

Introduction

Even though the European integration process has resulted in an improved economic reality for citizens of the European Union the perception of the public towards this association of states has become more negative. This short paper tries to find the underlying ideas behind this perception. It will do so using the risk factors as defined by Slovic (1999).

Qualitative risk factors influencing public perception

Slovic (1999) identifies three areas of qualitative risk factors: seriousness of the consequences (dread), uncertainty about the risk (knowledge) and number of people exposed (equality). The elements will be discussed in the next section.

Dread

With regard to the dread of risk control, voluntariness and severity of consequences are important elements (ibid). In this context all these factors seem to be important as well. As more power is transferred to the European institutions (popularly referred to as 'Brussels') the individual citizen has less control and influence over what is going on. Although it is still possible to influence policy (eg through citizens initiatives or by complaining to the European Ombudsman) this is much harder than similar influence on a national level (eg only 40000 signatures are needed for a citizens' initiative in the Netherlands compared to 1000000 for an European citizens' initiative). Although people have voluntarily given more and more responsibilities to the EU (through their elected politicians), there is a prevailing belief this shift of responsibilities was involuntary and the people should have been involved more in the process (eg through binding referenda). The severity of consequences is only something that became part of the public concern as a result of the euro crisis. Due to the uncertainty of the financial situation of Greece and other countries people think there can be severe consequences that will hurt them (financially).

Knowledge

With regard to knowledge of risks, the immediacy of the effects and the newness of the problem are important elements (Slovic, 1999). In general I believe people do have a (very) limited understanding of the EU. This is not strange as the EU (and its institutions) is complex. And although this is not a new thing, the increased importance of the EU over the last 2 decades have made the public more aware about this. As the influence of the EU became more visible through all kinds of regulations the public must have realized the effects of the perceived negative influence were already taking place around them.

Equality

When it comes to the equality of European programs for youth the ratio of people it reaches is limited. The Erasmus program is aimed at students in higher education and the Youth in Action program is often on a project basis. These programs reach only a (small) fraction of all young people. These people are more likely to be in favor of European integration as they have experienced the benefits of the EU. Young people who did not take part in this program are therefore more likely to be more negative about the EU.

Bibliography

Slovic, P. (1999). Trust, emotion, sex, politics, and science: surveying the risk-assessment battlefield. *Risk Analysis*, 19(4), 689-701.