



Analizy natolińskie

1(14)2007

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How do we treat the Eurotreaty?

Opinion polls concerning attitudes of Poles towards the Euro- Constitution¹

Key findings:

- * Poles declare support for the general the idea of a European constitution. In their opinion it should constitute a uniform and lasting legal foundation allowing the enlarged European Union to function.
- * The support of the Polish public opinion for the idea of a European constitution, however, does not translate into their support for the negotiated draft constitutional treaty.
- * A decisive majority of Poles do not know the contents of the constitutional treaty and have no clear opinions about specific solutions contained therein.
- * As regards specific provisions of the constitutional treaty, Poles most negatively assess the limitation of the number of commissioners. They are neither very enthusiastic about establishment of the function of the EU Minister of Foreign Affairs and the position of the President of the European Council. There is also a moderate liking for the possibility to create smaller coalitions and undertaking cooperation within groups narrower than the entire Community. So it seems that Poles are worried by any

¹ This is an abridged version of an article “Jak traktujemy eurotraktat? Sondáže opinii o stosunku Polaków do eurokonstytucji”, published in a special issue of „Nowa Europa”, devoted to institutional reforms of EU. Cf. http://www.natolin.edu.pl/pdf/nowa_europa/NE_spec2007.pdf

changes that weaken the role of member states and – at least potentially – deplete Community's solidarity.

* However, the issue of institutional reform of the European Union e.g. introduction of double majority system (one of central points of the dispute in the negotiated constitutional treaty from Poland's perspective) is not considered by most Poles as a priority issue in the discussion about the union's future. Substantive arguments concerning the significance of the constitutional treaty for the functioning of other Union institutions are much less acknowledged by the public opinion.

* Most Poles think that considering the difficulties with ratification of the constitutional treaty, the member states should renegotiate its content.

* Results of the referendum in France and the Netherlands in 2005 resulted in Poland in a significant rise in sceptical attitudes towards the tenor of the Constitutional Treaty. It is not certain whether Poles would adopt the treaty, if it were subjected to a referendum now.

I.

Public opinion polls published in the media during the recent few months are consistent. Most surveyed Poles declare a positive attitude towards the EU Constitution. Such a result was brought about by the frequently cited in public debates report from the Institute of Public Affairs (ISP) „Poles on the European Union and Constitutional Treaty”. When asked the question "*Does the European Union need a Constitution, or doesn't it?*" over two thirds (68%) of the respondents answered „yes”, one sixth answered „no”. The rest (16%) declined giving an answer.

Eurobarometr had a very similar result. According to its report, three fifth (62%) of Poles were in support of the Eurotreaty, while 16% were its opponents.

This means, however, that our fellow citizens are declared supporters of the Constitutional Treaty (similarly to societies of other EU states they have poor knowledge of its content) and that they would say „yes” in a referendum on the current draft of the constitutional treaty. Neither question, however, measures the attitude towards the document adopted in Rome in October 2004, or – even less so – behaviours of people in a potential voting concerning treaty ratification. They determine something else –

attitude of people to the idea, a general concept of a constitution for Europe, or even their attitude towards the broadest problem: the Union having some sustainable, legal basis for operation.

The limited usefulness of the Eurobarometr's question is best evidenced by the responses provided to it in the years 2004-2006 in Spain, the Netherlands, France and Luxembourg, i.e. in the countries that last year performed referenda on the adoption or rejection of the constitutional treaty.

Table 1. Public opinion about the idea of a constitution for the EU

	Autumn 2004		Spring 2005		Autumn 2005		Spring 2006	
	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no
25 states	68	17	61	23	63	21	61	22
including:								
France	70	18	60	28	67	21	62	27
Spain	72	13	63	16	62	13	63	13
Holland	73	20	53	38	62	34	59	35
Luxembourg	77	14	60	20	69	20	64	24
POLAND	73	11	61	17	60	19	62	16

Source: Eurobarometr, reports EB62, EB63, EB64 and EB65

Comment: Answers „yes” and „no” do not add to up to 100%; the remaining percentage of the respondents had no clear opinion on that issue.

It is visible that in the surveyed period, there was a significant, stable prevalence of persons accepting the idea of the Euro-Treaty in all four states. Only in Spain the percentage of supporters and opponents of the idea of a constitution for the EU known from the polls was similar to results of actual voting. In the remaining three countries it was completely different. It turned out that opponents of the specific constitutional treaty draft were much more numerous than the surveyed opponents of the Euro-Constitution idea. In the Netherlands and France the opponents of the treaty definitely won, while in Luxembourg they constituted almost half of all voters. Is there a better proof of how hardly useful the analysed Eurobarometr question was and of how risky is any interpretation of its results?

More useful results were yielded by answers to another question asked by Eurobarometr. It attempted at measuring not the attitude towards a general „idea of constitution”, but opinions on its current draft, which was known to the respondents.

It seems that the Eurobarometr has not used so far any research methods allowing for a precise determination of the distribution of forces between supporters and opponents of the treaty ratification prior to national referenda.

So how this should be done? Do such methods exist? In France and the Netherlands this goal was achieved in a very simple way: by asking a straightforward question to citizens on if and how they were going to vote. In both those countries demoscopic centres regularly measuring society's preferences observed the change in a trend and prevalence won by persons intending to say „no”.

This happened between March and April 2005, that is a few weeks before commencement of the spring Eurobarometr survey, which still gave a slight edge to treaty's supporters in both countries.

It must be borne in mind, however, that such simple measurements are accurate in determination of referendum preferences only under conditions of (at least relative) equivalence of both parties to a dispute in a public debate. Otherwise their results will be more or less distorted by the mechanism of political correctness.

The social image of a treaty for the EU outlined by answers of Eurobarometr respondents is unambiguously optimistic. The reports state that very positive expectations are related to introduction of a Union constitution. The problem is that it is not fully clear to what extent those questions measure an attitude towards a specific proposal for the constitutional treaty and to what extent (which seems more plausible) one towards a general „Eurotreaty idea”.

Another problem is that other surveys record much less clear image of the treaty. E.g. in Poland in mid 2005 spontaneous associations with the treaty were not unambiguous at all: the positive ones prevailed only slightly over negative ones. The public opinion, while recognising as beneficial for their country a majority of new, listed in the poll, treaty elements (including: stress on the catalogue of human and citizen rights, simplification of the decision-making process, introduction of the mechanism of civil initiative, an increase in the influence of the parliaments of individual member states), signalled their unrest related to entry into force of other solutions. As Anna Giza-Poleszczuk writes „the change perceived most negatively is the limitation of the number of commissioners and stressing that not every member states will have a commissioner of its own (...). There is also hardly any enthusiasm for establishment of

the position of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Union and the position of the President of the European Council. There is also a modest liking for the possibility of creation of smaller coalitions and undertaking cooperation within a group narrower than the entire Community. So – like in all previous cases – we are worried by any changes that weaken the role of the member states, or – at least potentially – deplete Community's solidarity". The ISP report also informs about the intensifying polarization of the Polish public opinion on the issue of establishment of new, common political institutions.

An incoherent image is also brought by an analysis of the attitude of Polish public opinion to the arguments for and against the Euroconstitution presented to it. On the one hand Poles accept the necessity of existence of efficient structures organizing EU member states cooperation, but on the other, they fear the related risk of weakening of Poland's independence. They want a solidary support from Union institutions and richer states while fearing their selfishness, the possibility of being exploited, and a permanent dependence. They are ready for compromises related to the risk of potential isolation but they do not agree for excessive concessions.

The most frequently accepted arguments „for” are: „if we are in the European Union, we must play as a team” (60%), „we should be solidary with other European states, everyone must make a small concession” (60%), „Poland should not slowdown the Union's integration” (56%). Much less popular were arguments concerning the effects of Treaty adoption (adjustment to meet challenges of modern world, simplification of the legal system, strengthening of the EU on international arena).

The most popular arguments against are: lack of any reference to Christian values (37% of the respondents agree with that), conviction that „treaty is pure bureaucracy, it only multiplies legal provisions” (36%) and that it will „strengthen Union institutions to the detriment of the member states” (35%). More rarely respondents also pointed out that the treaty „is a departure from what was agreed in Nice”, and finally that it „constructs a super-state”.

Comparison of the popularity of various arguments suggests that – as a report from Pentor (a Polish public opinion poll centre) indicates – „Poles perceive the treaty in „ideological” terms, identifying it with the very idea of integration. That is why they succumb to the greatest extent to argumentation (both for and against adoption of the

treaty) of „emotional” character (...). Substantive arguments referring to practical role of the treaty in the functioning of the EU are much less convincing”. The coupling of a social cliché of the treaty with a general vision of the Union largely explains its incoherence. Without any doubt it is related to contradictions in the perception by Poles of the EU itself.

Let us have a look now at motives for supporting or rejecting the EU Constitution by Poles. According to Eurobarometr in the years 2004-2005 they were similar to those prevailing in other member states. Treaty supporters spoke about the future of Europe, improving the efficiency of EU institutions. More frequently than anywhere else there was the argument of „I heard nothing negative about it”. Opponents were motivated – again similarly to other countries – by fears that Polish sovereignty will be at risk and lack of information (including positive one). Specifics of Polish (and also Slovak) criticism of the Eurotreaty consisted in quite frequent reminders of absence of references in the treaty to Christian roots of the EU.

A good image of the Euroconstitution in the social discourse does not mean that implementation of the new treaty was a particularly important issue for people. It turns out that reforming of Union structures is not considered a priority by the European public opinion. The societies of EU-25 considered as „the most important issues, which the European Union should deal with first” such problems as fight against poverty and social exclusion (in the autumn 2005, 44% of the surveyed citizens of EU-25 put them on a list of top three priorities), fight against unemployment (43%), maintenance of peace and security in Europe (28%), fight against organised crime and trade in drugs (25%), fight against terrorism (23%) and environment protection (20%). „Reforming the European union institutions and the modality of their operation” was indicated as one of top three priorities by only 5% of the respondents, which placed this goal at a very distant 13 position among 15 actions presented to the respondents by researchers.

This verdict is definitely related to patterns of human thinking (the public opinion more eagerly focuses its attention on „specifics”, that on procedures and structures influencing their course). On the other hand, however, it is a testimony of absence of bottom-up pressure on institutional changes in the Union.

What did the social visions of the constitutional treaty recorded by the demoscopic research in 2004 and in early 2005 ensue from? It seems that most Europeans evaluated at that time the draft treaty basing on elitarian, aiming at reaching a consensus, debates going on in political institutions and the media, which were in general well-disposed towards the draft. This took place separately from the main topics of political debates going on in their states. In consequence the societies perceived the issue of Eurotreaty independently from internal socio-political divisions within their countries, and at the same time in strong correlation with a general attitude towards Europe and the European Union. This was conducive for building in national parliamentary and media debates of „correctness” pressure for the support (and as a consequence – ratification) of the treaty. It was present in almost entire European Union (except a few states, including in particular the United Kingdom) contributing to an easy treaty ratification by the parliament given absence of any broader interest of the public opinion, which perceived the new project from the perspective of own attitude towards the Union.

The mechanism of the „spiral of silence” influenced also a quite one-sided course of the referendum campaign in Spain and its result: high prevalence of „yes” votes accompanied by poor provision of information to citizens about the content of the Eurotreaty and relatively low turnout. High evaluations of the result of this country’s membership in the EU and support for the treaty by the biggest left- and right-wing parties contributed to this result.

The research conducted immediately after the referenda suggested that their results were determined by factors related to specifics of national political arenas. But there were also similarities here. In all three countries, the „yes” supporters were guided first of all – according to their own assessments – by general (good) opinions about the Union. In all three of them the social and economic situation was of central significance for those voting „no”. It is interesting to note that in France and the Netherlands this was the most important factor, while in Luxembourg it yielded to another one – a critical assessment of the Euroconstitution.

II.

What follows for our national debate on the society’s attitude towards the Euroconstitution from the above deliberations? Conclusions seem pretty obvious:

Firstly, Poles are interested in the Union having a treaty defining the legal foundations of its operations. They want a solidary and effective Union. Most of them also have nothing against calling such act a „constitution”.

Secondly, most Poles would support changes improving on the currently binding, European rules of the game.

It is also known – **thirdly** – that the knowledge among (like among other nations) about the draft is scarce, and its image – incoherent, strongly coupled with a general attitude towards the European Union.

One must add on top of this that – **fourthly** – the issue of EU structural reforms is for the Polish public opinion (and also for societies of the remaining EU-25 states) relatively irrelevant.

Support of the majority of Poles for the idea of the Eurotreaty – **last but not least** – does not signify automatically (similarly to the case of the French or the Dutch) their approval for the draft constitution for Europe as adopted in Rome in the autumn 2004 and subjected to the ratification process. It would be also extremely risky to attempt jumping into conclusions about results of a potential referendum on the basis of the second of „Eurobarometr” question, the one about the specific, known to respondents draft constitution. A lesson learnt from experiences of other countries is that they also do not allow for an accurate diagnosis of human behaviours. Much better results are yielded by the simplest question: concerning participation in the referendum and how they intend to vote.

Let us see than what do Polish Euro-surveys show in that respect? We will have a look at results of research available in the public debate. To begin with, a few sentences about the turnout. Let us remind that it is of very big importance in Poland. For a result of a referendum on the Eurotreaty to be binding, the turnout must exceed half of all those with right to vote. CBOS (a Polish public opinion poll centre) surveys of the years 2004-5 suggest that such a high turnout in voting would not be easy to achieve. The percentage of persons declaring explicitly („definitely yes”) attendance in the referendum ranged in the brackets of 1/3-2/5 of all entitled for voting and was on a slight decline. Such factors as better education and a positive attitude towards the EU were positively correlated with the intention to go to the polls. The result was clearly lower than the one in public opinion surveys performed by the same centre be-

fore the referendum on the accession to the Union. The percentage of „definitely yes” was 60-65% in that study.

Table 3. If a referendum were held in Poland on adoption of the European constitution, would you take part in it?

	VII'04	XI '04	II '05	IV'05	V'05	VI '05
Definitely	42	42	42	34	38	33
Rather yes	22	22	24	24	23	21
Rather not	15	13	10	15	12	16
Definitely	13	13	12	14	15	15
Hard to say	9	10	12	13	12	14

Source: Opinions on the ratification of the European constitution, CBOS (a Polish public opinion poll centre), communication 105 of 2005.

According to CBOS (a Polish public opinion poll centre) data, the supporters of the treaty adoption (ratification) prevailed among persons declaring their intention to vote (those responding „rather yes” were also accounted for). But their position was not stable.

In the summer 2004 they constituted a half of potential referendum participants, in the winter 2004-5 about 2/3, in May 2005 – 3/5, and a month later – only slightly over 2/5. The number of persons hesitating on how to vote also remained at a high level (between 1/3 and 1/4).

Table 4. How would you vote in a referendum on adoption of the European constitution (*response from persons intending to participate in the referendum*)?

	VI '04	XI'04	II '05	IV '05	V' 05	VI' 05
For	56	68	64	56	60	43
Against	22	11	7	15	14	24
Hard to say	22	21	29	29	26	33

Source: Opinions on the ratification of the European constitution, CBOS (a Polish public opinion poll centre), communication 105 of 2005.

Quite similar results to those of CBOS were obtained by Pentor, OBOP and PBS from Sopot (Polish public opinion poll centres), and significantly different ones (equal forces of both camps, and starting from spring 2005 a clear prevalence of the opponents of the treaty) – by Polska Grupa Badawcza (a Polish opinion poll centre).

What conclusions can be drawn from such diverse results? They show that, first of all, the obtained results largely depend on methods and procedures applied by the centres. They also show that, secondly, referenda in France and the Netherlands had a very big

impact in Poles' preferences. They contributed – not only in our country – to a leap growth in the number of opponents of treaty ratification.

That is why between early May and June, the percentage of referendal „yes” dropped according to CBOS (a Polish public opinion poll centre) by 17 percentage points, while the percentage of „no” – rose by 10%. This also explains the growth in the number of treaty opponents in subsequent surveys made by PGB (a Polish public opinion poll centre) and levelling of the popularity of „yes” and „no” in June research by PBS from Sopot (a Polish public opinion poll centre) for „Gazeta”. This is also why in early June 28% of persons asked by CBOS about effects of referenda in France and the Netherlands stated that it was a good thing, while 25% - that it was a bad thing. Others (47%) chose „hard to say” answer.

It also draws ones attention to the fact that after the referenda in France and the Netherlands the largest number of critics of the Euroconstitution was recorded in Poland (which differs from previous situation) in elitarian communities, most susceptible to new trends in the public debate, frequently being opinion leaders.

One can assume that in the end of May and in June – in connection with the news coming from Paris and Amsterdam – there was a leap change in the social perception of the model of „Euroconstitutional correctness” in Poland. The formula „you are for the Union means that you are for the treaty” pushing (in line with the mechanism of the „spiral of silence”) a significant part of critics into passivity and silence, was substituted by more pluralistic clichés, including those legitimising more strongly than before the scepticism towards the Eurotreaty.

Was that a lasting process? Starting from second half of 2005, i.e. after quieting down of the Polish debate about the constitutional treaty, the demoscopic centres do not ask regularly about behaviours of Poles in the ratification Euroreferendum (even if they do, they do not always present results publicly).

Research devoted to attitudes of our fellow citizens to ratification of the constitutional treaty appears in the media relatively rarely. Basing on incomplete data (covering also measurements not published so far) one can say that the results depended on how the question was asked. When asked about rejection or ratification of the treaty by Poland, most respondents declared support for the Euroconstitution. But when they

were asked about „adoption of the European constitution in the present shape” opponents of this step prevailed.

Let us look in more detail at the latter question, asked in September 2005, i.e. immediately prior to parliamentary elections, by Pracownia Badań Społecznych (a Polish public opinion poll centre). Support for UE constitution was declared by 22% of the respondents, 34% were against. Others (44%) selected „Hard to say, I don't know” answer. The largest number of the opponents of the draft Eurotreaty in the „present shape” was recorded among managerial staff (54%) and persons with higher education (51%). Sceptics also prevailed among supporters of all majority political parties (except SLD), in all age categories (least prominently among the youth) and all social and occupational groups (least prominently among pupils and students). Place of residence did not differentiate opinions.

So did the pre-election, September measurement by PBS from Sopot confirm the trend started in Poland a few months before, after the referenda in France and the Netherlands? To what extent this might have been contributed to – in view of the available data of only hypothetical process – by the pre-election debate in the media (which- as we all remember – pushed European topics into background)? To what extent it was influenced by the debate between the parties, where opponents of the ratification of draft Eurotreaty prevailed over supporters of such step (but the voices on that issue were not well heard, being clamoured down by disputes on other issues)?

And what is the situation today? What would be the results of a potential referendum conducted today on the draft Euroconstitution? Lack of any current, publicised results of research about the attitude of Poles towards ratification of the treaty does not allow one to answer the question about the results of a hypothetical referendum on that issues carried out in the coming weeks.

This absence cannot be made up for by the spring research by „Eurobarometr” and Institute of Public Affairs. They only give us certainty that the attitude of Poles towards the general idea of Eurotreaty and generally the opinions on its draft (not translating straightforwardly into voting behaviours) are positive, and between autumn last year and spring this year, they did not change qualitatively.

To say anything more, we need some new, in-depth research allowing for location of the participants and observers of the Euroconstitutional debate in the field of Polish

politics, analyse relationships between the attitude of the public opinion to the constitutional treaty and to the Union and the main Polish socio-political divisions.

What we know is the attitude of Poles to the new stage of European debate on the future of the constitution, started after the failure of the constitutional treaty in France and the Netherlands. As we all know, entry into force of the treaty requires its adoption by all member states. What shall we do when the document was already accepted by a dozen states while two countries rejected it in a referendum?

Shall we continue ratification of the current version of the draft? Or maybe we should give up all works on the new constitutional treaty and be happy with the currently binding Nice treaty? Or finally – this is the third option – perhaps we should re-discuss a treaty for the EU?

Until recently in Brussels and some major European capitals the opinion „to go on with the ratification” prevailed. Subsequent Eurobarometr surveys show that the public opinion is of a different opinion: we should start new negotiations on the treaty contents! In the autumn 2005 renegotiations were supported by 49% of the citizens of EU-25, in spring 2006 – 47%. Continuation of the ratification was supported by 22% and 23% respectively, giving up the treaty– by 13% of respondents in both surveys. Assessments made by Poles were very similar to EU average. Similar results are brought by the spring report from ISP. The largest number of respondents (44%) selected the option – “write a new constitutional treaty”. A further treaty ratification process was supported by 22%. Even less (13%) selected the answer – “stop dealing with the constitution”.

It was a good thing that at June meeting of 25 ministers of foreign affairs, a decision was made to extend „the period for reflection on the future of Union institutions”. But no decision was made whether a new document should be written or the current one should be corrected.

(January 2007)

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