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The Future of the EU: Strong or Weak Europe?



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ESZTER
NOVA

When one would like to ascertain whether a stronger or a weaker European Union is better, one has to ask two questions first: 1) For whom is it good or bad, and 2) for what purpose? In other words, one has to tackle the issue of a vantage point. At the very least, one has to make the distinction between the interests of the citizens and those of the ruling elite as they do not naturally converge. Especially in autocracies.

Once we have looked at the actual preferences of EU citizens – and the differences between EU27 and Eastern European citizens, if any – we have to make the case for good governance being different from local governance. In order to gain clarity, we shall dispose of all the proxies to good governance (such as local or grass root), because these will always be suboptimal methods of ascertaining the quality of governance.

National, local, and EU-level governance are poor proxies to ascertaining whether governance is good, because none are an assurance in itself of the respect for civil liberties, human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. Setting these various levels of governance in check of each other might be.

Then, one has to look at the nature of good governance and make the distinction between a strong state and a big state. Support may exist for one, but not for the other – both on the national and on the EU level. If we look at the list of what Eastern Europeans want or like about the EU, it can be observed that a strong (and value-based) EU is wanted, not a big one (in the sense of a *big state*, i.e., overregulation, meddling, and micromanagement). Surprisingly, the support for more decisions to be made on the EU level appears strong. It may, however, not be a sign of demand for a big state,

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but rather that the harmonization of regulations tends to benefit individual citizens, with only secondary attention paid to the content of those regulations.

One the one hand, harmonization eliminates the competition between jurisdictions, enabling suboptimal rules to persist without the possibility of an escape through exit. On the other hand, it reduces

cross-border bureaucracy and increases transparency. One may choose to get upset about alleged infamous regulations about bananas – but one may also realize that it would replace up to 27 national regulations of the same thing.

From this angle, it is a welcome relief for citizens – and the next best thing to an actual reduction of regulations. The national- and EU-wide management of the COVID-19 pandemic is an excellent case in point, when harmonized travel regulations were much desired and enabled citizens within the bloc.

Let us, therefore, try to answer the question of whether a stronger European Union would be beneficial for its Eastern European members.

'THE POINT OF VIEW' PROBLEM

If one would like to ascertain whether a stronger or a weaker European Union is better, one has to ask two questions first: 1) For whom is it good or bad, and 2) for what purpose?



THE INTERESTS
OF THE LEADERS
AND THE POPU-
LATION DIVERGE
MORE IN AUTOCRA-
CIES

This may sound like a condescending *cliché*, but current public discourse lacks even this basic level of analytical clarity. Most importantly, it fails to refer to the difference between the citizens and that of their political elites. The problem becomes less and less theoretical, as emerging autocracies allow for leaders to neglect and ignore the interests of the public.

For the sake of clarity, let us focus on the interests of the citizens living in these countries and not their leaders (the latter being interested predominantly in staying in power and, potentially, in corruption). But the more autocratic a country, the less the interests of its people matter.

People can have different reasons for favoring the EU. At the very least, we have to make the distinction between the interests of the citizens and those of the ruling elite, as they do not naturally converge. It is a common first-world misconception that bad governance, or not governing in accordance with the people's interests would definitely unseat a politician. Emerging autocracies give plenty of lessons on how and in what stages those certainties can be defanged and how the seemingly logical election loss does not happen for autocratic leaders.

In a democratic society, the two interests (those of the citizens and their leaders) are linked by the need for the leaders to remain popular – but as their power grows, the leaders' need for love only lingers as a personality trait, rather than a cold, hard, political necessity. The more autocratic a country, the more its public opinion becomes managed by its politicians – rather than followed. As a consequence, public interest gets more and more neglected. By the time the chasm becomes apparent, the tools of democratic correction might be too deeply eroded to work.



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As a rule, the political elite's top priority is to gain and keep power. It may or may not be related to good governance (the interest of the citizens) as illustrated below.

The interest of the citizens is for their freedoms to be respected and observed. According to the 2021 Eurobarometer¹, 91% of citizens agree with the statement 'All EU Member States should respect the core values of the EU, such as fundamental rights and democracy', while only 7% believe otherwise. In Europe's new, emerging autocracy – Hungary – this value is 89%/10% (slightly reduced in the last year but broadly in line with the European average). 78% in the EU27 also regarded free trade as a positive (Eastern European countries broadly in line), while 60% said the same about globalization. Here the results diverged more.

¹ European Commission (2021) *Eurobarometer 95*. Available [online]: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2532>

The top-expressed priorities of European citizens thus support that statement by putting peace and freedom of movement on the continent at the top of the advantages of the European project and associating the European Union primarily with its values of liberal democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. These choices point to an understanding that a citizen's interest is not to be materially served and be cared for by the political elite (national or otherwise) but to be left alone. But what do citizens – and citizens of Eastern Europe – really want?

WHAT IS THE INTEREST OF EUROPEAN CITIZENS?

What matters to the citizens is that the state refrains from impinging on their civil liberties and human rights. They need peace and a liberal democracy with functional checks and balances on power. They need the rule of law and good governance. They need effective protection from foreign powers that erode these liberties and values. European citizens also identify the EU with these values. And when it comes to their views on what is desirable in the European project, these things do indeed top the list.

When trying to understand the interests of European citizens, analyzing surveys about their preferences is not a bad place to start. It is also useful to check if there is any discernible pattern of public opinion differences between Eastern European countries and the rest of the EU and in regard to which issues.

According to the 2021 Eurobarometer survey², citizens of the European Union broadly identify the European project with peace, the rule of law, democracy, and freedom of movement.

² Ibid.

Table 1: Top benefits of the EU

Top benefits of the EU (Name three - %)	EU27
Peace among the member states	47
The free movement of people, goods, and services within the EU	51
The euro	23
Solidarity among member states	22
Education exchange programs (Erasmus)	19
The Common Agricultural Policy	9
The economic power of the EU	23
The political and diplomatic influence of the EU in the rest of the world	19
The level of social welfare (healthcare, education, pensions) in the EU	18
The protection of the environment	14
Care for human well-being	11

Source: Eurobarometer 2021

When given the chance to choose three of the clear benefits of EU membership the majority named peace (47%) and freedom of movement (51%) as their top choices. The third preference was membership in the Eurozone and the economic power of the EU (tied at 23%), but strongly lagging behind the first two answers³.

Solidarity among EU member states, educational exchange programs (Erasmus), and the Common Agricultural Policy were similarly lagging behind, signaling a strong appreciation of freedoms over perks [See: Table 1].

Peace, as the major advantage of the European Union, was more appreciated among old member states than new ones⁴, who appeared to appreciate freedom of movement (of people, goods, and services) more than old members [See: Table 2].

When it comes to distinctive preferences in Eastern Europe, an increased appreciation of freedom of movement is unsurprising, but it does not cause Eastern Europeans

³ There was a clear distinction between Eurozone members whose citizens favored the common currency more than those who were not members of the Eurozone.

⁴ As of July 2021, when the survey was taken – this is expected to change in 2022 with the Ukraine war.

Table 2: Top 3 perceived benefits of the EU

Which of the following do you think is the most positive result of the EU? MAX 3 ANSWERS												
Top benefits of the EU (Name three - %)	EU27	BG	CZ	HR	LV	LT	HU	PL	RO	SK	FR	DE
Peace among the member states	47	37	50	41	40	36	33	35	28	41	55	67
The free movement of people, goods, and services within the EU	51	66	67	63	62	60	57	51	43	66	40	54
The euro	23	12	7	10	32	24	12	7	14	37	31	29

Source: Eurobarometer 2021



WHAT MATTERS TO THE CITIZENS IS THAT THE STATE REFRAINS FROM IMPINGING ON THEIR CIVIL LIBERTIES AND HUMAN RIGHTS

to identify the EU more with freedom of movement [See: Figures 1 and 2].

These choices refer to a value-based approach to the EU, where individual freedoms are the major attraction, while material benefits and redistributive values (such as the Common Agricultural Policy, social welfare, and environmental protection) do not make the top of the list of the EU's perceived advantages. It speaks clearly of the values Europeans seek in the EU – and Eastern Europe is not different from this perspective.

On domestic issues, citizens favor the freedoms the European Union provides, consistently marking 'peace and the freedom

Figure 1: Freedom of movement, peace, and democracy top the list of associations with the EU

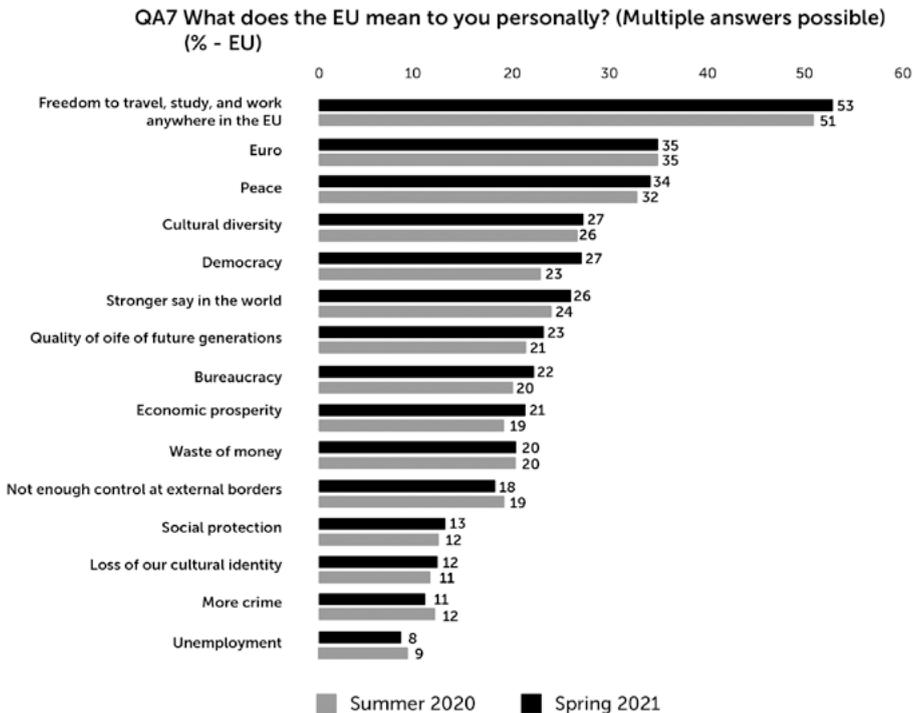
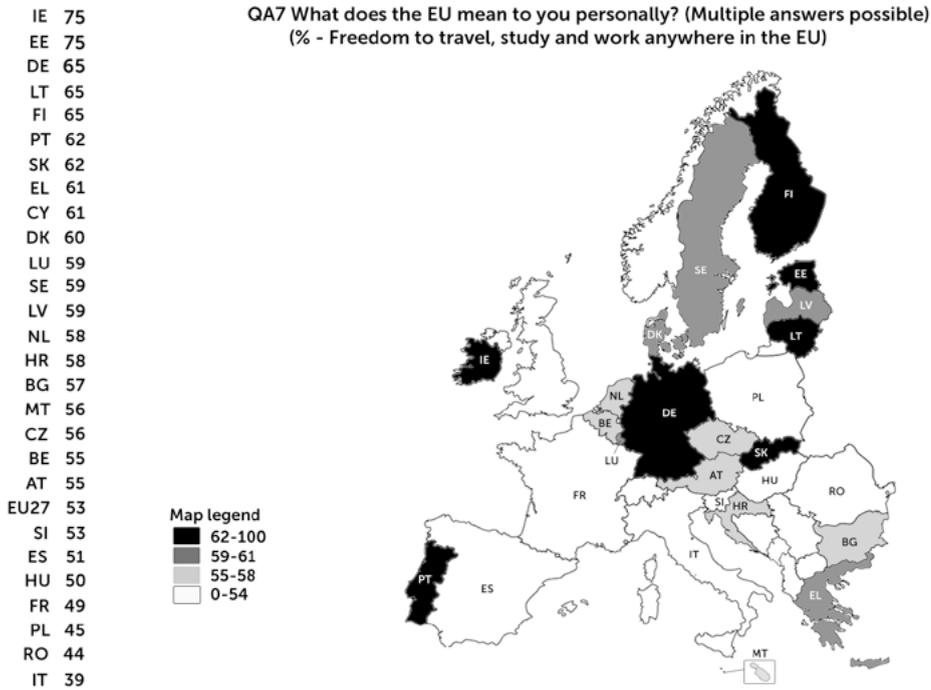


Figure 2: Identifying the EU with freedom of movement



Source: Eurobarometer 2021

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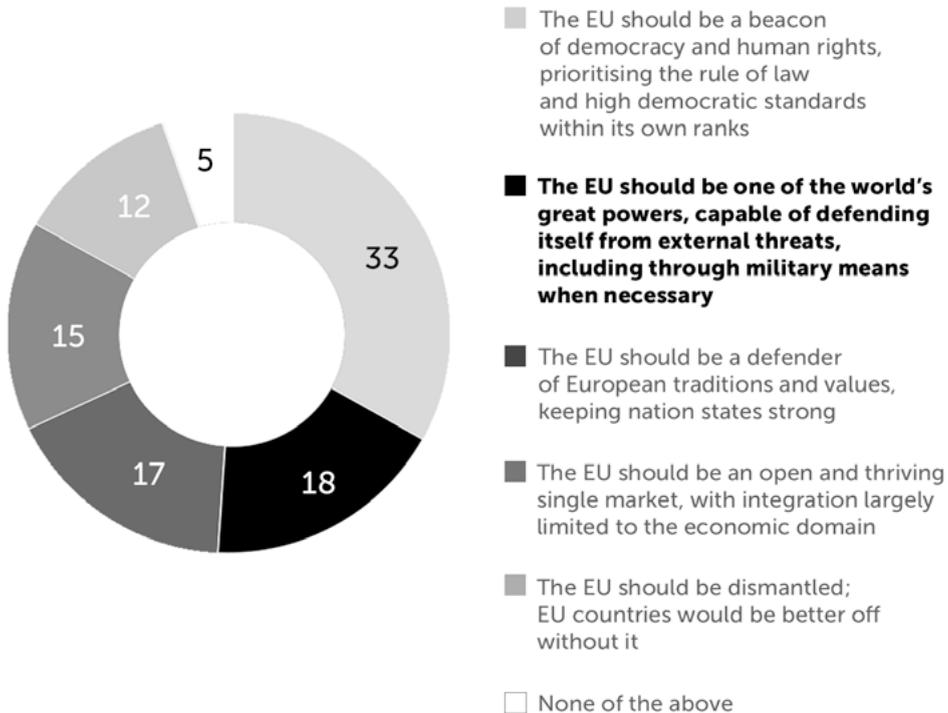
IN OTHER WORDS,
THEY HAVE UNDERSTOOD THAT
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FRONT

of movement' and 'the single market' as the greatest advantages of the EU.

Redistributive benefits, such as the money poured into the less developed regions of the European Union, are not among the top answers given by European citizens about their reasons for favoring the European project, not even in Eastern European countries. The reason for this phenomenon is probably that citizens do not feel the benefits personally, and so these advantages mainly serve the ruling elites in the recipient countries by enabling them to buy votes and loyalty through the distribution of these funds.

Figure 3: 51% of respondents favored the EU as a beacon of its values as well as one of the great powers defending those values

Which of the following best reflects your preference for what the EU should be? Jointly for all 12 countries polled (%)



Source: ECFR 2021

Note: Survey conducted in April 2021. Excludes those who responded 'don't know.'

The absence of redistributive values from the list of EU citizens' most perceived advantages of EU membership is proof that the interests of the elites and the populations do not align perfectly, not even in liberal democracies.

ARE CITIZENS REALLY AS CYNICAL AS WE ASSUME?

When it comes to the desirable foreign policy of the European Union and its identity in the world, the picture is even more value based.

According to the 2021 ECFR study⁵, European citizens are far less cynical and are far less motivated by short-term, interest-based thinking when it comes to the European Union's foreign policy [See: Figure 3]. They may be looking out for their own interests, but they have realized that in this case their values *are* their interests.

⁵ Dennison, S. and J. Puglierin (2021) "Crisis of Confidence: How Europeans See Their Place in the World", [in]: *ECFR Policy Brief*, June 9. Available [online]: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/crisis-of-confidence-how-europeans-see-their-place-in-the-world/>.

In the said study, Dennison and Puglierin found that building a stronger EU that protects citizens' freedoms, the rule of law, and democracy can increase their sense of safety in an increasingly uncertain world. Despite the popular assumption that people would mainly be motivated by short-term and material interests when it comes to the foreign policy of the European Union, the survey found that the plurality (33%) saw the EU as *"a beacon of democracy and human rights, prioritizing the rule of law and democratic values within its own ranks"*.

A slightly different top answer came up in France, where the respondents also marked the vision of the EU as *"one of the world's great powers, capable of defending itself from internal and external threats, through military means if necessary"* as in their top values. This has especially been the case after Brexit and the presidency of Donald Trump, which left Europeans feeling that the transatlantic relations are more important than ever – but they must rely more on themselves. No doubt, Vladimir Putin's 2022 war on Ukraine has further increased the proportion of those who support both answers.

The assumptions about the supposed materialism and cynicism of European citizens have been undermined by the findings. Policymakers instinctively assume that a non-idealistic, 'interest-based' approach to foreign policy would please citizens the most and it would make them feel safer in the world. However, data suggest that European voters are not at all distanced from the foreign policy ambitions of the 2007 Lisbon Treaty, which declares that:

"the Union's action on the international scene shall be guided by the principles which have inspired its own creation ... and which it seeks to advance in the wider



WHEN DEFINED PROPERLY, VALUES ARE ONE'S INTERESTS

*world: democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity (...)."*⁶

Indeed, by favoring a strong, value-based Europe that is a beacon of democracy in its foreign policy, citizens contradict the cynical excuses of corrupt and interest-driven politicians who enter into unsavory deals on their behalf. Citizens regard soft power as a core part of the EU and, perhaps instinctively, understand that material wealth rests upon the basis of good values and principles, enforced at home, but also promoted in the world. The war in Ukraine is unlikely to weaken this sentiment.

When asked about possible trade-offs in the EU's relations with potential human rights violators and whether the EU should criticize violations of the rule of law, respondents had, once again, contradicted expectations. According to the plurality of citizens, the EU should not refrain from calling out human rights and rule of law violators in order to prioritize trade and

⁶ Article 10A (1.) of the Treaty of Lisbon – Amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty Establishing the European Community (2007/C 306/01). Available [online]: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A12007L%2FTXT>.



GOOD IS GOOD,
BAD IS BAD.
ANY PROXY
TO ASCERTAIN
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SUBOPTIMAL

security. The only countries where this answer was not prevalent were Hungary and Bulgaria⁷. In July 2021, 72% in the EU27 were in favor of a common foreign policy of the EU, according to Eurobarometer 2021, with Eastern Europe split between below and above average values. In the same survey, 78% were in favor of a common defense and security policy, and Eastern Europe showed no discernible pattern in this regard for now. This value is likely to go up after the effect of the war in Ukraine makes its way into the survey in 2022. 76% of respondents supported having a common trade policy (no difference in Eastern Europe) and a majority a common immigration and energy policy. Here, however, countries showed a more pronounced difference according to their geographical position and exposure – only 46% of respondents in the EU27 were in favor of further enlargement of the bloc (with new member states being more in favor).

⁷ Dennison, S. and J., Puglierin, J. (2021) "Crisis of confidence: How Europeans see their place in the world", in: *ECFR Policy Brief*, 9 June 9. Available [online]: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/crisis-of-confidence-how-europeans-see-their-place-in-the-world/>

IS LOCAL/NATIONAL GOVERNANCE A GOOD PROXY FOR GOOD GOVERNANCE?

Humankind has a fondness for rules of thumb – simplifications and oversimplifications through which one can form an opinion in an overwhelmingly complex world. Orwell's famous "four legs good, two legs bad" slogan from *Animal Farm* is an excellent example, and not just because it came with an immediate caveat to include poultry in the animal rule hierarchy. Another such simplistic rule of thumb is racism (equating *goodness* or *badness* with skin color) and, indeed, mindless localism – equating local governance with *good* or *morally superior* governance.

Equating the nation states with all sorts of positive outcomes might be the residue of the post-WW2 movements to dismember empires, but many truths have been lost in the turmoil of the 20th century. The oversimplification of identifying the national level with *goodness* may have served a political purpose in the hands of the hypocritical power grabbers of the late 20th century (just think about the Soviet Union claiming to be anti-imperialist somehow), but it has definitely run its course and is in dire need of rethinking. In truth, good governance and the level at which governance is conducted are two different issues.

From the citizen's perspective, more emphasis should be put on the question of *good* versus *bad* governance – as opposed to *national* versus *imperial/federal* governance, because one does not follow the other. Arguably, they might not even be closely correlated.

The quality of governance is a complex issue that cannot be dumbed down to a simple political slogan. Power can be abused, bad decisions can be made on a local level – just as much as on the

national, federal, or imperial levels. Escape from such power abuse can also be found on either level – for different reasons.

The question is what tools are at the disposal of an ordinary citizen to raise their voice (or, in the very least, to exit an abusive jurisdiction) and whether civil liberties are observed and legally enforced in order for the citizen to be protected from power abuse. Good governance cannot ultimately be ensured by any institutional setup – but there are definitely better and worse examples to aim for that goal. And the impossibility of perfection (of outcomes) must never be an excuse for not even trying. The question is not whether the outcomes and institutions are perfect, because they will never be, but what checks are in place to correct bad governance, bad decisions, and power abuse.

In order to ascertain whether governance is *good* or *bad*, whether power *is* abused or *not*, is to go case by case and have at one's disposal a good definition of what constitutes good governance and power abuse. According to Eurobarometer 2021, 60% of respondents 'agreed' or 'rather



POWER
CAN BE ABUSED
IN A VILLAGE
AS WELL
AS IN A GALACTIC
EMPIRE

agreed' with the statement '*The interests of (OUR COUNTRY) are well taken into account in the EU*', and only 34% 'disagreed' – taken during the coronavirus pandemic. What matters is arguably not the fact that decisions must be made on a local level (how local, anyway?), but that those steps be the same everywhere (harmonization), and that transparency is in place to correct mistakes and disable corruption opportunities.

When we disentangle the unrelated issues of local and good governance, we can focus on improving the latter. Good governance cannot be secured as an end, but institutions that would most likely root out bad ones can be created – on any level.

BIG VERSUS STRONG GOVERNANCE

A distinction also exists between a *strong* state and a *big* state – or, in this case, governance. A strong state refers to effectiveness in the spheres in which the state has business dealing with (like foreign policy, law enforcement, or justice). A big state means that the state has business dealing with way too many spheres of life (i.e., overregulation and meddlesome micro-management) and it usually justifies big redistribution.

Support may exist for one, but not for the other – both on the national and on the EU level. If we look at the list of what Eastern Europeans want or like about the EU, we can see that a strong (and value-based) EU is what is wanted, not a big one.

After the war in Ukraine, this sentiment might even increase, with an emphasis put on effective defense and a united foreign policy voice for the EU. The relative lack of appreciation for the EU's social and redistributive functions also points in the direction of a strong – but not big – EU governance.

THE PROS AND CONS OF HARMONIZATION

Once we disentangle big and strong, local versus national governance, we must raise the question of harmonization. How much of the support for EU-wide regulation stems from the practical benefits of harmonization, and how much from an actual desire for it to be done by the EU?

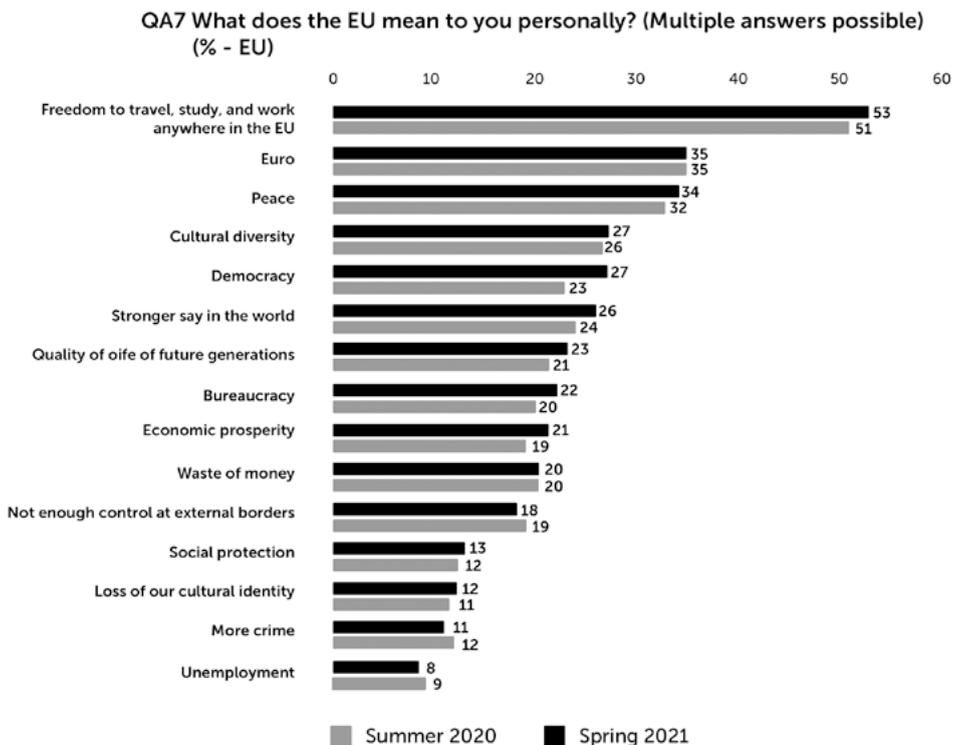
There are both benefits and disadvantages of the harmonization of regulations. On the one hand, harmonization eliminates the competition between jurisdictions, enabling suboptimal rules to persist without the possibility of an escape through exit. On the other hand, it reduces

cross-border bureaucracy and increases transparency in the form of homogeneous regulation throughout the bloc, as every EU-wide regulation potentially replaces up to 27 national ones.

According to the 2021 Eurobarometer survey, 59% of respondents ‘agreed’ or ‘rather agreed’ with the statement ‘More decisions should be taken at EU level (%)’, while 34% ‘disagreed’. Once again, Eastern European respondents showed no discernible difference in pattern [See: Figure 4].

The question is whether the support for EU-wide decisions comes from the trust in it to be of better quality or from the relief

Figure 4: A clear majority of respondents prefer more decisions to be taken on the EU level



Source: Eurobarometer 2021

from the costly and disempowering red tape of up to 27 different sets of regulation of the same thing, as one tries to live or do business in the bloc? Is an EU-wide regulation a desirable thing in itself— referring to the trust placed in EU institutions— or just the next best thing to reduce red tape within the borders of the EU?

The handling of the COVID-19 pandemic is an excellent case in point to see the benefits of a harmonized set of rules – with the content of these rules being of secondary significance. With the onset of the COVID-19-related panic, European borders once again descended upon the continent; and even after they partially reopened, travel rules inside the bloc became a 27 by 27 matrix, with special rules applying based on the origin, the nationality, and the destination of the travelers, not to mention their vaccination and health status. A common set of rules regarding travel was superior to 27 different sets of requirements, and, as a result, provided immense relief for citizens who needed to travel. The reopening of the borders would have been even more chaotic without harmonized rules – indeed, it was still a pain in the cases in which harmonized rules were overwritten by overzealous national regulators.

It is thus not surprising that Europeans concluded that more decisions should be referred to the EU level – not necessarily because they trust the EU or agree with it, but because it is the next best thing to not being hindered by overregulation in the first place.

CONCLUSIONS

One cannot use simplistic rules of thumb if one is to ascertain whether something is *good or bad, moral or immoral*. One such criminally simplistic rule of thumb is that governance on the local or national level

is necessarily better than that on a higher level.

The inconvenient truth is that good governance will always be a topic of discussion that cannot be solved once and for all. It is a goal to thrive towards that cannot be secured by such simplistic means, and it will always be (and should be) debated and discussed. And the more autocratic a country becomes, the more the interest of its leaders and its population is allowed to diverge, with the latter neglected and then ignored completely. Europe's values of liberal democracy and the rule of law thus become even more important as being in the interest of citizens.

When studying the expressed preferences of EU citizens in the Eurobarometer survey conducted in July 2021, we have found that there is clear support for the European project. At the same time, a survey conducted by the European Council of Foreign Relations conducted at around the same time found that European citizens are surprisingly idealistic and value-based when it comes to their desired European foreign policy. They identify the European Union with its values of liberal democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, and expect the EU to defend those values and to protect citizens from attacks on these at home. The ECFR study even found that there was significant support for enforcing these values in the foreign trade relations of the EU and calling out human rights abuses in trade partners.

The common, unspoken assumption that citizens prefer a so-called "interest-based" or cynical foreign policy has thus been overthrown, even though it serves as the go-to excuse of political elites to avoid confrontations and enable trade at all expenses. The ECFR survey was conducted months before the Russian invasion

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of Ukraine, so this sentiment is expected to grow even stronger in the long run, as Putin's war supports the conclusion that other countries' autocrats will, eventually, become our problem, even if we choose to ignore them for short-term business interests or with the intent of corruption.

Values and interests are thus not an 'either-or' choice. On the contrary, they are the same thing. Our values *are* our interests – when they are properly defined – and a clear plurality of citizens thought so too, even before the Russian invasion.

As of 2021, Eastern Europeans did not show a marked difference in their top answers regarding what they appreciate most in the EU. The answers were overwhelmingly freedom of movement (of people, goods, and services) and peace on the continent in both country groups. Eastern Europeans appreciated freedom of movement slightly more and peace a little less than citizens of old member states. (This too is expected to

change with the war on the eastern borders.) But the most important takeaway from the presented surveys is that preference is clearly given to freedoms over material benefits.

The social, welfare, and material benefits of EU membership did not even come close to the first two answers, signaling a clear preference for individual rights and civil liberties over perceived redistributive advantages. Even support for mixed choices (such as educational exchange programs that can be regarded both as material benefits and as instances of individual freedom) were dwarfed by the appreciation for peace and freedom of movement.

Eastern Europe gave a clear signal for a preference for a strong EU (but not a big one) and a more value-based European identity. The harmonization of national regulations might reduce competitiveness between countries, but it also provides a relief for the citizens from the costly burden of up to 27 different national regulations about any given issue. The COVID-19-induced closure of the borders and the slow and fragmented reopening rules have added to the pressure for a more unified set of rules – and lowered interest in the quality of those rules.



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