

BLOG POST

FRUGAL MEMBER STATES VS. THE EU : NOT TOO MUCH PLEASE

27/10/2020 | DANIEL DEBOMY | DEMOCRACY AND CITIZENSHIP

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2020 has been a year marked by arduous negotiations which resulted in the adoption of the recovery plan for the European economy, hit hard by the consequences of the COVID 19 pandemic. During these negotiations, the leaders of so-called “Frugal Four” Member States expressed their major disinclination towards a solidarity-based commitment to recovery (and ultimately only came around when granted substantial financial concessions): the Netherlands – although a founding Member State of the European Community –, Denmark, Sweden and Austria.

As the negotiations between European institutions continue, in particular with a view to finalising the European Multi-annual Financial Framework for 2021-2027, this paper analyses the state of public opinion towards the EU in these four countries, as expressed prior to these events. This paper is based on data from the European Commission’s Eurobarometer survey conducted in the autumn of 2019 and from the 2019 surveys of the European Parliament, the most recent comparable data available on the state of public opinion.

Positive opinions regarding the economic situation

Citizens of the “Frugal Four” Member States stand out for their highly positive opinions with regard to the economic situation in their country: 90% deem the situation positive in the Netherlands as in Denmark and 76% in Sweden and Austria - all scores which are much greater than the European average (47%). A similar question on the country’s situation “in general” shows results that are very much the same.

The EU’s economic situation is deemed positive by a majority (yet less than that of the country) accounting for 69% of Dutch and Austrian citizens polled, 63% of Danes and 54% of Swedes (opinions to the contrary ranging from 21% to 27%). Once again, these scores are considerably higher than the Member State average (47% against 39%).

A high level of satisfaction expressed in the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden with regard to EU membership; Austria below the EU average

When asked if the country's membership in the EU is a good thing, a bad thing or neither good nor bad (1), the citizens of the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden expressed very positive opinions: 79% (against 5%) for the Netherlands, 77% (against 6%) for Denmark and 72% (against 7%) for Sweden.

These scores, which are much higher than the European average (59% against 11%), contrast with the rating for Austria, where the ratings were lower than the average, with 49% considering membership "a good thing", against 16% (and 35% for "neither good nor bad").

This difference is also apparent in the responses to another conventional question (1) regarding how the country has benefited (or not) from its membership. 83% in the Netherlands, 85% in Denmark and 72% in Sweden believe that their country has benefited - with the EU average being 68%. Only 57% of Austrians polled see a benefit, with more than one third expressing the opposite opinion.

Trust in the EU and perceptions of its future: a similar hierarchy of positive opinions

Overall, a slight minority of European citizens express trust in the EU with 43% against 47% (it is true that trust in the national government is expressed by a very low minority: 34% against 61%). The Danes (63%), Dutch (56%) and Swedes (53%) show greater trust in the EU, while Austrians are closer to the average (46% against 48%).

The same scoring hierarchy can be noted with regard to optimism or pessimism for the EU's future, even though a majority of citizens polled are optimistic in all four countries (74% in Denmark, 65% in the Netherlands, 62% in Sweden, 57% in Austria - the score recorded in the latter being close to the European average).

Polled on the idea that their country could better face the future outside the EU, the citizens of the four countries under study all emphatically dismissed the idea: great majorities in the Netherlands (83%), Denmark (80%) and Sweden (72%), and less so in Austria (56%, which is lower than the European average of 60%).

As regards the EU's image (positive, negative or neutral), the Danes are the most positive (55% against 13% of opposing views) ahead of the Swedes (50% against 20%). They are more positive than the average European (42% against 20%) while opinions in the Netherlands are close to the average (43% against 22%) and those in Austria are below average (38% against 22%).

The country's place within the EU and the feeling of belonging: no expressions of frustration, but a modest degree of attachment

Are the interests of their countries well taken into account in the EU? A majority of citizens in the countries analysed here answered yes to this question: much higher than the European average (52% against 40% for the EU as a whole) in Denmark (63%) and in Sweden (60%) and slightly more in Austria (55%) and in the Netherlands (54%).

Do they personally believe that their voice counts in the EU? A great majority agree with this statement in Denmark (72%), in Sweden (69%), in the Netherlands (63%) and in Austria (58%) - while the European average is 45% (against 50%).

Do they feel like EU citizens? Again yes, to degrees at least slightly higher than the EU average (70% against 29%): 79% in the two Scandinavian countries, 73% in Austria and 72% in the Netherlands.

Does this mean they feel attached to the EU? Yes, but with relatively limited majorities in Denmark (53% against 46%), in Sweden (54% against 44%) and in Austria (56% against 43%), while the Dutch are almost split down the middle (49% yes, 50% no) – these percentages are lower than the average European score (57% against 41%).

Do they feel European? For the average European citizen, attachment to the EU as an institution is slightly lower (by 8 percentage points) than attachment expressed towards “Europe”. This gap is wider in the “Frugal Four” countries. Attachment to the EU compared to “Europe” is ten percentage points lower in Austria, 16 points in the Netherlands and 25 points in Denmark and Sweden - attesting to an emotional distance from the EU institutions.

Doubts expressed regarding the near future

While the citizens of the countries analysed claim to be particularly satisfied with the current economic situation (see above), they are somewhat pessimistic when asked about developments they predict for the coming year. Regarding the EU, only 8% of Dutch citizens foresee an improvement while 39% predict a deterioration of the situation (and 47% no change). In Denmark, the figures are 8% and 24% respectively, in Sweden 6% and 42% and in Austria 14% and 25% – with the average EU opinion being less gloomy (17% against 25%, with 46% predicting no change). This above-average pessimism for the short term is also apparent regarding the country’s economic situation in the coming year – except in Austria; it is particularly clear in Sweden.

These results can be linked to the answers to another question: in a general sense, are things going in the right direction or in the wrong direction in the EU? In the EU as a whole, fewer citizens see things going in the right direction than in the wrong direction (31% against 49%). However, in Sweden (24% against 56%) and Denmark (24% against 42%), opinions are particularly negative, while the Netherlands is close to the average (32% against 50%) and this time Austria is slightly less gloomy (34% against 45%).

This may seem in contradiction with the previous observations, particularly as regards the optimism expressed for the EU’s future. We may conclude that this optimism concerns the EU’s medium- to long-term future, and that this does not mean that reservations regarding its current direction are not expressed.

It should be noted that the same question regarding things going in the right or wrong direction was asked in reference to the citizens’ own countries. While the European average is slightly more negative with regard to the national direction than to the EU’s direction, the opposite was recorded in three of the Member States studied in this paper: very clearly in Denmark (52% “right direction” against 24%) and in Austria (51% against 35%), less clearly in the Netherlands (44% against 41%), the balance of positive and negative opinions in Sweden (29% against 60%) does not differ greatly for the country and for the EU.

Attitudes towards strengthening the EU: serious reservations

A double question from the Eurobarometer surveys concerns the speed of European construction: firstly, its current speed assessed on a scale, for which citizens from the “Frugal Four” Member States are not fundamentally different from the average European.

Regarding the desired speed of integration, the average European scores (36% chose the greatest speeds on the scale) reflect a desire for faster progress than those recorded in the Netherlands (23% in favour of faster integration), in Denmark (24%), in Sweden (27%) and in Austria (13%).

Regarding the idea that more decisions should be taken on an EU level (shared in the European average by 54% of citizens polled, against 37%), the Dutch are somewhat behind (52% against 43%), only a minority of Austrians agree (45% in favour) and the Scandinavians are for the most part opposed (29% in favour against 60% in Denmark, 27% against 69% in Sweden).

Should the EU have greater financial means given its political objectives, or do the EU’s financial means match its political objectives? In the EU as a whole, the two opinions are balanced (40% for the former, 41% for the latter). However, in the four countries under study, only a small minority agree with the former statement: 28% against 60% in Austria, 25% against 69% in the Netherlands, 24% against 62% in Sweden, and even 14% against 75% in Denmark. These four Member States record the highest gap between the first and second statement out of all Member States.

There are other signs of these reservations in the answers to a question in which the citizens polled were asked to say if they agreed or disagreed with various political proposals. For two of these proposals, which, although varying in content, explicitly state the need to allocate public funding, the scores in favour are lower in the “Frugal Four” Member States than in the European average:

- “The creation of a European public-private fund (financed both by public authorities and private companies) with a view to supporting SMEs”: more lukewarm support than the average, particularly in Denmark and Sweden.
- “Increase the EU budget for the Erasmus programme”: noteworthy reluctance in particular in the Netherlands and in Austria.

The same is recorded for three of these countries (Austria being the exception in this case) for another proposal which also implies public spending:

- “Public money should be used to stimulate private sector investment at EU level”
- While the EU average shows that most citizens are in favour of this idea (59% against 29%), the Danes are divided (42% against 40%) and the Dutch and Swedes are staunchly opposed.

Conclusion: satisfaction with the status quo

In the surveys conducted shortly before the health crisis hit, citizens of the so-called “Frugal Four” Member States expressed a **strong resistance to the idea of increasing the EU’s financial means**, in line with the positions of their leaders.

At the same time, they come across as particularly **unwilling to speed up European construction and to develop joint decision-making on an EU level** –on the latter point, however, the Dutch are only slightly less in favour than the EU average, while the Austrians are clearly less so and a vast majority of the Danes and Swedes polled are against this.

In the four countries, they all overwhelmingly reject the idea of a more positive future outside of the EU. In three of these countries (Austrians being markedly more half-hearted), there is a **high level of satisfaction regarding membership in the EU**, for which they foresee a positive future (despite reservations on the current direction taken). This goes hand in hand with the positive opinions (prior to the health crisis) regarding the EU’s economic situation and to a greater extent that of the country itself.

In conclusion, in the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden, there is a pragmatic relationship with the EU in countries in good health which are content with the benefits it provides and where **there is hardly any desire to move towards “an ever closer Union”** –**particularly if it implies a cost**; in Austria we can see similar attitudes together with more mixed opinions on the benefits of membership.

(1) Questions asked in the European Parliament surveys in the autumn of 2019 on EU membership, in the spring of 2019 on the benefits of membership (most recent available data).

All the other questions stated in this paper were asked in the Commission’s Standard Eurobarometer survey in the autumn of 2019.

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