

# WHAT DOES EUROPE FEAR?



**BILL DURODIÉ**

**UNDERSTANDING THE HOPES  
AND FEARS OF EUROPEANS**

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# 1. Introduction

What do people fear in the contemporary world? Simply asking the question raises a host of related problems. Some are methodological – could the act of asking be considered leading? And how should we measure fear anyway? Others are conceptual – what actually is fear? And how does it come about? Still others relate to the complexity of human beings – do they behave in accordance with their stated responses? And, in addition, to investigate the latter may suggest a critical view of those providing the answers.

To further complicate matters, might there be a divergence between how ordinary people view things, as opposed to those who speak on their behalf, or purport to know what they think? How might this vary across different cultural settings? And, if there is such a gap, has it grown wider in a period some propose as having been marked by widespread political disengagement? Or is the space between groups narrowing, as new media technologies offer the possibility for all to have their voices heard or, at the very least, expressed?

As the world emerges from almost two years of rolling lockdowns introduced by governments in response to the uncertainties they expected over the effects of the COVID outbreak, it appears that many other profound challenges now also confront us. But are there more of these today than ever before? Or are they maybe of a different nature to those we faced in the past, such that previous experience offers few pointers about how to address them?

Certainly, there are plenty of concerns to choose from – the return of war in Europe and elsewhere, rising inflation and its impact on jobs and livelihoods, strains within the education sector and a possible mental health ‘epidemic’ (exacerbated by reactions to the pandemic) – as well as future disease outbreaks, migration, the integrity of information, information systems or other networks, not forgetting climate change – among many others.

In keeping these conundrums in mind, it may serve to reflect on a line by the French political scientist, Zaki Laïdi, from his 1994 landmark text, ‘A world without meaning’<sup>1</sup>, which considered the confusions and challenges of the Western world in

the aftermath of the dissolution of the old, Cold War, world order. There, he proposed: “our societies claim that the urgency of problems forbids them from reflecting on a project, while in fact it is the total absence of perspective that makes them slaves of emergencies”. It may indeed be a crisis of meaning and purpose, more than genuine threats, that determines things.

*Author’s note: This work draws on a wide literature about the relative usefulness of public polling in general and Eurobarometer in particular. This underlying work, which may be familiar to students of political science or sociology, is presented in a series of accompanying appendixes, which are contained on the MCC Brussels website.<sup>2</sup>*

## 2. Why Fear Matters

Fears – if it is correct to characterise it as such – or concerns, at the very least, do not exist in a vacuum. As the executive director of MCC Brussels, Frank Furedi has made clear, it is more than a subjective emotion. Drawing on the work of US academic, Arlie Hochschild, he has noted how we are effectively taught ‘what’ to fear and ‘how’ to fear.<sup>3</sup> It is not just dependent on an individual’s psychological profile or the specific problems that confront them.

It has long been understood that how communities respond to challenges depends to a considerable degree on culture.<sup>4</sup> Fear serves to transmit “the structures of society” to people, whose anxieties derive not so much from the individual themselves, as being “always determined, finally by the history and the actual structure of his relations to other people”.<sup>5</sup> We learn how to manage emotions, such as fear, through informal “feeling rules”<sup>6</sup>, and these, and how we understand them, become settled and sustained according to dominant “cultural scripts”.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, fears can then be “manipulated by those who seek to benefit”<sup>8</sup> from these, although this can backfire too, as evidenced by a growing number of young people reporting that they experience phenomena such as ‘eco-anxiety’<sup>9</sup> (now leading to instances of suicide<sup>10</sup>). Furedi coined the term ‘fear entrepreneurs’ to encompass how fear can be used, both consciously and unconsciously<sup>11</sup>, a phenomenon most in evidence recently as some senior ministers and officials now openly admit to having sought to make the public more fearful over the course of the COVID pandemic.<sup>12</sup>

In keeping with the conclusion of the previous section, pertaining to the importance of meaning and purpose, it is also worth noting here how the Holocaust survivor and psychoanalyst, Viktor Frankl, observed that suffering is harder to endure in the absence of meaning.<sup>13</sup> The latter relies rather more on moral values, as well as political clarity and purpose, rather than mere scientific evidence, however important that may be.

In emergencies, it is usually not so much more information the public seeks (of which there is often a surfeit), as an “ability to give meaning to unpredictable experiences”.<sup>14</sup>

And the concerns people have are not simply related to the immediate situation at hand, but rather are mediated through the cumulative effect of their experience of how previous challenges were dealt with over a protracted period, as well as how these were framed and interpreted by society, including by the professionals charged with addressing these, often well in advance of their occurrence.<sup>15</sup>

**“In an age driven by dystopian fantasies or apocalyptic visions, it is likely that the pessimistic visions of our elites may have more impact in the popular imagination.”**

Part of what concerns us here is also how such emotions and expectations may be experienced differentially according to the different contexts of people’s lives, as well as the extent to which these may align, or not, with government views which, in many instances, drive and shape these, now increasingly through the framework of a supposed behavioural science.

Equally, however, we ought not impart meaning where there is none.<sup>16</sup> But we still hope to drill down beneath the surface of superficial impressions and contemporary obsessions in order to highlight and address the deeper “core beliefs” that are often far more important in shaping popular concerns, as well as allowing us to resolve these.<sup>17</sup>

People inevitably frame their experience through the language that they have to hand. In an age driven by dystopian fantasies or apocalyptic visions, then it is also likely that the pessimistic visions of our elites may find more purchase in the popular imagination.

Fear, of course, has consequences. It is a debilitating, demoralising force. It allows the already powerful to maintain their authority, while fragmenting any opposition they may face. That is why, now more than ever, at a time when a ‘Politics of Fear’ is continuously used to shape agendas, we need to assess it. Inevitably though, knowing what people really think is not so simple.<sup>18</sup>



### 3. The Gap Between Elite and Public Fears

If defining what we are investigating were not challenging enough, the matter is further complicated by the problem posed in accurately gauging popular opinion. Countless pieces of social science research all purport to represent what people think, with a view to making a difference. The techniques used are as varied as the conclusions reached. They cover the full range from quantitative to qualitative approaches, as well as everything in-between. They ask questions, monitor behaviours, analyse text, and pursue a myriad of other methods.

One key problem, of course, is that no matter how well defined or designed, there need not be a match between their research prognoses and reality. This was possibly most acutely demonstrated in recent times through the projections of pollsters in relation to the likely outcome of the UK Brexit referendum in 2016, as well as the US presidential election that led to the appointment of Donald Trump, just a few months later.

In both instances, almost all of the forecasts were wildly wrong. And, leaving aside the on-going claims by disgruntled parties relating to the possibilities of foreign interference, the vagaries of electoral systems, and the use of misleading information, there are probably a few key lessons to be learnt. One of these, that poses a significant challenge to all such predictive tools, is the possibility that those surveyed do not provide an honest answer.

Despite the efforts of some researchers, evidence suggests this as being likely to become worse, rather than better, in the future. That is because there is a growing cultural divide in many countries between those organising and running state affairs, together with their associated academic and media elites, as opposed to the mass of ordinary people they occasionally look to obtain information or support from.

This divide has been noted in a range of recent books across multiple settings that include Christophe Guilluy's, 'La France périphérique' (2014), Arlie Hochschild's, 'Strangers in their own land' (2016) in a US context, and David Goodhart's work, 'The road to somewhere' (2017) in the UK. People who sense themselves to have been dismissed, both politically and culturally,

are unlikely to provide genuine responses to those they suspect are likely to caricature or misrepresent them with a view to by-passing or ignoring them still further.

In fact, matters today are worse than even just a few years ago. Questions that would never have been seen as contentious in the past – such as, 'What is a woman?'<sup>19</sup>, or 'Is it OK to be white?'<sup>20</sup> – have become so within a very short period of time.

**"More and more people surveyed do not provide an honest answer due to the growing cultural divide between elites and the masses."**

There is a sense in certain quarters that terminology and supposedly 'correct' responses change quickly, precisely to further marginalise and exclude people, if not to effectively excommunicate – through cancelling – those deemed not to share the right value outlook.

Of course, the sheer volume of polls, surveys and questionnaires deployed by a vast army of psephologists and others, covering every country, community and context, means that some work is truly excellent, and raises important questions.<sup>21</sup> Others are important for simply asking the same questions again and again over a protracted period, leading to at least some sense of social change (such as the Standard Eurobarometer).

Alternatively, similar questions may have been asked at different times yielding fascinating possible outcomes, but with little guarantee that the polling was conducted in a way as to ensure homogeneity or comparability.<sup>22</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum, there are countless pieces of work that suffer from confirmation bias – asking questions designed to elicit predetermined answers – as well as poorly worded surveys that open the door to considerable ambiguity<sup>23</sup>, and still others that pay little attention to the timing or context within which responses are solicited. And that is when mistakes are not being made<sup>24</sup>, or reports suppressed due to their reaching the 'wrong' conclusions.<sup>25</sup>

## 4. The Difficulties Understanding Public Opinion

The notion of public opinion raises the challenge of defining who the public are, let alone ensuring that any opinion derived from them and subsequently used or broadcast be reflective and representative. Despite an extensive literature there is no clear or unequivocal definition of the term.

The classical model presumes it to be an act of communication emanating from responsible citizens aimed primarily to government, as well as to a lesser degree, other possible parties.<sup>26</sup> It is considered to be the product of a public exchange of ideas, transmitted openly, hence distinguishing this from concealed or private opinion.

But, as many views do remain private, and are not disclosed through an open exchange of ideas, what people really think can remain unclear. Accordingly, what is considered as public opinion by many is really the consensus constructed by those constituting an organised, and likely better educated, element of the public in dialogue with the political elites.<sup>27</sup>

This idealised consensus, emanating from the minority of the public who are politically active, will necessarily diverge from individual attitudes. This may be especially so when it comes to gauging people's perceptions of threats to their existential security. And so, what researchers pursue is likely to be not so much public opinion as private attitudes.

Polling may be aimed to elicit opinions about matters of public interest, but these need not be expressed openly. Indeed, respondents are usually guaranteed anonymity in expressing their views. This has led some to suggest that, rather than retaining the term public opinion, the true object of study is what they call mass opinion.<sup>28</sup>

Aggregated responses to anonymous surveys are not the same as clear acts of public communication. But there can still be a general consensus on key issues that is external to every person and is not reducible to individual attitudes.<sup>29</sup> This idealisation is not a fiction. Rather, this abstraction is a form of cultural script promoted by social elites and the media to signal what issues are deemed important and how people ought to respond to them.

But people's attitudes often diverge from this official line on public opinion, particularly so in relation to perceptions of security, which are necessarily experienced in a highly individualised fashion.

People's attitudes towards the major issues of the day are far more fluid than the official version of public opinion. The former can seem quite arbitrary and unstable as people hold many opinions about things but few matter to them much, particularly so when it comes to global issues.

People do not have fixed views on everything that are simply waiting to be elicited by a pollster.<sup>30</sup> Rather, they may construct statements on the spur of the moment<sup>31</sup>, quite often with a sense of a need to satisfy the questioner.<sup>32</sup> This has led some to distinguish between shallow opinions and more reflective judgements.

But even privately held, spontaneous and superficial views may shed light on the overall outlooks shared by citizens. More deeply held values or predispositions may serve to crystallise a latent opinion on the spur of the moment. These are "at least in part a distillation of a person's lifetime experiences, including childhood socialization and direct involvement with the raw ingredients of policy issues, such as earning a living, paying taxes, racial discrimination, and so forth".<sup>33</sup>

**"People's attitudes towards the major issues of the day are far more fluid than the official version of public opinion."**

Such predispositions clearly depend on a range of social, cultural, and economic factors, as well as "acquired personality factors and tastes".<sup>34</sup> But, in addition to such key "highly salient" personal elements there is often an inclination to align with presumed public and community ideals and attachments. This is what social psychologists call "sociotropic" motivations, meaning when individuals align their behaviour (the meaning of the suffix-*tropy*) with social forces.<sup>35</sup>

## The Difficulties Understanding Public Opinion

For instance, in a US context, Joslyn & Haider-Markel found that “general sociotropic concerns about terrorism are more important in predicting support for counterterrorism policies than are personal concerns”.<sup>36</sup> In other words, personal concerns regarding terrorism or crime, tend to be subordinated, or are expressed through the prevailing narratives that are deemed more acceptable, and with which they need not align.

There is a constant interplay between personal fears and the presumed interest of society in the articulation of public opinion. Pressure to conform leads to acts of self-censorship, or a “Spiral of Silence”.<sup>37</sup> How people express their views is influenced and modified by their assessment of majority opinion. Differing from the consensus communicated through the mass media means some are “less likely to express their own viewpoint when they believe their opinions and ideas are in the minority”.<sup>38</sup>

Aside from fear of social isolation or of negative sanctions about morally charged issues such as immigration, views about security are often incoherent and unstable. The relationship, between latent views and dispositions as opposed to articulated views is controversial and requires research. Nevertheless, this does point us to the need to sensitise ourselves towards dispositions and latent opinions, as well as semi-consciously and self-consciously unarticulated views.

Understanding the relationship between individual and wider social/cultural insecurities represents the principle challenge facing future research. Many concerns, such as those relating to the environment or climate change are officially affirmed and promoted (if not necessarily addressed in the manner that some activists would hope). Others, even those that become the focal point of protracted mass demonstrations, appear to emerge unexpectedly to the very bodies conducting much of the research.

This distinction is possibly best captured in a phrase used by the Gilets Jaunes protestors in France, over the course of their year-long stand-off with the Macron government there: “*Les élites parlent de fin du monde, quand nous, on parle de fin du mois!*”.<sup>39</sup> (The elites talk about the end of the world, we talk about the end of the month!).

Exploring this gulf in cultural outlooks is part of what this work sets out to do.

## 5. Can Eurobarometer Tell Us What the Public Fear?

The Standard Eurobarometer Surveys were an obvious place to start for our analysis, as one imagines these to provide a set of homogenous questions, asked twice-a-year, over a protracted timescale that goes back to 1974, hence covering a remarkable fifty-year period.

In fact, such matters are not so simple, as explained in the Eurobarometer section below. The questions asked did not remain fixed over time and there are a number of other methodological and ideological limitations to the responses elicited that need to be borne in mind.

Nevertheless, a complete search of Eurobarometer was conducted going back to the very first report. This was done as it became clear that, as people considered different questions in the past and conducted the work distinctly to the present (such as the posing of an open-ended question without prompted answers), there may be some important lessons to learn.

In addition to Eurobarometer, other survey data was sought. Due to the sheer volume of polling by a vast array of organisations, including private and academic, as well as official, public sources, it is impossible to delimit these, let-alone account for context in every instance.

### 5.1. Can AI tell us what the public fear?

Aside from sources known to the author and those obtained through various standard, online search engines, as well as snowballing from references (whereby surveys point to other sources), as a sign of the times, ChatGPT was also used to catalogue, collate, and point to links.

This latter element highlighted the limitations and care needed in making use of this much-heralded, new tool. For instance, ChatGPT proposed that the European Social Survey “includes questions on people's fears and concerns” and even conducted a trend analysis between two alleged iterations of the survey with an 8-year separation.

Upon being queried about the veracity of this, the programme responded:

“I apologize for the mistake in my previous response. The information I provided was inaccurate”, noting that the survey concerns “people's attitudes, values, and behaviors” and noting that “the ESS does not include a specific question on people's fears or concerns”.

Further, in response to being asked for source details relating to another claim, it advised that it was unable to do so, going on to highlight how “information obtained from surveys should always be verified with the original source to ensure accuracy”. Indeed!

**“ChatGPT insisted the survey ‘includes questions on people’s fears’ and even conducted a trend analysis... when questioned, it quickly backtracked.”**

At best, the tool served to point to alternative data sources, which were then searched manually for detail. The details relating to Eurobarometer sources are provided in the accompanying research appendix.<sup>40</sup>

### 5.2. Eurobarometer: Inventing an EU public?

The most systematic surveys across Europe of ordinary people’s concerns have been those produced as part of the Eurobarometer series. It seems reasonable then, if not necessary, short of developing and applying our own instrument, to start from these as a baseline assessment.

Eurobarometer encompasses a series of questionnaires, conducted twice a year since 1974 on behalf of the European Commission and other related institutions. The benefit of using this data is that, apart from questions specific to each survey that reflect the mood and priorities of the times, a number of standard questions have recurred over the longer term.



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And, as the surveys are conducted in every member state of the European Union (as well as some others on occasion), it enables comparison across countries, as well as over time. They are also largely uniform and representative, typically sampling about 1,000 people in larger states and 500 in smaller ones although, inevitably, there are some limitations.

Unsurprisingly, many questions relate to how respondents view the European Union, its institutions, policies and trajectory. This has led to some blurring of the line between research and propaganda.<sup>41</sup> It may be less critical to those elements we will examine here but it is still worth noting both unintended limitations and more conscious manipulation.

**“Questions on the European Union, its institutions, policies and trajectory have led to some blurring of the line between research and propaganda.”**

The former includes the fact that the same people cannot be surveyed in each poll wave and that different sampling methods are used across the various member states. In addition, there are translation challenges, which may skew exact meanings according to cultural biases and modes of interpretation.

More significantly though, the selection and framing of questions, as well as response options have been held to promote “integrationist” outcomes. This has also included only allowing positive opinions to be visible, and avoiding particular topics, as well as removing questions that delivered more critical responses.

Overall, the process aligns with that described above (see the section ‘The difficulties understanding public opinion’), of one that symbolically creates “a European public opinion that hardly exists empirically”<sup>42</sup>. Nevertheless, the consistency and frequency of these surveys leads us, necessarily, to reflecting on any trends identified.

## 6. What the Public Fears

Across almost all surveys, it would seem, ordinary people appear to have been consistent over a remarkably long period of time in their prioritisation of economic issues – employment, wages, and prices – over other matters of possible concern. Indeed, the financial strictures that were exacerbated by responses to the COVID pandemic have served to bring these back to the fore even more markedly as inflation now dominates concerns.

The Eurobarometer 97 (conducted over June and July 2022) shows this clearly (see figure 1.)

**“Do Eurobarometer’s results truly derive from popular fears, or are they projected into the public sphere and echoed back to researchers?”**

Concerns over health, at the personal scale, were still notable but, in the aftermath of COVID, had already declined to pre-pandemic levels. What is also clear is that asking questions about concerns at different scales – personal, national, and regional – a feature of early Eurobarometer surveys that went into abeyance before being reintroduced in part through Eurobarometer 70 (Autumn 2008) and in full through Eurobarometer 74 (Autumn 2010), provides useful insights and serves to distinguish types of concern.

It should also be noted however that concerns over energy supply, for instance, while not featured above, but appearing prominently in the national and EU scale concerns, while logical (as these would likely be encountered as rising prices at a personal level rather than supply issues *per se*), are also partly engineered by the answer options offered to respondents (see figures 2 and 3).

Nevertheless, the notion that ‘the international situation’ is considered to be more relevant to EU-scale concerns than national ones is clear, if questionable.

We have to go back to Eurobarometer 92 (Autumn 2019) to find a time-based representation of these trends (see figure 4),

and we can compare this to the same six-year trend at national and EU-scales (see figures 5 and 6).

This allows some striking differences to be noted, such as the steady decline of unemployment as a concern (which had featured prominently in the early Eurobarometer surveys), as well as fluctuations in concerns (in the latter two charts) over immigration and terrorism (most likely driven by events). The steady rise of the environment and climate change is in line with the growing media profile of IPCC assessments and special reports, as well as COP meetings subsequent to the Paris Climate Change conference of November 2015.

The persistence, or not, of some of these features can be noted by looking at previous time-series data for the previous five-year and three-year periods (going back to 2008, see figures 7 and 8 from Eurobarometer 81, Spring 2014).

Going back even further shows the tendency for external events to drive or shape responses. Accordingly, European expansion led issues related to migration to be more prominent in the run-up to and immediate aftermath of 1992. The events of 9/11 returned the focus towards security for the first time since the implosion of the USSR a decade earlier. Likewise, the 2008 financial crisis reverted attention to the economy.

Of course, whether these truly derive from popular fears or are projected into the public sphere and then echoed according to the mechanisms described in the opening sections of this report, augmented by the sociotropic pressure to be seen to conform, remains a moot and much debated point. For instance, the emergence of cybersecurity as a concern in surveys would very much seem to be a top-down agenda.

Following the Brexit referendum in the UK and the election of Donald Trump as US President in 2016, there emerged a major discussion over ‘misinformation’ within, particularly, elite circles. This had actually started a few years before but received a major boost through those events. The influence of presumed ‘Russian propaganda’ into these episodes catalysed a focus on the internet that would

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seem to have been seminal in pushing this concern forward.

As we have seen, people have not been so readily swayed by this, questioning, presumably, who gets to decide what counts as information in the first place, as made most evident through some responses to government appeals to 'the science' and 'experts' over the course of the COVID pandemic. This is not to question those elements (science and experts) *per se*, but rather to point to how these can be seen as being manipulated.

**"There is a straightforward schism between people's fears and the concerns of elites."**

Concerns in other, poorer parts of the world, understandably, come across as even more basic in many instances – road traffic accidents and corruption looming larger there than closer to home. In Europe, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has led to a revisiting of strategic priorities and concerns being expressed over energy prices and energy provenance, in particular.

It would be easy then, to conclude from all this that there is a straightforward schism between people's fears and the concerns of elites. The former, when not manipulated, appear to focus on more immediate matters pertaining to jobs, health, and education, while the latter project more esoteric issues (higher up the Maslow pyramid of needs), such as climate change, cybersecurity, and a more recent focus on identity.

Certainly, from quite early on, those charged with conducting Eurobarometer surveys appeared to think so. As early as Eurobarometer 6 (Autumn, 1976), a "special set of questions" was asked of "opinion leaders".<sup>43</sup> And, as late as Eurobarometer 98 (Winter 2022/2023) the last encompassed by this study, it was noted that "variations based on education are stronger than those on age, with those who spent longer in education more likely to say environment and climate change, and those who spent less rising prices/inflation/ cost of living".<sup>44</sup>

In fact, of course, we need to remember that, in all instances, what passes for 'public opinion' is, by-and-large constructed, or

at least significantly steered, through the questions people are asked, the answers made available for them to choose from, and the engagement and promotion of, often self-styled, community leaders, or those purporting to speak on behalf of the public in pursuit of their own agendas.

It may also be that the manner in which surveys are conducted, typically phone interviews and more recently, increasingly online, is not conducive to eliciting responses that have been reflected upon. Erait notes that: "One problem, I believe, is that most researchers tend to assume that people have considered views on the questions they are asked, and do not just make it up as they go along".<sup>45</sup>

There are also signs of a push-back emerging in some quarters. In national and regional educational policies, for example.<sup>46</sup> These suggest that, while appearing to focus on the immediate matter at hand, what is really at play is often a clash of cultural values between different social groups.

## What the Public Fears

QA4 And personally, what are the two most important issues you are facing at the moment? (MAX. 2 ANSWERS)  
(% - EU)

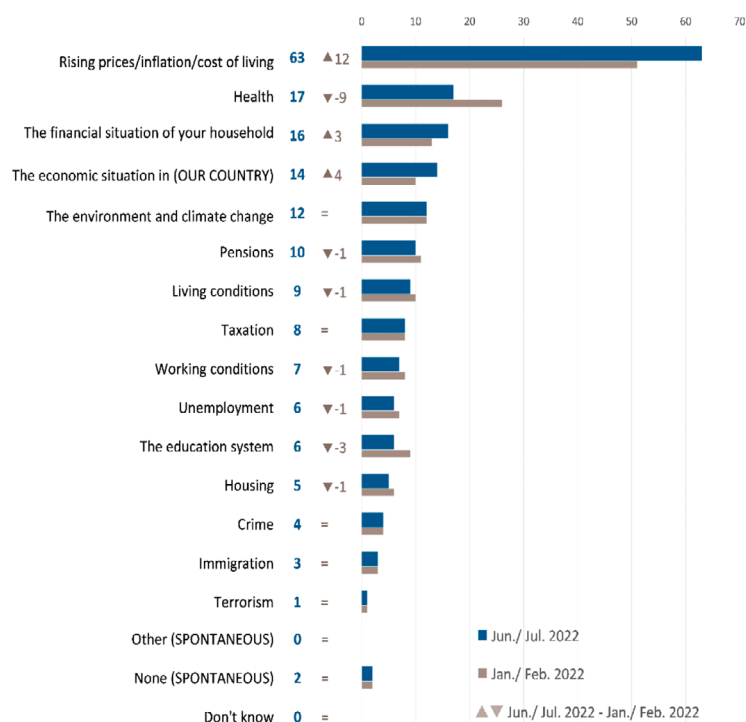


Figure 1. Important issues facing EU citizens (Eurobarometer 97)

QA3 What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment? (MAX. 2 ANSWERS)  
(% - EU)

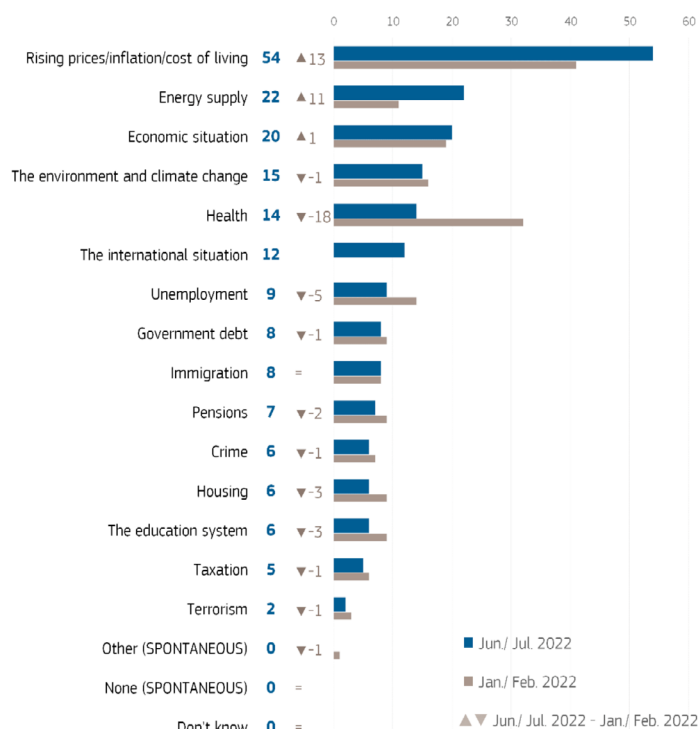


Figure 2. Important issues - country view (Eurobarometer 97)

## What the Public Fears

QA5 What do you think are the two most important issues facing the EU at the moment? (MAX. 2 ANSWERS)  
(% - EU)

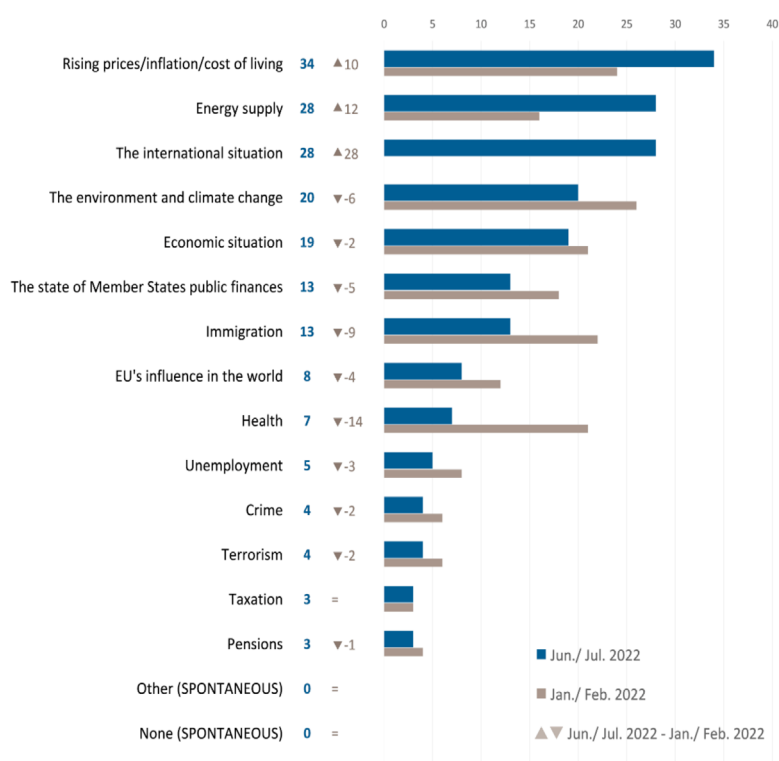


Figure 3. Important issues - EU view (Eurobarometer 97)

QA4a And personally, what are the two most important issues you are facing at the moment?  
(% - EU)

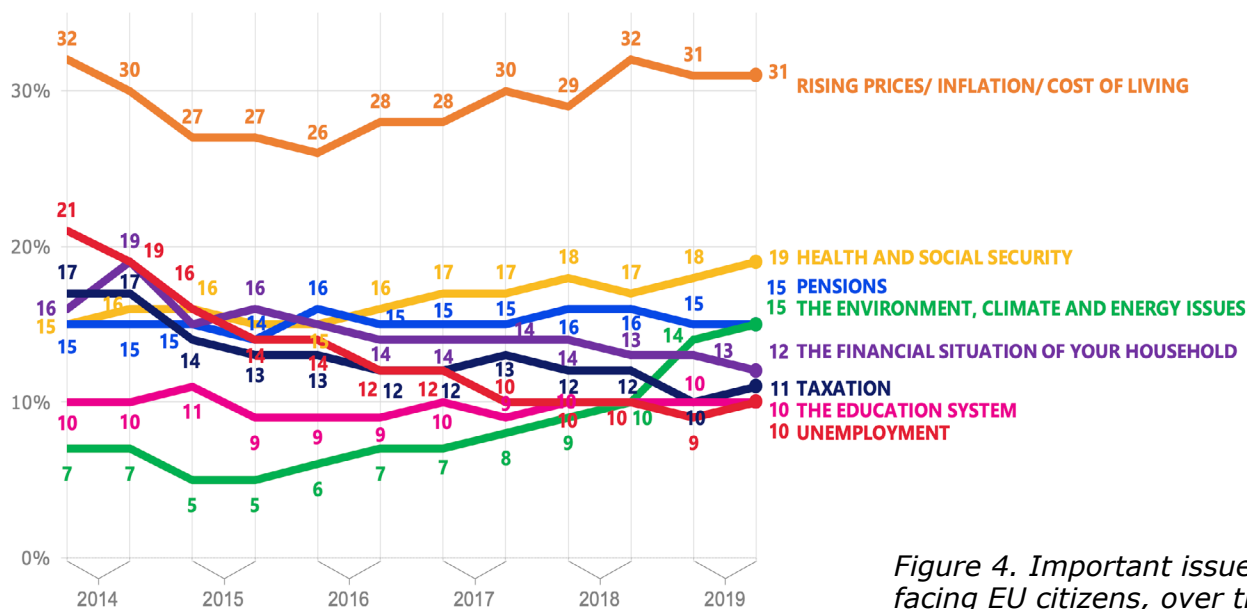


Figure 4. Important issues facing EU citizens, over time (Eurobarometer 92)



## What the Public Fears

**QA3a** What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment?  
(% - EU)

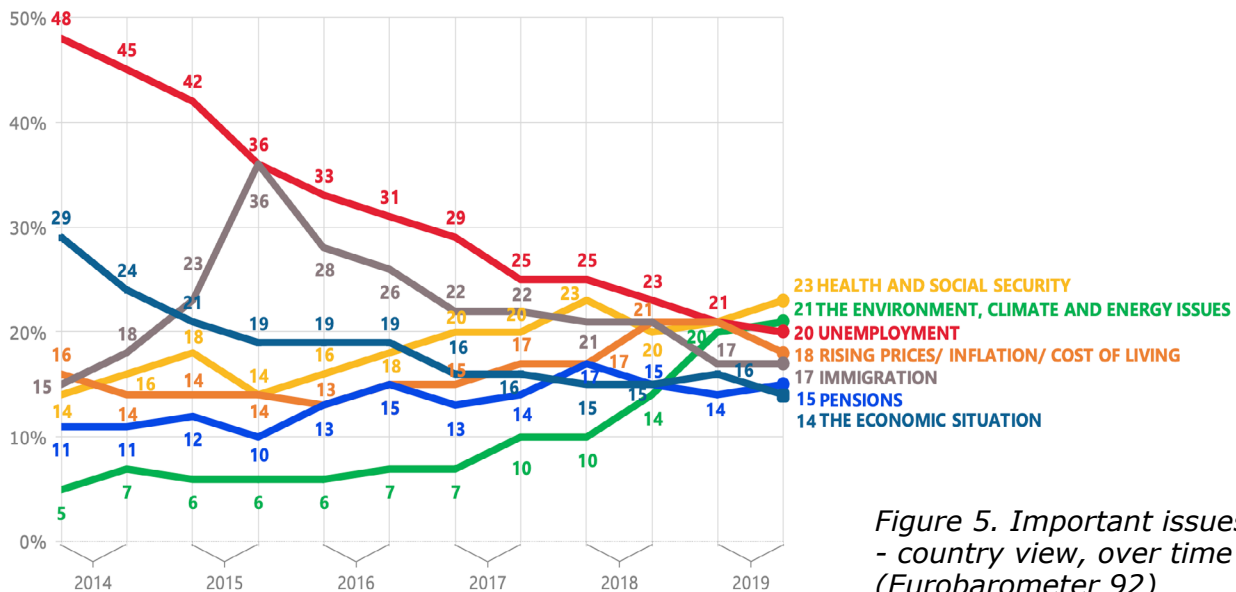


Figure 5. Important issues - country view, over time (Eurobarometer 92)

**QA5a** What do you think are the two most important issues facing the EU at the moment?  
(% - EU)

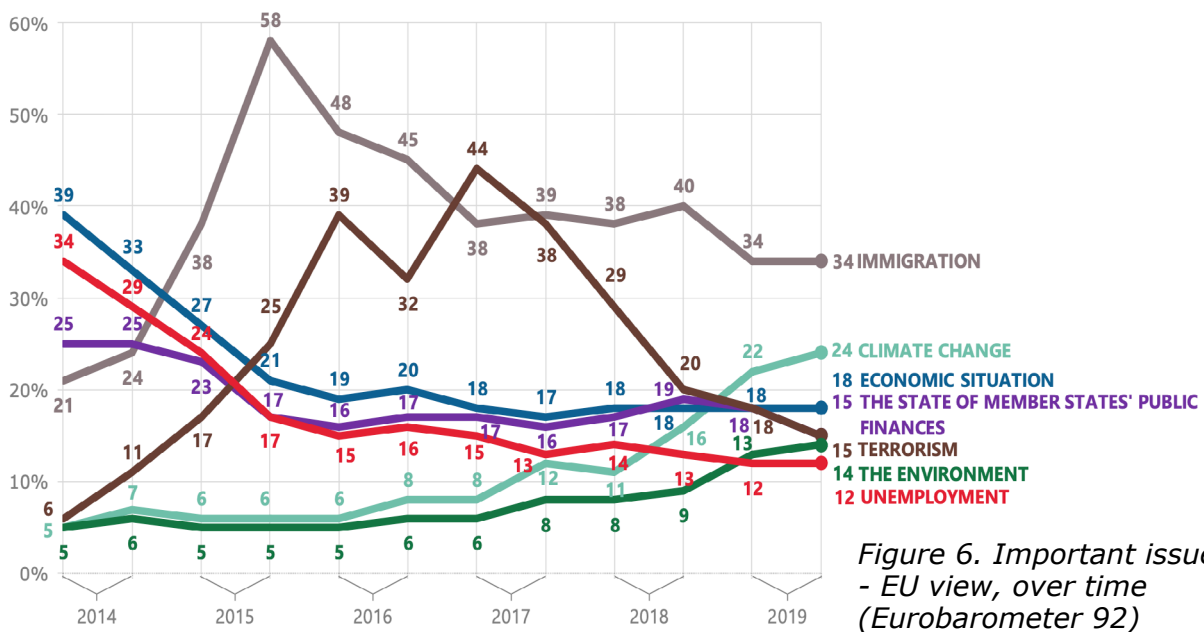


Figure 6. Important issues - EU view, over time (Eurobarometer 92)

## What the Public Fears

QA4a. What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment? (MAX. 2 ANSWERS) - %EU

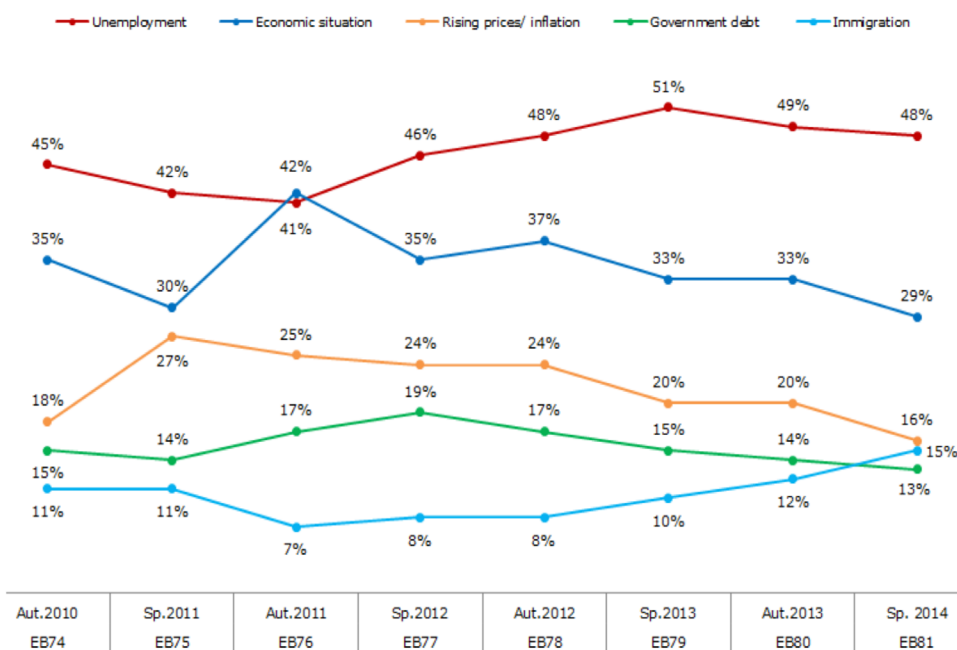


Figure 7. Important issues - country view, over time (Eurobarometer 81)

QA6. What do you think are the two most important issues facing the European Union at the moment? (MAX. 2 ANSWERS) - %EU

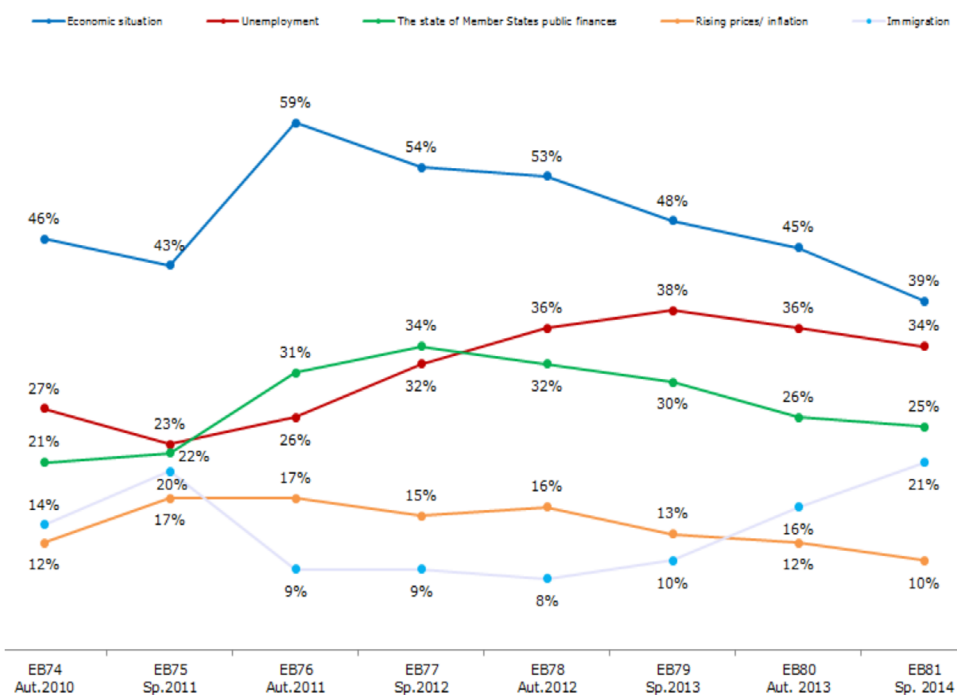


Figure 8. Important issues - EU view, over time (Eurobarometer 81)

## 7. Why We Need a Barometer of Fears

It is clear from the preceding pages that there is no clear indication of what 'the public' think. Oftentimes this is purposefully constructed or elicited to suit pre-determined agendas. What's more, when choices are offered, these are crafted according to elite priorities and concerns.

There is evidence however, that certain types or modes of questioning are more insightful than others. Rosenberg noted long ago how deeper values (incorporating optimistic or pessimistic conclusions about our fellow citizens) lent themselves to quite different political views and policy projections.<sup>47</sup>

In a similar vein, the European Social Survey question (presented in Appendix 3)<sup>48</sup> asked people whether they viewed others as primarily helpful or not. And the Pew Research Centre asked people what made their lives meaningful. These highlight the benefits of looking to uncover wider social and cultural outlooks, rather than responses to immediate concerns that are hardly reflected upon.

Going back over the Eurobarometer series and other surveys allows us to propose that any future work needs to use open questions (Eurobarometer 2) more often (however laborious this may be), distinguishing personal experience from national or regional concerns (Eurobarometer 3), and perceived fears from actual experience (Safety Perceptions Index 2023).

There were questions asked about trust (Eurobarometer 14) and other values (Eurobarometer 66) that need to be revisited. Likewise, and more so, whether there are any 'great causes' left to fight for (Eurobarometer 17), as well as people's sense of national pride (Eurobarometer 19).

The willingness of individuals to fight for their nation (Eurobarometer 24 and Atlas of European Values) is surely an important metric of "courage, loyalty and duty".<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the authors of that Eurobarometer survey were led to reflect "whether a political society can conceivably survive if its members do not have a strong feeling of national identity".<sup>50</sup>

What qualities we would like to see in our children (Eurobarometer 34), our sense of solidarity (Eurobarometer 72), the arenas within which we imagine volunteering to be important (Eurobarometer 73) and our willingness to help strangers (World Risk Poll 2021) are other examples of fruitful lines of investigation that ought to be pursued.

A recent poll in the US appears to point to a notable decline in patriotism, community engagement, religious belief and willingness to have children, in favour of the pursuit of money (although there may be some problems in the comparison this made to earlier data).<sup>51</sup> Accordingly, we propose the need to conduct just such research, sensitising ourselves towards dispositions and latent opinions, as well as semi-consciously and self-consciously unarticulated views. The cultural pushbacks noted at the end of the preceding section would be particularly important to monitor and assess, going forwards.

It behoves anyone truly interested in understanding public opinion, without wanting to force, manipulate or otherwise artificially elicit this, to determine how best to do so. It is unlikely to be something conducive to a straightforward surveying technique as we have largely been examining here.

That is why the main conclusion of this report is for the need to commission and conduct genuine surveys into people's fears and concerns. These need to allow sufficient time for respondents to reflect upon their answers, thinking whether these are true challenges or simply the form that deeper, underlying issues may take – such as a clash over cultural values. For instance, the perennial concerns over unemployment identified here may, on reflection, reveal deeper moral commitments to work as a form of social solidarity. There will need to be a focus on how ordinary people simply lead their lives and what it is that imbues these with meaning.

As De Tocqueville noted long ago, it is through such everyday interactions that citizens and their sense of duty to a nation or community are forged.<sup>52</sup>

## About the Author

### Professor Bill Durodié

Visiting Professor, MCC Brussels

Bill is Visiting Professor to MCC Brussels and Chair of Risk and Security in International Relations at the University of Bath. He previously held posts in British Columbia, Canada and at NTU in Singapore, as well as at the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom and in the War Studies Group of King's College, London. Since 2014 Bill has also been a Visiting Professor to the China Executive Leadership Academy Pudong, one of China's top-level Party schools. In 2017, following in the steps of former US Secretary for Homeland Security Michael Chertoff and the UK Minister of State for Universities and Science David Willetts, he became the 8th person and first alumnus to give the Vincent Briscoe Annual Security Lecture at Imperial College London. French by origin, he has lived in the UK for much of his life and currently resides in Oxford with his wife and three young sons, two of whom sing for the Choir of Magdalen College there. He views the establishment of MCC in Brussels as essential for shaking-up institutional complacency, both there and further afield.



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