

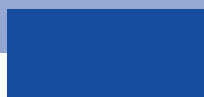


The opinions of Poles concerning the actions of the European Union during the pandemic: continuity and change

SUMMARY

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Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic is the greatest challenge Poland, Europe and indeed humanity in general has faced for many generations. This challenge is multi-faceted. Initially, the struggle against the pandemic focused almost exclusively on medical and sanitary issues, but it was soon evident that the pandemic was also – indeed, perhaps mainly – an economic problem, and that countries and societies would also have to manage the various social, psychological and cultural effects of the crisis.

From mid-March onwards, social scientists worldwide began to conduct both academic and popular research into the nature of and changes to social opinions and moods concerning the coronavirus. In early April, a team of researchers from the Center for the Study of Democracy at SWPS University embarked on a project of this type.

The survey comprises several dozen questions, including several questions about the European Union, and in particular opinions and assessments of actions taken by the EU and their reception in Poland. The questions about the EU consist of one constant battery of questions (3 in total) and several questions about a variety of different topics.

The research was conducted online using Computer Aided Web Interviews (CAWI). The research sample was selected, and post-stratification weights were applied so as to achieve the closest possible representation of the attitudes of adult Poles.

Objective

The aim of this study was to record, analyse and interpret the opinions, attitudes and preferences of Poles during the pandemic in reference to the European Union. Where possible, we sought to build on existing traditions of research into the EU by asking identically worded or functionally similar questions to those used in previous surveys.

Methodological notes

Before turning to substantive findings, it is necessary to comment on an important methodological observation concerning the study of this new issue and its association with the European Union. We have shown that the questions asked in our study that relate to EU issues are well chosen in terms of their content: Poles understand what they are being asked about, and their responses are strongly correlated with those of similar studies conducted in the same period and with data from studies conducted on similar issues in the recent past. However, the study also included more complex questions, such as those concerning the competences of the EU in the area of the public health and concerning knowledge about specific actions taken by the EU to combat the pandemic. Responses to these questions should be treated with caution and treated primarily as indicative of the extent of ignorance about the role and actions of the EU.

Results

General observations

Our analyses show that Poles feel a strong sense of attachment to the European Union. The vast majority of Poles believe that the project of EU integration should be continued and deepened. It is the EU, rather than other countries, that Poles mainly see as Poland's key strategic partner. Around half of Poles think that the EU's actions during the pandemic have been adequate, a more positive assessment than the one they have of the actions of the Polish government.

The most important overall result is that **attitudes towards the EU during the height of the pandemic (from early April to late July) did not change**, despite the fact that there were significant changes in attitudes to the pandemic itself, to its economic impact, to the Polish government's response to the pandemic, and in particular attitudes to the presidential election held in Poland during this period. **This is a very important result.** Answers to our fundamental question about whether the European project should be deepened further and the EU more closely integrated, or whether instead the project of EU integration has gone 'too far', show a picture of great stability: **51 to 61 percent of those polled believe that the EU should continue to integrate, while the opposite view is held by only 14 to 22 percent of respondents.**

The second of the key indicators that show the positive attitude of Poles towards the European Union concerns **preferences over Poland's choice of strategic allies.** Again, attitudes did not change during the period of the pandemic (see the full report for details). In surveys held during the period from the beginning of April to the end of July, **between 56 and 61 percent of Poles expressed the belief that the EU should be the most important ally for Poland**, compared with only just over 10% in the USA and less than 5% in Poland. However, about

a quarter of the respondents believe that present allies are redundant or that new allies should be sought.

Finally, we asked respondents for their **assessment of the European Union's actions in relation to the pandemic. A large plurality or small overall majority (47-51%) are of the opinion that the EU's actions are 'adequate'**, and this is a view that did not change over the four-month period in which our research was conducted. However, there were changes in respondents' assessments of whether the EU is 'overreacting and sowing unnecessary panic' or 'not reacting seriously enough and underestimating the threat'. **At the beginning of April, 39% of respondents believed that the EU was underestimating the threat, and only 10% felt that it had overreacted. At the end of the survey period, 31% felt the EU was underestimating the threat, while as much as a fifth of Poles said that the EU was overreacting and sowing panic.** To understand this change, it is necessary to place it in a broader context of much significance for our research as a whole: the fact that **the level of concern expressed by Poles about the coronavirus decreased significantly over the period of study.** In early April, 72% of respondents thought that COVID-19 posed a 'very serious' threat to their health, compared with only 44% at the end of July.

Detailed results

(1) First, a few remarks about the results concerning the opinions, assessments and preferences of Poles towards democracy.

(A) In the period of analysis, Poles' attitudes towards democracy did not change. For a clear majority, democracy is the preferred political system in a normative sense, as shown in the six iterations of the survey in which this question was present. **Between 68 and 81 percent of respondents declared themselves in favour of democracy**, with a

substantial minority (22-31 percent) saying they were "strongly" in favour. Between 12 and 22 percent expressed the opposite view. In short, democracy as a political system enjoys strong and broad support in Polish society, although there is a not insignificant minority that holds a different opinion. An equally important facet of attitudes to democracy is assessment of its everyday functioning in practice. In this case, responses are slightly different.

During the period of our surveys, 34-39 percent of Poles positively assessed the functioning of Polish democracy, but a clear majority (54-61 percent) held a negative view.

(B) To understand the real attitudes of respondents towards democracy, it is necessary to contextualise them with reference to attitudes towards alternative forms of government such as military rule, charismatic leadership, and rule by technocrats. In a nutshell, our data show that **while there is little support for alternative regimes based on the military or on charismatic leadership, the the idea of politically independent technocratic rule commands the support of nearly two-thirds of the population**, making this form of rule only slightly less popular than democracy. This is a significant result, the more so given that the acceptance of this solution has been gaining support in recent years.

(C) To analyse attitudes to democratic regimes in more detail, we asked respondents questions about what political goals and social meta-values the state should support. **There is greater support among Poles for a state that prioritises entrepreneurship over social solidarity** (by a ratio of 2:1) **and greater support for a state that focuses on social progress and modernity rather than the protection of traditional values** (by a ratio of 3:2). Answers to these questions vary depending on whether respondents hold Euro-enthusiastic or Eurosceptic views. Euro-enthusiasts are much more likely to be in favour of social

progressiveness and entrepreneurship rather than tradition and social solidarity. For Eurosceptics the opposite applies, although in this case the difference is not quite so strong.

(D) Finally, respondents were asked about their attitudes to six statements that are controversial from the perspective of democratic practice: (a) the permissibility of allowing the authorities to 'break the rules of democracy if it is required by the interest of society', (b) the view that 'public security should always be more important than the right to privacy', (c) the admissibility of breaking the rules of democracy in the interests of society, (d) the principle that the authorities should prioritise the interests of the majority over those of minorities, (e) granting the authorities significant scope to pacify protests by the authorities, (f) the extent to which citizens should be able to control their governments even at the price of making it difficult for them to govern. **With the exception of the issue of public security and the right to privacy, on which Poles are equally divided, respondents primarily support solutions that are compatible with mature democracy.**

(2) **The majority of respondents think that Poland's membership in the EU will be as important after the pandemic as it has been so far** (41% in April; 46% in May), with around 30% believing that it will be more important and only 15 % believing it will be less important. Respondents aged 45-54 and those living in big cities are most likely to think that Poland's membership of the EU will be important. The perceived severity of the pandemic is strongly related to attitudes towards EU membership. Those who see the threat of the pandemic as high are also more likely to think that Poland's membership of the EU will be important. There is a similar pattern among those who think that Poland, in comparison with other EU countries, is not handling the pandemic well. However, the greatest differentiation in assessments of the future usefulness of the EU is between supporters of political

parties. Over 90% of those who support the Civic Coalition believe that the role of the EU will be the same or greater in the future, compared with only 45% of those who support Confederation. Indeed, over half of Confederation's supporters believe that the EU will be less important.

(3) On average, **half of the respondents believe that states should take joint action with the European Union to deal with the pandemic and its consequences**, while around 14% think that states should deal with these problems on their own. In this case, there is no significant differentiation of this opinion by gender and age, although older respondents – and in particular older women – have a somewhat greater preference for a collective approach to resolving these problems. Unsurprisingly, a preference for joint European action is all the stronger the more a respondent sees the pandemic as dangerous for public health and for the economy. This opinion is conditioned by party identification. On the one hand, supporters of the Left and the Civic Coalition clearly support a community solution to the problems of the pandemic. On the other, a larger proportion of the supporters of PiS and Confederation see an independent role for nation states, although even in these two cases a preference for community action prevails.

(4) One of the most important aspects of our analysis concerned the issue of whether more competences currently possessed by nation states should be transferred to the EU level. **There is a slight preference for the further transfer of competences to the EU (37%)**, while a substantial minority (29%) disagree with this. Those who are more afraid of the pandemic, those who judge that Poland has done well out of EU membership and those who think that Poland is coping with the crisis worse than other EU countries are more often willing to consider a further transfer of competences. This view is also shared by those who believe that the EU should be more decisive in defending the rule of law in Poland.

(5) The current functioning of the media in Poland, and in particular the bias of public television and its dependence on those in power, complicates public life in Poland and the attitudes of Poles to the European Union. Overall, our analyses suggest that traditional media – and in particular, television – has returned to favour during the period of the pandemic. However, there are significant differences with respect to individual broadcasters: public broadcaster TVP is clearly considered less reliable than private broadcasters TVN and POLSAT. Social media and internet portals are rarely considered a reliable source of information about the EU.

Our study shows **a relatively high level of support for the EU and for the specific actions it has been taking during the pandemic, regardless of the respondent's preferred source of information.**

There is nevertheless a clear divide between Eurosceptics and Euro-enthusiasts, with the former convinced of the reliability of TVP while the latter find TVN more reliable. This is a finding in keeping with a generally observed dynamic in media consumption, by which citizens choose media outlets that confirm their previously held opinions, which are then in turn strengthened by continued exposure to those opinions. POLSAT viewers occupy an intermediate position between TVP and TVN, selectively leaning towards Euro-enthusiasm or Euro-skepticism.

The use of and trust in social media is associated with more radical judgments and opinions than when using other media. On the other hand, it appears that willingness to consider information from the internet is correlated with a greater openness to new ideas and solutions.

(6) The data gathered on the attitudes of Poles to the EU can and should be looked at through the prism of socio-demographic differentiation. **Gender and age significantly differentiate the assessment of the threats posed by the pandemic to the health of Poles and the Polish**

economy, and the attitudes of respondents towards European integration, the EU as Poland's main ally, and the EU's response to the pandemic. Younger Poles and men are less likely to view COVID-19 as a threat to their health and to the economy. Men aged 18-34, who are the most Eurosceptic cohort, less likely to have a positive opinion on the EU's response to the coronavirus crisis and are the group that least frequently sees the EU as Poland's main ally. Older women are the demographic most supportive of the use of common EU funds to solve economic problems, but the majority of men aged 25-34 think that each country should solve economic problems related to the pandemic on their own. Inhabitants of **small and medium-sized towns**, and in particular **men** living in these areas, are more likely to invest hopes for the future in Poland's EU membership. Respondents who have a negative view of Poland's crisis management are more likely to see the EU as Poland's main ally and much more likely to attach greater importance to Poland's EU membership in the future.

(7) **The relationship between a positive assessment of the European Union and a positive attitude towards democracy** is one of the main threads of this report. As expected, our analyses show that there is a high level of importance attached to democracy as the best political system and to being Euro-enthusiastic, and a broadly positive set of attitudes towards the EU in general and to numerous specific features and achievements of the EU. The picture is rather different when we consider the relationship between attitudes to the EU and assessment of the current functioning of Polish democracy. There is a disproportionately high level of satisfaction among Eurosceptics; similarly, there is a disproportionately high level of dissatisfaction with current Polish democracy among Euro-enthusiasts. Euro-enthusiasts are also – albeit to a lesser extent - more critical of alternative political systems such as military rule and charismatic leaders.

(8) **The strength of Polish Euro-enthusiasm** derives more from women than from men, from older rather than younger people, from educated rather than poorly educated people, and from people from cities rather than villages. A similar picture emerges with respect to those who consider the EU as a strategic ally and those who view the EU's actions during the pandemic as "adequate".

(9) **Poles have far from perfect knowledge about specific EU policies,** the prerogatives of the EU, and the EU's programmes for supporting countries during the pandemic. However, respondents' self-assessment of their knowledge about the activities of the EU suggest that Poles are aware of the fact that gaps in their knowledge exist.

Poles know little about the specifics of EU competences, but a relative majority (almost 40%), support the transfer of more competences from the nation state to the EU level. The full report shows in more detail how this general disposition toward the EU (or opposition to it) interacts with more detailed issues of relevance to the delegation of state powers. The picture is not a uniform one: there are varying levels of consent to the delegation of powers, with a more negative attitude in the case of delegating powers in migration policy, and a more positive attitude in the case of public health and economic issues.

(10) **Euro-enthusiasts are convinced that the EU helped Poland during the pandemic,** a view not shared by Eurosceptics. This report does not address the question of causality in this relationship, but the persistence we observe in attitudes to the European project throughout the survey period suggests that attitudes to the EU influenced the assessment of pandemic assistance from the EU rather than vice versa.

(11) **Euro-enthusiasts** are not only generally willing to grant the EU more competences in the politics of member states but are also more likely to show higher levels of pan-European solidarity.

(12) **The absence of ties with the church, or the existence of only loose ties, are related to pro-European attitudes** and the willingness to delegate decision-making powers to the EU level. It is interesting that the group of people who most often participate in this institution does not differ significantly on the question of delegating powers. However, this is likely to be an effect of age; the elderly are more likely to engage more frequently in acts of religious participation and are also more likely to be convinced of the value of EU membership and of the project of European integration more generally.

(13) **For the most part, supporters of political parties behave as expected.** Supporters of left-wing parties and supporters of the liberal centre concentrated on the Civic Coalition show greater approval for the delegation of competences, while supporters of PiS do not. More noteworthy is the extent to which PSL supporters show both support for and opposition to this idea, while the real surprise is the electorate of Confederation, among which there is slightly greater support for rather than opposition to the delegation of competences to the EU level. This last result in particular should be subjected to greater scrutiny before firm conclusions are drawn.

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