

Euroscepticism has taken hold across the EU – but it has many different roots



*Euroscepticism – defined as outright or defined opposition to the European project – is becoming a mainstream, contested phenomenon, writes **Simona Guerra**. The EU has been challenged by the Greek referendum in July 2015, the refugee crisis and Brexit. Euroscepticism is no longer the exclusive province of ‘peripheral’ parties like Ukip or the fringes of society. How did a previously sidelined set of views come to the forefront of public discourse?*

In our new book, *Euroscepticism, Democracy and the Media*, we examine how Euroscepticism is shaped and the issues it adopts, and ask whether it is ‘traditional media’ and ‘new media’ that are facilitating or obstructing both European democracy and the development of the European *demos*. Yet Euroscepticism sometimes amounts to less a wholesale rejection of the EU than a form of Euroalternativism. The policy, not the polity, is at stake. And negative media bias at least partly explains opposition to the EU.



Protesters in Berlin call for an end to eurozone-imposed austerity in Greece, February 2015.
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European institutions are perceived as lacking transparency and accountability. But the first ‘Euro-critical’ social movements and protests did not call for a return to the nation state, but for a process of Europeanisation from below. This was very different from the Euroscepticism we saw in the British referendum. [Della Porta, Kouki and Fernández](#) stress the link between the anti-austerity protests that emerged in 2011 and the dramatic loss of trust in both national and EU institutions. In addition, the costing conditionalities inflicted on the weaker states of the EU impacted on perceived threatened national sovereignty and increasing inequalities. The wave of anti-austerity protests spread across Southern Europe and targeted the current process of EU integration and the Troika (ie.: European Central Bank, European Commission and International Monetary Fund).

‘The 2008 crisis has now produced unexpected new political openings, in southern Europe in particular, in forms that few could have predicted. State bailouts for bankrupt financial institutions led to ballooning national debts and soaring interest-rate spreads. The emergency policies to ‘save the euro’ imposed—and soon normalised – by the German-led bloc have had disastrous effects in Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain, where millions have lost their jobs... The EU has been split along north–south lines, a division of labour that mandates a low-wage workforce and cheap goods and services for the Mediterranean countries, while the young and better-trained are forced to migrate. The 2014–20 EU budget represents a victory for this line.’ ([Iglesias 2015](#))

Interviews with Italian Members of the European Parliament reflect distrust towards international organisations: ‘Who should care about our national economy? And the economic crisis is the government’s fault, and banks’ and the IMF... citizens, oh, poor citizens, what have they done?’ (a Five Star Movement (M5S) MEP in 2015). The M5S has always assumed a soft Eurosceptic stance that nonetheless often seems close to a hard position (between opposition to policy and withdrawal from the EU), although the MEPs interviewed always stress they do not seek to leave the EU. Their Euroscepticism is not fully hostile to the EU, but opposes the costs of the Eurozone and austerity measures, without becoming prominent in their daily European work.

The economic crisis – and the consequent adoption of austerity programmes – has contributed to the emergence and rise of sometimes opposing political phenomena which are closely linked to the perceived threat [represented by social change](#). ‘The people’, or the community belonging to the same nostalgic heartland, are not just an important feature of extreme right-wing populism, but, as in Syriza, can be deployed as an inclusive ally against the economic crisis and the social costs of austerity. The people can mobilise active citizenship against the crisis. The most successful examples of this in Western Europe are the electoral success of Syriza in Greece (36.3%, January 2015), the Brexit referendum (June 2016), the increasing support for the Five Star Movement (26%-29%, June-July 2017) in Italy as the general election approaches, and the popular support for Podemos (21.2% in the 2016 general elections) in Spain.

In an analysis by [Evangelos Fanoulis](#), we argue that the tensions arising from the EU integration process and the social costs of the crisis have found an ally in a populist discourse that promises to empower disenfranchised citizens, and enable them to fight what in their eyes appears to be an unfair political status quo. Within this anti-domestic politics and anti-EU narrative, we suggest that *this discourse* is able to become the opportunity to ‘openly articulate their dissatisfaction with the socio-political elites of the country [and the EU], [following a populist antagonistic logic of ‘us’ versus ‘them’](#)’.

This becomes urgent in [Yanis Varoufakis](#)’s words against the European Central Bank and his call for democracy in countries that demonise the left of centre or do not pay attention to the social and political costs of austerity. In Varoufakis’ view, the democratic deficit of the EU does not exist, as there is no democracy. The EU needs to be reformed, or it will implode, and [‘We, the peoples of Europe, have a duty to regain control over our Europe](#) from unaccountable ‘technocrats’, complicit politicians and shadowy institutions’.

Yet despite these trends, a rational, utilitarian view of the EU has also emerged. Attachment to the EU is affected by life expectations. Well-educated young people, who are generally the most positive towards the bloc, perceive that the older generation is killing off their hopes. But not all young people share this positivity. In Croatia, results from both the accession referendum in January 2012 and the 2014 EP elections reveal a lack of interest and low levels of Euro-enthusiasm, [in particular among young people](#). About 41% expect personal benefits from EU membership, yet low wages and prospects are not delivering the benefits they anticipated, and their high expectations are leading to negative perceptions of EU membership.

A similar pattern can be seen in youth support for the Congress of the New Right in Poland (*Kongres Nowej Prawicy*: KNP), [which successfully gained one third of the vote \(28.5%\) among 18-to-25 year old Poles at the 2014 EP elections, and for support for right-wing and conservative political parties](#) at the 2015 general elections. This ‘Generation Y’ protest vote – young, well-educated, but unemployed people who are denied an independent life and forced to stay in the family home – [‘are frustrated](#) that the country has not developed more rapidly, with an apparent ‘glass ceiling’ of vested interests and corrupt networks stifling their opportunities.’ [Youth unemployment](#) is one of the most salient problems across the EU.

[As I have written elsewhere](#), the recent crises have frozen the EU into immobility. [Erik Jones](#) calls it ‘the most postmodernist characteristic’ of this process: first the Greek referendum, and now the British referendum, are putting the EU to the test.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.

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