

# As member states have to negotiate both externally with the EU and internally with their own regions, European integration is reaching a point of exhaustion.

by Blog Admin

*As the leaders of the major EU member states grope towards a solution to the eurocrisis [Bob Hancké](#) looks at the impact of the rise of challenges posed to member states' governments from regions such as Catalonia, Scotland and Flanders. National governments now not only have to negotiate with the EU and other member states, but their own increasingly restless regions and populations.*



While the eyes of the world have been turned to Brussels and the main European capitals in the last few years, something less immediately recognisable, almost subterranean in fact, seemed to be taking place. Marc Chandler recently [pointed out](#) on his blog at Economonitor, that in Germany, Italy, Spain and Belgium the post-war internal financial settlement, based on solidarity between wealthy and poorer regions, is being challenged at the exact moment that Germany and France are simultaneously governed by leaders for whom the European construction as a means of avoiding a third war on the continent within one century is no longer the driving force behind European integration. Europe can handle a lot, as we have learned over the past decade and a half: European Monetary Union (EMU), eastward enlargement, and the move toward a more sustainable, coherent international economic and defence and foreign policy. The EU even seems to be able to design a plan for a fiscal, banking and political union to help EMU back on track (touch wood). And it probably will survive a challenge by a more than Eurosceptic UK to its decision-making structures and the results that these generate.

But the European paradigm, if we can call it that, was built on the nation state, and particularly on the ability of member states to discipline internally, through reward and constitutional stick, in order to negotiate externally. As long as governments had the ability to tie opponents into the non-zero sum game that the combination of economic growth and European integration offered, they were able to hold their ground in international negotiations. In a now classic [article](#), Robert Putnam suggested that governments, everywhere but especially in the EU, always danced on the edge of that world, pursuing strategies in what he called a two-level game: the space for governments in international negotiations was, as it were, a result of their ability to project the constraints imposed on



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them by their own domestic political system onto their partners in the EU: 'my voters will not accept that' was the usual refrain, 'and we therefore need to find a settlement that is easier for me to sell at home'. Yet if – admittedly a big but not unconscionable if – the internal coherence implied by that approach to international politics disappears, and central governments permanently have to negotiate internally as well as externally, European integration is reaching a point of exhaustion. There is, in all likelihood, not a single government that could survive a sustained challenge from a wealthy region at home (I do hope you're not listening, Catalonia, Flanders, Bavaria and, with apologies to my Italian friends, Padania).

I don't know if this is a new thing going on and if it is a new thing going on, although the numbers and regions are important enough to think about that. A quick back of envelope calculation on the relative size of these regions in their national economies, and extrapolating that across the EU, suggests that 25 per cent or more of the EU economy could be held hostage in this way. I don't know either if this is a trend — I can't predict the future any more than readers of this blog can. But remember that egoism is hardly a new word in the EU vocabulary, and consider that most of the wealthy regions have, in their own eyes, contributed massively to national solidarity since the Second World War. And finally, don't underestimate the endogenous Euroscepticism that Brussels engenders by not always being up to the complex tasks that it sets itself. By and large, no one has held the ECB and the European Commission responsible for the crisis of the euro when it erupted in 2010; yet the lack of strategic vision in Brussels and Frankfurt have, to put it mildly, raised some question marks about the whole idea, even in previously Europhile countries like Finland, The Netherlands and Germany.

Wherever it is we might be headed, we're not there yet... In the same worrying way that we were not close to a euro break-up four years ago. And that's exactly what worries me about this idea.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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