



The perception of the European Union in Japan

Katalin Völgyi

To-date, the theme named in the title has not received much attention from researchers. This short paper about the perceptions of the EU in Japan is primarily based on the research projects of the European Studies in Asia Network (ESiA)¹ established by Asia Europe Foundation and National Centre for Research on Europe, University of Canterbury (New Zealand).

The EU in the Japanese media²

For the purposes of this study, between 2004 and 2006 three leading Japanese newspapers, namely The Daily Yomiuri, The Asahi Shimbun and The Nikkei Weekly were monitored. In the survey the following news times were taken into account: those dealing with events or situations in the EU, or events in Japan in which the EU has taken part, or which have relevance to the EU.

During this period, the words 'EU' or 'European Union' appeared 371 times in these newspapers. The Daily Yomiuri was the most prolific in reporting on the EU. It accounted for 44% of the analysed sample, or 163 news items. The Nikkei Weekly was second with 132 articles referencing the EU. Finally, the EU was mentioned in 76 articles in The Asahi Shimbun. Almost all the articles were written by local journalists working for the three newspapers. Only a few open-

ing editorials were written by high-ranking EU officials, Western academics and opinion leaders.

The majority of the articles related to the EU dealt with the following five topics: the EU's internal affairs, the EU in international trade, the EU's external actions, the industrial developments in the EU, and EU participation in conflict prevention.

In more than half of the articles, the EU appeared as a political power. One third of the articles represented the EU as an economic power. In the former case, the EU enlargement was the most popular topic in the analysed period. Japanese journalists stressed that the union of European countries was a good example of close cooperation between former enemies and that it would be desirable for Asian countries to follow it. Compared to the EU enlargement Japanese articles dealt much less with the EU's other political roles in e.g. conflict prevention, the promotion of democracy and human rights protection (among others).

Articles featuring EU's economic role mostly addressed international trade: e.g. the EU's FTA talks with different countries and the EU position on the WTO Doha-Round etc. Articles about EU-Japan relations primarily mentioned EU resentment toward investment barriers in Japan. But some also pointed out that Japanese companies could benefit from the EU enlargement.

Japanese newspapers displayed the EU as a powerful political actor, with significant activity inside and outside its borders. In general, the evaluations of the EU's political actions by Japanese newspapers ranged from neutral to positive. The EU's international role as an active negotiator for legal development of nuclear programmes, a visible actor in international conflict prevention, an advocate for international human rights, a promoter of democracy, and a leading aid donor were praised by Japanese newspapers. Similar neutral-to-positive evaluations were detected in articles addressing the EU's economic role. During the observation of leading Japanese newspapers the EU was represented as a partner to Japan. However, in Japanese newspapers the EU appeared more rarely than the US or Asia. The EU was portrayed as sharing similar democratic values, visions on peace and stability, economic stances with

¹ In 2006, the ESiA started 'The EU through the eyes of Asia' project. The results of this project have been published in three volumes. Research has been conducted on the media, public and elite perception of the EU in different Asian countries.

² Chaban, Natalia – Kauffmann, Marco (2009): Report on Japan, in: Sonia Lucarelli (director of research): The external image of the European Union, Garnet Working Paper No. 17, pp. 223–258, downloaded: http://www.garnet-eu.org/fileadmin/documents/working_papers/1707/1%20Survey%20Front%20Page-Content-Authors-Acknowledgments.pdf

Japan. Moreover, in various fields EU practices were often mentioned as examples for Japan to follow (the fight against poverty, international conflict prevention, promoting democracy and human rights).

Japanese public opinion on the EU³

The ESiA research project examined Japanese public opinion about the EU from three aspects: the general image of the EU held by the Japanese public, attitudes towards the EU regarding its relations with Japan and public sources of information about the EU.

Japanese respondents considered the EU to be a less important partner for Japan than other countries. According to the Japanese public, the US and Asia are the most important partner countries or regions for Japan. Most of the respondents assumed this attitude would remain unchanged in the future. Within Asia, relations to China and South Korea are dominant. The Japanese public was asked which images came to their minds when they heard the words, „the European Union“. Respondents chose from eight possible answers: the euro, European unity/European integration, European power, tourism/culture/diversity, individual countries, problems of the EU, EU politics, and „other“. The most frequent response was the euro, followed by European unity and integration. The image of European power was also popular among respondents.

Potential Japanese respondents were asked to rank the areas in which they felt the EU had the most impact on Japan. The results were the following: the EU's role within the WTO Doha-Round talks, ECB policies and their influence on global financial markets, EU relations with China, EU relations with the US, the euro, EU reactions to international terrorism and the ASEM. This survey pointed out that Japanese people seldom discussed the EU or related issues with their family and colleagues. Only about 10% of respondents considered the EU a frequent topic of discussion.

The next group of questions surveyed perceptions of EU-Japan relations. The majority of Japanese people (74.2% of the sample) considered bilateral relations stable. 11.2% of respondents thought they were improving. This meant that 85% of respondents had positive impressions about the EU. However, 12% of respondents could not say anything about EU-Japan relations. During the year of the survey (2006) the 6th ASEM Summit was organised in which

the majority of respondents had little interest. 21.8% of the sample stated that they were not aware of the meeting.

The last section of questions attempted to illustrate both how and how often Japanese people acquired information about the EU. Two thirds of Japanese respondents accessed the media for foreign news either every day or several times a week. They claimed to primarily get their EU information from television news and programmes, newspapers and the Internet.

The EU through the eyes of Japanese elites^{4;5}

From May through October 2007, thirty-two interviews were conducted with Japanese elites. The survey attempted to discover how Japanese elites perceive the EU. The interviewees were divided into four groups: political elites, business elites, civil society elites and media elites. Every group was represented by eight elite persons. The survey questions were grouped into six clusters: general perceptions of the EU, perception of the EU's international roles, the EU's relations with Japan, the perception of special issues shaping those relations, elites' information sources on the EU, and the perception of the overall importance of the EU to Japan.

The general perceptions of the EU were quite varied. European politics and European unity/integration dominated Japanese elites' most frequent images about the EU. Several interviewees identified the euro with their most prominent image about the EU.

As regards the EU's international roles, Japanese elites considered the European Union to be a great global power and a leading actor in some areas of international political affairs. Most of the interviewees viewed the EU as an economic power and a normative power, but few elites agreed that the EU was a military power.

The third set of questions dealt with the perceptions of EU-Japan relations. The majority of political, business and civil society elites agreed that the European Union would be more important in the future than at present. But the opposite perception was held by media elites.

Japanese elites were asked to compare the importance of the EU to Japan to that of other important global regions and countries. The majority of Japanese elites considered the United States, Asia and China to be much more important than the EU. How-

³ Bain, Jessica – Fukui, Eijiro – Tanaka, Toshiro (2007): Cast in America's shadow: Perceptions of the EU in Japan, in: Chaban, Natalia – Holland, Martin – Nowak, Alojzy – Ryan, Peter (eds.): The EU through the eyes of Asia: Media, public and elite perception in China, Japan, Korea, Singapore and Thailand, University of Warsaw, Singapore-Warsaw, pp. 104–144.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ „The EU in the Eyes of Japanese Elites“, Toshiro Tanaka and Eijiro Fukui, Workshop on the Future of European Studies in Asia, Manila, the Philippines, 5-7 December 2007, downloaded: <http://esia.asef.org/documents/ToshiroTanaka-1.pdf>

ever, the EU was seen as more important than Russia. The US is the most significant partner for Japan, particularly from the perspective of national security and geography. For Japan, Asia is an arena in which it plays a key role, while the EU is a foreign partner and China is considered a competitor. For Japanese elites, while Russia is geographically close, it is ideologically and economically distant.

Interviewees viewed Japan-EU relations as stable with no serious issues. However, only few saw positive improvements in bilateral relations. Environmental and economic/financial issues were the two areas in which Japanese elites perceived the EU had a direct impact on their country. A number of respondents could not name any important issues in bilateral relations.

The enlargement of the EU, the euro and the Asia-Europe Meeting were either positively perceived or had of low profile in respondents perceptions. The ASEM process was not considered an important factor in EU-Japan interactions. Some elites from business and civil society group did not know about the ASEM, and others hardly knew much about it. Political and media elites were aware of the ASEM process, but considered it of negligible importance.

Japanese elites' main sources of information on the EU were Japanese newspapers. But local Japanese television networks and the global cable and satellite television networks (BBC, CNN) were also mentioned as important sources of information.

The results of the interviews clearly showed that Japanese elites' attitude toward the EU are either positive or neutral. But the EU's significance is perceived as lower than that of the US and China.

* * * * *