

European Identity Begins to Gel

Thalys International Explorer confirms that different nationalities are embracing Europe

As the European Union enters a decisive phase in its development, a growing number of signs indicate that "Europe" is emerging as a daily concrete political and social reality among Europeans. To assess this fundamental trend, the Thalys International Explorer has done a survey to find answers to key questions: What nationalities feel the strongest ties to Europe? What vision do Europeans have for the political future of the EU? How far have the Europeans been converted to the euro?

The results of this survey¹ reveal that Europeans remain very much attached to their national identities, although a relatively significant percentage really and truly feel that they are now "citizens of Europe". A European identity is thus gradually emerging, despite substantial differences from one country to the next. At the same time, one must consider the possible impact on responses of the particularly tense international situation that reigned during the survey period.

Sociologist Gérard Mermet² puts the results of the Thalys International Explorer in perspective.

PART OF EUROPE

Still more "national" than "European"

The majority of Europeans (51%) identify more strongly with their native country than with Europe. France (63%) and the United Kingdom (41%) figure at the two extremes of the "supranational identity" spectrum.

One out of three Europeans (32%) express only a national identity. This figure climbs to 48% for the British and 42% for the Dutch, confirming the singular attitudes towards the EU that reign in both countries.

European identity nevertheless becoming stronger

A full 14% of the respondents stated that they felt first and foremost European! Germans rank highest in this regard, 27% of them stating that they feel exclusively European, with Belgians a distant second (18%). Germany, which has always played a pivotal role in the construction of Europe, again affirms its reputation as a trailblazer in the process of forging a European identity. On the contrary, only 8% of the Dutch and British say they feel exclusively European.

¹ Survey done from February 20 - March 12, 2003.

² Sociologist and corporate consultant Gérard Mermet is the author of "*Francoscopie 2003*".

The future of the European Union

One out of two Europeans is a federalist

The majority of Europeans - 51% of those questioned - want to see the future Europe take the form of a federation of states. Germany has long had this type of structure and 62% of the Germans would like to see it applied to the entire EU. Only 42% of the Dutch concur, reflecting their priority on preserving their national identity and sovereignty.

A federal Europe is much preferred to a "multi-tier Europe" (14%), spanning a handful of "core" countries, countries that are part of the euro zone, and others with varying degrees of integration. This format nevertheless receives a favorable reception among the Dutch (20%), French (17%) and Germans (16%). Still, there is a shared commitment to maintaining a national existence within the context of a federal-type supranational structure.

At the same time, there is no outright rejection of a "maximalist" solution, meaning a single European state. This option garnered 13% of the votes overall, with peaks of 18% in Italy and Spain and a low of 7% in the United Kingdom.

One out of ten favor doing away with the EU

One out of ten Europeans (12% overall and 28% in the U.K.) would like to return to the system of "nation states", even if this meant eliminating the European Union outright. The Spanish and Italians (5%) were joined by the Germans in being most hostile towards this return to the past.

Here again, it is legitimate to ask whether these significant results might not reflect a retreat to nationalism in the light of dissension over Iraq.

Euros are easier to spend than to count

While most Europeans have no trouble spending their euros, the majority of them - a resounding 84% - still have problems "thinking" in euros. Some 55% say they systematically convert, at least mentally, to their former national currency, including everyday purchases. Only 29% convert solely when it comes to big-ticket items.

Despite previous experience in switching from "old francs" to "new francs", the French convert more than other nationalities (93%, especially for large amounts). A quarter of the Spanish and Italians state they are completely at ease with the new currency. The Germans have more trouble with smaller sums and there was a requisite "mourning period" as they bid farewell to the deutsche mark.

Finally, the survey confirmed the reticence of the British towards joining Euroland, with 64% opposing any abandoning of the pound sterling. This figure underscores the symbolic power of the single European currency, which embodies an entirely different relationship with Europe. And this is precisely what a substantial majority of the British do not want.