

BREXIT: BETWEEN BRITISH EUROPHOBIA AND CONTINENTAL EUROSCEPTICISMS

Yves Bertoncini | *director of the Jacques Delors Institute*

SUMMARY

1. Brexit: a democratic decision that remains a specific case

- While the prospect of Brexit constitutes an earthquake for the EU, it occurred due to the seismic fault line that has been a feature of relations between the UK and “Europe” from the outset.
- The British referendum outcome is not that surprising given the UK’s highly specific historical and geographical characteristics, in particular its insular nature, imperial past and economic gaze, etc. that is turned towards the open sea.
- An unwritten constitution and a parliamentary democracy do not fit in well with the way the Brussels-based political and administrative machine operates: “sovereignist” political motivations in particular influenced the vote to leave.
- The crass and unrelenting Europhobia of the British tabloid press naturally also played a key part in the relatively narrow outcome of the vote on 23 June.
- The United Kingdom has attracted a high number of nationals from other EU Member States over the last decade, while their settling in Britain has proved disruptive in some towns and in certain economic sectors.
- The EU undertook to regulate and supervise financial operations following the crisis of 2007-2008: this welcome activism aroused dissent in the influential City of London, while giving credit to the myth that the UK would be governed from Brussels.
- Other cyclical factors which are not directly related to EU membership also played a decisive part in the referendum outcome, in particular mistrust of the political and financial elites.

2. British Europhobia must not be confused with continental forms of Euroscepticism

- The “Brexit” earthquake is going to spawn “aftershocks” in other European countries, sparking calls for national referenda on EU membership, whose organisation remains hypothetical at this stage.
- There is a need to distinguish between “Euroscepticism”, i.e. criticism of the EU and the marked deterioration of its image, and “Europhobia”, i.e. the desire to leave the EU.
- The EU’s image and the level of trust its citizens express in it declined sharply between 2005 and 2015 in most Member States.
- The current political crisis is the direct result of diametrically opposed “Euroscepticisms”: for instance, the EU has been perceived as a vehicle for excessive austerity in Greece and Ireland, while being viewed as an organiser of excessive solidarity in Finland or Slovakia.
- The citizens’ perception of their country’s membership of the EU and the benefits it enjoys from this membership remained positive throughout the last decade in an overwhelming majority of Member States.

Even though it must now plan its divorce from the UK, the EU is facing a “crisis of co-owners” arguing over a revision of their co-habitation rules rather than the start of a wave of exits heralded by the future Brexit.

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INTRODUCTION

The British vote to leave the European Union (EU) has given rise to a variety of reactions, most notably that of a prophecy according to which Brexit is the trigger of a European construction disintegration process. Given the many other challenges, in particular external issues, that the EU is facing, and which require a common mobilisation of its Member States and peoples, it is necessary to stress that Brexit is a specific case, and that the Europhobia expressed by a majority of the British people must not be confused with the rise in contradictory Euroscepticism observed across Europe as a whole.

1. Brexit: a democratic decision that remains a specific case

We must not underestimate the extent to which “plate tectonics” favoured the British vote to leave the EU, which conveys a questioning of the identity of Europeans, and more broadly Westerners, in terms of an economic, political and migratory openness which is both essential and disturbing. However, while Brexit constitutes an earthquake for the EU, it occurred due to the seismic fault line that has been a feature of relations between the United Kingdom and “Europe” from the outset.

1.1. Structural causes for Brexit

“RENDER UNTO SHAKESPEARE THAT WHICH IS SHAKESPEARE’S”, BY HIGHLIGHTING THE SPECIFIC FEATURES OF THE REFERENDUM OUTCOME ON 23 JUNE 2016”

The British referendum campaign was naturally followed by other European peoples, who sometimes had the impression of “voting by proxy”. It focused on the issues that will continue to lie at the centre of debates in most Member States and in Brussels, such as the distribution and exercise of powers between the EU and its Member States, and the free movement of people and workers. However, it is important that we “render unto Shakespeare that which is Shakespeare’s”, by highlighting the specific features of the referendum outcome on 23 June 2016.

This outcome is not surprising given the UK’s highly specific historical and geographical characteristics, in particular its insular nature, imperial past and economic gaze that is turned towards the open sea: the UK is one of the very few Member States to conduct less than half of its external trade with the EU. Brexit is no surprise either in terms of its perception as a major power able to ride the wave of globalisation alone or its brave stand against Nazism, which explains why older British voters are not as “pro-European” as their counterparts in other EU Member States.

“THE UK IS ONE OF THE VERY FEW MEMBER STATES TO CONDUCT LESS THAN HALF OF ITS EXTERNAL TRADE WITH THE EU”

Neither is Brexit surprising if we consider the deep roots of an unwritten constitution and a parliamentary democracy which does not fit in well with the way the Brussels-based political and administrative machine operates: post-referendum polls show that “sovereignist” political motivations in particular influenced the vote to leave, with economic reasons in a secondary position (see Table 1)¹.

TABLE 1 ► Why leave voters voted leave

REASONS	%
“The principle that decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK.”	49%
Leaving “offered the best chance for the UK to regain control over immigration and its own borders.”	33%
Remaining would mean having no choice “about how the EU expanded its membership or its powers in the years ahead.”	12%
“When it comes to trade & the economy, the UK would benefit more from being outside the EU than from being part of it.”	6%

Source: Lord Ashcroft, “How the United Kingdom voted on Thursday... and why”, Lord Ashcroft Polls, 24 June 2016.

1.2. Cyclical factors for Brexit

“LOOKING BACK, WE COULD ALMOST SAY THAT THE BRITISH GRAFT ONTO EUROPE WAS NEVER A TOTAL SUCCESS”

Whether a cause or a consequence, the crass and unrelenting Europhobia of the British tabloid press naturally also played a key part in the relatively narrow outcome of the vote on 23 June. Looking back, we could almost say that the British graft onto Europe was never a total success, as a first referendum on membership was held back in 1975, only two years following the UK’s entry into the EEC...

At least two other more cyclical factors that are no less specific to Britain also played a key role in the victory of the Leave camp. Firstly, there is the fact that, unlike countries such as France, the United Kingdom has attracted a high number of nationals from other EU Member States over the last decade, while their settling in Britain has proved disruptive in some towns and in certain economic sectors. Secondly, the EU undertook to regulate and supervise financial operations following the crisis of 2007-2008: this welcome activism aroused dissent in the influential City of London, while giving credit to the myth (see Table 2) that the UK would be governed from Brussels².

1. On this point, see for example “How the UK voted and why?”, Lord Ashcroft Institute, June 2016, General comments.

2. On this issue, see Yves Bertoncini, “The EU and its legislation: prison of peoples or chicken coops?”, Policy paper No. 112, Jacques Delors Institute, May 2014.

TABLE 2 ► Europeanisation of national legislatures in eight EU countries according to sectors (1986-2005)

PROPORTION	SECTORS CONCERNED
Between 30 and 40%	Agriculture Banking and Finance Environment
Between 20 and 30%	Energy Technology International affairs Transportation Macroeconomics Foreign trade Health
Between 10 and 20%	Civil rights Labour Government operations Law
Between 0 and 10%	Public lands Education Social Welfare Housing Defence

Source: Yves Bertoncini, "The EU and its legislation: prison of peoples or chicken coops?", Policy paper No. 112, Jacques Delors Institute, May 2014. Data Thomas König and Lars Mäder, in Sylvain Brouard, Olivier Costa and Thomas König, *The Europeanization of domestic legislature*, op. cit. The eight countries analysed in this book are Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Spain, and Switzerland.

Other cyclical factors which are not directly related to EU membership also played a decisive part in the referendum outcome, in particular mistrust of the political and financial elites, power struggles within the Conservative Party and the low levels of commitment displayed by the new Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. David Cameron also shoulders a considerable share of the responsibility for the Leave campaign's victory, not only because he spent three and a half years stating he was neither for nor against his country's membership in the EU, before suddenly campaigning against a departure he deemed apocalyptic; but also because he committed the strategic mistake of giving credence to the idea that his country was no longer influential on an EU level and that it bore the choices of the EU more than it determined them, a subliminal message that was hardly very attractive to his fellow citizens.

“ BREXITERS WERE
ABLE TO LEVERAGE THE
DECLINE IN THE EU'S
IMAGE”

Last but not least, Brexiters were able to leverage the decline in the EU's image, related to its leaders' great difficulties in providing swift and effective responses to the crises it has been faced with in the last decade (financial crisis, Euro area crisis and refugee crisis in particular). From the English countryside, the EU was perceived as a Titanic sluggishly dodging between many icebergs, with twenty-eight constantly arguing captains, an image that could only encourage British passengers to jump ship ...

2. British Europhobia must not be confused with continental forms of Euroscepticism

The “Brexit” earthquake is going to spawn “aftershocks” in other European countries, sparking calls for national referenda on EU membership in a period of rising Euroscepticism.

This predilection for referenda is frequently evinced by minority political forces incapable of getting into power through the normal channels of representative democracy because they do not enjoy the support of a majority of the electorate in their respective countries. It is up to them to win the next elections and to be part of a government in their country in order to call a referendum on EU membership, which seems rather unlikely at this stage.

On these grounds, we must above all ask ourselves if such membership referenda have any chance of a positive outcome for “Leave” campaigners. This could be the case if we consider that, as with the recent British referendum and all referendum consultations, votes are not only motivated by EU affairs, but by those who are asking the question and a number of factors related to the political, economic and international situation. If we restrict the analysis solely to European issues, there is reason to be much more measured in terms of the outcome of such referenda: this requires us to distinguish between “Euroscepticism”, i.e. criticism of the EU and the marked deterioration of its image, and “Europhobia”, i.e. the desire to leave the EU³, in light of the Eurobarometer surveys conducted over the last decade.

2.1. The forms of Euroscepticism are the sign of a decline of the EU’s image

“A ‘EUROSCEPTICISM’ THAT HAS PROGRESSED EVEN FURTHER AS IT HAS BEEN FUELLED BY DIAMETRICALLY OPPOSED MOTIVATIONS”

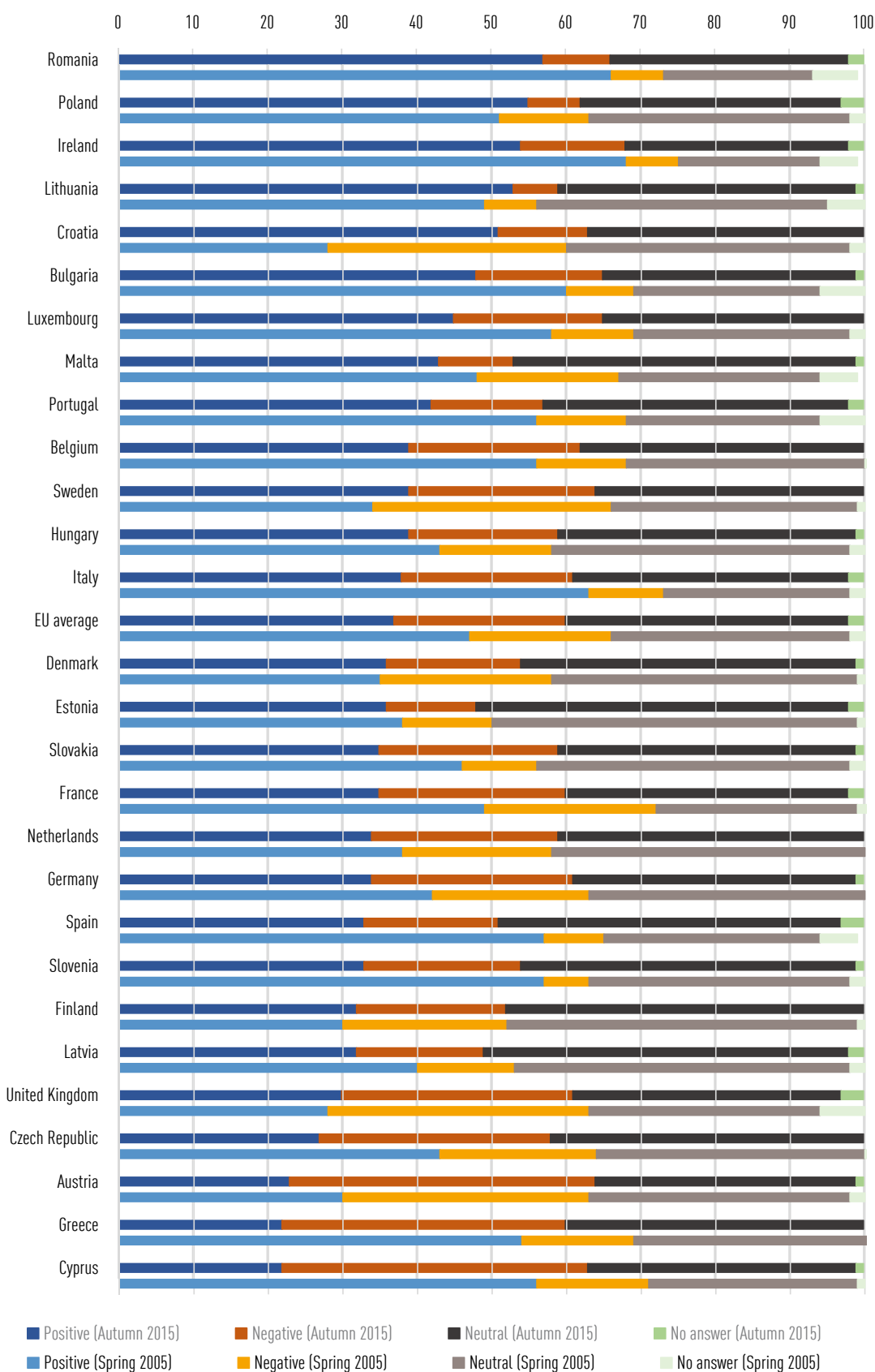
The first political lesson we can learn from these “Eurobarometer” surveys is that the EU’s image and the level of trust its citizens express in it declined sharply between 2005 and 2015 in most Member States – by 10 points on average for the former indicator and by more than 15 points on average for the latter (see Figure 1)⁴. This considerable drop is the direct result of the crises which hit the EU over the last decade, but also of the divisions and delays that have punctuated the EU’s response to them. It conveys a “Euroscepticism” that has progressed even further as it has been fuelled by diametrically opposed motivations, meaning that in reality several types of Euroscepticism have gained currency.

For instance, the EU has been perceived as a vehicle for excessive austerity in countries receiving financial assistance such as Greece and Ireland, while being viewed as an organiser of excessive solidarity in countries such as Finland or Slovakia. The EU lost on both counts and it will naturally take time to improve its image and win back its citizens’ lost trust, especially as a comparable divisive political approach once again seems to be implemented to deal with the refugee crisis: “Europe” is perceived as too open and willing to show solidarity by a majority in countries such as Hungary and Poland, while on the contrary it has been considered too closed and selfish in Sweden and Germany.

3. For further information on this difference, see Yves Bertoncini and Nicole Koenig, “Euroscepticism or Europhobia: voice vs. exit?”, *Policy paper No. 121*, Jacques Delors Institute, November 2014.

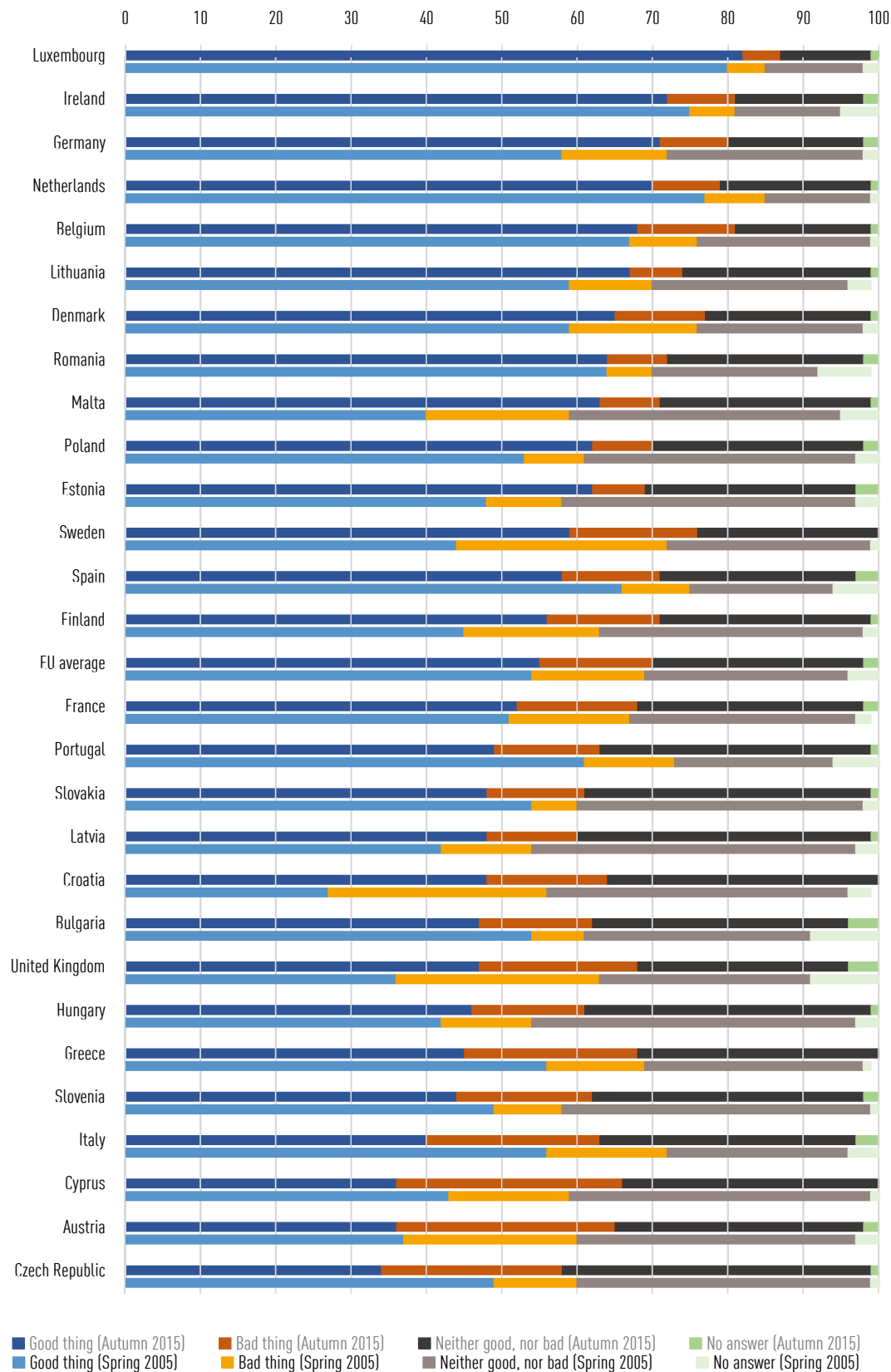
4. For further information, see Daniel Debomy, “The EU, despite everything? European public opinion in the face of crisis (2005-2015)”, *Studies & Reports No. 111*, Jacques Delors Institute, June 2016.

FIGURE 1 ► Image of the EU: perception in the 28 Member States (2005-2015)



Source: Daniel Debomy, "The EU, despite everything? European public opinion in the face of crisis (2005-2015)", Studies & Reports No. 111, Jacques Delors Institute, June 2016

FIGURE 2 ► EU membership: perception in the 28 Member States (2005-2015)



Source: Daniel Debomy, "The EU, despite everything? European public opinion in the face of crisis (2005-2015)", *Studies & Reports No. 111*, Jacques Delors Institute, June 2016

2.2. The will to belong to the EU remains largely majoritary

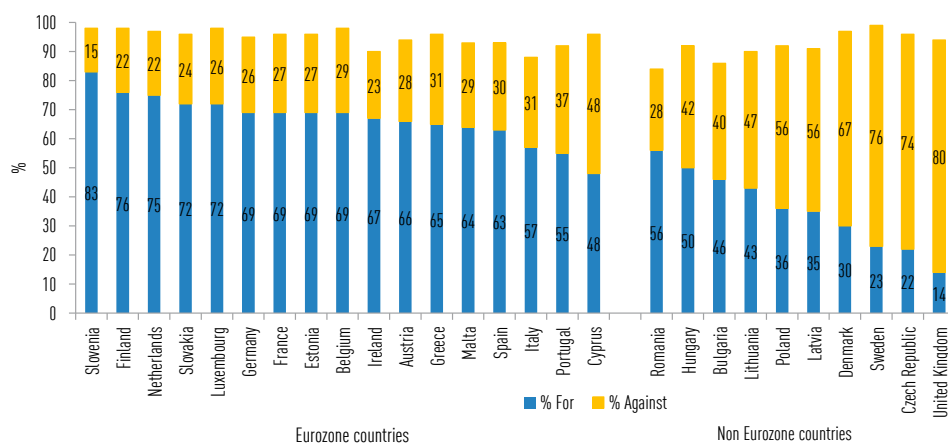
The second political lesson to be learned from the Eurobarometer surveys is that citizens' perception of their country's membership of the EU and the benefits it enjoys from this membership remained positive throughout the period in an overwhelming majority of Member States, and that it was even more positive in 2015 than in 2005 in a dozen of these countries. Less than 30% of citizens in all 28 EU Member States believed that membership of the EU was a "bad thing" at the end of 2015 (see Figure 2).

The desire to continue being part of the EU is deeply rooted for a majority of citizens in all Member States, even though this does not of course rule out the expression of fierce criticism of the way the EU operates and takes decisions. The case of the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe is highly significant in terms of the contrasting development of European public opinion: while definitely more Eurosceptic than in the past, they certainly do not wish to leave the EU which provides them with so many benefits, including the freedom of movement called into question in the United Kingdom.

“ THIS SMOKESCREEN CONTRADICTION BETWEEN EUROSCEPTICISM AND EUROPHOBIA RESONATES DIRECTLY WITH THE CONTRADICTION WITNESSED DURING THE EURO AREA CRISIS”

This smokescreen contradiction between Euroscepticism and Europhobia resonates directly with the contradiction witnessed during the Euro area crisis⁵: this crisis ultimately shed light on citizens' attachment to membership of the monetary union, including in Germany and Greece, and therefore the desire to accept the rights and responsibilities related to this membership, albeit grudgingly. This popular attachment also explains why the Eurozone did not suffer the disastrous collapse that a good number of prophets of doom had predicted over many years (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3 ▶ Attitudes toward a European economic monetary union with a single currency, the euro

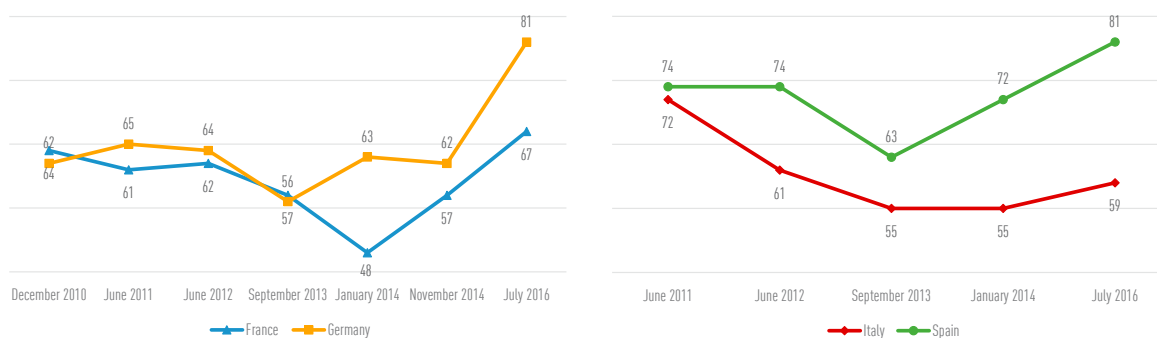


Source: Eurobarometer data cited in Daniel Debomy, "EU no, euro yes? European public opinions facing the crisis (2007-2012)", Policy Paper No. 90, Jacques Delors Intitute, March 2013.

5. See Daniel Debomy, "EU no, euro yes? European public opinion facing the crisis (2007-2012)", Policy paper No. 90, Jacques Delors Institute, March 2013.

On these grounds, let us not forget that for many Member States, “leaving the EU” would also mean leaving the Euro and the Schengen area, and this twofold breakaway would have much deeper ramifications than the more “straightforward” UK exit, which already seems to have disrupted the country both politically and economically. In this respect, the first opinion polls published following the British referendum show that the uncertainties caused by Brexit have further strengthened European citizens’ desire for EU membership (see Figure 4)⁶, i.e. a reaction directly opposed to the hypothetical “domino effect” that the outcome of the British referendum was alleged to create.

FIGURE 4 ▶ Evolution of opinions on the membership of one’s country to the European Union (Percentage of responses “mostly a good thing”)



Source: Jérôme Fourquet, “Les Européens et le Brexit” (in French), Note, Fondation Jean Jaurès, 15 July 2016.

6. See Jérôme Fourquet, “Les Européens et le Brexit” (in French), Note, Fondation Jean Jaurès, 15 July 2016.

CONCLUSION

Even though it must now plan its divorce from the UK, the EU is facing a “crisis of co-owners” arguing over a revision of their co-habitation rules rather than the start of a wave of exits heralded by Brexit. This must not lead us to underestimate the seriousness of this internal crisis, fuelled by major divisions between its citizens yet without the intention of walking out, but must at least dispel the predictions announcing the “dislocation” of our common European home.

We can be sure that the development of this crisis will depend significantly on the ability of European leaders and EU citizens to look beyond this common home⁷, most notably towards its immediate neighbourhood which has become particularly unstable. Also, it is by successfully promoting a more extroverted vision of European construction that they will find the motivation to continue serenely and firmly towards a rapprochement, the outcome of which will determine the fate of most Europeans in the 21st century.

7. On this issue, see for example Enrico Letta and Yves Bertoncini, “Stronger together – even at 27!”, *Tribune - Viewpoint*, Jacques Delors Institute, 16 September 2016.

On the same themes...

STRONGER TOGETHER – EVEN AT 27!

Enrico Letta and Yves Bertoncini, *Tribune - Viewpoint*, Jacques Delors Institute, September 2016

“BREXIT”: A BRITISH DRAMA, A CHALLENGE FOR THE EU

Enrico Letta, Yves Bertoncini & alii, *Tribune - Viewpoint*, Jacques Delors Institute, July 2016

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António Vitorino, *Tribune - Interview ahead of the European Council*, Jacques Delors Institute, June 2016

THE EU, DESPITE EVERYTHING? EUROPEAN PUBLIC OPINION IN THE FACE OF CRISIS (2005-2015)

Daniel Debomy, *Studies & Reports No. 111*, Jacques Delors Institute, June 2016

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Yves Bertoncini, *Policy Paper No. 133*, Jacques Delors Institute, May 2015

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