

INTRODUCTIONby **Mario Kölling**

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The European project has been an ongoing process since the beginning of the fifties in the past century. Only recently a debate has started on how to increase the democratic legitimacy and how to guarantee more efficient decision-making at the Union level or on how to improve and promote a popular sense of European identity among the EU population. On the one side, the decision-making procedures at EU level have been traditionally criticized with the argument that the governance of the European Union in some way lacks democratic legitimacy. Over time, a number of reforms have been undertaken to increase democratic legitimacy, e.g. the Lisbon Treaty enhanced the role of national parliaments in EU legislation and introduced the European Citizens' Initiative. On the other side the European Union has been mainly characterised as having strong output legitimacy. The subject of our publication, the EU cohesion policy¹ has the objectives of reducing economic, social and territorial disparities, have had a significant impact with regard to this output legitimacy. Nevertheless the economic and financial crisis has put the output legitimacy under pressure, making it more difficult to explain the benefits of the EU. Since 2008, the income has declined for many people across the EU, at the same time employment rates have fallen in most EU countries and unemployment has grown, while poverty and social exclusion have tended to become more widespread. While in 2007 only 14% of EU citizens considered their country's membership to be a 'bad thing', this percentage had more than doubled in 2008 to 30% and remained almost constant in 2009. Nevertheless after this downwards trend and parallel to first signs of economic recovery, the image of the EU continues to improve. At the end of 2014 a majority of Europeans have a positive image of the EU (39%, +4 percentage points since spring 2014), while 37% have a neutral image (37%, -1), and fewer have a negative image (22%, -3). Furthermore the trust in the European Union has increased significantly (37%, +6 percentage points since spring 2014).

According to the classical distinction between political inputs and outputs; the current legitimacy debate of the EU focuses on the conflicts between a democratic (input) vs. a performance (output) emphasis. The input-output debate can also be linked to the identification with the political community. It has been held that when citizens feel the benefits of Europe they are more interested in and supportive of the EU. Especially in Western Europe, attitudes regarding EU membership have been explained by personal economic situations and individuals' perceptions of their own economic well-being and national economic performance. The identification with Europe has been understood as a positive attachment to the EU and is interpreted as being an effect of three causes: positive personal experiences (e.g. facilitated by ERASMUS), active identity formation through narratives and symbols (e.g. European anthem, flag and motto) and benefits from the EU and its policies (e.g. regional policies). With regard to the latter, there is empirical evidence that voters in the countries benefiting most from the EU subsidies turn out in the polls more actively than voters in the countries that pay these subsidies. In this context there also seemed to be evidence of a positive relationship between net financial transfers from the EU towards member states and identification with the EU integration process. These explanations rest on the notion that support for EU membership comes from the implicit cost/benefit analysis of individuals' likely economic benefit to be gained from integration.

1. The EU Cohesion policy is a broad term, it is often used synonymously with regional policy. For the purposes of this publication, the focus will be on the economic, social and territorial cohesion of the EU, what this means and the measures taken to promote this.

There is significant research showing variations of public opinion and of concepts of the EU (variety of perception within the EU Member states, but also within societies, in addition to a variation over time). Moreover, there is no consensus on what constitutes European identity, and the question is left open whether such identity can be promoted. In our publication we would like to analyse if and how European regional policies impact the perception of Europe by its citizens.

Regional policies are the second largest part of the EU budget in the period of 2014-2020. EU regional policy has been considered as an investment policy, which should support job creation, competitiveness, economic growth, improved quality of life and sustainable development. Nevertheless during the past few years the crisis has had a major impact on regions and cities of the EU. Regional economic disparities which were growing caused national governments to reduce public investments in recent years to balance their budgets (public investment declined by 20% in real terms between 2008 and 2013), although cohesion policy funding continued to flow to Member States and regions.

There is a variety of European regions with regard on the level of implication concerning EU cohesion policy. EU regional policies have been affecting EU citizens in different ways, both related to their economic development, but also related to their thematic focus. Some regions have been receiving structural aid for decades, although in other regions these resources have been reduced progressively in addition to regions which have never received structural aid.

In concrete we will analyse the interrelation of the EU regional policy with the identification for the EU integration in five EU Member States (United Kingdom, Spain, Italy, Poland and the Czech Republic) with different territorial organisation, civil participation and civic identification with EU membership. Spain and Italy are two countries which benefited for a long time from EU cohesion policy with a population characterised by a very positive attitude towards the integration project and where only recently the positive identification declined. Poland and the Czech Republic only recently started to benefit from the EU re-distributive policies and those citizens consider EU membership increasingly as a positive and beneficial phenomenon. Finally the financial resources received by the UK represented only a small proportion of GDP. Moreover the public opinion in this country is less in favour of the integration process.

Our approach is not simply based on the argument that citizens who gain from the EU tend to identify with Europe, nevertheless we will analyse under which conditions the EU cohesion policy can contribute or not to a stronger identification with the EU.

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