

THE EUROPEANS AND EU ACTIONS: CO-OWNERS' DEBATES ON THE RISE

Yves Bertoncini, consultant and visiting professor of European Affairs

The 2019 European elections will generate intense debates on what the European Union should do

The peoples of the European continent¹ want to go on living in the EU, but they differ on what the EU should do - or not do: in a nutshell, this is the major lesson to be drawn from the Eurobarometer surveys carried out in March and April 2018.

In the Standard Eurobarometer of spring 2018², 40% of Europeans have indeed a positive image of the EU, 37% a neutral one and only 21% a negative one; trust in the EU is on the rise at 42% and at its highest level since autumn 2010; support for the Economic and Monetary Union and for the euro remains at a record high with three-quarters of respondents (74%) in the euro area; a majority of Europeans are optimistic about the future of the EU (58%) and this optimism is shared by all the peoples, except in Greece (42%) and... the UK (43%). The British people was free to leave the EU but, given the difficulties of such departure, no doubt that the peoples of the continent can consider more clearly the benefits of their membership and be even more reluctant to face the high costs of a potential divorce.

Against this positive background, the citizens' answers to the Special Eurobarometer survey « One year to go to the European elections » conducted for the European Parliament³ offer a much more contrasted and even contradictory state of play when it comes to the EU debates and policies. What the EU does – or doesn't – is indeed perceived very differently from one country to another, and doesn't frequently correspond to the reality of the European interventions, which is a challenge for the EU institutions. The same is true for citizens' expectations on what the EU should do and the identification of the fields in which « more or less Europe » would be needed. Even if there is undoubtedly a momentum for more European external interventions, there are still important nuances and discrepancies among EU citizens and Member States. It's then not surprising that the debate around EU budget reflects the same type of contradictions between perceptions and facts, but also between the changes wished by the peoples of Europe, « united in diversity ».

¹ Except the British people then, who decided to leave the EU in June 2016 and are to leave it soon.

² EB89, Spring 2018, March 2018

³ EB89.2: European elections – one year to go, April 2018.

1. The priorities for the 2019 electoral campaign: Europeans « united in diversity », EU institutions answering them?

EU citizens express quite clear views about the priority topics which should be at the center of the campaign for the next European Parliament election – even if their expressions echo the very nature of peoples « united in diversity »

1.1. The European citizens identify three set of more or less absolute priorities for the 2019 electoral campaign

The results of the Special Eurobarometer « one year to go to the European elections » provide key findings as regards the priority topics which should be at the center of the campaign for the next European Parliament election. Three set of priorities can be identified from the EU citizens' perspective:

- four topics gather between 40% and 50% of citizens' preferences: **the fight against terrorism** (49%), **combatting youth unemployment**⁴ (48%), **immigration** (45%) and, a wider one, **economy and growth** (42%);
- three other topics gather around one third of citizens' preferences: **combatting climate change and protecting the environment** (35%), **promoting human rights and democracy** and **social protection of EU citizens** (both 32%);
- finally, five other topics gather around one quarter of citizens' preferences: **security and defence policy** (29%), **the way the EU should be working in the future** (27%), **consumer protection and food safety** (27%), **protection of external borders** (26%) and **protection of personal data** (20%).

The basic interpretation of such results leads to consider that the 1st category of priorities have to be put at the core of the campaign, but also that the EU should do more to deal with them – which is a slightly different statement, to be backed by more precise findings focusing on EU interventions (see 2).

The fact that presumably quite popular topics, such as consumer protection, protection of personal data and protection of external borders rank very low in the hierarchy of priorities, could feed an alternative interpretation: these topics should not be at the core of discussions and campaigns, but should nevertheless be addressed through concrete actions and interventions. A third complementary interpretation is that European citizens may feel the need to see some topics at the center of the next electoral campaign because they perceive oppositions and divides between EU peoples, to be fixed in this perspective (see 1.2).

⁴ It should be noted that the item is specifically on *youth unemployment*, not about *unemployment in general*.

1.2. Europeans have different visions of what should be the priorities of the 2019 electoral campaign

Seven countries indeed see « combatting youth unemployment » as the priority topic of the Spring 2019 campaign (ranging from 77% in Cyprus to 40% in Slovakia)⁵. Five other countries share the idea that « economy and growth » should be the priority topic (from 81% in Greece to 52% in Romania). The citizens of these twelve countries then want the electoral campaign discussion to focus on economic and social challenges. The same could be said of the three countries seeing « combatting climate change and protecting the environment » as the first priority for the 2019 electoral campaign (from 66% in Sweden and the Netherlands to 56% in Denmark), in an effort to promote « sustainable development ».

Identified as the 1st priority based on the EU27 average (49%), fighting against terrorism is seen as the absolute priority by the citizens of seven EU countries (from 60% in France to 45% in Poland)⁶: this express a focus put on security issues rather than economic and social one.

The fact that the population of five EU Member States see « Immigration » as the first priority for the campaign (from 66% in Italy to 46% in Estonia) can also lead to consider that their main focus is not economic and social, but also based on stability and identity issues.

1.3. EU and national actors should feed a campaign balancing advocacy and subsidiarity

All in all, these diverse civic preferences should lead the political parties, candidates and institutions **to develop the 2019 electoral campaign while combining distinct sets of priorities** (from economy to security), **with an intensity adapted to peoples' national preferences and the most important focus put on the economic and social issues.**

They should also develop a campaign adapted to the very nature of EU competences, powers and interventions – along three complementary lines:

- It is first necessary to shed light on the decisions taken by EU institutions to deal with the main priorities identified by the citizens; this means highlighting the contributions delivered by the Juncker Commission, the European parliament and the Council during the 2014-2019 term, especially as regards priorities such as economy and growth, migrations, environment protection and security at large;
- It would also be welcome to adapt the 10 priorities of the 2014-2019 term⁷ to the new challenges identified by the EB survey, both by upgrading some of them (e.g. defence policy) and by creating new ones (the fight against terrorism, but also consumer/data protection), in line with the reflections of the « Road to Sibiu/Leaders' agendas »;

⁵ In Austria, combatting youth unemployment comes first equally with Protection of external borders and Social protection of EU citizens.

⁶ In Luxembourg, Fight against terrorism comes first equally with Combatting youth unemployment.

⁷ To see the 10 priorities of the Juncker Commission: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities_en

- Last but not least, EU institutions should not forget that it would be counterproductive to focus the 2019 electoral campaign on challenges the EU has limited tools to deal with (combatting youth unemployment and social protection in particular): it would then be wiser to underline that the EU may have an added value to answer these challenges, but that it's up to the national and regional authorities to fix them, and to be blamed if they are not fixed – as long as the distribution of competences between the EU and its Member States has not been modified.

2. Europeans favour more EU interventions, albeit for different purposes

The results of the Special Eurobarometer survey « one year to go to the European elections » also provide key findings as regards the civic expectations and perceptions of EU interventions. These findings are globally in line with the preferences expressed in the perspective of the 2019 electoral campaign, including by confirming that there are substantial differences between Europeans. They represent another political challenge for the EU institutions actions, communication and perspectives.

2.1. Europeans globally expect more EU interventions, but at various degrees

The Special Eurobarometer results show a very impressive support in favour of more EU interventions, which is shared for all the policy objectives mentioned, with more or less intensity. Three groups of political priorities can be distinguished:

- six policy objectives for which around ¾ of European citizens are in favour of **more EU interventions**: the fight against terrorism, the fight against unemployment, the issue of migration - three of the four issues already considered as priorities for the 2019 electoral campaign⁸ - but also three other policy objectives: environmental protection, the fight against tax fraud and the promotion of democracy and peace in the world;
- five policy objectives for which around 2/3 of European citizens are in favour of more EU interventions: the protection of external borders, security and defence policy, energy supply and energy security - and two more domestic overarching issues, health and social security and equal treatment of men and women.
- finally, four policy objectives for which a bit more than half of European citizens are in favour of more EU interventions (but between 19% and 23% in favour of less EU): foreign policy, economic policy, industrial policy and agriculture.

Here again, the main challenge for EU authorities is to make the actions they have undertaken to address these challenges much more visible, in particular by devoting specific messages and communication campaigns around the six policy objectives on which expectations for more EU action are the more pronounced (gathering around 75% of answers “more than at present”).

⁸ Only « economy and growth » is missing, but employment at large is mentioned, not only youth unemployment.

2.2. The negative civic perceptions of the ongoing EU interventions echo popular desire to reframe them

Europeans' perceptions of EU action are in line with their expectations on one point: they don't see this action as « excessive », or only in a very limited way (from 3% on the fight against unemployment to 12% in agriculture).

The overall dissatisfaction they express directly echoes their wish for « more Europe », especially as regards six policy objectives, vis-à-vis which 50% or more see EU action as « insufficient »: the fight against unemployment, the fight against tax fraud, the issue of migration, the fight against terrorism, environmental protection and the protection of external borders⁹. This dissatisfaction is globally consistent with the citizens' expectations as regards EU actions and their 2019 electoral campaign priorities; for the EU institutions, it should confirm the necessity to consider these objectives as priorities for the month and years to come, including while precisating that the fight against unemployment must above all be undertaken at the national levels.

Not a single policy objective reaches the level of 50% of satisfaction, which would welcome an « adequate/about right » level of EU intervention, but this feeling of « adequation » is somehow expressed in five seven policy fields to which EU institutions and actors are encouraged to go on granting the same level of political attention:

- « adequate/about right » is indeed superior to the sum of answers « insufficient » and « excessive » for Energy supply and energy security (45%) and Industrial policy (42%),
- it is equivalent to insufficient and excessive for Equal treatment of men and women (at 46%);
- and it is substantial but inferior to insufficient or excessive when it comes to the promotion of democracy and policy in the world (42%), foreign policy (41%), security and defence policy (41%) and economic policy (40%).

Agriculture deserves a specific comment: not only because it's the policy objective meeting the most important score of answers « excessive » (12%), but also to stress that only 25 points separate those thinking that EU interventions are insufficient in this field (37%) and those considering that they are excessive (12%). This political statement can lead to two alternative conclusions: either to underline the perception of EU interventions for agriculture is somehow mixed and controversial, and that it should be subject to a more intense political and electoral debate; or to consider that there is the need to do more for agriculture at the EU level so as to reduce the « insufficient » score, including in terms of budget support – but this is not really confirmed by the Eurobarometer survey findings on EU budget (see 3.).

⁹ The civic dissatisfaction expressed against an insufficient EU action is slightly less substantial for The promotion of democracy and peace in the world (45%), Security and defence policy (43%) and Health and social security (48%).

3. The (not that) new debate on EU budget: another expression of « unity in perplexity »

The Standard Eurobarometer survey of spring 2018 (EB89) finally offers interesting findings about citizens expectations and perceptions vis-à-vis EU budget: it's not surprising that they reflect the same type of contradictions between the expectations and perceptions of the European citizens, but also between the changes they ask for, united in diversity – and in perplexity.

3.1. What was the question all about? A poor knowledge of EU citizens on EU budget

The first striking finding is that the Europeans have a very poor knowledge on what the EU budget is about: nearly one third of Europeans think that the EU spends most of its budget on administrative and personnel costs and buildings (31%), and one quarter on defence and security (26%)... It is worth noting, however, that the rate of "don't know" answers is particularly high in six countries (superior or equal to 20%) and even reaches 25% in Portugal. There are few countries where citizens are able to identify agriculture/rural development and regional investment as the two main fields of EU expenditures: these two items are most cited in Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark and Finland.

This poor knowledge must lead EU and national institutions to interpret cautiously the desire expressed by the peoples, as well as **to intensify massively the information and communications actions around EU budget at the occasion of the new MFF negotiation and during the next electoral campaign.**

3.2. The EU should not spend more - but it should spend more in many fields...

The second key finding of this Standard Eurobarometer survey of spring 2018 is that EU shouldn't spend more - but it should spend more in many fields...

In 18 EU Member States, most respondents agree that "the EU's political objectives do not justify an increase in the Union's budget". Among these countries, the proportion ranges from 67% in both Denmark and Austria to 41% in Estonia and 42% in Germany. This number of Member States is very significant since it's much bigger than the « net contributors » club¹⁰ and should then be considered very carefully by EU institutions and decision makers: **spending more money at EU level would need intense pedagogy efforts, in particular** at this very moment when the departure of the United-Kingdom from the EU will reduce importantly the level of resources available.

Three other findings can be highlighted: the third one is that, for Europeans, public health (40%) and employment and social affairs (38%) are the main areas in which the EU should spend its budget – which is not in line with the reality but also with the distribution of competences between the EU and Member

¹⁰ There are eight usual « net contributors » to the EU budget: Germany, France, Italy, The Netherlands, Sweden, Austria, Finland, and the United Kingdom.

States level. While respecting the subsidiarity principle, EU institutions should be encouraged to do more on social affairs, in particular through the use of social adjustment measures (European social fund, European globalisation adjustment fund, etc.), but also to remind the public that they can't really do much more to finance public health measures.

The other policy objectives gathering a significant popular support correspond to more concrete EU interventions, which should then be developed: economic growth (34%), education, training, culture and media (33%), climate change and environmental protection (26%) as well as defence and security (25%)¹¹.

A fourth finding is that most of the key policies financed by the EU budget gather quite a limited level of expectations from EU citizens: scientific research (20%), agriculture and rural development (18%), energy issues (16%), regional investment (15%), development and humanitarian aid to countries outside the EU (8%), assistance to EU neighbours including candidate countries (6%) and transport (5%). It should perhaps then lead EU and national institutions to « make the case » again for all these expenditures, so that they can be maintained in the future.

Finally, **a fifth key finding** is that the extreme contradictions between expectations and perceptions on EU budget should lead its institutions and actors to reduce the « knowledge deficit » mentioned above. When expectations on the importance of EU budgetary interventions are much higher than their perceptions, what is needed is to spend a bit more (example of climate protection), but also to justify this gap by invoking the subsidiarity principle (example of public health). When expectations are very inferior to perceptions because of a knowledge deficit, the same pedagogy needs to appear, especially about administrative and personnel costs. One should bear in mind that this gap between perceptions and expectations could be considered as the expression of political preferences (for example in favour of the reduction of external aid to candidates or non-EU countries)

Conclusion: challenging times for the Austrian Presidency

The civic and political findings mentioned above confirm that EU institutions are living in challenging times given the impressive, but also contradictory and sometimes illusory demands expressed by European peoples.

The Austrian authorities have tried to meet part of these demands by selecting three main sets of priorities for its presidency of the Council, namely security (the fight against illegal immigration by securing external borders), maintaining Europe's competitiveness through digitisation and stability in Austria's neighbouring countries (working towards EU accession for Western Balkan countries).

It is worth underlining that the first of these priorities is very much in line with quite consensual popular expectations on the effective protection of European external borders. Its focus on Europe's competitiveness is also consistent with quite a massive popular support for more EU actions in favour of

¹¹ The fact that this question is a trend question probably explain why there is no item on « the fight against terrorism », which could correspond to the item on « defence and security ».

economic growth – even if the social dimension expressed in the mentioned Eurobarometer survey results appears to be underestimated.

The third Austrian priority seems to be more controversial, since European assistance to EU neighbours including candidate countries receive a limited popular support. It's worth adding that the strategic relations between EU and Western Balkans could and should be framed into a more popular narrative, center around the need to « extend peace and stability » as well as underlining the contribution of this region to the success of other more consensual policy objectives (e.g. the protection of external borders, security and defence, energy supply, etc.).

This need for a more adapted narrative is naturally vital on a larger scale for EU actors, especially in the perspective of the next European Parliament elections. **Two main dimensions should be particularly highlighted: the economic and social one, around the notions of competitiveness and cohesion, since the single market, EU budget and EMU are the very pillars of European integration; the external and security dimension, which will give more sense to European unity in a destabilising world and could lead EU citizens to feel « stronger together ».**

About the author

Yves Bertoncini is an expert and Consultant on EU affairs. He is President of the Mouvement Européen-France since December 2016 and Vice-President of European Movement – International since November 2017. He teaches European issues at the Corps des Mines (Mines Paris Tech – since 2007), the College of Europe in Bruges (since 2016) and the Institut d'Études Politiques/Sciences Po Paris (2001-11 and from 2018 on) and has also taught at the École Nationale d'Administration (2007-09). Yves Bertoncini holds degrees from the Institut d'Études Politiques in Grenoble and the College of Europe in Bruges. He has also studied at Sciences Po Paris and at the University of California in Berkeley.

DISCLAIMER

This briefing note has been produced and provided by the European Parliament's Eurobarometer contractor, Kantar Public. The opinions expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position of the European Parliament.