NO EUROPE WITHOUT ITS REGIONS

For 9 out of 10 Europeans, there is nothing abstract about the regions. Their attachment to them is stronger than it is to Europe, but there is no conflict between the two. On the contrary, although it is true that not even one European in two knows anything about the Community’s regional policy (some 8 out of 10 have never heard of the ERDF), those that do are strongly in its favour.

How does the EC population regard the idea of developing the regions to build Europe? First of all, what are their concepts of region and of Europe? A recent EUROBAROMETER survey has monitored these questions. A summary of its findings is given below, with some selected graphs by way of illustration.

The great majority of Europeans see themselves as very or fairly attached to their region (87%), their town or their village (85%) - almost as many as those who feel attached to their country (88%). Among those who feel very attached, the region comes first (55%), with town or village coming second with 54% and country third with 53%. The answers were frequently very specific. The region people identify with - the place where they live and feel at home - is a smaller geographical area than their country, regardless of the latter's size. It is a physical, social and cultural area with which they identify. However, regional or local and national attachment are not mutually exclusive.

Conversely, only a large minority (48%) regard themselves as fairly or very attached to the EC or Europe as a whole (47%). In both cases, those describing themselves as very attached totalled 12%. This similar result for the EC and for Europe as a whole (including non-EC countries) reflects a tendency to assimilate the former concept of Europe to the latter. Here too there seems to be no inherent conflict between attachment to Europe on the one hand and to a nation or region on the other.
Regional attachment is most marked in the 3 southern countries: Greece (97%), Portugal (94%) and Spain (93%). These are also the countries where people are most attached to the town or village (94% for Portugal, 93% for Spain and Greece). Attachment to the country is strongest among the Danes (98%), Greeks (97%), Irish (95%) and Portuguese (94%).

Those seeing themselves as "quite" or "very" attached to the EC are most conspicuous in Italy (61%), Spain (58%), Luxembourg (55%) and France (54%); least so in the Netherlands (28%), the United Kingdom (35%), Ireland (36%), Denmark (42%), Germany (44% in the West, 35% in the East), Belgium and Portugal (both 47%). Europe as a whole scores highest in Denmark (61%), Italy (59%), Spain and Greece (52%), and France (50%).

Whatever the degree of attachment, it increases with age and media consumption. There is little variation according to gender or political opinions (with a few variations, the latter do not seem to have much effect on any of the answers given in this survey). Those with high incomes or levels of education are slightly more attached to the EC. It is worth noting that a negative attitude towards the EC is matched by a slightly lower degree of attachment to the region, town or village.

Regional policy of individual Member States

Only 46% of Europeans claim to be aware of their country's policy for developing its less favoured regions, and 28% did not know. This awareness is most common among the Danes (60%), Dutch (56%) and Germans (52%) and least common among the French and Belgians (34%). The number of those who "don't know" is particularly high in Belgium (43%), but quite considerable in all countries.

85% of those who are aware of this policy are in favour (generally speaking, they are concentrated in the countries most involved in regional development). 47% support it wholeheartedly, while 11% disapprove. Within the group of those in favour, the policy is most supported in
Germany (96% for the country as a whole, 99% in the former GDR), Portugal (95%), and Greece, Italy and Denmark (93%).

Among those who do not know about this policy, 80% believe it should exist, while 5% are of the opposite opinion. 14% do not know. Positive answers were most numerous in Greece (94%), Portugal (90%), Spain and France. They were less frequent in West Germany (66%) than in the former GDR. The percentage of those with a negative opinion was particularly high in Italy (33%).

Awareness of their country’s regional policy was more widespread among men than women. It was less widespread among the 15 to 24 and over 55 age groups. It increases with the age of completion of studies and the level of income. It is almost twice as great among “opinion leaders” and heavy media consumers.

Where there is awareness of this policy, approval is more widespread among those over 55. In this instance, the duration of studies and income level are not particularly relevant. For the most part, “opinion leaders” and heavy media consumers are favourable. Those whose attitude towards the EC is ambivalent have less clear cut opinions. Where respondents are unaware of this policy, the opinion that it should exist is slightly more widespread among men and people aged between 25 and 54.

In addition, the latter percentage increases markedly (with a decrease in those having no opinion) with the age of completion of studies and the level of income. It is also higher among “opinion leaders” and heavy media consumers. Those whose attitude towards the EC is ambivalent show less interest.

The EC’s regional policy

An even smaller number of Europeans (41%) claim to be aware of the existence of the EC’s regional policy, while a strong proportion (45%) don’t know. Awareness is most widespread among the Danes (68%), Greeks (62%), Irish (59%), Belgians (58%) and Portuguese (54%); at the opposite end of the scale are the Italians (37%) and the French (25%).
44% of Europeans see equal opportunities for the regions as the main objective of the Community's regional policy, while 41% see an increased standard of living as the priority. On average, equal opportunities remains first with 81% and raising the standard of living follows at 71%; increased competitiveness rates only 37%.

In total, the significance attached to raising standards of living is highest in Portugal (85%) and Greece, Spain and Ireland (82%) - those countries where the regions are poorest. In the 8 other countries, equal opportunities in the regions predominates.

Here too, awareness of regional policy is higher among men, the 25-54 age group, higher income-earners, those with more formal education, "opinion leaders" and heavy media consumers. Among those who are not aware of this policy, the tendency to be in favour of it is slightly greater among men and slightly less pronounced among those over 55. It increases with the levels of income, education and degree of attachment to the EC. It is also higher among "opinion leaders" and heavy media consumers.

As regards the perceived objectives of the EC's regional policy, the trends are very generally the same when measured by sociological criteria. It is perceptible that "opinion leaders" or those favourable to the EC more often refer to competitiveness (however, without it being the dominant objective overall).
The ERDF

As regards the ERDF, only 22% of Europeans are aware of its activities, while 64% state that they are not and 14% give no answer. Knowledge about the ERDF is highest in Portugal (50%) and Ireland (49%) and very slight in the Netherlands (7%), Belgium (11%) and France (14%).

The number of those who gave no answer is very high in Germany (41%).

Among those who have heard about the ERDF, 80% cite radio and television as one of the sources of their knowledge, but the press also accounts for a very significant percentage (65%). Radio and television play a major role in knowledge about the ERDF in Portugal (95%), Greece and Belgium (89%), and the United Kingdom (82%). The press is most often cited in the Netherlands (86%) and Denmark (84%). Notice boards attract the most attention in Ireland (41%), the United Kingdom (26%), Portugal (22%) and Spain (21%). There is little mention of assistance personally received from the ERDF but more of assistance received by others, particularly in Portugal (19%), Denmark (16%) and Greece (14%).

Awareness of the ERDF is higher among men and older people. It also rises with the levels of income and education. It is three times greater among "leaders" and heavy media consumers. On the other hand, the attitude towards the EC is not a determining factor here.

The right of regions to have a say in the EC

The figures here are quite clear: 76% of Europeans approve of their region having a say in the Community's decision-making process; only 10% do not approve and 14% do not know. Approval is greatest in all the southern countries (including France): Portugal (89%), Spain (87%), France (86%) and Greece and Italy (85%). It is least widespread in Denmark and Luxembourg (56%), the Netherlands (61%) and West Germany (61%, as compared with 69% in the former GDR).

In this case too it is those who are wealthiest, most highly educated, most
influential, most tuned in to the media and most in support of the EC who express the most favourable opinion.

The key role of information

The above findings clearly indicate that regional development policy, as a whole, benefits from widespread support on the part of public opinion. Moreover, it can rely on privileged relays among some groups who are more open to such issues.

The effectiveness of communication in spreading this awareness is quite obvious. There does seem, however, to be some confusion as to the organisations responsible for this policy. As for the EC’s regional policy, it is a long way from having reached the whole of its potential audience. This is particularly true of the ERDF.

These analyses should be taken into account in designing information and communication about the policy and the various roles played by those involved.

References:

"The Community’s regions": a general report on the issues facing European society in EUROBAROMETER 36, INRA (Europe), European Coordination Office, Av. R. Vandendriessche 18, B-1150 Brussels.