



EUROPEANS AND BREXIT (OPINION POLL DONE BY FEPS AND FONDATION JEAN JAURÈS)

On January 23, 2013, Britain's Prime Minister David Cameron sensationally announced that the United Kingdom would be holding a referendum on its membership of the European Union. That announcement became reality last June 23, and, with almost 52% of the votes, the Leave camp won the day. The British have decided to separate from the European Union. The situation is unprecedented and the consequences uncertain. Across Europe, the media, experts and politicians of all persuasions are concerned about the potential fallout from this exit, whether from the economic, geopolitical or institutional point of view. And while Brexit is of great interest to Europe's leaders, it is also of great interest to citizens in Europe.

What are their reactions? Illustrated through a series of opinion polls Jérôme Fourquet sums this up in an article entitled "Europeans and Brexit". To begin, he points out that public opinion in Europe "seems highly contrasted" and attributes this situation to the uncertainty mentioned above. He observes that in countries where pro-European sentiment runs high, the predominant reaction is incomprehension (in Germany, for instance). Conversely, in the more Eurosceptic countries and in countries with fragile economies, the predominant feeling is one of understanding (e.g. in France). Elsewhere, the prevailing sentiment is concern.

Fourquet also notes that, on the whole, public opinion seems less appalled than the financial markets and the world of politics and media (except in Poland). This can be explained by the UK's special status within the Union (the UK is not in the euro zone and is not part of the Schengen area). That said, public opinion harbours doubts regarding the consequences of Brexit on their domestic economies. While some believe this could benefit the economies of continental Europe, others speculate that this divorce will have adverse effects. Here again, opinions vary between places where the economy is strong (here respondents are more confident about the consequences of Brexit) and regions where the economy is weaker (respondents are more worried).

As for the impact of Brexit on the British economy, the vast majority of Europeans are sceptical. They feel there is a danger this decision will weaken the United Kingdom. According to Fourquet, "the patriots have [thus] lost the battle for public opinion". Remarkably, one of the more curious consequences of the victory of the Leave campaign is that many other people now see greater benefits in belonging to the EU. For instance, 80% of Germans and 70% of French take a positive view of their belonging to the EU, compared with just 62% and 57% respectively two years ago. This



substantial upswing in public opinion regarding the benefits of Europe concerns all political parties in both countries (including the AfD – Alternative für Deutschland) with the exception of France's Front National. However, public opinion in Italy seems to be the exception in Europe. In Fourquet's view, this reaction can be ascribed to the migrant crisis – which is affecting Italy more than other countries – and to the budgetary concessions made to Brussels in recent decades.

Fourquet demonstrates that the corollary of this upturn in the feeling of belonging to Europe is the increasing hostility to the organising of a referendum on whether or not to keep their country in the EU. For instance, while 54% of French and Italians are against the idea, the proportion is 59% in Germany, 65% in Belgium, 66% in Spain and even 67% in Poland. So at least for the moment, the idea of a domino effect seems out of the question, but with the UK serving as a case study, that situation could potentially change if its economy were to pick up.

In addition, the final gauge confirms the broadening of the divide. In Italy, the upper socio-professional categories (CSP+) are increasingly in favour of being part of Europe (79%) whilst the lower ranking categories (CSP-) would appear to be increasing wary of EU membership (49%). We find this same dichotomy in France where, over 80% of pensioners, independent professions and senior executives would vote to remain in the EU in the event of a referendum. However, this figure is below 50% in the case of workers and employees. This social fracture is also in evidence in the results of the British referendum. The CSP+ categories voted very much in favour of the Remain campaign, unlike the CSP- categories who mostly voted for the Leave camp. We have reason to imagine the situation would be similar in the other European countries. While the majority reject the idea of organising referendums, Jérôme Fourquet points out that the wish to leave the euro zone, which is down sharply, is also in the minority in the countries polled (43% in Italy, 33% in Germany, and 29% in France).

In this context, public opinion everywhere seems little inclined to make any concessions to the British. A majority of Germans, French and Spaniards expect an intransigent stance on demands from the UK (in addition to a relative majority in Italy and Belgium). Only in Poland is public opinion more inclined to take a conciliatory stance on Britain (70% want the EU to be “quite” or “very” conciliatory). Fourquet further observes that opinions vary by age category. Young people, who are less enthusiastic about the EU than their elders, are less intransigent than the latter. Likewise, the expectation of firmness with the UK is highest in the historically more pro-European political families (including over 70% of UDI and Modem sympathizers).



On the issue of relaunching further European integration around the founding countries, there seems to be a consensus around this idea. Eight out of ten French people would be in favour. The same proportion was found for Germany, Belgium and Italy. More recent members such as Poland (70%) and Spain (68%) are no different and also want a new momentum to come from the founding members. Once again, the older the respondents, the more they are in favour of this idea. However, whilst the wish to relaunch integration around the founding countries would appear to be shared by one and all, Jérôme Fourquet remarks that there is a risk of this new phase being difficult to implement. None of the players seems to have sufficient legitimacy to bring together all the points of view. In fact, while the Presidents of the European institutions (Juncker, Tusk and Schulz) have the support of the majority in the northern European countries, the situation is very different in the southern countries (57% of Germans place their trust in them, versus 40% of Spaniards).

Finally, Brexit could bring the enlargement process to a halt. Back in 2004, 30% of the French, 37% of the Germans, 67% of the Italians and 78% of the Spaniards were in favour of Turkey joining the EU; those figures are now 13, 12, 46 and 34% respectively. In addition to this reversal, public opinion in Europe is quite strongly against more recent candidates joining (e.g. only 30% of French, Belgian and German respondents are in favour of Ukraine joining the EU). The case of the Balkan countries is more complex. In the founding countries, public opinion is very much against them joining the Union, whereas in Poland and Spain public opinion is much better disposed towards the Balkan countries. In view of all these considerations, Fourquet warns against an enlargement process that would be contrary to public opinion (e.g. the case of Turkey) as this could jeopardise citizens' trust in the EU and its institutions.