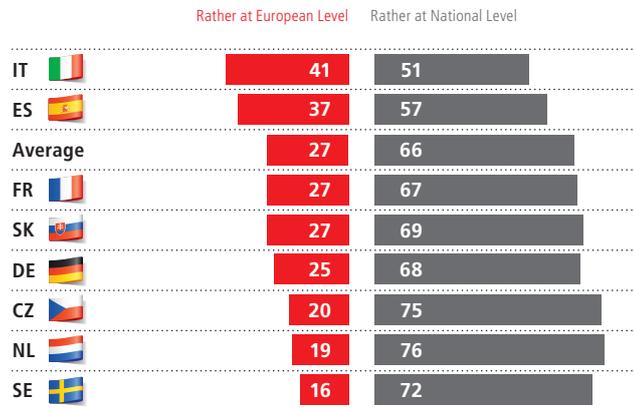


Figure 14

**National vs. European Competences**

Task: »Defining the Level and Duration of Unemployment Benefits«



**Question:** I am going to name a number of policy issues. Please tell me for each issue whether, in your opinion, it should rather be dealt with at the European or at the national level.

Figures in per cent | Gap between figures shown and 100 percent is the equivalent of categories »do not know«, »prefer not to say«

Basis: Eligible voters

Source: policy matters

role of the EU – are a bit louder in Spain and Italy only. (See fig. 14)

Patterns become less clear when people are asked about the struggle against youth unemployment. On a cross-country average, a majority of 53 percent consider this task a national issue. Nonetheless, 57 percent of Spaniards, 53 percent of Italians and 52 percent of Slovaks would actually like to see a stronger EU involvement. This seems plausible, especially in the case of Spain, as national governments have failed to deliver. In Germany, where youth unemployment is nothing but a minor problem, 45 percent of citizens believe that

the current distress in other EU countries should be reason enough for a stronger European involvement.

In three policy areas, same-sex marriage, costumer protection and energy, Europe’s citizens are split. About half of respondents are in favor of additional EU competences, whereas the other half do insist upon their national prerogatives. Regarding the legal status of homosexual couples, 72 percent of Czech citizens and 62 percent of Slovaks want legislation to remain with the nation-state. The same is true, even though to a lesser extent, for France (51 percent), Sweden (49 percent) and the Netherlands (51 percent). Meanwhile, respondents from Germany and Italy, i.e. two countries without full same-sex marriage, are actually more numerous in their support of a European solution.

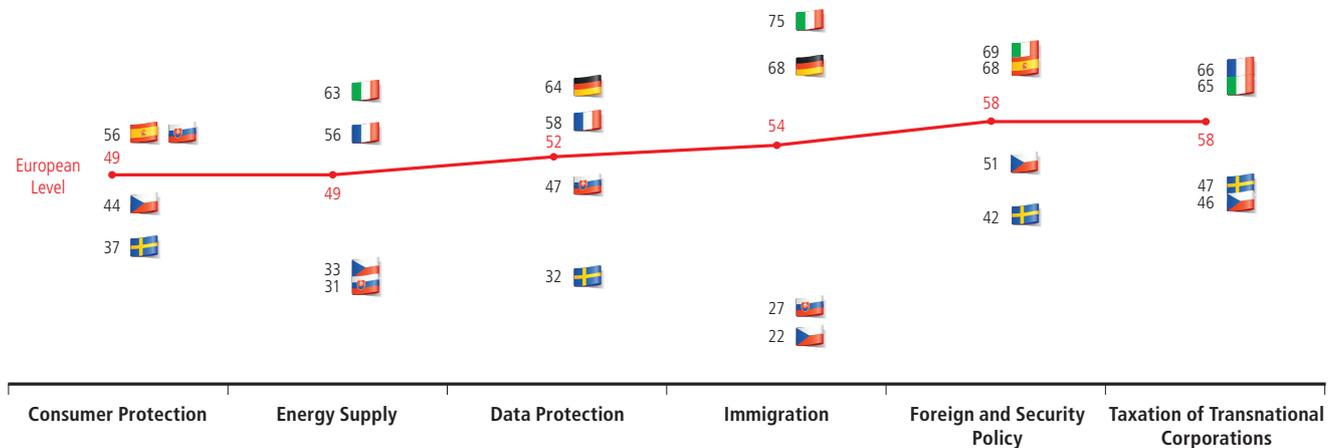
In the realm of consumer protection, supporters of national regulation (45 percent) are almost as strong as supporters of EU regulation (49 percent). Likewise, differences among countries are not very significant, with supporters of national competences being dominant in Sweden and the Czech Republic only. The ratio is quite similar regarding energy policy (type and securing of energy supply), where a slim majority support a stronger role of the EU (49 vs. 44 percent). That majority is most dominant in Italy (63 percent), France (56 percent), Spain and the Netherlands (54 percent both). Wide majorities in favor of national autonomy in energy policy can be found in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, two countries whose energy supply is at least as dependent upon international energy cooperation as that of the other countries.

There are another four policy areas that a cross-country majority would like to transfer further up to the European level, such as data protection (52 percent). Here, Germans are the most fervent supporters of a European approach (64 percent), whilst the Swedish rather insist upon national solutions (58 percent).

Figure 15

**National vs. European Competences**

Policy Areas to Be Dealt With at European Level



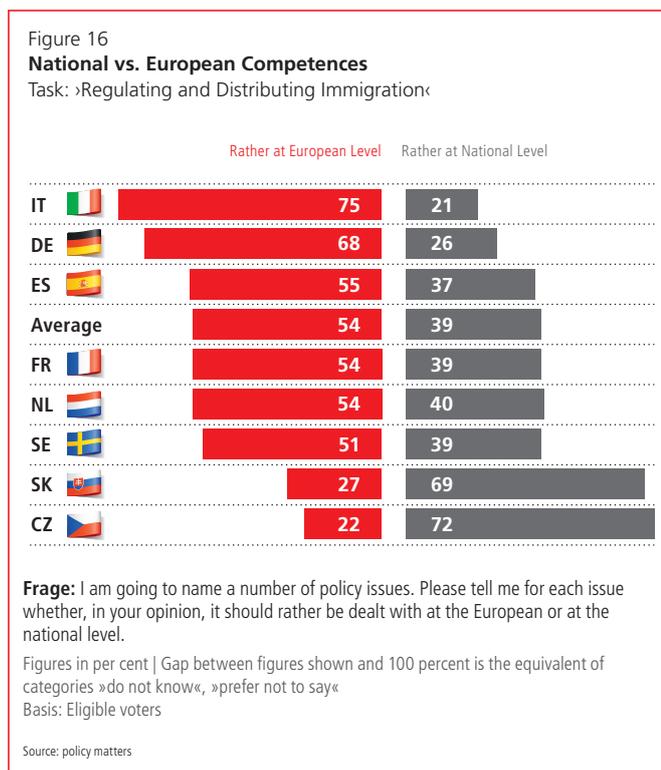
**Question:** I am going to name a number of policy issues. Please tell me for each issue whether, in your opinion, it should rather be dealt with at the European or at the national level.

Figures in per cent | Gap between figures shown and 100 percent is the equivalent of categories »rather at the national level«, »do not know« and »prefer not to say«

Basis: Eligible voters

Source: policy matters

Quite unsurprisingly, attitudes toward the different levels of migration policy are extremely diverse. The cross-country average shows that a majority support a common European approach in this difficult area. Italians (72 percent) and Germans (68 percent), whose countries struggle with a large intake of refugees, are the strongest proponents of a joint solution. In that regard, they may rely on support from Spaniards (55 percent), the French (54 percent), the Dutch (54 percent) and the Swedish (51 percent), with the latter hosting the highest relative number of refugees so far. The Czech Republic and, even more so, Slovakia, however, reject any distribution of refugees by the EU, notwithstanding the fact that so far, those two countries have taken in far fewer refugees than the other countries. Yet, not only do the Czech and Slovak governments have the firm support of Poland and Hungary, they also truly speak on behalf of their citizens: seven out of ten Czechs and Slovaks are in favor of national autonomy on this matter. Bridging the gap in this European conflict will be of crucial importance if the EU’s cohesion is to be maintained.



Regarding tax policy, there is a far-reaching consensus that taxation of international corporations should be handed over to the EU. This way, people demand that an end be put to tax havens within the EU through the harmonization of national corporate taxes. Once again, however, the Czech Republic and Slovakia do not follow the European symphony, as their citizens are split on the question whether the European or the national level should hold authority over corporate tax policy.

Respondents from all eight countries examined agree that their countries’ foreign and security policies are in need of further coordination. There are large majorities in favor of EU policymaking in Italy (69 percent), Spain (68 percent),

Germany (62 percent), Slovakia (62 percent) and even in France (53 percent). It is remarkable, after all, that the *Grande Nation*, once so eager to maintain autonomy in foreign and security policy, has eventually opened up to the idea of cooperation. In the aftermath of the Paris attacks, the need and the demand for a common foreign and security policy have become more evident than ever. Even Sweden, as the only non-NATO country in our sample, will find it difficult to withstand the pressure for common action, even though a slim majority of Swedish citizens are still rejecting a common foreign and security policy.

At the very core of the EU’s fate lies the question whether European Integration should speed up or slow down. Respondents answer this question in mainly three different ways. Citizens in the Netherlands and Sweden, who are quite well-off economically, as well as citizens in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, are quite skeptical towards a further loss of national sovereignty – for different historic and economic reasons, presumably. Meanwhile, Spain and Italy, as they lie struck by the economic crisis, are more strongly in favor of a further pooling of sovereignty at the European level. The third group consists of Germany and France, which have always been the engine of European integration. Respondents in those two countries also tend toward the transfer of further competences to Brussels, with Germans being a bit more enthusiastic than the French. Apparently, despite all current trouble, the populations of France and Germany still feel secure and have maintained a rather positive relationship with the European Union – a reassuring signal, after all.

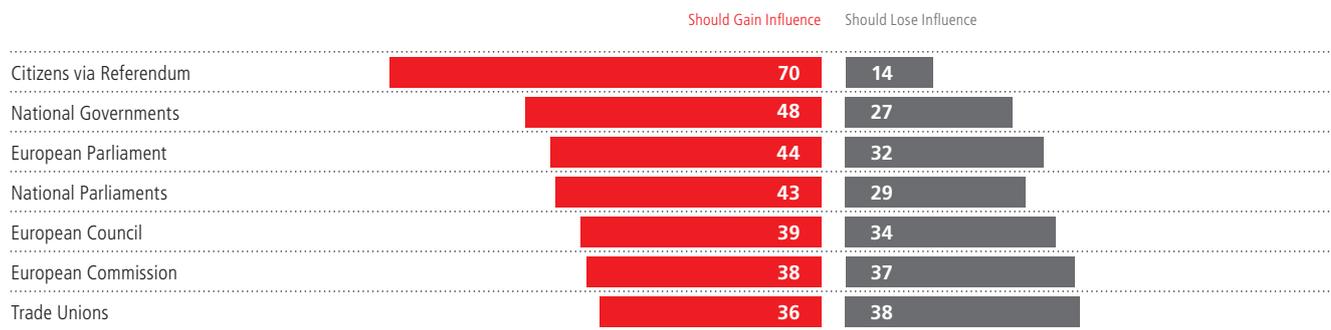
The only fly in the ointment here is that the idea of European integration remains strong with upper and middle classes only. Among the lower classes, demands for renationalization are omnipresent across countries.

## 9. INSTITUTIONAL DECISION-MAKING

Beyond the question of which issues should be taken care of at the EU level and which should be dealt with at the national level, the overall power architecture of EU institutions, national governments and parliaments is at least as controversial a topic. In this survey, respondents were asked which institutions should have more influence on European issues and which of them should have less. Roughly half of respondents (48 percent) across countries are in support of strengthened national competences. 27 percent are in favor of fewer national prerogatives, and another 13 percent think the current level of national authority is about right. This pattern can be observed in seven out of eight countries. Only in Italy, a country haunted by numerous scandals and corruption, a slim majority would like to see fewer – EU-related – powers in their national government’s hands. (See fig. 17)

Consensus is quite strong among citizens regarding additional competences for both national parliaments (43 percent favorable, 29 percent unfavorable) and the European parliament (44 percent in favor, 32 percent against). Once more, however, Italians stand somewhat apart: whilst they are willing to hand over more power to the EP, they would like to cut the competences of their own national parliament. Mean-

Figure 17  
**European Matters: Institutions and Authority**  
 Which Institutions Should Gain, Which Institutions Should Lose Influence?



**Question:** Who should gain and who should lose influence in European matters?

Figures in per cent | Gap between figures shown and 100 percent is the equivalent of categories »do not know«, »prefer not to say«

Basis: Eligible voters

Source: policy matters

while, tight majorities in the Netherlands, the Czech Republic and Sweden demand a transfer of powers from the European Parliament towards national parliaments.

There is no common attitude toward the future power of the European Council. Strong pluralities in Italy (49 percent) and France (44 percent), as well as weaker pluralities in Spain (41 percent), the Czech Republic (42 percent), Germany (39 percent) and Slovakia (37 percent) are in favor of additional competences for the Council. In Sweden and the Netherlands, however, citizens would rather curtail its competences (Sweden: 32 vs. 35 percent; NL: 29 vs. 40 percent). Controversy is even stronger in the case of the European Commission. Once again, the Dutch and the Swedish support the cutting of Commission competences (45 and 39 percent), with a majority of Czechs sharing their opinion (47 vs. 33 percent). At the other end of the spectrum, Italians and Spaniards appreciate the idea of additional competences for Mr. Juncker’s EU Commission (53 and 49 percent).

In a total of six countries, citizens rather prefer a re-transfer of European competences to the national level. In Spain, the situation is rather unclear, as citizens would be willing to grant more powers to both national and European institutions. Thus, Italy is the only country where a strengthening of EU institutions at the expense of national institutions is a popular idea.

The survey also included questions about the power trade unions should have. Responses vary strongly here: the Dutch and Slovaks ask for more trade union influence, whereas Italians, Germans and French would rather have less of it. Across countries, this leads to a stalemate: 36 percent are in favor of more union power, 38 percent are in favor of less union power. This is surprising given that a clear majority consider the EU to be more employer- friendly than employee-friendly. Even in the Social Democratic electorates, demand for an increase in union power is moderate at best.

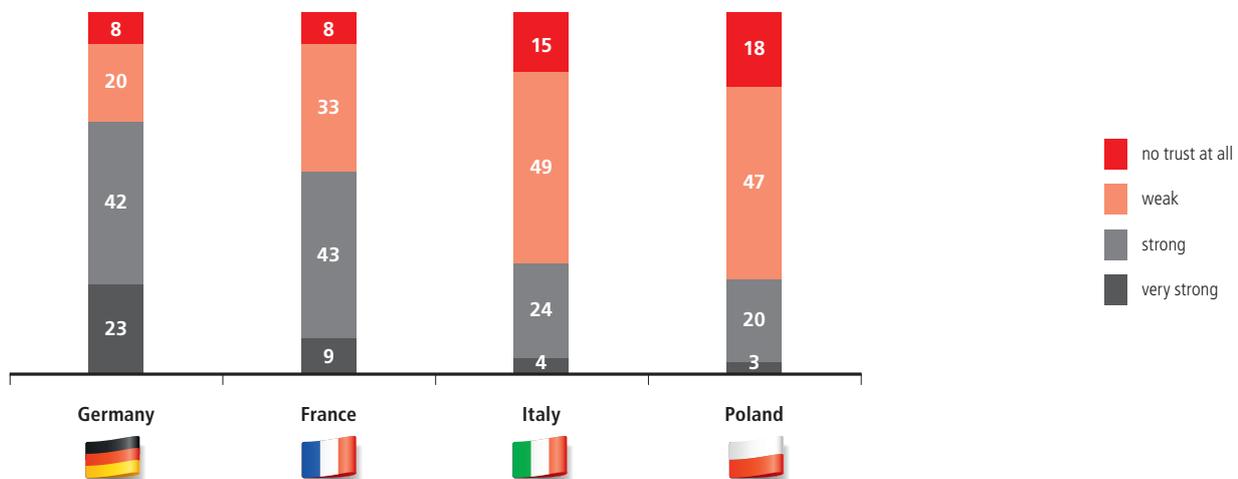
Respondents from all eight countries concur that in the future, citizens should have the right to decide about EU policy via referendum. 70 percent are in favor of such an innovation, whereas seven percent believe that citizens’

current influence is quite sufficient already, and 14 percent are outspoken opponents of any direct democracy at the EU level. Apparently, views on that matter do not vary along the lines of diverging national traditions of direct democracy. By asking for their right to vote in an EU referendum, citizens express their feeling that there is a massive democratic deficit at the EU level. It is telling, also, that the lower classes are most fervent in their support of direct democracy, whereas the pro-referendum majority is slimmer among upper-class respondents.

## 10. TRUST WITHIN AND AMONG EU MEMBER STATES

Throughout the EU’s history, France, Great Britain and Germany have played a lead role due to their demographic size and their economic power. Additionally, France and the United Kingdom have always wielded special influence in security issues, with both of them being permanent veto members of the UN Security Council. Whereas the UK, however, has interpreted this lead role in a rather defensive manner and has frequently withdrawn from the integration process (e.g. Schengen), France and Germany have used their lead roles to push integration further ahead, as could be seen in the case of the Euro, for instance. Their leadership has often been in underlying contradiction with the EU’s core principle of *one state, one vote*. Without any majority of their own, France’s and Germany’s power depends less upon hard power than it does depend on trust. Their behavior as lead countries has constantly been monitored by the rest of the Union. Thus, EU cohesion has often been a function of the level of trust those two countries have had with others. For historic reasons, this has been a delicate matter for Germany, in particular. Thus, in this survey, respondents from other EU countries were asked whether and to what extent they trusted France and Germany in their role as EU member states. For comparative purposes, respondents were also asked to indicate whether or not they put trust in Italy

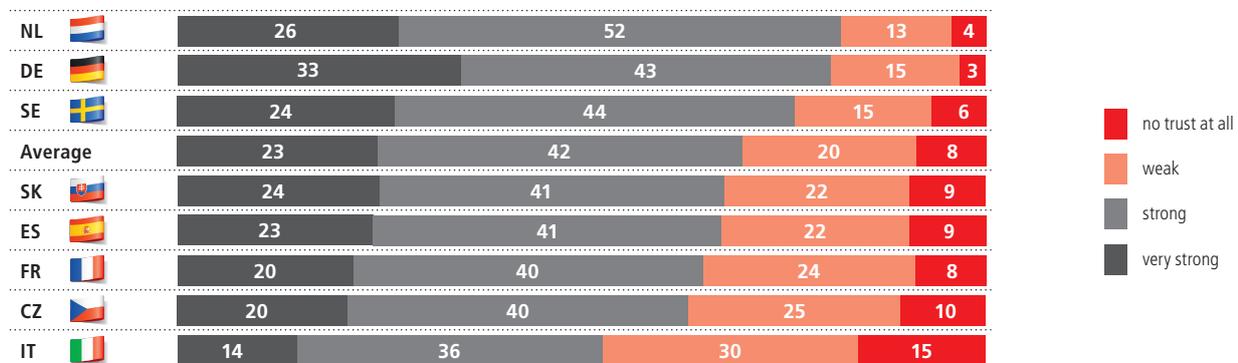
Figure 18  
**Trust in EU Member States**  
 Strong Trust in Germany and France, Weak Trust in Italy and Poland



**Question:** When you think of ... in its role as an EU member state: Is your trust in that country very strong, strong, weak or do you not trust it at all?  
 Figures in per cent | Gap between figures shown and 100 percent is the equivalent of categories »do not know«, »prefer not to say«  
 Basis: Eligible voters

Source: policy matters

Figure 19  
**Trust in EU Member States**  
 Trust in Germany Is Strong across Countries – Except Italy



**Question:** When you think of Germany in its role as an EU member state? Is your trust in that country very strong, strong, weak or do you not trust it at all?  
 Figures in per cent | Gap between figures shown and 100 percent is the equivalent of categories »do not know«, »prefer not to say«  
 Basis: Eligible voters

Source: policy matters

and Poland as another two important EU countries, but also whether they trusted their own countries respectively.

Results are quite encouraging for the EU as, despite all current problems, France and Germany are well trusted by the peoples of Europe. This is particularly true with Germany, which 65 percent of respondents across countries trust strongly (42 percent) or even very strongly (23 percent). In the Netherlands (78 percent), trust is even higher than in Germany itself (76 percent) – a remarkable finding given a troubled common history. The only exception to be found is Italy: only half of Italians put their trust in Germany, whereas almost as many show little or no trust at all.

Although France also has the trust of a majority of Euro-

pean citizens (52 percent), those with little or no trust in the *Grande Nation* are quite numerous (41 percent). Skepticism is strongest in Sweden and, once again, Italy. What should be more important, however, is that trust between France and Germany is strong and mutual. This provides for a solid foundation on which to build a common response to common challenges, especially after the Paris attacks. Also, high levels of trust in Germany and France become even more impressive when compared to people’s weak trust in Italy (28 percent) and Poland (23 percent) – with figures for Poland not even including reactions to Kaczynski’s *PiS* victory yet.

The future of the EU will highly depend upon whether or not citizens trust their own countries in their role as EU

member states. So far, the pattern is split. Whilst citizens do trust their own nation-state in Germany (76 percent), the Netherlands (71 percent) and Sweden (66 percent), trust is a lot weaker in Slovakia (46 percent) and particularly in Italy, where people’s mistrust toward their own country (58 percent) is even stronger than skepticism toward Germany or France. On the positive side, a majority of French citizens do trust their country (53 percent), even though these figures do not convey a strong impression of confidence among the French people.

### 11. RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN EUROPE

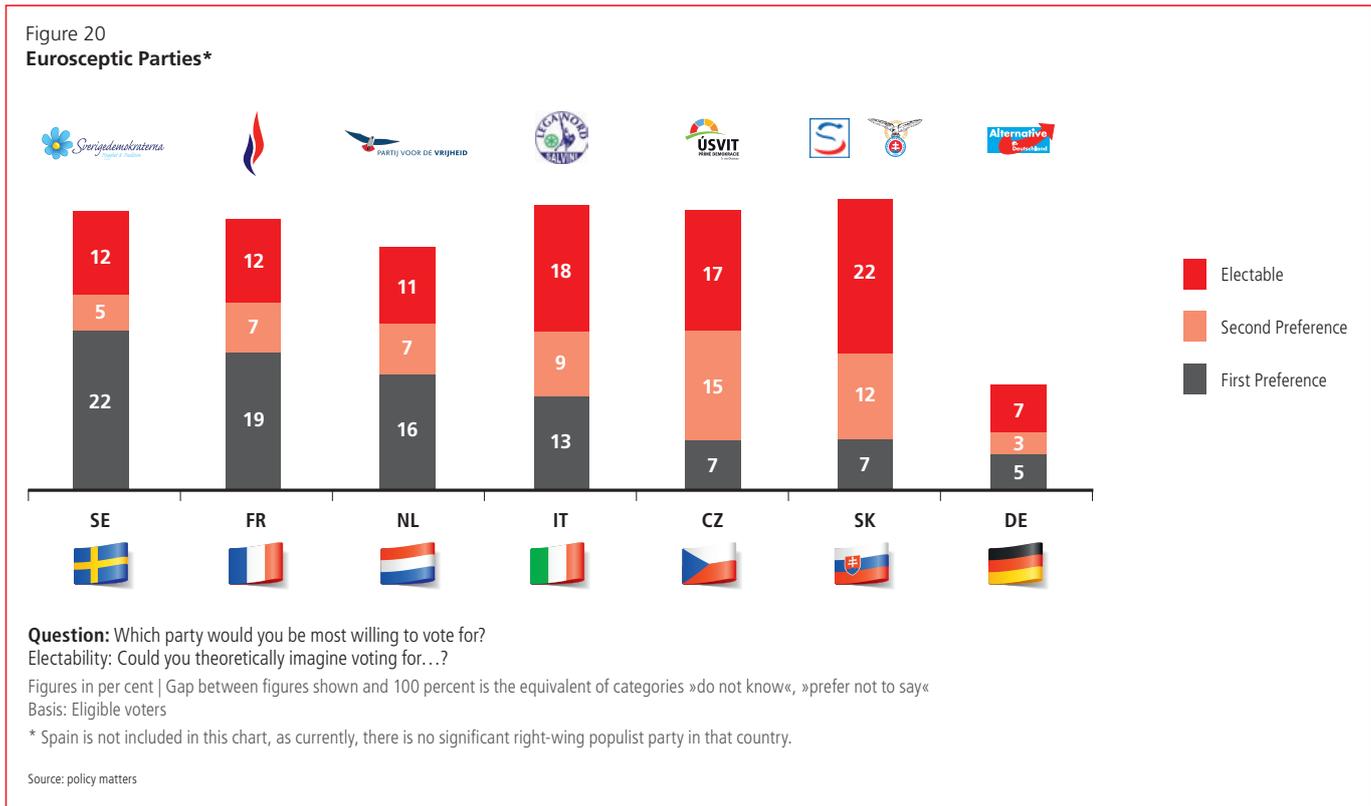
The European Union is facing a series of heavy challenges. Whilst this survey has certainly shown some encouraging findings, reasons for concern are evident. So far in its history, the EU has always managed to cope with challenges by, eventually, finding a common formula for countries’ and people’s diverging expectations and interests. The *conditio sine qua non* for these achievements, however, was that pro-EU forces were dominant in the European Parliament, the EU Council and – as it goes without saying – the EU commission. In 2014, however, EP elections gave birth to a Eurosceptic spectrum that has been stronger than ever. Right-wing populists, as represented by *EFDD* and *ENF*, have been in control of roughly 100 out of 750 seats. Since many of the 52 members of the left-wing *GUE/NGL* group often have a Eurosceptic background as well, a de facto grand coalition of Social Democrats and *EPP* is a constant necessity. This task is not likely to become any easier given that EU-sceptic or even outright anti-EU parties will most probably keep growing thanks to issues such as the refugee crisis and

the fight against terrorism. National elections in Poland and Croatia with their right-wing populist majorities, or the rise of France’s *Front National* in December 2015 must be considered first evidence for this trend.

Numbers show that the electoral potential for right-wing nationalist parties is of remarkable size. That potential consists of three groups:

- Citizens who explicitly prefer right-wing nationalist parties and who would also vote for them in national elections
- Citizens who actually prefer another party, but who would vote for a right-wing populist party in case their first-preference party were not available
- And, eventually, all those who could theoretically imagine voting for a (given) right-wing populist party

At the moment, right-wing populist parties are ahead of their rivals or at least even with them in three out of eight countries. In France, *Front National* is the strongest party with 19 percent of first preferences, ahead of Sarkozy’s *Les Républicains/Union des Démocrates et Indépendants (LR/UDI)* (18 percent) and Hollande’s *Parti Socialiste* (15 percent). In the Netherlands, Wilders’s *Partij voor de vrijheid (PVV)* ranks even with Conservative *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (VVD)* (both 16 percent) and lies clearly ahead of Social Democratic *Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA)* (nine percent). In Sweden, the *Sweden Democrats (SD, 22 percent)* are just one percentage point behind *Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetareparti (SAP, 23 percent)*. In Italy, even though *Lega Nord* (13 percent) lies far behind the governing *Partito Democratico (PD)* (23 percent), the flag of Euroscepticism may just as well be carried by left-wing populist *MoVimento 5 Stelle* and its 21 percent of supporters. In the Czech Republic and



Slovakia, while *Úsvit přímé demokracie* («Dawn of direct democracy») and *Ludová strana – Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko* (HZDS – «Movement for a democratic Slovakia») as well as *Slovenská národná strana* (SNS – «Slovakian National Party») have been trailing behind governing parties, they have nonetheless been able to gather seven percent of eligible voters. In comparison, Germany's *AfD* appears quite modest with its five percent of voter support. The refugee crisis, however, has recently been pushing more and more voters towards it. In this parade of right-wing populists, Spain is the odd one out with its complete absence of any significant right-wing populist or right-wing radical parties.

A further increase in the vote share of right-wing parties is far from unlikely as, with second preferences taken into account, voter potential for those parties reaches between 20 and 30 percent in six out of eight countries examined. If one adds those respondents who could theoretically imagine voting for such a party, their »wide« voter potential reaches roughly 40 percent in five countries (Slovakia, Italy, Czech Republic, Sweden and France) as well as 34 percent in the Netherlands. In Germany only, hurdles for right-wing populists and right-wing extremists remain higher. On top of those five percent who would already vote *AfD*, only another 3 percent name that party as their second preference, and an additional seven percent could theoretically imagine voting for them. Thus, the *AfD*'s »wide« voter potential does not exceed 15 percent on German average, reaching 20 percent in the East and 13 percent in the West. Germany is quite similar, however, to the other six countries (Spain excluded) in the extent to which right-wing populist parties draw their voters from lower social strata. It seems that people living at the bottom of society no longer believe that traditional parties represent their interest – a trend that has grown stronger during the refugee crisis.

At the same time, people's willingness to vote for a right-wing populist party is more than a mere sign of protest. The survey shows that right-wing populist voters actually believe in these parties' problem-solving capacities regarding policy areas these same voters hold to be particularly important, such as refugee policy. As nowadays, anti-migration or xenophobic parties are in charge in all four Visegrád countries, consensus-finding – which is crucial for the EU's ability to act and for its mere existence – will become even more difficult in this important policy area.

## 12. CONCLUSION: NEW OBSTACLES AHEAD ON THE ROAD TOWARD EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

2015 was a difficult year for the European Union. The Euro crisis reached yet another climax with the currency area staggering on the brink of Grexit. The Ukraine conflict has become entrenched, while diverging expectations and interests among EU partners have become evident. Since August, additionally, the EU has been confronted with its biggest challenge so far: the influx of refugees. As no solution has been found yet, those predicting the collapse of the EU have become more numerous.

European turmoil has left its mark on public opinion in the eight countries examined. This survey has shown that citizens' expectations on a number of issues vary heavily among countries. Good examples of such controversial issues would be worker mobility or welfare entitlements. Also, EU cohesion has been threatened by the fact that, across several countries, citizens rather consider the EU a risk instead of an opportunity and that they associate the EU with decreasing instead of increasing prosperity. Moreover, it is worrying that citizens believe less and less in politicians' ability to cope with the problems the EU has been facing. Conservative and Social Democratic parties in particular have lost a large share of their perceived problem-solving competences. This »gap of trust« has increasingly been exploited by right-wing populist or even right-wing extremist parties. The ongoing rise of anti-EU forces will further complicate any attempt at achieving European consensus.

On the bright side, however, this survey has also found reasons for optimism. For instance, the EU is still being associated with democracy, political stability and peace – an important asset in a time of crises and conflicts. Furthermore, there is a whole range of policy areas that a majority of citizens explicitly associate with EU authority, showing people's conviction that those issues can only be dealt with on a common basis. Also, it is encouraging that at the end of the day, Germans in particular are actually quite EU-friendly. Given all current challenges, it is a reassuring finding that Germans still think benefits outweigh costs regarding their country's EU membership. As respondents make the link between Germany's net contributions and its dependence, as an export-oriented nation, upon a functioning Europe, they leave little room for anti-EU polemics.

Additionally, EU cohesion has a strong foundation in the high level of trust citizens put in Germany and France as Europe's lead nations. Apparently, the increase in Germany's power since 2010 has not led to any particular hostility or mistrust towards that country. The same goes, even though to a lesser extent, for France. Nonetheless, France's recent drop in influence can be seen best in the fact that the French themselves do not put full trust in their own country. The lead role France has picked in the fight against terrorism, however, could eventually re-strengthen French confidence and, thus, re-strengthen solidarity among member states as well.

## LITERATURE

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