

Financial, migration crises in Europe add to EU skepticism, professor finds

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Mainstream political parties in Europe have failed to respond to the increasing public skepticism of the European Union, opening the door for nationalist political groups to gain more power, a University of Kansas researcher has found.

The fallout of the [financial crisis](#) and subsequent bailouts of Greece and other struggling nations, coupled with the recent migration crisis, have further enflamed skepticism toward European integration, said Robert Rohrschneider, KU's Sir Robert Worcester Distinguished Professor of Political Science.

"Since 2007, there has been really a dramatic drop in acceptance of the European Union and further support for integration," he said. "Given their past commitment to integration, mainstream political elites in

Europe have really had a difficult time responding quickly to the changing sentiments among mass publics."

Rohrschneider is the lead author of the recent study "Responding to growing European Union skepticism? The stances of political parties toward European integration in Western and Eastern Europe following the financial crisis," published recently in the *European Union Politics* journal.

The EU's formation is traced initially to the 1950s and since then it has included various economic and political partnerships among some 28 member states has given Europe global political clout because the region contains an estimated 508 million people. Proponents have argued the union has led to economic prosperity through free-trade zones and other economic policies.

However, recent events have shifted public opinion on such policies, he said.

"On one hand, mainstream parties would like to go where voters are on integration issues, but on the other hand, most mainstream parties and political elites have supported integration for the past 40-50 years, virtually since the EU's inception," Rohrschneider said.

Even after things seemed to have calmed down after the Greek government-debt crisis last year, the wave of millions of migrants fleeing the Syrian civil war has opened up a new set of contentious circumstances for nearly all European nations as leaders decide whether to close borders or seek to manage the flow of migrants, he said.

In some cases the migration crisis has aided nationalist political parties in both Eastern Europe and Greece and more affluent nations like in Germany and France, and political scientists will be watching for how

this could shift power in certain states and in turn attitudes toward EU membership in general.

"If right-wing, neo-populist parties become mainstream parties because voters increasingly support them, then the political integration project of Europe will be stalled or perhaps even be reversed," Rohrschneider said.

It could lead to dismantling of free-trade zones and more strict enforcement of national borders, two things that have been hallmarks of European integration in recent decades.

Attitudes of nationalism have also turned ugly, he said.

"That is an unfortunate return to a rhetoric that many observed had thought had been relegated to the dust heaps of history," Rohrschneider said. "It's a huge mess. The dimensionality and complexity of the problems have never been as severe since World War II. There's nothing comparable."

One possibility could be the EU could shrink to a group of core states, mostly in Western and Northern Europe instead of the much larger, expanded set of members.

Perhaps the first domino or at least major test of the EU's future could be the June referendum on Britain's membership. Prime Minister David Cameron, who favors EU membership, at least on economic grounds, also leads a Conservative Party that traditionally has resisted many aspects of European integration, Rohrschneider said. To appease those in his party, Cameron agreed to let the British voters decide.

"If Britain stays in, Europe will have bought a bit of breathing space," Rohrschneider said. "If Britain is out, all bets are open."

More information: R. Rohrschneider et al. Responding to growing European Union-skepticism? The stances of political parties toward European integration in Western and Eastern Europe following the financial crisis, *European Union Politics* (2015). DOI: [10.1177/1465116515610641](https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116515610641)

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