

## ***IDENTITY, SOLIDARITY AND INTEGRATION: EUROPEAN UNION DURING THE ECONOMIC CRISIS***

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*Abstract: How Europeans see themselves, how they see one another and how sympathetic are they one another are some of the questions that preoccupy those who study the European integration process. The paper addresses these questions and explores the effects of the ongoing economic crisis on citizens' perceptions and sense of belonging to the European Union. Using data collected from several Eurobarometers, it tries to find out how has evolved the feeling of belonging to the European Union during the economic crisis. The levels of trust in political institutions, the perceptions about the most effective actors for dealing with the crisis, the reasons for solidarity or non-solidarity between the Member States are analyzed in order to emphasize both the general picture and differences occurring between citizens in different EU countries.*

Keywords: identity, solidarity, trust, European Union, economic crisis

### **Identity, Solidarity and Integration: preliminary remarks**

The European integration process, in most of its parts, was elite handled and insulated from public pressures. At least at the early stages, the progress of integration did not depend upon popular support and the EU's institutions continued to expand their output, irrespective of popular attitudes.<sup>1</sup> Public opinion has been regarded as a by-product of this elite-driven process.

But a real integration cannot be achieved without citizens, without their support for a project built for them (and we could see that when the attempts to reform the EU treaties have been stalled due to NO votes in referendums). This paper tries to find out how the feeling of

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<sup>1</sup>See Erik Jones, (2013), "Identity and Solidarity", in *The Oxford Book of the European Union*, Oxford University Press, pag. 2.

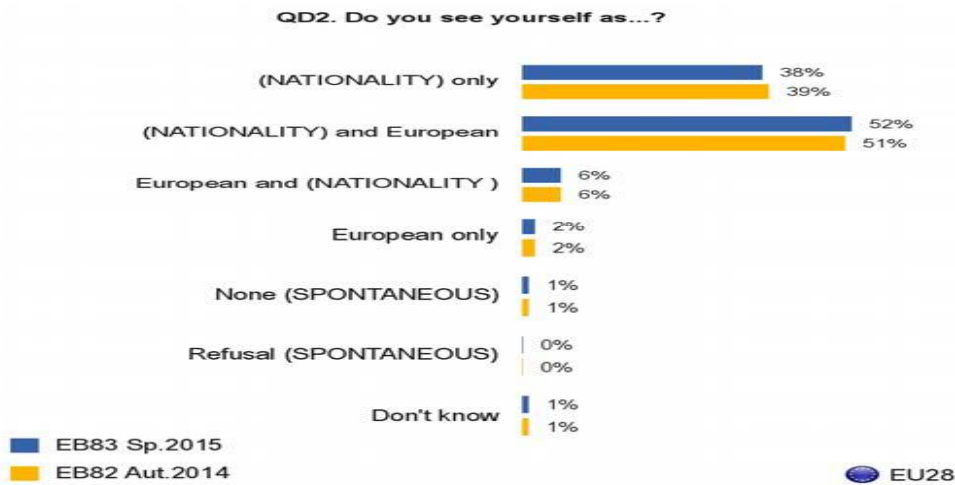
being European citizen evolved during the economic crisis and how sympathetic are Europeans with each other in times of economic hardship. While determinants of support and identification with the EU have received much attention in the European integration literature, lesser is known about the effects of the economic crisis on citizens' perceptions and sense of belonging to the European Union.

In the main, there are two types of views concerning the national-European identities relationship: one claiming that national and European identities are competing, therefore, to develop an European identity, national identity needs to be at least eroded; and another one claiming that the foundations of identification with the European community are different from those with the national community, so national and European identities are compatible and they can coexist peacefully. From our point of view, European identity is not in competition with the national identity, it can be constructed and function alongside national identity. People have multiple identities and specific circumstances dictate which identity becomes more important at a particular time.

This thesis is supported by data from Eurobarometer surveys, showing that the two identities are not perceived as contradictory and people feel part of both communities. Thus, the figure bellow (Figure 1) shows that an absolute majority of Europeans define themselves in terms of „nationality and Europeans”, 38% define themselves solely by their nationality and just 2% as Europeans only.

From socio-demographic point of view, generational criteria plays an important role: only a minority of respondents born before 1950 define themselves as Europeans, compared with a majority in younger generations. Also, the more educated generations (who studied up to the age of 20 and beyond) and the most privileged classes of the population (upper middle class) are more likely to see themselves as Europeans.

**Figure 1: How Europeans see themselves**



*Source: Standard Eurobarometer 83- European Citizenship (Spring 2015)*

While the identity is individual, solidarity is collective. It is a motor for European integration, anchored in the Treaties<sup>2</sup> and reflected in Agricultural, Structural and Cohesion Funds. The economic and debt crisis, as well as the new immigration crisis, are testing the EU’s ability and capacity to act solidary. The economic and financial crisis started in 2008 show how dependent the Members States are on each other and demonstrate that the future of the European

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<sup>2</sup> The article 3 of the *Treaty on the European Union* stipulates that „The Union shall establish an internal market. It shall work for the sustainable development of Europe based on balanced economic growth and price stability, a highly competitive social market economy, aiming at full employment and social progress, and a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment.... It shall combat social exclusion and discrimination, and shall promote social justice and protection, equality between women and men, solidarity between generations and protection of the rights of the child. It shall promote economic, social and territorial cohesion, and solidarity among Member States. It shall respect its rich cultural and linguistic diversity, and shall ensure that Europe's cultural heritage is safeguarded and enhanced”.

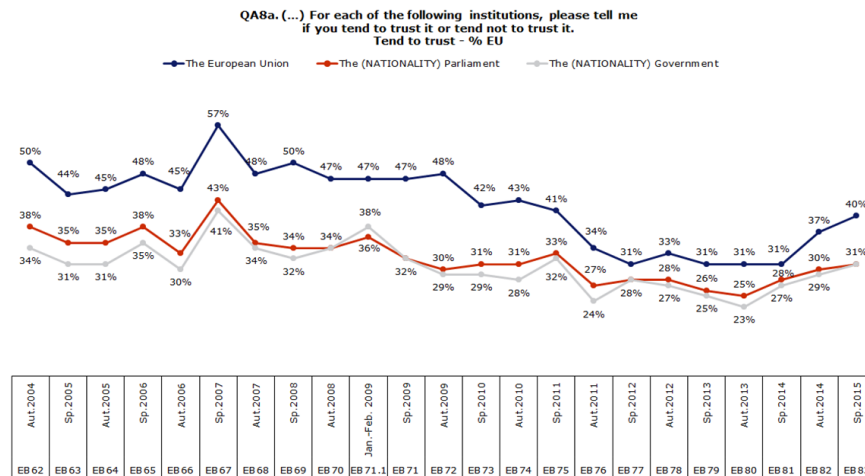
project depends on the extent to which the European Union takes decisive steps towards more integration, adopting new political approaches to cope with internal and external challenges.<sup>3</sup>

But deepening the integration process is possible only if citizens show trust and support for European institutions and decision-making processes. The Eurobarometer polls measure their confidence in the European Union’s institutions, their expectations towards the EU and towards the national governments during the crisis, their solidarity with other Members States and reasons for solidarity or non-solidarity, providing an interesting picture for political decidents and researchers.

### Trust and solidarity in times of economic hardship

How Europeans perceive their political institutions, both national governments and parliaments and the EU and its institutions and how evolved this perception during the years allow us to find explanations and to detect public opinion trends. We can observe a decline in confidence in the EU (see Figure 2) over the past decade by ten percent (from 50% in 2004 to 40% in 2015), one reason being the economic crisis.

**Figure 2: Trust in European Union and in the national institutions**



<sup>3</sup> See *Solidarity and Strenght. The Future of the European Union*, Heinrich Böll Stiftung Series on Europe, Volume 6, 2011. pag. 18-35.

*Source: Standard Eurobarometer 83- European Citizenship (Spring 2015)*

However, confidence in the EU has maintained throughout this period higher than that to the national institutions (which fluctuated from 38% in 2004 to 31% in 2015), so the explanation that, in the context of the economic recession, citizens trust more the national governments (perceived as primarily dealing with the crisis) is not supported by the survey data. The largest levels of trust, in both the EU and the national institutions, were recorded in 2007 (the year of EU's enlargement with two former communist countries having high levels of confidence on it) and decreased almost steadily during the economic crisis, reaching lowest level of 31% over four years. The renewal of trust in the EU began to emerge during the last two years, reaching 40% in Spring 2015.

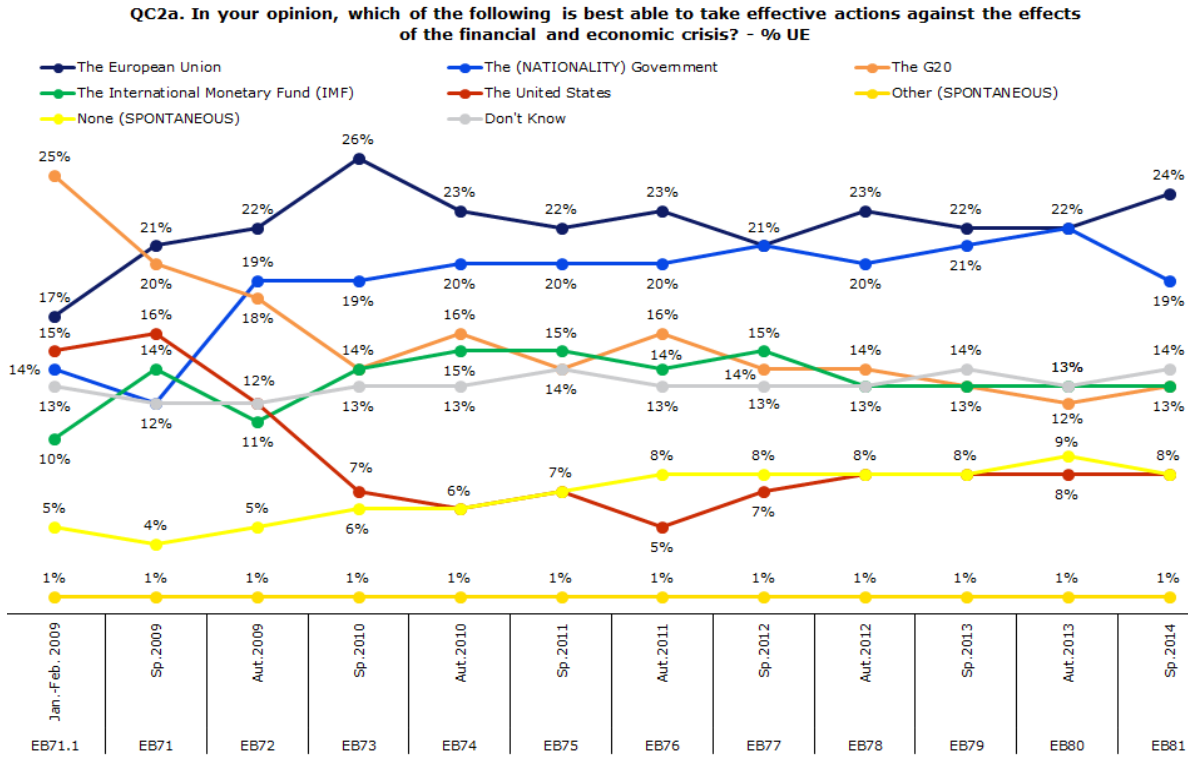
There are large variations within the EU regarding the levels of trust. In 2015 survey, distrust in the EU predominates in ten Member states, with an absolute majority in Greece (74%), Spain (54%)<sup>4</sup>- countries the most affected by the economic crisis- or UK (55%- known as distrusting EU), while the level of trust in the EU predominates in other ten Member states, being most widespread in Lithuania (68%), Romania (68%) and Malta (62%).

When asked which actor they believe is the most effective for dealing with the economic and financial crisis (see Figure 3), Europeans first mention the EU (24%, meaning an increase of 7% compared with 2009 survey), followed by national government (with 19%). The other actors, as the United States, the International Monetary Fund and the G20 countries decreased over the years in the Europeans' perception about the most able actors to deal with the crisis.

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<sup>4</sup> In Spain, distrust is significantly high also in national institutions (reaching 84%).

**Figure 3: The most effective actors for dealing with the crisis**



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 81- Europeans, the EU and the Crisis (Spring 2014)

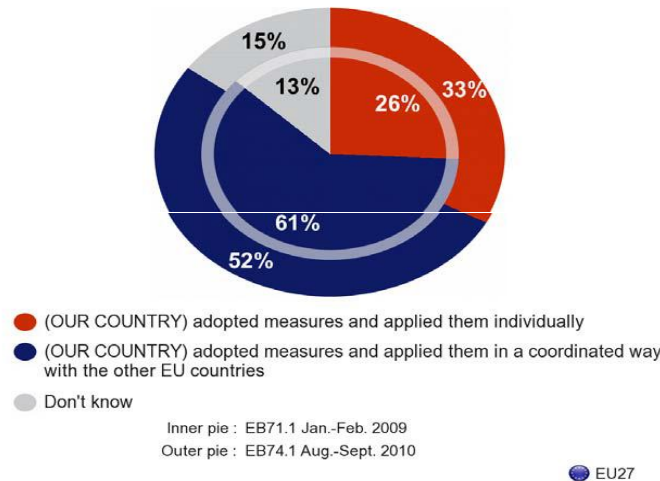
Within the EU, there are sharply differing perceptions from one Member State to another. Respondents in the euro area countries believe that the EU is the most able to act effectively against the crisis, while outside the euro area, interviewees trust their governments first (with highest percentage in Romania- 35%, UK- 33% and Hungary- 31%, compared with the EU 28 average which is 19%).

In socio-demographic terms, the youngest respondents (15-24 years), as well as the most educated (those who studied to the age 20 and beyond) and the most financially comfortable categories trust the European Union more. Respondents who believe their national governments are the best able to deal with the effects of the economic and financial crisis are those who finished their education earliest, are retired people and those who say they belong to the working class.

The surveys also highlight that an absolute majority of EU's citizens believe that the Member States should work together more in tackling the economic and financial crisis. This opinion is found in several surveys over the years, even during the peak of the economic crisis. For instance, the Special Eurobarometer 74.1/2010- *Europeans and the Crisis* emphasizes that a majority of Europeans citizens believe that they would be better protected if their country adopted measures and applied them in a coordinated way with the other Member states (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Within the EU: individual or collective action?**

QC6. As a citizen would you say that you would be better protected in the face of the current crisis if...?



source: *Special Eurobarometer 7.41-Europeans and the Crisis, 2010*

Even if the the wish for coordinated action between Member States has oscilated from one survey to another, it remains the majority opinion. It is to mention the relatively high level of „don't know” answers (around 15%), suggesting not-interested and/or confused respondents.

The interviewees form euro zone countries are more likely than those living in non-euro zone countries to consider that they would be better protected if their country adopt and apply measures in a coordinated way with the other Member States.

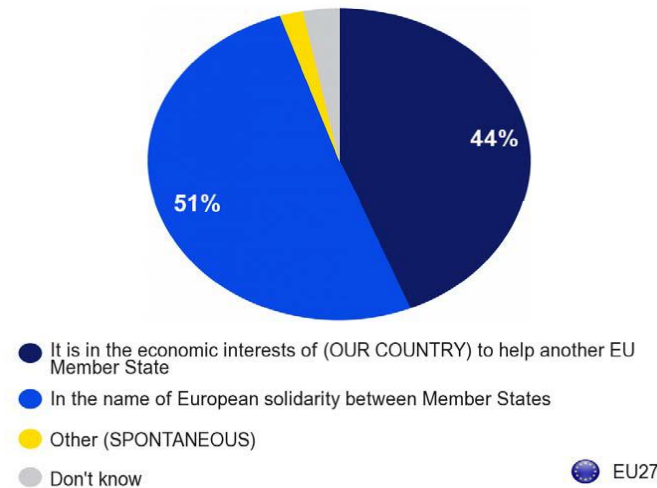
A socio-demographic analysis reveals that the level of education (those who studied up to the age of 20 and beyond) and the social category (managers would prefer collective action,

compared with housepersons and unemployed people) seem to influence answers. From the point of view of political leanings, the survey shows that opinion in favour of coordinated/collective action tends to have more support among people on the left of political spectrum (59%) than among those in the centre (54%) or on the right (53%).

As regards the Europeans' reasons for solidarity, we can see (Figure 5) that they support solidarity firstly because they believe that it is in their country's economic interest to help another Member State and only then in the name of European solidarity between Member States.

**Figure 5: Reasons for solidarity**

QC11. What is the main reason why you think it is desirable that (OUR COUNTRY) gives financial help to another EU Member State facing severe economic and financial difficulties?



source: *Special Eurobarometer 7.41-Europeans and the Crisis, 2010*

Once again, opinions are fairly divided. Support for the principle of solidarity is particularly strong in Greece (which appreciate the need for such help, given that recently benefited from it), Cyprus and Luxembourg (with 74% each) and Bulgaria (with 68%). On the other side, the economic interests are mentioned firstly in the UK (68%), Germany (53%), Ireland (52%) and the Netherlands (50%). However, a large percentage of Europeans (39%)



declared themselves unwilling to help another Member State, saying that their country should not have to pay for the problems of others.

We can conclude that intra-European solidarity, as a matter of principle but which may also prove beneficial for everyone, is shared by the majority of the EU's citizens. They consider the EU- as data briefly analyzed here show- the best able actor to take effective actions against the effects of the economic and financial crisis and, overall, keep confidence in the European Union more than in the national institutions.

“The time when elites could pursue European integration with no regard to public opinion are long gone”<sup>5</sup> and the future of European integration hinges upon public support. The fact that people define themselves firstly by their nationality (and they feel less emotionally attached to the European Union than to the nation-state) does not equate with a lack of support for the European project. The Eurobarometers are providing an invaluable source for examining cross-temporal and cross-national patterns of support for the EU, leaving us to observe that the support goes hand in hand with education and to expect that it will increase as education and welfare will increase and people feel secure within the EU's borders.

The ability of the EU Member States to show solidarity to each other, to act together and to meet the challenges of our times is being put to the test not only as concerns the economic crisis, but also the new immigration crisis. Both show the necessity for increased solidarity and coordination, as imperative for the future of the European Union.

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