

Focus on Italy

European Sovereignty

Ipsos survey on behalf of the Fondation Jean-Jaurès and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

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Survey conducted by Ipsos on behalf of the Fondation Jean-Jaurès and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Some 8,000 people were interviewed over the internet via Ipsos' Access Panel between 28 December 2020 and 8 January 2021, making up eight samples of 1,000 persons representative of the national population of persons aged 18 and over in France, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Spain and Sweden. The sampling was carried out in accordance with the quota method (sex, age, occupation, rural/urban location, region). This summary presents the results on Italy.

IN ITALY, SOVEREIGNTY GENERALLY HAS ADVERSE CONNOTATIONS

Out of the eight countries in the survey the term »sovereignty« has the worst connotations in Italy. Just over one in three Italians (35 %) – especially those below 35 years of age and people with left-wing sympathies – have a negative view of the word, as against 21 % who take a positive view and 38 % whose opinion is »neither positive nor negative«. At the same time, it is only in Italy that an absolute majority considers sovereignty to be »outdated« (53 %), as against a mere 10 % who consider it to be »modern« and 31 % »neither one nor the other«. This is far above the European average (32 % consider the term to be »outdated«, 20 % »modern« and 40 % »neither one nor the other«), and par-

ticularly far from what is observed in Germany, where only 9 % of respondents opt for »outdated«, 44 percentage points below Italy.

In seeking to explain this phenomenon a first clue lies in the fact that Italians are more likely to attribute the term to a political affiliation. Just over one in three Italians (35 %) regard sovereignty as a »right-wing« idea, as against only 5 % of Germans. Italians and Germans do agree on one thing, however: it is not a left-wing idea (only 6 % of Italians and 3 % of Germans take this view), the remainder of respondents opting for »neither left-wing nor right-wing« (48 % in Italy and 77 % in Germany). The more intense »politicisation« of the word »sovereignty« in Italy leads to more divided views, and it's understandable that left-leaning Italians take a more negative view, something also observed in France.

A second clue is provided by the closed questions. Respondents are provided with a list of words that they may or may not associate with the term »sovereignty« (they have to choose two). The top three choices among Italians are »nationalism« (mentioned by 58 %), »power« (46 %) and »protectionism« (26 %), while Germans choose »independence« (63 %), »self-determination« (53 %) and »freedom« (35 %). In these two countries people are clearly not talking about the same thing.

EUROPEAN SOVEREIGNTY? TWO WORDS THAT DON'T GO TOGETHER WELL

The decidedly mixed view of the term »sovereignty« in Italy has a depressive effect on the concept of »European sovereignty«. The very linking of the two words is called into question. Less than half of Italians (45 %) consider that they have a »very good« (10 %) or a »fairly good« (35 %) understanding of what it means. All the other countries register above 50 %, some even well over 50 % on this question: France stands at 54 %, Sweden 60 %, Germany 69 %, Spain 71 %, Poland 75 % and Romania 77 %. The problem lies in the term »sovereignty« itself, because the same lack of understanding is observed in relation to the idea of national sovereignty (only 56 % of Italians have a good understanding of what it means, as against a 71 % European average), whereas in the case of »strategic autonomy«, an expression that one might assume is less well known, 70 % of Italians claim that they have a good understanding of its meaning, the second highest score among the eight countries in the survey (behind Romanians, at 79 %).

Both corporate and opinion barometers regularly show that people tend to like that they know and what they understand. In Italy, the ambiguity surrounding the notion of sovereignty hardly works in its favour. Indeed, it is the country that takes the most negative view of it. European sovereignty only has positive connotations for 37 % of Italians, the lowest score among the eight countries in the survey (41 % are inclined towards a positive view in France, 48 % in Sweden, 49 % in Spain, and above 60 % in Germany, Poland, Romania and Latvia). Italy is also the only country, besides France, in which the majority (56 %) of persons interviewed believe that »it is contradictory to use these two words together because sovereignty refers primarily to the nation«. On average in the eight countries in the survey, a majority believe the opposite: »it is possible to use these two words together because European sovereignty and national sovereignty are complementary« (58 %). This brings us back to the meaning people attach to sovereignty. In Italy, it is »the ability to assert one's own interests« (mentioned by 64 %), and »independence in relation to others« (59 %). Independence is also cited in Germany and Sweden (63 % and 55 %, respectively), but followed immediately by »cooperation freely agreed with one's partners« (49 % and 52 %).

STRENGTHENING EUROPEAN SOVEREIGNTY? FEWER PEOPLE WANT IT IN ITALY THAN ELSEWHERE, BUT STILL A MAJORITY

But does Europe have sovereignty today? Similarly to the French, and in contrast to the other countries surveyed, the majority of Italians do not think so: while 46 % consider that »yes, Europe is sovereign«, 54 % believe the opposite. The Italians are nevertheless in agreement with their neighbours when it comes to the essential elements that Europe must have in order to be sovereign, and indeed are a little more exacting: »a strong economy« (73 % of Italians consider this to be »essential«, as against a 69 % European average), »a com-

mon defence policy« (72 %, 67 %), »safeguards on European production in such strategic areas as food and health« (66 % / 65 %) and »Europe's own energy sources« (64 % / 60 %).

There is an even stronger emphasis on some criteria, such as »Europe's own tax revenues« (63 % of Italians consider this to be essential, as against a European average that is 10 percentage points lower, at 53 %). By contrast, one might have expected a higher score than elsewhere regarding »control over the EU's external borders« given the problem with migrants arriving on the Sicilian island of Lampedusa. But that is not the case. Italy is even the country, alongside Poland, in which this issue is least often considered to be »essential« (56 % and 39 %, respectively, as against values ranging from 59 % to 68 % in the other countries).

While the notion of European sovereignty appears to be more opaque and poorly regarded in Italy than elsewhere, 60 % of respondents nevertheless believe that it should be strengthened. This score is lower than in the other countries – the European average is 73 % – but it is clear nonetheless. By comparison, support for strengthening national sovereignty (71 %) is more substantial, even though again somewhat lower than the average among the eight countries in the survey (77 %). As in the other countries, the people who most favour strengthening sovereignty are in the higher socio-professional categories, among the most highly paid, the best educated and left-leaning people.

Invited to choose from a list two reasons that justify their desire to strengthen European sovereignty, Italians most often choose »their country's lack of international clout«. This answer is given by 39 % of respondents, the highest score among the eight countries in the survey, 12 percentage points above the European average (27 %). The other reasons cited most often are more conventional: »the threat to health« (38 %, as against a 31 % European average) – in all likelihood an effect of the Covid-19 crisis which has hit Italy hard – and »the challenge of climate change« (34 % / 34 %). The »terrorist threat«, which on average tops the list in the other eight countries in the survey (mentioned by 37 %), is by contrast mentioned less frequently in Italy (28 %). Around a quarter of Italians nevertheless believe that the strengthening of European sovereignty would make it easier to resist »China's great-power ambitions« (23 %). As for the current obstacles facing such strengthening, Italians mention four reasons of more or less equal importance: »the weakness of European institutions (Commission, Parliament ...)« (mentioned by 22 %), »pressure from certain foreign countries in whose interest it is that Europe does not become stronger« (20 %), »the fact that some countries are led by nationalists« (19 %) and »cultural differences between European nations« (19 %).

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