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## What Do Citizens' Opinions and Perceptions Mean for EU Enlargement?

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# WHAT DO CITIZENS' OPINIONS AND PERCEPTIONS MEAN FOR EU ENLARGEMENT?

## Policy Brief

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# What Do Citizens' Opinions and Perceptions Mean for EU Enlargement?<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In many of the EU member states, majorities of citizens express opposition to further EU enlargement when surveyed in standard public opinion polls. Such deep and widespread opposition can undermine the credibility of the accession negotiations with current and potential candidate countries and represents a threat to future enlargements in view of ratification requirements for accession treaties and possible referenda. It is therefore important to understand the sources of public opposition and identify potential channels for influencing citizens' perceptions, evaluations, attitudes and opinions.

A large academic literature exists that identifies structural, individual and polity-level correlates of opposition to enlargement, the most important of these being socio-economic status, attachment to national identity, perceived economic threats and political cues. Some recent studies, however, have shown that identity effects can be muted when expectations of economic support are mobilized at the same time.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the ways in which citizens' arguments, responses and perceptions are combined in different discourses represent more than the sum of their attitudes and can reveal possible ways to proceed with enlargement in the future.

In short, in this policy brief we address the problems of 1) understanding the structure of citizen attitudes and evaluations of EU enlargement and 2) finding possible ways to influence these attitudes and evaluations.

## Evidence and analysis

First, let us briefly document the state of public attitudes to future enlargements. Based on the most recent available representative survey of all EU citizens<sup>3</sup>, 49 percent declare that they are against 'Further enlargement of the EU to include other countries in future years', 39 percent are in favor, and 12 percent express no opinion. These figures have remained relatively stable since 2012. The extent of support or opposition differs significantly across the EU member states. A majority (more than 50 percent of all survey respondents) is against further enlargement in Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Greece, France, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Austria, Finland and the UK (12 countries). In addition, in Cyprus and

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1 The brief draws upon the findings of the EU-funded research consortium "Maximizing the integration capacity of the European Union: Lessons of and prospects for enlargement and beyond" (MAXCAP) (<http://maxcap-project.eu>). The MAXCAP Policy Task Force for this policy brief included Antoaneta L. Dimitrova, Dimiter Toshkov and Elitsa Kortenska.

2 Kuhn, T. and Stoeckel, F. (2014) 'When European Integration Becomes Costly: The Euro Crisis and Public Support for European Economic Governance', *Journal of European Public Policy* 21(4): 626-41.

3 Standard Eurobarometer 83 (Spring 2015), with fieldwork from May 2015, available at [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb83/eb83\\_anx\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb83/eb83_anx_en.pdf), accessed 20 March 2016.

Portugal there is net opposition (but without a majority). Further enlargement enjoys the support of majorities in Bulgaria, Spain, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Romania and Slovenia (ten countries, nine of which have joined in 2004 or after). There is also net support (but without a majority) in Estonia, Ireland, Slovakia and Sweden.<sup>4</sup>

These aggregate numbers are indicative of the scale of the problem. However, they conceal that the individual survey responses might be sensitive to the exact wording of the survey question and exist only as “a projection of an extremely complex set of other values and specific premises upon the EU’s future”.<sup>5</sup> To address this, the MAXCAP team conducted a large-scale empirical data-collection and analysis that identified citizen discourses on EU enlargement. Our six country selection for this analysis included two ‘old’ member states from Western Europe (Germany and The Netherlands), two recent member states from Eastern Europe (Poland and Bulgaria) and two candidate states from the Western Balkans (Serbia and FYROM).<sup>6</sup>

In addition, we complemented the original data collection and discourse analysis based on Q methodology with analyses of the determinants of EU enlargement opposition based on existing standard public opinion surveys and an analysis of factors determining attitudes<sup>7</sup> to the candidacy of Turkey.<sup>8</sup>

We find that the consequences of the 2004-2007 enlargement are still being absorbed by citizens. In the last decade, citizens in new and old member states have gotten to know each other as labor migrants, but little dialogue has taken place to give enlargement a broader meaning than the widening of the internal market. The results of public opinion analyses and the discourse analyses clearly indicate that if future enlargements were to happen at all, they should be much better communicated and broadly debated.

Individual attitudes to future EU enlargements have both utilitarian and normative/identity dimensions. Furthermore, national political, economic and discursive contexts matter for the overall level of opposition

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4 This general picture is also consistent with qualitative evidence from focus groups collected for Eurobarometer in 2014 (p. 4 and p. 8 of the summary report ‘The Promise of the EU’ in particular), available at [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/quali/ql\\_6437\\_sum\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/quali/ql_6437_sum_en.pdf), accessed 20 March 2016.

5 Dimitrov, G.; Haralampiev, K. and Stoychev, S. (2014) ‘Contextual Policy Reading of Public Opinion Data and Recent Trends in Attitudes towards European Integration’, *MAXCAP Working Paper No. 6*, “Maximizing the integration capacity of the European Union: Lessons of and prospects for enlargement and beyond” (MAXCAP), Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin.

6 For details see Dimitrova, A. L. and Kortenska, E. (2015) ‘Understanding Enlargement: Discourses in Six Countries’, Paper presented at 14th Biennial Conference European Union Studies Association (EUSA), Boston, 5-7 March, available at <https://eustudies.org/conference/papers/download/184>, accessed 20 March 2016 and Dimitrova, A. L.; Kortenska, E. and Steunenberg, B. (2015) ‘Comparing Discourses about Past and Future Enlargement: Core Cleavages and Arguments’, *MAXCAP Working Paper No. 13*, “Maximizing the integration capacity of the European Union: Lessons of and prospects for enlargement and beyond” (MAXCAP), Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin.

7 Toshkov, D.; Kortenska, E.; Dimitrova, A. L. and Fagan, A. (2014) ‘The ‘Old’ and the ‘New’ Europeans: Analyses of Public Opinion on EU Enlargement in Review’, *MAXCAP Working Paper No. 2*, “Maximizing the integration capacity of the European Union: Lessons of and prospects for enlargement and beyond” (MAXCAP), Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin.

8 Hatipoglu, E.; Müftüler-Baç, M. and Karakoç, E. (2014) ‘Explaining Variation in Public Support to Turkey’s EU Accession, Turco-skepticism in Europe: A Multi-Level Analysis’, *MAXCAP Working Paper No. 4*, “Maximizing the integration capacity of the European Union: Lessons of and prospects for enlargement and beyond” (MAXCAP), Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin.

and mediate the effects of some individual-level factors. Pro/contra EU enlargement attitudes can therefore be seen as a construct of diverse and multifaceted relationships of a number of components.<sup>9</sup>

Examining underlying motivations as expressed in discourses, we found that citizens oppose enlargement because they feel they have not been informed and consulted about it. Citizen discourses across the board in our six countries suggest that citizens expect more information and timely involvement in discussions on enlargement. We suggest that citizens, even skeptical ones, do not close the door on future enlargements, but seek more deliberation on how and if they would happen. Finding channels to discuss and deliberate the merits of candidate countries and enlargement in the member states may alleviate some of the public skepticism on the issue.

A number of the discourses supporting enlargement that we have identified refer to European identity and to a community of ideals and norms such as democracy and good governance. Normative arguments would resonate with some voters in The Netherlands, Poland and Germany. Furthermore, there are bridging discourses and connecting arguments among the citizens of the 'old' (The Netherlands and Germany), 'new' (Poland and Bulgaria) and candidate states (FYROM and Serbia) depicting the EU as a source of better governance, or as a community of ideals. Citizens of candidate states in particular expect the EU and the enlargement process to be a source of economic opportunities, but also, remarkably, of better governance in terms of rule of law, impartial institutions and lack of corruption.

Next to the positive discourses we have identified, there are also bridging discourses skeptical of future enlargement and European integration, which can undoubtedly be mobilized by opponents to enlargement. Skeptical and negative discourses are relatively few in number, but they reject both enlargement and European integration in general. There are also those who reject the accession of specific countries only, while not fully rejecting enlargement. As public opinion surveys, discourses analyses and the separate analysis we have made show, Turkey is a special and especially disputed case. The analysis of factors determining opposition to potential Turkish membership highlights the importance of determinants such as national political contexts and the size and presence of the Turkish migrant population driving turco-skepticism in the member states.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, we note that more research is needed to examine the ways in which the politically relevant opinions of people – part of different discourses on EU enlargement and integration – can be influenced (if at all), for example, with different policy frames, emotional or normative appeals vs. rational argumentation and fact provision.

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9 Dimitrov, G.; Haralampiev, K. and Stoychev, S. (2014) 'Contextual Policy Reading of Public Opinion Data and Recent Trends in Attitudes towards European Integration', *MAXCAP Working Paper No. 6*, "Maximizing the integration capacity of the European Union: Lessons of and prospects for enlargement and beyond" (MAXCAP), Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin.

10 Hatipoglu, E.; Müftüler-Baç, M. and Karakoç, E. (2014) 'Explaining Variation in Public Support to Turkey's EU Accession, Turco-skepticism in Europe: A Multi-Level Analysis', *MAXCAP Working Paper No. 4*, "Maximizing the integration capacity of the European Union: Lessons of and prospects for enlargement and beyond" (MAXCAP), Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin.

## Policy implications and recommendations

The EU should:

### **Anticipate politicization and public debate regarding future enlargements**

- It is clear that it will be difficult to sustain the credibility of enlargement negotiations and of enlargement as such in the face of deep and widespread public opposition to future EU expansion. The possibility of future referenda on accession treaties diminishes the EU's credibility in enlargement negotiations, if governments do not engage more actively in debates on enlargement.
- To proceed with enlargement, EU institutions and member state elites need to gain a deeper understanding in the conditions under which citizens may approve the accession of new member states.

### **Open up the public debate and engage with citizens**

- An open political and societal debate on enlargement should be encouraged, especially in the older member states, to alleviate the objections and doubts of those citizens who feel they have not been consulted on enlargement. Consultations and parliamentary debates should take place during enlargement negotiations and not only at the stage of ratification of Accession Treaties. Finding opportunities to discuss and deliberate the merits of candidate countries and enlargement may alleviate some of the public skepticism on the issue.
- Member state governments and opposition should seek to use existing media and establish new channels for consultation with domestic stakeholders, civil society and citizens such as open consultations, citizens' conferences and social media events.

### **Make the case for enlargement in the member states**

- Governments of critical member states, such as The Netherlands, must be prepared to back up increased conditionality towards applicant and candidate states with their own willingness to make the case for enlargement to their citizens.
- Discussing the membership of forerunners such as Serbia and Montenegro with citizens does not have to be a losing proposition because of the downward trend in public opinion. As our analysis shows, there are a number of possible lines of justification and understanding what enlargement has been and should be about.

### **Stress values, shared community, clear rules and good governance**

- Framing enlargement in terms of shared values and identity will resonate with some citizens in various member states who disagree with enlargement on utilitarian or geopolitical grounds.
- A commitment to an enlargement process based on clear rules and the fulfilment of enlargement criteria and conditions will resonate with citizens in various member states and in candidate countries, which support the governance reforms the Union requires and the EU's strengthened conditionality.

### **Support development in the candidate states**

- Support development and economic growth in candidate and aspirant states to answer the expectations and hopes of citizens who support enlargement on utilitarian grounds.

## Research parameters

To reveal the understandings, expectations and motivations behind citizens' attitudes to past and future enlargements, we have employed Q methodology, a reconstructive methodology in which interpretation of qualitative results is constrained by statistical analysis. Q methodology, in contrast to surveys, does not use pre-defined questions sorting subjects' responses along established political categories or parts of the political spectrum. Instead, this approach allows citizens to define the domain – in this case the EU enlargement – in communication and in their own terms. The method combines focus groups and individual interviews with a statistical analytical approach to produce a set of factors, or discourses, for each country. While the results of the Q method analysis are not statistically representative for the wider country population, they illustrate, elaborate and clarify the attitudes expressed in mass surveys.

We have used the standard steps of Q methodology in combination with political discourse analysis, resulting in a research design that involves two stages of fieldwork with different sets of respondents, analysis, centroid factor extraction and interpretation. Altogether, a total of 241 citizens participated in 24 focus groups followed by a second stage of individual interviews of about 40 citizens per country in 70 locations across the six countries. A total of 500 respondents participated in the two fieldwork stages. A broad variety of respondents have been selected for both stages, ensuring that different social and educational backgrounds, gender and age and localities – from capital cities to small villages – have been represented. The group discussions as well as the individual interviews have been conducted in the respective national languages and later translated with minimal editing.

The collected Q sorts – distribution of 64 statements, rank-ordered according to levels of disagreements (-6) and agreement (+6) – have been analysed by means of centroid factor analysis for every country and interpreted according to the statistical results. In contrast to the usual approach to factor analysis, in Q method, analyses correlate persons' viewpoints. The resulting rotated factors we have subsequently interpreted to resolve internal contradictions or remove repetitions. The final sets of factors are generalizations of points of view, narratives or, as referred to above, discourses.





**“Maximizing the integration capacity of the European Union: Lessons of and prospects for enlargement and beyond”**

The ‘big bang enlargement’ of the European Union (EU) has nurtured vivid debates among both academics and practitioners about the consequences of ‘an ever larger Union’ for the EU’s integration capacity. The research project MAXCAP will start with a critical analysis of the effects of the 2004-2007 enlargement on stability, democracy and prosperity of candidate countries, on the one hand, and the EU’s institutions, on the other. We will then investigate how the EU can maximize its integration capacity for current and future enlargements. Featuring a nine-partner consortium of academic, policy, dissemination and management excellence, MAXCAP will create new and strengthen existing links within and between the academic and the policy world on matters relating to the current and future enlargement of the EU.