

# German support for the European project should not be taken for granted

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/04/16/german-euroscepticism-2/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/04/16/german-euroscepticism-2/)

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**Robert Grimm** and **Marius Guderjan** argue that Germany's relative economic well-being and prosperity partly explains the continuous support of the German people for the European project. However, there has been a growth in euroscepticism in the country in recent years. Whilst history might have made Germans more idealistic about the EU's value to unite a continent that underwent centuries of wars and instability, in the long run the calls for more democracy, transparency, participation and efficiency may grow louder.



British Euroscepticism is a well-known phenomenon. Germans, on the other hand, are generally thought of as Europhiles. But do the German population, media and political class share British concerns about Europe's lack in competitiveness and democracy, over-regulation and bureaucratic overload? Although Euroscepticism in Germany is milder than on the British Isles, it has grown in recent years. Arguably, the European political and economic instability has been a decisive factor in the change of attitude of Germans towards further European integration.

Compared to other EU Member States, the global economic crisis and the European sovereign debt crisis had limited effects on the German economy. Unlike Greece, Portugal and Spain, Germans have not endured painful deficit reduction policies and austerity. In actual fact, the specter of default and subsequent downgrading of sovereign debt of some Member States benefited Germany in numerous ways: Germany borrows money at low interest rates on international bond markets because of its status as a safe haven, its exports thrive because of the Euro's low exchange rate, and money has flown into the German economy as a consequence of capital flight from the European fringe.

During the peak of the European crisis in 2012, Germany's trade surplus hit its second highest level in more than 60 years and unemployment was at a record low since German unification. Even in the structurally weaker parts of East Germany, unemployment has been falling markedly. Whilst youth unemployment is over 55 per cent in Greece and Spain, and about 20 per cent in the UK, it is only 8 per cent in Germany. Budget constraints forced some countries to make painful spending cuts that seriously disadvantage future generations. For instance, in stark contrast to the much-debated increase in tuition fees in the UK from approximately £3000 to £9000 per annum, German Länder are abandoning fees altogether.

Perhaps Germany's economic well-being and prosperity explains the continuous support of the German people for the European project. At the same time, however, there are signs that Germans are increasingly concerned and anxious about the unforeseeable consequences of the current crisis and the increasing costs of bail-out policies to the German tax-payer. The political debate about the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) and European Fiscal Compact are a good example thereof. In June 2012, German parliamentarians voted 491 to 111 in support of the Fiscal Compact and 493 to 106 for the ESM. This is in contrast to the overwhelming support for the Treaty of Lisbon that was ratified by the Bundestag with 515 votes in favour to only 58 votes opposed.

Twenty-six parliamentarians from the coalition government and the whole parliamentary group of DIE LINKE, the left-wing party, rejected both the ESM and European Fiscal Compact. Ratification of the ESM was also challenged at the German Federal Constitutional Court in Karlsruhe. Under the heading 'Europe needs more democracy' and supported by 37,000 citizens, it was the biggest legal challenge lodged with the constitutional court in Germany's history. The main arguments of the court case focused on the sovereignty and unconstitutional de-powerment of the German parliament, and the corresponding lack of democratic legitimacy over financial transfers to support other Member States. Peter Gauweiler, the most prominent plaintiff, is MP for the CSU (the Bavarian sister party of Angela

Merkel's CDU). Other political heavyweights, such the finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU) and Peer Steinbrück, the SPD's designated candidate for the post of Chancellor, also declared that the constitutional limits of the Basic Law are reached and further transfers of sovereignty to the EU would need to be decided by a referendum.

The ESM and Fiscal Compact mark perhaps a change in the political debate about European integration in Germany. However, it is hard to say whether this can be interpreted as an emerging Euroscepticism amongst Germany's political class. Europe has been made neither a hot topic for the federal election in autumn this year, nor is there currently a party or movement such as UKIP to concertedly challenge pro-European politics. DIE LINKE, for example, voted against ESM and Fiscal Compact, but promote the extension of the social dimension of the EU. Their objection therefore does not reflect an anti-EU attitude but it is rather a critique of European neo-liberal policies.

How about the general German population? Are they more receptive towards Euroscepticism? Reading the reactions to Cameron's speech 'on the future of the EU and the UK's relationship with it' on 23rd January on Spiegel Online (one of the most visited German news websites) may be indicative of the German opinion (authors' translation):

Reader Comment: Spiegel Online, 23rd January 2013

*The majority in the UK and Germany think like Cameron. This EU is a total catastrophe. Corruption, mismanagement and incompetence. At its current state, the EU must not survive. Shame that we didn't have such educated founding fathers like in the US.*

Scanning more readers' comments on Cameron's speech in a range of online papers including the Süddeutsche Zeitung, BILD, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and the Berliner Tageszeitung, we did indeed find more criticisms of the EU's inefficiency (a particularly German concern), lack of transparency, bureaucracy, centralisation, lack of democratic accountability, and even a sort of jealousy that the British people might get the chance to express their opinion about Britain's future in the EU in a popular referendum.

Reader Comment: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung Online, 23rd January 2013

*A brave step, it is really about time to include the citizens. Not only in England, but all people are sceptical about actions from Brussels, a clear sign of this low acceptance is the fear of all politicians in Europe to ask their people what they really think and desire...*

Reader Comment: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung Online, 23rd January 2013

*Us obedient Germans should not fall for a jealousy reflex. Let's instead take it as an example when Cameron – for whatever reasons – actually asks the sovereign (the people). After the EU privatises drinking water, and soon probably breathing air as well, we should get together and demand our rights to participate in the democratic process. Otherwise, we should not moan.*

Reader Comment: Bild Online, 23rd January 2013

*Cameron is the only politician in Europe who sees the true problems. This bloated EU state must be*

*reformed, but nobody dares to. There is ever more bureaucracy, which by now is administered by over 33,000 over-paid public servants. No other politician wants to touch it. He has got my vote.*

The true perspective on Europe is certainly nuanced; German people welcomed parts of Cameron's speech. Some agreed with its overall neo-nationalist tone whilst others approved of individual points but not with its overall objective. Notwithstanding that there are critical comments towards the EU, a majority of readers that expressed their views would rather see the UK out of the EU than accepting disintegration or a Europe à la carte.

Euroscepticism has found some receptivity in German society. On Saturday April 14 2013 the newly formed Eurosceptic party Alternative für Deutschland will have its inaugural conference in the Hotel Continental right in heart of Berlin. The party has seen growing support; membership increased by 2500 in just one week. While it may be too late for Eurosceptics to upset the September general election campaign, political strategists from Germany's mainstream parties nervously await the outcome of this weekend's event.

However according to the Eurobarometer survey in June 2012, 70 per cent of all respondents think that membership in the EU is a good thing (50 per cent/EU27) and only 8 per cent find it a bad thing (16 per cent/EU27). 46 per cent of the German respondents have a positive (40 per cent/EU27) and only 18 per cent have a negative association to the EU (23 per cent /EU27). A recent FORSA study commissioned by Handelsblatt (09.04.2013) found that 69% of Germans preferred to keep the Euro and only 27 % wish to return to the Deutschmark.

In contrast to their British neighbours, Germans generally see their future in a unified Europe. There must, however, be reasons for their recent doubts about further European integration. We consider Günter Verheugen's [guest contribution](#) in the *Süddeutsche* and a response to Cameron's EU speech (5th February 2013) as indicative. Verheugen, former vice-President of the European Commission and known as a strong supporter of the European idea, sympathises with Cameron's position and is reflective of many Germans who associate Brussels with a 'greedy, bureaucratic kraken' that interferes unnecessarily in national matters. Verheugen agrees with Cameron that European integration does not have to be a one-way transfer of competencies, 'power must be able to flow back to Member States'. History might have made Germans more idealistic about the EU's value to unite a continent that underwent centuries of wars and instability, but in the long run the calls for more democracy, transparency, participation and efficiency may grow louder.

*This post is part of a [collaboration](#) between the LSE's British Politics and Policy blog, EUROPP and Ballots & Bullets, which aims to examine the nature of euroscepticism in the UK and abroad from a wide range of perspectives.*

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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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## About the authors

**Robert Grimm** and **Marius Guderjan** work at Manchester Metropolitan University and currently research political attitudes and civic engagement among young people in East Germany. This work is part of the [FP7 research project MYPLACE](#). <http://www.fp7-myplace.eu>.

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