

PUBLIC OPINION AND EUROPEAN DEFENCE: **Results of a European Opinion Survey**

Within the long construction process of a common security and defence policy, public opinion is a strategic variable of the highest importance. Without its support, substantial progresses are unlikely to be made. Knowing the opinion of the European citizens on this matter is therefore essential. To which extent do they share the goal of further integration in this field? In order to answer this question and in the prospect of the future Belgian presidency of the European Union, the Belgian Minister of Defence, André Flahaut, has decided to carry out a large comparative survey in the 15 countries of the European Union. To this end and with the consent of the European Commission, eight questions on this subject, most of them with multiple items, have been inserted into the Eurobarometer survey wave 54.1 of autumn 2000.¹

The main findings of the first survey of this kind ever carried out among representative samples of population in the 15 countries of the European Union on the issue of a common security and defence policy are the following:

1. **The three things Europeans fear most** are non-military risks, that is to say organised crime (77 %), an accident in a nuclear power plant (75 %) and terrorism (74 %). On the other hand, the three risks less often mentioned (but nonetheless mentioned by more than four respondents out of ten) are a nuclear conflict in Europe (44 %), a conventional war in Europe (45 %) and a world war (45 %).
2. **Concerning the functions of the military in general**, the defence of the country remains the one most often mentioned by the Europeans (94 %). But immediately followed with 91 % of the votes by a non-military role, that is to say helping the Nation in case of (natural, ecological or nuclear) disasters. The mission, which has incontestably become the most important from a quantitative point of view and which is also characteristic of post-modern armies, that is to say peacekeeping or peacemaking, is mentioned by eight Europeans out of ten. Seven Europeans out of ten

¹ Eurobarometer opinion surveys have been carried out between 2 and 5 times per year since 1973 at the request of the European Commission, the Directorate-General for Education and Culture, Centre for the citizen- Public Opinion Analysis Unit. They are made up of a similar set of questions asked to representative samples of the population aged fifteen and above in each country of the European Union. In total, 15,900 persons have been interviewed, that is to say about 1,000 persons per country, except in Luxembourg (600), in Germany (2,000: 1,000 in the western part and 1,000 in the eastern part) and in the United Kingdom (1,300: 1,000 in Great Britain and 300 in Northern Ireland). The Eurobarometer survey wave 54.1 has been conducted between 14 November and 19 December 2000 by the *European Opinion Research Group*, a consortium of market and public opinion research agencies, made up of INRA (EUROPE) and of GfK Worldwide.

consider that defending values such as freedom and democracy is also a role of the military.

3. **The military is, among the 16 institutions respondents had to express an opinion on, the institution in which they have the most confidence.** More than seven Europeans out of ten (71 %) say to be rather confident in the military. At the bottom of the list, we find political parties (18 %), big companies (35 %) and the press (38 %). Confidence in the military is the lowest in Spain (65 %) whereas it is the highest in Finland (91 %). Apart from Spain, four other countries have a level of confidence in the military below the European average, that is to say Denmark (66 %), Italy (67 %), Belgium (67 %) and France (68 %).
4. **More than four Europeans out of ten (43 %) consider that the decisions concerning European defence policy should be taken by the European Union.** Only 17 % of the respondents think that NATO should take them while 24% think that the national governments should be entrusted with them.

In 1989, that is to say at the end of the Cold War but at a time where the USSR still existed, a similar question (but formulated in other terms) had been asked within the framework of Eurobarometer 32 by the *U.S. Information Agency*. Although any rigorous comparison seems rather difficult to make, it is interesting to note that the percentage of respondents choosing NATO has decreased.

Far more Italians (63 %) consider that decisions concerning European defence policy should be taken by the European Union. They are followed by the French (56 %) and the citizens of Luxembourg (53 %). Belgium, another of the six founder countries of the European Community, is also above the European average in this field (49 %). On the other hand, two other founder countries, the Netherlands and Germany, are more divided: respectively 40 % and 38 % of their citizens opt for the European Union. Ireland and the United Kingdom, two islands, are the only countries where a majority of respondents clearly put their own national government in first place with respectively 36 % and 31 % of the answers. With Denmark, these countries rank also as two of the less pro-European countries. As far as Finns and Austrians are concerned (two "non-aligned" countries during the Cold War), they waver between their own government (respectively 42 % and 36 %) and the European Union (41 % and 36 %). Denmark is the only country where NATO clearly ranks in first position (40 % against 27 % for the European Union and 27 % for the own national government).

5. **In case of military intervention, nearly one European out of two (47 %) considers that the governments of the countries willing to send troops have to take the decisions.** The "maximalist" option, that is to say a majority vote forcing each member State to send troops ranks in last position with only 7 %. In other words, there still remains a significant gap between the diffuse wish for a European defence and the operationalisation of such a policy. Apart from Italy where opinion is rather equally divided between the national option and the non-constraining majority vote, the national option largely wins in every country of the European Union. The most radical option exceeds 10 % only in three countries, all members of the core of Union's founder countries, that is to say Italy (13 %), Belgium and France (12 % each). The number of don't knows varies also considerably between a minimum of 4 % in Greece (the only country where it is below 10 %) and a maximum of 23 % in Italy. This undoubtedly reflects the complexity and opaqueness of the European decision-making processes for many citizens.
6. **More than seven Europeans out of ten (73 %) think that the decision taken at the Helsinki European Council, confirming the commitment made at Cologne, that is to say the setting-up by 2003 of a rapid intervention force of 60,000 soldiers is a very good (23 %) or rather good thing (50 %).** 16 % do not know. In other words, only a tiny minority of respondents (14 %) do not agree with this initiative. In every country of the Union, more than half of the respondents consider that the setting-up of this rapid intervention force is a very good or rather good decision. In three countries, founder members of the Europe of the Six, that is to say Belgium, Italy and France, the approval rating even exceeds 80 %. However, it is worth noticing that, the percentage of don't knows is not only rather high on average (16 % for the whole EU), but also varies rather strongly from country to country: it varies from a minimum of 6 % in Denmark to a maximum of 34 % in Ireland.
7. **To the question what kind of European army would be preferable within the framework of a common security and defence policy, nearly four Europeans out of ten (37 %) opt for a permanent European rapid intervention force, in addition to national armies.** The proposal closer to the solution accepted at the Helsinki European Council, that is to say "a European rapid intervention force which would be put together only when needed" is chosen by 18 % of the respondents. Nearly two respondents out of ten (19 %) would be favourable to the setting-up of a single

European army which would replace national armies. On the other hand, only 12 % of Europeans do not want a European army at all, whatever its form, and content themselves with purely national armies.

In other words, more than seven Europeans out of ten (74 %) are aware of the fact that the era of purely national armies in Europe is a thing of the past and that such a solution does not meet the challenges the European Union faces and will face more and more in the future. They are therefore favourable to the setting-up of a European supranational force whatever its form. It is worth noticing that, in the fifteen countries of the European Union, the option of a permanent European rapid intervention force, besides the national armies is the most chosen one, admittedly sometimes by a short head. Among the most favourable countries to the setting-up of a European army, whatever its form, we find again five out of the six founder countries of the Union. More than eight Belgians, Italians, Dutch (81 % for each country) and French (80 %) out of ten as well as 79 % of the citizens of Luxembourg would indeed prefer such an evolution.

8. **Finally, as far as the roles of a European army are concerned, more than seven Europeans out of ten (71 %) consider that it should be used for defending the European Union's territory, their country included.** In other words, the most often mentioned role is an extension at the Union's level of the traditional role of the Armed Forces, that is to say the defence of the Nation. In second position with 63 % of the votes comes the proposal "guaranteeing peace in the EU", followed by "intervening in case of natural, ecological or nuclear disaster in Europe" (58 %).

The so-called Petersberg missions (humanitarian, evacuation, peacekeeping and peacemaking missions) are still a long way from getting an enthusiastic support from European citizens. All of them are indeed mentioned by less than one European out of two. In other words, the EU governments have still a long way to go to convince their citizens of the importance for the Union of these new missions in order to increase the legitimacy of these missions. Respondents make a rather clear distinction (twice the percentage) between taking part in peace-keeping missions outside the European Union, without the agreement of the U.N. on the one hand (15 %) and those decided by the UN (blue helmets) on the other hand (34 %).

With regard to the three Petersberg missions most often mentioned by Europeans as being part of the roles of a European army, that is to say carrying out humanitarian

missions, intervening in conflicts at the borders of the European Union and repatriating Europeans who are in areas where there is a conflict, rather important differences of opinion can be observed from country to country. The legitimacy of these missions is for example clearly greater in the six founder countries: the percentages are indeed systematically above the European average, except for Germany as far as the intervention in conflicts at the European Union's borders is concerned, a subject still very sensitive in this country.

A more detailed data analysis will be published in the Proceedings of the Symposium. All findings and analyses will be available on the internet at the following address:
<http://europa.eu.int/comm/dg10/epo/eb/surveys.html>

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