

# PUBLIC OPINION IN GREECE & THE EU

## BETWEEN BITTERNESS AND AN ABIDING DESIRE FOR UNITY



*Photo by João Marcelo Martins on Unsplash*

■ **DANIEL DEBOMY**

Associate Researcher,  
Jacques Delors Institute,  
Directeur of OPTEM

In collaboration with:

■ **XENIA KOURTOGLOU**

Founder and Managing  
partner, Focus Bari, Athens

■ **ANNA KARADIMITRIOU**

Vice president, Focus Bari,  
Athens

Just over a year ago, following a third and final bailout, Greece emerged from the European Union's financial regulation, which began in 2010. It remains, however, "under supervision" and is bound by the commitments it made to its creditors. Its debt burden (around 180% of GDP) remains the heaviest in the euro area, GDP has fallen by a quarter, wages and pensions have been significantly reduced and the unemployment rate is still around the 20% mark (despite an 8-point drop since 2013).

In 2019, two elections were held: the election of the European Parliament, which confirmed the leading position of Kyriakos Mitsotakis' New Democracy party, followed

by a legislative election, in which Alexis Tsipras' government was defeated. This cycle of elections continued on 23 January 2020 with the highly consensual election of Ms Ekaterini Sakellaropoulou as President of Greece (indirectly elected by MPs).

This brief considers Greek public opinion against this backdrop. It is based in particular on the results of the Eurobarometer surveys by the European Commission and the European Parliament<sup>1</sup>. In addition, the findings of qualitative studies conducted over the last thirty years can be used to shed light on the significance of statistical data<sup>2</sup>.

1. Questions regarding EU membership and whether the country has benefitted from it, analysed in section 1 hereafter, were asked in the Commission's surveys until the spring of 2011 (with the exception of autumn 2010 for the former question). They were then made part of the Parliament's surveys: on membership in the springs of 2012 and 2013, in the autumns of 2014, 2015 and 2016, and each semester thereafter; on the benefits in the spring of 2013, in the autumns of 2015 and 2016, and each semester thereafter with the exception of autumn 2019. The other questions considered in this brief come from the Commission's Standard Eurobarometer surveys. Results based on samples of one thousand people polled in most Member States (including Greece).

2. Qualitative studies conducted by the OPTEM Institute and its European partners of the European Qualitative Network, including Focus Bari for Greece.

## 1 ■ Opinions on EU membership: early signs of improvement since 2017, following a collapse induced by the crisis

When Greece joined the EEC in 1981, the opinion of its citizens appeared to be significantly lower than the community average with regard to their country's membership: 42% considered it a good thing, 22% a bad thing (and 26% neither a good nor bad thing) – while the average was 50% against 17%. This score fell even further in the first year of **membership** before starting to rise.

Greek citizens remained more reserved until 1988, when public opinion rose and caught up with the European average, which had itself risen quite regularly, at 66% (against 8%). It then exceeded this average and reached a peak of 76% (against 6%) in the spring of 1991 – 5 points higher than the European peak recorded at the same time.

Subsequently, **Greeks constantly proved more positive than the European average until 2007** (with the exception of two half-year measurements at the end of this period): in the autumn of 2007, 62% (against 8%) still considered EU membership to be a good thing – 4 points above the European average.

In the meantime, European public opinion initially suffered a significant deterioration from 1991 to 1997 (46%, against 15% in the spring of 1997) before rising slowly with many fluctuations over the next ten years. Greek public opinion also dipped initially, but less rapidly, and then fluctuated around the 60% mark – with noteworthy peaks at several times (in 2001, 68% in the autumn, in 2004, 71% in the spring).

With the 2008 financial crisis, European public opinion fell by around ten points (a record low was recorded in the spring of 2011, with 47% against 18%) and then reco-

vered to a level around 60% (59% in the last measurement at the end of 2019).

Public opinion in Greece collapsed as the crisis unfolded, falling much more sharply and durably to a level at which positive opinions almost equalled negative opinions between 2013 and the start of 2017 (trough of 31% against 29% in the autumn of 2016). **It has improved in the last two years, rising to 47%**, against 12%, at the end of 2019 – **while remaining considerably below the European average.**

As regards opinions on whether the country has **benefitted** from its EU membership (measured for the first time in 1983), it can be noted that the Greeks, again initially more reserved on this point, quickly became more positive than the European average: constantly from 1986 and increasingly broadly in the following years, with scores which remained very high until the crisis. From 1989 in most of the half-year measurements, the positive rating in Greece was 20 to 25 points greater than the European average, and sometimes even more, peaking at 82% (against 12%) in the spring of 2004 and again at 80% (against 17%) in the autumn of 2007.

From 2008, Greek opinion on the benefits for the country became more negative, although it fell less quickly than opinion on membership itself. It was still broadly positive in 2010. The measurements taken in 2011 (47% positive against 50%), in 2013 (47%, against 51%), in 2016 (44%, against 52%), and again in 2017 (48%, against 46%) have highlighted positive opinions under the 50% mark. **There has been a noticeable recovery since 2017**, however: 60% in the spring of 2019 believed that Greece benefitted from its EU membership (but still 8 points below the average European rating)<sup>3</sup>.

3. Question not asked in the autumn 2019 survey wave.

## 2 ■ What changing opinions bring into play: disenchantment commensurate with a high level of expectations

The qualitative investigations conducted over several decades shed light on the factors underpinning these changes.

They include an in-depth study conducted in 1992 which demonstrated that Greek citizens were very dissatisfied by the state of their country (regarding the economy, the political system and politicians, social issues and its external image). They were, however, rather optimistic about the future – hopes were to a great extent pinned on EU membership.

However, they did hesitate to fully embrace the feeling of belonging to the EU, as a relatively recent member which was geographically and psychologically removed from the western core of the EU which was more developed and prosperous. Yet this feeling of distance waned after the first years of membership, and at the same time the benefits of membership were acknowledged (investments in infrastructure, economic and social progress, etc.) – due to the provision of community funds in particular. There is no doubt that the improvement in the indicators analysed above in the second half of the 1980s was related to Jacques Delors' plan to endow Europe with a new momentum (as in other countries, but this was certainly more clearly the case in Greece). The sharp hike recorded in 1988 was doubtless related to the first "Delors Package" and the doubling of structural funds. Many Greeks at the time directly associated the President of the Commission's name with the Greek word "Paketo".

Greek enthusiasm for the project appeared to be very strong. There were high hopes for an ambitious Europe that asserted itself economically and politically. The Single Market and the prospect of a single currency were

important elements, which brought the promise of development and greater prosperity. There were still reservations, however: the continued awareness of the country considerably lagging behind other Member States and questions regarding its ability to meet the shock of fiercer competition, worries that Greece may lose some of its control over its destiny, and more periodically a frustration with the "lack of solidarity" from other countries with regard to Macedonian issue.

In the following fifteen years, the Greeks continued to show a strong attachment to the building of Europe, while fluctuating in their opinions on their country's situation and place in the EU. This attachment was expressed firstly by a great awareness of Europe's historical and cultural identity, perceived and valued as the home of culture and humanism, a place which embodies the values of peace, freedom, democracy, respect for human rights, tolerance and solidarity in particular (a feeling shared by a great number of Europeans but which was particularly strong in Greece).

This went hand in hand with the widespread hope for a strong and unified Europe that could rival the most powerful competitor countries including in particular the USA, broadly deemed a model to be avoided. The citizens polled, from one study to another, on the European Union in general, on the current or future community policies or on various measures with more limited scope, were among those most in favour of the actions and projects which were brought to their attention regarding the strengthening of EU institutions, the various aspects of economic policy, the single currency, policies on energy or scientific and technological research, consumer protection, public health measures, support for cultural initiatives and external and security policy, etc.

It is clear that these seemingly positive attitudes towards the EU could be compared to the low level of trust placed in national institutions to deal with the country's problems.

Furthermore, the aforementioned worries and frustrations regarding Greece's shortcomings and the lesser status of being "bottom of the class" of a small country lagging behind the other EU Member States were always present, even though they were expressed in a more vocal or subdued manner depending on the period. This can be observed in the changing attitudes towards the Euro. At the beginning of this period, while raising positive hopes for monetary stability (a key issue), economic modernisation and convenience for citizens (or at least for some of them, the better-off who were more likely to benefit from the single currency during their travels, for example), the prospect of the single currency also came with fears (of price increases, price cheating, difficulties adapting), in particular in the lower socio-economic groups of the population, together with a certain nostalgia surrounding the relinquishment of the Drachma, which had been a symbol of national identity since ancient times. With the "divine surprise" of the country "qualifying" for the Euro in mid-2000, its formal entry into the euro area the following year, then the introduction of the Euro as a cash currency in 2002, support for the single currency was confirmed, concerns abated as did the more general reservations regarding the EU or some of its policies.

Against this backdrop of widespread Eurofavour, these reservations included for example those which concerned the prospect of an "enforced" standardisation or harmonisation (of products, standards or political direction). Moreover, community measures which were unanimously welcomed

in principle and acknowledged as beneficial could have their positive effects put into perspective (effects of the Single Market dampened by greater competition for SMEs; the new airport in Athens and the capital's underground network improved with the key assistance of structural funds but partly to the benefit of foreign companies involved in

their construction or operation; provisions of the CAP deemed poorly suited to local conditions, etc.). Lastly, doubts emerged regarding the EU's ability to actually apply seemingly welcome measures, and even to maintain its cohesion (cf. internal disagreements concerning the Iraq war by the USA or the question of enlargement which was particularly sensitive for the Greeks in relation to their neighbour, Turkey).

In the latter years of this period, these concerns and reservations gained ground, and a climate of gloominess spread significantly from 2007-2008. As the economic crisis worsened, around 2013-2014, new studies showed that they had developed into a deep-seated scepticism. Economically speaking, the Greeks tended to consider that the EU had failed in its role as a safety net, or at least had neglected to foresee the problems for the most fragile countries and that the Euro had heightened their difficulties. They felt that they were dependent on decisions made elsewhere in a Union deemed increasingly unequal. The following few years were marked by abiding pessimism and bitterness, at levels that were even on the rise, faced with both a devalued national government regarded as unsuccessful in instigating recovery from the crisis and the EU which enforced extremely harsh austerity measures. Admittedly, the EU had implemented bailout packages and provided key financial support, but with highly inflexible enforcement and without a care for the hardships of the population. A widespread impression was that by providing this assistance, the EU, or Member States, were striving as much to protect their own interests as best they could, and with a simplistic "cost cutting" approach rather than supporting investment and restarting the economy. Furthermore, at least as much as the content (citizens being well aware of the internal causes of the country's troubles), it is the EU's manner that aggravated frustrations, an **inflexible EU which behaved like a scornful bogeyman**

**in relation to Greek dignity** – while Greek citizens naturally express what their ancestors brought to Europe in terms of culture and civilisation while admitting what they owe to the EU.

Other than the economic aspect, they also believe that the EU has also lacked solidarity with Greece in relation to the upsurge in migration, leaving the country to bear most of the burden alone. In this respect, criticism of the scarce support given to the country has been expressed and continues to be expressed, compared to the financing offered to Turkey to retain migrants – some of whom still succeed in reaching the Greek coastline. In addition, concerns have grown regarding changes in Turkey under President Erdogan – tensions with their neighbour and the control of a border which is an external border of the EU should concern the EU as a whole and not only Greece which is located on the front line.

Throughout these dark years, even though they were obscured by the prevailing resentment, Greek citizens remained well aware of the positive aspects of the EU – in particular the provision of community funds (which the country probably failed to leverage fully), the open borders bringing about opportunities for travel, study and work in another country (despite the abstract nature of this advantage for many people) and generally the introduction of shared policies and rules, etc.

For the last two years or so, their feelings have become gradually less negative as the economic situation began to improve, with the very recent change in government also contributing to the (start of a) return to “reserved optimism”.

### **3 ■ The current outlook remains very gloomy, but there is an abiding desire for a united Europe**

#### **3.1 Views of the country’s situation continue to be very pessimistic**

When asked their opinion on their country’s situation in general, only 17% of Greeks deemed it good in the autumn of 2019, with 83% expressing the opposite opinion. Regarding the economic situation, the rating is even lower at 8% (against 92%) and has hardly progressed from the 3% score of autumn 2016 (the record low of the membership and benefit indicators). The same can be said for the employment situation (positive opinions accounting for only 7%).

Regarding these questions, the Greek ratings are the lowest of all EU Member States, as for other questions concerning personal circumstances (professional situation, financial situation of the household – for which positive responses are however more frequent, while remaining a minority)<sup>4</sup>.

Greece is also among those having the lowest rating of all EU Member States of citizens believing that things are going in the right direction in their country: 26% (against 62% in the wrong direction, and 10% neither good nor bad). Despite an improvement since the low point at the end of 2016 (4%, against 92%), they are far from returning to the more balanced opinions they expressed prior to the crisis, in 2007 (35%, against 26% for “wrong direction” and 26% of neutral opinions in the autumn of that year).

In addition, it can be noted that the level of trust in the national government expressed in Greece – despite the fact that it was only elected recently – remains one of the lowest at 26% (against 71%), far from the 46% measured at the beginning of the crisis – an

<sup>4</sup>. Trend observed generally across Europe.



expression of caution in the initial opinions on its actions, and probably a reflection of a great disenchantment with institutions in general.

### 3.2 The EU's image is damaged, and yet it is still considered necessary

As regards the EU, it also only inspires trust in a minority (albeit less dire than that expressed concerning the national government)<sup>5</sup>: 34% confident, against 62%. Very far from the strong majority in the autumn of 2007 (65%, 17 points above the EU average at the time), it is now below this average (by 12 points), despite a certain recovery (of around ten points) over the last two years; only the British express less trust.

The responses to a question concerning the EU's image appear more balanced: positive for 31% of respondents, negative for 32% and neutral for 23%. The recovery has been more significant here since the low point in 2016 (17% positive against 47% negative and 36% neutral), although it remains very far from the high rating recorded at the end of 2007 (57%, 8 points above the average).

This difference may be explained by the citizens polled considering their overall vision, which remains valued, of the concept of the European Union in their answers to the second of these questions, while the first question gives rise to reactions to the EU's recent direction. In another question, only 24% of respondents believe that things are heading in the right direction, against 61% (and 10% in a direction that is neither good nor bad), while those who claim to be optimistic about the EU's future remain a minority (46%, against 51% – a very low rating among Member States; despite a 16-point improvement in two years it remains very far from the 72% recorded in 2007).

Along the same lines, it is unsurprising that those who believe that the interests of their country are properly taken into account in

<sup>5</sup>. Trend also commonly observed in a vast majority of Member States.

the EU are in a considerable minority (27% against 71% despite a 9-point improvement in two years), far from the EU average (52% against 40%), or that only 27% (against 72%) believe that their voice counts in the EU (EU average: 45% against 50%).

However, **only 33% (against 63%) claim that Greece would be better equipped to face the future if it were outside the EU** (it can be noted that even at the lowest point of 2016, this figure did not exceed 38%).

This ambivalence in Greek attitudes is also reflected in the responses to two questions concerning the "measures to be taken to reduce the public deficit and debt" in their country. In one question, 66% of respondents (against 29%) agree with the idea that these measures "cannot be delayed"; in the other, 51% of the respondents, against 44%, answered that these measures are "not a priority for now". This is a sign that while bitter about the means with which the country's economic problems were dealt with, citizens do not ignore the reality of these problems.

### 3.3 An abiding desire for a united Europe that takes action

In a question which asked respondents to express their opinion, on a scale of one to seven, of the desired speed of building Europe, in autumn 2019 Greek citizens opted for the two responses corresponding to faster speeds in greater numbers than the European average (59% for the former, 36% for the latter).

Furthermore, in response to the idea that more decisions should be made on a European level, 52% (against 42%) agree. It was more balanced in the autumn of 2016 at 47% in favour and 49% against). These ratings are quite similar to the European average.

When asked whether they are in favour or against various European policies that are

FIGURE 1 ■ Greek and EU public opinion qualifying EU membership as a good thing between 1981 and 2019

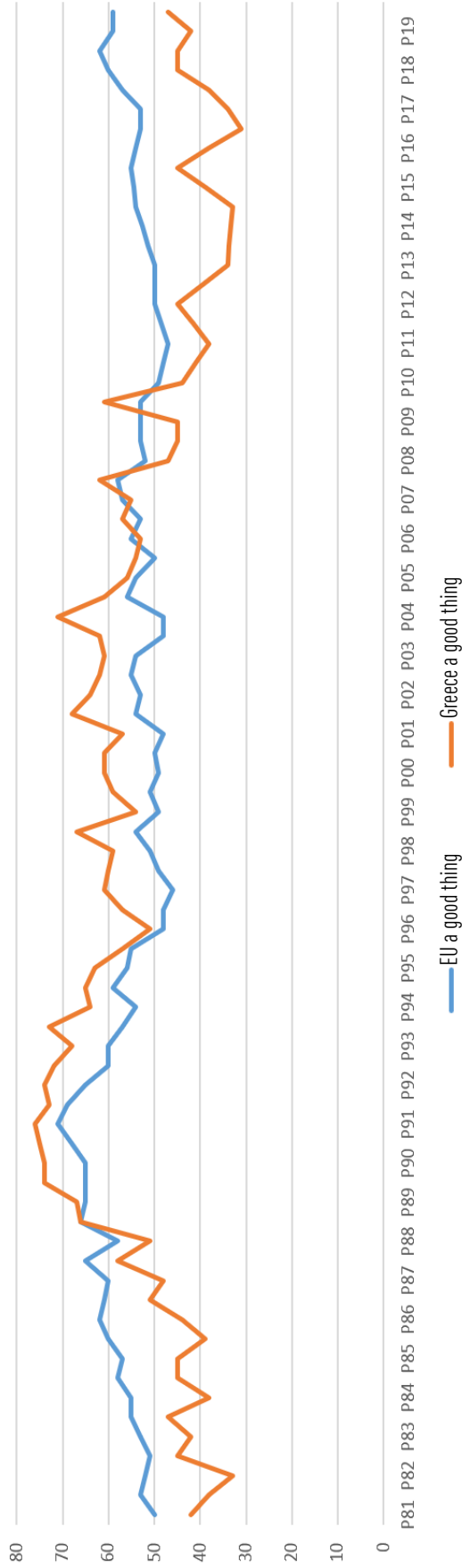
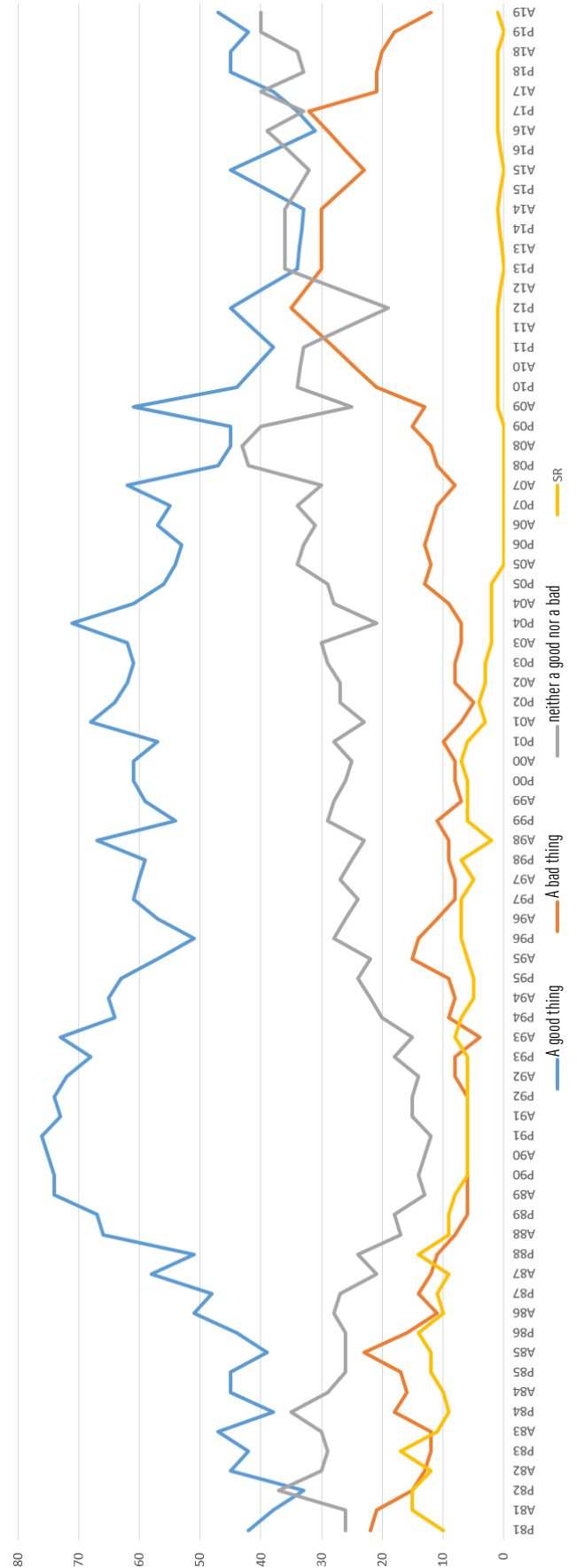


FIGURE 2 ■ Greek public opinion on EU membership between 1981 and 2019



well-established or under development, they are more inclined than the average of citizens of Member States to approve all of them. Among the policies put to them, 70% were in favour of a monetary union with a single currency, the Euro (EU average: 62%), 76% were for a common foreign policy (average: 68%), 81% for a common security and defence policy (average: 75%), 75% for a common trade policy (average: 71%), 87% for freedom of movement (average: 82%), and even 78% for a common migration policy (average: 72%); and the 52% which were in favour of enlargement to new countries still represent a higher rating than the European average (44%) for this point.

**The desire for Europe**, for a Europe that is more pleasant for them naturally, **is still felt in Greece.**

## CONCLUSION

Greek public opinion, which used to be strongly europhile, was badly affected by the crisis and the harsh treatment of the crisis under the aegis of the European Union. In the last two years it has begun to emerge from its eurobitterness. But this early improvement is still limited and fragile. Doubts remain on the directions in which the EU is moving.

However, there is an abiding desire for a strong and united Europe. The remaining skepticism could gradually abate, provided that the current beginning of economic upturn is confirmed.

■

Managing Editor: Sébastien Maillard

■ The document may be reproduced in part or in full on the dual condition that its meaning is not distorted and that the source is mentioned ■ The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the publisher ■ The Jacques Delors Institute cannot be held responsible for the use which any third party may make of the document ■ Translation from French: Barbara Banks ■ © Jacques Delors Institute



L'Europe pour les citoyens



Institut Jacques Delors

18 rue de Londres, 75009 Paris

info@delorsinstitute.eu – www.institutdelors.eu