

Thought communities and their implications for polity formation in the EU

Summary

This policy brief presents findings on how citizens in six EU countries (France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland and Slovakia) think about the EU as a polity and about its policies. It focuses on identifying what cognitive frameworks or scripts people employ when they think about the EU. Such a focus is useful as the EU continues to be an unsettled political order and citizens do not share the same notions or scripts when their opinion on EU policies or institutional arrangements is asked for. Our approach complements standard opinion polling by:

- Identifying not just attitudes towards particular policies, but also the underlying understanding of the EU polity related to these policies;
- Identifying groups of citizens sharing such thinking styles (i.e. 'thought communities' of citizens);
- Explaining why high levels of support for the EU in some countries (e.g. Hungary) cannot be taken at face value, and there is a need to look not just at how citizens perceive the Union but how at a deeper level they think about the Union;
- Providing a starting point for developing the EU's public-communication approaches oriented not just towards promoting the EU but promoting it in ways tailored towards groups of citizens who share particular ways of thinking about the EU (i.e. thought-community oriented public outreach).

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Introduction

High levels of public support for the European Union in countries where there is also significant support for anti-EU populist governments are puzzling. Hungary and Poland consistently show public support for the EU in excess of 70 per cent (over 80 per cent in Poland). Explaining this apparent paradox requires an analysis of how people actually think about the EU. Understanding why a Hungarian citizen can be strongly pro-EU while voting for Viktor Orbán with his anti-EU standpoints, requires a deeper exploration of the conceptual frameworks citizens use when they think about the EU. This will also help define what kinds of polity structures and policy types would be readily acceptable in a given national setting.

‘Thought communities’ in six EU countries: Empirical findings

Groups of citizens sharing ‘thinking styles’ can be referred to as ‘thought communities’ (see Goldberg 2011). To identify such communities, we followed the argumentation laid out by DiMaggio et al. (2018). As they point out, studying the meaning of a concept or a construct from the peoples’ perspective (the EU in this case) requires more than studying individual responses to survey questions. The current approach thus moves beyond individual responses, in order to reveal the relations among survey items. This way, we can examine broader belief systems of (sub)populations. DiMaggio et al. call this the *relationality* principle - ‘the principle that meaning emerges not from single entities but out of relations among

them’ (2018, p. 32; see also Goldberg, 2011). Relationality is an important element in revealing belief systems or thinking styles because the same survey response may have various meanings or, in fact, distinct and mutually divergent meanings to several respondents. Putting several survey items together allows us to reveal the underlying meaning structure in the individual responses and identify subgroups of a population sharing the same structure of responses, i.e., thinking styles.

DiMaggio et al. argue that, next to relationality, multiplicity is another key element to be considered. As previously stated, a belief system undergirding a thinking style is defined by a particular relationship among survey items, and most probably, there will be a number of such patterns in any population for any meaning domain. In other words, most likely, there will be at least two subgroups of a population that think about a social phenomenon distinctively and, thus, fit within distinct thought communities.

Data for the analysis was collected in our own online survey conducted in March 2022.¹ The Relational Class Analysis identified two thought communities in each of the six EU countries we studied. Based on their characteristic features, we term them statist and pragmatists (Table 1). The sizes of these communities are similar in all of the studied countries (Table 2).

While on the surface, all the countries we looked at have similar characteristics, if we unpack the two thought communities, we find significant differences between countries, in particular within the pragmatist community. Pragmatists think about EU policy outputs, and the EU as a polity, as independent and de-coupled domains (see Table 1). What is of analytical interest are

Table 1: Characteristics of thought communities

Thought community	Characteristics of thinking style/construct
Statists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thinking about features of the EU as a polity is interconnected with thinking about policy outputs The governance structures – as an expression of a polity – and policy outputs at the EU level, are seen as mutually dependent, similarly to those in sovereign states. The EU is thus similar to a sovereign state. Provision of policy outputs by the EU is linked to more competences and stronger governance structures at the EU level. Thinking style organised around how the state is understood. The opposing ends of the spectrum in this understanding are EU-level federalist statist and nation-state statist.
Pragmatists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thinking about polity-building at the EU-level as a process independent from various types of cooperation that provides policy outputs, including on peace or security². Thinking about various types of benefits and policies is mostly aligned, but at the same time, thinking about public policies at the EU-level is not aligned with thinking about democratic polity building at the EU-level. Responses to questions about policy outputs are not separated from and independent of responses about EU-level governance or EU-level competences (these respondents do not see an automatic link between policy outputs and polity structures needed to achieve such outputs). Thinking style organised around the understanding of policy outputs is de-coupled from structural/institutional governance arrangements for the delivery of such outputs. The opposing ends of the spectrum are supranational pragmatists and nation-state pragmatists.

the differences in how pragmatists in different countries think (see Table 3).

There are at least *four* groupings within the pragmatist thought community. First, Germany is the only country where the pragmatist thought community connects EU policy outputs in areas such as peace, cooperation and democracy directly with the polity dimension of federalisation. German pragmatists think of the EU-level policy outputs in the areas of core state powers (peace, cooperation) as requiring federal

structural arrangements on the EU level.

Among the six member states studied here, Germany is hence the society in the EU with the strongest presence of the federalist script among the pragmatists when it comes to thinking about the EU. As Table 3 indicates, this is not the case in the other five member states analysed. Second, pragmatists in France and Italy are highly similar. They link policy outputs in the areas of peace, cooperation and democracy. In a separate dimension, they link free-market issues (free movement, lower

Table 2: Size of thought communities in individual countries

Country	Statists	Pragmatists
Slovakia	21%	79%
Germany	21%	79%
France	20%	80%
Italy	23%	77%
Poland	24%	76%
Hungary	22%	78%

taxes, digital services, etc.) and federalisation. So for pragmatists in France and Italy, polity formation in the EU is connected with market-related policy outputs but not necessarily with core state powers on the EU level. Third, pragmatist thought communities are also highly similar in Hungary and Slovakia. This may be related to the fact that in both of these countries EU membership has played an important role in democratisation - and hence citizens may be linking democratic politics and EU-level polity building. In both of these countries, EU membership has played an important role in democratisation. In a separate dimension, peace and cooperation policies (core state functions) are also coupled in the thinking of pragmatists in Hungary and Slovakia but, as Table 3 indicates, they are not necessarily connected to federalisation in the EU. It is also interesting to note that market issues (free movement, lower taxes, digital services) are marginalised among the pragmatists in these two countries. So for pragmatists in France and Italy, polity formation in the EU is connected with market-related policy outputs but not necessarily with core state powers on the EU level. Fourth, pragmatists in Poland share some characteristics with pragmatists in Hungary and Slovakia, but the Polish pragmatist community is different in that it links policy outputs in areas of cooperation and peace to

the dimension of democracy (this makes them similar to pragmatists in France and Italy). At the same time, they separate federalisation. This suggests that for pragmatists in Poland, the EU can deliver policies in various areas and even feature democratic processes without necessarily being a federation qua polity. If a respondent is a statist, s/he could be both an EU-federalist and a believer in national sovereignty. The fact that s/he has a statist thinking style shows merely that s/he thinks about the EU and political integration in Europe in terms of statehood. To identify on what part of the spectrum of opposing attitudes within a thought community a respondent is located, we included further items in our survey. This included questions about trust in particular EU institutions: the European Commission, European Parliament and Council of the EU (Figure 1).

Table 3: Pragmatists and their linking of the EU and its policy outputs

Country	Features of political order	
	Dimension 1 of Thought Community Pragmatists	Dimension 2 of Thought Community Pragmatists
Germany	Market	Peace, cooperation, democracy and federalisation
France	Market and federalisation	Peace, cooperation and democracy
Italy	Market and federalisation	Peace, cooperation and democracy
Slovakia	Democracy and federalisation	Peace and cooperation
Hungary	Democracy and federalisation	Peace
Poland	Federalisation	Peace, cooperation and democracy

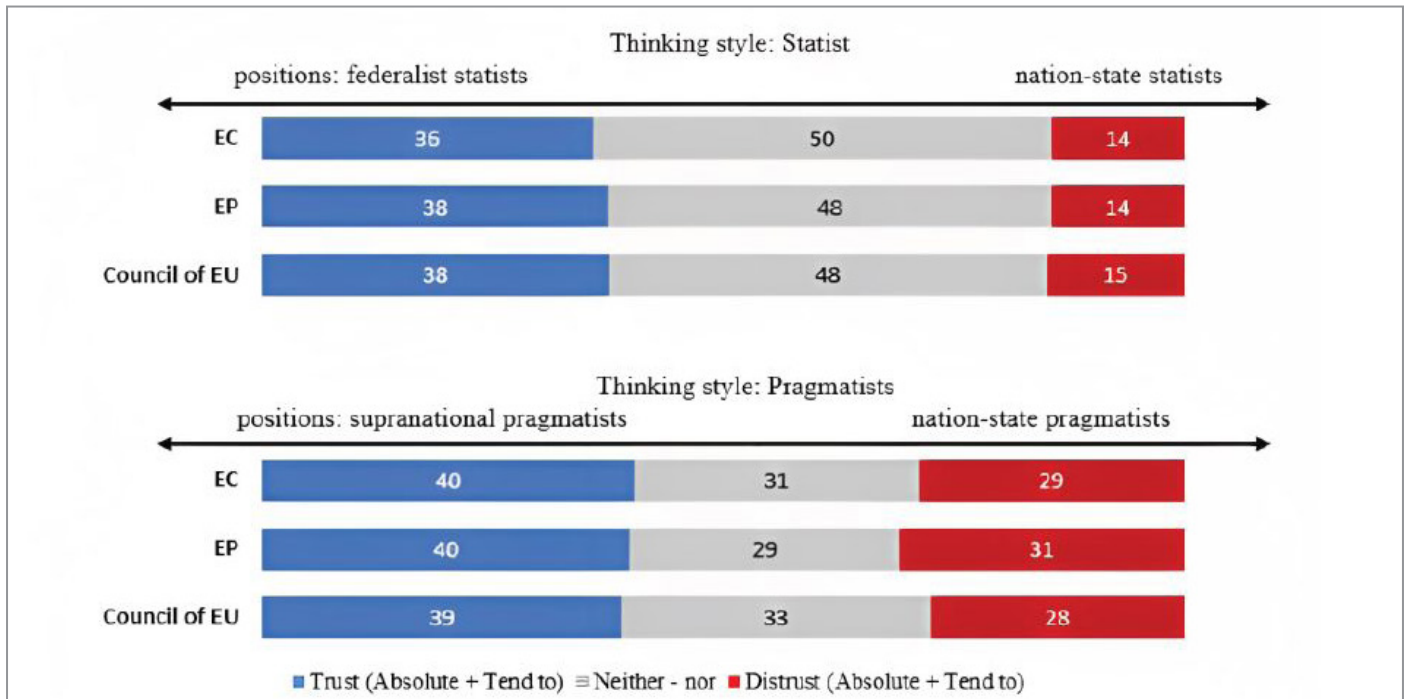


Figure 1: Trust in EU institutions, by thought communities

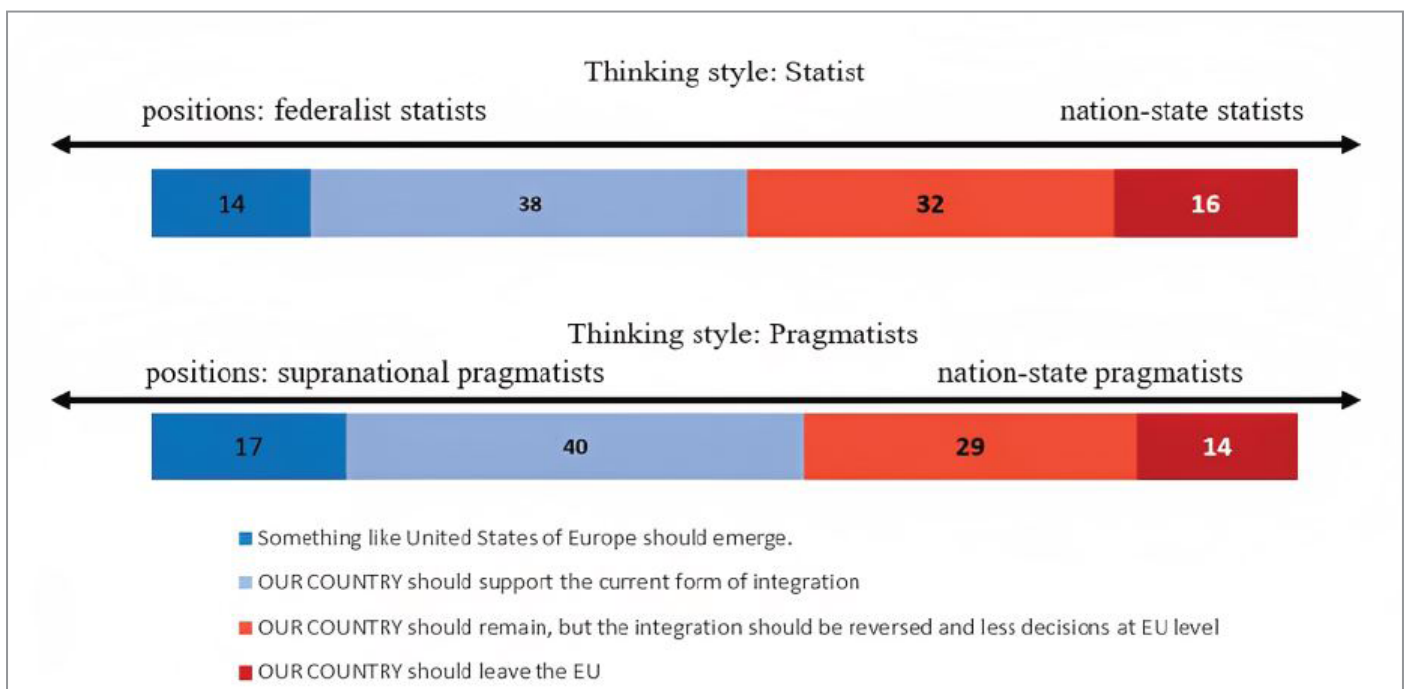


Figure 2: Preference for different scenarios of EU integration for one's country, by thought community

Belonging to a thought community as such does not reveal whether a respondent has pro- or anti-EU attitudes. Further indicators of respondents' attitudes towards the EU can be found in their responses to the question on scenarios for the future development of the EU (Figure 2).

Conclusions and recommendations

There are several key findings from this research. First, about 20-24 per cent of the population in the surveyed countries thinks about the EU in statist (statehood) terms. This does not mean, though, that all of the statist embrace a federalist vision of the EU. In fact, only about 7-10 per cent of respondents can be considered federalist statist. The rest are in the nation-state statist group (and/or in the relatively sizeable group of ambiguous statist). This tells us that Fossum's (2021) second model, the EU as a federal state, finds only limited support throughout the Union. The only exception here is Germany, where even the pragmatist thought community largely links federalisation with policy outputs such as peace, democracy and cooperation. Arguably, as Germany is at the core of any further development of the EU, this is actually an important exception.

Also, it is interesting to note that the pragmatist community features sub-groups with somewhat different thinking about key aspects of policy-making and polity-formation (i.e. pragmatists in France and Italy; Hungary and Slovakia; and Poland). One of the ways of interpreting the pragmatist community is that it constitutes an important part of the population in all the member states analysed here which accept the undefined nature of the EU qua polity. It is this part of the population that then is ready to think flexibly about possibilities of policy-

making and policy-delivery without traditional Weberian type of state being formed.

Several policy-relevant questions are related to these findings:

- How sustainable is the European integration project if the majority of Germans as a core EU nation think about the EU conceptually in a different way (i.e. in terms of federalisation) to the rest of the societies in the EU?
- What is the potential for the 'German way' of thinking about the EU to be extended to the rest of the Union?
- What are the implications of continued cognitive diversity in thinking styles about the Union across the EU?

Second, when it comes to public outreach and communication about the EU (e.g. by EU institutions), it is likely that the same messages will resonate differently in different EU countries. Support for and opposition to EU policies and integration initiatives will be formed along different lines, depending on the respective national contexts. Hence, pending further research into thought communities in the EU (extended to include all 27 member states), the EU should *develop thought-community oriented public outreach strategies*.

Summary of policy recommendations:

- Thought communities in all EU countries should be analysed;
- The EU and its members should develop thought-community oriented public outreach strategies; this means, in practice, targeting messages in ways framed to resonate with cognitive scripts about the EU present in a particular population. Strategies need to keep in mind that people who see EU as a state have different ways

and reasons for opposing/endorsing further integration than people who see the EU as a pragmatic platform for coordination of policies

- Governments of EU countries should tailor their communications on their policy priorities according to the respective thought-community constellations in different member states. This means that different types of framing might be necessary to best reach audiences in different member states – depending on the constellation of thinking styles in a given member state. Implications for policy and polity formation need to be part of the message framing.

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Notes

- 1 Data was collected by a professional contracted agency with experience in pan-European surveys and offices in all the member states studied. The survey was translated from Slovak into the local languages (Polish, French, German, Italian, and Hungarian). Translations were controlled by reverse translation testing provided by the agency and also by the authors of this paper. Surveys were then conducted using Computer Aided Web Interviewing in March 2022. In each of the selected member states, we collected a representative sample of about 1000 respondents. The survey was administered online, and stratified quota sampling was used to ensure representativeness of the sample in regard to gender, age, education, region and residence size.
- 2 An exception from this pattern among the pragmatists is Germany, where federalisation is relatively strongly related to policy outputs.



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