

Catherine De Vries

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Italians want more Europe, not less

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*At the onset of COVID-19 pandemic, individual EU countries were slow in showing solidarity with their fellow Europeans in Italy. Still, Italians want more Europe, not less, shows **Catherine De Vries** (Bocconi University). Italians might be critical of the direction the EU is taking, but they are in fact the more supportive of further political and economic integration in Europe compared to those from other member states. Being dissatisfied with what the EU does currently, does not mean rejecting the idea of European integration.*

The coronavirus outbreak is the latest stress test for the European Union (EU), which has been hit by the UK's departure from the club and previous disagreements over the refugee crisis and the eurozone debt crisis. In a situation that begs for solidarity and a collective response across a highly interdependent Europe, the first responses have been primarily national without much European coordination. The first response to the outbreak in Italy in late February was perhaps a case-in-point. While hospitals in Northern Italy were reaching breaking-point, other member states were slow in providing support by taking in patients or

providing medical staff and equipment. While health is not a policy area in which the EU has much authority, it is the prerogative of member states, individual countries were slow in showing solidarity with their fellow Europeans in Italy.

As the pandemic spread through the continent, many member states were forced to implement lockdowns to stop the virus from spreading. The associated economic costs of putting their economies in hibernation required a European solution to support the Euro and protect the Single Market. While in late May, the European Commission launched an ambitious plan to revive the European economy (750 billion consisting of loans and grants tied to economic reforms and investment in climate and digitization), the first negotiations within the Eurogroup of European finance ministers were beset by conflict. While army trucks were collecting corona deaths in Italy, the Dutch finance Minister Hoekstra opposed financial support and demanded a review of government finances in the South of Europe. The stereotypes of **Northern saints and Southern sinners**, that were so prevalent in the eurozone debt crisis, quickly resurfaced.

Italian citizens, deeply wounded by the suffering caused by the pandemic and fearful of their livelihoods with a deep economic ahead, were taken aback by Europe's lacklustre response. Commentators were quick to cite polls showing that Italians are **losing faith in EU institutions and their European allies** and **might eventually turn their back on the EU**, just like UK citizens had done in 2016. While this no doubt creates interesting headlines, I would urge caution discussing public Euroskepticism in this fashion. Public opinion cannot be simply characterized as Eurosceptic or not. It is not that black and white.



When we wish to understand the nature of public Euroscepticism in Italy, and other member states, as a matter of fact, **my research** suggests that it is important to keep two things in mind. First, Euroscepticism is multi-dimensional. It relates to people's evaluations of the EU as it stands, but also to their preferences about the EU's future. Second, Euroscepticism is not a stand-alone phenomenon. It develops in reference to people's views about their own country. Let me elaborate both points in some more depth by focussing on public opinion data from Italy and member states that I have collected together with the **eupinions** team supported by the Bertelsmann Foundation.

On the multi-dimensionality of Euroscepticism, when we look at the evaluations of Italian respondents of the current direction of the EU, they are indeed quite pessimistic. Figure 1 below shows the share of Italian respondents compared to those in some other member state that think that the EU is moving in the wrong direction based on the eupinions data since July 2015. The data suggest that Italian respondents are indeed negative about EU direction, in March of this year 76 per cent think EU is moving in the wrong direction. Italian respondents are also more sceptical than those from other member states. That said, by comparison, Italian respondents today are less sceptical than they were in the past. During the height of the refugee crisis in July 2015, for example, 90 per cent of Italian respondents were of the opinion that the EU was moving in the wrong direction.

eupinions trends / Direction of the EU

Think about the European Union in general. Would you say that things are currently moving in the right direction?

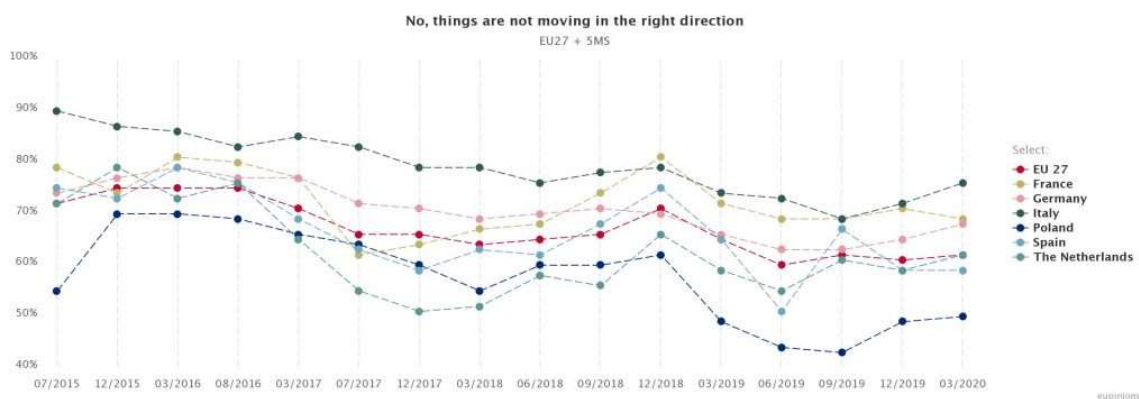


Figure 1: Is the EU moving in the right direction?

Yet, we need to remember that Euroscepticism is multi-dimensional. It is not only about evaluating the current direction of the EU, but also about what people want from the EU in the future. If we check the preferences of Italian respondents about more political and economic integration, a quite different picture emerges. Figure

2 suggests that Italian respondents are in fact the more supportive of further political and economic integration in Europe compared to those from other member states. In March this year, 71 per cent of Italians respondents state that they wish to see more political and economic integration in Europe.

Opinion trends / Attitude towards European Integration

If you had to choose, which of the following statements best describes your overall attitude towards European integration?

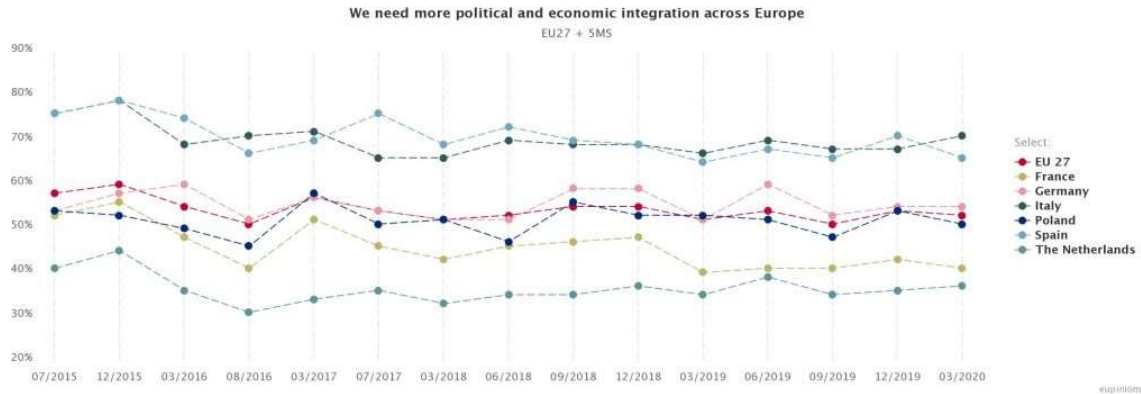


Figure 2: Should there be more political and economic integration in Europe?

The data thus far suggest that Italians are ambivalent about EU: they are unsatisfied about the current direction, but wish to see more, not less, integration in the future. Against this backdrop, it will be interesting to see how Italian respondents will react to the recent Commission recovery plans.

Next to multi-dimensionality, we need to think about Euroskepticism in relationship to how people view their own country. **My work** suggests that Euroskepticism becomes more pronounced when people are very satisfied about their own country. This is because they think there would be a viable alternative to EU membership. When we look at how Italian respondents evaluate the direction of their own country, see Figure 3, it becomes clear that they are relatively less satisfied with their own country. Only 18 per cent of Italian respondents think that their country is moving in the right direction in March this year. The same is true when we look at how satisfied Italian respondents are about the state of democracy in Italy. Only 31 per cent of Italian respondents are satisfied with democracy in their own country.

Opinion trends/ Direction of your country

Think about your country in general. Would you say that things are currently moving in the right direction?

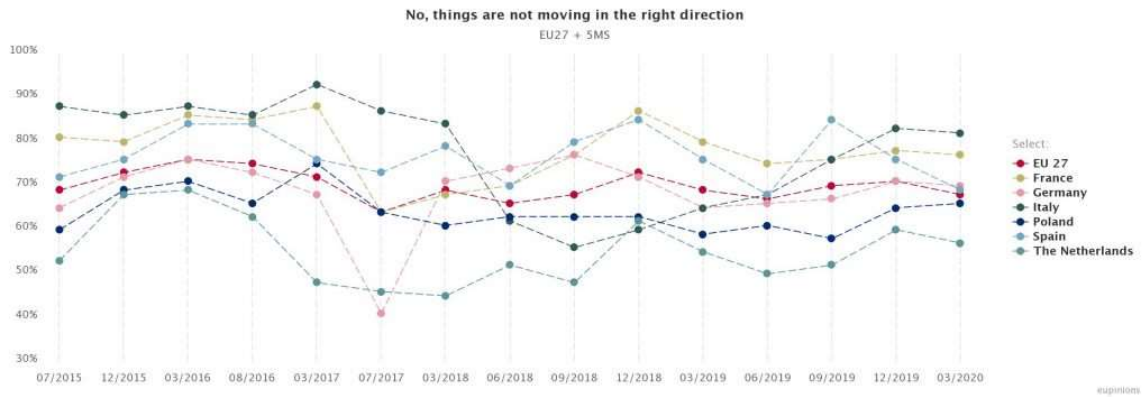


Figure 3: Is the country moving in the right direction?

Relative to the national system, Italian respondents actually evaluate the EU more positively. While important individual and regional variation of course exist, it is clear that public Euroscepticism is not as straightforward as it might seem. Simply, concluding that Italian respondents are Eurosceptic misses an important point: being dissatisfied with what the EU does currently, does not mean rejecting the idea of European integration. In fact, Italians want more integration in Europe, not less.

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