

European issues

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THE EUROPEANS' ATTITUDES ABOUT EUROPE: A DOWNTURN LINKED ONLY TO THE CRISIS?

Abstract :

Julien Zalc

Since 2007 Europeans' attitudes about the European Union have constantly worsened. Image, confidence, optimism about the Union's future – these three indicators in the Eurobarometer have plummeted sharply. As we explain this downturn we immediately turn to the financial and economic crisis. But a national analysis illustrates that the key factors in attitudes to Europe are not just economic. Increasingly Europeans are being tempted by a type of national withdrawal and this phenomenon is clearly linked to a weakening in support to the European Union. In a bid to restore support, more now than ever before, the European Union must act and show that it is supporting the citizens of Europe.

From 22nd to 25th May 2014 Europeans will again be called to ballot to elect their representatives in the European Parliament. Beyond the new political configuration that will result from this vote the abstention rate will be one of the main issues in these elections: indeed since the first European elections in 1979 turnout has constantly declined, dropping from 62% to 43% in 2009.

Even if it is risky, just one year before the vote, to make any forecast about the 2014 election turnout, recent developments across several EU support indexes tend towards a pessimistic outcome: indeed European opinion about the Union has never been so low.

And the least we can say is that the elections held on 14th April in Croatia (when the Croats elected 12 MEPs to represent them in Parliament as they enter the Union on July 1st 2013) were not very encouraging: only 20.79% of the Croats voted. In 2009 only Slovakia did worse, achieving a turnout of 19.64%!

How can we explain this sharp downturn in attitude towards Europe? Is it a direct result of the economic quagmire in which Europe has been wallowing since the start of the crisis? Are other factors responsible? Is the European Union's image suffering because of a rising trend amongst European public opinion to withdraw? This analysis will try

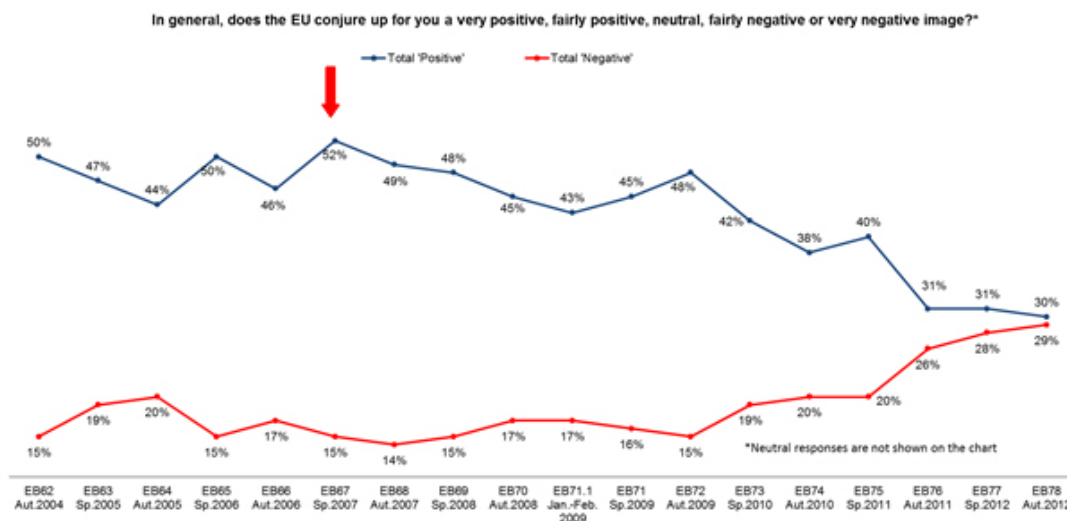
to answer some of these questions by using data from the Eurobarometer which enable the precise study of developments in feelings about the Union over time.

Firstly, it seems appropriate to review euroscepticism: this term defines a trend that has existed since the beginning of European integration, marked by a desire for national refocusing and Member States' determination to protect their sovereignty. Eurosceptics can adhere to extremely different political trends, both on the left (Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France, for example) and the right of the political scale (Marine Le Pen in France or Geert Wilders in the Netherlands). In this article euroscepticism is used in the widest sense of the term, to define the negative opinion regarding the Union (negative image, mistrust, pessimism about the future of Europe). Is the declining image of the Europe a reality? When did it start? Is the downturn equal throughout? Are some countries/categories of Europeans affected more than others? The reasons explaining this rise in euroscepticism will be analysed starting with the economic factor. "Is it just a question of 'the economy stupid'?" Or are other factors, notably a trend towards national withdrawal contributing towards a decline in confidence in the Union? Finally the reasons for hope for the European Union and the identification of some levers that might reverse the trend will also be set out.

1. EUROSCEPTICISM RISING SHARPLY SINCE 2007

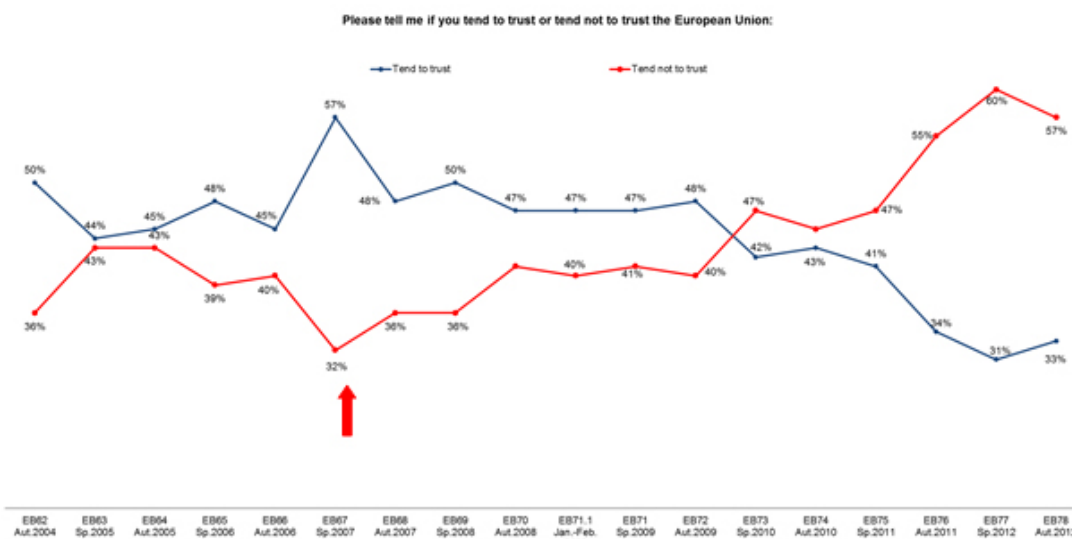
The Union is suffering a real image deficit in the eyes of European public opinion. Three indexes are

analysed in this case: the European Union's image, confidence, optimism for its future. As of 2007 the downward trend of each of these has been constant and this in spite of some very often anecdotal improvements.



In the spring of 2007 [1], more than one European in two said they thought positively about the European Union (52%), which illustrated a rise since 2004. In the autumn of 2012 [2], less than a third declared

this, i.e. a fall of over 20 percentage points. At the same time the share of Europeans with a negative image of the Union had more than doubled, rising from 15% to 29%.



1. Standard Eurobarometer 67, spring 2007.

2. Standard Eurobarometer 78, autumn 2012.

3. Standard Eurobarometer 73, spring 2010.

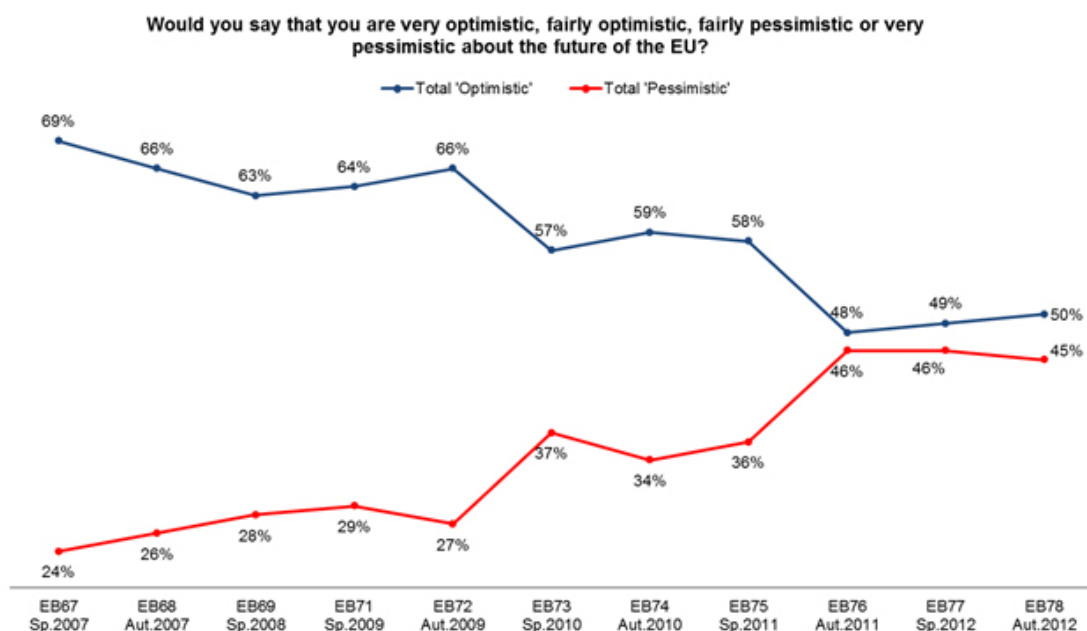
Confidence in the European Union follows exactly the same trend: after having reached a peak in the spring of 2007 (57%) it has been declining on a regular basis. Mistrust became predominant in the spring of 2010 [3],

and in the most recent survey in autumn 2012 only one third of Europeans said they trusted in the European Union (33%). The confidence index (difference between confidence and mistrust) plummeted from

+25 in the spring of 2007 to -24 in the autumn of 2012!

The question regarding optimism about the future of the European Union has only been asked since spring of 2007. But the trend is the same: the share

of optimists dropped from 69% in the spring of 2007 to 50% in the autumn 2012 survey. And although there remains a majority, a strong minority of Europeans now say they are now pessimistic about the EU's future (45%).



In the countries in which erosion of support to the European Union has been the most dramatic, a national analysis of results shows that this downturn in confidence and the image of the European Union since 2007 has not been homogeneous: although the three indexes studied have worsened since the spring of 2007 in all of the EU countries, except for one [4], some Member States have

been affected more than others, notably in the countries in the south of Europe [5]. The Union's image has suffered particularly in Spain (-41 points in total positive opinions), in Greece (-33) and in Portugal (-33); this also applies to confidence (Greece, -45; Spain, -35; Portugal, -31; and Cyprus, -30), and optimism in the future (Greece, -40; Cyprus, -34; Portugal, -39; and Spain, -26).

National Development of EU support indicators - spring 2007-autumn 2012 -

In general, does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?
- TOTAL POSITIVE -

Please tell me if you tend to trust or tend not to trust the European Union
- TEND TO TRUST -

Would you say that you are very optimistic, fairly optimistic, fairly pessimistic or very pessimistic about the future of the EU?
- TOTAL OPTIMISTIC -

	EB67 Sp.2007	EB78 Aut.2012	Diff EB78 - EB67		EB67 Sp.2007	EB78 Aut.2012	Diff EB78 - EB67		EB67 Sp.2007	EB78 Aut.2012	Diff EB78 - EB67
 UE27	52%	30%	-22	 UE27	57%	33%	-24	 UE27	69%	50%	-19
 ES	64%	23%	-41	 EL	63%	18%	-45	 EL	67%	27%	-40
 EL	51%	18%	-33	 ES	65%	20%	-45	 CY	70%	36%	-34
 PT	52%	19%	-33	 PT	65%	34%	-31	 PT	57%	28%	-29
 IE	68%	36%	-32	 CY	61%	31%	-30	 ES	74%	48%	-26
 SK	58%	28%	-30	 SI	68%	39%	-29	 SI	80%	55%	-25
								 SK	75%	50%	-25

Five strongest evolutions per indicator

Five strongest evolutions per indicator

4. Bulgaria where confidence has risen slightly since 2007 (+6 points, from 54% to 60% ; but -3 in terms of image and -2 for optimism about the future).

5. See notably the article by Daniel Debomy, « L'UE non; l'euro oui! Les opinions publiques européennes face à la crise (2007-2012) », for Notre Europe.

THE EUROPEANS' ATTITUDES ABOUT EUROPE: A DOWNTURN LINKED ONLY TO THE CRISIS?

Although the decline appears in all countries – how have these indexes developed within the various categories of Europeans? The same observation applies: whichever indicator is studied the decline is massive in all socio-

demographic categories. It is all the more worrying that this decline is worse amongst the categories which are usually europhile: young workers, executives and the more qualified (cf. see the table below).

Socio-demographic development of EU support indicator - spring 2007-autumn 2012 -

	In general, does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image? - TOTAL POSITIVE -			Please tell me if you tend to trust or tend not to trust the European Union - TEND TO TRUST -			Would you say that you are very optimistic, fairly optimistic, fairly pessimistic or very pessimistic about the future of the EU? - TOTAL OPTIMISTIC -		
	EB67 Sp.2007	EB78 Aut.2012	Diff EB78 - EB67	EB67 Sp.2007	EB78 Aut.2012	Diff EB78 - EB67	EB67 Sp.2007	EB78 Aut.2012	Diff EB78 - EB67
UE27	52%	30%	-22	57%	33%	-24	69%	50%	-19
Gender									
Men	56%	33%	-23	59%	34%	-25	70%	51%	-19
Women	49%	29%	-20	55%	31%	-24	67%	49%	-18
Age									
15-24	62%	35%	-27	64%	41%	-23	77%	58%	-19
25-39	55%	31%	-24	60%	33%	-27	72%	51%	-21
40-54	52%	29%	-23	56%	32%	-24	68%	48%	-20
55 +	46%	28%	-18	52%	30%	-22	63%	46%	-17
Education (End of)									
15-	41%	22%	-19	46%	22%	-24	55%	38%	-17
16-19	51%	27%	-24	56%	30%	-26	68%	47%	-21
20+	62%	37%	-25	67%	40%	-27	78%	57%	-21
Still studying	65%	41%	-24	68%	46%	-22	81%	63%	-18
Socio-professional category									
Self-employed	57%	35%	-22	61%	35%	-26	73%	49%	-24
Managers	62%	36%	-26	67%	39%	-28	79%	57%	-22
Other white collars	56%	34%	-22	61%	37%	-24	74%	54%	-20
Manual workers	50%	25%	-25	54%	30%	-24	67%	45%	-22
House persons	45%	25%	-20	50%	28%	-22	62%	45%	-17
Unemployed	47%	26%	-21	52%	26%	-26	61%	44%	-17
Retired	45%	28%	-17	52%	30%	-22	61%	46%	-15
Students	65%	41%	-24	68%	46%	-22	81%	63%	-18

To a certain degree it is logical for the decline to be greater amongst these categories because indicators were highest within these segments of the population in the spring of 2007 (62% positive image amongst the 15-24 year olds, the more qualified and executives, against 57% amongst all Europeans). This is still of great concern however: the European Union no longer seems to enjoy the opinion multipliers who would be likely to defend and promote it within public opinion.

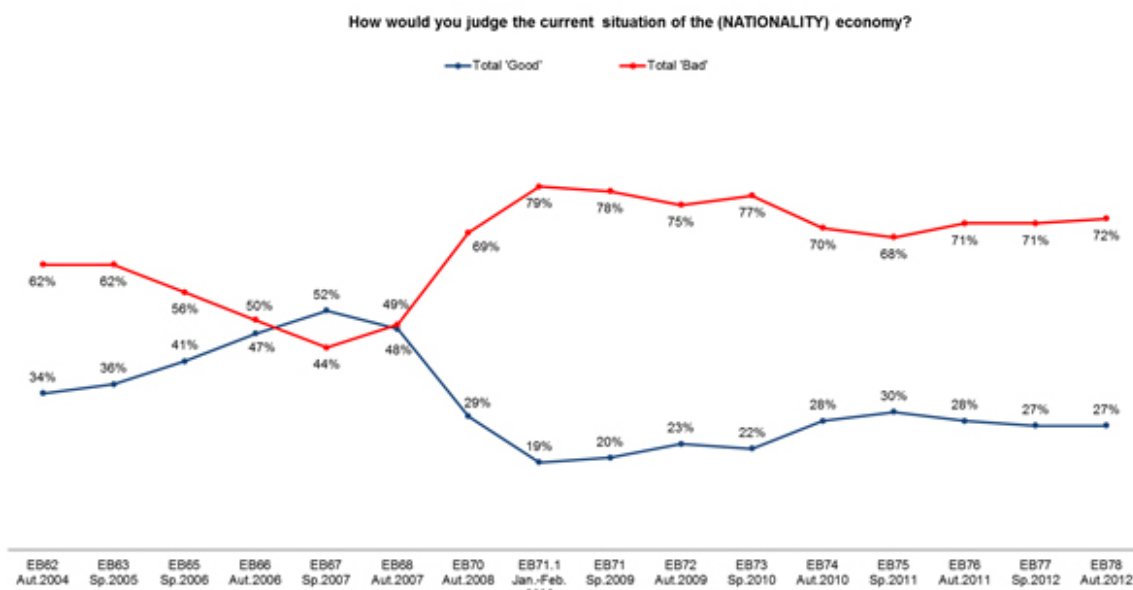
2. THE ECONOMIC CRISIS, THE MAIN EXPLANATORY FACTOR?

And so what is behind this tailspin? Obviously the eco-

nomic factor immediately springs to mind: the perception of the national economic situation indeed reached lowest ebb in the Eurobarometer survey undertaken at the beginning of 2009 [6], some months after the start of the crisis and this has only improved tentatively since. Since the autumn 2008 survey [7], more than two thirds of Europeans have come to believe that their country's economic situation is bad. And these results would be even worse if the extremely good results achieved by Germany since the autumn of 2010 (with more than six Germans in ten deeming the economic situation of their country good) were not there to improve the European average (German results contribute to more than 15% of the European average, weighted according to the Member States' respective populations).

6. EB71.1 Special Eurobarometer 311, the economic and financial crisis, January-February 2009.

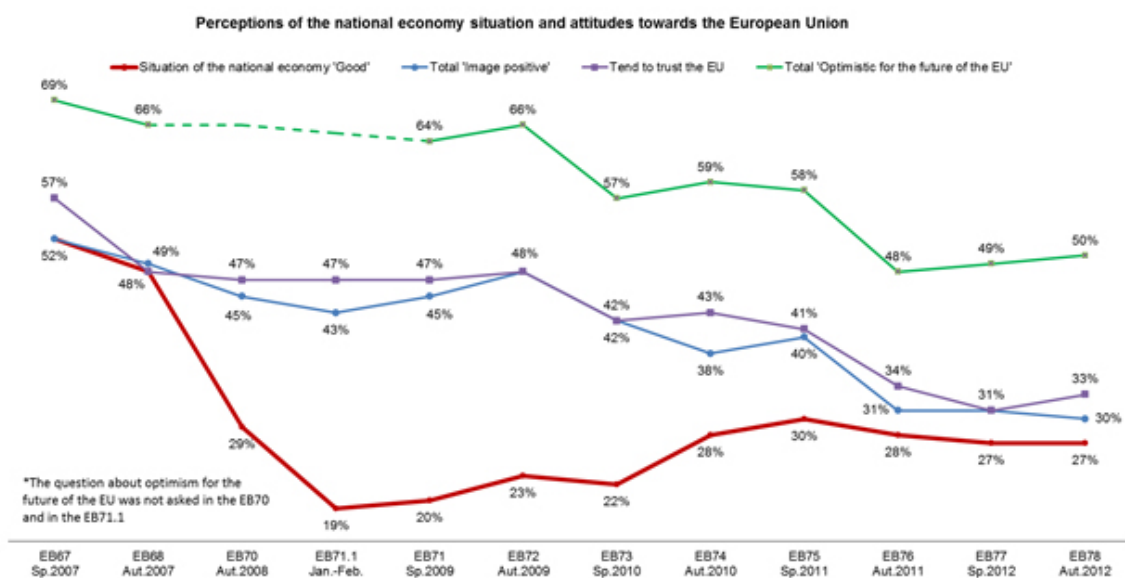
7. Standard Eurobarometer 70, autumn 2008.



One thing is certain however: the three support indicators to the European Union are running alongside the perception the Europeans have of their national economic situation: since the spring of 2007 we can see positive correlations of +0.42 in terms of the European Union's image, +0.43 in terms of confidence and

+0.46 in terms of optimism in the future of Europe.

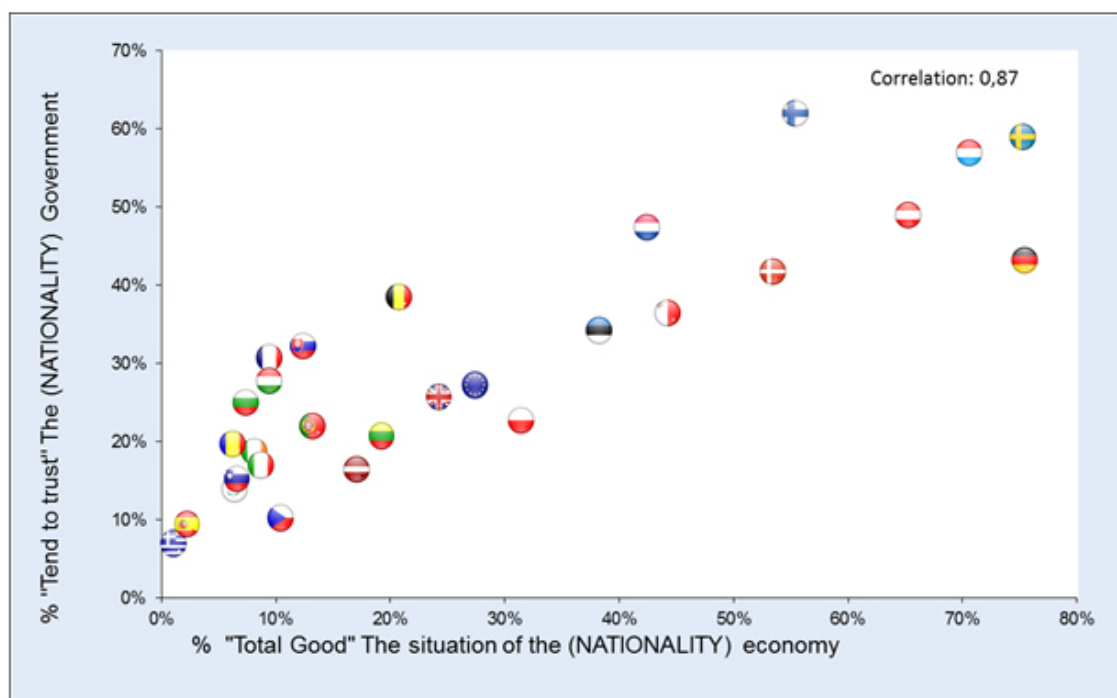
We might settle with that and conclude that if Europeans are turning away from the European Union it is a direct consequence of the economic situation. However a country-by-country analysis relativises this argument.



The graph below in which the positions of the various Member States is plotted according to their perception of the national economic situations (in abscissa) and the confidence in their national government (in ordinate), confirms that there is a strong link between these two variables (a

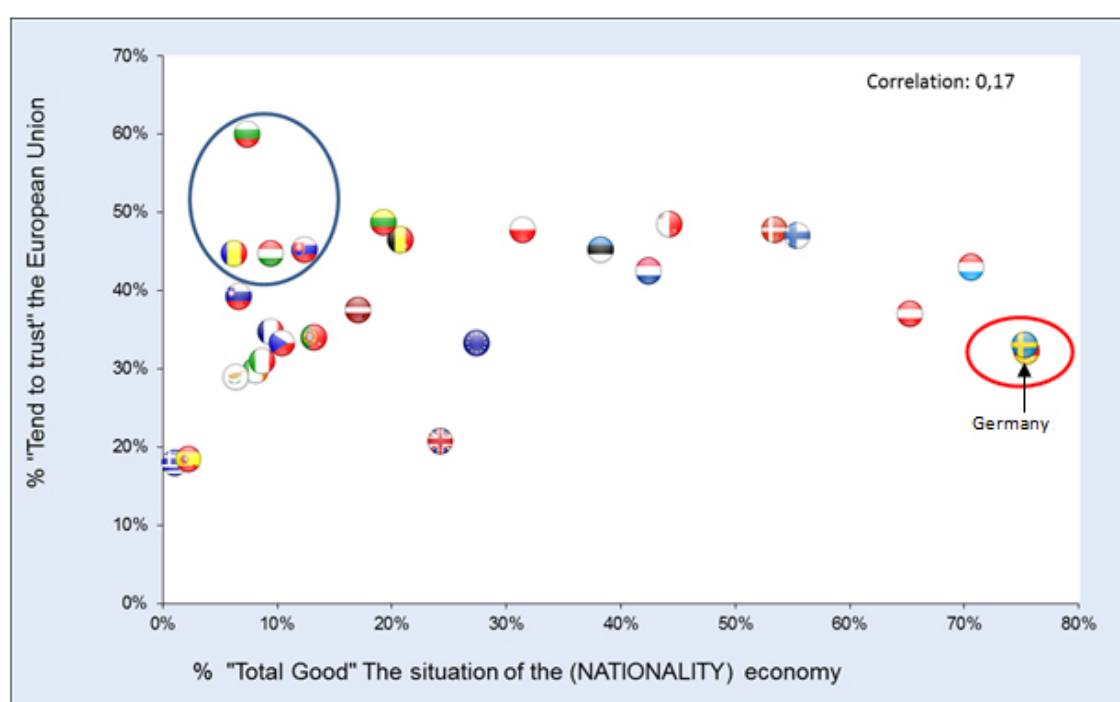
positive correlation of 0.87). The countries with a healthy economy attribute their good results to their government (Sweden and Luxembourg) and conversely mistrust of the government is particularly strong in Member States where the economic situation is disastrous (Spain and Greece).

THE EUROPEANS' ATTITUDES ABOUT EUROPE: A DOWNTURN LINKED ONLY TO THE CRISIS?



But the result is quite different if we analyse the link between the perception of the national economic situation and confidence in the European Union. The following graph illustrates a variety of situations: public opinion in Sweden and Germany is much more satisfied with the national economic situation than the European average but this lies on the same level if not below the average when it comes to expressing their confidence

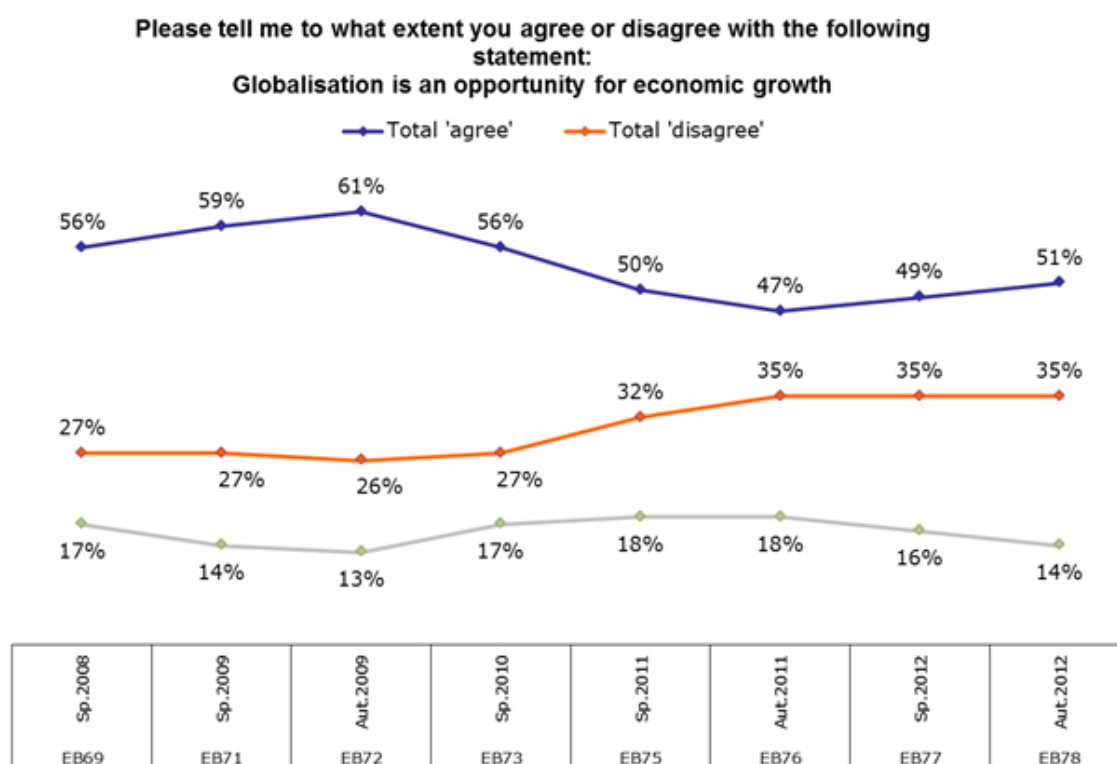
in the Union. Conversely in Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary and even Slovakia confidence in the Union is clearly higher than the European average, in spite of a national economic perception which is quite below the European average. The weak correlation between the two variables (0.17) confirms that the key factors in confidence in the Union are not just economic, and that other elements are at play.



3. THE TEMPTATION TOWARDS NATIONAL WITHDRAWAL: A REASON FOR THE RISE IN MISTRUST OF THE EU?

Regarding how Europeans perceive globalisation, a analysis over time reveals that it has worsened since 2008 and the start of the crisis. In spite of a slight recovery since autumn 2011 [8], the "agree" indicator (difference between the share of "agree" and "do not

agree" with the statement "globalisation represents an opportunity for economic growth" has declined by 13 points (from +29 to +16). This decline involves a great majority of the Member States: in 22 countries out of 27, the vision of globalisation as an economic opportunity has lost ground, sometimes in a spectacular manner. This is notably true in Cyprus (-56 points of the "agree" index), Romania (-48), Portugal (-40), in the Czech Republic (-39) and Slovenia (-37).



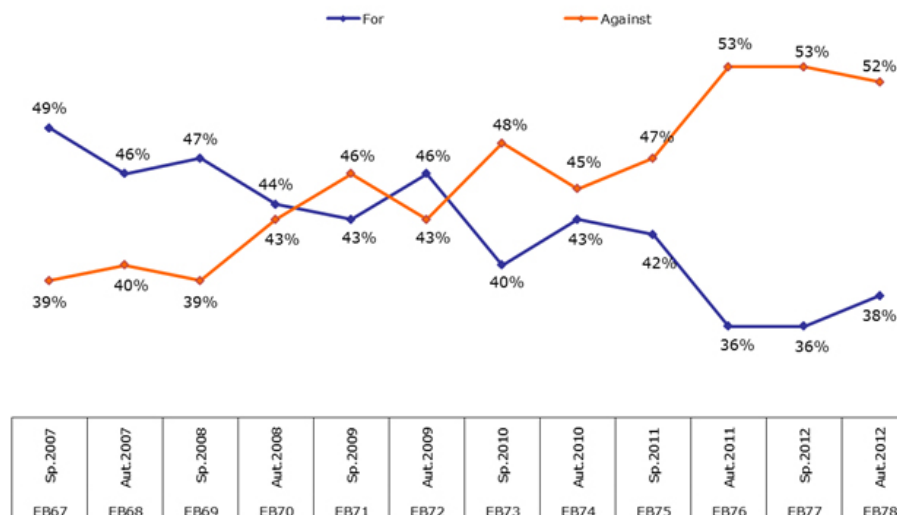
Moreover we note that the image of globalisation has particularly declined in the categories most exposed to unemployment: young working people (-17 points in the "agree" indicator amongst the 25-39 year olds), workers (-18) and the unemployed (-18). The crisis seems to have damaged the image of globalisation: negative aspects and notably the exposure caused in terms of increased competition with the emerging countries appear more clearly to European citizens. Most Europeans continue however to see it positively.

This is not the case as far as the Union's enlargement

to include new countries is concerned. The most recent enlargement took place on January 1st 2007, when the European Union grew from 25 to 27 Member States as Romania and Bulgaria joined. Interviewed just a few months later, in the spring of 2007, nearly half of the Europeans said they supported the future enlargement of Europe towards other countries in the next few years (49% in support, 39% against). Since then this support has continued to decline amongst public opinion and in the autumn of 2012 the trend reversed almost identical proportions: 38% in favour, but 52% were against any further enlargement.

8. Standard Eurobarometer 76, autumn 2011

Please tell whether you are for or against further enlargement of the EU to include other countries in future years



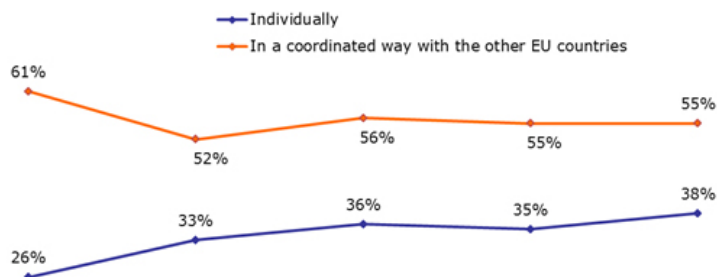
Close up support to enlargement has declined in all EU countries except for one. In Luxembourg the rate has remained constant. Some contractions are spectacular, notably in Cyprus (-63 points of the support index [9]), in the Czech Republic (-50) and in Spain (-41). In some Member States public opinion is more than just turning away from enlargement: it is undergoing a complete turnaround. In seven Member States there has been a move in which opposition to future enlargements is now in the majority. A socio-demographic analysis reveals that support to future enlargements has declined in almost all categories.

Is there a common point in the simultaneous contractions of favourable opinions about globalisation and

enlargement? A trend seems to be emerging in European public opinion in terms of tension about openness towards others: in other words people are tempted to withdraw. It is as if many Europeans, as they are hard hit by the crisis, are turning towards a political framework deemed to more protective, i.e. the State and they believe that they will find solutions to the crisis alone.

Furthermore although a majority of them continue to think that it is by taking coordinated steps with other Member States that they will be best protected against the crisis, the share who believe the contrary that salvation is in national solutions has risen from 26% in January, 2009 to 38% in March 2012.

As a citizen would you say that you would be better protected in the face of the current crisis if (OUR COUNTRY) adopted measures and applied them...?



9. Difference between the shares of « for » and « against » any future enlargement to other countries in the next few years..

And quite logically the rise of these ideas is not as illustrated in the table below.
without effect on support to the European Union ,

		Globalisation is an opportunity for economic growth		Further enlargement of the EU to include other countries in future years	
EU27		Agree	Disagree	For	Against
Image of the EU					
Total 'Positive'	30%	39%	21%	43%	23%
Total 'Negative'	29%	20%	43%	17%	39%
Trust in the EU					
Tend to trust	33%	43%	22%	47%	25%
Tend not to trust	57%	49%	71%	44%	67%
Future of the EU					
Total 'Optimistic'	50%	63%	35%	67%	40%
Total 'Pessimistic'	45%	34%	61%	29%	57%

Those who are sceptical about the positive effects of globalisation on growth as well as those against enlargement are amongst the most critical as far the European Union is concerned. In the crisis a large minority of Europeans seem to feel that it would be easier to go it alone. They are resolutely turning away from the European Union. But will it be forever?

The trend towards national withdrawal is linked to the crisis. And therefore the influence of this phenomenon on the rise of euroscepticism is connected to the economic situation. However it is neither a direct nor immediate consequence of it. The crisis is causing phenomena in opinion such as the trend to national withdrawal, and these are affecting support to the European Union.

4. REASONS FOR HOPE AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Is the outlook so dark? Are the rising trends of national withdrawal and the decline in support indicators to the

EU inexorable? In fact there are a certain number of encouraging factors and reasons for hope.

In spite of a growing feeling that national solutions would provide better protection against the crisis, the Union still enjoys some credit amongst the European population, notably in comparison with other major players: hence it is deemed the most able to act effectively to counter the crisis. Although it has shared this lead position once with national government (in the spring of 2012 [10]), and although it was beaten by the G8 when the question was first set (in January 2009, some months only after the start of the crisis [11]), the EU came out ahead of all of the others. The highest number of statements in support of the EU were recorded in Poland (36%), Bulgaria, in Luxembourg and in Malta (31% each).

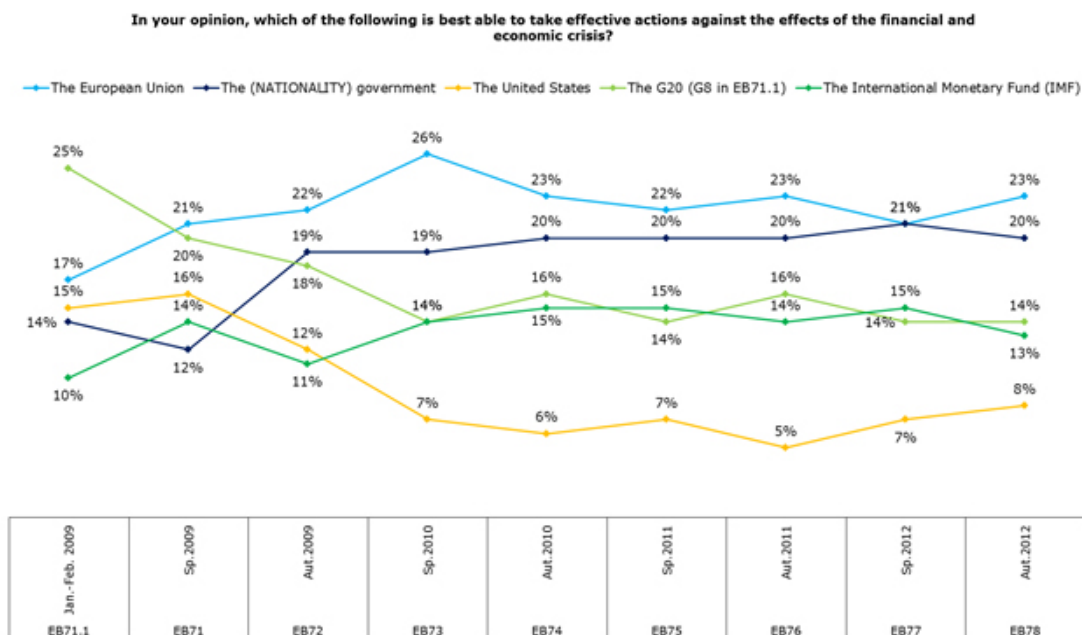
And although their figures are the ones to have declined the most in terms of support to the Union, young people (27% of the 15-24 year olds), the most qualified (25%) and executives (25%) are still in the majority to think that Europe is best placed to act effectively.

10. Standard Eurobarometer
EB77

11. EB71.1 Eurobarometer
special 311, the economic
and financial crisis, January-
February 2009. In the following
waves, the G8 was replaced by
the G20.

THE EUROPEANS' ATTITUDES ABOUT EUROPE: A DOWNTURN LINKED ONLY TO THE CRISIS?

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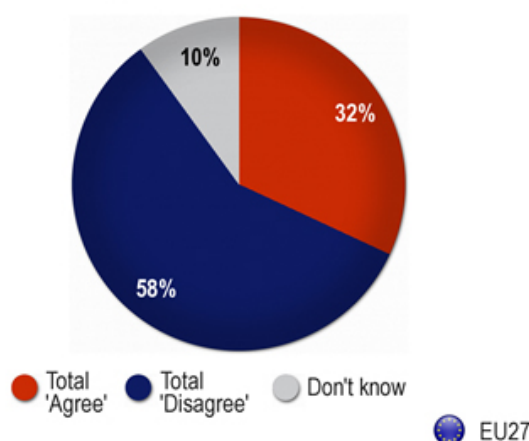


Furthermore with this sharp decline in support to the Union we might legitimately wonder whether Europeans think they would be better off if their country were not an EU member. But this is not the case! On the contrary, nearly six Europeans in ten do not agree that their country would have a better

chance in the future if it were not an EU member (58%, a quarter of whom fall within the category "do not agree at all"). Slightly less than one third believe the contrary and think that their country would be better equipped to face the future outside of the EU (32%).

Please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

(OUR COUNTRY) could better face the future outside the EU



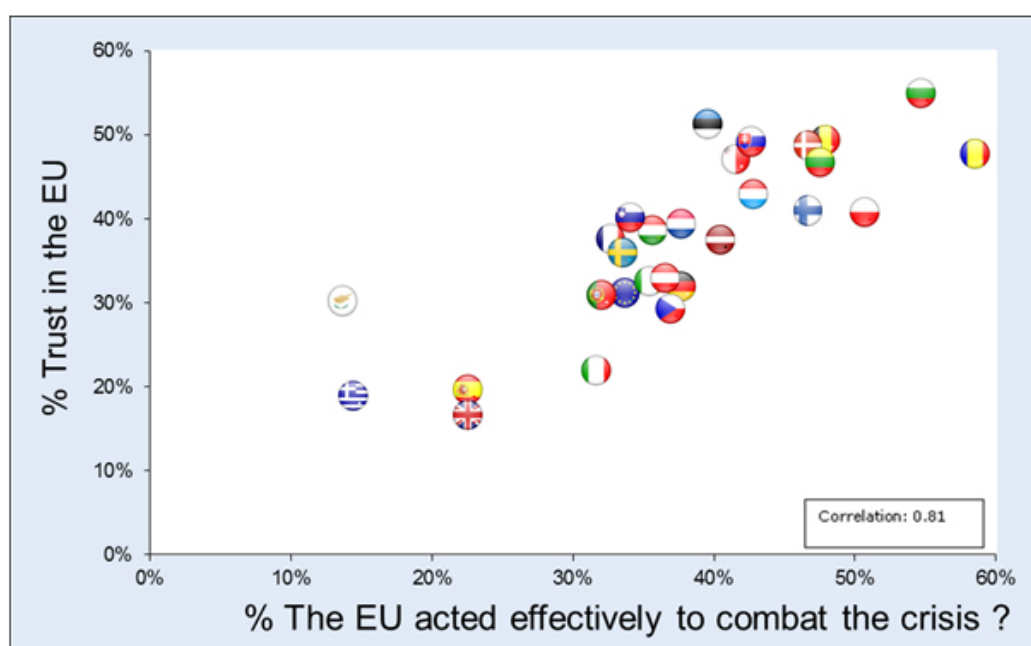
A national analysis almost totally confirms the feeling of a Union, which ultimately, would be protective to a certain extent in the present economic context: in 26 Member States most of those interviewed believe that

to face the future it is preferable for their country to be an EU member. The highest scores are achieved in Denmark (77% do not agree with the suggestion ("OUR COUNTRY) might be able to face the future

better if it were outside of the EU”), in the Netherlands (75%) and in Luxembourg (74%). The only exception to the rule, and unsurprisingly, is the UK where the population mainly believes that the country would do better outside of Europe.

In all categories (sex, age, level of education and socio-professional category), a clear majority of Europeans believe that their country is better equipped to face the future within the EU.

What should Europe do about this? How can it show European citizens that the Union is on their side in the crisis? In this instance action is key. Europeans are expecting the Union to act against the crisis: if we look at the opinion the Europeans have about the efficacy of the action taken by the EU since the start of the crisis we can see a strong correlation with confidence in the EU (0.81, spring 2012 [12]): quite logically attitudes towards Europe are strongly linked to the perceived efficacy of European policies.



The Union must act. But how? Firstly by playing a protective, supportive role to its citizens: indeed it is in the social sphere that the Union is expected to act. More than half of Europeans believe that the fight to counter poverty and social exclusion must be the European Parliament's top priority (53%). Far ahead of the coordina-

tion of economic, budgetary and fiscal policies (35%), lie policies concerning agriculture that respect the environment and help towards the world's food balance (30%), and the fight to counter climate change (28%). Other aspects are quoted by less than one quarter of those interviewed.

The European Parliament promotes the development of certain policies at European Union level. In your opinion, which of the following policies should be given priority?

Evolution January 2010 - November 2012

	EU27					
	J-F 2010	A-S 2010	A-M 2011	N 2011	J 2012	N-D 2012
Tackling poverty and social exclusion	44%	52%	51%	49%	50%	53%
Coordinating economic, budget and tax policies	24%	27%	28%	37%	37%	35%
Improving consumer and public health protection	35%	33%	32%	30%	31%	30%

12. Standard Eurobarometer
EB77, spring 2012

A security and defence policy that enables the EU to face up to international crisis	30%	23%	24%	29%	28%	28%
Combating terrorism while respecting individual freedoms	34%	28%	25%	22%	24%	22%
A foreign policy that enables the EU to speak with one voice on the international stage	21%	17%	16%	21%	22%	22%
Combating climate change	28%	27%	25%	22%	23%	21%
An agricultural policy that is environmentally friendly and contributes to the global food balance	34%	26%	26%	22%	20%	21%
A common energy policy intended to ensure the EU's energy independence	24%	20%	23%	22%	21%	21%
An immigration policy implemented in consultation with countries of origin	20%	20%	22%	19%	19%	18%
A research and development (R&D) policy that ensures competitiveness and innovation	13%	14%	13%	14%	16%	18%
The assertion of a European social model	11%	13%	12%	14%	14%	15%

Every time that this question is asked the fight to counter poverty and social exclusion comes out far ahead as the Europeans' top priority. In the first months of the crisis in September 2008 troubles seemed to be far away, a kind of abstract event that involved the world of finance, bankers and traders. But now the crisis is there, it is real. The population is being affected more directly; unemployment has never been as high in the EU and it is by far the most important cause of concern for European citizens. And therefore it is regarding social issues, before all others, that action is expected on the part of the EU.

CONCLUSION

Since 2007, the rise of euroscepticism seems to be irresistible. Image, confidence, optimism about the future, indicators vary but the observation is constant: increasingly Europeans have less confidence in the EU.

And although the temptation is great to explain this downward trend because of the economic situation it has to be admitted that this is not enough.

More and more Europeans are tempted by national withdrawal. After having believed, in the first few months of the crisis, that the EU might serve as

a shield the idea that they might do better alone without the other Member States is gaining ground. Obviously the crisis is notably blamed for the rise in this trend in public opinion. Hence the economic situation is affecting support to the EU – not in a direct, immediate manner but by means of other secondary dimensions. In other words although negative opinions of Europe are rising it is not exclusively because of the poor economic situation. It is also because the economic situation is leading to the formation of other opinions that also affect support to the EU negatively.

In all events the Union is still deemed to be the most adequate player to act effectively against the crisis. But this also means that the Union has a certain responsibility, even a duty: which is to act. Europeans want to see Europe acting to support the growing number of citizens who are being directly affected by the crisis. And it is clearly in terms of countering unemployment and support to the most vulnerable populations that action is mainly expected of the Union. The Union must be seen to be "at work" in the field alongside its citizens. This is how it will succeed in restoring its image that has been seriously damaged since the start of the crisis. Hence it is vital for the Union to be seen to be at work – it must communicate, more and better, about its work to support European citizens.

A year before the next European elections there is still time to inverse or at least change this downward trend: the success of the next European election depends on it, because the danger of seeing a total loss of interest in the next elections is a reality. The explanation that would be given would be "in all events it changes nothing for me". In their 20% turnout the Croats have issued a warning that should be taken seriously. Indeed, we can be sure that the most fervent opponents to the Union will know how to act in this election.

Julien Zalc

A graduate of the political institute of Grenoble (DESS PROGIS) he started his career in the political and opinion department of TNS Sofres. In 2006 he joined TNS Opinion, the TNS Group's coordination centre for international studies. He was notably responsible for the Eurobarometer. Since 2009 he has continued his work with TNS Opinion as a consultant.

He is the author of several articles, notably for "L'opinion européenne", an annual publication managed by Dominique Reynié.

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