

Is the EU still attractive?

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Politicians left and right tend to agree, that the 2019 European elections will become a turning point in the history of the EU. Euro-sceptic and euro-critical politicians will compete with pro-European forces, offering fundamentally different views on the future of the integration. These may range from a sovereigntist and purely common market approach to a more federalist, pro-integration notion. Ideological and strategic debates about the future of the EU are not to be rejected, but if the campaign gets too emotional, there is a danger that the existence and the basic values of the EU can be questioned.

Looking at the data regularly provided by Eurobarometer, it is not far-fetched to say that the EU is suffering from a fundamental image problem. The decline of its appeal is a long but steady process. In the last bonanza year, in 2007 – after the big bang enlargement and ahead of the financial crisis – the EU enjoyed a positive image by 52 % of the population. Not exactly a phenomenal result, but still very much above the data we have today. The sad fact is that the second biggest economic power of the world (if we consider the EU as a block) is only seen favorably by 40 % of the population, while 21% views it negatively. But looking at it from another angle: still, 37% has a neutral image, which indicates clearly: it is difficult to like it, although many are aware of the advantages and assets the membership means.

The deteriorating image can have a lot to do with the constant criticism and the permanent crisis of the last ten years. Practically ever since the financial crisis, the EU is under pressure by the member states and their governments, or other, emerging political forces either for being too active or, on the contrary, for not solving the problems fast enough. A significant part of responsibility lies with the national governments in the deteriorating image of the EU, but the European institutions are not doing their best in shaping their own image either.

Tendencies are also telling: the two countries where the EU's image declined the most in the last year (from 2017 to 2018) are Sweden (loss of 6%) and Hungary (minus 5%). In Hungary's case the EU's image is still better than the EU average, but it shows that even in countries which had a favorable view of the EU, a downturn can be achieved in a relatively short time with effective negative propaganda.

Looking at the optimism about the future of the EU – a key question ahead of the EP elections - it is reassuring that optimism has been slowly on the rise since 2016, but it is still far from the 2007 level (total optimistic: 69 % total pessimist: 24% in 2007, 58-36% in 2018). It is evident that the handling of the financial and the migration crises, plus the unprecedented step of the UK to leave the community, had its toll on the image of the EU. However, in certain countries, like Portugal, Estonia and even in Greece, positive tendencies can be noted. On the other hand, optimism is declining in Spain, Finland and again, in Hungary. However, there is no country so far – with the exception of the UK – which would question its membership in the EU. Generally speaking, one third of the population thinks life would be better outside the EU, while two thirds are rejecting

this possibility. In case of Hungary, this ratio is a bit more negative: 35% thinks life would be better outside and 56% believes it is better to stay in the EU - despite the clear financial and economic benefits of the membership. This result is surprising seeing that usually countries experiencing economic difficulty – currently Slovenia and Italy, not yet recovering from the financial crisis – are the most critical regarding the membership. In the case of Hungary, a solid economic growth should be a pro for membership.

Currently there is little hope for countries waiting for accession. Despite a modest increase in support, the majority of the EU-population still rejects further enlargement (except in the case of Switzerland or Iceland). It seems that a favorable moment was seized in 2004/2007, since then, the enthusiasm has evaporated. Yet there is some hope on the horizon: since 2016 a somewhat positive trend has started, now the ratio of those rejecting and those favoring enlargement are getting closer (46 % vs 44%). The division of the two camps is telling: those against enlargement are mainly the rich Western countries, led by Austria (although Vienna benefitted a lot from the previous Eastern enlargements and could be a potential winner of the opening of the Balkan markets), and those arguing for accession are some Central Europeans (Hungary not in the first line) and Spain. As the support of all member states is required for enlargement, still a lot has to be invested to convince national politicians and citizens to reintroduce enlargement policy.

The appeal of the EU is declining beyond its borders: in Serbia, only 29% of the population thinks it would be a good thing to join the EU, 39% are undecided and 22 considers it a bad thing. In all other SEE countries there is substantially more enthusiasm – but the longer they wait, the attractiveness of the EU may decline. As the EU has little to offer for the region, competitors have already appeared. China is offering similar loan-based infrastructure investments as in Africa. However, the Western Balkan countries will have to pay a high political price if letting Beijing take strategic positions in the immediate neighborhood of the EU. Russia continues to strengthen its presence in the region, not only through investments but by investing in undermining democratic principles and trust in the EU.

Supporting EU accession is shaped by somewhat different factors in the Eastern neighborhood. Russian aggression in the Ukraine radically changed public opinion in a number of countries. Ukraine's stance on the EU changed as much as the Georgian position and the EU became once again popular among the majority of Moldovans. The latter one required the most efforts. According to a recent poll, in January 2018, 60% of the population was supporting joining the EU, while only 15% would have voted for the Eurasian Union. In 2015 the picture was radically different, then only 40% Moldovans supported the country's European accession while 44% were in favor of a Eurasian integration.

The bank fraud scandal swiped away the party called the Alliance of European Integration. People blamed all member parties of the coalition as well as the EU, for supporting the government due to their pro-European stance. Although only a few politician, businessmen and judge were involved in the fraud, the whole public administration had to take the responsibility. On the other hand, the EU also made promises on potential accession which proved to be unrealistic and failed to manage expectations in a same way as it has happened in the Western Balkans.

Learning from its earlier mistakes, the EU grasped pro-EU sentiments of the East by offering what was feasible. The DCFTA (Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements) with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine were beneficial for all parties. The DCFTAs, combined with an attractive visa free travel policy, significantly increased the EU's popularity. To maintain this support, which is geopolitically important, EU officials will have to remain innovative to introduce schemes stopping short of membership, but bringing closer the benefits of the EU. A controversial situation is already taking shape: mostly West-European countries already welcome large numbers of guest workers from their Eastern Partners. From the 3 countries (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) more than 5 million people have moved westwards. While financial remittances are crucial for the economies of these Eastern countries, the socio-economic impacts will be soon devastating. The EU will have to offer some solutions to these challenges or prepare for serious crises at its immediate neighborhood.

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