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Revitalizing Europe – An EU-branding campaign as a tool to regain public support for the European Union and to overcome its political crisis

Volume I – Theoretical background

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Abstract:

The European Union is in a deep crisis of public support. Recently, this has been shown in the negative outcome of the British referendum on the future of the United Kingdom in the EU and rising Euroscepticism across the European Union in general. This paper draws on David Easton's concept of political support stating that a political system such as the EU needs the support of its members in order to persist. Easton's ideas are combined with the concept of destination branding. It is argued that an EU-branding campaign could be a tool to revitalize Europe, to stabilize and to regain public support for the EU. Marketing techniques could be used to improve the citizens' attitude towards the EU. However, it is made clear that branding can be considered as a challenging tool in political contexts. This paper therefore attempts to make several recommendations, which would need to be taken into account for the conceptualization of an EU-branding campaign. Moreover, based on a SWOT analysis of the current state of play of the EU-brand, different strengths and opportunities of which the EU could make use for its branding purposes, as well as weaknesses and threats, which negatively influence the EU's capability in being or becoming a brand, are highlighted.

Key words:

European Union, EU-branding, nation-branding, communication, marketing, Simon Anholt, systems theory, political system, public support, diffuse support, David Easton, SWOT matrix

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1. Introduction

“While the British referendum shocked European leaders, observers and poll experts, it confirmed a shared feeling: Europe is no longer a dream, let alone an inspirational ambition. It is not hard to project that such a referendum would probably have generated similar results in other European countries. Between the growing Euroscepticism, a questionable management of the migrant crisis, and the feeling of insecurity resulting from terror attacks, the consensus is there: Europe has lost its dream dimension” (Seeman 2016).

The European project is currently characterized by a fundamental contradiction. The integration process has been geographically deepening during the last 65 years with the accession of new Member States as well as in a policy-related manner with regard to new responsibilities that have been transferred from the national to the European level. With the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, project 'Europe' was founded by six western European countries. The goal, which was laying at the very heart of the project, was to avoid new wars in Europe. Italy, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Germany therefore pooled their policies in the field of the mining industry – the main resources for the production of war material. However, in addition to the stabilization of peace, the European integration process was soon fed with new goals, including economic prosperity, social law and the respect of human rights. With the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the European integration project advanced rapidly. The cooperation between Member States has been intensified and extended to various policies. With the Economic and Monetary Union in particular, the integration process has been largely deepened. In 2009, the Lisbon Treaty led to a stronger democratization of European politics. The role of the European Parliament as well as that of national parliaments has been strengthened in the European legislative process. Citizens also got something out of the treaty reforms since they now have the possibility of direct participation in European politics through the so-called European Citizens' Initiative¹. The former six founding members of the European Coal and Steel Community have been followed over the years by a further 22 European countries that today form the European Union. Nowadays, the effect 'Europe' has on its citizens' everyday lives is more far-reaching and deep-rooted than it has ever been the case.

1 The European Citizens' Initiative is a direct democracy tool enabling EU citizens to participate directly in the development of EU policies and propose legislation. The Citizens' Initiative was introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon, which entered into force in 2009. Regulation 211/2011, which is applicable since April 2012, determines the conditions and procedures of the Citizens' Initiative. An initiative must be set up by a so-called citizens' committee of at least seven EU citizens coming from at least seven different EU countries and being old enough to vote in European Parliament elections. At least one million signatures from at least seven EU Member States have to be collected within one year after the registration of the initiative in one of the EU's official languages on the European Commission's website. If an initiative is successful, the Commission can decide to put forward a legislative proposal or take other actions. At least, the Commission has to explain why it does not act. Any policy area for which the EU is responsible can be subject of a Citizens' Initiative. Link to the European Commission's dedicated website: <http://ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative/public/welcome?lg=en>

At the same time, the support of European citizens for the deepening of the EU integration process, both politically and geographically, seems to be decreasing for many years. For the first time in history, this trend became very clear during the ratification process of the Maastricht Treaty, which was rejected by the Danish population in a referendum in June 1992. Among the French population, it only reached a very narrow majority. In 2005, Dutch and French citizens brought down the project of a European constitution via referenda. In 2009, the Irish blocked the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty, so that a second vote had to be set up in order to approve it. In 2016, the Dutch citizens expressed their negative attitude towards the trade agreement between the EU and Ukraine. The same year, the Danish citizens also decided not to hand over more responsibilities to the EU level in a referendum. In a nutshell, general public opinion has been quite negative on project 'Europe' for many years.

However, very recently, it has particularly been marked by intensive anti-European sentiments and slogans. The citizens' support for the political system of the EU seems to have decreased very drastically in the wake of the economic crisis. Eurosceptic and anti-European parties have risen in the popularity rankings. Today, the EU is facing a real withdrawal of support from its citizens. This represents an unquestionable fact that reached a completely new dimension in June 2016 in the context of the British referendum asking to leave the EU. When the British people decided on 23 June 2016 to quit the EU, this was not only a very clear signal for the dipping popularity of the EU, but for a growing demand to reject the European project as a whole and to return to the political system of the nation state. Such strong opposition to the EU did not exist before.

Hence, the EU is at a critical turning point. The erosion of public support towards this political project is becoming a threat to the future of the EU. In view of this problem, this paper endeavors to answer three central research questions: 1. To what extent does a political system – in this case, the political system of the EU – need continuous support of its citizens? 2. In what way could an *EU-branding* campaign reverse the trend of declining public support? 3. What internal and external factors have to be taken into consideration if it was decided to brand the EU?

The withdrawal of citizens' support from a political system plays an important role in David Easton's systems analysis of political life. David Easton is an American political scientist, who is renowned for his application of systems theory to the study of political science. According to Easton, the citizens' support is crucial when it comes to the survival – Easton calls it *persistence* – of a political system like the EU. In order to illustrate what the declining popularity of the EU actually means, I will provide as a first step the basic ideas of Easton's concept of political support, which will serve as a particularly useful scientific background in order to explain why and how public support towards the EU could rise again. According to Easton,

"[the] erosion of support needs to be viewed [...] as a threat to [a political] system. When support begins to slip away visibly, this is a danger signal to those who remain attached to the political objects and will typically trigger responses to prevent the support from falling too low" (Easton 1979, p. 224).

He argues that a decline of support towards a political system typically

“arouse[s] reactions among the non-authoritative members of the system who for one reason or another strongly identify with the political objects and feel impelled to bring others to share their attitudes. Opinion leaders, mass media or patriotic organizations may take it upon themselves as a civic duty to bolster up any flagging diffuse support [for their political system]" (Easton 1979, p. 466).

As a second step, I will then develop Easton's arguments a bit further. He has never made any concrete proposal how such a reaction by the wider public, which still feels very much attached to a political system, could look like. Since Easton assumes that such a reaction will be developed by the mass media, opinion leaders and organizations, I will discuss the possibility of fighting the dipping popularity of the EU through an *EU-branding* campaign. Based on the concept of *nation-branding*, I want to provide a possible solution to the current dilemma. Simon Anholt, who has considerably coined *nation-branding* research and whose ideas I will present in chapter 3, is of the opinion that

“[f]or Europeans, [...] the phrase ‘European Union’ stands unequivocally for the political and administrative machinery of Europe, and is associated [...] with factors that are at best tedious and worst dysfunctional, even corrupt: bureaucracy gone mad, reams of petty and interfering legislation, outdated ideologies, and so on” (Anholt 2007a, p. 116).

I will argue that branding the EU could inverse the citizens' negative opinion and lead to a rise in public support as well as to a revitalization of the European project. I will also present several recommendations for a possible *EU-branding* campaign based on a critical scientific review of the *nation-branding* concept.

As a third and last step, I will provide an analysis of the current state of play of an *EU-brand*. I will make use of a SWOT matrix in order to highlight the external *threats* and *opportunities*, to which the EU is exposed, but also its internal *weaknesses* and *strengths* that influence the EU's capability in being or becoming a brand. The SWOT matrix is a useful tool that is especially used in marketing contexts and which therefore corresponds to the *EU-branding* approach I am focusing on in this thesis.

What I will not provide within the scope of this study is what such an *EU-branding* campaign could possibly look like. In Volume II, Barbara Liebshardt will explore the conceptualization of an *EU-branding* campaign in more detail.

2. The EU's need of public support

2.1. Citizens' trust and support towards political systems in social science research

The issue of trust or support citizens direct towards their political systems and the question to what extent the stability of a political system is dependent on the latter already employs social science research since the 1970s. A number of scientific concepts have been developed over the years trying to explain the relationship between public support and the *persistence* of a government or other political authorities (see Parsons 1968; Habermas 1973; Luhmann 1975; Easton, 1979; and others). David Easton's concept of political support seems to be a particularly useful theoretical approach to this research problem. Not for nothing was it further developed during the last decades and operationalized for empirical analysis of political support regarding various political systems. Miller studied the issue of political support in the United States based on Easton's concept (see Miller 1974). Fuchs and Westle tackled the question of public support directed towards the political system of the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1990s (see Fuchs 1989; Westle 1989). Furthermore, the supranational political system of the EU has also found its way into the research of political support more recently based on Easton's concept (see Fuchs 2003; Westle 2003; and others). According to Easton, political support is one of the most important determinants for the survival of a political system. Political support is a social-psychological attitude that as an aggregate of all citizens affects the stability of a system. Euroscepticism or the decrease in citizens' support is, against this background, a fundamental threat to the existence of the EU.

Today, the EU seems to be confronted with a decline of its citizens' support. This issue plays a crucial role in David Easton's systems analysis of political life when it comes to the continuous existence of a political system. Easton calls it *persistence*. The basic ideas of his scientific work can therefore serve as a helpful theoretical approach to my research work. Easton's systems analysis has often been criticized for being too abstract and generalized leading to some inconsistencies, but I do not wish to open the discussion on that in the course of this thesis. Many other scholars have already dealt with this issue (see Münch 1971; Fuchs 1989; Westle 1989; and others). Systems theories such as that of David Easton, to be presented in the following section, can, despite all the criticism, provide a basic concept of problem analysis. Afterwards, those developing their arguments against the background of these theories are responsible for finding their own explanations and problem solutions on a micro level. I will thus use Easton's systems analysis of political life and more precisely his concept of political support only as a broad framework for my research and I will concentrate on the main ideas of his theory.

2.2. The political system and its environment

David Easton considers the society as a social system, which is composed of a plurality of subsystems. Political systems like for example the German, French or Hungarian political systems form only some systems amongst them. Those are surrounded by a variety of other systems that influence each other, such as the economy, culture, but also other political systems (Easton 1979, p. 21f). In Easton's functionalist systems theory, a political system is defined by its function: the authoritative allocation of values for a certain society. This means that a political system transforms citizens' demands in binding decisions, which are accepted by everybody (Easton 1979, p. 21f):

"A political system can be designated as those interactions through which values are authoritatively allocated for a society; this is what distinguishes a political system from other systems that may be interpreted as lying in its environment "(Easton 1979, p. 21).

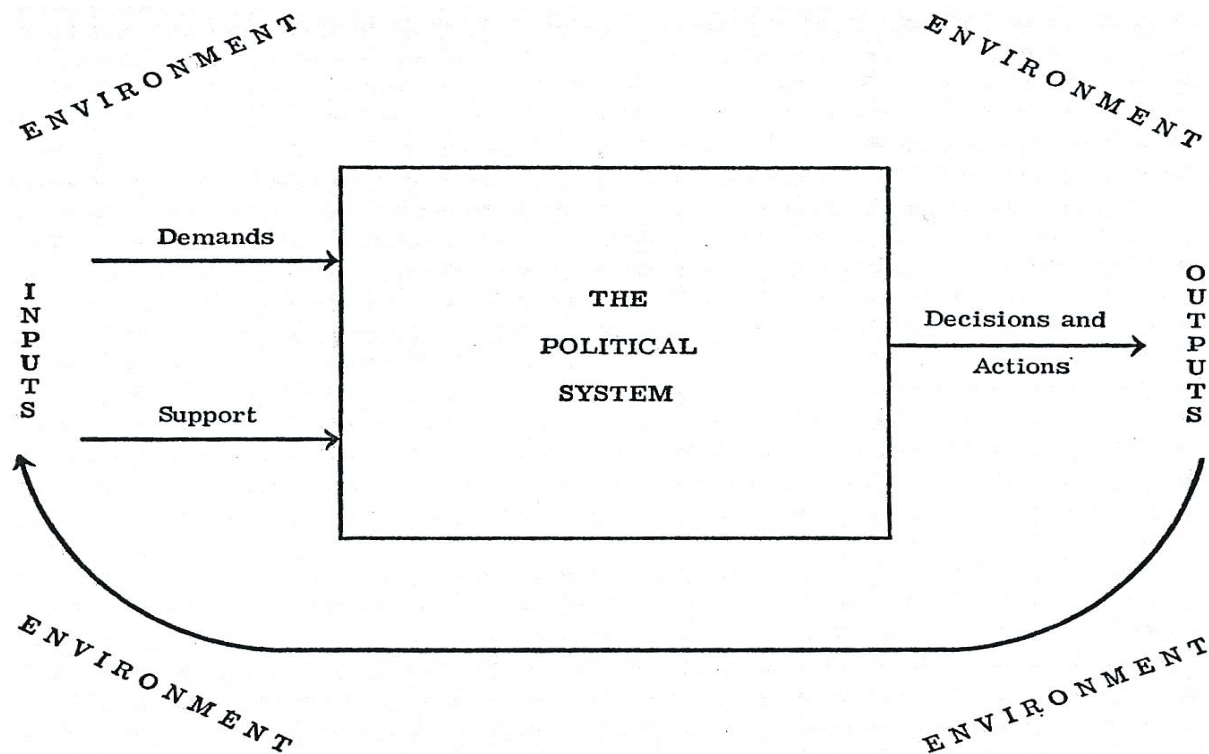
Since Easton's definition of a political system is very broad, it is easily applicable to all political systems possible, such as tribes, local governments, nation states, etc. The EU can also be regarded as a political system according to Easton's definition. First, the EU has an environment: the European and the national cultures, the European and national economies, the national political systems of the Member States as well as their local governments. Secondly, the political system of the EU provides binding decisions and policies to the citizens in its Member States, which are in general accepted – at least tolerated – by them.

A political system and its environment are, according to Easton, connected by *inputs* and *outputs* (Easton 1979, p. 25). Figure 1 shows a simplified illustration of a political system and its relationship with its environment. In practice, there is of course an undetermined amount of environmental factors that can affect a political system: Demographic developments, financial crises, cultural projects, rising unemployment, etc. However, Easton summarizes all the possible influences on a political system under only two variables – *demands* and *support*:

"[They] are the key indicators of the way in which environmental influences and conditions modify and shape the operations of the political system" (Easton 1979, p. 27).

In theory, a political system processes the inputs to outputs. The systems members' demands, citizens calling on their government to give homosexual couples equal rights for example, are developed into real actions and decisions taken by the respective government. However, Easton keeps this process as a black box, which is not to be considered as a problem for this research work since it is not of greater interest for us how a political system transforms demands and support to certain outputs. I am only interested in the relation between a political system and the support it receives.

Figure 1: The political system and its relations with the environment by David Easton



Source: Easton 1965, p. 112.

Outputs are all forms of *decisions* and *actions* that are submitted from a political system to its environment. As figure 1 shows, the *outputs* should not be understood as the end point of a political process. Since the *outputs* of a political system affect its environment, a cycle of *inputs* and *outputs* going from one system to another is created. *Decisions* and *actions* of the actors of a political system lead to changes in the surrounding systems, which then create new *inputs* to the political system (Easton 1979, p. 344f).

2.3. The political system and its persistence

Due to the connection between a political system and its environment in the form of *demands* and *support*, the latter is always exposed to possible burdens and stress. Those may be of various kinds and can at worst threaten the *persistence* of a political system, in the sense of threatening its continuous existence. In the case of the EU, this would mean that the declining support of the citizens could lead to a collapse of the political system. In the worst scenario, it could mean the return to completely sovereign nation states.

The threats to the persistence of political systems are lying at the heart of Easton's systems theory, which also becomes evident from his central research question:

"How can any political system ever persist whether the world would be one of stability or of change?" (Easton 1979, p. 15).

Easton does not consider the *persistence* or stability of a political system as a preservation of a status quo. The stability of political systems does not necessarily mean that it is not subject to any change. Each system is continuously characterized by the fact that it changes and yet persists: New parties establish themselves, constitutions are amended, a state changes geographically, etc. (Easton 1965, p. 84f; Easton 1979, p. 179; Fuchs 1989, p. 6f).

Demands represent a potential threat to the continuous *persistence* of any political system since political systems have, of course, only limited resources – both human, financial and time – to transform *demands* into *decisions* and *actions*. Not all of the *demands*, which are brought to the fore by the members of a political system, can be fulfilled. However, the cause of non-fulfillment may also lie in the complexity of the content of the *demands*. If the *demands* of the members of a political system stay unfulfilled, the system or at least a part thereof, namely the *authorities* – political leaders, the government of a political system –, which are directly responsible for the transformation of *demands* into *decisions*, eventually lose their *support*. Yet, Easton even goes a bit further and gives rise to concern that a political system could entirely lose out on *support* in the case of permanent non-compliance with the *demands* of its members (Easton 1979, p. 58ff).

"Accordingly, whenever demands appear in such numbers that the system is unable to absorb [...] them, stress on the system must result. The demands would of necessity remain unfulfilled. This output failure, persisting over time, must lead to the loss of support for a system [...]" (Easton 1979, p. 118).

However, according to Easton, a political system is flexible. There is the possibility that a system takes measures to reduce the different difficulties to cope with the various number of *demands* (Easton 1965, p. 99; Easton 1979, p. 69), such as the professionalization and expansion of governance structures.

Hence, the far more fatal danger to the continuous persistence of a political system is, however, a decline in the *support* of its members below a minimum level:

"Where the input of support falls below [a critical] minimum, the persistence of any kind of system will be endangered" (Easton 1979, p. 220).

Easton leaves the question of how much *support* is necessary for the stability of a political system open. This is one of the central moments of criticism of his theory of the political system (Westle 1989, p. 33). It is undeniable, however, that a political system needs the *support* of as many of its citizens as possible. I will therefore explain Easton's concept of political support in more detail in the following subsections.

2.4. Specific support

In Easton's theory of the political system *support* is one of the two central input variables a political system has to deal with. In his work, Easton dedicates much more space to the input

variable of *support* rather than to the *demands*, thereby making it clear that *support* apparently influences the *persistence* of a political system to a greater extent. Easton defines *support* as

"feelings of trust, confidence, or affection, and their opposites, that persons may direct to some object [...]. Support will vary in degree from absolute hostility to blind loyalty" (Easton 1969, p. 57).

Although Easton's definition of *support* includes both positive and negative mental attitudes towards one object, I would like to point out that I associate the term *support* exclusively with positive associations. *Support* is a variety of positive feelings a person directs to a political object or not. Easton easily describes it as following:

"We can say that A supports B either when A acts on behalf of B or when he orients himself favorably toward B. B may be a person or a group; it may be goal, idea or institution" (Easton 1979, p. 159).

Easton's concept of political support is based on a distinction of *support* towards a political system. The form of *support* and the political object, which it is met with, can be different (Easton 1979, p. 157). He assumes that political *support* is not directed to a political system in its entirety, but to the various sub-objects of a political order. He distinguishes between three sub-objects, namely the *political community*, the *regime* as well as the *authorities*, and two types of *support*. *Support* can be either of *specific* or *diffuse* nature. Figure 2 shows a schematic overview of this distinction.

Figure 2: Schematic overview of David Easton's concept of political support

		<u>Objects of political support</u>		
		Political community	Regime	Authorities
<u>Types of support</u>	Diffuse	Sources:		
		Values and norms	Sense of political community	Legitimacy of the regime
	General benefits		Trust in the regime	Trust in the authorities
	Specific	Short-term benefits		Satisfaction with the daily outputs

Source: Translation of Fuchs 1989, p. 18.

According to Easton, one source of *support* lies in the satisfaction of the members of a political system with its daily *outputs*, meaning its daily performance including speeches of the political leaders as well as their *actions* and *decisions*. He calls this form of *support specific support*.

"This is an input to a system that occurs as a return for the specific benefits and advantages that members of a system experience as part of their memberships. It represents or reflects the satisfaction a member feels when he perceives his demands as having been met" (Easton 1965, p. 125).

Specific support is based on the satisfaction of a systems member's personal needs through specific *outputs*. This means that *specific support* is characterized by its short-term nature and the fact that it is directly oriented towards an object. It is directly oriented towards the performance results of the political rulers, the *authorities* (Easton 1979, p. 268; Westle 1989, p. 60). For the *persistence* of a political system, it is necessary that its *authorities* – the president, the chancellor, the ministers, the mayors, etc. – can generate enough *support* for themselves, which then enables them to be capable to continue to take *decisions* that are accepted by the society as binding. This is only possible if the systems members positively evaluate their *decisions* and *actions*.

"But if members of a system are unable to provide enough support for some set of authorities who can assume responsibility for the daily affairs of the system and provide initiative and direction in identifying problems and taking some steps toward their resolution, the system must collapse, for want of leadership as we might say "(Easton 1979, p. 216).

If the *authorities* can no longer meet the wishes and *demands* of the systems members, the *specific support* for this part of the political order hence declines. In modern societies, such disappointments are most probably part of citizens' everyday life, as expectations of system members are much higher and diversified than in simpler societies such as tribes. Today's society is very pluralistic and individuals have very different needs. Yet, political systems only have limited capacity to deal with all these *demands*. Therefore, *specific support* can only arise with difficulty and persist in a continuous manner.

David Easton has recognized this problem and has therefore given prominence to *diffuse support* within his concept of political support (Easton 1965, p. 126). *Diffuse support* for political systems is especially becoming increasingly important in modern societies:

"As governmental decisions become more complex, their results are less and less likely to be felt by a current generation [...]. Increasingly, political system must tend to rely on diffuse support to tide it over particularly rough periods in its history" (Easton 1979, p. 410).

With this in mind, I also wish to focus purely on the development of *diffuse support* (towards the EU) on the following pages.

2.5. Diffuse support

Since not every *demand* can be met by a political system, it needs to be guaranteed that the systems members still tolerate the system's *outputs*, so that the *persistence* of the system is not endangered. This is only possible if the political system has a minimum level of *diffuse support* among its members (Kaina 2007, p. 87). *Diffuse support* forms

"a reservoir of favorable attitudes or goodwill that helps members to accept or tolerate outputs to which they are opposed or the effect of which they see as damaging their wants" (Easton 1965, p. 273).

The *diffuse support* helps the members of a political system to accept the *decisions* and *actions* of the *authorities* even though they are not in line with their own wishes and *demands* (Easton 1979, p. 273). In contrast to *specific support*, *diffuse support* is therefore not only based on the pure evaluation of the services provided by the *authorities* of a political system, but it exists for its own sake. *Diffuse support* refers to the political object in itself, to what the object represents, not to what it does or decides (Westle 1989, p. 62). It is a "deep-rooted emotional bond" with a political system and its objects (Fuchs 1989, p. 14) and thus characterized by durability, a fundamental nature (*Grundsätzlichkeit*) and affectivity. This means for example that a political system "is supported because of its values, it has institutionalized" (Fox 2003, p. 51). In the case of the EU, peace, equality and prosperity represent such values. *Diffuse support* ensures that the citizens' loyalty towards a political system and its rule-makers is consistently maintained, even in problematic situations. The economic and monetary crisis of the EU, as well as the refugee crisis, could be seen as such a problematic situation.

"A system may seek to install in its members a high level of diffuse support in order that regardless of what happens the members will continue to be bound to it by strong ties of loyalty and affection. This is a type of support that continues independently of the specific rewards which the member may feel he obtains from belonging to the system" (Easton 1965, p. 124f).

While *specific support* can only be directed towards the political object of the *authorities*, *diffuse support* can be developed for all of the three different political objects (see figure 2). However, it is questionable whether or not *diffuse support*, which is basically characterized by its fundamental nature and durability, can really be directed towards the political object of the *authorities*, to the people who hold these offices and who are in principle constantly changing as well as exchangeable. This constitutes one major inconsistency in Easton's concept of political support (Westle 1989, p. 86ff).

Easton describes the *regime* as the "basic procedures and rules" of a political system (Easton 1979, p. 191). It is made up of values, norms and decision-making structures, and it is thus much more than only the constitution of a political system, contrary to how a *regime* is usually understood in political science (Easton 1979, p. 193). Democracy, peace or freedoms are only some examples of the values of a political system. Norms are considered as the "operating rules and the rules of the game" (Easton 1979, p. 200). These include informal rules, such as discussions and the search for compromises, as is the case in democratic political systems, as well as formal rules, such as laws or even constitutions. The decision-making or governance structures can be understood as the roles of the actors in power and the balance of power that lies beneath the relationships between the different actors of a political system (Easton 1979, p. 200ff). According to Easton, *diffuse support* for the *regime* can be perceived, on the one hand, in the faith of the members of a political system in the legitimacy of the regime. On the other hand, it can be perceived in their *trust in the regime*. *Faith in the legitimacy of a regime* is present when the systems members are of the opinion that the existing order, i.e. the values, norms and decision-making structures of the present political system, is better than no other (Easton 1979, p. 280). When the members of a political system recognize the legitimacy of the *regime*, the continuity of the formal and informal procedures will not be challenged and the functioning of the political order will be guaranteed. The *trust in the regime* is described as "the belief in a common interest" (Easton 1979, p. 311) and can therefore be considered as the conviction that the values, norms and structures of a political system are oriented towards the welfare of all citizens and do not imply systematic preference or deprivation of individual groups (Westle 1989, p. 84). Such a general societal interest makes the systems members evaluate the *outputs* in the same way, namely that they are conducive to the society as a whole, even though the individual may not directly benefit from it. Unfulfilled *demands* of individual members of a political system are thus likely to be accepted (Easton 1979, p. 313).

Easton defines the *political community* as the aggregate of all members of a political system. *Diffuse support* for this political object is revealed in the *sense of political community* or in the form of a *we-feeling*. A collective identity, a sense of belonging to a political community, a feeling of connectedness with other citizens or the pride of being a member of the political system can be conceived as examples for *diffuse support*, which is oriented towards the object of the *political community*.

"The sense of political community may be described as a we-feeling among a group of people, not that they are just a group but that they are a political entity that works together and will likely share a common political fate and destiny" (Easton 1979, p. 332).

Diffuse support for the *political community* can arise in several ways according to Easton. First, it can be based on very general instrumental conditions, meaning that the cooperation among the

members of a system is simply considered necessary (Westle 1989, p. 54f). Second, it can arise from interactions and interdependencies between the members of a political system, from participation in the political process, from the reflection on or the communication of shared values, traditions and history, and from the discovery of common objectives. In this way, connections are created between the systems members helping to build or to strengthen a sense of togetherness (Easton 1979, p. 176 & 372ff).

Easton is of the opinion that the *diffuse support* of the *political community* is, especially in times of crisis, of particular importance for the long-term *persistence* of a political system:

"Whatever other measures that may be taken, most systems typically anticipate possible stress [...] by striving to arouse and nurture among its members what [is] called a sense of political community or of mutual identification" (Easton 1979, p. 325).

Accordingly, the stimulation of the citizens' *faith in the legitimacy of a political system*, of the *sense of political community* as well as of a *we-feeling* are the main components to secure the continuous *persistence* of a political system such as the EU.

3. EU-branding as a tool to revitalize public support

3.1. David Easton's views on how to revitalize public support for political systems

As I have tried to make clear in the previous chapter, the continuous *persistence* of a political system such as the EU depends greatly – at least according to Easton's concept of political support – on the support of its citizens. On the one hand, the citizens' support has become measurable through direct events, such as the outcome of referenda during the European integration process, and, on the other hand, through general public opinion. Yet, although Easton assumes that it is necessary for a political system to stimulate the citizens' *diffuse support* in the form of the citizens' *faith in the legitimacy of the system*, their *sense of political community* or their *we-feeling*, in order to secure the system's *persistence*, he does not really give an answer to the question on how this could be realized.

Easton only postulates that those systems' members who still have strong emotional ties with the political objects will take actions when it comes to a decline in public support towards their political system. As a general rule, they will try to stabilize public support and to even convince the other systems' members of the fact that their political system deserves their support:

“[The] erosion of support needs to be viewed as a threat to the system. When support begins to slip away visibly, this is a danger signal to those who remain attached to the political objects and will typically trigger responses to prevent the support from falling too low“ (Easton 1979, p. 224).

In this way, an attempt is being made to revive the system's input of support in order to ensure the *persistence* of the political system (Easton 1979, p. 161). Easton is of the opinion that different supportive actors will try to stabilize and to stimulate the *diffuse support*:

“Typically, a decline of diffuse support may arouse reactions among the non-authoritative members of the system who for one reason or another strongly identify with the political objects and feel impelled to bring others to share their attitudes. Opinion leaders, mass media or patriotic organizations may take it upon themselves as a civic duty to bolster up by flagging diffuse support” (Easton 1979, p. 466).

Unfortunately, neither Easton nor other social science researchers have so far completed this proposal for an approach on how to revitalize public support for a political system, which is under threat. I therefore want to bring Easton's ideas together with the cultural-critical approach of the concept of *destination-branding* in order to show how the EU's decline of public support could be stopped.

3.2. The concept of EU-branding

In social sciences, *destination-branding* is better known under the term '*nation-branding*'. Yet, I will use the term '*EU-branding*' interchangeably with the term '*nation-branding*' in the following pages since this paper deals with the political system of the EU and a possible *EU-branding* campaign. *EU-branding* should be considered as the further development of the *nation-branding* concept on EU level.

Nation- or *EU-branding* means the application of conventional brand management techniques to nations, or supra-national organizations and political systems such as the EU in order to change and define the EU's image as well as the citizens' perception, as Baygert says:

“The *place* or *destination branding* – generic concept involving *nation branding*, the *region* or *county branding* and *city branding* – refers to the process of identifying, organizing and coordinating different variables to shape the image and the perception of a territory” (Baygert 2015, p. 135)².

Bassey assumes that

“[t]he thing about nation branding that makes it such an interesting concept [...] is that it is a technique borrowed from the corporate business world – where marketing is used to sell products, increase customer loyalty and broaden consumer markets” (Bassey 2012, p. 13).

2 Translated from original: “Le *place* ou *destination branding* (marketing territorial) – concept générique regroupant le *nation branding*, le *region* ou *county branding* et le *city branding* – renvoie au processus d’identification, d’organisation et de coordination des différentes variables destinées à modeler l’image et la perception d’un territoire.”

Today, the principle techniques of branding are used for everything; goods and services, organizations, events, individuals, but also for nations. The use of marketing strategies in a political context and the fact that political institutions, governments, political parties or individual politicians can be understood as brands is nothing new. *Nation-branding* found its way into social science research already in the 1990s. According to Kaefer, “[t]he definition of a nation most attuned to this theoretical perspective [has been] Benedict Anderson’s [...] conception of nations as imagined communities” (Kaefer 2014, p. 58). When he came up with his conception in 1983, he already defined a nation through the image it has in the people's minds (Anderson 2006, p. 5ff). We can consider that the image of an imagined community such as a nation in the sense of Anderson's conception is very comparable to what is considered as a *nation-* or *EU-brand* today.

A broad distinction can be made between three *nation-branding* approaches: the technical-economic, the political and the cultural-critical approach (Kaefer 2014, p. 71f). Whereas the technical-economic approach defines “nation branding [...] as a strategic tool to boost a country’s competitive advantage, seeking to inform – not question – the hegemony of the market” (Kaefer 2014, p. 72), the political approach understands nation-branding as “coordinated government efforts to manage a country’s image in order to promote tourism, investment and foreign relations” (Kaefer 2014, p. 73). The cultural-critical approach understands branding as a tool to influence national identities, social power relations and agenda-setting (Kaefer 2014, p. 74) and therefore best matches David Easton's ideas on how to revitalize *diffuse support* for a political system such as the EU, which is under threat: Actors identifying strongly with the political system will pool their resources in order to convince the system's members having negative feelings towards the political system and its benefits. When applying the concept of *nation-branding* to Easton's ideas, this would happen through means of branding.

3.3. The identity-image gap of the EU

The concept of *nation-branding* has been influenced to a great extent by Simon Anholt. According to him, a *nation-* or *EU-brand*, has three properties (Anholt 2007b, p. 29): 1. It attracts among others consumers, tourists, talent, investors, respect and attention. 2. It transfers magnetism to other objects. With regard to the EU, this means that an *EU-brand* would also transfer its attractiveness to its Member States, European products, etc. 3. It has the power to create order out of chaos. He considers brand management as a powerful tool that can help countries as well as the EU to manage their internal identity and their external reputation, which makes the respective political system more competitive:

“[T]he concept of brand is a powerful one, and is uniquely important to the management of countries, cities and regions, because it captures so well the idea that places need to understand and manage their internal identity and their external reputation” (Anholt 2007b, p.7).

Anholt defines a brand as “a product or service or organization, considered in combination with its name, its identity and its reputation”. He defines branding as “the process of designing, planning and communicating the name and the identity [of the brand], in order to build or manage its reputation” (Anholt 2007b, p. 4f). With regard to the concept of *nation-* or *EU-branding*, the brand is a county, a region, a nation or the EU. *Branding* is the way the *EU-brand* is put forward, how it is communicated and how it is managed to please its citizens and change their perception of the EU.

In order to clarify the understanding of what a brand really is, Anholt distinguishes between four different aspects of the brand itself (Anholt 2007b, p. 5ff): *brand identity*, *brand image*, *brand purpose* and *brand equity*.

“Brand management uniquely embraces these important ideas of core meaning (brand identity), reputation (brand image), the asset value of reputation (brand equity) and the power of shared goals (brand purpose)” (Anholt 2007b, p.7).

1. *Brand identity* “is the core concept of [a] product, clearly and distinctively expressed” (Anholt 2007b, p. 5). With regard to an *EU-brand*, key components of the *brand identity* are the EU's history, territory, folklore and icons. The *brand identity* thus represents “the enduring essence” of the EU (Dinnie 2008, p. 49f.). According to Dinnie, “[n]ations are clearly in an excellent position to construct such identity-building narratives, given the historical and cultural foundations upon which nations are built” (Dinnie 2008, p. 45).

2. *Brand image* is the perception of the brand that exists in the consumers' or the brand's audience's minds. It is virtually the same thing as reputation. It includes a range of associations, memories, expectations and other feelings that are linked to a product, a service, a company or a political system. In the case of an *EU-brand*, we are talking about the public opinion of the EU, the citizens' associations and feelings.

3. *Brand purpose* is an idea that is similar to *corporate culture*. It is considered as the internal aspect of the brand, as “the spirit of the organization”, “living the brand”, “shared values” or “common purpose”. The EU's *brand purpose* can be compared with the vision of the people working for the European institutions and related stakeholders. Anholt argues that

“an external promise to the marketplace has little meaning if it isn't shared by the workforce and other stakeholders, and if it isn't lived out in the internal structures, processes and culture of the organization. This is true of all groups of people, whether it's a company, a club, a sports team or a whole country: if most people accept the same

values and share the same goals, the group is far more likely to achieve its objectives” (Anholt 2007b, p. 6).

4. *Brand equity* “represents the 'permission' given by the company’s loyal consumer base for it to continue producing and developing its product range, innovating, communicating and selling to them” (Anholt 2007b, p. 6). In the context of an *EU-brand*, this would mean that citizens permit the EU to continue taking decisions. In other words: The EU’s *persistence* relies on its *brand equity*.

In the case of the EU, we can assume that its *brand identity* is quite clear for almost everybody in the EU and abroad. The EU stands for peace, freedom, democracy, economic development and diversity. What is currently missing in the case of an *EU-brand* is a positive *brand image*. The EU has a bad reputation. Quite the same is probably the case with regard to the EU’s *brand purpose*, but I do not want to make the internal structures and the staff identity of the European institutions subject of discussion in this thesis. Due to its bad reputation and most probably to problems in its *corporate culture*, the EU has lost its *brand equity*. A decline in the citizens’ support towards the European project can be observed. More and more people are calling the EU’s decisions, actions and even its existence into question.

Dinnie calls this problem “identity-image gap”:

“The identity-image gap tends to be a negative factor, with many nations struggling with the frustration of not being perceived by the rest of the world for what they truly are” (Dinnie 2008, p. 42).

According to him, the reputation of a country plays a critical role in its economic, social, political and cultural progress and he therefore highlights the importance of assisting nations “to dismantle and oppose the negative forces that might otherwise hold back the nation’s economic development and standing in the world” (Dinnie 2008, p. 42). He considers this as a “prime objective of nation-branding” (Dinnie 2008, p. 42). Anholt also points out that branding can play a major role when “the poor reputation [of a country] is genuinely unfair, and purely the result of a gap between reality and perception” (Anholt 2007b, p. 64).

3.4. The reasons behind EU-branding

In a world, which is marked by globalization and digitization, it becomes necessary for nation states as well as the EU to make use of branding techniques in order to work on their image and reputation. Anholt postulates that the spread of democracy and democratic-type governance in many parts of the world creates a need for a more “public-aware” approach to politics. At the same time, the public sphere becomes international due to the growing power of international media as well as more influential non-governmental organizations. The result is a better-informed and news-hungry audience. In addition, the decrease in international travel costs, the

rising spending power of a growing international middle class and its constant search for new experiences compels more and more places to make use of branding techniques in order to make themselves tourist destinations (Anholt 2007b, p. 19).

Anholt is of the opinion that “[t]he common driver of all these changes is globalization: a series of regional marketplaces [...] which is rapidly fusing into a single, global community” (Anholt 2007b, p. 21). When Anholt speaks about marketplaces, he does not only mean traditional markets for products and services. He also means markets for ideas, for influence, for culture, for reputation, for trust and for attention. He makes clear that

“[o]nly those global payers – whether they are countries, cities, regions, corporations, organizations, religions, NGOs, charities, political parties or individuals – with the ability to approach a wide and diverse global marketplaces with a clear, credible, appealing, distinctive and thoroughly planned vision, identity and strategy can compete” (Anholt 2007b, p. 21).

In a competitive environment, Dinnie therefore describes the more common aim of *nation-branding* as being to attract tourists, stimulate investments, attract higher education students and skilled workers, increase currency stability, but also to enhance *nation-building* (Dinnie 2008, p. 17). As I have already stated above, this paper only focuses on the cultural-critical approach of *nation-branding* and thus on the influence *nation-branding* has on national identities, social power relations and agenda-setting.

With regard to *EU-branding*, Van Ham criticizes the EU of having sold itself poorly to its citizens as well as the outside world over the past decades, which has, in his point of view, lead to the decline in public support towards the EU (Van Ham 2005, p. 122). The EU is currently confronted with a crisis of self-identification and a lack of direction regarding its future development. The EU strongly competes with its Member States for the citizens’ support. Unfortunately, it seems as if the EU Member States today are much more important to the citizens than the EU. The EU is experiencing a decline of public support. Nationalists and Eurosceptic parties have thus risen in polls and the future of the EU is called into question. Van Ham therefore argues “to refresh Europe's image, to restyle its PR and to start serious effort to brand the EU” (Van Ham 2005, p. 122). He calls for a revitalization process of the EU bringing its assets again to the fore. According to Van Ham, an *EU-branding* strategy would serve one very essential purpose:

“[It] aims to make European citizens feel better and more confident about themselves by giving them a sense of belonging and a clear self-concept. By creating an aspirational lifestyle, branding offers a kind of ersatz for ideologies and political programmes that have lost their relevance” (Van Ham 2005, p. 123).

The aim of *EU-branding* is to give “an emotional dimension” to the respective political system:

“Branding goes beyond PR and marketing. It tries to transform products and services as well as places [such as the EU] into something more by giving them an emotional dimension with which people can identify. Branding touches those parts of the human psyche which rational arguments just cannot reach” (Van Ham 2005, p. 122).

Yet, branding is not only about emotions. Baygert explains that *political* or *institutional branding* follows mainly the same principles as *commercial branding*. Branding plays a structuring role with regard to citizens’ choices (Baygert 2015, p. 134). An *EU-brand*, which Baygert calls *institutional brand*, has two very important dimensions: its *semiotic dimension* and its *narrative dimension* (Baygert 2015, p. 137). Through its *semiotic dimension*, an *EU-brand* can create meaning, signification, direction and orientation among the citizens. It can reduce transaction costs, costs that occur when citizens have to look for information in order to make themselves an opinion on the EU. An *EU-brand* allows the condensation of a set of attributes and images in one word (Baygert 2013, p. 51). Through its *narrative dimension*, the *EU-brand* can construct its own subjectivity. Branding the EU will make citizens, politicians and others talk about it. Discussions and active participation by all individuals will help the EU to (re)build itself.

“[An institutional brand] does not only produce statements and, through them, meanings. It also builds his own (political) subjectivity – a subjectivity that is neither empirical nor purely psychological, but, by accumulating an intelligible and sensitive aspect (or physically – through the incarnation of the brand by individuals), is built through its manifestations” (Baygert 2015, p. 138)³.

EU-branding is needed to create and to maintain a *we-feeling* of European society in a period when EU citizens have lost their faith in the outcomes of political decisions at EU level, at a time when the EU is confronted with stress due to wars in third countries, migration waves towards the EU, as well as terrorism and social exclusion in the aftermath of the financial and economic crisis within the EU. Furthermore, *EU-branding* can help citizens to cope with information overloads and to ease their opinion-forming process.

Easton argues for

“responses through which systems are able to cope with stress occasioned by cleavages of any kind, indirectly we shall be dealing with measures through which systems seek to build support through the creation of conditions of agreement and harmony” (Easton 1979, p. 239).

3 Translated from original: “[Une marque institutionnelle] ne produit pas seulement des énonces et, à travers elles, des significations. Elle construit aussi sa propre subjectivité (politique) – une subjectivité qui n’est ni purement empirique ni psychologique, mais qui, en cumulant un aspect intelligible et un aspect sensible (ou corporel – à travers l’incarnation de la marque par des individualités), se construit à travers ses manifestations.”

Dinnie is of the opinion that branding can be used to create a common identity, to enhance *nation-building* “by nourishing confidence, pride, harmony, ambition, national resolve” (Dinnie 2008, p. 17). Van Ham is convinced that the EU provides all the assets in order to become a successful brand. He considers the EU as

“the model of effective multilateralism if one applies a global yardstick. Europe’s policy style is remarkably civil and mutual trust is beyond comparison. It is therefore astonishing that the EU undersells itself so dramatically. Branding European power will be critical to focus the mirror of European identity, and to spread the European model abroad. At home fine-tuning of this model is required, but in a world where cooperation and trust are scarce political commodities, the EU has much to offer. Acknowledging Europe as a force for good in the world will bring pride and self-confidence to Europeans, as well as respect and credibility abroad. For Europe, it will be a choice between branding or decline. This should not be a very difficult dilemma” (Van Ham 2005, p. 126).

Branding can be seen as a very useful tool to regain public support for the European Union and to overcome its political crisis, because branding can “provide the [EU] with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences” (Dinnie 2008, p. 149). At the same time, branding becomes particularly important in times of increasing Euroscepticism, since it can “help to create spontaneous alignment of purpose and shared goals amongst normally competitive and even combative stakeholders” (Anholt 2007b, p. 29).

3.5. Challenges of EU-branding

Although *EU-branding* seems to be a useful and necessary solution to the current self-identification crisis of the EU, as I have shown in the previous chapters, scholars have raised several very legitimate critical arguments in the past why branding could also be a misleading approach or even result in less public support for the respective political system. On the following pages, I will therefore give a short theoretical overview of the different challenges an *EU-branding* campaign will need to overcome in order to be as effective as possible. I will then develop a number of recommendations an *EU-branding* campaign will need to take into consideration.

3.5.1. Transparency and legitimacy

Nation- or *EU-branding* is considered as problematic since a nation or the EU belong neither to politicians nor to communication specialists. A nation belongs to anyone and so does the EU. The EU belongs to its entire citizenry. The question therefore is: Who has the right to act as *EU-brand* manager? It is questionable if politicians or communication specialists actually have the

legitimacy to launch an *EU-branding* campaign since such a campaign aims to have large effects on the whole political system and its system members. Due to the decline in public support towards the EU, politicians should be careful when launching such a campaign. Public support for the EU could even further decrease if EU citizens do not think that the EU institutions have the right to brand their EU. Thus, the effectiveness of an *EU-branding* campaign can only be guaranteed, according to Dinnie, if it is developed in a public-private partnership. He argues that

“a head of state who is democratically elected [...] can [...] decide how to spend public money. At the same time, the head of state does not have the sufficient know-how and marketing skills and will thus need to get the work done by professional marketers” (Dinnie 2008, p. 170).

In the case of *EU-branding*, such a public-private partnership would need to include the EU institutions, the heads of States, communication specialists and could even go further than that. This joins Easton's argument saying that

“[o]pinion leaders, mass media or patriotic organizations may take it upon themselves as a civic duty to bolster up by flagging diffuse support” (Easton 1979, p. 466).

An *EU-brand* should be developed by a variety of stakeholders in order to make sure that public opinion is well represented and respected, which in the end creates *brand legitimacy*. Apart from ensuring the campaign's legitimacy, this will also help to ensure that citizens do not consider such a campaign as a waste of money or as another opaque activity carried out by the EU.

“Such a public-private partnership will need enormous transparency efforts and should be based on an inclusive stakeholder approach in order to have as much support for the campaign as possible” (Dinnie 2008, p. 170).

Furthermore, Dinnie argues that transparency with regard to an *EU-branding* campaign does not simply mean transparency on how public money is spent. It should also be understood as providing good reasons on why the money is spent:

“Any nation-branding activity that is funded by public money will find itself under intense scrutiny from the media, and therefore, it is essential to provide some examples of tangible benefits delivered from such branding activity” (Dinnie 2008, p. 153).

Apart from an inclusive and integrative branding approach based on a public-private partnership, Kaefer and Bassey underline the importance that a branding campaign should be based on those values that are reflected in the actual political leadership (Kaefer 2014, p. 86) and that are lived by the respective citizens:

“Nation branding must not be confused with propaganda; it is only successful when the 'brand' is lived by the citizens of that country” (Bassey 2012, p. 14).

In this regard, Anholt postulates that branding actions should never be implemented only for the sake of branding and communication purposes, but “for a real purpose in the real world”.

Otherwise, EU citizens could perceive *EU-branding* “of being insincere, ineffective, and [...] as propaganda” (Anholt 2007b, p.32).

Recommendations:

- An *EU-branding* campaign should be based on an integrative stakeholder approach, including politicians and marketers, as well as other organizations such as NGOs or trade unions, in order to be considered legitimate by the majority of the citizens.
- An *EU-branding* campaign should honestly reflect the values lived by the citizens as well as the current political system in order not to be perceived as empty propaganda.
- An *EU-branding* campaign should be organized and developed in a very transparent way, also providing the reasons why it was decided to create such a campaign.

3.5.2. Limits of advertising

According to the concept of *nation-branding*, advertising and marketing techniques can be used to increase the *diffuse support* for the political system of the EU, as David Easton would put it. Branding is regarded as one possible means to develop a *we-feeling*, a *sense of political community*, a collective identity among EU citizens although advertising is considered as having limits to reach the initial goal of changing the people’s minds:

“Advertising may be limited in its mind-changing power” (Dinnie 2008, p. 49).

“Pre-existing national stereotypes may be entrenched in consumer’s minds and therefore difficult to change” (Dinnie 2008, p. 15).

As in *corporate branding*, advertising can only be as good as the quality of a product. If the quality of a product does not live up to the hype, which is created around it, there is no way for advertising campaigns to encourage consumption. Likewise, if the EU does not live up to the image it attempts to project, the EU does nothing more than waste time and resources on an initiative that is doomed to fail. Moreover, a branding campaign could even have a negative effect on the *EU-brand*, as Jonson explains. The use of symbols such as the EU-flag, which is in general a symbol citizens associate positively with the EU, could lose its symbolic nature when used in a branding campaign:

“nation branding effectively transforms a civic image such as the flag, something which belongs to all, and revered by many, into something calculated and therefore contested” (Jonson 2011, p. 17).

Therefore, Anholt is of the opinion that branding alone is not sufficient and that it needs more to change the perceptions of the people and strengthen the image of a nation or the EU:

“National reputation cannot be constructed; it can only be earned; and imagining that such a deeply rooted phenomenon can be shifted by so weak an instrument as marketing

communications is an extravagant delusion. [...] Whilst governments cannot hope to manipulate the perceptions of millions of people in distant countries, there are three important things that they can do about their national reputation” (Anholt 2009).

Anholt provides three basic conditions, which should be implemented, so that an *EU-branding* campaign can really work. First, the EU should try to understand and monitor their image “in the countries and sectors where it matters most to them in a rigorous and scientific way, and understand exactly how and where this affects their interests in those countries and sectors” (Anholt 2009). Since an *EU-branding* campaign should be developed in order to increase the public support for the EU, the EU should focus on monitoring and understanding the public opinion of citizens in its Member States, especially in those Member States where nationalist and Eurosceptic movements and parties are strong. Second, the EU should “collaborate imaginatively, effectively and openly with business and civil society” (Anholt 2009). In this way, the EU could agree on a common “strategy and narrative – the ‘story’ of who the [EU] is, where it is going and how it is going to get there – which honestly reflects the skills, the genius and the will of the people” (Anholt 2009). Third, Anholt claims that the EU should maintain “a stream of innovative and eye-catching products, services, policies and initiatives in every sector, which keeps it at the forefront of the world’s attention and admiration; demonstrates the truth of that narrative; and proves the [...] right to the reputation its people and government desire to acquire” (Anholt 2009). These three conditions join the critical arguments concerning the legitimacy and transparency of an *EU-branding* campaign that I have presented in the above chapter.

The question arises, if an *EU-branding* campaign really is the right track or if the EU simply has to start adjusting its policies in the interest of its citizens. If public support for the EU were only linked to concrete policy outputs, the answer would be very clear. Yet, the EU is not only facing an image problem due to its policies, but foremost because the citizens do not feel close to the EU. They are indifferent to the EU. Therefore, an *EU-branding* campaign can be considered as useful way to change this situation.

Recommendations:

- An *EU-branding* campaign should be based on a scientific monitoring of the status quo of the *EU-brand*, of public opinion and the will of EU citizens.
- An *EU-branding* campaign should only communicate what the EU has already reached or what it really plans to do.
- An *EU-branding* campaign should go hand in hand with new (policy) initiatives demonstrating the legitimacy of such a campaign.

- An *EU-branding* campaign should not aim at changing citizens' perception directly, but at bringing the EU closer to the citizens so that they could change their opinion on the EU themselves.

3.5.3. Problem of complexity

Now, the European institutions – the European Parliament, the European Commission, the Council of the European Union, the EU presidency, the political groups represented in the European Parliament, the European political parties – all communicate on their own on the EU and its political outcomes. Each institution has its own communication strategy. In addition, national governments and parties also communicate on the EU and the decisions taken at EU level. Finally, yet not less importantly, stakeholders are part of the manifold organizations communicating on the EU as well. All these actors disperse lots of information through different communication channels, using different logos, messages and representatives. Mass communication on the EU coming from all these different actors ends in a misinformation of the citizens. They no longer find their way through the very complex world of EU decision-making. Consequently, the EU appears too complex and difficult to its citizens, which then leads to the impression of the EU being too bureaucratic, inefficient and not able to take decisions. The complexity of the political system of the EU is definitely a big challenge an *EU-branding* campaign needs to overcome. Branding a nation is already difficult due to the number of different actors and institutions. This number grows exponentially when communicating on the EU.

The problem of complexity is not only linked to the number of stakeholders who all communicate differently on the EU. Besides, the EU decision-making processes as well as the decisions taken at EU level are in general very complex, technical and difficult to understand for EU citizens. It is a matter of fact that the citizens therefore turn their back on the EU and feel the EU to be excessively bureaucratic and opaque. Consequently, the EU has to be made simpler so that everybody can understand the role and the reasons of the existence of the EU. At the same time, Anholt warns about communicating in a too simplistic way:

“It’s more accurate to say that ‘nation branding’ is the problem, not the solution. It is public opinion that ‘brands’ countries – in other words, reduces them to the weak, simplistic, outdated, unfair stereotypes that so damage their prospects in a globalised world – and countries need to fight against the tendency of international public opinion to brand them. Governments need to help the world understand the real, complex, rich, diverse nature of their people and landscapes, their history and heritage, their products and their resources: in other words, to prevent them from becoming mere brands” (Anholt 2009).

Recommendations:

- An *EU-branding* campaign should be based on the use of one common logo, one slogan and one strategy, so that the multitude of actors, currently communicating differently on the EU, will talk with one voice.
- An *EU-branding* campaign should be simple and understandable, but not too simplistic so that it does not encourage stereotypical thinking.

3.5.4. Managing diversity

“Managing diversity is a critical component of the nation-brand construct [...]. Cultural and social diversity poses an important challenge to the application of branding techniques in developing a consistent message about the nation” (Dinnie 2008, p. 145).

When it is already difficult to create a *nation-brand* because of the cultural and social diversity of the citizens of a nation, as Dinnie argues, the application of branding techniques in developing a consistent message about the EU must be even more challenging. The European population can be considered as one of the most heterogeneous (culture-, social-, linguistic-wise, etc.) populations in the world. *Nation-brands* in general, and especially the *EU-brand*, can be considered as “multi-faceted” (Dinnie 2008, p. 150). Consequently, it is a challenge for marketers to create consistent *nation-branding* campaigns (Dinnie 2008, p. 150). EU citizens will expect an *EU-branding* campaign to reflect different topics and values of the EU, depending on their social and cultural background. An *EU-branding* strategy, therefore, has to find an answer to the question of how one brand can reflect the diversity and plethora of identities and opinions of the European society (Jonson 2011, p. 18), which is based on different countries and national identities, different languages and dialects, different religions, different social models, different wishes, demands and opinions. In consequence, an *EU-branding* campaign that wants to reach its citizens and convince them about the EU will have to be as inclusive as possible, and even more inclusive than traditional *nation-branding* campaigns.

Recommendation:

- An *EU-branding* campaign should be as inclusive as possible, and even more inclusive than traditional nation-branding campaigns. Inclusive means reflecting the realities of the socially and culturally diverse EU societies, but also in the sense of simple and easy understandable content.

3.5.5. Inclusiveness

Dinnie considers inclusiveness as one of the key challenges of a *nation-branding* campaign:

“The principle of inclusiveness holds that all the relevant stakeholders need to be involved in campaign development” (Dinnie 2008, p. 187).

At EU level, the relevant stakeholders comprise the different European institutions, the national and local governments as well as political parties in the narrow sense. In the wider sense, “relevant stakeholders” could also mean further stakeholders having an interest in the EU, such as NGOs, communication agencies, scientists, media outlets, businesses. Furthermore, Nicolas Baygert suggests that an *EU-branding* campaign needs to be based on its *brand community*:

“Branding involves a brand community; brands in permanent interaction with their audiences” (Baygert 2015, p. 138)⁴.

In the case of an *EU-brand*, “brand community” could be understood as the EU citizens. An *EU-brand* thus has to constantly communicate with its public and should rely on their wishes and feelings. Concisely, *EU-branding* demands a cooperation between all different societal and political levels: European, national and regional, public and private, authorities and citizens (Baygert 2015, p. 136). Anholt therefore says correctly that a country only “has a real chance of affecting its image and making it into a competitive asset rather than an impediment or a liability” if its branding strategy is realized in coordination and cooperation with all stakeholders through effective brand management and a long-term strategy (Anholt 2007b, p. 14f).

Recommendations:

- An *EU-branding* campaign should be supported by all the relevant stakeholders (European, national, regional, local, public, private, authorities and citizens).
- Citizens should have the possibility to participate in the development of an *EU-branding* campaign in order to strengthen their identification with the campaign’s goals.
- An *EU-branding* campaign should be envisaged on long-term basis.

3.5.6. Problem of competitors

Simon Anholt evokes that the communication strategies used by the national governments represent “[a]nother reason for the EU’s weak ‘brand image’” (Anholt 2007a, p. 119). Member State governments have the longstanding habit to ascribe all successes reached on EU level to their own efforts and all failures to the EU and its representatives. According to Anholt, a huge challenge occurs from this competitive environment:

4 Translated from original: “Le branding implique une dimension communautaire (brand community); des marques en interaction permanente avec leurs publics.”

“It is certainly not impossible for people to feel multiple loyalties - to community, to region, to country, to continent - but wherever those loyalties are weakest, it provides an opportunity for politicians to use the place as a scapegoat or dumping-ground for anything unwanted, negative or undesirable, and over time this habit will further weaken and eventually kill the brand” (Anholt 2007a, p. 119).

Politicians currently use the EU as a “scapegoat”. As long as the governments of the EU Member States tell their citizens that the EU institutions are responsible for the bad decisions taken at EU level and that they have tried to get the most out of it for their citizens, it seems almost impossible for the EU to create or maintain its *brand image*. At the same time, it shows that there is no real *EU-brand purpose* since the governments or the EU Member States, which are part of the internal structures of the EU, do not act and communicate for a common purpose.

Furthermore, the public discourse has worsened with the rise of Eurosceptic and nationalist parties bashing the EU for many failures using demagogic and untrue facts. It is therefore not surprising that the different *nation-brands* within the EU are much more present in the minds of the EU citizens than the *EU-brand* itself. This is also due to a strategic problem of the *EU-brand*: Its representatives are in general not well known whereas national party and government leaders are very well known in their respective Member States. The latter therefore have more influence on public opinion and *brand development*. Concisely, the *EU-brand* has always been weak and is currently further weakened due to the communication strategies of its competitors compared to the EU *nation-brands*.

As long as the different EU institutions and stakeholders do not communicate with a common aim, it will be almost impossible to create a real *EU-brand* and strengthen citizens’ support towards the EU, as Anholt states:

“Just like commercial and corporate brands, a powerful brand identity tends to stem from a powerful and united sense of common purpose within the organisation itself. Ask any company about its brand and it may well talk first about its corporate culture - how the staff ‘live the brand’ - rather than questions of external promotion and publicity. So just in case anybody should fall into the trap of thinking that logos and slogans can achieve anything more significant than mild publicity for an important anniversary, the point needs to be stressed that without a common purpose there can be no community, and without community there can be no identity” (Anholt 2007a, p. 118).

Recommendation:

- An *EU-branding* campaign can only be effective if all stakeholders act and communicate with a common purpose: increasing citizens’ support towards the EU.

3.5.7. Managing uncontrollability

Numerous unpredictable external factors exist that can influence the *EU-brand* negatively. Dinnie therefore argues for a *segmentation approach*:

“A solution to the dilemma [...] of managing diversity and uncontrollability may be found in the development of a nation-brand strategy that adopts and implements the basic marketing technique of segmentation” (Dinnie 2008, p. 146).

In marketing, *segmentation* means the division of a market or an audience into subsets of consumers, businesses, or countries that have, or are perceived to have, common needs, interests, and priorities, and then designing and implementing specific strategies to target them. In the case of an *EU-brand*, this may include different messages or communication channels adapted to the demands and attributes of the different audience segments. In general, it is easier to reach the older population through traditional media outlets such as television and newspapers, whereas the younger population prefers to consume information via the Internet. Just to give some short examples, how segmentation could be done: an *EU-branding* strategy could target nations, regions, cities or neighbourhoods differently (*geographic segmentation*); it could also follow a *demographic segmentation* approach, which divides an audience into different life stage groups and allows for messages and communication content to be tailored accordingly. Based on their age, sex, generation, religion, profession and education level, EU citizens could perceive the reasons and the benefits of the EU differently.

Recommendation:

- An *EU-branding* campaign should follow a *marketing segmentation* approach.

3.5.8. The ‘zeitgeist’

When developing a *nation-branding* campaign one has to take into consideration the current ‘zeitgeist’, “the defining spirit or mood of a particular period or history” (Dinnie 2008, p. 151).

“The social trends and phenomena contributing to zeitgeist require to be monitored and taken into consideration if the nation-brand is to have resonance and relevance within society at large” (Dinnie 2008, p. 151).

In the EU, the current predominant ‘zeitgeist’ is very much shaped by the consequences of the economic and monetary crisis. The unemployment rate is high, people fear for their jobs and more and more people are living in precarious conditions, especially in Southern European countries. Furthermore, the EU faces big challenges linked to migration as well as a feeling of instability because of terrorism. The outcomes of globalization and in particular international trade give rise to mistrust in the current political elites as well. The citizens have the impression that the current economic and political system only benefits a small group of people and that it is

not designed to benefit society at large. Since the EU and its Member States seem unable to find satisfying solutions to these problems, EU citizens turn their back on the EU and support Eurosceptic and nationalist parties, which call the EU into question.

The EU, therefore, has to define a future *EU-branding* campaign based on the current 'zeitgeist'. It has to communicate on how the EU is actually fighting those different problems and on how people benefit from the decisions taken at EU level. Politics needs to get closer to the citizens and give them the feeling that their concerns and opinions are taken into consideration. This could, in the end, change the current 'zeitgeist' of fear, instability and mistrust.

Recommendation:

- An *EU-branding* campaign should be based on the current 'zeitgeist' showing what the EU is actually doing to counter people's fears.

4. Internal and external factors influencing an EU-branding campaign

4.1. The SWOT matrix

As I have explained in the previous chapters, the EU can be considered as a brand. I was arguing for a better brand management, especially because the EU's *brand image* has been seen to vanish in recent years. With this in mind, the European Commission has already acknowledged the fact that its communication efforts need to adapt to the new environment of Euroscepticism. In the Management Plan of its communication department, Directorate-General Communication, the overarching objective for communication has been defined as to change the citizens' perception of the way that they perceive the EU to “improve their lives” and that they “engage with the EU”. They should get the feeling “that their concerns are taken into consideration in European decision making process and they know about their rights in the EU” (European Commission 2016a, p. 6). People's support for the EU is declining and has reached quite an alarming trough, demonstrated by the British referendum to leave the EU. I have therefore made several recommendations based on a critical theoretical review of the *EU-branding* concept on how an *EU-branding* campaign should be implemented in order to change citizens' perception and in order to safeguard the *persistence* of the political system.

Yet, before launching a branding campaign, an evaluation or analysis of the current state of play of a brand is needed. That is why I will proceed to provide an analysis of the current state of play of the *EU-brand*. I will make use of the so-called *SWOT matrix*. *SWOT* is the abbreviation of the words *strengths*, *weaknesses*, *opportunities* and *threats*. In 1965, four Harvard professors – Edmund Philip Learned, Roland Chris Christensen, Kenneth Richmond Andrews and William D. Guth – created the *SWOT matrix* in order to analyze the environment of a system or organization

(Speth 2014, p. 5). This multidimensional analytical model helps to identify the internal and external factors influencing a certain object such as a political system like the EU, but also its internal positive and negative elements of which the respective object can make use or which it should improve. The analysis can subsequently serve as an objective basis to develop a strategy aiming to improve the standing of the system or organization (Speth 2014, p. 4f).

“The SWOT matrix allows the analysis of the state of play of an organization at a given time, in a forward-looking perspective rather than retrospective. It is therefore to analyze the situation of a structure while keeping in mind its future prospects” (Speth 2014, p. 7)⁵. Today, the *SWOT analysis* is especially used in marketing contexts. This analytical model therefore corresponds very well to the *EU-branding* approach I am focusing on in this thesis. Hence, I will now highlight the external factors (*threats* and *opportunities*), to which the EU is exposed, but also its internal *weaknesses* and *strengths* – characteristics that are part of the EU itself – that influence the EU’s capability in being a brand. However, I would like to make clear that a *SWOT analysis* is only a snapshot of the current situation, which can change very quickly. Nevertheless, with regard to a future *EU-branding* campaign, the goal should be “to match the company's [– in this case the EU's –] strengths to attractive opportunities in the environment, while eliminating or overcoming the weaknesses and minimising the threats” (Armstrong et al. 2013, p. 55).

Figure 3: The SWOT matrix

Internal	Strengths Internal capabilities that may help the EU reach its objectives	Weaknesses Internal limitations that may interfere with the EU's ability to achieve its objectives
External	Opportunities External factors that the EU may be able to exploit to its advantage	Threats Current and emerging external factors that may challenge the EU's performance
	Positive	Negative

Source: Adaptation of Armstrong et al. 2013, p. 55.

4.2. The strengths of the EU-brand

The EU can already rely on a number of internal characteristics that positively influence its capacity to be or become a brand. In the framework of the *SWOT analysis*, these characteristics are called *strengths*.

“Strengths include internal capabilities, resources and positive situational factors that may help the company serve its customers and achieve its objectives” (Armstrong et al. 2013, p. 54).

5 Translated from original: “La matrice SWOT permet de faire l'état des lieux de la situation d'une organisation à un moment donné, dans une optique prospective plutôt que retrospective. Il s'agit donc d'analyser la situation d'une structure tout en gardant à l'esprit les perspectives d'avenir de celle-ci.”

Existing communication infrastructures, such as the communications departments of the different EU institutions and the different communication channels, through which they try to reach out to the citizens, can be regarded as internal resources owned by the EU institutions facilitating communication with the public. The European Commission for example relies on a variety of communication channels, including the Spokesperson's Service, which is responsible for traditional media relations; representations and EuropeDirect offices representing the Commission in the Member States and even on a more local level; events like the Citizens' Dialogue giving citizens the possibility to directly address questions to the Commission in a face-to-face environment; websites, social media accounts and communication campaigns, which aim to inform the citizens (European Commission 2016c, p. 6f).

As I will discuss in chapter 4.3., the communication infrastructures of the EU institutions also show some *weaknesses*. Although the EU institutions are highly bureaucratic public bodies, which in general seem to be immune to change, reorganization and better coordination of communication infrastructures within and between the institutions is possible and can therefore be considered as another *strength* according to the *SWOT matrix*.

The budgets of the EU institutions used for communication purposes are based on public financing and thus have a stable character. Hence, the institutions can develop their communication strategies on a long-term basis. They can also expect a sufficient amount of money for their implementation. In comparison to private businesses and other organizations also relying on branding, the public character of the EU budget for communication matters can be regarded as another internal resource that helps the EU to achieve its communication objectives.

The policy areas on which the EU institutions are active and the decisions taken by the institutions are very diverse. Such rich communication content can be considered as a positive internal factor influencing the EU's branding capabilities, too. Rich content leaves enough room for a possible *market segmentation* approach I have argued for in chapter 3.5.7. Not all citizens have the same needs, interests and priorities. It is therefore important to design and implement specific communication strategies to target them. Rich content makes this possible.

Apart from the diverse EU policy areas, the EU as a political system also represents a diverse range of strong and well-known societal as well as political values, which are in general much appreciated by the citizens. Amongst other things, the EU stands for peace, cultural diversity, democracy, rule of law, freedom of movement, economic development and human rights. Furthermore, the citizens are acquainted with strong symbols illustrating the EU, such as the European flag, the European anthem, Europe Day and the slogan of the EU "United in Diversity". The euro, the common currency of 19 out of the 28 EU Member States, can also be regarded as a symbol of the EU. Moreover, the fact that physical borders are nonexistent

between the Member States belongs to the list of strong EU symbols. The diverse range of values and symbols can help to underpin a *market segmentation* approach in *EU-branding* since almost every citizen can at least identify with some if not all of them. The use of those symbols and values can also drive the emotional part of branding activities, something Barbara Liebhardt will discuss in more detail in the second volume.

Finally, the Eurobarometer surveys, which are conducted twice a year based on approximately 1000 face-to-face interviews per EU Member State, represent another *strength* of the *EU-brand*. These quantitative analyses enable constant monitoring of public opinion and especially the image of the EU as well as people's support for their political system. I will describe some of the collected data in more detail in chapter 4.5. Currently, public support towards the EU has decreased dramatically, as I have already described at the very beginning of this paper. Recent Eurobarometer surveys support this argument. Based on the outcomes of the Eurobarometer surveys, *EU-branding* can be adapted and new communication priorities can be developed.

4.3. The weaknesses of the EU-brand

Although the EU institutions are well equipped with internal *strengths* in order to brand the EU, they do also show some *weaknesses* with regard to their brand management. Armstrong defines the *weaknesses* of a company, organization or political system such as the EU as “internal limitations and negative situational factors that may interfere with [its] performance” (Armstrong et al. 2013, p. 54f).

As I have explained previously, the communication infrastructures and channels of the EU institutions are part of the internal *strengths* to brand the EU. Yet, their multiplicity also represents a significant factor weakening the *EU-brand*. Within the critical review of the *EU-branding* concept, I have already made clear that national governments as well as Eurosceptic and nationalist parties compete with the EU for the citizens' attention, but the problem of competition even extends over the EU institutions themselves. Every EU institution has its own communication department at its disposal. They all communicate independently with the citizens. The result is a competitive environment between the institutions trying to convince the citizens as much as possible of their role in EU decision-making processes. Within the European Commission, the communication infrastructure was not centralized for a very long time. Hence, even the different directorate-generals of the Commission communicated separately with the citizens. The Commission has recently acknowledged this problem so that the “Directorate-General Communication (DG COMM) has steered the process to streamline and define one sole overarching Commission-wide objective for external communication, aligned with the new political environment and the increased expectations expressed in the Commissioners Mission Letters and the Working Methods of the Commission” (European Commission 2016a, p. 3). This

should be kept in mind for an *EU-branding* campaign. It does not make sense that every EU institution communicates on its own since this situation results in inconsistent and contradictory communication outcomes. If the EU institutions want to brand the EU and overcome its crisis of public support, they should speak with one voice. At least the European Commission has already acknowledged in its Strategic Plan that “[c]ommunication can only be successful if the Commission speaks with one voice” (European Commission 2016c, p. 3).

The communication infrastructures of the EU institutions can not only be regarded as a *weakness* in branding the EU, because they are competing with each other for the citizens’ attention, but also because they are highly bureaucratic and hierarchic. The decision-making process with regard to the communication policies of the EU institutions are long, which only gives room to reactive rather than active communication with the citizens. Especially, in times of digitization and social networks this becomes problematic. The EU should do more than following the traditional top-down approach, meaning that political institutions provide communication to the citizens without any form of interaction.

The way the EU institutions communicate with the citizens is not only characterized by the top-down communication management, but also by bad communication in general. Due to the high number of communication channels used by the EU institutions, especially on social networks, it is not surprising that citizens have problems to find their way through the maze of EU politics. The EU appears to them as an opaque, complicated and incomprehensible political system. Citizens do not know the offline communication channels of the institutions that I have already mentioned in the previous chapter – Representations, EuropeDirect, and Citizens’ Dialogues. In addition, offline communication campaigns are often carried out in the surroundings of the EU institutions in Brussels. In that way the institutions cannot reach out to the citizens. EU civil servants literally create communication for EU civil servants and people who already know how the EU works and who are aware of the benefits of this political system. EU communication campaigns beyond the Internet therefore often do not target the right target group.

I have mentioned the diverse nature of European society as one of the *strengths* of the *EU-brand* since it stands for the uniqueness of the European project. At the same time, diversity represents one of the key challenges in branding the EU as I have already explained during the critical review of the *EU-branding* concept in chapter 3.5.4. Apart from the fact that communication content and material has to be created in the 24 official languages and translation is costly, the EU institutions have to adapt their communication to different citizens with different cultural backgrounds. The target group of *EU-branding* is very diverse. It is already complicated to adapt a branding campaign to one nation since different social groups have different references. With national borders in-between the social groups, targeting becomes even more complicated.

The fact that public financing provides the EU institutions with a stable budget for

communication purposes, which allows the development of huge long-term communication strategies, has been highlighted as a *strength* in the previous sub-chapter. Nevertheless, the budget spent on communication purposes becomes contestable. Spending huge amounts of money in order to brand the EU could give rise to questioning if the money should not be invested in other areas. This joins the arguments presented in chapter 3.5.1. on the legitimacy and transparency of *EU-branding*.

In chapter 3.5.3. I have discussed the problem of complexity of an *EU-branding* campaign. I have pointed out the complex nature of the political system of the EU due to the multiplicity of its institutions, the influence of national governments and stakeholders as well as the often very technical policy outcomes. The political system of the EU is therefore a problem in itself. Many efforts have to be undertaken in order to communicate about the EU in a simple and understandable way.

4.4. The opportunities of the EU-brand

Apart from internal factors, notably its *strengths* and *weaknesses*, the EU's capability in being a brand is also influenced by external factors. Armstrong defines "favourable factors or trends in the external environment" of a company, organization or political system as *opportunities*, which the EU "may [...] exploit to its advantage" (Armstrong et al. 2013, p. 55).

In the context of *EU-branding*, two particular external factors can be considered as *opportunities* the EU could make use of. One is the EU's network of stakeholders. The other is the fact that the EU institutions carry out most of their communication with communication professionals coming from outside the EU institutions.

The EU could make use of its stakeholder network in order to create synergies. NGOs, companies, citizens' organizations as well as media outlets have a strong interest in the functioning of the EU. They all work with the EU institutions on policy-related matters as lobbyists. If public support towards the EU decreases, they should also be interested to fix this problem. As I have explained in chapter 3.1. based on Easton's concept of political support:

"Opinion leaders, mass media or patriotic organizations may take it upon themselves as a civic duty to bolster up by flagging diffuse support" (Easton 1979, p. 466).

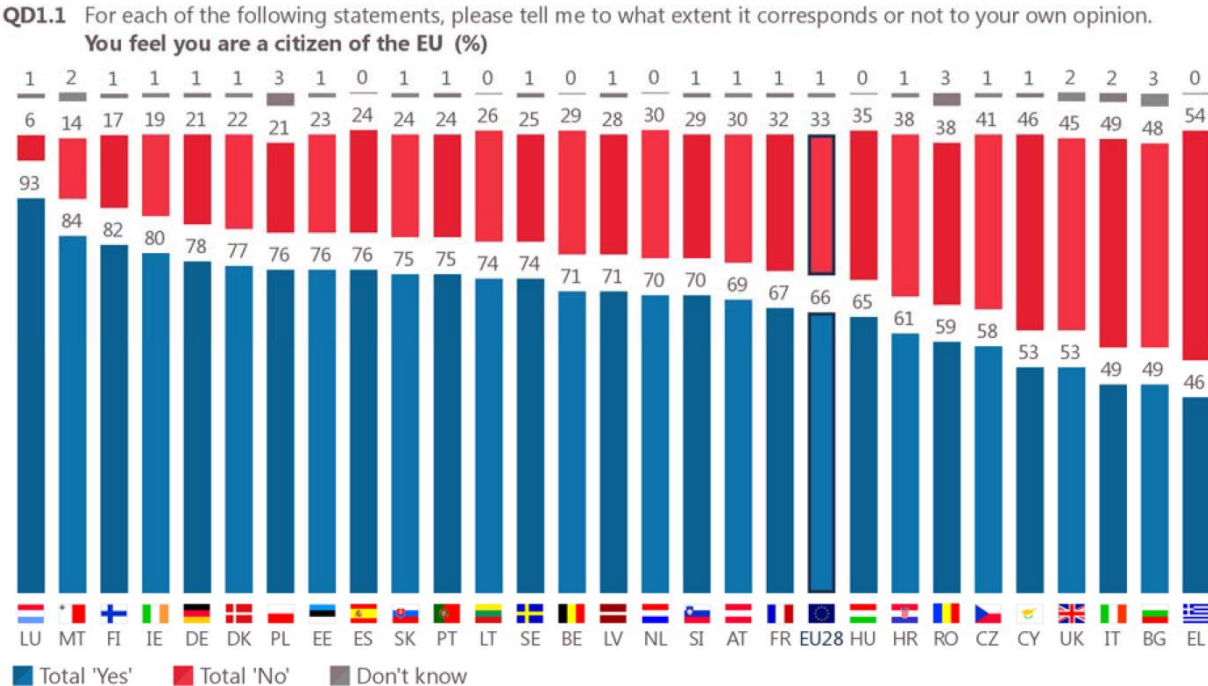
Cooperation between the EU institutions and their stakeholders could be used to better reach out to the citizens, and strengthen the transparency and legitimacy of an *EU-branding* campaign, as I have explained in chapters 3.5.1. and 3.5.5. A synergy with media outlets could even lead to cooperation in the content production and diffusion of a campaign.

What the EU institutions are already doing now is cooperating with external communication agencies with regard to the development and implementation of communication campaigns. In that way, the EU institutions can build their communication efforts on the expertise of

professionals knowing how to communicate towards a certain target group of citizens or costumers.

Another external factor, which can be interpreted as favorable to the functioning of an *EU-branding* campaign is the citizens’ high identification with the EU, as figure 4 demonstrates.

Figure 4: The EU citizens’ feeling of being a citizen of the EU in 2016



Source: European Commission 2016b, p. 38.

The last Eurobarometer survey, conducted between 21 and 31 May 2016, has shown that

“[t]wo in three Europeans feel that they are citizens of the EU (66%, +2 percentage points since autumn 2015), while a third still do not (33%, -1). [...] This opinion is most widespread in Luxembourg (93%), Malta (84%), Finland (82%) and Ireland (80%)” (European Commission 2016b, p. 38).

In 26 EU Member States the number of people feeling they are EU citizens is higher than 50%. In autumn 2015, this was only the case in 24 Member States.

The high number of people feeling they are citizens of the EU is definitely a positive factor influencing the EU’s capability in being a brand and communicating with the public. Feeling like an EU citizen means that people are receptive towards the EU. Nevertheless, it does not show in-depth what the people’s impression of the EU really is. In the next chapter, I will therefore go into more detail explaining that public support has reached such a low point that it can actually be considered a *threat* to the *EU-brand*.

4.5. The threats to the EU-brand

Although several *opportunities* could positively contribute to an *EU-branding* campaign, the EU's capability in being a brand is also threatened by “unfavourable external factors or trends that may present challenges to performance” (Armstrong et al. 2013, p. 55).

The European Commission's Directorate-General Communication has acknowledged that “external factors and actions by other stakeholders are likely to [...] limit [the European Commission's communication] achievements” (Strategic plan 2016-2020, p.4). In its Strategic Plan 2016-2020, the European Commission highlights several types of externalities that have a negative impact on its communication activities, such as international, national and regional political and economic factors, the level of trust in political institutions as well as media habits and practices (Strategic plan 2016-2020, p.4).

The anti-European propaganda from non-EU Member States, notably from Russia, but also from terror organizations such as the so-called Islamic State, can be considered as an international political factor threatening the *EU-brand*. In a recent study, the European Parliament describes the communication activities of both actors as “hostile strategic communications campaigns” with “destabilising messages” hitting the EU (European Parliament 2016, p. 2). According to the study, the Russian government uses both direct and indirect communication channels in order to shape the image of the EU negatively. Direct communication channels include, for example, a dedicated TV channel, Russia Today, promoting the image of Russia, while at the same time reducing the one of the EU (European Parliament 2016, p. 6). Although not openly, the Kremlin also finances a number of other media groups promoting the government's world view (European Parliament 2016, p. 12). The Russian government indirectly spreads its communication activities through NGOs and other movements.

“Russia’s strategic communications are further sustained by a growing network of organisations ranging from governmental agencies to government-sponsored NGOs, civic associations, student groups, and political movements or parties” (European Parliament 2016, p. 12).

The target audience of the Russian government's anti-EU propaganda stretches from inside Russia over the EU's Eastern Partnership States to the EU itself, as well as its candidate countries. Although, the study does not consider Russia's messaging as “necessarily consistent”, it says that it “has proved quite effective” (European Parliament 2016, p. 6):

“[W]hile often crude and deceitful in terms of content, its delivery is sophisticated, targeted and tailored to different audiences, and capable of exploiting the EU’s weaknesses” (European Parliament 2016, p. 6).

The study describes the Russian government's key messages with regard to the EU as following:

“The EU is portrayed as close to crumbling under the combined pressure of the fiscal and migration crises. The Union is also painted as an unwieldy entity, which is incapable of making decisions due to waves of hasty enlargements to the east. These two representations, in turn, feed into forecasts about the imminent demise of the EU, just as the Soviet Union collapsed twenty five years ago” (European Parliament 2016, p. 8f).

By attacking the EU and denouncing its weaknesses, the Russian government reaches out to “social groups that were disappointed with the political and economic situation in Europe” (European Parliament 2016, p. 6).

The national political and economic situations in the EU Member States are another factor that negatively influences the EU's *brand image*. The financial crisis from 2008 has hit several EU Member States hard with far-reaching economic and social consequences such as high unemployment and shrinking economies, especially in Southern Europe. The EU institutions have imposed austerity plans on the respective Member States. This has led to a decrease in public support of the EU as a political system on the one hand, which I will explain at a later stage, and to the rise of anti-European parties on the other hand. Similar to the anti-EU propaganda of the Russian government and the so-called Islamic State, those parties act as anti-EU marketers and therefore represent a *threat* to the *EU-brand*.

In the current public debate, those parties are generally defined with the term 'Eurosceptic'. Nicoli explains that

“Euroscepticism, more than a political ideology, can be considered a loose label under which a variety of forms of opposition to the EU can be collected” (Nicoli 2015, p. 2).

Hobolt uses the term “challenger parties” in order to define parties, which are opposed to the EU. She explains that *challenger parties* can come from both the left and the right of the political spectrum:

“On the left, challenger parties reject the austerity agenda and are critical of the EU's insistence of reduced government welfare spending. On the right, the focus is on the desire to reclaim national sovereignty, specifically to control immigration and repatriate powers from the EU. In both cases, challenger parties [...] claim that national governments can control their own destiny and offer distinct policies” (Hobolt et al. 2015, p. 4).

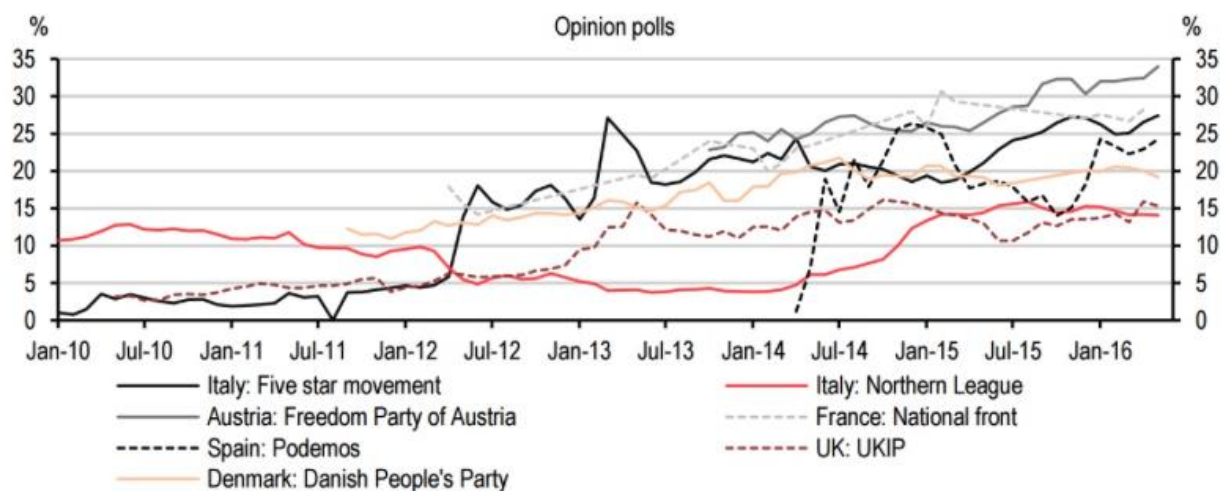
Examples of challenger parties are the Front National in France, Podemos in Spain, and the Five Star Movement in Italy. Hobolt states that such parties are capable of restructuring the political agenda (Hobolt et al. 2015, p. 7). They also have a strong influence on the public agenda as well as public opinion forming since they successfully exploit popular anxieties about migration, globalization, austerity, Islam and European integration (Hobolt et al. 2015, p. 10). With regard to their communication habits, Hobolt is convinced that

“their lack of government experience and limited incentive, and opportunity, to join future governments enables them to adopt more risky political platforms. This allows challenger parties to offer a clear alternative narrative to the mainstream consensus” (Hobolt et al. 2015, p. 8).

According to Hobolt, this alternative narrative exploiting people's fears and proposing more extreme solutions to economic and societal problems, has led to the rise of *challenger parties* calling (parts of) the EU in question. Hobolt argues that voters of *challenger parties* either want to sanction the established parties based on their experiences of economic hardship in the aftermath of the financial crisis or select emerging new parties on the basis of their policy preferences, because they are opposed to EU integration, immigration (*challenger parties* from the right political spectrum) or in favor of redistribution of wealth (*challenger parties* from the left political spectrum) (Hobolt et al. 2015, p. 15ff).

Figure 5 shows the rise of Eurosceptic *challenger parties* in seven EU Member States between January 2010, just after the beginning of the financial crisis, and July 2016. In all of the seven countries, *challenger parties* opposed to the EU today reach between 15 and 35 percent in the respective national opinion polls. The Italian Five Star Movement has increased the most, from only 2 percent in January 2010 to almost 30 percent in July 2016.

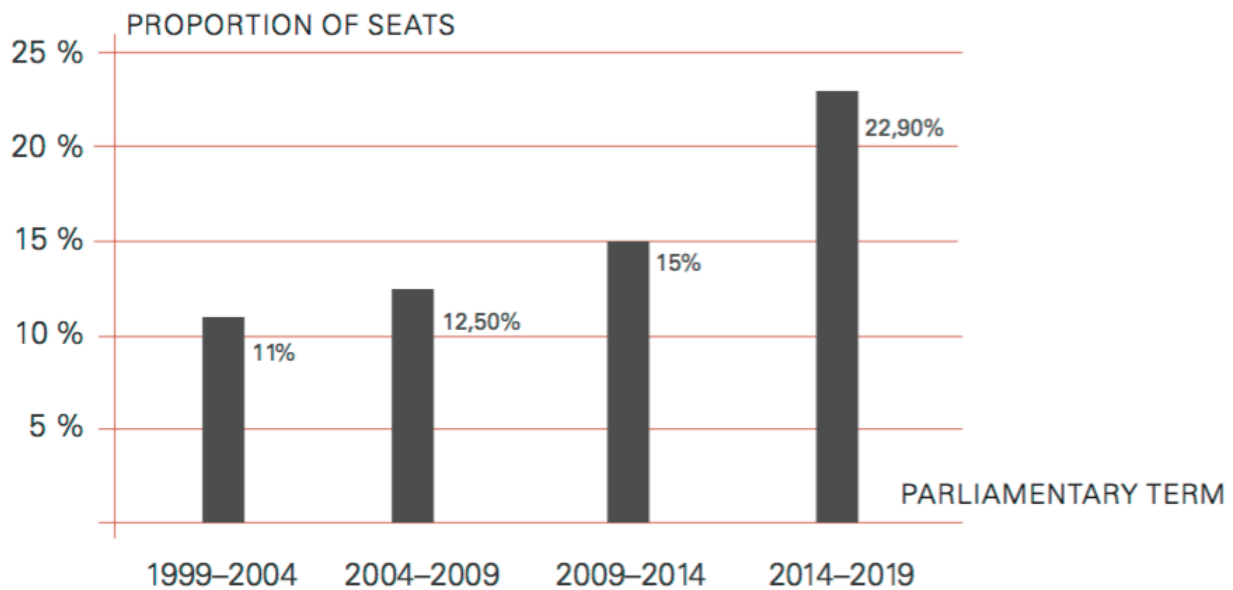
Figure 5: The rise of Eurosceptic challenger parties in national opinion polls between 2010 and 2016



Source: SCUTT 2016.

Eurosceptic *challenger parties* have not only increased their poll results with regard to their own countries. They have also improved their turnout in the elections to the European Parliament. In 2014, there was indeed a sharp rise in parties and independent parliament members generally perceived as opposing the EU. Figure 6 only shows the rise of the right political spectrum of *challenger parties*. Yet, these parties have increased in the proportion of seats by almost 100 percent from the elections in 1999 to the elections in 2014. They now hold 22.9 percent of the seats in the European Parliament whereas their proportion of seats was limited to 11 percent in 1999.

Figure 6: Proportion of seats of Eurosceptic parties in the European Parliament to the right of the European People's Party between 1999 and 2014



Source: Janssen 2016, p. 8.

Nicoli argues, “communication and media, including online platforms, have played a fundamental role in the spread of Euroscepticism” (Nicoli 2015, p. 6). On the one hand, the relative decline in the relevance of mainstream parties and the respective rise of *challenger parties* in opinion polls has led to a stronger mediatization of the latter. On the other hand, their mediatization has further strengthened their position.

“Mediatization of Euroscepticism appears to have contributed in strengthening the consensus for existing Eurosceptic parties (like the Front National in France and the Partij voor de Vrijheid in the Netherlands), to have pushed other groups on more Eurosceptic positions (like the Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy and the True Finns in Finland) and to have provided the social fuel required for the rise of far-right groups (like Golden Dawn in Greece)” (Nicoli 2015, p. 6).

In a nutshell, the communication campaigns of anti-EU *challenger parties* are better-placed than ever to exploit citizens' fears about sovereignty, immigration and safety. They aim at weakening the EU's image. In the aftermath of the financial crisis, they have gained in public support, which has contributed to a stronger mediatization and led to an even better positioning of these parties in society. Hence, *challenger parties* can spread anti-EU communication messages more easily. They therefore represent a *threat* to the *EU-brand*.

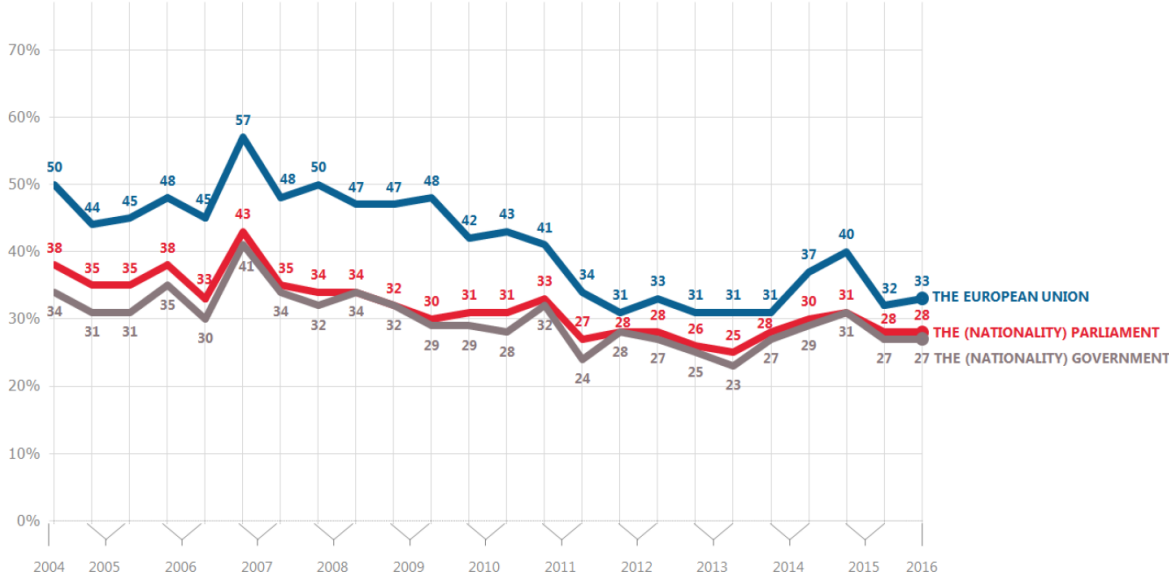
The anti-European attitude of EU citizens has not only been manifested in their increased support for anti-EU *challenger parties*, but also in their declining support for the EU in general. The last Standard Eurobarometer survey from spring 2016 shows some devastating results with regard to the citizens' *diffuse support* for their political system. Twice a year, the survey measures the citizens' trust in the EU, the EU's image, the people's feelings about the future of the EU and whether they have the impression that their voice counts in EU decision-making. The first three variables can be considered as variables of *diffuse support* that are directed towards the *regime* of

the political system of the EU, according to Easton's concept of political support. They value the fundamental values, norms and decision-making structures of the EU. The last variable can be considered as representing the *diffuse support* of the citizens towards the object of the *political community* of the political system since it measures the citizens' feeling of connectedness to the EU.

In spring 2016, only a third of EU citizens had trust in the EU (33%). This is a slight increase of one percent since autumn 2015. Since 2004, nevertheless, people's trust in the EU has fallen by 17 percent as figure 7 shows. This represents a dramatic decline in *diffuse support* towards the political system of the EU, although figure 7 also shows that the citizens have more trust in the EU than in their national parliaments and governments.

Figure 7: The citizens' trust in the EU and national institutions between 2004 and 2016

QA8a I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain institutions. For each of the following institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it.

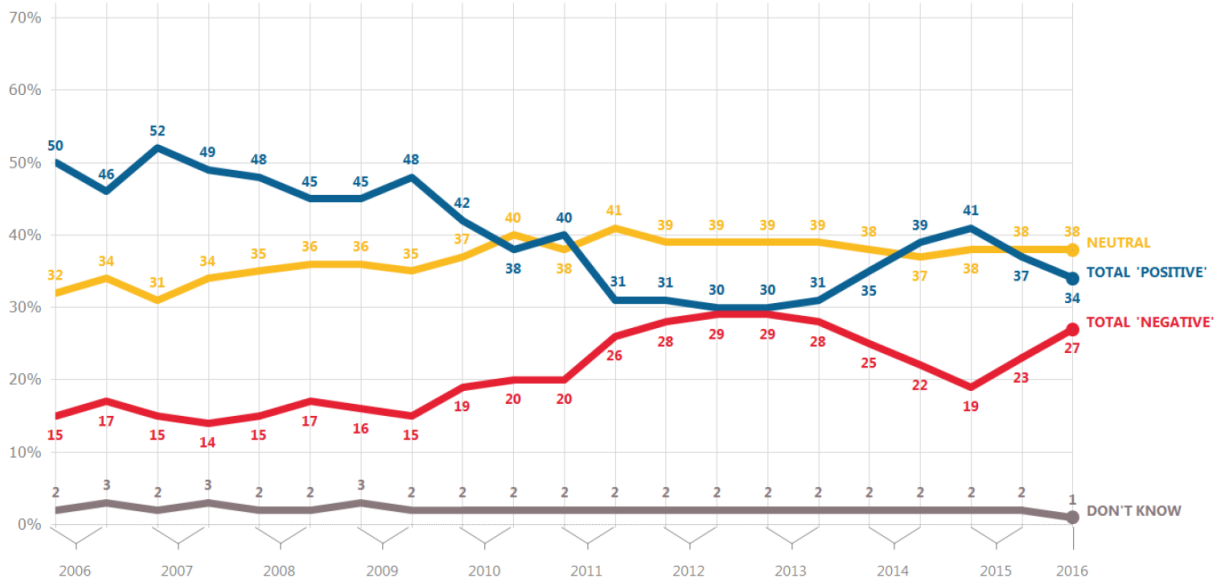


Source: European Commission 2016b, p. 14.

As with the citizens' trust in the EU, the EU's positive image has decreased greatly since 2006, as figure 8 shows. Whereas 50 percent of EU citizens still had a positive image of the EU in 2006 and only 15 saw the EU negatively, only 34 percent of EU citizens today perceive the EU as positive and 27 percent as negative.

Figure 8: The EU's image between 2006 and 2016

QA9 In general, does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image? (% - EU)

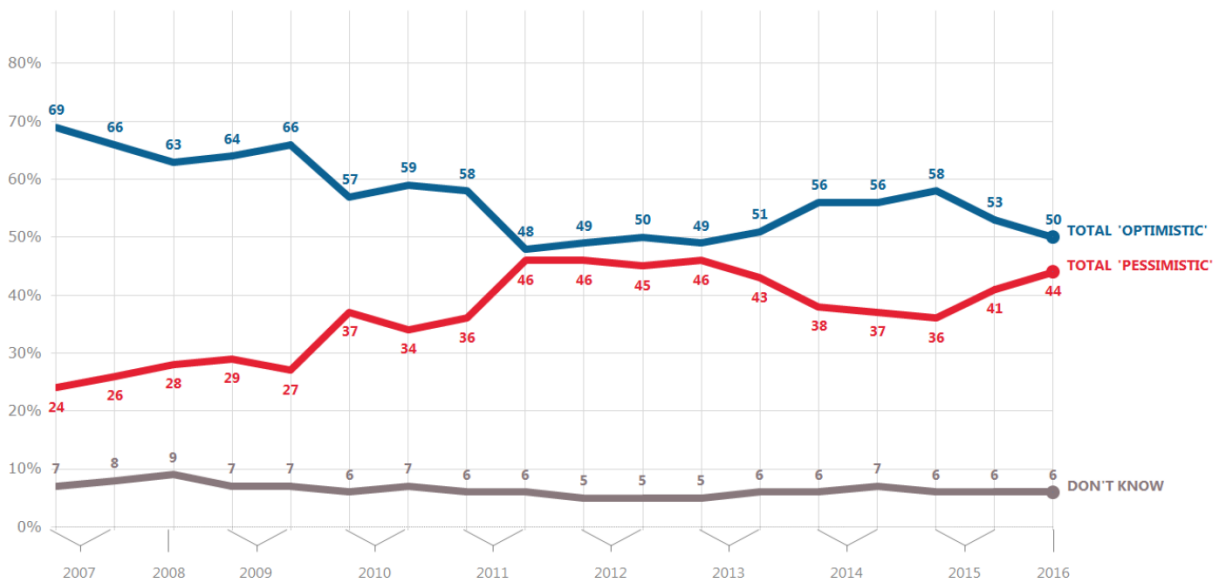


Source: European Commission 2016b, p. 15.

Only half of EU citizens are optimistic about the future of the EU (50%, 3 percentage points less since autumn 2015), while 44% are pessimistic (+3). Compared to the data, which was collected in spring 2007, today's citizens are much more pessimistic about the future of the EU (see figure 9). The number of people saying they are optimistic about the EU's future has decreased by 19 percent (69 percent in 2007).

Figure 9: The citizens' perception of the future of the EU between 2007 and 2016

QA20 Would you say that you are very optimistic, fairly optimistic, fairly pessimistic or very pessimistic about the future of the EU? (% - EU)



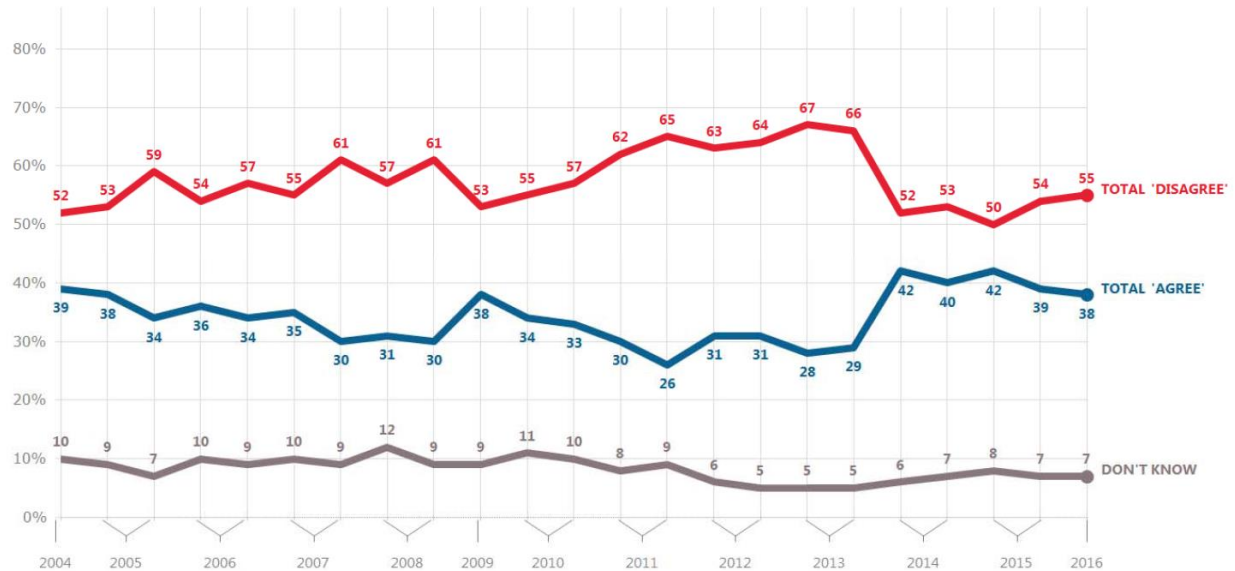
Source: European Commission 2016b, p. 19.

With regard to citizens' perception as to whether their voice actually counts in the EU, there has only been minor deterioration. While 52 percent of the respondents had the impression that the

EU did not respect their voice in 2004, today 55 percent are of this opinion. In spring 2013, the situation has already been worse. 67 percent of the respondents had the impression that the EU was not listening to their demands and wishes (see figure 10).

Figure 10: The citizens' perception whether their voice counts in the EU between 2004 and 2016

D72.1 Please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.
My voice counts in the EU (% - EU)



Source: European Commission 2016b, p. 17

It becomes clear that public opinion has changed much during the last 10 to 12 years. EU citizens show less *diffuse support* towards their political system. There is a lack of trust, optimism and connectedness. The EU's image is bad. This represents a *threat* to the *EU-brand*.

Yet, not only EU citizens perceive the EU as negative, but some governments of the EU Member States also do, such as Poland, Hungary or the United Kingdom. National governments make use of the citizens' mistrust and held referenda on different EU policies. The British referendum on the United Kingdom's EU membership was the latest example. In autumn this year, the Hungarian government will hold a referendum on the EU's migration policy. Their communication activities try to weaken the EU's image, as I have already discussed in chapter 3.5.6. with regard to the problem of competitors in *EU-branding*. National politicians and political leaders generally use the EU as a “scapegoat” (Anholt 2007a, p. 119).

All these previously described *threats* to the *EU-brand* – anti-EU propaganda from third countries, the rise of *challenger parties* and Euroscepticism in general, national governments competing with the EU – find the nourishment they need to prosper in citizens' unfavorable media consumption habits as well as in the business practices of the media themselves. According to Nicoli,

“national media may play a role in providing asymmetric visibility to national politicians in respect to European policy-makers, creating space for the blaming game often played by national actors towards the EU” (Nicoli 2015, p. 6).

The media still very much focuses on their national political and economic contexts. Even if they treat EU topics, they normally only interview and show politicians from their country. The result is a hotchpotch of 28 different public spheres. A European public sphere, giving room to really discuss EU matters, is non-existent. This is not helpful to overcome the EU's declining public support.

Now, one could say that the Internet has changed the power relations. The EU could reach its citizens directly through websites, social media and other channels. Min attempted to portray individuals' use of the Internet for political matters. He found that Internet use for politics depends much on the motivational factors of the individual. He argues:

“This may serve as a warning against the technological deterministic view that technologies will bring a democratic utopia. Instead, [...] the simple availability of the new technology is not enough to encourage the meaningful use of technology for politics. Human interest and capacity are equally important” (Min 2010, p. 32).

Internet is not a linear medium like television, radio or newspapers providing information to consumers directly. On the Internet, users have to look for information themselves. In general, they prefer to consume information they are already interested in, not the other way around. Citizens feeling negatively about the EU thus consume information confirming their point of view or consume very little or no information at all with regard to the EU. Today's media environment and consumption therefore represent further *threats* to the EU's capability in being or becoming in brand.

Figure 11: Overview of the internal and external factors influencing the EU's capability in being or becoming a brand

Internal	<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> existing communication infrastructures possible reorganization and cooperation stable and sufficient budget for communication purposes rich communication content strong and well-known values as well as symbols of the political system of the EU constant brand evaluation based on Eurobarometer surveys 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> competitive communication strategies within and between the EU institutions highly bureaucratic and hierarchic communication infrastructures top-down communication approach too many online communication channels unknown offline communication channels wrong target groups of offline communication campaigns very diverse target group public financing of communication purposes complexity of the political system of the EU
External	<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> stakeholder network cooperation with communication professionals citizens identify with the EU 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> anti-EU propaganda from third countries rise of anti-EU parties and Euroscepticism low level of trust in the EU bad image of the EU mistrust of EU Member States governments problem of competitors unfavorable media habits and practices problem of national public spheres
	Positive	Negative

5. Conclusion

Based on David Easton's concept of political support, I have tried to make clear that the EU should make use of communication activities in order to improve its image. Currently, the EU's competitors, such as Eurosceptic parties, as well as its citizens, call the political system of the EU more and more into question. This has recently been manifested in the decision of the British citizens to leave the EU.

Easton argues that once support for a political system such as the EU slips away visibly, reactions may be needed. The individual members, organizations, mass media and political leaders, which still feel favorable towards their political system, may trigger *diffuse support*. They may try to nurture the citizens' *faith in the legitimacy of the political system*, their *sense of political community* as well as a *we-feeling* among them. Since Easton has never explained how this could be done, I have argued for the creation of an *EU-branding* campaign. Modern marketing techniques could help to revitalize the EU, as Seeman recently stated:

“Europeans are seeking direction. They need a compass to understand what the European identity stands for; they need a shared history to build upon. And, eventually, it is up to political leaders to write this story, and to overcome this shock in order to engage with constituents, to relentlessly educate on what is Europe, how it works and how it succeeds. Political communications should not be a taboo. It is an essential part of democracy as it facilitates debate, exchange of ideas and invites constituents to take part in the project” (Seeman 2016).

The *SWOT matrix* of the current state of play of the *EU-brand* has shown that the EU already possess several *strengths*, which could facilitate the creation of an *EU-branding* campaign. Several external factors could also positively influence the launch of such a campaign. Nevertheless, the *EU-brand* currently has different *weaknesses* and is especially threatened by several challenging external factors. This has to be kept in mind when conceptualizing a branding campaign. Barbara Liebshardt will discuss what such an *EU-branding* campaign could look like in more detail in the second volume of this study. Certainly, it will have to take the different challenges of branding into account, which I have highlighted within the critical review of the *EU-branding* concept.

What is clear is that *EU-branding* could be a way to regain public support for this political project and to overcome its political crisis. Nevertheless, communication is only one “essential part of democracy” (Seeman 2016). *EU-branding* alone cannot be a sufficient answer to the declining support of the citizens towards the EU. As I have explained within the critical review of the *EU-branding* approach, branding has to be accompanied by real political outcomes.

Anholt states that

“[b]rand management for countries should be treated as a component of national policy, not a discipline in its own right, a 'campaign', or an activity that can be practised separately from conventional planning, governance, economic development or statecraft” (Anholt 2007b, p.33).

EU leaders should therefore not only focus on branding techniques in order to change the citizens' perception of the EU, they should also carefully listen to their needs and demands. They should not only communicate the vision of an EU the citizens want to live in. They should build it.

Furthermore, I would like to highlight one of the Eurobarometer findings, which I presented within the *SWOT analysis* of the EU's capability to be or become a brand. The trust citizens direct towards the EU, the EU's image as well as the citizens' positive perception of the future of this political system has been declining for several years. This development represents a *threat*, also according to David Easton's idea of the *persistence* of a political system. I have therefore argued for an *EU-branding* strategy, which could help to inverse this development. Revitalizing the EU's narrative has been on the political agenda for many years.⁶ Yet, citizens still have more trust in the EU than in their national governments and parliaments as figure 7 shows. We should therefore ask ourselves whether only the EU is confronted with a deep crisis of support or if this problem applies to politics in general. As I have already stated, branding alone cannot be sufficient. A new approach to citizens' engagement in politics, new participatory tools and policy changes may probably be needed as well.

6 The European Commission has launched the 'New Narrative' project in April 2013 with the purpose of bringing the EU closer to its citizens and restoring the declining support towards the EU. Link to the Commission's dedicated 'New Narrative' website: http://ec.europa.eu/culture/policy/new-narrative/index_en.htm.

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