

## Indifference, Distrust and Scepticism in the Candidate Countries

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A majority of the people in the Central and East European countries seeking to join the European Union do not think of themselves first and foremost as Europeans, according to the New Europe Barometer (NEB), a survey of public opinion in 10 pre-accession countries (not including Malta, Cyprus, or Turkey). Low identification with Europe is not necessarily, however, a sign of Euroscepticism. It is rather due to ignorance and indifference and, as far as the European Union is concerned, indicative of a more general scepticism or distrust of government.

### **Regional, National and European Identities**

Everyone has a multiplicity of identities. To determine which comes first, the NEB asks: "With which of the following do you most closely identify yourself--the local community or city in which you live, your region, your country, Europe, or other?" Across the region as a whole, 48 percent identify primarily with the community or city in which they live, and in five countries--the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, and Romania--more than half do so. The strength of local identification is not unique to post-communist countries. In Italian politics there is the phenomenon of *campanilismo*, that is, attachment to the local church bell tower, and in Irish politics, the home counties of candidates for the Dail (Parliament) are a primary factor in seeking votes. The big exceptions are the Baltic states: only a third, on average, of their large Russian-speaking minorities identify with the local community.

Identifying with the country as a whole--that is, thinking of oneself as Polish or Slovak--is the second most frequent choice. However, across the 10 NEB countries, it is selected by only 31 percent of respondents. Again the Baltic states are exceptional, demonstrating the highest identification with nationality. In Estonia, 49 percent identify themselves primarily as Estonians. In Latvia and Lithuania, the relevant figures are 41 percent and 38 percent, respectively. By contrast, in Poland, which is virtually homogeneous in its ethnic population, only 22 percent consider themselves Polish first, rather than from a city, a small farming village, or a region. This leaves a tiny proportion in the 10 countries who consider themselves Europeans first and foremost: only 3 percent. The number is higher than 4 percent only in Slovakia (7 percent) and the Czech Republic (6 percent). The low level of identification likely reflects ignorance rather than antipathy--a majority of citizens know little or nothing about the European Union.

Academics may imagine Europe as a "spirit" or "value," but ordinary people from east of the old Iron Curtain travel not to Europe but to Germany, Austria, England, or France, for these are the terms they learned in their school geography and see on their maps. At home, people don't tune in to elite television stations or follow the politics of Brussels on the Internet. For the popular perspective of ordinary Central and Eastern Europeans, scan the periodicals on sale at any railway station. The pictures alone are enough to remind you that Romano Prodi and his colleagues lack political sex appeal.

Since it is possible to have multiple identities, the New Europe Barometer asks whether people have a second identity. An average of 11 percent name Europe as their secondary identity, and the proportion rises as high as 20 percent in the Czech Republic. In addition, 33 percent name their country as a secondary identity, 27 percent their region, and 24 percent their local community.

When first and second choices are combined, the proportion who include European identity as a part of their identity rises to an average of 13 percent, peaking at 32 percent in the Czech Republic and 21 percent in Slovakia and falling below 10 percent in Lithuania (9 percent), Latvia

(8 percent), and Poland (7 percent). National identity remains effectively more significant than "Europeanness" in the candidate countries. But to infer from this that Central and East Europeans are nationalists would be premature-- identification with the state is rarely exclusive. A fifth of those who put their national identity first also identify with Europe.

### **Identification as a Chord not a Single Note**

What do these results tell us about the importance of identity as Europe moves towards enlargement? A first observation is that there is no simple opposition between a "European" and a national identity. Instead of thinking of identity in "either/or" terms, we could consider it rather in "both/and" terms. Multiple identifications can be in harmony, just as multiple notes together make up a chord. Moreover, the "chords" of identifications are not all struck at once. As it were, they are the notes on an accordion, in some cases expanding to emphasize the European dimension and in other instances contracting to emphasize the local community.

The establishment of new democratic regimes in Central and Eastern Europe was not driven by exclusive nationalism of the sort that led to wars or dictatorship in the region a century ago. Nor was it driven by scepticism. It was based on the experience of living more than 40 years under a communist regime directed from Moscow. That experience led people to reject one-party rule in favour of governments chosen through multi-party elections.

A second observation we might derive from the NEB results, therefore, concerns the trust of the region's polities in democratic governance. Responses to NEB questions on the issue of trust reveal that only 10 percent of those polled trust their political parties and a mere 14 percent confess to trusting their representatives and parliaments. Over the past decade, the citizens of Central and Eastern Europe appear to have learned to distrust their new governments almost as much as their former authoritarian regimes. That does not, however, indicate a popular revival of anti-democratic models of government--polls have also shown a robust rejection of authoritarian models in these countries.

On the other hand, distrust of government, partly a legacy from communist days, may be generalised to the EU, its structures and politicians. As Central European populations become acquainted with the European Union, its endless talk over obscure details and, for candidate members, incessant discussions about whether or not a country meets the requirements of the *acquis communautaire*--the nonnegotiable laws and policies of the EU--encourages scepticism and sometimes virulent attacks on specific EU policies.

Nor, it should be noted, is distrust or scepticism of national governments confined to Central and Eastern Europe. It is widespread throughout the EU. National referendums on specific EU proposals show that every country is divided; the main issue hangs on whether the pro-Brussels vote wins more than 50 percent or not. The French and the British have divided, and Danes and Irish have voted both for and against Brussels policies. Notably, the Irish "no" vote to the Nice Treaty has also been viewed as an expression of distrust of government. Moreover, Norwegians and Swiss have consistently voted to stay out of the European Union.

Every meeting of ministers of EU member states registers disagreements about what the current policy is and, even more important, how the European Union should be reformed. EU member states disagree about the reforms needed to accommodate 10 entrants from Central and Eastern Europe. Countries such as Britain, which have had to acquiesce in subsidising French and Spanish farmers, have no wish to pay more money out to subsidise Polish farms too.

One area of reform has little to do with the fall of the Berlin Wall: that is the recognition that structures adopted almost half a century ago for six countries are not optimal today. When six countries joined together to establish the precursor of the European Union in the 1950s, everything was up for negotiation. As the EU has evolved, many bargains have been struck that

have been codified into the *acquis communautaire*. As the EU has increased its responsibilities and membership, the size of the *acquis* has increased exponentially. Bargains struck long ago frequently appear inappropriate to new circumstances.

The current member states of the EU have the constitutional authority to decide what rules, if any, should be changed in anticipation of enlargement. And prime ministers from Britain and Spain to Germany and Greece have been using the occasion of enlargement to promote policies that benefit the voters who elect them. Candidate states have considerably less say. Little wonder, then, if Central Europeans' distrust of national governments extends to their negotiating partners in member countries. Nor, perhaps, is it surprising that they choose to identify not with Europe or ultimately with their nation, but increasingly with their locality.

*The New Europe Barometer survey, organised by the Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Strathclyde, surveyed representative nationwide samples in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania between 3 October and 10 December 2001. A total of 10,878 people were polled. For further details, see [www.cspp.strath.ac.uk](http://www.cspp.strath.ac.uk)*