

Survey on European Sovereignty

Carried out by Ipsos on behalf of the Fondation Jean-Jaurès
and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

On behalf of the Fondation Jean-Jaurès and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Ipsos surveyed 8,000 Europeans on the topic of »European sovereignty«.

European sovereignty is increasingly an issue of political debate, whether at European level (for example, in the EU State of the Union address in 2018¹) or at national level (for example in France, François Hollande's 2015 address to the European Parliament² or Emmanuel Macron's 2017 address to the Sorbonne³). While for those who tend to use it the concept of European sovereignty has very positive connotations, do others agree? How is the term »sovereignty« understood and evaluated in the various European countries? Do these different evaluations vary in terms of national, both historical and political, but also geopolitical context? How is the juxtaposition of the words »sovereignty« and »European« perceived and understood? Is it regarded as contradictory or as reasonable? Is Europe regarded as sovereign today? Should its sovereignty be strengthened, and if yes, on what grounds?

To try to answer these questions, between 28 December 2020 and 8 January 2021 Ipsos surveyed 8,000 Europeans from eight countries online: France, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Spain and Sweden. In each of these eight countries a representative sample of the population aged 18 or older was surveyed (quota sampling).

Attitudes to sovereignty differ considerably in the various EU member states

Before discussing European sovereignty it is important to recognise that the concept of sovereignty is interpreted very differently in the various European countries.

It is viewed as positive by a large majority of Germans (73 per cent), Poles (69 per cent), Latvians (61 per cent) and Romanians (60 per cent) and to a somewhat lesser extent by Swedes (56 per cent). In these countries the concept has somewhat negative spontaneous associations for less than 10 per cent of respondents (between 2 and 10 per cent, depending

¹ State of the Union 2018: The Hour of European Sovereignty, European Commission

² Statement by the then President of France François Hollande of 7 October 2015, *Vie publique*

³ Initiative for Europe, speech by Emmanuel Macron for a sovereign, united and democratic Europe, *Elysée.fr*

on the country), while others regard it as »neither positive nor negative« (19 to 29 per cent) or it has no associations at all (5 to 13 per cent).

By contrast, in France (29 per cent), Spain (28 per cent) and Italy (21 per cent) only a minority evaluate it positively. In Italy, the negative assessments even outnumber the positive ones, at 35 per cent, which is not the case in France (25 per cent) and Spain (23 per cent).

For the French, the notion of sovereignty refers primarily to monarchy: according to the respondents, among the words, ideas and images that spring to mind when they hear the term »sovereignty«, taking first place is the word »king«, with 300 mentions, followed by »power« and »queen«. The concept of »independence« falls some way behind, being mentioned only a little more often than »monarchy«.

Among the Germans this notion gives rise to completely different spontaneous associations. They are very instructive. Springing most readily to mind for the Germans are the words »independence«, »independent«, »state« and »freedom«. Indeed, the word »king« doesn't crop up at all.

It is therefore not surprising that opinions differ widely, not just in France and Germany, but throughout Europe concerning how modern the concept of »sovereignty« is. Those who most often consider the notion to be outdated are the French (49 per cent in contrast to the 12 per cent who consider it to be modern), the Italians (53 per cent as against 10 per cent), the Spanish (38 per cent as against 13 per cent) and the Romanians (37 per cent as against 25 per cent). In Germany, by contrast, the prevailing view is that the notion is modern (31 per cent as against 9 per cent who regard it as outdated); similarly in Poland (31 per cent as against 17 per cent), Latvia (33 per cent as against 17 per cent) and, marginally, also in Sweden (23 per cent as against 22 per cent). Finally, it should be noted that almost half of all Europeans (48 per cent) regard sovereignty as »neither somewhat modern nor somewhat outdated« (40 per cent) or it means nothing to them at all (8 per cent).

A majority of Europeans spontaneously associate this term neither with the political left nor with the right (58 per cent). Those who do give it a political association tend to link it rather to the right (23 per cent as against 6 per cent who associate it with the left). Particularly in Germany the concept tends to be regarded as »non-political« (only 8 per cent associate it with »left« or »right«). It is considered to have political connotations much more often in countries that evaluate it negatively: in Italy (41 per cent), Spain (37 per cent) and France (34 per cent) it is associated predominantly with the political right. It is possible that the term's similarity to the notion of »sovereignism«⁴ may have contributed to this association with the right and, for some, to negative connotations.

In the countries in which attitudes to the concept of sovereignty are rather negative, it is strongly associated with the notion of nationalism (58 per cent of Italians associate this with sovereignty, as do 43 per cent of Spaniards and 43 per cent of the French). Italians and French

⁴ With its connotations of exceptionalism and isolationism. Trans. note.

people also mention **protectionism** (26 per cent), in comparison, for example, with only 6 per cent in Germany. Finally, the notion of **power** is also mentioned more often, especially in France (51 per cent), Spain (54 per cent) and Italy (46 per cent), for many rather in a negative sense. Across all countries it is those in which the term »sovereignty« has somewhat negative associations that also most often link it with the notion of power (57 per cent in comparison with only 23 per cent of those with a positive attitude to the notion of »sovereignty«).

In countries in which the notion of sovereignty is regarded positively it is primarily associated with independence (63 per cent in Germany, 65 per cent in Poland, 72 per cent in Latvia), **and with self-determination** (53 per cent in Germany, 62 per cent in Sweden, 42 per cent in Latvia, 40 per cent in Poland), **and much less often with power** (23 per cent in Germany, 22 per cent in Sweden, 15 per cent in Latvia, 9 per cent in Poland), nationalism (only 7 per cent in, for example, Germany) or protectionism (6 per cent in Germany).

Finally, the notion of sovereignty, in addition to the marked differences in perceptions between countries, is regarded somewhat more positively by older people (52 per cent of people over 60 years of age as against 42 per cent of those under 50 years of age) and by the highly qualified (56 per cent of those in higher socio-professional categories), primarily because they tend to be in a position to make a judgement.

The concept of European sovereignty is elusive and not without controversy

In answer to the question of whether they understand the term »European sovereignty« six out of 10 Europeans replied that they have a good idea what it means (63 per cent, only 16 per cent of whom, however, have a »clear idea«, while the remaining 37 per cent can scarcely imagine what it means). That is 8 percentage points fewer than in relation to »national sovereignty« (71 per cent say they have a good understanding of it) and only a little higher than in relation to »strategic autonomy« (61 per cent).

In France and, especially, in Italy the term is understood the least (only by 54 per cent of French people and by 45 per cent of Italians). It is better understood in Sweden (60 per cent), Latvia (67 per cent) and Germany (69 per cent), but above all in Spain (71 per cent), Poland (75 per cent) and Romania (77 per cent).

In France and, especially, in Italy the term »strategic autonomy« is better understood. In Germany, Spain, Latvia and Sweden, by contrast, much less.

The term »European sovereignty« is somewhat better understood by respondents over 60 years of age (68 per cent) and especially by respondents in higher socio-professional categories (74 per cent). The same applies to the term »national sovereignty«.

Europeans are divided in terms of how they value this term. In all eight countries taken together, just over half regard the term »European sovereignty« as positive (52 per cent). Some 26 per cent view it as somewhat negative and 22 per cent as neither one nor the other.

This evaluation is somewhat less positive than in the case of »national sovereignty« (5 percentage points less) and only marginally more positive than in the case of »strategic autonomy« (3 percentage points more).

The term »European sovereignty« is regarded positively by a large majority in four of the countries under investigation: Germany (63 per cent), Poland (69 per cent), Romania (66 per cent) and Latvia (68 per cent). Opinions are much more mixed in Spain (49 per cent regard it as positive, 24 per cent negative), Sweden (48 per cent positive, 19 per cent negative), France (41 per cent positive, 35 per cent negative) and above all Italy (37 per cent positive, 47 per cent negative).

It is also noteworthy that in France and Italy a majority of respondents even consider it to be contradictory to put the words »sovereignty« and »Europe« together (52 per cent of French respondents and 56 per cent of Italians), compared with only 27 per cent of Germans.

From a sociodemographic standpoint the term is regarded as positive by those over 60 years of age (58 per cent in comparison with 47 per cent of those 35–49 years of age). The same applies to those in higher socio-professional categories (61 per cent). However, the proportion of negative views varies only marginally by age and qualifications (between 22 per cent and 29 per cent, depending on the group in question). It appears that capacity for judgement develops with age and qualifications. **Political self-positioning has more influence on how someone evaluates the term:** among those identifying as politically in the centre, the term is more often regarded as positive (61 per cent, with only 17 per cent giving negative evaluations) than by those on the left (54 per cent as against 27 per cent negative evaluations) and those on the right (51 per cent as against 30 per cent negative evaluations). The latter doubtless regard European sovereignty as a narrowing of national sovereignty, which is much more important to them (70 per cent positive evaluations as against 48 per cent among those on the left).

Only half of Europeans regard Europe today as sovereign

Europeans define sovereignty first and foremost as independence from others (58 per cent give this as one of the two main definitions of sovereignty), **as living in accordance with one's own values and ideas** (57 per cent) **or as the ability to assert one's own interests** (51 per cent). The definition of sovereignty as freely chosen cooperation with partners lags far behind (35 per cent). **However, only 51 per cent of Europeans regard Europe today as sovereign.** While northern and eastern European countries are largely convinced of Europe's sovereignty (61 per cent of Swedes, 65 per cent of Poles, 63 per cent of Romanians, 56 per cent of Latvians and 57 per cent of Germans), those in France and Italy look at the situation quite differently (64 per cent of the French and 54 per cent of Italians take the view that Europe is not sovereign). Spanish people are divided on this question, with a slight majority regarding Europe as sovereign (53 per cent).

For most people, the economy is the most important factor in determining Europe's sovereignty (69 per cent regard a strong economy as indispensable for Europe's sovereignty), although **other considerations are also regarded as almost as important**. For example, a large majority of Europeans consider it as essential that Europe pursue a common security and defence policy (67 per cent overall and a majority in all countries); that in strategic areas such as food supply and health care provision production must take place in Europe (65 per cent overall and a majority in all countries, apart from Poland); that Europe should have its own energy sources (60 per cent and a majority in all countries, apart from Poland and Sweden); that it strongly defend its values (61 per cent, apart from Poland and Sweden); that it control its external borders (59 per cent, apart from Poland); that it should possess common instruments for combating foreign interference (58 per cent, apart from Poland); that it should have control over its strategic infrastructure (52 per cent, apart from Poland and Sweden); and that it should have its own tax revenues (53 per cent, although only a minority in Germany, Poland and Sweden).

Control over digital infrastructure is regarded as critical by a little less than half of Europeans (46 per cent), but by a slim majority in France (51 per cent), Spain (51 per cent) and, especially, Romania (60 per cent).

Almost three-quarters of Europeans think that European sovereignty should be strengthened

While a large majority of Europeans take the view that their country's sovereignty should be strengthened (77 per cent overall, 70 per cent in France and Spain and 91 per cent in Romania), **they do not consider it to be contradictory to strive at the same time to strengthen European sovereignty. In fact, 73 per cent of Europeans believe that European sovereignty should be strengthened**, in particular Latvians (84 per cent), Romanians (83 per cent) and Germans (83 per cent), to a lesser extent, but still by a large majority the Spanish (73 per cent), the French (66 per cent), Swedes (64 per cent) and even Italians (60 per cent).

Even though the notion of European sovereignty doesn't seem to appeal much to French people or Italians, a majority of them are not substantially opposed to it.

The majority of Europeans take the view that European sovereignty should be strengthened, above all to counter the threat of terrorism (37 per cent offer this as one of the two main reasons, especially in France, Poland, Romania and Sweden), **to meet the challenge of climate change** (34 per cent, especially often in Germany) **and to prevent threats to health** (31 per cent, especially in Italy and Spain). **These global challenges, in their view, require a global response**, because their country does not have sufficient international clout (27 per cent overall and as much as 39 per cent in Italy and 37 per cent in Latvia), or other actors, first and foremost China, are seeking hegemony (20 per cent overall, 25 per cent in France and 27 per cent in Sweden). Russia's power ambitions are cited as a reason by only 13 per cent of

Europeans overall, but by 30 per cent in Poland (the third most often cited reason for strengthening European sovereignty) and by 31 per cent in Latvia (again, the third most often cited reason).

What is currently hindering the realisation of European sovereignty, according to Europeans, is not the unwillingness of the population (only 11 per cent take this view), but rather the fact that some European countries are led by nationalists (23 per cent overall, 38 per cent in Sweden and 35 per cent in Germany); pressure from certain foreign countries in whose interest it is that Europe does not become stronger (22 per cent overall, 41 per cent of Latvians and 36 per cent of Romanians); the weakness of European institutions as currently constituted (19 per cent); cultural differences between European states (16 per cent); and, to a lesser extent, pressure from big industrial corporations or digital platforms (9 per cent).