

Schuman Paper
n°789
29th April 2025

Europe appears to be the solution, not the problem

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The most recent [Eurobarometer](#) of 25 March 2025 shows historically high approval ratings for the European Union, while nationalist, Eurosceptic parties are steadily gaining ground in the European Parliament and in the member states. What appears to be a paradox can be explained by a shift in the discourse. Even right-wing populists no longer question the EU – a clear triumph for the European idea.

These are figures that the founding fathers of the European Union could only have dreamed of. Given the abundance of negative news dominating headlines in Europe and around the world, and the seemingly unstoppable rise of anti-European, nationalist parties in all European countries, they appear paradoxical. They can be explained in part by the current tense geopolitical and economic context and, against this backdrop, may actually spread optimism.

The latest Eurobarometer revealed historically high levels of support for the EU among the people of Europe. According to the survey, 74 per cent of citizens say that their country benefits from membership of the European Union – the highest figure recorded since the annual survey began in 1983.

PEOPLE WANT MORE, NOT LESS EU

In times of crisis in particular, public opinion seems to view the EU as fulfilling its role as a peace project that guarantees prosperity and security for its citizens. Russia's brutal war of aggression against Ukraine, Russian cyber attacks and threats against Europe, the turning away of the United States as a historic ally under US President Donald Trump, the danger of being caught between the fronts in the trade war between the US and China, the looming global recession – in the face of

growing external pressure, fewer and fewer Europeans are questioning the usefulness of the community of Member States. On the contrary, they feel protected by it and even want to see their respective countries strengthen their European commitment. 'There has never been more talk about Europe than there is now,' said German-French former MEP Daniel Cohn-Bendit [in a radio-interview](#) in March. Europe no longer appears to be the problem - but the solution.

The other results of the survey, which involved more than 26,000 interviews with residents of all 27 Member States between the beginning of January and February, also shed light on people's perceptions of the European Union and what they hope it will deliver. Respondents who considered membership of the Community to be beneficial cited the preservation of peace and greater protection as the main reasons for this. This suggests that a peaceful life in security on the European continent is no longer taken for granted, unlike in previous decades. The values that Europeans hold most dear are peace (45 percent), democracy (32 percent) and the protection of human rights in the EU and around the world (22 percent). The responses remained stable compared to last year, which can be seen as evidence of unwavering support for the EU's fundamental values and principles.

**YOUNGER PEOPLE IN PARTICULAR WANT
THE EU TO PLAY A STRONGER ROLE**

Even the largest European country is too small to stand up to other major powers in the current volatile context. This is why alliances between states, first and foremost the European Union, are considered the best means of protection in an emergency. NATO – although not covered by the survey – also appears to have gained in importance since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, after French President Emmanuel Macron had [described](#) it as 'brain dead' in November 2019 against the backdrop of a conflict with Turkey, the US and the actions of both of these countries in Syria. Given the dubious reliability of the United States under Donald Trump, who has hinted that he might renege on his promise of military support, the actual protection afforded by the North Atlantic Alliance can no longer be taken for granted. This may be one of the reasons why Europeans are turning even more strongly to the EU. According to Eurobarometer, 62 percent of them hope that the European Parliament will gain in importance. Two out of three respondents express the wish that the European Union should play a more important role in protecting people against global crises and threats. This expectation is particularly pronounced among younger people. The call for greater 'strategic autonomy' made by French President Macron in his 2017 [Sorbonne speech](#) on Europe is now gaining traction, albeit belatedly. People in the EU, like European leaders, are more aware than ever that Member States must take responsibility for their own defence capabilities – and do so together if they are to be effective. In Germany, Chancellor Olaf Scholz coined the apt phrase '[Zeitenwende](#)' (turning point).

**MAJOR PROBLEMS OF OUR TIME CANNOT BE
SOLVED AT NATIONAL LEVEL**

After defence and security, competitiveness and the economy and industry are considered the most important areas in which the EU should strengthen its international position. These responses also

clearly show how much citizens are influenced by a growing sense of insecurity in the face of the war in Ukraine and fears that Russia could attack an EU or NATO member state in just a few years, as warned by several European intelligence services, including those in [Germany](#) and [Lithuania](#). On the other hand, fears of economic decline and rising unemployment are growing as a result of the US president's unpredictable and hostile customs policy. These developments must be countered with a united EU. With its 450 million inhabitants and a gross domestic product of €17 trillion in 2023 – slightly more than China – it must stand up to the other major powers with confidence and use this strength to its advantage. There is a growing realisation that the major problems of our time cannot be solved at national level. These include inflation and the high cost of living, which worry four out of ten Europeans, as well as independence in terms of energy, food supply and agriculture. The issue of climate protection has slipped out of the public spotlight, but it is no less crucial for the future.

**LESS OBSTRUCTIONISM, MORE JOINT
SOLUTIONS**

Almost nine out of ten Europeans want Member States to present a more united front and act more decisively to tackle global challenges: a finding that heads of state and government should take to heart. After all, what slows the EU down most, whether in terms of economic strategy, common security and defence or migration policy, is the often protracted search for compromise. Contrary to their official assurances, many national leaders regularly put on their national hats when it comes to controversial issues – whether it is Germany's protection of its domestic automotive industry, France's opposition to the EU-Mercosur agreement out of consideration for some French farmers, or the regular obstructionism of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, whether on sanctions against Moscow or refugee agreements. In contrast, by taking on joint debt for the first time in the coronavirus crisis, the EU showed that it can offer solutions in an

emergency, even if some member states had to take a leap of faith to do so. The added value of being part of this union was already abundantly clear at that point. Half of those surveyed in the study have a positive image of the EU. This figure was only higher in spring 2022, at the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Approval ratings for the EU Parliament remain stable at 41 percent. That is six percentage points higher than in the previous year.

CONTRADICTION: DESPITE SUPPORT FOR THE EU, NATIONALIST PARTIES ARE ON THE RISE

At the same time – and this seems to be a contradiction – nationalist, right-wing populist parties are gaining ground in polls and elections in every European Member State. They are more or less openly opposed to the European project. These parties, which usually present themselves as the only 'true' representatives of the people, question all the mechanisms of cooperation that a large majority of people in Europe want. Nevertheless, this paradox is not hindering their momentum at the polls.

As a result of the European elections in June 2024, the EU Parliament shifted further to the right than ever before. In the previous legislative period, there were two far-right factions: the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and the even more extreme Identity and Democracy (ID). In 2024, the factions were partly reorganised. In addition to the European Conservatives and Reformists, which now has 80 MEPs, there is now the new Patriots for Europe faction with 86 seats, as well as the Europe of Sovereign Nations faction with 26 seats.

In the Member States, national conservative, sovereigntist and right-wing populist parties are not only in opposition, but in some cases are also part of the government. The right-wing nationalist Sweden Democrats, who explicitly reject supranational entities such as the EU, are supporting Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson (EPP). In Finland, the Eurosceptic True Finns are part of the

government led by conservative Petteri Orpo (EPP). In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders' Islamophobic and anti-European Party for Freedom (PVV) became the strongest force in the House of Representatives in the 2023 parliamentary elections with 23.7 per cent of the vote, forming a government with three other parties led by independent Prime Minister Dick Schoof. In Austria, meanwhile, the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) won the parliamentary elections in autumn 2024, but attempts to form a government with the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), which came second in the elections, failed due to too wide a gap between their positions and ideas on the composition of the government. Ultimately, Christian Stocker (EPP) now leads a coalition government with the Social Democrats and the Liberals. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán, whose Fidesz party belongs to the 'Patriots for Europe' faction, is a prime minister who frequently makes the EU a scapegoat and has blocked joint decisions without causing an open break. Leaving the EU is not an option for Viktor Orbán. Such a political gamble would be too risky, as the Eurobarometer survey shows, according to which Hungarians have a clearly positive image of the European Union. 63% of those surveyed in Hungary would like it to play a greater role in protecting its citizens. 74% believe that they benefit from membership of the European Union – exactly the same as the European average.

THE GIORGIA MELONI EFFECT – FROM EU CRITIC TO CONSTRUCTIVE EUROPEAN POLITICIAN

The case of Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni is particularly noteworthy – and it explains better than any other the apparent contradiction between the pro-European sentiment in the member states and the electoral and poll successes of nationalist, Eurosceptic parties. In the election campaign leading up to her victory in October 2022, Giorgia Meloni aggressively stirred up anti-EU sentiment, criticising the Treaty of Lisbon, the European Fiscal Compact and, initially, the coronavirus recovery fund, from which Italy benefited greatly. She demanded that European laws be subordinated to national laws, and

the German magazine Stern [called](#) Meloni *'the most dangerous woman in Europe'*. But once she was in power with her allies from the Lega (far right) and Forza Italia (EPP), the fears of pro-Europeans did not come true. In fact, she appears moderate compared to Matteo Salvini, the leader of the Lega, a minister and the government's number two, who has often been criticised for his anti-immigrant rhetoric, his hard line and his openly displayed closeness to the Kremlin. However the President of the Italian Council of Ministers is putting pressure on the judiciary in her own country and interfering in the work of the public media, leading the civil rights organisation Civil Liberties Union for Europe to [accuse](#) her of 'democratic recession'. She is also taking a hard line on immigration policy. However, Giorgia Meloni is acting constructively within the European Council. She does not question support for Ukraine, and Italy's withdrawal from the EU is not up for debate. Nor would this be desired by the people of Italy, 88% of whom, according to Eurobarometer, believe that member states should show more cohesion in the face of current challenges. More than two out of three respondents in Italy believe that their country benefits from membership of the European Union.

Giorgia Meloni serves as an example of how right-wing populists are adapting their rhetoric and policies to the pro-European mood among the population and focusing on other demands, above all those for restrictions on immigration and tougher asylum rules. Systematic criticism of Europe is no longer central to the discourse, and the government is taking a pragmatic stance to move the country forward. This is a triumph for the European Union.

BREXIT AS A NEGATIVE ROLE MODEL

Marine Le Pen, leader of France's Rassemblement National (RN), has also discreetly distanced herself from her former demand for France to leave the EU and the eurozone, which was central to the party for decades under her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, the long-time leader of the former Front National. During the 2022 election campaign, the RN presidential candidate attempted to justify her

U-turn since the 2017 campaign by saying that she now wanted to *'fundamentally change the EU from within in order to transform it into a European alliance of nations'*. Le Pen continued to display her nationalist reflexes with her proposal to disconnect France from the European electricity grid and her refusal to allow France's nuclear deterrent to benefit its neighbours and to engage in strategic dialogue on the matter. The far right has not changed its anti-European beliefs, but it has given up the fight for an exit from the EU. It does not have the support of the majority anymore.

This distinguishes the French RN from the German AfD, which was founded in 2013 in response to the debt crisis out of criticism of the euro, the EU and aid for economically weak EU countries. Since then, the party has steadily shifted to the right ideologically and continues to fight to leave the Union and the eurozone. However, even for the AfD, this is no longer the central goal.

The negative example of Brexit is undoubtedly playing a role here. Five years after the United Kingdom's departure from the EU, it is clear that the negative consequences for the country, its economy and its population far outweigh the positive ones. The supposed 'return of control' promised by its supporters is also a common demand of right-wing populists in other countries. But it was a fallacy. Interestingly, given the massive challenges facing the European continent as a result of Russia's attacks and the withdrawal of the US, the UK is now moving closer to the EU again. In the spring of 2025, there was a flurry of meetings in new formats that included the United Kingdom as an important partner. Prime Minister Keir Starmer is taking a leading role alongside Emmanuel Macron in setting the pace for finding European responses to the crisis and not leaving fundamental decisions to the other major powers.

This in turn confirms and supports the findings of the Eurobarometer: in times of crisis, when existential

questions such as personal safety and defence capabilities are called into question, no country can stand alone. Europeans are a community with a shared future – and that is a strength. European citizens are also aware of this, even though many of them vote for parties that want to undermine the core of the EU. This makes it all the more important to clearly identify and highlight the respective

positions and their possible consequences, and to encourage political leaders to make clear statements and show their colours – for or against the EU. This is what the vast majority of people want.

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Publishing Director: Pascale JOANNIN

ISSN 2402-614X

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