

THE ITALIANS AND EUROPE, CHRONICLE OF DISENCHANTMENT

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Summary

As is the case for any elections in a country of the European Union, the general elections (MPs and senators) that will be taking place on the 4th of March in Italy are of interest to all those who are paying close attention to Europe and its future, all the more so in this case as the country in question is the 3rd strongest economy of the Twenty Seven. But in these specific elections, the stakes are even higher, as the consequences of the election do not just concern Italy. For Europe, it is no trivial fact that one of the founding members and one of the most highly populated members of the European Union is affected by political instability following the 2013 elections, aggravated by the failure of the constitutional referendum of 2016, causing the two-party system that had been the norm until then to become ever more fragile.

Europe is directly affected by these elections, of which it is the main issue. The economic and budgetary policy crisis, the migrant crisis and claims for sovereignty are all issues causing unrest in Italy, with consequences at the European level, and which directly and explicitly address the relationship between the country and the EU. In this context, the March elections shall also determine the direction Italy will take in the next few years, years which shall prove pivotal for the European Project.

Therefore, with the 4th of March approaching, the Institut Jacques Delors and the Centre Kantar sur le Futur de l'Europe wanted to shed a particular light on these elections: the perspective of the history of Italian opinion towards the European Union, and the grievances and expectations that explain why Italy is now one of the countries in which the attitude towards Europe has deteriorated the most.

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ITALY'S DISILLUSIONMENT: FROM SUNNY "EUROPHILIA" TO CLOUDY "EUROMOROSITY"¹

BOX 1 ■ Preferred opinion indicators

The evolution of public opinion regarding the EU can be observed in particular through two indicators that have been measured under identical conditions for several decades. They are reviewed here starting in spring 1985.

The membership indicator measures the proportion of citizens who believe that the fact that their country is part of the EU is a good thing (or on the contrary a bad thing, or neither good nor bad).

The benefit indicator refers to the belief that one's country has benefited (or not) from being a member of the EU.

These indicators were measured over six-month periods in the European Commission's Standard Eurobarometer surveys until spring 2011 (save one exception, when it was not measured in autumn 2010); they were then resumed once again, albeit less frequently, in the Parlemeter surveys launched by the European Parliament².

These surveys have included an increasing number of countries as the number of Member States has grown. Until autumn 1985, the average results covered 10 Member States, then 12 until autumn 1994 and 15 until spring 2004. The average then covered 25 countries until autumn 2006, 27 until spring 2013 and 28 ever since then.

It is noteworthy that the European averages were only marginally affected during each successive enlargement; we can therefore legitimately examine the trends of these indicators in their continuity since the beginning of the examined period.

These trends show how average European opinion has fluctuated over five successive periods, recovering in the most recent period after a dip due to the economic crisis, and returning to a level that is close to the rather high level observed at the outset of the surveys.

Admittedly, these indicators only provide a partial view of the state of opinion. A study published by the Jacques Delors Institute in 2016³, showed, for example, that their improvement did not automatically entail an improvement in trust. However, as they are the only indicators available over such a long period, they are the most useful to examine the Italian disillusionment phenomenon (in comparison with the European average), which is the primary purpose of the present analysis.

1 ■ TRENDS IN ITALIAN OPINION: A HISTORY OF THE DETERIORATION

The evolution of Italy's membership indicator was initially similar to that of the overall European indicator.

- A peak of favourable opinions in spring 1991 - but at an even higher level (79% favourable compared with 3% unfavourable, and 13% neutral), which had already been recorded several times in the previous few years.
- A decline towards a low recorded in spring 1997 - 62% favourable compared with 8% unfavourable, and 21% neutral opinions (despite a temporary improvement around 1995).
- In most cases, the fluctuations in the Italian opinion and the European average were si-

1. This text was prepared with the assistance of Lucia Di Franco, director of Studies at Periscope (Milan), Optem's partner in the European Qualitative Network, and Luciano Daina, former director of Italian research institutes.

2. Absence of measurement of the membership indicator (in addition to A10) in A11, A12, A13, P14, P15, P16 ; of the profit indicator from A11 to A12, from A13 to P15, in P16 and P17. (P = spring ; A = autumn).

3. Daniel Debomy, "The EU, despite everything? European public opinion in the face of crisis (2005-2015)", Jacques Delors Institute, June 2016

multaneous prior to 1997, and also in the following 10 years: evolving upwards (in 1995, 1998, 2002, and spring 2006) or declining (in spring 1997 and 2001, 2004, autumn 2005).

But, although the trend for European score was generally upwards between 1997 and 2007 (notwithstanding these fluctuations), the opposite was true for Italy's score. The latter had always been significantly higher than the former (by at least 10 points in most scores) but the gap narrowed in 2004, and the two scores remained roughly equal until the end of 2006.

The Italian indicator then sagged and fell sharply afterwards in 2008 (a much stronger drop than that of the EU as a whole). After clearly (but temporarily) recovering during three survey waves, it then relapsed again until spring 2012. We then observed a slight recovery between 2013 and 2015, but this was followed by a further sharp decline in autumn 2016. At that time, only 33% of Italian respondents rated their country's membership as a good thing, compared with 25% who considered it to be bad (and 38% who were neutral) - the lowest point ever in over 30 years.

In autumn 2017, a slight improvement brought this score to 36% good, versus 18% bad (and 41% of neutral responses), nevertheless leaving it 21 points below the European average (which had meanwhile increased fairly steadily since 2011). Only Cypriots were less favourable (by one point) as well as Czechs (who are traditionally very guarded regarding the EU).

As for the benefit indicator, it was also at a particularly high level at the beginning of the period: 65% estimating in spring 1985 that Italy had benefited from its membership (versus 19% who thought it had not benefitted), which was 15 points above the average European score. This upward trend continued until it reached a peak in autumn 1988 (75% has benefitted versus 12% has not benefitted). A fairly steady decline then began, leading to a low of 41% (versus 35% "has not benefitted") in spring 1997.

After 1997, this indicator fluctuated a lot, albeit at a much higher level, settling at 54% (versus 30%) in spring 2006. Meanwhile, however, the gap between the Italian score and the European score (generally subject to the same type of fluctuations as the membership indicator, but of different magnitudes) had narrowed, and it had even reversed at the end of 2004 and in 2005.

As with the membership indicator, the benefit indicator then fell sharply until spring 2008 (37% of favourable opinions, compared with 36%), and then regained part of its lost ground until late 2009/early 2010, but fell very low until spring 2013 (36%, versus 52%). After a slight improvement, observed in the 2015 survey, but practically cancelled a year later, it finished below 40% in 2016 and in 2017 (39% favourable, compared with 48% in the autumn). A clear relative majority of Italians now declare that the country has not benefited from its membership in the EU.

During the same period, the average European score - which was also negatively affected in the first years of the crisis - clearly started recovering as of spring 2011 (for the record: 64% versus 25% at the end of the period).

BOX 2 ■ Evolutions of European opinion averages: five successive periods

Here, we will briefly review the findings already presented in the Jacques Delors Institute's previous publications, which highlight five major successive periods since 1985:

- An initial and gradually increasing "pro-euro" period until spring 1991, in parallel to the rise of the Delor project which aimed to revive Europe's construction: a 14-point increase in the membership indicator, achieving 71% of favourable opinions (compared with 7% of interviewees who considered this membership to be a bad thing, and 17% neither good nor bad); a 9-point increase in the recognition of a beneficial effect for one's country, hitting 59% (compared with 25% who didn't see any positive effects).
- A second period marked by a very strong decline, to a historically low level in spring 1997: a 25-point decrease in the positive membership score, an 18-point decline in the benefit score. It was noted that this period was marked by controversy and confused debate regarding the Maastricht Treaty, by a downturn in the economy, and also by the EU's limited ability to coherently and effectively deal with the various crises (conflicts in former Yugoslavia, the mad cow disease, etc.).

- A difficult erratic upswing until 2007, with the first indicator regaining 12 points to reach 58% (in the autumn survey wave) from the low waters of 1997, while remaining far from the peak of 1991, and the second indicator regaining 18 points (score from the spring wave) - getting back to the 59% recorded in 1991.
- A new collapse, coinciding with the economic and financial crisis: a fairly regular decline for the membership indicator until a low measured at 47% in spring 2011; a more intermittent decline for the benefit indicator, whose low point (in autumn 2010) stood at 50%.
- A sharp recovery afterwards. At the end of 2017, 57% of EU citizens rated their country's membership positively, compared with 12% negatively (and 28% neither positively nor negatively). This level was similar to that recorded prior to the crisis, and the initial level of 1985, but still quite far from the peak in 1991. 64% felt that their country had benefited from it (compared with 25% negatively) which was a higher proportion than the previous peaks recorded in 1991 and 2007.
- Between 2011 and 2017, this evolution was quite steady (except for a slight decrease observed in autumn 2016).

As we mentioned earlier, this does not prevent trust from remaining very moderate: at 41%, compared with 48% in autumn 2017, it is still the minority opinion despite a 5-point increase in one year. And the same is true regarding opinions on the current direction of things in the EU, considered as good by 30%, versus 47% bad, once again despite a significant improvement since the end of 2016.

Three decades ago, Italians were highly pro-Europe, but today they are among the most "Euromorose" of the EU's nations.

Their attitudes towards the Union, like those of other Europeans, have fluctuated over time. But we can identify two singular moments in their evolution. Around 2004 they stopped being more positive than the European average and from 2010-2011 on, unlike the European average which was recovering amidst hopes of a way out of the crisis, the Italian indicator continued to fluctuate downward until 2016. 2017, however, seems to show a slight improvement.

2. FACTORS EXPLAINING THE EVOLUTIONS

The following developments are based in particular on the results of numerous qualitative studies conducted over three decades.⁴ Without claiming to give an exhaustive analysis, we can nevertheless highlight factors that played an important role.

2.1 A problem economy

It has often been observed in European countries that the improvement or deterioration in attitudes towards the EU is linked to the economic situation. In this case, we note that Italy's growth rate has been one of the lowest in the EU since 1997.

Between 2007 and 2016, there was a clear deterioration in Italian opinion compared with the European average, whilst the economy contracted by 9%. More specifically, 2008 - the beginning of a two-year decline in GDP - was marked by a sharp drop in pro-Euro support. The same phenomenon occurred a few years later, when GDP declined for three consecutive years between 2012 and 2014. Many Italians suffered a significant drop in their income (and for some of them a loss of value of their wealth). Simultaneously, their judgment regarding the economic situation of their country, already harsh in 2007 (36% deeming it good, compared with 58% in the spring) deteriorated further (13% reporting a good situation, compared with 86% in autumn 2016).

In 2017, the (slight) increase in opinions in favour of the EU measured by these indicators as well as other indicators (the EU's image, the trust it inspires, the direction taken, optimism in terms of its future, etc.), is coupled with a less unfavourable appreciation of both the economic situation and prospects for both the country and the European Union after a three-year return

⁴ Studies conducted by Optem with its partners, in particular for the European Commission, some of which can be consulted on the Commission's Eurobarometer website.

to (modest) growth. Throughout this entire period, the EU's recommendations, warnings and suggestions to reduce the public deficit, tackle the considerable amount of debt, initiate structural reforms, etc. were a painful experience for the Italians.

There was a noteworthy drop in trust in the EU in 2007: 58% of opinions of trust in the spring compared with 28%, a 15-point loss six months later, and a further 12-point decline in autumn 2016. The level of trust noted for the national executive branch (traditionally much lower) simultaneously suffered from the rigorous measures that the various governments implemented with more or less vigour, but without much visible success at least in the short term (37% of trust, down from 53% in spring 2007, 14 points lower in the autumn, a further 8-point decline at the end of 2016).

2.2 The euro perceived as inflationary and subject to harsh attacks

The euro bore the brunt end of frustrations, with a widely shared sentiment that its introduction had led to sharp price increases. The government - presided over at the time by Mr Berlusconi - had been blamed for its insufficient vigilance and casualness in terms of the measures accompanying the transition from the lira to the common currency.

Vicious attacks against the euro came later, and in recent years, launched by populist political parties ranging from Forza Italia to the Five Star Movement. They have undoubtedly contributed to an assured collapse of favourable attitudes towards the euro, which are nevertheless still expressed by a majority: at the very least, Italians remain attached to the principle of a single currency.

Autumn 2017 also saw the support for the euro gain five points since the end of 2016, reaching 59%, versus 30% against (and 11% of non-responses). This places Italy slightly below the European average (61% for versus 33% against), but far behind the euro zone (74% for versus 21% against). Criticisms from the aforementioned parties have also faded lately.

2.3 The effect of detrimental government positions

More generally, positive attitudes towards the EU may have been affected by "eurosceptic" positions expressed by the government at certain times.

We observed a notable collapse between 2002 and 2004, when the (Berlusconi) government at that time openly expressed scepticism (as opposed to its openly pro-American position), and made several decisions that were unfavourable to the construction of the European Community (resistance against the establishment of a European judicial area, withdrawal of Italy's participation in the A 400M military transport aircraft programme, etc.), leading to the resignation of the Minister of Foreign Affairs - Ruggiero - who disagreed with these positions.

2.4 A possible link with the fluctuating perception of national institutions

This decline contrasts with the inverse movement observed between spring 2001 and spring 2002, a period that spans this government's first year in power. A similar phenomenon was observed several years later, with the short-lived rise in EU opinion indicators at the beginning of the third Berlusconi government between 2008 and spring 2010.

Interpreting the data is a bit trickier; perhaps the promises made by the newly-elected governments (and these promises were abundant) had temporarily contributed to an improved perception of the institutions in general, both European and national.

More recently, we can link the low-point of 2016 to the failure of Mr. Renzi's government in terms of the referendum on institutional reform.

2.5 The impression of solitude in dealing with the immigration problem

On another level, the immigration problem has clearly weighed on Italian opinion towards the EU. Italians, who are reluctant to view immigration in a favourable light (less so than the European average, especially the citizens of many older, more open Member States), did not seem less favourable to a European policy in this area, and were especially eager for concrete measures to help solve the related problems that affect them.

It is clear that - in their view - the EU (and within it the other neighbouring Member States) has shown a great deal of indifference and a lack of solidarity towards their country, which is directly exposed due to its geographical situation, and that they feel both bitter and unfairly treated.

IN CONCLUSION: “EUROFRUSTRATION” YES, “EUROPHOBIA” NO; BUT A STEEP SLOPE LIES AHEAD

Three decades ago, the Italians had a very idealised vision of the EU (more precisely of the Community at the time). Above the homeland, it was a sort of protective mother that would be able to remedy its shortcomings and provide anything it lacked. As in other countries, but to a much greater extent, their perception of the EU was much more favourable than that of their own political system.

Gradually, this state of affairs deteriorated, and the unconditional affection became imbued with disillusionment, with an added feeling of abandonment. In the words of our Italian experts, the loving mother had turned into a fussy stepmother.

At the end of 2017, only 36% (compared with 57%) of Italian citizens believed that the interests of their country are well taken into account. This score, despite a genuine improvement over the last year (an 8-point gain), is much lower than the average European opinion, which is nevertheless marked by reservations. When asked which qualifiers they would associate with the EU, they describe it, for example and in relation to the European average, as less protective, and more distant. At the same time, however, Italians do not see the EU as less modern or effective. Furthermore, a sign that they are probably aware of problems that the EU has highlighted rather than created, 70% say that measures to reduce the country's public deficit and debt “cannot be delayed”, while only 17% express the opposite opinion - a score very close to the average European score. In addition, when asked about the desired speed of European construction, a significantly higher share of the Italian population than the European average is in favour of an acceleration (48% choose the answers that lean the most in this direction, compared with 37% in the European average).

In short, Italians aspire to see a protective Europe that is moving forward. Despite the troubled waters, they do not seem to have given up hope. However, it will probably take more than an economic improvement, even a significant one, as the EU will have to be able to once more propose an attractive project for the future so that they truly shed their deep disillusionment.

FIGURE 1 ■ Indicator of membership: Citizens regarding EU membership as a good thing (%)

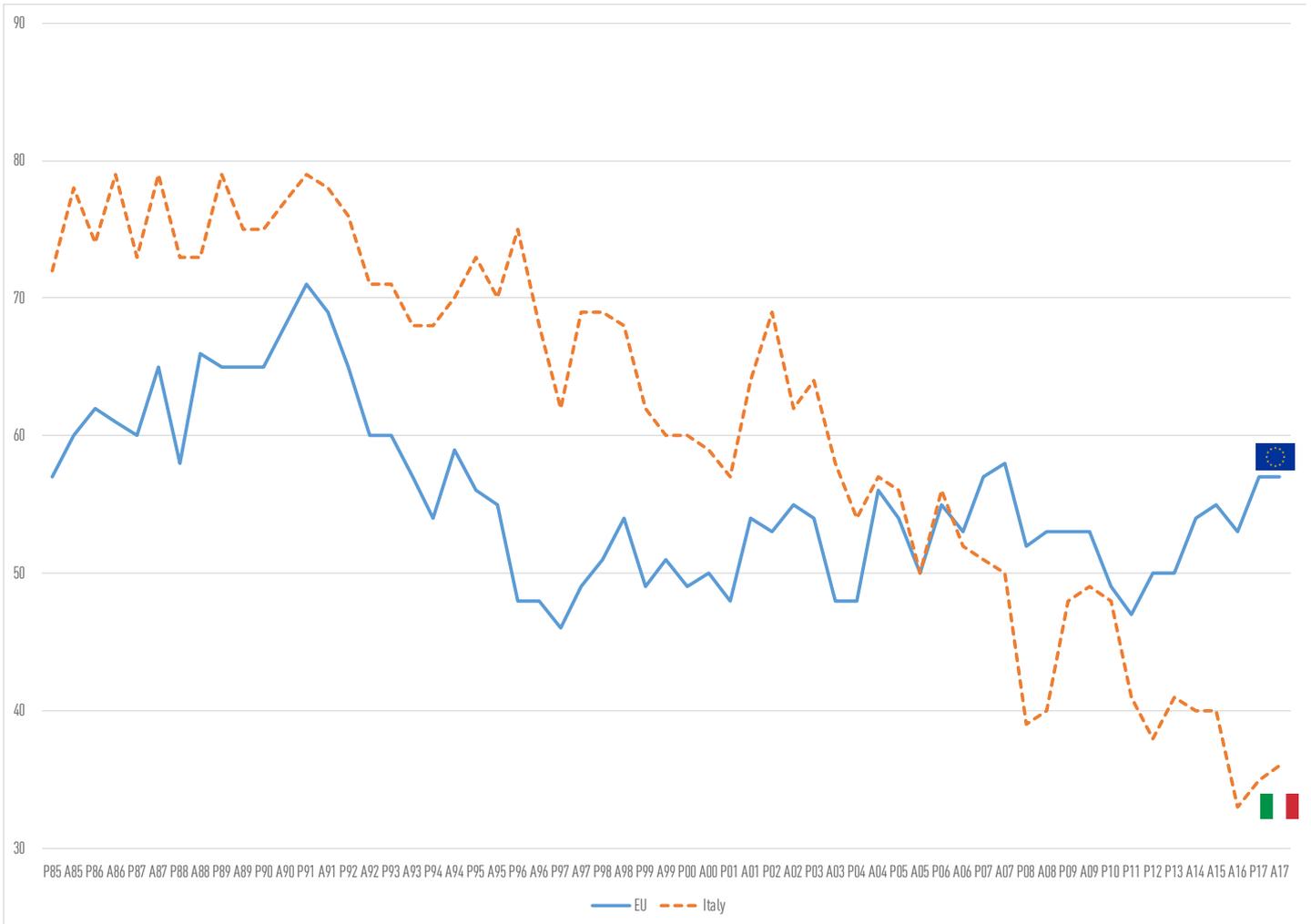
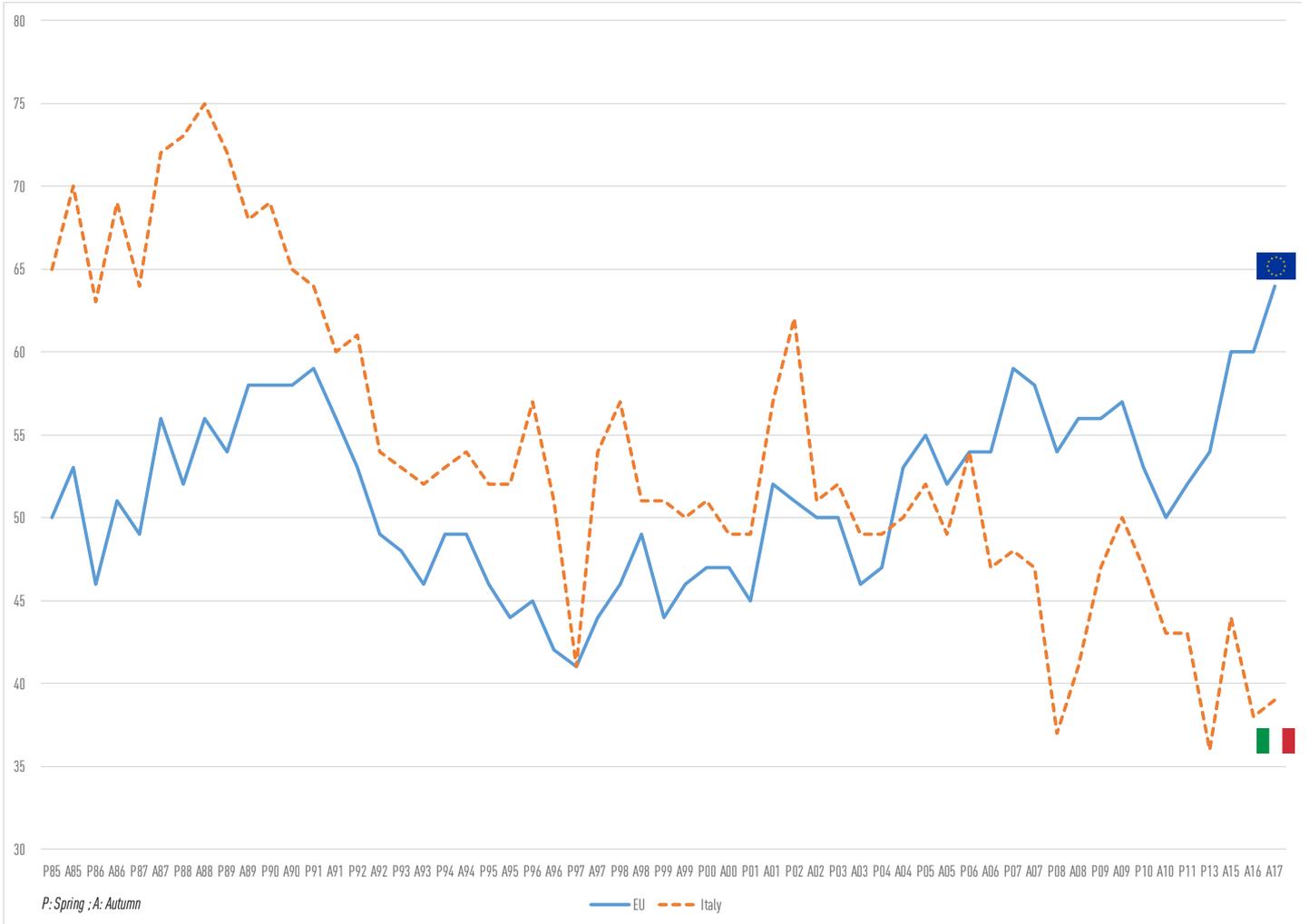


FIGURE 2 ■ Indicator of benefit: Citizens considering that their country has benefited from EU membership (%)



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ITALY FACING A THREEFOLD CRISIS AS IT PREPARES FOR ELECTIONS

Established within Kantar Public, a global consulting and research business, the 'Centre Kantar sur le Futur de L'Europe' brings together a pan-European team of researchers with expertise in political and opinion polling, social and economic trends and migration. The Centre aims to contribute to the quality of public debate through Kantar's analysis and knowledge of public opinion and political change in Europe and its member countries.

The Italian general elections of March 2018 will take place in the context of a threefold crisis: an economic crisis, a migratory crisis and a representation crisis. Over the past few years, Italy has been affected by events that have contributed to profoundly changing the Italian people's opinions towards the European Union⁵. Economically, Italy was particularly strongly affected by the economic, social and financial crisis of 2007/2008, then by the sovereign debt crisis of the Eurozone in 2010. The country was also hit hard by the migratory crisis that reached its peak in 2015, namely because it is one of the main points of entry into the European Union, through its geographical position in the south of the Mediterranean. Italy is one of the countries (along with Greece, and to a lesser extent Cyprus and Malta) where the larger part of the refugees trying to reach Europe arrive in their makeshift boats. In fact, since the agreement signed between the European Union and Turkey in March 2016, Italy has had more refugees arriving at its coasts than Greece (nearly 120 000 in Italy for nearly 30 000 in Greece in 2017)⁶. Lastly, the political representation crisis is fuelled in part by the historical governmental instability linked to the Italian two-chamber system, as well as by the aborted attempt to reform this system in 2016, leading to the resignation of the president Renzi and his replacement by the Gentiloni government that is currently in office.

This threefold crisis is also a challenge for Europe: it undoubtedly contributes to explaining Italians' increasing distrust of the European Union. Support for the EU has strongly decreased since the beginning of the century in Italy: in autumn 2001⁷, before the introduction of the euro, trust in the EU was at its highest (65% 'tend to trust'). At that point in time, it was actually higher than in most EU countries, and continued to be so until spring 2007, a few months before the sub-prime crisis in the United States, which announced the beginning of the global economic crisis. A majority now 'distrusts' the EU: in autumn 2017, 52% of Italians declared to 'tend to distrust' the European Union (versus 34% 'tend to trust')⁸, a result that is below the European average (48% distrust versus 41% trust across the EU 28 as a whole).

It is even more worrying that whereas in autumn 2012, the majority of Italians were still against the opinion that their country "could do better in the future if it was outside of the EU" (56% 'do not agree' for 29% 'agree'⁹), that majority is now of the opposite opinion (46% 'agree' for 43% 'do not agree' in autumn 2017). This evolution is not reflected across the whole of the EU 28, with opposition to this statement varying between 55% and 60% between 2012 and now.

We shall study the economic and migratory issues in this analysis, as well as Italians opinion of their institutions and their national representatives, by studying their impact on opinion of the European Union in particular.

5. In the article also written by Daniel Debomy, for the Institut Jacques Delors, the Italians' opinion towards the EU is analysed across a long time-frame.

6. <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>

7. Standard Eurobarometer of autumn 2001, EB56, October-November 2001

8. Standard Eurobarometer of autumn 2017, EB88, November 2017. When not otherwise specified, the data used in this note are from this Eurobarometer survey.

9. Standard Eurobarometer of autumn 2012, EB78, November 2012

1. A FRAIL ECONOMY

Italy faced an economic crisis for several years, which affected its growth and jobs, while raising the levels of taxation and public debt.

The European Commission's¹⁰ latest forecasts anticipated an Italian economic growth of 1.5% in 2017, the lowest of the EU 28. The forecasts for 2018 are no better: at 1.5%, the Italian growth would be before-last, just ahead of the United Kingdom (1.4%).

In terms of jobs, the unemployment rates in Italy are higher than the Eurozone average (10.8% in December 2017 for an average of 8.7%) or the EU average (7,3%).¹¹ Only Cyprus, Spain and Greece¹² present higher unemployment rates. Focusing on young people, the situation is even bleaker: still in December 2017, 32.2% of the under 25 age group were unemployed in Italy, for 17.9% in the Eurozone and 16.1% in the EU.

Although unemployment decreased significantly in 2017 (-1 point in Italy since December 2016), and in a similar proportion to that of the Eurozone (-1 point) and the European Union (-0.9 point), the employment situation remains worrisome.

Two other indicators also illustrate the economic difficulties Italy is facing. Firstly, the level of public debt which reached 132% of the GDP in 2016, the second worst ratio of the EU after Greece (180.8%). These figures should be analysed keeping in mind the Eurozone average which was 91.1% in 2016.¹³

Secondly, the level of taxation in Italy also stands out from the rest of the European Union. At 43.2% of the PIB in 2015, the Italian tax revenue is far above the Eurozone average (40.2%) and the EU average (38.7%), but is below the averages in Sweden, Austria, Finland, Belgium, France and Denmark.¹⁴

This morose economic context has a predictable effect on the Italian public opinion, especially on the indicators of the perception of the economic situation. Despite a slight improvement compared to spring 2014, the situation of the Italian economy was considered bad by 80% of Italians in Autumn 2017 (for 19% who considered it 'good')¹⁵, which is more than 31 points above the average of the 28 Member States (49% 'bad', for 48% 'good' in the EU 28).

10. https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/economy-finance/european-economic-forecast-winter-2018-interim_en

11. <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/8631701/3-31012018-BP-FR.pdf/e52b92c4-9cd1-4e3e-9757-01df5f42ef33>

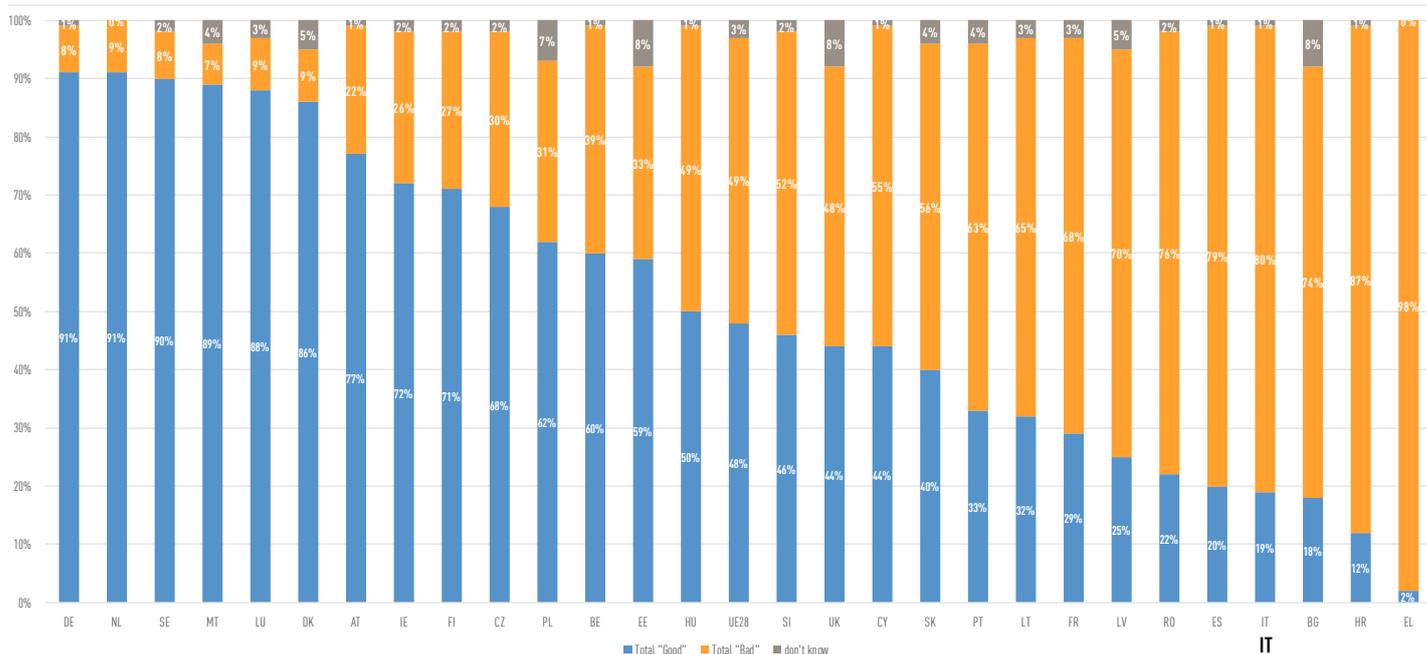
12. Grèce : données d'octobre 2017

13. https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/economy-finance/european-economic-forecast-autumn-2017_en

14. https://ec.europa.eu/taxation_customs/business/economic-analysis-taxation/data-taxation_en

15. Eurobaromètre standard de l'automne 2017, novembre 2017

FIGURE 1 ■ How would you judge the current situation in each of the following? The situation of the (nationality) economy (%)



This negative opinion does not only pertain to the country's economic situation. Nearly six out of ten Italians also consider the situation of the European economy to be bad (58%, the highest ratio in the entire European Union). This observation also applies to employment: 83% of Italians consider that the employment situation in their country is bad, for 54% on average in the EU 28.

This bleak picture of the Italian economic situation is darkened a little further by one last issue: in autumn 2017, more than one Italian in two admitted to having had difficulties paying their bills – either occasionally or regularly – over the last twelve months (59% for 30% at the European level).

The hierarchical order of the most important problems the Italians are facing personally is predictably influenced by this bleak economic situation: they indeed first mention taxes (27%), then inflation (21%) and unemployment (16%). These economic questions remain in the forefront when people are asked about what problems Italy must face (with, respectively, 16%, 11% and especially 42% in first position).

2. IMMIGRATION: A MAJOR SOURCE OF TENSION

However, when asked about the main problems the EU is currently facing, economic issues are mentioned slightly less (8% for taxes, 8% for inflation, and 23%, still, for unemployment). "European" issues are predominantly immigration (38%) and terrorism (34%). It is noteworthy that in the national issues, immigration comes in second place, mentioned by 33% of Italians (for 22% on average in Europe, also in second place), whereas the issue of terrorism is only mentioned by 13%. While terrorism is perceived as a mainly European problem, immigration is a source of worry at both European and national levels.

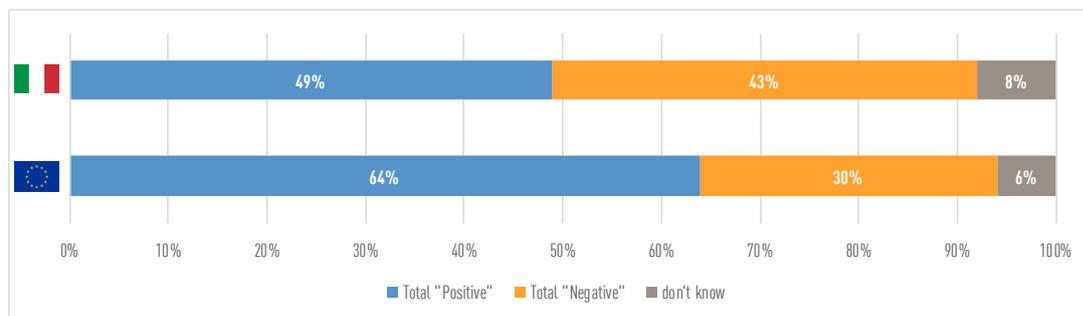
This migratory issue is thus indeed a subject that causes tension in Italy: nearly six out of ten Italians express a negative opinion concerning immigration of people from countries outside of the EU (59% versus 32% 'positive'), i.e. five points below the European average. Furthermore, only

38% think that immigrants have a lot to offer their country (for 55% 'do not agree'), whereas this is the opinion of a slight majority of Europeans (48% for 45%).

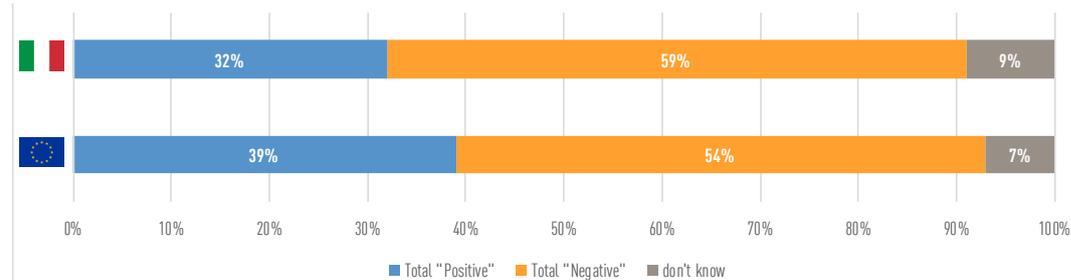
Currently, this tension also concerns immigration of people from other EU Member States: with 49% of positive opinions (versus 43% 'negative'), Italy has the lowest scores in the European Union on this question (equally with Cypress and Slovakia).

FIGURE 2 ■ "Please tell me whether each of the following statements evokes a positive or negative feeling for you."

Immigration of people from other EU Member States



Immigration of people from outside the EU



More specifically, Italian public opinion is divided about the question of help for refugees: 48% 'agree' with the statement that Italy should help refugees, whereas 44% 'do not agree'. Without being one of the most negative countries on this issue (the ratio of 'do not agree' indeed reached 67% in the Czech Republic and 66% in Hungary), Italy is well below the European average (27% 'do not agree' versus 67% 'agree').

This tension about the migratory issue means high expectations of action by the European Union: 88% of Italians want additional measures to be taken to fight irregular immigration of people arriving from outside of the EU, of which 34% at the European level, 26% at the national level and 28% at both levels (the latter answer was expressed the most spontaneously). This preference for solutions implemented by the EU is confirmed by the strong support in favour of a common European policy on migration (70% in Italy, for 69% across the EU 28 as a whole).

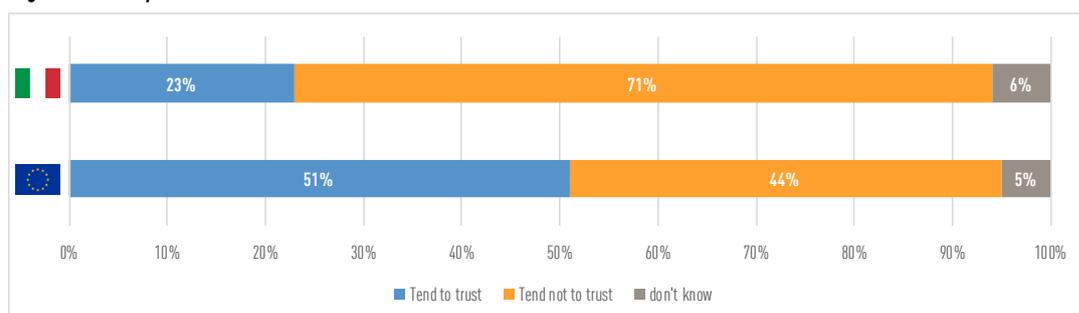
3. A SERIOUS LACK OF CONFIDENCE IN LOCAL, NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN REPRESENTATIVE BODIES

Europeans are highly distrustful of their political parties in general (18% 'tend to trust', versus 77% 'tend not to trust'), however, Italians are even more distrustful: only 13% of them trust their political parties, versus 83% that 'tend not to trust'.

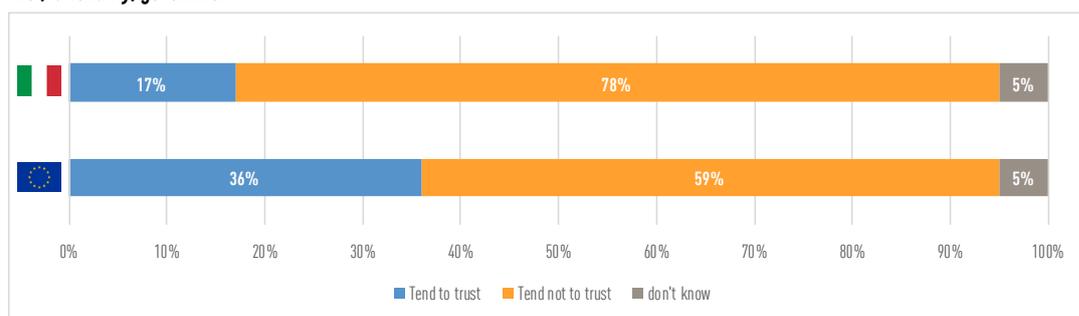
With the elections approaching, respondents in Italy are also very harsh towards their local and national institutions: less than a quarter of them trust the regional or local public authorities (23% versus 71% 'tend not to trust', with the European average at 51% versus 44%), and only 17% of Italians 'tend to trust' their government (versus 78% 'tend not to trust', with a 36/59 ratio at the European level). Although they mostly remain critical, they are however more indulgent towards the European Union, with 34% 'tend to trust' answers versus 52% that 'tend not to trust', the ratio being 41/48 at the European level.

FIGURE 3 ■ "I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain media and institutions. For each of the following media and institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it."

Regional or local public authorities

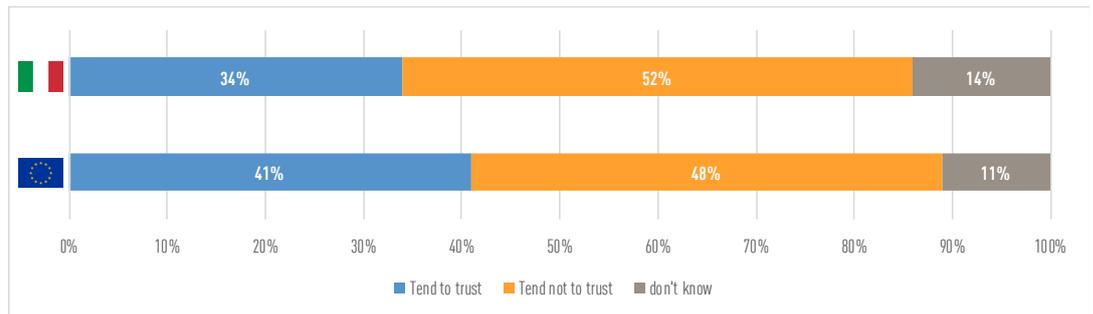


The (nationality) government*



* In Italy, the item read to the persons questioned was "the Italian government".

The European Union



Italian public opinion is just as critical with regard to how democracy works in their country: Italy is one of the five Member States that are the most critical on this issue, with only 36% of Italians satisfied, ahead of Romania (33%), Lithuania (32%), Croatia (27%) and Greece (23%). On the question of how democracy works in the EU, Italy is one of the three most critical countries, with 41% of satisfaction, ahead of the United Kingdom (40%) and Greece (27%).

The consequence of this distrust in the institutions and criticism of how their democracy works is that less than a third of Italians feel that their vote counts in their country (32%, versus 62% 'do not agree'). The results are practically the opposite at the EU level, with an opinion ratio of 59/37.

In the same way, few Italians feel that their vote counts in the EU: 29% 'agree', versus 64% 'do not agree'. In comparison, on average Europeans are a lot more divided on this issue (44% versus 50%).

BOX 1 ■ Socio-demographic analysis

The socio-demographic analysis reveals several divisions in Italian society. This threefold crisis is thus particularly visible for certain categories of Italians, namely **the seniors (people aged 55 or older), the unemployed, or those who say they often have difficulties paying their bills at the end of the month.**

The perception of these different crises increases with the age of the participants. It is noteworthy that **only 25% of those aged 55 or older see the situation of the EU economy as positive**, for 46% of the 15-24-year-olds and 36% of the 25-54-year-olds. The analysis according to the socio-professional category is also enlightening with regards to the divisions in Italian society: the opinion according to which immigrants have a lot to offer Italy is shared by a majority of white-collar workers (55%) and students (50%), but is **not frequently mentioned by the unemployed (21%) and retired people (26%)**. Lastly, common variations on these three crises can be observed according to the financial situation of the respondents. Indeed, only 6% of those who often have difficulties in paying their bills think **their voice counts in the EU**, versus 39% of those who almost never face this kind of difficulty.

Overall, these divisions by age, socio-professional categories and financial situation exist for each of the three crises.

As seems logical, we see the same variations of opinion for the European Union. Trust in the EU gradually decreases with age: 45% of the 15-24-year-olds trust the European Union, versus 42% of the 25-39-year-olds, 37% of the 40-54-year-olds and only 26% of those aged 55 or older. In the same way, a majority trust the EU among students (53%) and white-collar workers (52%), but very few do so among the unemployed (18%) and house people (21%). Lastly, the divide is also stark between those who rarely or never have difficulties paying their bills (44% trust, versus 45% mistrust), and those who have difficulties most of the time (12/72).

Strong regional differences

Lastly, it is noteworthy that the opinions of the European Union vary between regions. In most cases, opinions of the EU are more positive in the Northern and Eastern regions than in the Centre and the South. For example, trust in the EU is a majority opinion among respondents from the North-West (49% 'tend to trust', versus 30% 'tend not to trust'), but definitely a minority opinion in the Centre (32/67) and the South (27/53).

4. A (DOUBLE) ITALIAN PARADOX?

Nonetheless, beyond these difficulties, the majority of Italians support the different community policies, even if this support is always below the European average (except for the idea of a common European policy on migration). Italians namely support 'the free movement of EU citizens to live, work, study and conduct business anywhere in the EU' (68% 'for', 21% 'against'), 'a common foreign policy for the 28 EU Member States' (64/23), 'a common security and defence policy of the EU Member States' (67/23), 'a common energy policy for the EU Member States' (62/25) and 'a unique digital market within the EU' (56/26). The majority of Italians also support 'an economic and monetary European union, with a single currency, the euro' (59/30), although they have the lowest levels of support amongst the 19 Member States of the Eurozone on this issue¹⁶.

It would seem therefore that there is a sort of Italian paradox: although they are particularly critical towards the European Union, and Italy is one of the only two Member States that feels that 'their country could face the future better if it was outside of the EU' (46% 'agree' versus 43% 'do not agree'), at the same time, a majority of Italians still remain in favour of common European policies, and Italy ranks amongst the highest scores in considering that more decisions should be taken at the EU level (61% 'agree', ranking seventh of the EU28). Unlike the British, who are often critical of the EU's actions, Italians seem to regret that the European Union does not act more, and more efficiently.

A second paradox can also be noted: for certain indicators, Italians show optimism that, although moderate, is quite surprising given the quite bleak picture we have just shown of the public opinion. The ratio of Italians saying that the impact of the crisis on employment has already reached its peak has risen by two points to 49% compared to spring 2017, a score just above the European average (48%). Lastly, 31% of Italians estimate that the economic situation in Italy will improve in the next twelve next months (versus 29% 'worse'). Opinion remains divided, but we have seen a three-point improvement compared to the previous survey, and this score remains above the European average (27%).

CONCLUSION

These rays of hope are too fragile to prevent the Italians from expressing their dismay and their dissatisfaction with their leaders through their vote (or lack of vote) during the elections on 4th of March. If these elections result in a political crisis or an unconvincing compromise, the Italians' renewed optimism may be snuffed out before it can start to grow. But if the elections result in a solution and leaders capable of representing a fundamental change, this new power could help these encouraging signs come to fruition and improve the political climate in a shorter timeframe than foreseen. The factors of success are, however, not only in the hands of the next government. Only European solidarity will convince the Italians that a solution is in sight for the refugee problems.

¹⁶. This issue is developed further in the article written by Daniel Debomy, for the Jacques Delors Institute.

ON THE SAME TOPIC

- Pascal Lamy, Sébastien Maillard, Henrik Enderlein and Daniel Debomy, “[Evolution of public opinions](#)”, Jacques Delors Institute and Jacques Delors Institut - Berlin, September 2017
- Daniel Debomy and Alain Tripier, “[European public opinion and the EU following the peak of the migration crisis](#)”, Policy Paper No.201, Jacques Delors Institute, July 2017
- Daniel Debomy, “[The EU despite everything? European public opinion in the face of crisis \(2005–2015\)](#)”, Study, Jacques Delors Institute, June 2016
- Daniel Debomy, “[The EU yes, the euro no? European public opinion in the face of crisis \(2007-2012\)](#)”, Policy Paper No.90, Jacques Delors Institute, March 2013

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