

EUROPEAN ATTITUDES AND INSTITUTIONAL TRUST IN EASTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES AFTER THE ECONOMIC CRISIS: STRESSING THE IMPACT OF EUROPEAN IDENTITY

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Abstract:

This paper analyses the determinants of people's support for the European institutions, mainly focusing on the impact of European identity, after the economic crisis in Eastern European countries and in a moment in which – after a profound uncertainty for its immediate future – there is a new feeling toward the European integration.

Previous research on the support for the European institutions, before the economic and financial crisis which had hit Europe since 2008, has found that people's evaluations followed mainly an instrumental logic – support being contingent on a perception of personal/national benefit accruing for EU membership – with an additional role played by European identification. This contribution expands the analysis after the beginning of the economic crisis, so to assess whether the former has affected the structure of such support, and deepens the analysis of the impact of EU identity on European Institutional confidence. Using a recent Eurobarometer survey (88.3, Autumn 2017), the paper shows that European identity plays a crucial role in explaining European support also after the crisis.

Keywords:

European Union, Eastern Europe, economy, identity

Introduction

In March 2017, in a climate of profound uncertainty for its future, the European Union celebrated its 60th birthday.

The “Brexit heritage” and the growing size and influence of Europhobic parties, together with a legacy of economic and financial crisis, cast a “dark light” on the future of the European Union.

Never as in those months have the questions about the prospects of a united Europe become so complicated. Even the White Paper, handed down by the European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, has tackled the root of the problem.

The political events that took place in the following months – especially the elections in France – have removed the most pressing concerns, but there is no doubt that the situation is not yet completely outlined. Even the elections in Germany at the end of September 2017 – the other political-electoral appointment on which the attention of observers and political actors was focused – allowed the knots to loosen.

The Italian national elections in March 2018 seem to throw new shadows on the European integration path: thus, the future definitely seems to be something to be written, although some signs of optimism are beginning to emerge.

However, to what extent has the economic crisis, after threatening the very existence of Europe, altered the structure of relations between the citizens and the EU?

The goal of this paper is to inquire into the determinants of people’s support for the European institutions, also considered as institutional confidence, focusing in particular on the attitudinal consequences of holding an affective feeling towards Europe that can be labelled as “European identity”.

In more detail, the goal is to assess to what extent European identity contributes to the explanation of European support (in this case, European Institutional Trust) compared to other determinants. Previous research on such support has found out that people’s evaluations followed mainly an instrumental logic – support being dependent on a perception of personal or national benefits accruing from membership in the European Union (EU) – with an additional role played by the European identification and other factors, such as trust in the Europeans.

This contribution expands the previous analysis, done well after the beginning of the economic crisis and aims to offer a comprehension of the structure of the European attitudes.

The paper is organized as follows: in the first section, I discuss the concepts of European identity and European institutional trust. Subsequently,

I review the main theories that have been elaborated to explain the development of political support for the EU. Thus, after a description of data and measurements, in the second section I offer a description of distributions of European Institutional Trust across Europe. Finally, I test a model that assesses the explanatory power of European identity on the EU support as compared to other variables. The concluding section reviews the findings and the implications for future research.

European identification and Trust for European Institutions

European identity is often seen in literature as a component of more general attitudes towards European integration. In the early research it is even interpreted as being synonymous with support (see Inglehart 1970). European identity is also seen as a diffuse support of the political community as a part of the political system (e.g. Duchesne and Frogner 1995). Later research has explicitly interpreted European identity as a link to a political community distinct from general support for the EU itself (e.g. Scheuer 1999).

According to Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel and Turner 1986), identity is a feeling of attachment to a salient group: so European identity is an attachment to a salient supranational community.

Differently from a nation, the EU faces difficulties in becoming a proper polity because people's primary loyalty is still weak. Europeans do not share a single common history, culture and values. On the other hand, this traditional reasoning can be questioned, since Europeans do share a relevant past (the Greek *polis* and the Roman Empire, the Crusades, the Renaissance, Romanticism and the French Revolution). However, together with a common heritage, Europeans share religious conflicts such as the cleavages between Catholics and Protestants, Latin and Orthodox, the Christian and Islamic world. Moreover, there are extreme political divisions within Europe: its history is a history of wars, culminating in the First and Second World Wars and the Cold War. In addition, Europeans do not share a common language. On balance, it might therefore be argued that, since basic elements of a common identity are lacking, the divisions are stronger than the commonalities. This perspective sheds a bleak light on the possibility of a European identity.

However, stressing the identity achieved components (Huddy, 2001) defining European identity could be easier also because together with the vertical dimension (the sense of belonging to), a collective identity could also imply a horizontal dimension (the so-called sense of community, or sense of belonging together) (Kaina and Karolewski, 2013; Green, 2007). Another point is stressed by Checkel and Katzenstein that contrasts a 'cosmopolitan'

vision with a ‘national-populist’ declination of identity projects (2009, p. 11). There are few doubts that European identity is something closer to a cosmopolitan allegiance, because it stresses political rights and citizenship, while national-populist European identity focuses on cultural authenticity.

Political support could be instrumental and diffuse (see Easton, 1965); this latter is crucial for a political system’s life. In Europe, with the end of the initial permissive consensus on EU integration, people’s support was conceived as a possible “remedy” to bridge the gap between supranational governance and citizens. Then, in this paper, the basic idea is that European identity might increase the legitimacy of EU governance, also via a “resilience” mechanism.

Public perception of the EU covers several dimensions and literature suggests a number of typologies to conceptualize them. Moving from Easton’s (1965, 1975) notions of specific and diffuse support, Norris (1999) distinguishes five objects of political support (political community, regime principles, regime processes, regime institutions and political authorities). Conceptually, popular support for the basic principles of the EU is conceived as the level of popular approval for integration project as a whole.

But citizens’ orientations towards the EU also include evaluations of the institutions of the EU. These assessments of the institutional design of the EU are most commonly assessed by asking respondents about their level of trust or confidence in various institutions. Institutional trust is explicitly linked to regime stability since it enhances the likelihood of support by citizens believing that the political system will produce ideal outcomes.

In Easton’s words, institutional trust could be seen as support for regime institutions; European institutions make decisions, so – in a way – they are directly considered responsible for policies and answers given.

During the crisis, European Institutions are directly “under observation” because of a lack of responses. For these reasons the focus in this paper is on the European Institutional Trust, as a dependent variable.

Before exploring the trends and the distribution of European Institutional Trust among countries, the possible source of Europeanism should be considered. Therefore, the next paragraph will revise the literature on the predictors of European attitudes.

Theoretical perspectives and research hypotheses on the sources of European Institutional Trust

The sources of Europeanism are of various nature. In a first step, the study of public opinion on European integration draws on the tools and methods of the comparative study of regime support at the national level (Loveless and Rohrschneider, 2011, p. 5).

At first, scholars followed the model of the permissive consensus (Lindberg and Scheingold, 1971). Pro-European sentiments began to weaken with the Single European Act of 1987 and the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, which broadened the sphere of action and the range of competences of the EU and brought about its transformation into an (un)stable system of governance. Rejections of the Constitutional Treaty in France and Holland in June 2005 – even though for different reasons – and the bumpy road taken by the Lisbon Treaty before it became effective in December 2009, again recall the question of the link between the citizens and Europe. New theories were proposed and the subsequent empirical research on the determinants of European support is quite copious. They point to four theoretical perspectives that have been developed over time: cognitive mobilization, instrumental rational perspectives, political mobilization and affective/identitarian explanations (Bellucci et al., 2012; Toka et al., 2012).

Chronologically, the first theoretical perspective used to explain attitudes to Europe was the cognitive mobilization theory advanced by Inglehart (1970). This was followed by a series of studies in which motivations of a utilitarian nature had a predominant role (Gabel, 1998). Subsequently, a number of authors studied Europeanism according to the idea that political explanations offered the key to its understanding (Anderson, 1998; Sanchez-Cuenca, 2000). More recently, the identity paradigm has been established, where national (and local) identities are seen as the variables explaining most of the variation of the orientations of public opinion towards Europe (Carey, 2002; McLaren, 2002; Hooghe and Marks, 2005).

Summing up, ignoring the chronological criterion, the possible predictors of pro-Europeanism could be placed into two broad categories: economic and non-economic, as suggested by Hooghe and Marks (2005).

The economic-utilitarian theory (Gabel, 1998) interprets the pro-European sentiments of public opinion as the product of rational thinking and therefore of a calculation. Membership of Europe is in other words evaluated on the basis of criteria of expedience and utility of the choice

involved. This literature presupposes that citizens are capable of rational evaluation, and therefore of calculating the economic consequences of European integration both for themselves and for the social groups to which they belong, including the nation. Attitudes towards the EU are thus the product of this calculation. The results of Gabel's investigations showed that citizens that benefitted directly from community assistance (such as farmers) had a higher level of support for Europe: this is a reflection of the so-called 'egocentric utilitarianism'. The utilitarian approach also takes into account aggregate economic factors, according to economic voting literature (Lewis-Beck, 1988). From this perspective, support for European integration is influenced by the performance of the national economic system. In particular, support for integration is strong when the state of the national economy (in terms of inflation, unemployment and growth) is good (Eichenberg and Dalton, 1993): this is the so-called 'sociotropic utilitarianism'. In sum, the central assumption of the economic or instrumental theory is that individuals' orientations towards the EU result from a calculation of costs and benefits.

In very recent years, economic crisis has played a crucial role in Europeanism, as several studies show (see Serricchio et al., 2013).

This perspective in particular is useful because the economic crisis has threatened the very existence of the European Union.

Kuhn and Stoeckel (2014) look at the effects of the crisis on support for European economic governance. As far as the utilitarian approach is concerned, the authors hypothesize an opposite relationship with support for EU governance during the crisis.

Lastly, Di Mauro and Serricchio (2016) assess the role of the national institutions as a proxy for Europeanism, stressing also the role of some contextual variables.

Among non-economic factors, cognitive mobilization (based on growth in levels of education among citizens, exposure to a wider range of information sources and consequently greater awareness of Europe and of the way it works) was thought to favour pro-European sentiments. However, in recent years, especially following the expansion in the range of competences of the EU and its various enlargements, the identity explanation has become more relevant. In this perspective, national identity becomes a key predictor of the orientations of public opinion with respect to the EU. In Carey's view (2002), the danger of a loss of power on the part of the citizen's own member state deriving from the growing interference of the supranational institutions produces a negative reaction in those citizens who do not see the EU as a

legitimate entity, and who in any case do not see or clearly recognize the outline of a European identity. So, for Carey, strong national identities, in some cases reinforced by sentiments of belonging to a sub-national territory, constitute an obstacle to the European integration. McLaren (2002) focuses on the perception of a threat to one's own identity. The perceived threat posed by integration with other populations and cultures could be economic, deriving from possible conflicts over economic benefits enjoyed by minority groups, or it could derive from purely cultural considerations. The conclusion reached by McLaren is in line with that of Carey: strong national identities obstruct the process of European integration. However, the relationship between national identity and the attitudes towards Europe seems to be more complex. For Duchesne and Frognier (1995), Bruter (2005) and Citrin and Sides (2004), in contrast to the interpretations of Carey and McLaren, the relationship between a sense of national belonging and pro-European sentiments is, rather, positive, and a strong national identity is fully compatible with positive attitudes towards Europe. Similar conclusions are reached by the authors of studies carried out by social psychologists (Cinnirella, 1997; Huici et al., 1997; Catellani and Milesi, 1998).

Hooge and Marks (2005) have suggested that the national context has a mediating role: national identity works in opposite directions, in favour of or against European integration, according to the context concerned, and especially as a consequence of specific political events with the power to trigger nationalistic sentiments in citizens (in the case in point, the holding of a referendum on Europe). Accordingly, people holding exclusive national identity – in contrast to people expressing dual allegiance to both nation and Europe – would be less supportive of European integration.

Other authors (Bellucci et al., 2012; Serricchio, 2010 for the Italian case) stress the impact of different component of national identity (civic *vs.* ethnic or, as social psychologists claim, achieved *vs.* ascribed as in Huddy 2001).

The role of European identity in determining pro-European attitudes is quite clear. In the Intune project (e.g. Serricchio, 2011; Sanders et al., 2012) European identity has a relevant role as a predictor in European attitudes and, in fact, according to Toka et al. (2012), European identity can be grouped into an affective/identitarian factor.

According to Serricchio and Bellucci (2016), European identification is one of the most powerful predictors of pro-European attitudes also because could be seen as a source of “resilience”.

The third perspective introduces political mobilization factors and judgemental heuristics. The main idea here is that mass perceptions of Europe are defined in national political arenas and that parties, political elites and the mass media may ‘cue’ voters in their views towards Europe and its institutions (Hooghe and Marks, 2005). Political explanations (or political cues) encompass theoretical perspectives whose wide range is reflected in a corresponding heterogeneity of empirical findings. One perspective emphasizes the way in which individuals use certain political cues – which come to them from their own ideological orientations and the messages put in circulation by the political élites – to form their ideas about Europe. Underlying this approach is the conviction that individuals are not able to obtain complete information; that their capacity for rational thinking is limited; that they have only partial awareness of the relevant issues and therefore must make use of institutional and other forms of delegation. These studies therefore give special emphasis to the role of political parties as the suppliers of cognitive shortcuts (Gabel, 1998). A second perspective focuses on the citizens’ confidence in national institutions and in the national political system more generally. Anderson (1998) shows that the attitudes of the citizens towards the EU – which is now a polity for all practical purposes, a polity *sui generis* though it may be – are to a degree filtered by the national political and institutional system. In other words, confidence in institutions has a positive impact on citizens’ attitudes to Europe because the national institutions are used as cognitive shortcuts. Those who have confidence in their own political system are likely to develop attitudes of closeness to, if not confidence in, the institutions of Europe. However, the impact can also be negative, as Sanchez-Cuenca (2000) shows: those mistrustful of the national political system may develop strongly pro-European attitudes. So on the one hand, Anderson (1998) establishes a mechanism of institutional proxy in the context of which the national institutions are shortcuts to feelings of confidence in Europe. On the other hand, Sanchez-Cuenca (2000) provides confirmation of the hypothesis of a substitution mechanism whereby a lack of confidence in the national political system leads to the prediction of strong pro-European sentiments. Bellucci et al. (2012) show that the relationship between confidence in the national institutions and pro-European attitudes is in fact mediated by a third variable, namely, the quality of governance. In countries where this is high, the relationship is negative.

Data and measurement

In order to do analysis and test hypothesis, I use a very recent Eurobarometer survey, the 88.3, which was released in November 2017 by the European Commission.

In the following analysis, the dependent variable is the European Institutional Confidence, an index that combines some classic measures of European institutional Trust, including both elected and not elected institutions: so, the scale includes general European trust, trust towards the Parliament, the European Commission, the European Central Bank; the variables were combined into an additive index and rescaled into a 0 – 10 point range, where 0 is the lowest level of confidence and 10 the highest.

Usually, European identity is measured with survey instruments pertinent to belonging, territorial-geographical attachment and future feelings (Citrin and Sides 2004; Sinnott 2006; Moreno, 2006).

In previous research (Serricchio and Bellucci, 2016), European identity is conceptualized and measured according to Social Identity Theory that imply belonging and salience, captured by two questions which have been elaborated from Lilli and Diehl's (1999) as reformulation of the Collective Self-Esteem Scale originally proposed by Luhtanen and Crocker (1992); unfortunately, the Eurobarometer survey employed for this paper doesn't have the same items, nor any similar. Nevertheless, it contains several parameters that measure emotional and affective feeling toward Europe thus allowing to well grasp the feeling of European identification.

The questions included are: Europe's perceived image, the European and the European Union attachment, the European citizenship and the classic measure of European identity, the so called Moreno question; the variables were combined into an additive index and rescaled into a 0 – 10 point range, where 0 is the lowest level of identification and 10 the highest.

European attitudes across time

The 2017 survey reveals some news. The (small) trends of some selected indicators – some of them are shown in Figure 1 and Figure 1a for Eastern Europe – describe some interesting trends: since 2013 trust toward the European Parliament has been stable, trust toward the European Commission slightly has decreased, while trust toward the EU as a whole has slightly grown.

In Eastern European countries, all indicators decrease.

These trends need to be confirmed in the following months. So, next surveys most probably will tell us something more on this subject. For the moment, the results are quite uncertain. (*See Figure 1 and Figure 1a*)

Focusing on the described dependent variable, it has a moderate average intensity (5.23 on a 0-10 scale, $n=27.746$) with a 3.9 of standard deviation that reveals a good variability among nations; so, as suspected, this level is not common to all Europeans; indeed, the level of European institutional trust index varies considerably across the European nations, depending on national context, with fifteen countries over the average.

Therefore, a question could be raised: which factors explain these great variations among different national contexts? A preliminary explanation recalls the different impact of economic and financial crisis, the different level of national attachment but also – and possibly most importantly – the potential different role of national institutional confidence.

A more complex explanation is thus needed. In order to do so, some multivariate regression models are set up. In these models the dependent variable is always the European institutional confidence, measured as explained; the predictors are selected and included according the theories presented and discussed in Section 3.

The next sections will present and discuss empirical findings. This also allows me to explain the relevance of European identity. (*See Figure 2*)

Determinants of European institutional confidence

The literature review has shown that several factors affect the level of pro-EU attitudes and may lead to changes over the years and between countries. To ascertain their impact I use a “basic” regression model (OLS) with only individual level predictors: this model is presented in Table 1. The socio-demographic variables are included mainly as control variables, without any specific hypotheses.

The coefficients at the individual level suggest that economic variables are associated with great strength of support, also after the crisis. So, it is confirmed that the economy does directly impact the EU support.

Observing the confidence in national institutions, this predictor is very strongly correlated with the index of EU institutional trust, with a positive direction.

This is a very relevant finding, as the role of domestic governance is not always univocal and sometimes uncertain, as explained. With these data and this analysis its role appears to be quite clear.

National identity has a weak impact, negative and not significant in Eastern Europe. In general, the model fits the data reasonably well as r-square reveals (.37 and .31).

European identity has a relevant impact on general explanation: its impact on European institutional confidence is very important, both in European and Eastern Europe. So, the sense of European identification greatly increases the confidence in European public institutions.

This is not a “banal” finding: rather, it confirms the idea that an affective connection with a supranational entity could promote also the institutional confidence and, broadly speaking, the political support for European integration project. The two concepts, certainly connected in citizens’ mind, however, have a different role, as many previous researches show. The casual link between them (who cueing whom?) is not totally clear and some *endogeneity* problems also could be raised. But this is not the place for this discussion.

Rather, I would stress the importance of European Identity as a reserve of positive values.

Certainly the European identity has above all a civic matrix, considering that the cultural aspect is largely deficient. But, following the functionalist theory, over time the civic matrix can also generate the missing pillar. This is probably more an aspiration than a forecast, but if in spite of all the difficulties the united Europe still exists, then perhaps it is possible to be moderately optimistic about its future.

The European elections of 2019 will provide some answers, certainly partial and not exhaustive but the feeling is that Europe is at a real crossroads.

Further researches should focus firstly on the level of pro-European attitudes, seeking confirmation of their increasing levels. In addition, and most importantly, all the possible interactions between contextual and individual attitudes are yet to be verified because according to these results the question is only partially solved. (*See Table 1*)

Conclusion

In the first months of 2017 European Union was highly contested: in March 2017, the united Europe celebrated its 60th birthday in a very heavy climate (considering Brexit and the growing influence of Eurosceptic parties

across Europe). The White Paper, handed down by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, seem to indicate useful solutions.

The Presidential and Parliamentary elections in France seem to have removed the most pressing concerns, but the picture is not yet completely outlined and the future of a United Europe is still under observation.

What will be the future is a very hard question but some signs of optimism are beginning to emerge. So, in this general climate, this paper aimed to assess if the economic crisis altered the structure of the relations between the citizens and the EU.

Previous research on support for European integration has found that citizens' evaluation followed mainly an instrumental logic – support being contingent on a perception of personal/national benefit accruing for EU membership – with an additional role played by European identity.

This contribution expanded the analysis already done, mainly when the financial and economic crisis began to affect popular confidence towards political institutions and, mainly, the supranational polity.

The findings are quite surprising. First of all, pro-European attitudes show an increasing level among Europeans, although the level of trust in the European institutions (and other indicators, too) considerably varies across countries. The situation in Eastern countries is slightly different.

The first relevant finding concerns the trust in national political institutions that appears always positive.

But the most important result to be highlighted concerns the role of European identity that is able to contribute significantly to the explanation of the support.

Probably this affective attachment constitutes a reserve of resilience, able to drive public perception toward Europe across times of crisis, allowing to maintain support at an acceptable level during peak of disaffection, too.

As I tried to argue, this could be good news for the future of the united Europe and an indication for political actors.

For sure, next year with European elections will provide some answers.

Figures and tables

Institutional Trust across time in Europe (Fig. 1) and Eastern Europe (Fig. 1a) (selected indicators)

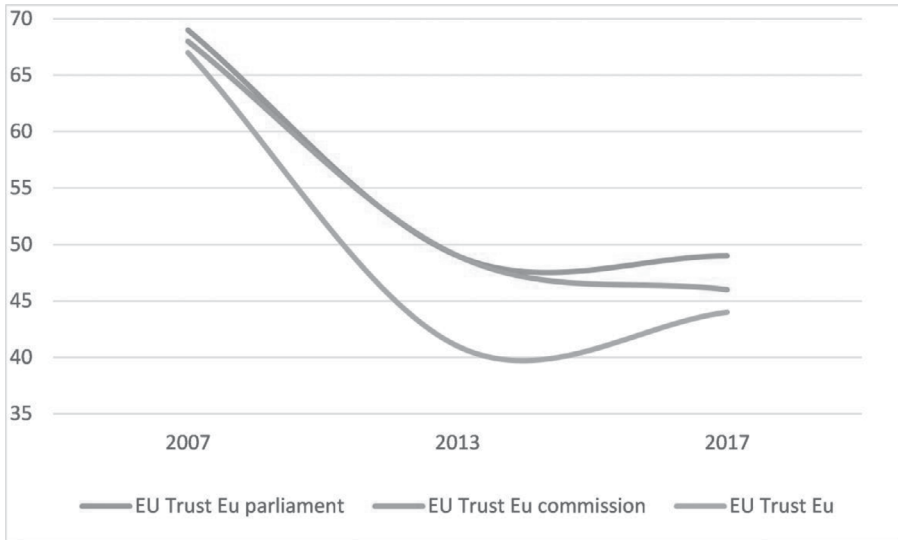


Fig. 1

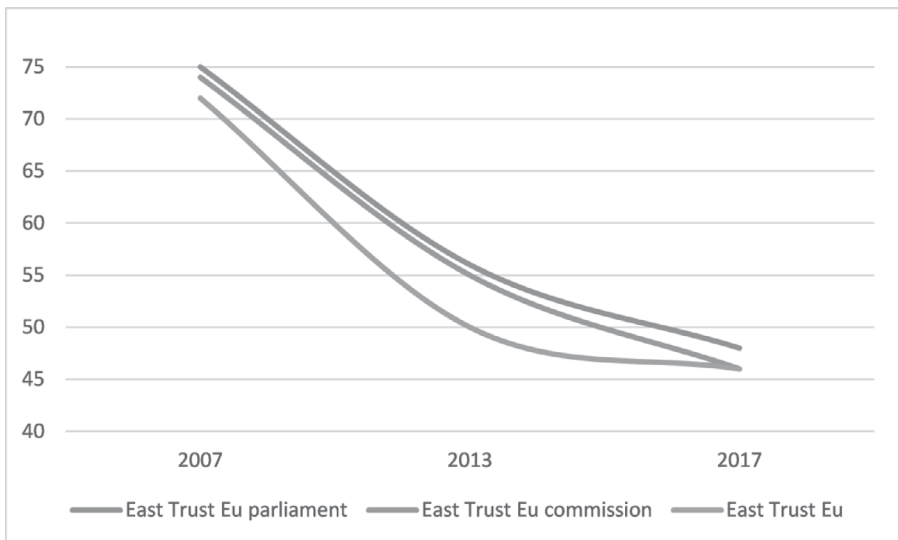


Fig. 1a

Source: Author's elaboration based on Eb 67.2 (2007), 80.1 (2013) and 88.3 (2017)

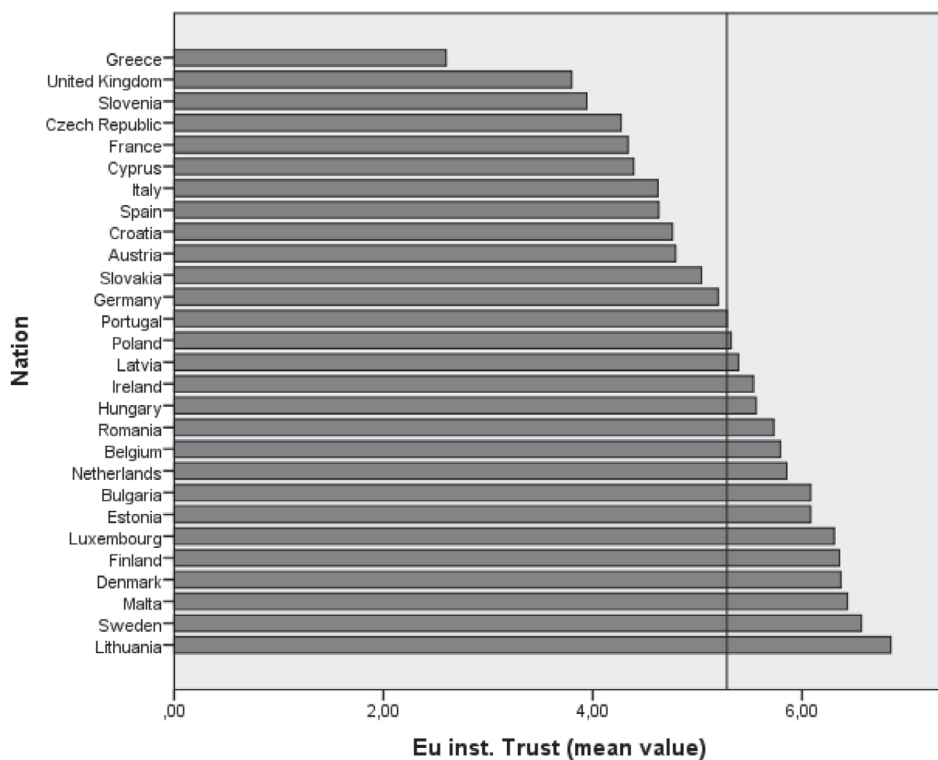


Fig. 2. The distribution of the European institutional trust among countries (mean value on a 0 – 10 scale): 2017

Source: Author's elaboration based on Eb 88.3 (2017, Autumn)

	eu-28					eastern			
	Not		St.	Sig.		Not		St.	Sig.
	std coeff.		coeff.			std coeff.		coeff.	
	B	St. err	Beta			B	St. err	Beta	
(Costant)	,380	,193		,049		,889	,329		,007
Nat econ	,072	,027	,022	,007		,010	,044	,003	,823
Eu econ	-,110	,025	-,035	,000		-,124	,042	-,037	,004
Nat. Econ exp	,112	,031	,021	,000		,078	,055	,014	,155
Eu econ exp	,035	,027	,008	,199		,102	,047	,022	,031
Media use	-,027	,029	-,006	,364		,049	,047	,011	,295
Nat. Instit. trust	,340	,006	,346	0,000		,280	,011	,267	,000
Eur. Identity	,672	,010	,411	0,000		,744	,017	,439	0,000
Nat. Identity	-,049	,011	-,024	,000		-,025	,020	-,012	,217
Left-right	,027	,010	,015	,006		-,048	,016	-,028	,002
Sex	-,180	,042	-,023	,000		-,243	,073	-,030	,001
Educ	,065	,029	,014	,023		,108	,054	,021	,045
Age	-,127	,026	-,031	,000		-,105	,044	-,026	,018
Social class	,020	,023	,005	,384		-,093	,040	-,023	,021
Unemploy	,055	,050	,007	,271		,104	,086	,013	,227
Adj-R-sq	.37					.31			
N	22059					8337			

Tab. 1.

European identity as a predictor of European institutional confidence.

Source: Author's elaboration based on Eurobarometer 88.3 (2017)

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