

# The EU may have a democratic deficit, but national governments are facing an even greater legitimacy crisis

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/10/29/the-eu-may-have-a-democratic-deficit-but-national-governments-are-facing-an-even-greater-legitimacy-crisis/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/10/29/the-eu-may-have-a-democratic-deficit-but-national-governments-are-facing-an-even-greater-legitimacy-crisis/)

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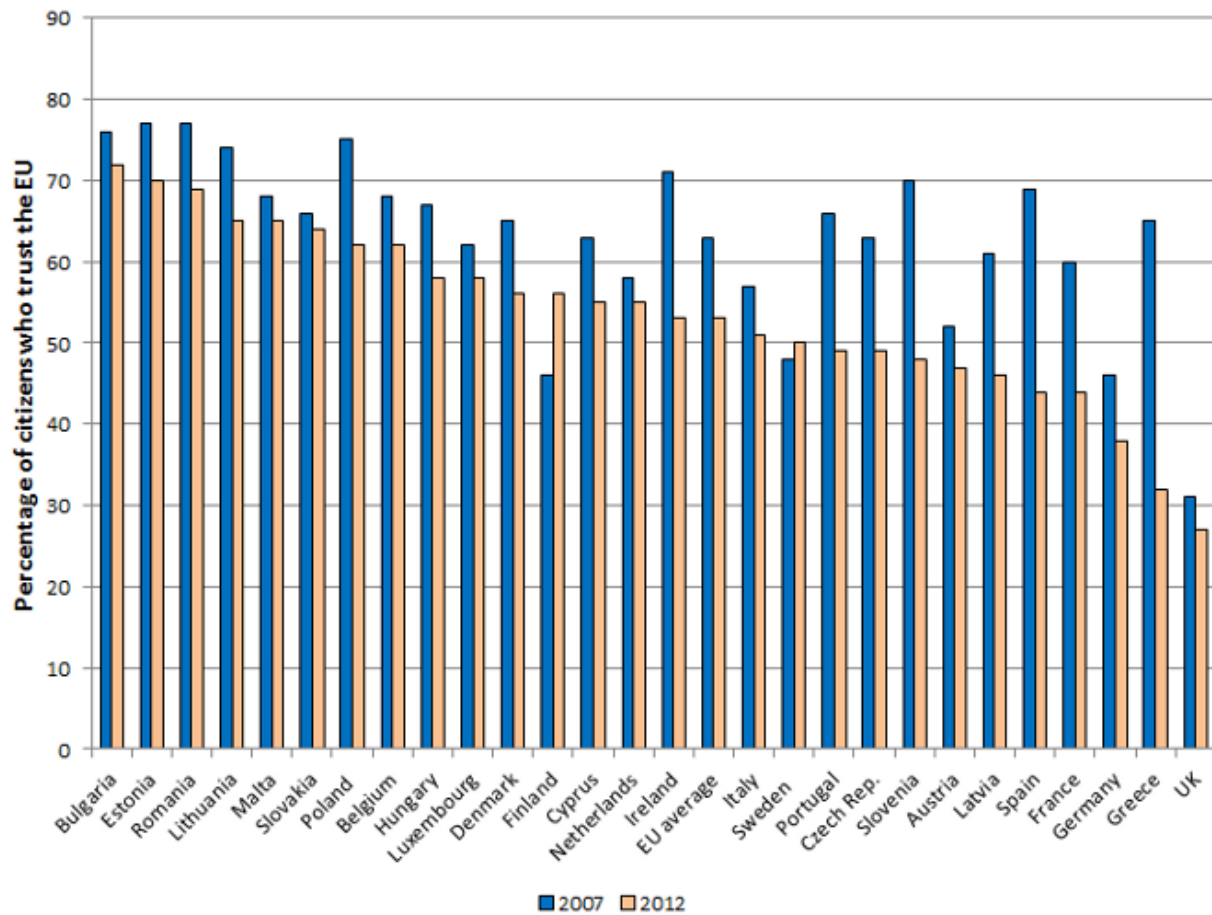
*Trust in the EU has declined in several countries since the start of the financial crisis in 2007. Using Eurobarometer data, [Besir Ceka](#) compares trust in the EU with the trust citizens place in the national governments of EU states. He notes that while both have declined during the crisis, most states still show higher levels of trust in the EU's institutions than they do in national governments. This suggests that concerns over the EU's democratic deficit should be expanded to include the legitimacy of governments at the national level.*



Since 2007, Europe has plunged into an economic and financial crisis that has had a profound impact on the lives of many citizens. The European project has appeared in danger, and many have raised concerns that the European Union could implode from the great burden that the crisis has engendered and the seemingly intractable debt problems in a number of countries in Southern Europe. The prolonged nature of the crisis and the toll it has taken on EU citizens has been reflected in public support for the EU.

Beginning in 2007, there has been a marked decrease in the number of Europeans who say that they trust the EU, a measure often employed to gauge diffuse or broad support for a government (see Figure 1). Perhaps unsurprisingly, this increase in Euroscepticism has been most pronounced in Greece: in 2007, 35 per cent of Greeks had no trust in the EU. Six years later this number had risen to 67 per cent. Similarly, the share of Greeks who think that their nation's membership in the EU is a good thing went from 62 per cent in autumn 2007 to 38 per cent in the spring of 2011.

**Figure 1: Change in percentage of citizens who trust the EU between 2007 and 2012**



**Source: Eurobarometer**

What explains this drop in support for the EU and the idea of European integration? Did the austerity policies that the EU, together with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), imposed on several member countries help cause this drop? Has the ‘democratic deficit’ of the EU increased as a result of the crisis, as many Eurosceptics advocate?

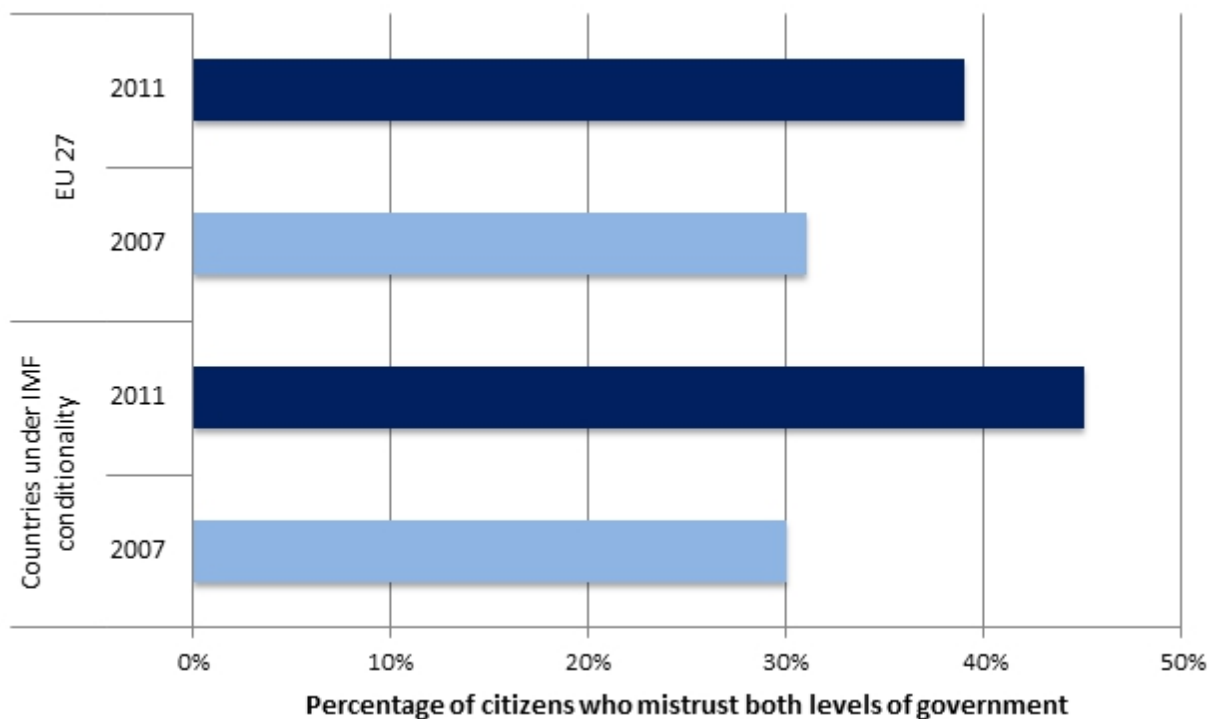
While there is some evidence that the austerity policies imposed by external actors have eroded support for the EU, the impact seems to be small and we see a significant drop in support for the EU even in countries that have not been under direct conditionality or pressure from the EU and the IMF. The evidence suggests that the drop has been most pronounced in countries facing a deeper economic crisis because the majority of EU citizens evaluate the EU by using their national experience as a major heuristic.

This last point requires some elaboration. There is much disagreement about how exactly citizens value the EU and its policies. Do most Europeans decide whether to put trust in the EU based on their understanding of actual policies coming from Brussels? Or, do they rely on cues from their home countries (e.g. the health of their national economy), in deciding whether to put trust in the EU? The evidence supports the latter: for example, purely domestic events, such as changes in national government that are usually followed by a quick “honeymoon” of increased trust in national institutions, also boost trust in the EU.

In other words, evaluations of the EU are driven by evaluations of national governments because all but the most sophisticated Europeans lack the information and knowledge to evaluate EU policies directly. Instead, they evaluate the impact of the crisis on their home country and the way their national governments have failed or succeeded to contain the downsides of a globalised world. The helplessness of governments in the face of market forces and the inability of democratically elected, but hamstrung, leaders to deal effectively with the crisis have meant that both the national and the EU levels of government have lost legitimacy.

An increasing number of people who used to trust both levels of government now trust neither. Similarly, many who used to lack trust in their national governments, but who trusted the EU, have now lost trust in both levels of government. As Figure 2 shows, in 2011 almost 40 per cent of survey respondents in EU member states indicated that they have no trust in either their national governments or the EU (i.e. detached citizens), up from 31 per cent in 2007. This increase is almost twice as large in countries under IMF conditionality.

**Figure 2: Percentage of citizens who mistrust both the EU and their own national government (2007 and 2011)**

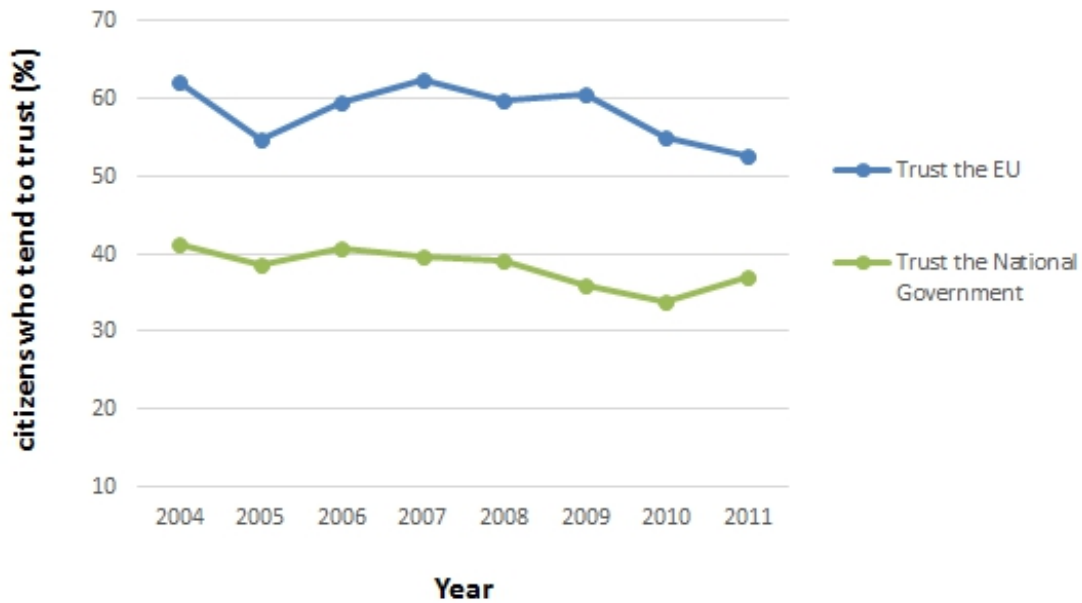


**Source: Eurobarometer**

These are the detached Europeans who show little or no affective support for either level of government. [Jürgen Habermas](#) might have exaggerated the point when he said that Europe is ‘experiencing a dismantling of democracy’ due to ‘the pressure of the crisis and the frenzy of the markets.’ Yet, it is evident that diffuse support for both the EU and national governments has taken a hit, as there is a discernible increase in the number of people who are disillusioned with politics both at the national and the supranational level.

However what’s most fascinating is that, when compared to national governments, the EU is the more trusted level of government by Europeans, and by a long stretch (see Figure 3). This has been the case for a while and it is a fact which has largely been ignored by Eurosceptics. Despite much debate about the democratic deficit in the EU, the legitimacy deficit of national governments, as measured by the level of trust that citizens put in them, is far more acute than that of the EU. Over the last decade, the “trustworthiness gap” between the EU and national governments has been as high as 25 per cent.

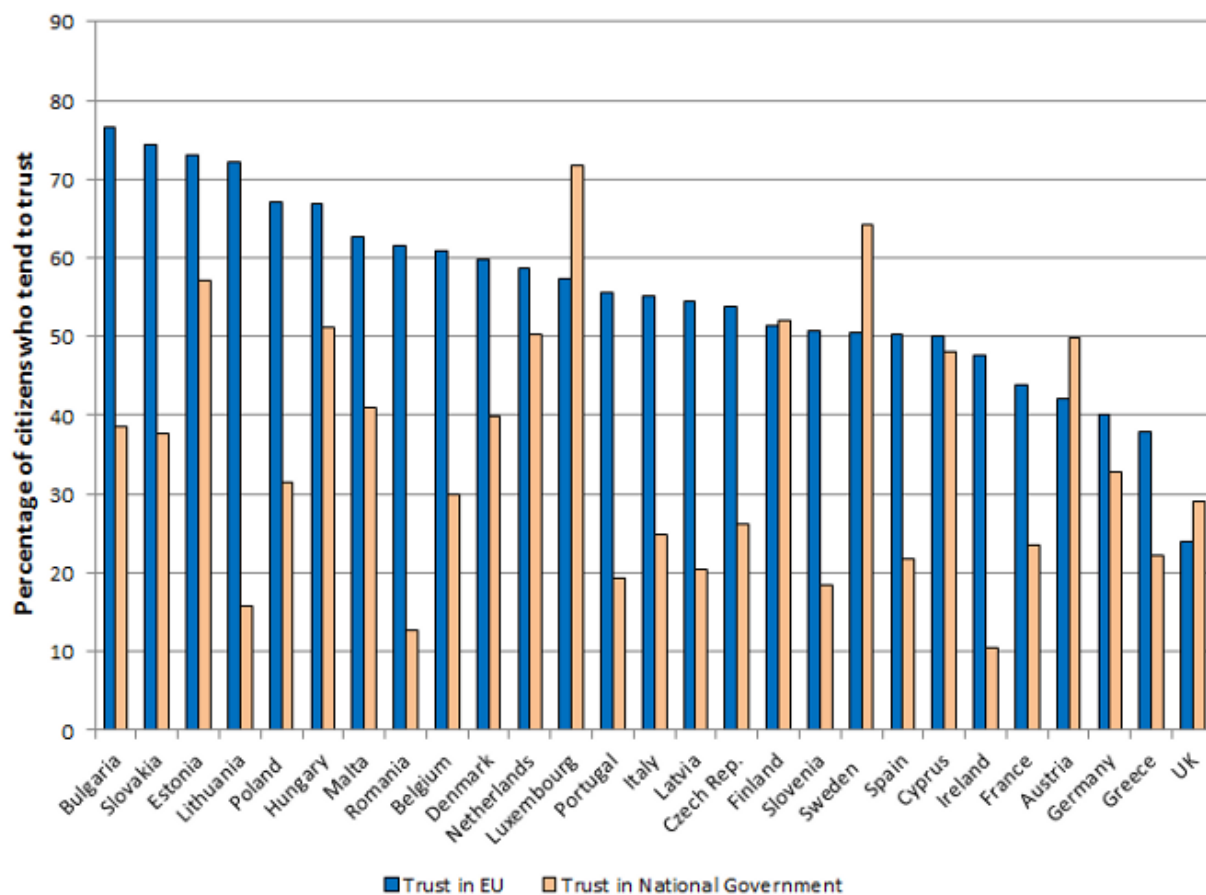
**Figure 3: Percentage of citizens who tend to trust the EU and national governments**



**Source: Eurobarometer**

Even at the height of the financial crisis in 2010, only in Luxemburg, Sweden, Austria, and the UK did citizens say that they trust their national governments more than the EU (see Figure 4). In Finland and Cyprus, both governments enjoyed roughly the same level of trust. In the overwhelming majority of countries, citizens trust the EU more than they do their national governments. In some cases, the “trustworthiness gap” is astounding: while only about 16 per cent of Lithuanians said that they trust their national government in 2010, 72 per cent of them said that they trusted the EU. Ultimately while the EU may be facing a democratic deficit, national governments are facing an even bigger legitimacy deficit.

**Figure 4: Percentage of citizens who trust the EU and national governments by country (2010)**



**Source: Eurobarometer**

For a longer discussion of this topic, see the author’s article in [European Union Politics](#)

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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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Besir Ceka completed his PhD at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and is currently a Max Weber Fellow at the European University Institute and a lecturer at the James Madison University in Florence. Broadly speaking, his interests lie in the fields of public opinion, political participation, party politics and international organizations with a particular focus on the European Union. His work has been published in *Comparative Political Studies* and *European Union Politics*.



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