

Report indicates EU citizens feel increasingly European

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The sense of a European identity has increased among inhabitants of the European Union in the past 15 years—in spite of crises like Brexit and the Eurozone crisis. That is the conclusion of professor of European Studies Theresa Kuhn in a recent publication. "The euro and open borders have made the EU tangible."

With the European elections just around the corner, one question is more relevant than ever: to what extent do the inhabitants of Europe feel a sense of connection with the European Union? And where does that come from?

"We wanted to map out how European identity has evolved over the years," says Theresa Kuhn, "but our research into this was severely limited by the types of opinion polls that we usually consult for our research. Most polls don't date back very far and usually only one type of question was asked on the subject."

In order to rectify this problem, Kuhn and her team combined various opinion polls from dozens of countries over a period of 41 years. "We subsequently applied a calculation to this, as a result of which we now have information about the development of European identity since the 1980s."

Crisis has a reinforcing effect

The research reveals that the sense of European identity among inhabitants of most EU countries has increased in the past 15 years. "That surprised us to be honest," says Kuhn. "The past two decades were marked by crises, not only externally, but also internally, such as Brexit and the Eurozone crisis. You might expect that this would make people want to distance themselves from the European Union, but that does not appear to be the case.

"One explanation for this could be that people are more inclined to adhere to a group as a result of a crisis. People feel threatened and are more likely to surround themselves with people whose views align closely with their own."

The fact that an entire generation has only ever known the European

Union to be part of Europe may be another explanation for this according to Kuhn. She explains, "This group of people have grown up in an era in which there are open borders and many countries have the euro as currency unit. These things have also made Europe something tangible, as a result of which people have been able to experience the EU, rather than it being an abstract institution."

It is the case, however, that there are major differences in the development of European identity from country to country. She says, "In Northern and Western European countries, the sense of a European identity is usually more prevalent, while South and Central Europe exhibit a more diverse development. For example, you see that Italians have become increasingly less pro-European over the years, whereas Spain has actually experienced growth in that regard."

Euroscepticism

A lot of Eurosceptic parties are poised to make gains according to polls for the upcoming European elections. In Kuhn's opinion, however, that does not mean that people also feel less European.

"A clear differentiation needs to be made between the perception of a European identity and support for the European Union. Someone may feel European, but not agree with the current policy. The opposite may also be true," she says.

She also argues that the popularity of the Eurosceptic parties does not automatically mean that people are less pro-Europe at present.

"Eurosceptic voters have most likely existed since the 1950s. However, they didn't have any way yet to express that electorally, because almost all parties were pro-European at national level. Parties have only decided to make this an issue since the 1990s."

In her research, Kuhn argues that the European Union should do even more to strengthen a sense of European identity. She says, "Many important decisions are taken at European level. That's why it is important for the democratic legitimacy of the EU that a significant proportion of Europeans also feel connected to Europe.

"In addition, research shows that people who identify as European are less likely to vote for populist parties and more likely to show solidarity for other Europeans."

More information: Report: [A community of fate: growing european identity in times of polycrisis. Exploring Long-Term Trends of European Identity Across the European Member States](#)

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