

PRESS RELEASE

Europeans are personally optimistic, but pessimistic about their own country

A majority of Europeans look positively into their personal future, but negatively into the future of their own country. This optimism paradox runs through all social groups, age groups and countries. At the same time, the strong tendency of Europeans to have a pessimistic view of their own country's future has clear political implications - especially in terms of party preference. This is shown by the Bertelsmann Stiftung's new eupinions study "The Optimism Paradox". The Belgian versions of this study in Dutch and French were produced with the support of the King Baudouin Foundation.

Gütersloh (Germany), 28 May 2020. How optimistic or pessimistic do people in the European Union view their personal future and the future of their country? How does this differ between EU member states? And how do these basic attitudes relate to party-political preferences? These questions are answered by the Bertelsmann Stiftung's new eupinions study "The Optimism Paradox". The key finding: 58 percent of respondents in the EU27 are optimistic about their personal future. At the same time, however, they are pessimistic about their country's future.

This optimism paradox applies - albeit to varying degrees - in all EU member states. The human tendency to trust in one's own strength more than in that of society has political implications that can be clearly observed, particularly during the corona pandemic.

"The Germans stand out for their high level of trust in their own strength, while remaining particularly despondent about Germany's future," says Isabell Hoffmann, Europe expert at the Bertelsmann Foundation and head of the "eupinions" project. 65 percent of Germans state that they are optimistic about their own future, while only 44 percent are optimistic about the future of their own country. "Only in Spain, this contradiction between personal and social expectations is similarly pronounced as in Germany," Hoffmann continues. Belgium is an interesting case, too. Belgian respondents are split right in the middle when it comes to how optimistic or pessimistic they are about their personal future. Chances are that the ongoing Corona pandemic will tip this balance, possibly impacting Belgian's already pessimistic outlook on the future of their country.

There are countries such as Poland, where the population is similarly optimistic about its own future (67 percent optimists and 33 percent pessimists), but then also more positive about their own country (48 percent optimists and 52 percent pessimists). However, there are also countries such as France, whose population has a gloomy view of its own future (31 percent optimists and 69 percent pessimists) and at the same time is extremely negative about its own life (39 percent optimists and 61 percent pessimists).

The more educated, the more optimistic

A look at the different social groups reveals that the 16 to 35-year-olds are much more optimistic about their own country than the 46- to 70-year-olds. Students are also more

optimistic about their own lives and their country than the average. Generally speaking, this applies to all age groups: people with a high level of education are optimistic about their own lives, but pessimistic about that of their own country.

The majority of women are optimistic about their own lives, yet not as optimistic as the majority of men. At the same time, they are much more pessimistic about the future of their own country than men. Especially pessimistic about their own life and their country are unemployed people.

Supporters of right-wing populist parties are more pessimistic

The analysis also reveals a close connection between the personal and social pessimism of respondents and their party-political preferences. The supporters of right-wing populist parties are characterized by a particularly high level of personal and social pessimism.

Germany: 66 percent of AfD supporters have a negative view of their own future while 90 percent have a negative view of Germany's future.

France: 82 percent of the supporters of Le Pen's Rassemblement National look negatively at their own future and at the future of France. The supporters of the French LFI come close to this in terms of social pessimism (78 percent), but by no means in terms of personal pessimism.

Italy: The supporters of the Italian Lega are 62 percent pessimistic about their personal future and 81 percent pessimistic about Italy's future.

Netherlands: 59 percent of supporters of the Forum for Democracy are worried about their own future and 75 percent about the future of the Netherlands.

Belgium: The same picture emerges when looking at the supporters of Vlaams Belang: 65 percent of them are worried about their personal future, 78 percent about the future of Flanders. An interesting exception is the Walloon party Parti du Travail de Belgique: it is the only left-wing party in our survey that massively attracts the pessimists. 84 percent of its supporters have a negative view of their own future and of the future of Belgium.

Poland: The view of Polish party supporters is also remarkable in that the social pessimists are gathering among the country's liberal parties: Wiosna and Platform. With over 80 percent, the clear majority of supporters of the right-wing conservative governing party PiS, on the other hand, view their own future and that of their country positively.

Corona crisis likely to intensify negative trend

In the context of the corona pandemic, these results are relevant in two respects: Firstly, it is expected that the prospects for the future of one's own country will become gloomier. Even if satisfaction with the crisis management of the respective government is high, social pessimism is likely to increase given the personal and economic consequences of the crisis.

It will also become more difficult to navigate the negative effects of the optimism paradox politically. Since the beginning of the crisis, it has been observed how excessive belief in one's own strength (nothing will happen to me) has been dampened and weak belief in the strength of society strengthened (each individual can contribute to making it happen together). What initially worked well during shutdown turns out to be a fragile construct in the

re-opening. It not only fuels protests against the crisis measures and carelessness with the rules of conduct in the pandemic, but also weakens the faith of communities to face this health crisis.

It is now the task of governments to keep people aboard with the sometimes-drastic measures. One thing is already clear: those countries that have used a transparent and clear crisis communication have been the most successful in convincing their citizens of the necessity of these measures. Now more than ever, it is clear that without the cooperation of each and every individual, all efforts are in vain. For this very reason, political opposition parties also have a special responsibility in these times. As important as an open debate on the measures introduced is, it must be conducted in a way that does not compromise any efforts to deal with the acute health crisis. Insight requires legitimacy and, in a democracy, legitimacy requires an open discourse. Right now, it is the responsibility of all politicians to conduct such a discourse.

Additional information

"eupinions" is the Bertelsmann Stiftung's European opinion research tool developed in cooperation with Dalia Research. It is used to regularly survey citizens of all EU member states on European issues. The survey for the present analysis was conducted in December 2019 throughout the EU and, with a sample size of 12,933, is representative for the EU as a whole and for the seven member states Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and Spain. Detailed information on the survey methodology can be found in the publication.

Further information can be found at: www.eupinions.eu or via Twitter: @eupinions.

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