Feelings towards the European Union

The European Commission published a special survey in May this year specifically looking into public attitudes towards Europe's future. Almost 25,000 people in the EU's 25 Member States were interviewed in February and March by the Commission's polling agency, Eurobarometer, to assess how citizens see the EU and what they expect of it as it expands.

Relatively optimistic outlook

The survey revealed that the public has relatively little interest in EU affairs: while 63% said they were interested in their country's politics, only 47% said the same about European affairs.

However, generally, people appear more optimistic about the way things are going at EU level than at national level: 39% said they thought " things are going in the right direction" at EU level and only 27% said "things are going in the wrong direction". Asked about their own countries, an average of only 34% thought events were moving in the right direction and 43% thought they were moving in the wrong direction.

How citizens see the EU

When asked what came to mind first when they heard the words 'European Union', 22% mentioned cooperation, unity, equality, common decisions and rules, and legislation; 19% cited Europe, the EU, European institutions and membership; 15% spoke about the euro and having one single currency; 11% mentioned holidays, tourism, the fact that it was easy to work, study and travel across the EU, the lack of borders and freedom of movement; and 9% referred to the Common Market, trade agreements, the economy, globalisation and business opportunities.

However, 5% said it was a "bad idea and I'm against the idea of the European Union"; the same number also regarded it as a "waste of time" and they regretted that their country had joined; and 3% said it meant a loss of national identity.

The European Union is perceived as "democratic" and "modern" by 67% of people and "protective" by 54%, according to the survey. However, 49% regard it as "technocratic" and 43% see it as "inefficient".

Just under half of all EU citizens (49%) believe that, generally speaking, their country's membership of the EU is "a good thing", with 32% saying it is "neither good nor bad" and 15% believing it to be "a bad thing" for their country.

The figures show that men tend to be more positive than women, with 53% of males and 44% of females declaring the EU to be "a good thing". Young people of both sexes are most positive of all, with 59% in the 15-24 age bracket saying it is "a good thing" compared with just 43% of those aged over 55.

EU achievements and failings

When it comes to the EU's achievements, 60% mentioned peace among the Member States as the most positive result of European unification; 56% cited the free movement of people, goods and services within the EU; 27% referred to the euro; 18% mentioned student exchange programmes such as ERASMUS; and 11% cited the Common Agricultural Policy.

Asked how, on a scale of one to ten, they would judge the EU's performance in a range of policy areas, cooperation in the field of research and innovation scored highest, with 5.8; followed by the protection of human rights (5.7); the equal treatment of men and women (5.6); and the promotion of peace and democracy in the world (5.6). The fight against unemployment scored lowest of the 15 policy areas listed, with just 3.8; followed by the protection of social rights (4.7); and ensuring economic growth (4.9).

What future for the EU?

Questioned as to what, if anything, would be most helpful for the future of Europe, 51% said achieving comparable living standards across the Member States; 26% mentioned the introduction of the euro in all EU countries; a quarter (25%) cited a common constitution; 22% a common language; 19% well-defined external EU borders; and 9% a common army.
The survey also found that the public favours more decision-making at the European level in a wide range of policy areas, including:
-    the fight against terrorism and organised crime (80% and 75% respectively);
-    the promotion of peace and democracy in the world (77%);
-    cooperation in the field of research and innovation (74%);
-    the protection of the environment (72%).

Asked what would give them a stronger sense of European identity, 32% mentioned a European welfare system; 27% a European constitution; 21% being able to vote in all elections organised in the Member State in which they lived; 16% a President of the EU directly elected by Member State citizens; 11% the replacement of national income tax by a European income tax; and 5% a European Olympic team. Eight per cent said spontaneously that they did not want to be European citizens.

Attitudes towards the EU's growth and globalisation

Asked about the increase in the size of the EU, 55% said they regarded it as "something positive", and 61% agreed with the statement that expanding the EU improves its influence in the world. However, 63% considered that further growth would increase problems on their country's jobs market, and only 34% believed that many products had become cheaper as a result of the EU's expansion to date.
Despite generally positive attitudes towards the prospect of an even bigger EU, globalisation is seen by 47% as a threat to employment and companies in their country, with only 37% saying it represents a good opportunity thanks to the opening up of markets. This compares with 56% of Europeans who saw globalisation as "a good opportunity" in a similar Eurobarometer poll in the 15 countries which then made up the EU in October 2003.