

Chart in focus

Are Europeans facing an identity crisis?

April 4, 2017

In the current debate about the future of the EU, politicians as well as the media are warning of a tendency by member states to shift their focus back to their own national interests and of a subsequent loss of significance of the EU. Are policymakers reacting to actual changes in the attitudes of EU citizens or is there an underlying perception issue here?

According to the latest Eurobarometer polls from November 2016, most EU citizens increasingly feel they have both a national and a European identity. At the same time the share of those who define themselves pre-dominantly as citizens of their respective country has been constantly decreasing for the past 10 years. This trend is particularly distinct in the core countries of the EU such as Germany and the Netherlands.

While in 1996 half of the people interviewed in Germany identified themselves exclusively as German, this share has declined by almost 50% since then. In France, the proportion of people defining themselves solely as French was already lower than the respective figure for Germany in 1996 and has not changed considerably since then despite increasing troubles in the EU. Thus, the strength of European identity among Germans and French still forms the basis for intensified Franco-German initiatives in the EU. However, only a small number of citizens in the EU continue to feel exclusively European, which is not really surprising given the fact that the nation-state is the primary guarantor of civil rights.

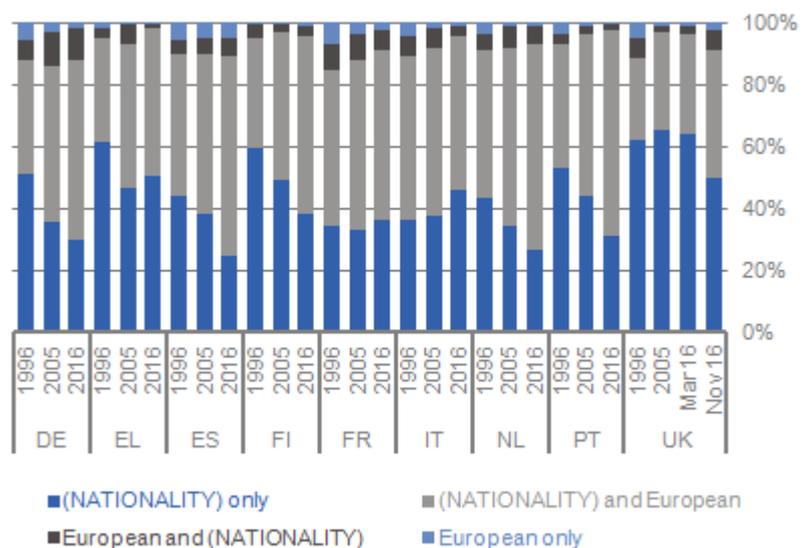
An exception to this trend is Greece, where the majority of people do not feel European. The weak identification is not new; even before the crisis the Greeks already felt much more Greek than European. However, the public debt crisis and the resulting tensions between Brussels and Athens may well be the main reason behind the growing national sentiment of the Greeks since the advent of the crisis.

In Italy, too, the identification with Europe decreased in the course of the crisis. The EU and its alleged focus on fiscal austerity are also blamed for the country's economic problems. At the same time, eurosceptic populist force are gaining support – the eurosceptic Movimento 5 Stelle party currently holds around 30% of votes according to recent polls and would thus be the strongest political force in the event of early elections.

To the surprise of many observers, such a “crisis of identity” could not be detected in Spain and Portugal, the other two southern European member states that experienced significant problems during the euro area crisis. The trend towards a “blending” of national and European identity continued despite the crisis. The economic recovery in these two countries could be one reason for that. However, a more important factor is likely to be the positive role the EU played in the countries' transition process to democracy. In any case, neither in Spain nor in Portugal could eurosceptical political forces gain significant ground.

Mixed multiple identities

Feeling national and/or European: “In the near future. Do you see yourself as...”



Sources: Eurobarometer, Deutsche Bank Research

The results of the survey are particularly interesting with regard to the UK and the Brexit referendum in June 2016. While British people traditionally have a strong sense of nationality – 60% of the British people consider themselves solely as British and not as European – this share dropped by 14 ppts after the Brexit vote. The proportion of those who consider themselves just Europeans doubled.

Ultimately, when it comes to their sense of identity most people in Europe perceive themselves as both national and European citizens. Claims that the population of Europe is turning away from the project of European integration must therefore be seen as a wake-up call to reform and adjust the EU to the needs and expectations of the European public. This is also the starting point for the White Paper on the Future of Europe which the EU Commission has published on the occasion of the recent 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome. By presenting different scenarios for the future, the Commission aims to initiate the crucial debate on the direction the European project should take. At the EU summit in December the member states will discuss this matter further.

Original in German: March 30, 2017

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