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Eurosceptic about What? Knowledge Gaps and Public Euroscepticism Across Crises

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Abstract

Euroscepticism has been woven into the fabric of EU politics for nearly forty years now, reaching its peak especially in times of crisis. Theory suggests that there is a positive relationship between levels of knowledge about the EU and support for it, as better understanding of its nature and policies can mitigate the drivers of public Euroscepticism. Yet, does this account hold under the exceptional circumstances of the ongoing polycrisis, when satisfaction with the EU depends also on the information about the measures taken for the handling of each crisis? The results of this longitudinal analysis of Eurobarometer data reveal a paradox: Although Euroscepticism is reinforced during turbulent political waters, it is often triggered by policies that citizens do not fully understand or are not well informed about.

Keywords: Euroscepticism, European Integration, Crises, Public Opinion, Eurobarometer

Ευρωσκεπτικιστές για ποιο θέμα; Κενά γνώσης και Ευρωσκεπτικισμός σε επίπεδο πολιτών σε περιόδους κρίσεων

Μαρίνα Ζωή Σαουλίδου, Εντεταλμένη διδάσκουσα,
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Περίληψη

Ο Ευρωσκεπτικισμός αποτελεί αναπόσπαστο κομμάτι της ευρωπαϊκής πολιτικής για σχεδόν σαράντα χρόνια, με τη δυναμική του να κορυφώνεται ιδιαίτερα σε καιρούς κρίσεων. Στη θεωρία υποστηρίζεται ότι υπάρχει μία θετική συσχέτιση μεταξύ του βαθμού γνώσης γύρω από την Ένωση και της υποστήριξης προς αυτή, καθώς η καλύτερη κατανόηση της φύσης και των δράσεων της μπορεί να αμβλύνει τους παράγοντες του Ευρωσκεπτικισμού σε επίπεδο πολιτών. Επαληθεύεται ωστόσο αυτή η εξήγηση και υπό τις ασυνήθιστες συνθήκες της τρέχουσας πολυκρίσης, όταν η ικανοποίηση από την ΕΕ εξαρτάται επίσης από τη γνώση των πολιτών γύρω από τα μέτρα που υιοθετήθηκαν για την αντιμετώπιση κάθε κρίσης; Τα αποτελέσματα της παρούσας διαχρονικής ανάλυσης στοιχείων του Ευρωβαρόμετρου αποκαλύπτουν ένα παράδοξο: Παρότι ο Ευρωσκεπτικισμός αυξάνεται σε παραγμένες πολιτικές περιόδους, συχνά πυροδοτείται από πολιτικές τις οποίες οι πολίτες είτε δεν κατανοούν πλήρως ή για τις οποίες δεν είναι πλήρως ενημερωμένοι.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: Ευρωσκεπτικισμός, Ευρωπαϊκή Ενοποίηση, Κρίσεις, Κοινή Γνώμη, Ευρωβαρόμετρο

1. Introduction

The multiple crises that the EU faced during the past fifteen years brought renewed salience and academic interest to an old acquaintance in European politics, namely Euroscepticism. Although in reality it never ceased to be an integral part of the debates over the depth and the width of European integration, the prolonged crisis conditions, and the consequent erosion of citizens' perceptions of the credibility and effectiveness of EU policy, have significantly fanned the flames of public Euroscepticism (Smętkowski and Dąbrowski 2019; Carpenter, Brunet-Jailly and Hallgrímsson 2024).

It is characteristic that between 2009 and 2015, when the effects of the Eurozone crisis were still being felt across Europe, there was a sharp drop in citizens' support for the EU, as proxied by one of the most crucial Eurobarometer (EB) indicators for assessing levels of popular Euroscepticism, i.e., the image of the EU (European Commission 2025). Similarly, during the migration crisis (2015–2016)¹, on average, only 3 out of 10 Europeans had a very or fairly positive image of the EU, and these low levels have persisted from 2018 to this day, with less than half of Europeans saying that the EU represents something positive (European Commission 2025). Besides, this trend is confirmed by the more than doubling of Eurosceptic vote across Europe in the last twenty years (Henley 2020).

Theory suggests that there is a positive relationship between levels of knowledge about the EU and support for it (e.g., European Commission 2002a, 2002b, 2003a, 2003b, 2004a, 2004b, 2009a) as understanding and better information about what the Union is and how it works can mitigate the drivers of both hard and soft Euroscepticism (Sinnott 1997). This account has been widely confirmed up to the onset of the successive crises, as numerous rounds of the Eurobarometer survey showed that the greater the awareness of the EU institutions and their functioning, the more favourable citizens' attitudes towards the Union were.

In 2002, 2003 and 2004, for instance, the analysis of the EB 57–61 data showed that the more people felt they knew about the EU, the more likely they were to support it. This relationship held true across all standard indicators of support, namely the perceived benefit of EU membership, the image of the EU and the feelings if the EU were to be scrapped, with 69% of less informed citizens saying they would feel relieved (EB 57).

These findings are also in agreement with rational choice theory in political decision making, which assumes that information is a key force in shaping complete and utility-maximizing political judgments (Ainsworth 2020; Héroux-Le-gault 2023; Levi 1991; Pollack 2006) and that the utter or partial lack of it may add to other factors such as computational limits (Simon 1995), ideology and party identification (Knight 1985), as well as interest in politics in general (Bishop 1987).

Yet, does this otherwise strong link hold under the exceptional circumstances of crises? This research note aims to test this knowledge-acceptance of integration thesis in the context of the ongoing polycrisis, when the satisfaction

with the EU depends not only on general awareness of EU matters but also on the knowledge about the measures taken for the handling of each crisis.

To answer this question, this article employs an observational, longitudinal analysis of data from the Eurobarometer surveys, conducted during recent major transboundary crises, namely the Eurozone, Migration, COVID-19, Brexit and Ukraine crisis. The results reveal a paradox, in that although popular Euroscepticism is reinforced in turbulent political waters, it is often triggered by policies that citizens do not fully understand or are not well informed about.

The note proceeds as follows: first, it outlines the theoretical framework, then it turns to the empirical data and their analysis, and finally concludes by discussing the main findings and their implications for the European integration process.

2. Method & Data

Setting out to examine whether the otherwise strong relationship between citizens' knowledge about the EU's nature and actions and the support of European integration holds up even in times of crises, this research note employs a longitudinal analysis that relies on data from both Standard and Special Eurobarometer survey series.

The choice of this design offers three main advantages. First, the method provides greater analytical depth as it allows the examination of the effect of knowledge gaps on popular Euroscepticism trends across different phases of the polycrisis. Second, relying on a longitudinal design makes it possible to trace how the interplay between knowledge and public stances toward the EU evolves over time. Finally, given the heterogeneity that characterizes a decade and a half of crises, the design enhances the accuracy of the results by allowing the variation across different crisis episodes to be observed.

Additionally, this empirical analysis draws on data from the Eurobarometer Surveys conducted between 2009 and 2025, supplemented, when necessary, with earlier waves released from 2002 to 2009 for comparative purposes. The main advantage of this polling instrument lies in the fact that Eurobarometer combines a "wide range of topics covered consistently over a long time", while also meeting the double criterion of "regularity of publications" and width of "geographical coverage" (European Commission, n.d.). Furthermore, the survey offers a number of trend questions that are repeated across time (GESIS n.d.). Among them are items that operationalize, on the one hand, citizens' awareness and knowledge of the EU and its actions, and, on the other hand, their level of support for the Union.

More specifically, regarding the level of awareness about the nature and the policies of the EU, the main trend question is the following: "To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? I understand how the EU works (%-EU), which is repeated —with some minor variations— in all Euro-

barometers of the period under study. Additionally, the research note uses other relevant questions that were posed during different time intervals of the polycrisis, from which it can extract the levels of knowledge about the handling of each crisis (e.g., “Have you seen, heard or read anything about NextGenerationEU, the EU’s COVID-19 recovery instrument?”. The exact wording of all questions used from the Eurobarometer is provided in Appendix A.

On the contrary, this note does not include more ‘encyclopedic knowledge’ questions, such as whether participants know what the European Parliament is, since –in accordance with Sinnott (1997)– “these questions can probably be treated as indicative of more general levels of knowledge and understanding,” and therefore they are not trustworthy proxies for factors contributing to Euroscepticism. Besides, the European Commission itself (2013) notes that the fact that most EU citizens by now have heard of the European Parliament and the European Commission suggest that “most people know the basic facts about the European Union, but do not feel they have any depth of knowledge”.

Finally, two main limitations should be considered when interpreting the results of this article. First, Eurobarometers do not provide a comprehensive account of the levels of public knowledge about the EU or how it addressed the multiple crises of the past decade and a half. Second, as Sinnott (1997) mentions, it is “extremely difficult to quantify what either the minimum or the desirable level of knowledge should be”. And this is exactly the reason why, when available, more than one relevant answer is used to ensure a clearer picture of the levels of knowledge vis-à-vis Euroscepticism during the polycrisis.

3. Analysis

As is true with many other -isms, Euroscepticism is a phenomenon that thrives in the grey zones between public knowledge and concrete actions of the European Union. The research interest in the relationship between awareness and acceptance of the Union goes back many decades, with the Eurobarometers already including in the 1980s and the 1990s questions and correlations regarding the link between support for EU membership, image of the EU, and feelings if the EU were to be scrapped on the one hand, and self-perceived knowledge about the Union on the other (Table 1).

Table 1: The Relationship between Knowledge and Support for the EU (2000-2004)

	Self-perceived knowledge about the EU											
	EB 57			EB 58			EB 59			EB 60		
	Low %	Average %	High %	Low %	Average %	High %	Low %	Average %	High %	Low %	Average %	High %
<i>Country's membership to the EU is...</i>												
A good thing	37	62	72	40	62	70	41	63	72	37	55	64
Neither good nor bad	35	26	16	36	25	16	13	10	12	37	28	16
A bad thing	13	9	11	12	9	12	32	25	15	14	15	19
Don't know	16	3	1	12	3	2	14	3	1	12	3	1
<i>Image of the EU is...</i>												
Positive	32	58	70	34	57	68	34	55	69	32	52	59
Neutral	37	29	16	39	29	18	38	30	15	40	29	17
Negative	18	11	12	16	12	14	19	14	15	20	18	22
Don't know	13	3	1	11	2	0	9	2	1	9	2	3
<i>Feelings if the EU were to be scrapped...</i>												
Very sorry	16	43	61	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Indifferent	55	39	23	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Very relieved	14	9	11	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Don't know	15	10	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Country has on balance...</i>												
Benefited	-	-	-	35	57	72	-	-	-	-	-	-
Not benefited	-	-	-	31	28	21	-	-	-	-	-	-
Don't know	-	-	-	34	16	7	-	-	-	-	-	-

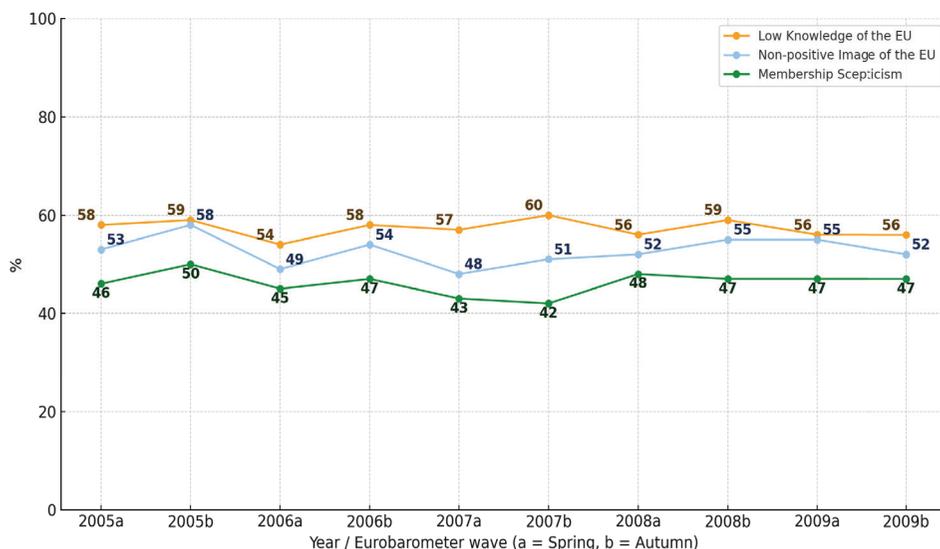
Source: Author's contribution based on data from Eurobarometer Surveys (57-61)

Data from the EB 57, in 2002, for instance, show that those with high self-perceived knowledge about the EU believed that the Union was a good thing (72%), while also having a positive image for it (70%) and declared that they would feel “very sorry” in case the EU were to be scrapped (61%). On the contrary, only 37% of those with low levels of knowledge supported their country’s membership in the EU and only 32% had a positive image of it. Additionally, only 16% of them stated that they would be sorry if the EU were to be dismantled.

Likewise, the EB 58 reveals that citizens with little understanding of the EU believed that their country’s membership in the Union was either a bad thing (12%) or they didn’t even have an opinion on the subject, as 36% said that it was “neither good nor bad” or stated that they don’t know. Moreover, the EB 61 shows that those who had high levels of knowledge about the EU were the most ardent supporters of their country’s membership in the EU (61%) and were very unlikely not to have an opinion on the image of the Union (only 1% answered ‘Don’t Know’).

These specific correlations are not provided consistently in all the Eurobarometer waves. Nevertheless, their argument is confirmed through the comparison of the longitudinal data on the question “do you understand how the EU works” –which started in 2005– and the two strongest indicators of support for the EU, namely the image of the EU and the positive views of their country’s membership in it (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Comparing Low Knowledge with Non-Positive Image of the EU & Membership Scepticism (pre-crisis period)



Source: Author’s contribution based on data from the Eurobarometer Survey (63-71)

Note: * Low knowledge corresponds to the answers: “Don’t know” and “Disagree”; ** Non-positive image of the EU follows from the answers: “Negative”, “Neutral”, and “Don’t know”.

As it is clearly evident from the above graph, the mean levels of knowledge about the EU across the member states go hand in hand with the mean levels of acceptance of the Union. In 2006, for example, 58% state that they are not adequately aware of the EU's function and 54% express a negative or no opinion regarding its image. It is important here to note that the compound percentages were not created arbitrarily, as a substantial body of empirical studies agrees that both substantive ("neither agree nor disagree") and nonsubstantive ("Don't Know" and "No Opinion") answers that show neutrality, often mask either lack of political knowledge or avoidance of giving a true opinion for several reasons (e.g., Johns 2005; Blasius and Thiessen 2001; Krosnick et al. 2002). According to Converse's thesis (1964), for example, respondents often fabricate opinions instead of stating their ignorance on political issues, while Faulkenberry and Mason (1978) correlate neutral "Don't Know" answers with low political interest and lack of political knowledge. Besides, the EB also takes the view that people "by choosing the 'Don't Know response' state indirectly that they do not understand the way the EU works (European Commission 2006), and that "Ignorance" includes both "False" and "Don't know" answers (European Commission 2017).

It is also interesting that the already low levels of subjective knowledge about the EU are complemented, across time, by low objective² knowledge. In EB 61 (Spring 2004), for instance, 50% didn't know that they can vote for the Members of the European Parliament (21% answered false and 29% Don't Know), while in the EBs from 2005 and 2006 only 17% knew that most of the budget is spent on agriculture and not on buildings and personnel costs. A similar percentage stated that they did not know where the money was allocated.

Does this nexus persist, though, during the polycrisis that started in 2009, leading to new heights of critical stances toward European integration (Kang and Oh 2020; Carpenter, Brunet-Jailly and Hallgrímsdóttir 2024; Shebalina and Kotok 2022)? This is an interesting question to pose if one considers that in the past fifteen years citizens' opinions are formed through a more funnel-like pattern, where the stoking of public Euroscepticism arises not solely as a result of the levels of knowledge about the institutional structure and the EU competences, but also from the awareness regarding the handling of the crises.

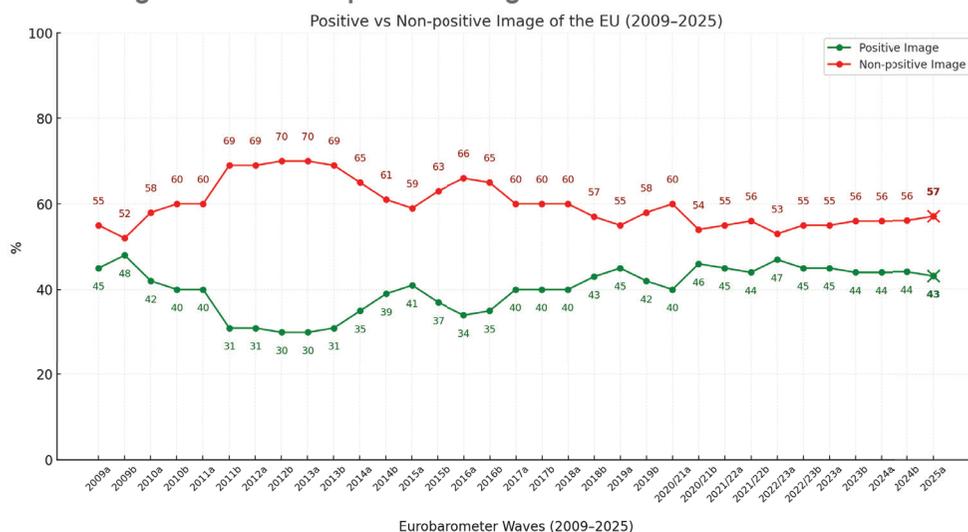
The first step to determine whether the positive relationship between understanding and support for the Union holds in times of crisis is to examine its dynamics from 2009 onwards. To do so, proxy variables of both subjective and objective knowledge will be juxtaposed with variables related to the levels of acceptance of the EU and its policies.

3.1 The (lack of) support for the EU

Despite the fact that the recent crises have been different in their nature and ramifications (Pirro, Taggart and van Kessel 2018), they have undoubtedly disrupted citizens' relationship with the EU (De Vries 2022; Kang and Oh 2020; Verney and Katsikas 2020). Data from the Eurobarometer Surveys (EB 78-79) reveal that at the height of the Eurozone crisis only 30% of the citizens had

a positive image about the EU, with this low percentage continuing during the 2015 migration crisis (34% saw the Union positively in Spring 2016) before the sentiments toward the EU partially reversed, reaching, yet still only, 44% on average from 2017 onwards (Figure 2).

Figure 2: The Non-positive Image of the EU in times of crisis

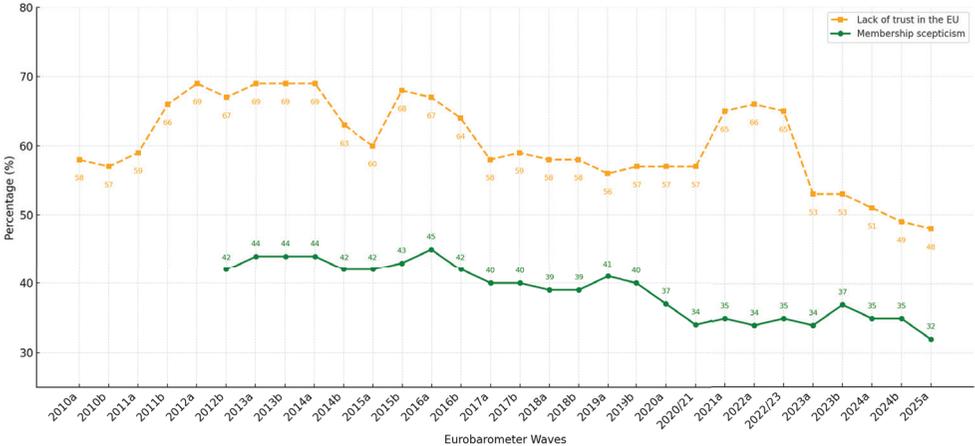


Source: Author's elaboration based on data from the Eurobarometer Surveys (71-103)

Note: * Non-positive image of the EU follows from the answers: "Negative", "Neutral", and "Don't know".

In the same vein, Eurobarometer data reveal significant spikes in public distrust toward the EU during the polycrisis. Amid the Eurozone crisis, only three out of ten people stated that they trusted the European Union, a ratio that did not once again increase until the COVID-19 crisis, when it gradually began to return to the "lukewarm" levels recorded in the pre-crisis period (i.e., around 45-50%). On the other hand, European citizens were somewhat more reluctant when asked whether the future of their country could be better outside the EU. Nevertheless, even in that case, roughly up to the onset of the pandemic, more than four out of ten respondents answered that either their country would do better if exited the Union or that they didn't know (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Membership Scepticism and Distrust in the EU (2010-2025)



Source: Author's own contribution based on data from the Eurobarometer Surveys (73-103)
 Note: * "Membership Scepticism" follows from the combined answers: "Agree" and "Don't know".
 ** Data on trends in trust in the EU are drawn from Eurobarometer 103.

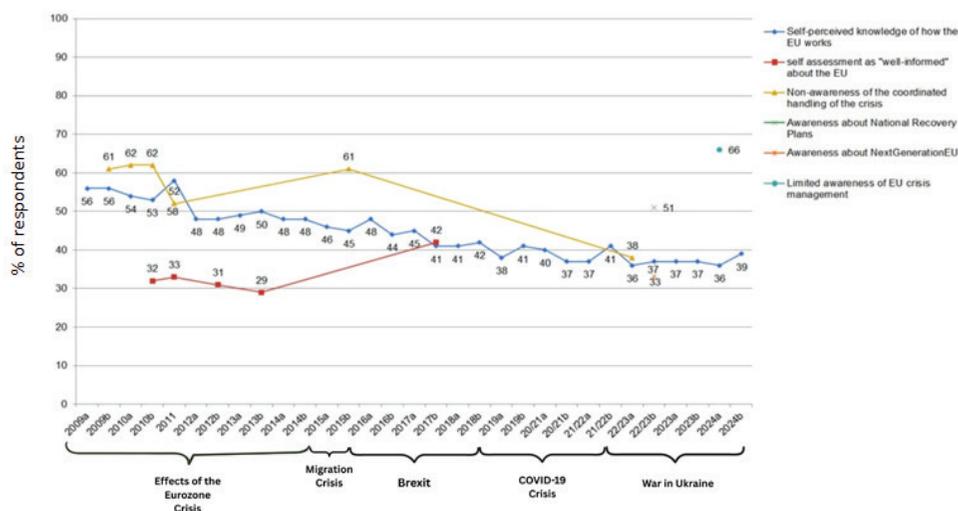
3.2 The (lack of) knowledge for the EU

The task of reaching a safe conclusion about citizens' knowledge of how the EU functions is fraught with difficulties, let alone when their support for European integration is also filtered through their assessment of the handling of the successive crises of the past decade and a half. As was true for the pre-crisis period, Europeans tend to state that they are more or less familiar with how the Union works, something that has been maintained, or rather somewhat reinforced, in the context of the polycrisis. Yet still, during most of the period under review, it is only a little more than half of the respondents who feel they know how the Union works, and what's more, this number corresponds to the subjective knowledge levels. This picture changes when one focuses on data about objective knowledge or other qualitative data, such as citizens' information about the measures taken by the EU for the handling of each crisis (Figure 4).

In the midst of the economic crisis, for example, when the EU was under public fire, only 29% of Europeans said in the thematic Eurobarometer Effects of the Economic and Financial Crisis on European Public Opinion (European Commission 2013) that they felt "well-informed about European matters", a percentage that marked a further decline from the already low 32% in 2010. Likewise, the Qualitative Eurobarometer Study Coping with the Crisis (European Commission 2014) found that respondents' knowledge of EU funding was "very limited" and that there was also "a very low level of awareness" about what the EU was doing to tackle unemployment and lack of understanding of how European funds for addressing the economic crisis might impact their lives.

During the migration crisis, data also confirm the knowledge-support for the EU hypothesis. It is characteristic that in the Special Eurobarometer *Integration of immigrants in the European Union* (European Commission 2018c) only a minority of Europeans said that they were informed about immigration and integration, with 46% of them stating that they were “not very well informed”, 15% that were “not at all informed” and a 2% that did not even know whether they were well informed or not. These results, again, are consistent with the ones from the Standard Eurobarometer 88 of the same period, which showed that, in total, 58% considered themselves not well informed about EU matters.

Figure 4: Indicators of Public Knowledge and Awareness of the EU (2009-2015)



Source: Author's contribution based on data from the Eurobarometer Surveys (71-103), Flash Eurobarometers 456, 506, 515, and 546, as well as Special Eurobarometers 71.1, 74.1, 74.3, and 84.1
 Note: * Non-awareness of the coordinated handling of the crisis follows from the answers: "Don't know" and «Individually» ** Limited awareness of EU crisis management follows from the answers: I am not aware that the EU is involved in dealing with crises; I am aware that the EU is involved in dealing with crises, but I do not know exactly in what way.

On the other hand, Brexit, COVID-19, and the war in Ukraine have apparently affected trust in European Integration less and to varying degrees (e.g., European Parliament 2018a; European Parliament 2018b; European Commission 2022; Katsikas 2025). In 2018, for instance, while on average 65% of citizens preferred a joint action with other EU member states on Brexit, 51% of British respondents favoured a national approach or expressed no opinion, with eight other countries showing comparable reluctance toward joint EU action. Likewise, the Flash Eurobarometer *EU's response to the war in Ukraine* (2018b) finds significant variation

among EU Member States “in terms of how respondents assess EU’s response to the war in Ukraine” and “how likely respondents are to identify themselves more with Europe since the start of the war in Ukraine”. Additionally, Flash Eurobarometer *Attitudes on vaccination against COVID-19* (2022) shows large cross-national differences in the assessment of vaccination strategy at the EU level, with satisfaction levels ranging from 33% in Germany to 75% in Portugal.

Nevertheless, as was true up to Brexit, Europeans continue to evaluate the European Union while having rather patchy knowledge. As Figure 4 shows, in 2018, almost six out of ten Europeans considered themselves not well-informed about European issues, while in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, only 33% stated that they had “seen, heard or read something about NextGeneration EU” (European Commission 2023). Similarly, Flash Eurobarometer *Perceptions of EU crisis management* (2024) found that 66% of respondents either were “not aware that the EU is involved in dealing with crises” or knew of its involvement in dealing with crises but they did not know “exactly in what way”. Besides, an implicit acknowledgment of citizens’ limited knowledge and understanding of the EU is reflected in the persistent way they characterize the Union as “complex” (75% in EB 103) and “remote” (average 53% between EB 81-103).

4. Conclusion

The successive crises of the past fifteen years not only tested the limits of European integration but also led to a renewed wave of popular Euroscepticism, which this time focused on the culprits and the handling of the multi-dimensional crisis. Theory has widely related this new spike with the further politicization of the Union. Nevertheless, politicization does not necessarily imply opposition, since previous phases of EU history showed that if combined with duly knowledge and awareness it could hamper the rise of Euroscepticism at the level of the public. This analysis examined whether this linkage between knowledge and support for the EU holds true also in times of crisis, finding a paradox: Despite the fact that public Euroscepticism rose during the turbulent last years, to a very large extent, it was based on citizens’ judgment on policies that they did not understand or were adequately informed.

This finding is important as support of the EU is already being eroded by two other constant factors, namely the permanent crisis mode and the developments in technology and communication that have permitted the easy dissemination of misinformation and disinformation, even among those interested in politics. Therefore, in a context of increasing unpredictability, and also inability to control the sources and the quality of information Europeans consume, it would be interesting for both research and policy to dig into this complex and constantly evolving relationship between public knowledge and scepticism toward European integration.

Endnotes

1. The periodization of crises is based on that of the EU itself (European Parliament 2016).

2. As is true with other disciplines, such as consumer and business studies, it is widely accepted that political knowledge can largely be distinguished into two categories, namely “objective” and “subjective” (e.g., Dreston, Halversen and Weeks 2025; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Carlson et al. 2009; Oberle 2012). Broadly speaking, objective knowledge refers to the range of factual information about political issues (Gherghina and Marian 2024), while subjective knowledge is a mix of knowledge and self-confidence about how much they know (e.g., Park and Lessig 1981). The European Commission treats subjective knowledge as respondents’ own assessment of the knowledge they have of the EU, distinguishing it from objective/ effective knowledge, which it defines as the actual knowledge about the Union (e.g., EB 62; EB 63; 65). To measure it, over the years, the EU has used several short “quizzes”, most of which included five or six statements about the Union for which the respondents were asked to say whether they were true or false. These proxy questions attempt to capture both general knowledge (e.g., whether they know that the members of the European Parliament are elected directly by the citizens of the European Union or where the European Union’s budget is spent) and current affairs (e.g., whether they are aware about initiatives such as NextGenerationEU).

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