

Highlights

- ★ The Portuguese population remains supportive of the EU, but without a clear motive, and with a feeling that the country is run by external actors with external interests. Meanwhile, the authorities have strived to appear as “a good student” rigorously implementing austerity measures.
- ★ The ruling political elite has fostered a “positive instrumentalisation” of the EU in the country, which drives the population to have an almost instinctively supportive attitude for the EU, often more so than in other Member States.
- ★ The debate on Europe follows a top-down approach in Portugal, but could be further stimulated if there was more EU focus in school curricula, which could lay the ground for a common Educational Policy, and additional incentives to take advantage of cultural programmes.

Building Bridges project

This paper is part of the Building Bridges Paper Series. The series looks at how the Member States perceive the EU and what they expect from it. It is composed of 28 contributions, one from each Member State. The publications aim to be both analytical and educational in order to be available to a wider public. All the contributions and the full volume *The European Union in The Fog* are available [here](#).



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About Building Bridges

Called “Building Bridges Between National Perspectives on the European Union”, the project aims to stimulate the public debate around national experts on the relationship between their Member State and the EU and on the future of the Union. This project confronts their visions with others’ from different member states, but also those of people from different horizons via workshops in Warsaw, Madrid, Paris and Brussels, which took place in 2015 gathering experts and local citizens.

The project is coordinated by the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) with three major partners: the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), Real Instituto Elcano and EUROPEUM—European Institute for European Policy. The project has also benefited from the support of institutes in each Member State.

You can find all the information and publications about the project at this address: <http://www.ifri.org/en/recherche/zones-geographiques/europe/projet-building-bridges>.



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What does your country hope to gain from its membership to the European Union?

Taking into consideration public opinion polls, the EU is mainly associated with the possibility of travelling, studying and working in other Member States. The currency is a strong symbol of the Union although Portuguese - and especially young adults, rural inhabitants and people educated to secondary level - also associate the EU with unemployment and blame it for the austerity in Europe, which is perceived to have been imposed in a bureaucratic manner. In parallel, a majority of Portuguese believe that the Union improves their quality of life and that, in the end, the crisis may actually foster more social justice, though people don't quite know exactly how this could be done. Half of the polled population is optimistic regarding the future of the Union and only less than a third believe the country would be better off outside the EU.¹

The polls indicate a negative trend stemming from the external bailout of the country and a more positive trend in regard to the EU's capacity to help in responding to the economic crisis. Nonetheless, they fail to inform us about either the main trends that occurred during the centre-right government that was in power between mid-2011 and the end of 2015 (legislative elections took place in October, one year after the end of the bailout plan), or citizens' reactions to the austerity measures implemented in the context of the international assistance programme monitored by the "troika" (International Monetary Fund, European Central Bank and European Commission).

We analyse below how the government and part of the opposition have used the EU for their political objectives and how citizens have been aligning, or not, with these perspectives.

The EU is the country's main strategic priority. Portugal perceives itself as a "European and Atlantic democracy" with limited resources and whose membership to the EU (and to NATO) are vital.² This perception includes a need to foster "cohesion and solidarity" in both organisations, along with closer ties with the United States and the Portuguese speaking countries.³ The strategic relevance of the integration in the EU for Portugal has been consistently reassured over time and is quite well summarised in its foreign policy doctrine as reformulated in 2013.⁴

In return for its membership and clear commitment, the country expects continuous support for its fundamental strategic goals such as security, administrative modernisation, economic growth, financial stability and social cohesion. It also expects to present itself as pivotal in managing the relationship between the EU, the US and the South Atlantic (namely Brazil, and in parts of the African Continent).

The Portuguese crisis, initiated in 2011, coincided with a crisis in the EU itself, which has notoriously brought about uncertainty for the very future of the integration process. In this context, Portugal appears to be willing to contribute to strengthening the EU's cohesion, namely by deepening the EMU along with other common policies,⁵ as it believes that only through deeper integration may the EU overcome its various challenges and avoid political fragmentation.

The EU, in return, and as expected by the country more broadly, shall help Portugal to surpass its national vulnerabilities and challenges regarding its financial balance and economic growth; energy and food autonomy; natality and population aging; reform of the justice system; and land usage and planning.

The above-mentioned expected gains are widely discussed in the political discourses, within both government and parliamentary oppositions, but cannot be said to be fully recognised in public opinion. There is a perception that reforms must be made, and that the EU is relevant in that process, but public opinion varies with respect to which reforms should be prioritised or how they should be implemented. Social questions are dominant among the public's concerns. Of key importance are: unemployment rates, especially youth unemployment, brain drain and the reinforcement of emigration flows, the vulnerability of elderly people and children and the overall decrease in families' economic capacity over recent years, mostly due to the reduction of salaries (both real and nominal). As to whether the deepening of the European mechanisms of integration are the right path to face these challenges, citizens do not quite know, since the level of expertise required to discuss such issues is perceived to be out of reach.

Do you think that the European Union appears to be a clear project in your country? If not, what are the main reasons?

The country's external bailout (2011-2014) has contributed to focus on the macroeconomic aspects of the EU project and on its domestic consequences. The massive presence in the media of economic news and analysis might have contributed to the public opinion's central view of the European project as mostly an economic one. What appears quite clear is that the European economic crisis in general, and that of the country in particular, accentuated the public's perception about the centrality of economic issues in the making of the EU project, while the whole idea of the EU as a political project was undermined in the face of what

citizens read as a growing lack of solidarity among countries (specifically of Northern ones in regard to Southern ones) and of an increasing danger of political fragmentation.

During 2014 and partially 2015, the Grexit conundrum added to this state-of-play. At the height of the exit crisis in late June 2015, the centre-right coalition government of PSD and CDS-PP insisted on keeping Portugal away from any comparison with Greece, arguing that contrary to Athens, the country is financially more robust and wiser in its political decisions, therefore downplaying any contagious effects. The chaos that seemed to affect Greek politics was strategically used to bring additional credibility to the government's austerity measures and to justify the need to pursue them. Meanwhile, the Greek government has however been doing less badly than anticipated, and the dramatic "Grexit" scenario became less likely and less debated during the last quarter of 2015. This might have contributed, if only marginally, to the 2015 legislative election results in Portugal. Indeed, it became clear during the 2015 campaign that all left wing parties (PS-Socialist Party, BE-Left Bloc, PCP-Portuguese Communist Party, and Os Verdes-The Greens) tried to capitalise on the waves of political change blowing from Greece. But what they exploited the most was the idea of exhaustion of a population of ten million people devastated by the economic crisis. The electoral results, however, became a bit more complex to read, as the total number of votes cast by left wing parties brought a left majority into the parliament, and eventually led to the formation of a historical left wing coalition for government. In parallel, the centre-right coalition (PàF) cast more votes in relative terms.

Despite the European crisis, Portuguese citizens never stopped relying on the capacity

of the European institutions to address the crisis, although the levels of trust in the European institutions and in the EU have, broadly speaking, varied over time.

However, to be more or less supportive of the EU institutions does not imply that citizens understand the meaning of the EU as an economic and political project. The EU is far from being a fancy theme, even among Political Science students who tend to see it as a rather arid and technical field of research. Let alone among the regular citizen less acquainted with the jargon of European integration.

Three main reasons explain this adherence to Europe without totally understanding its meaning. First, the way the Portuguese political elites have systematically treated the EU in their political agenda. Whenever the political forces in government seem unable to succeed in their bargaining goals, “Brussels” appears as the “bad guy”, and Europe emerges as a complex set of power relations insensitive to small countries’ interests. Likewise, positive results are elevated to the category of major bargaining victories vis-à-vis the European institutions. Either way, the EU institutional architecture appears, in the eye of the citizens, to be a complex space dominated by technical details and intricate power relations located too far away from their day-to-day life.

Another major explanation lies in the perceptions that citizens have about their economic condition with regards to that of other countries, which are seen as the core members of the EU. Indeed, during the crisis period, more Portuguese citizens began to feel that the EU is a distant geographical entity that derives more benefit for wealthier rather than poorer countries.

A third explanation has to do with a strong relation that the country forged over the centuries (at least since the beginning of the discoveries period in the early 15th century) with the Atlantic space. If the Atlantic Ocean was the path for Portugal to meet the world and to reach a certain sense of imperial centre in regard to its colonial domains, Europe was simultaneously the powerful geography that never stopped looking at Portugal as part of its periphery. This hybrid condition of Portugal is at the heart of what some academics have called Portugal’s “semi-peripheral condition” in the world.⁶ This helps to explain why, on the one hand, Portuguese have kept a distant look over Europe (as if Portuguese felt they did not quite deserved to be seen as “equals among equals”), and why “Europe” appeared more recently as the gateway to modernity (to democratic values, economic prosperity and cultural innovation) with the country’s democratic transition after 1974. Aside from these considerations, and once invited to give their view about the EU as a project, the general tendency of Portuguese citizens is to affirm it to be a mostly economic project.

One might be inclined to say that citizens’ views are not those of political elites. Political elites see the EU both as an economic *and* a political project, being in general terms quite supportive of deeper European integration as the right path to deal with the country’s domestic and external challenges. But citizens also tend to embrace this optimistic interpretation of the EU, despite their less clear views about the EU as an economic and political project, and despite the ambivalence sometimes revealed in their evaluations. For instance, in Autumn 2014, 72% of Portuguese citizens considered that the EU was responsible for the austerity felt in Europe (compared to 63% in the rest of the EU) and 62% evaluated it as rather

bureaucratic (72% in the EU). But, simultaneously, 53% believed that the EU improves the quality of life in Europe (49% in the EU), and 46% believed that the EU will emerge fairer from the crisis (38% in the EU).

Which degree of integration seems adequate to the position and ambitions of your country both politically and economically?

According to Gorjão, Portugal has a very high level of ambition in foreign policy that he scores 4 in a scale of 5.⁷ In this context, Europe appears to be the main focus of its external policy, whether through bilateral relations and multilateral forums with the European states, particularly the EU Member States, or as part of the EU as a global player. As a consequence, membership is both helping the country to have a global role and is a way to advance its preferences through EU actions. This approach is all the more relevant as relations with the US have decreased over recent years.⁸ Gorjão confirms that “Portugal’s strategy toward the European project has been to affirm itself as a good student at the forefront of every institutional development, such as the Eurozone”.⁹ As a consequence, Portugal is officially an active proponent of deeper integration. The alignment with the German vision for the management of the Eurozone, i.e. austerity, is quite illustrative of this, and has also contributed to clarifying the position of Portugal among the other European Member States.

Lisbon’s ambition, while high, is nevertheless constrained by its political and economic size. As a small country,¹⁰ with significant economic vulnerabilities - regarding in particular productivity, a trade imbalance and a public budget deficit - meeting Portugal’s level of ambition in foreign policy and bargaining capacity is quite a challenge. Much

will depend on the country’s capacity to respond, in the short term, to the external financial institutions that have been constraining its domestic governmental decisions. In our perspective, the level of satisfaction of such institutions with Portugal’s answer to the economic crisis will strongly determine the country’s credibility in the international arena, both as a reliable partner to do business with and as a credible partner to achieve diplomatic objectives.

According to you, how could we strengthen the idea of belonging to a common European public sphere among your national citizens?

The process of improving the idea of belonging to a common European public sphere could be summarised in this sentence, “the EU lies in each citizen and not in each state”.¹¹ The message in this sentence is that a stronger sense of belonging to Europe and to a common European public sphere cannot be detached from the idea of fostering a stronger bottom-up relationship between individuals and the EU. Citizens need to believe they are indeed heard, and that their opinions are valued. Otherwise it is quite unlikely that they will maintain an active participation in the European public sphere. At the heart of this, lies a complex problem: that of the relationship between citizens and ruling (economic, intellectual, political) elites and the challenge of how to make this relationship less unbalanced for the citizen.

For instance, we see a decline in Portuguese citizens’ trust in the political elites,¹² as well as in the EU institutions (which is different, though, from stating that citizens distrust them as we mentioned above), and it is tempting to say that the construction of a European public sphere should therefore be more focused on reaching to the individual level. Furthermore, it

is reasonably clear that the focus of national debates on political and economic issues deprives citizens from an understanding of the EU in its other dimensions, most importantly the cultural one. But, how exactly do we bring citizens into the public sphere, particularly when they seem to reject any attempt to participate? This would lead us to a far more complex discussion, where education for citizenship would definitely play a major role. Indeed, only education can open the path to empower the citizen to be an active, civic, cultural and political subject, fully aware of his/her rights and duties at the national, European and human level.

One way to strengthen a European sense of common belonging would be to invest in whatever links different cultures and pluralities, in order to create a sense of commonality. One such possible bridge that could bring nationalities and cultures closer together, could be biodiversity (and its protection) since all individuals, while humans, can actually relate to this sphere, which means that creating a common action would be easier to understand and to achieve.

To foster a common sense of belonging to the same interdependent and simultaneously diverse and fragile environment, sounds promising, but again it faces major challenges. One such challenge lies in the level of sensitivity that EU citizens have to this subject, and in particular to any solidarity felt across perceived economic and social divides with other Member States. The tendency in Portugal, as previously referred to, has been for citizens to see themselves as being worse off economically than other EU citizens. We believe that this negative perception about one's level of social and economic development is a major obstacle to solidarity. This can mean that common

efforts are perceived to be unfair on those who have less resources, or even as non-priorities in the face of other more prominent issues such as unemployment, or brain drain.

Another way to enforce the EU presence in the Portuguese public mind would be to grant European affairs higher visibility in the public sphere, specifically through the media. This could offer a fundamental discursive space that might help to foster the knowledge of and the discussion about the European reality, without reducing it, as often occurs, to a strict national angle of analysis. This wouldn't mean that a specific national perspective would disappear, but rather it would be complemented and enriched by a wider "European awareness" about various issues.

The existence of more interactive, and easily accessible platforms of contact between citizens and the EU institutions, could also help to empower nationals in the EU debates. This seems all the more relevant as most citizens (as underlined above) do not feel they are "being heard" by Brussels. Citizens often lack a sense of connection or even integration, and in that regard, despite all the work already done, we believe that MEPs could help promote far more such platforms, at least in the first instance, so as to stimulate a deeper sense of active participation.

Finally, the idea of belonging could also emerge from a shared consciousness of the adversities facing us in the European integration process. As a legacy, the EU is a process that ought to be fed and deepened. Better access to information about what the EU is about, its policies, main obstacles and achievements is therefore crucial for a vivid public sphere.

Which policies would you deem essential to conduct at the EU level in order to better legitimise the European project?

First, it appears that the policies would be conveyed essentially from a top-down approach in order to trigger a greater debate and civic participation on European affairs. The goal would be to impact on generational change by addressing primarily the younger generations. In the medium to long term, this approach could transform into a bottom-up approach as the younger generations would become able and willing to promote change.

The creation of a “Common Education Policy” would allow for the implementation of specific common courses in the curricula of all Member States from primary school to graduate studies. In Portugal, in subjects such as history, only a few connections are made between the national and European levels. Portuguese nationality is constructed in a way that seems detached from Europe, with a focus, for instance, on the discoveries of the fifteenth century and on the country’s relationships overseas. Strengthening the European pillar in the making of Portugal’s cultural and national identity would help foment, even if indirectly, a greater sense of European belonging and a more intuitive acceptance of European citizenship in the medium term. Educational policies would also allow the sharing of European common values and bolster the European duty to preserve memory. Additionally, it would help to foster civic responsibility, because greater knowledge of the EU would help citizens to identify what

they can get from the EU as well as *how* they can actually contribute.

The EU foreign policy, including defence, should evolve towards a greater level of integration. If Europe speaks “with one voice”, then it will convey internally a greater sense of strength and, thus, stronger identification with European citizenship will also gradually emerge.

Finally, the legitimization of the EU to the average citizen could also benefit from policies that relate directly to “culture”, because these tend to focus on more positive dimensions of the EU, which is especially relevant in the context of crisis when only the negative aspects of the EU seem to emerge at first glance. Again, a focus on younger generations could trigger the most significant changes. Specific cultural groups - following the example of the EU Youth Orchestra - and intensification of the already well-functioning exchange programmes, such as Erasmus, would contribute to a sense of “European citizenship”. However, once more the only way to avoid these from becoming elitist channels of interchange, accessible only to those who are economically able to reach them, is to foster greater solidarity among all the EU states. Burden sharing in this regard is particularly important to combat major challenges, such as unemployment and the refugee crisis. Otherwise, these examples of good practice run the risk of becoming the hallmark of a small elite of European citizens, rather than the means by which the common citizens are able to engage positively with Europe.

Endnotes

1. European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer, No. 82, Opinião Pública na UE. Relatório Nacional Portugal, Autumn 2014.
2. Externally, the Southern neighbourhood is a main concern.
3. CEDN, Conceito Estratégico de Defesa Nacional, Resolução do Conselho de Ministros, No. 19/2013, 5 April 2013.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibidem*, p. 1988.
6. For extensive reading on the historical semi-peripheral condition of Portuguese culture, see Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Portugal: Um Retrato Singular*, Porto, Afrontamento, 1993; João Arriscado Nunes and Maria Eduarda Gonçalves (eds.), *Enteados de Galileu? A semi periferia no sistema mundial da ciência*, Porto, Afrontamento, 2001.
7. Paulo Gorjão, "Letter from Lisbon", *Strategic Europe*, blog, 20 March 2015, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/>.
8. Quite significant was the announcement in recent years of the US decision to decrease its military presence in the Azores military base (Base das Lages in the Island of Terceira) – an estimated reduction of 410 to 430 local employees up to March 2016 was announced in 2015. This resolution had great impact on Portuguese public opinion, due to the tremendous economic impacts expected on dozens of local families, and was deeply criticised by various social and political sectors who considered the diplomatic action of Portugal to be deficient and unable to properly secure the interests of the country in the long run.
9. See also Sandra Fernandes and João Gil Freitas, "Portugal Through the EMU Crisis: Setting a Good Example for Germany", in Almut Möller and Roderick Parkes (eds.), "Germany as viewed by Other EU Member States", *EPIN Paper*, No. 33, June 2012, pp. 20-24.
10. For instance, Portugal's decision in the Council of the EU weighs 12 out of 352, similar to Belgium, the Czech Republic, Greece and Hungary.
11. Debate on the EU in the context of the International Seminar "New Narrative for Europe" initiative, March 2015, University of Minho (Portugal).
12. Despite the trust in the Portuguese national governments' solutions to the crisis having increased in recent years of the crisis, a general frustration towards the political elite remains, as the increasing rates of electoral abstention reveal. This phenomenon is far from being a Portuguese singularity, but the figures show that the abstention rates have been increasing consistently for all types of elections in Portugal.