

'Old' and 'New' Europeans united: public attitudes towards the Iraq war and US foreign policy

By John Springford

At the end of January 2003, a journalist asked US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld why Europe was not supporting US policy on Iraq. Rumsfeld's defiant reply sent shockwaves across the Atlantic:

"You're thinking of Europe as Germany and France. I don't. I think that's old Europe. If you look at the entire NATO Europe today, the centre of gravity is shifting to the east and there are a lot of new members. The vast numbers of other countries in Europe, they're not with France and Germany, they're with the United States."¹

¹ Foreign press corps meeting, Washington, January 22nd 2003.

Rumsfeld implied that Europe could be divided into two parts: an 'Old Europe' of core EU member states which are anti-American and seek to create a European foreign policy that could challenge the US; and a 'New Europe' of countries peripheral to the EU which have strong links to the US and NATO. The governments of 18 European countries seemed to confirm this division the following week by publishing two letters of support for the enforcement of UN Security Council Resolution 1441.

Is there a clear and lasting division between new and old Europe at the level of public opinion? This paper looks at public opinion polls conducted in the EU-15 countries and ten new members that will join the EU in 2004, to see which countries' populations supported the Iraq war before and after it took place. The paper also assesses European attitudes towards the US more generally. Can European citizens be split into two camps in the same way that their governments were in 2003? If the EU is to develop a credible common foreign policy, it is worth finding out.

Before the war

Opinion polls offer only a partial guide to public opinion. Slightly different questions can produce wildly different answers. The two polls shown below bear this out: in the Pew Global Attitudes survey, the number of respondents answering that 'the US should not invade Iraq' was far lower than in Gallup International's poll.

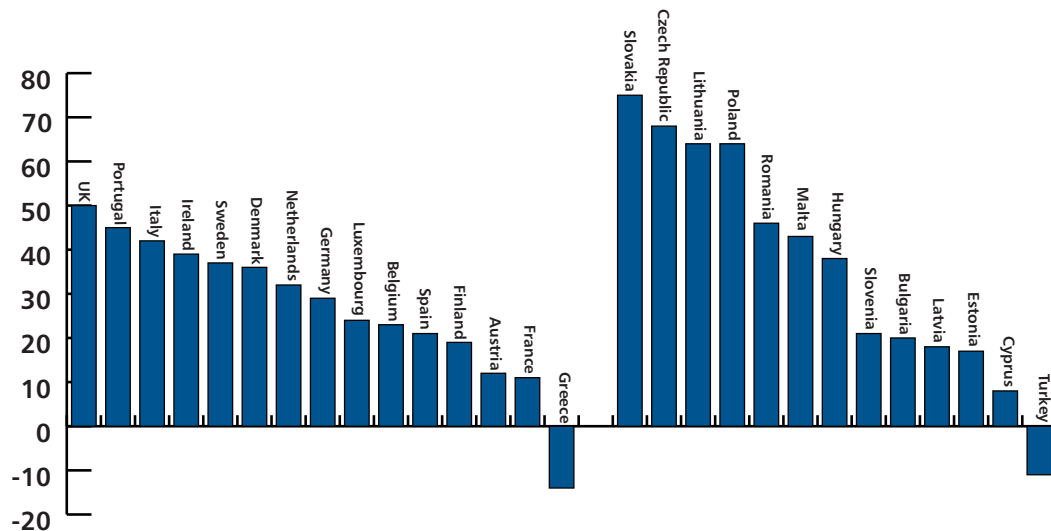
Graph 1: Problem polls

	Gallup International			Pew Research Group		
	France	Germany	UK	France	Germany	UK
Under no circumstances	60	50	41	27	28	20
Only if sanctioned by the United Nations	27	39	39	63	56	69
Unilaterally by America and its allies	7	9	10	6	12	10

Sources: Gallup International, 'Iraq Survey', January 2003 and Pew Research Centre, 'Global Attitudes Project', December 2002.

Gallup asked for a flat 'yes or no' answer – "Are you in favour of war in Iraq?" – which produced greater opposition to the war than Pew's leading question: "There has been some discussion about whether the US should use its troops to overthrow Saddam Hussein. Which of the following positions comes closest to yours?"

Graph 2: Coalition of the willing: Is Iraq a treat to world peace?



Results found by formula $0 + \text{positive responses} - \text{negative responses}$.

Source: EOS-Gallup Europe 'International crisis survey', January 2003.

Nonetheless, opinion surveys have produced some striking results. Graph 2 shows the outcome of an EOS-Gallup poll taken in January. At first glance, it seems to show that East Europeans thought that Iraq was much more of a threat to world peace than citizens of the current EU. In the Union, the Greeks were at one end of the spectrum, with a majority thinking Iraq did not represent a threat to world peace, followed by the French and Austrians. At the other end of the spectrum, the Irish, Italians and Portuguese had a near majority thinking Iraq was a threat, and 73 per cent of the British were of that opinion.

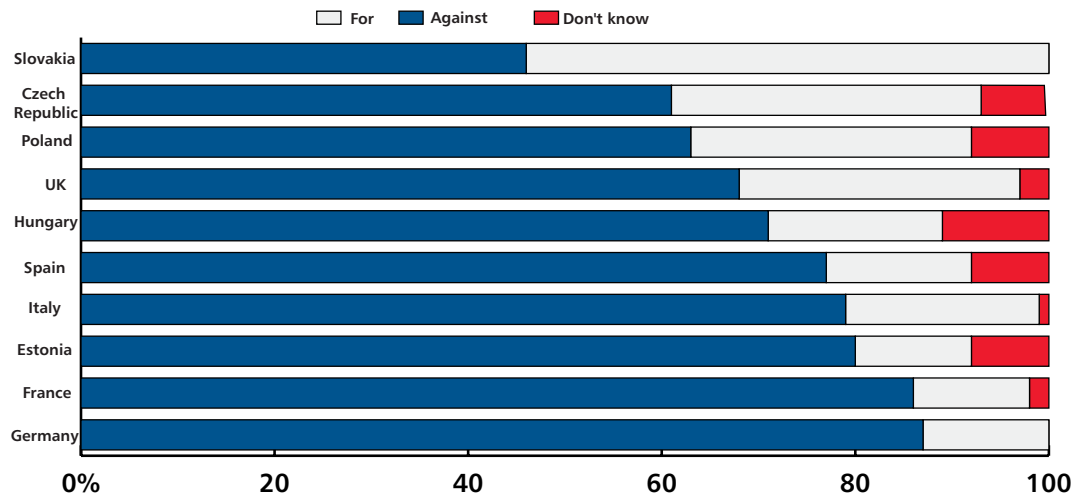
On closer inspection, four countries are the cause of the higher perception of Iraq as a threat in the new members: the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia. They all showed a greater fear of Iraq than did America's staunchest ally, the United Kingdom. The other countries in the east felt the threat less than the British public, but more than the Greeks – in other words, they fell within the extremes of view among the EU-15 countries.

In the period before the US decided to go to war without a UN Security Council mandate, support throughout Europe for unilateral action by the US and its allies was low. The Pew survey, conducted in December 2002, found that in most countries, including Poland, there was only between 5 and 12 per cent support for unilateral action.

A survey by the CVVM agency in Prague found a majority of 67 per cent of Czechs against an attack on Iraq in January. In Poland in February, the CBOS group found that 62 per cent thought the Polish government should not support the US in any military action. The Pew survey found that 26 per cent of Poles were opposed to war "under any circumstances", while only 53 per cent would support it with UN approval. This figure was even less than in France. In sum, according to these surveys, there was little public support for the war, especially not one without a UN mandate, in either eastern or western Europe.

However, other polls produced different results. EOS-Gallup Europe (Graph 3) found more respondents willing to support unilateral action, as their question asked respondents if they agreed with an attack "without formal agreement of the UN", implying that tacit consent was possible. In this poll, a majority of Slovaks supported the US going it alone. Around 30 per cent in Poland and the Czech Republic felt the same – but two-thirds in both countries did not support such an action. Hungarians and Estonians were far less happy about unilateral action, with supporters numbering only 18 per cent and 12 per cent respectively. Predictably, support in the EU for unilateral action by the US and its allies was led by Britain, with 29 per cent of those surveyed in favour. There were more respondents opposed to unilateral action in Spain, Italy, France and Germany, with only 12 to 15 per cent in favour.

Graph 3: Don't go it alone: Public opinion for/against US action in Iraq without UN backing



Source: EOS-Gallup Europe, 'International crisis survey', January 2003.

Despite the different overall findings of the surveys, support for an attack in Iraq in the new members was always highest in the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Lithuania. Still, most people did not favour a military action without UN Security Council approval, apart from in Slovakia. Support depended on the

question asked, showing that few people had clearly developed views: there was a large bank of undecided people who were swayed by leading questions. Interestingly, the number of ‘don’t know’ responses was generally higher in the new members than in the EU-15 (see Graph 3). Finally, it is only in comparison with the EU-15 that the new members seemed supportive of US military action in Iraq. Rumsfeld’s assertion that the vast majority of countries in eastern Europe were with the US may have been true in terms of governments, but it was not true of public opinion before the war.

After the war

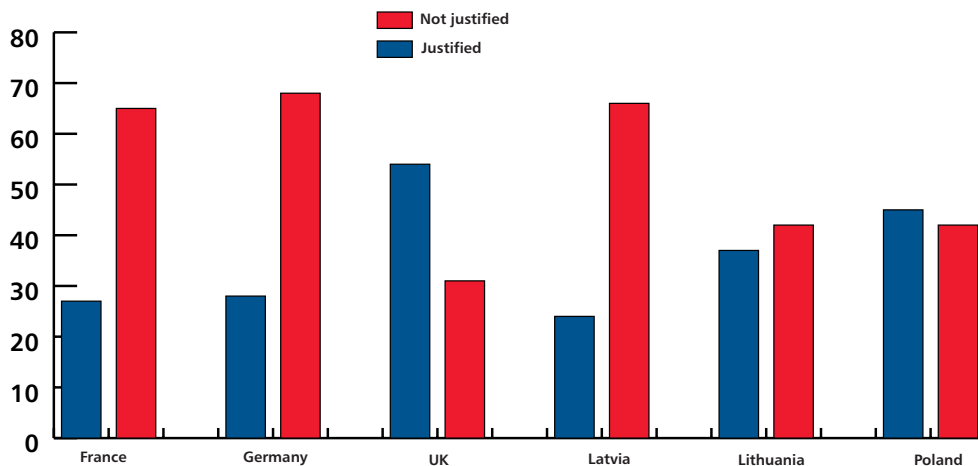
As is often the case, public opinion in most countries that took part in the war swung round to back the troops once military operations began. At the war’s end, according to Gallup International, 54 per cent of UK citizens thought military intervention in Iraq was justified, against 31 per cent who considered the war unjustified. However, this does not come close to the level of support for the Gulf War in 1991, where 80 per cent of the British public thought military action was right.²

² ICM/Guardian tracker poll, February 1991, <http://www.icmresearch.co.uk/reviews/1991/guardian-poll-feb-1991.htm>

Public opinion was particularly fickle over Iraq. Gallup International found that the Danes started from a position of active opposition in January, with 45 per cent saying there should be no war “under any circumstances”, and only 10 per cent advocating the eventual outcome – military action taken “unilaterally by the US and its allies”. But by the end of the war, opinion had reversed. Two-thirds of Danes believed war to have been justified despite the lack of a UN mandate.

Finland saw an opposite swing: the Finns’ opposition to the war in January matched the Danes’, but 55 per cent thought war was unjustified in April-May, against 26 per cent who thought it was justified. Apart from Denmark, only the Netherlands, Portugal, and the UK had pro-war majorities in April-May. In the rest of the EU, opposition was strong, reaching 83 per cent in Greece. Even in ‘New’ European allies like Italy, Spain and Portugal, the majority thought war was unwarranted.

Graph 4: War is over – was it justified?



Source: Gallup International, ‘Post-Iraq war’, April-May 2003.

As Graph 4 shows, however, public approval for the war at the end of conflict in the new members was more mixed. People in Latvia were heavily against the war. Lithuanians were marginally against, while Poles were marginally in favour. These figures do not amount to an unequivocal endorsement of the war.

Graph 5, which is a conflation of two tracker polls carried out in Poland and the Czech Republic, shows a similar picture to what happened in the EU. Polish public opinion swung round to support the government as

the coalition progressed towards Baghdad. The proportions agreeing and disagreeing before and after the war are neatly reversed. In the Czech Republic, however, opposition to the war continued at a high level even as the conflict drew to a close.

Graph 5: Divergent opinion

		December	January	February	March	April
Poland	Agree	35	33	29	60	53
	Disagree	46	55	62	32	37
Czech Republic	Agree	–	21	22	21	24
	Disagree	–	67	71	72	70

Source: CBOS, 'Polish public opinion bulletin', June 2003 and CVVM, 'Public opinion on war in Iraq', April 2003.

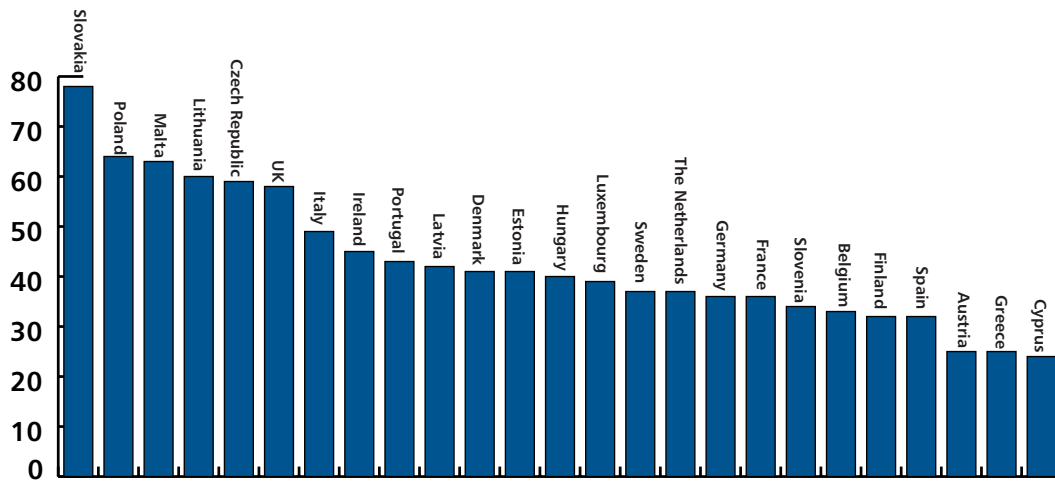
As it became clear that the occupation would be long and costly, and weapons of mass destruction proved hard to find, public support in Europe for the campaign dipped further. The German Marshall Fund's June 2003 'Transatlantic Trends' survey was conducted after two months of occupation and increasing deaths among the troops in Iraq. It found that majorities in the UK (55-45 per cent), and the Netherlands (59-41 per cent) – both countries whose public had supported the war against Iraq – thought the war was “not worth the loss of life and other costs”. In Poland, there was a much larger majority against the war of 69 per cent.

In sum, in both the EU-15 countries and the new members, public opinion was undecided and capricious. Pro or anti-war majorities depended on the questions asked, and the changing fortunes of the forces in Iraq. The populations of Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Lithuania in the east, and the UK and Denmark in the west, were more supportive than other countries. As the occupation dragged on, however, public support declined.

Cooling feelings towards the US

What about attitudes towards the US more generally? The East Europeans may not have been solidly pro-war, but they do tend to have a more positive view of the US than the EU-15. Before the war, most new members' populations had warm feelings towards America and its foreign policy. In January, EOS-Gallup's poll (Graph 6) also asked Europeans how they felt about US actions “on the international scene”. Unsurprisingly, Slovakia had by far the highest approval ratings – 78 per cent gave a positive view of US foreign policy. Then came Romania, Poland, Malta, Lithuania and the Czech Republic, where US foreign policy could count on majority approval. The most populous countries, apart from Hungary, all had majority support. In terms of US foreign policy generally before the Iraq war, then, Rumsfeld is right to claim that the countries of the East are “with the US”, even if his assessment that a “vast number” of East Europeans supported the US is exaggerated.

Graph 6: The usual suspects: Profile of positive feeling towards US foreign policy, candidate country -10 and EU-15



Source: EOS-Gallup Europe, 'International crisis survey', January 2003.

In March 2003, Eurobarometer asked whether they felt the US played a positive or negative role regarding peace in the world. The only countries with majorities seeing the US as positive in the EU were the UK and Denmark. In the new members, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Malta and Poland showed majority support for America's role in the world. This correlates with pro-war feeling in the new members – the four pro-US countries (the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Lithuania and Poland) showed higher rates of approval for America and its policies than the rest. But the majorities were slim – in Poland only 51 per cent thought the US had a positive influence on world peace. There was only an 11 per cent majority in the Czech Republic.

The Iraq war has caused positive feeling towards the US to decline in both the new members and the EU-15 countries. In June 2003, Pew asked Europeans if they had a favourable or unfavourable view of the US. In Poland, 50 per cent were favourable, and 44 per cent were unfavourable. In June 2002, 79 per cent had approved of the US – so feelings had cooled significantly. In the GMF survey, the number of Poles who professed warm feelings slipped by four points in six months, from 65 per cent in December 2002 to 61 per cent in June the following year. France's feelings dropped ten points to 50 per cent, and figures in the UK and Germany produced falls of 7 per cent. The war in Iraq and the lengthening occupation are no doubt behind this decline.

There is little of the general Atlanticism proposed by Rumsfeld. Estonians, Hungarians, Latvians and Slovenians all see the US as playing a negative role in world affairs. Public support for the US from its new allies – Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia – is tailing off. Once more, Eastern Europe showed a high degree of ambivalence: the number who answered neither to both questions was on average higher in the the new members than the current EU-15.

Conclusion

The new members have mixed feelings about the US military intervention in Iraq. The people of Hungary, Slovenia, Latvia, Estonia and Cyprus did not support it, and do not show much sympathy for the US. Support for the war was fickle at best in the 'New' European countries within the EU, such as the UK, Spain, the Netherlands and Denmark. 'Old' Europeans in France and Germany were heavily opposed to the war.

However, people in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Malta and Lithuania all showed reasonable support for the war in Iraq, at least before the costs and difficulties of the occupation became better known. Before the war, they tended to view the US in a more positive light than their fellow new members and the EU. But the war itself and the messy occupation have eroded those warm feelings: Poles' support for the war Iraq is declining, and the majorities favouring US foreign policy in general are slight.

On the whole, the larger accession states are more pro-US than the smaller countries. Poland in particular will be unlikely to accept an EU challenge to US foreign policy. But a bedrock of East European support for the US does not exist. The vast number of people in the EU-15 and the EU-25 may not be with France and Germany, but they are not necessarily with the US either.

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