

EUROBAROMETER 60.1

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

AUTUMN 2003

NATIONAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BELGIUM

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INTRODUCTION

This executive summary brings together the main data of the Eurobarometer 60 that were gathered in Belgium and in the fourteen other Member States of the European Union during the Autumn of 2003. The report outlines the Belgians' stance towards the European Union and various aspects of their awareness of it.

Some data were also gathered in order to give a general image of the Belgians. This information is analysed in the first part of this report, which is entitled 'Insight into the people of Belgium'. Of the 16,082 people surveyed in the fifteen Member States, 1,112 were Belgian. The research agencies carrying out the survey ensured that each national sample was representative of the socio-demographic composition of the population. In this way, it was possible to examine results on the basis of:

- Place of origin
- Gender
- Age
- Education
- Occupation

In addition to looking at these variables, comparisons have also been made with the results of previous Eurobarometers, in particular with Eurobarometers 58 (Autumn 2002) and 59 (Spring 2003).

1. INSIGHT INTO THE PEOPLE OF BELGIUM

In this first part of the report, the main elements that help understand/explain the Belgians' stance towards the European Union are described.

- **The Belgians are amongst the Europeans who talk least about politics with their friends.** In fact, 40% of Belgians say that they never discuss this type of subject with their friends.
- **The Belgians, like other Europeans, are fairly satisfied with the life they lead.** Very few of them think that their life will be different in 2004. They even show some optimism regarding the financial situation of their household and their employment situation. On the other hand, between 50% and 60% of the people surveyed think that 2004 will be less positive in terms of employment and economic situation. On all these subjects, the inhabitants of Brussels are the most positive, followed by the Walloons and by the Flemish.
- In the eyes of the Belgians, **unemployment** (cited by 55% of people surveyed, that is 14% more than in the previous Eurobarometer survey) and **crime** (29%, that is 5% less than in the previous report) **represent the two main problems that Belgium is currently facing.** The Belgians who were questioned believe that the European Union neither plays a positive or a negative role in solving those specific problems. Other problems that worry Belgians include the economic situation (25% = + 4%), immigration (18% = +2%) and inflation (16% = +3%).
- On the other hand, issues such as public transport, defence, the education system and the protection of the environment do not represent major preoccupations for the Belgians (less than 4%).
- **The Belgians tend to trust the media, i.e. the radio, television and the written press more than institutions,** such as political parties (72% say that they do not trust them), the Belgian legal system (61 % do not trust it), religious institutions, as well as large companies. Since Autumn 2003, the **written press** no longer belongs to the three more trustworthy organisations. **Non-profit associations and charities** have ousted it. It should also be noted that there has been a **slight decline in the Belgians' trust in the European Union.** Indeed, **45% of the people surveyed said that they trust the European Union** as opposed to 49% in the previous Eurobarometer. The unemployed, the retired, house persons and those who stopped their education before the age of 15 are those who have the least confidence in the European Union. In contrast, white-collar workers, those aged between 15 and 24, managers, those who studied beyond the age of 20 and students represent the largest group of people trusting the European Union. Lastly, a little less than 40% of the Belgians surveyed say they trust their national government.
- **People's sense of identity appears to be linked to Belgium rather than to the European Union.** 42% of Belgians questioned feel Belgian and European, 40% feel Belgian only, 9% feel European and Belgian and, lastly, only 6% feel European only. Overall, the people surveyed are rather proud to be Belgian.

2. THE BELGIANS AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

2.1 WHAT BELGIANS THINK OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

2.1.1. The Union's image

The Belgians believe it is a **good thing** that their **country** is **part of the European Union**. In thinking this, they are **above the Community average**. This observation has regularly appeared in the last eight Eurobarometer reports, although the figures have fallen considerably (-11%) this time. Brussels' inhabitants are the most positive in this regard (70% of them believe this). They are trailed by the Flemish (58%) and the Walloons (48%), whose scores, nevertheless, remain above the Union average. From a socio-demographic point of view, students (75% believe it is a good thing), managers (68%), those aged between 15 and 24 (68%) and those who studied beyond the age of 20 (67%) are the most positive. The least satisfied are the unemployed, the retired and house persons.

As in the previous Eurobarometer survey, 57% of the people questioned consider that their country benefited from its European membership. This is 10% more than other Europeans.

All in all, we can say that the **Belgians are more satisfied than the European Union average**. It is, therefore, clear that the Union's image in Belgium is broadly positive. **Only 14% express a negative opinion towards the EU.**

If the European Union were to be abandoned tomorrow, 48% of Belgians would be indifferent, 33% would highly regret it and only 11% would be relieved. Results differ widely according to the region. While 57% of Flemish, 40% of Walloons and 27% of Brussels' inhabitants would be indifferent if the Union were to no longer exist, 55% of Brussels' inhabitants, 39% of Walloons and 27% of Flemish would regret it greatly.

The European Union has been developing for more than 50 years. In the Belgians' opinion, **the current speed of the European integration is neither too fast nor too slow**, even if **the people surveyed would like European integration to be speeded up a little**.

2.1.2. What the Union Represents

According to the Belgians, the EU represents:

1. The Euro (64%)
2. Freedom to travel, study and work in all the Union's Member States (39%)
3. Peace and a stronger say in the world (26% each)
4. Waste of money and unemployment (24% each)

It should be noted that the Union, for the most part, represents positive rather than negative things.

People were also questioned on feelings that the EU gives them. When comparing these results with those of Eurobarometer 57, it is seen that positive values are not mentioned as often as before, whereas negative values are mentioned more often. While hope still comes first, it only obtains 34% of responses compared with 42% in Eurobarometer 57. This value is followed by indifference (25% ; EB57 = 24%), trust (25% ; EB57 = 32%) and anxiety (19% ; EB57 = 16%).

2.1.3. The Union's priorities

Various actions

A list of 15 actions that the European Union currently undertakes or could undertake was presented to the public. According to the Belgians, **the five main actions that have to be undertaken are linked to the security and social issues**. Above all, the Union must:

1. Fight against unemployment (93%)
2. Fight against poverty and social exclusion (91%)
3. Fight against terrorism (89%)
4. Preserve peace and security in Europe (89%)
5. Fight against organised crime and drug trafficking (88%)

These 5 actions have, over the last few years, recurred as the main priorities in Eurobarometer surveys. **The fight against unemployment and the fight against poverty and social exclusion, in particular, are cited regularly by 9 out of 10 Belgians.**

In contrast, **the two actions that get the least votes are the reform of European institutions (40%) and the integration of new Member States (18%; EB59 = 27%)**. This latter action has decreased by 9 percentage points since Eurobarometer 59. This confirms the fact that, currently, Belgians do not see the added value of the enlargement of the European Union.

2.1.4. The Union's efficiency

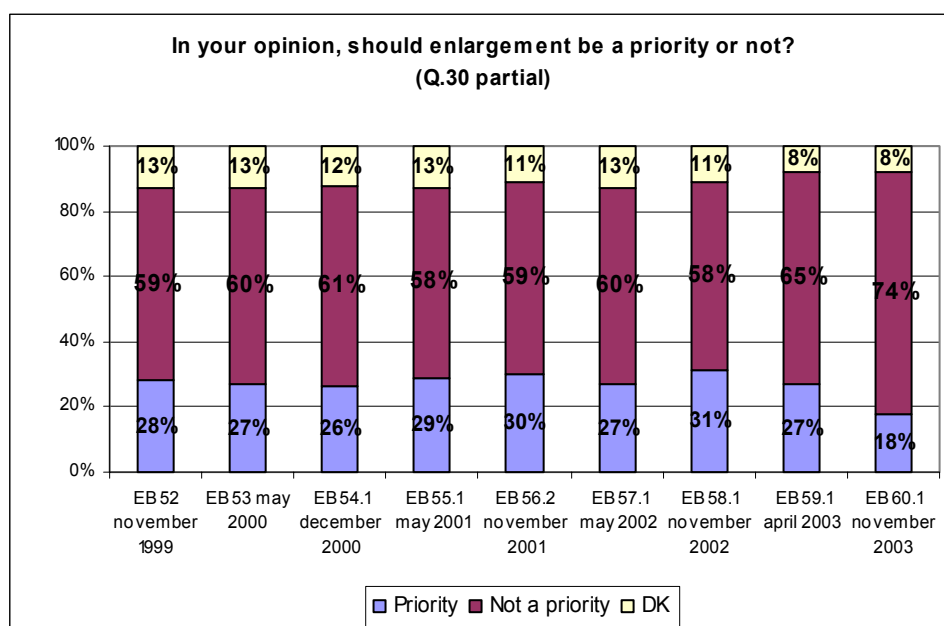
The same list of actions was then presented to the Belgians to see what they thought of the European Union's efficiency in these areas.

In some cases, priority and efficiency converge. Examples of these are the guaranteeing of food quality (6th position as a priority 6th position in terms of efficiency), getting closer to European citizens (11th position as a priority; 10th position in terms of efficiency), as well as the preservation of peace and security in Europe (4th position as a priority; 2nd position in terms of efficiency).

In other cases, priority and efficiency do not converge at all. It can clearly be seen that **divergences mainly lie in the actions that are a priority for the Belgians**. These are the fight against unemployment (1st position as a priority and 14th position in terms of efficiency), the fight against poverty and social exclusion (2nd position as a priority and 11th position in terms of efficiency), the fight against terrorism (3rd position as a priority and 12th position in terms of efficiency) and the fight against organised crime and drug trafficking (5th position as a priority and 13th position in terms of efficiency).

2.1.5. Enlargement

As has been observed before, when presented a list of 15 actions that the EU should undertake, Belgians place the enlargement in last position with only 18% of the poll in favour. When the results obtained since November 1999 are analysed, it can be seen that **the percentage of people considering this action as a priority has never been as low as it is now (18% compared with 27% in the previous Eurobarometer). Belgians are well below the Community average (28% votes in favour) in this regard.**



These results are not surprising when it is borne in mind that when the enlargement question is asked in a more clear-cut way, i.e. in terms of acceptance or refusal, 43% of Belgians say they are in favour of enlargement and 45% say they are against it. We, therefore, note a greater balance in the answers - even if the trend remains negative.

2.1.6. The Institutions

Knowledge, importance and confidence

As always, **the European Parliament and the European Commission remain the best-known institutions amongst the Belgians. 97% said that they knew of the European Parliament and 92% knew of the European Commission.** According to those surveyed, **these two institutions play the most important roles at European level (Parliament: 81%; Commission: 80%). European Parliament and European Commission are also the most trustworthy (Parliament: 58%; Commission: 55%).** It should be noted that **this trust has slightly decreased** since the last survey.

More than 7 Belgians out of 10 have heard of the Court of Justice, the Council of Ministers and the European Central Bank. Slightly more than half of them know about the Court of Auditors.

It should be noted, once more, that there is a **lack of knowledge of the existence and of the work of the Convention on the Future of Union. There is a similar lack of knowledge regarding the European Ombudsman, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions**, which are known by less than 40% of the Belgian citizens questioned.

The European Constitution

More than 60% of the people surveyed have never heard of the Convention on the future of the Union. It is, therefore, to be expected that people did not know that the Convention was involved in the drafting of the European Constitution. Despite this ignorance, **7 Belgians out of 10 are in favour of such a Constitution.**

The people in favour of a European Constitution are:

- Managers (96%)
- People who studied beyond the age of 20 (77%)
- Inhabitants of Brussels (75%)
- Those aged between 25 and 39 (72%)

The people against a Constitution are:

- Students (19%)
- Self-employed (18%)
- Those who stopped their education between the age of 16 and 19, as well as those between the ages of 15 and 24 (17%)

The European Commission

Four potential **procedures for the appointment of the President of the Commission** were proposed to the people surveyed.

- **44% believe that s/he should be directly elected by the citizens**
- 17% think that s/he should be elected by a majority vote of the European Parliament.
- 18% believe that s/he should be chosen jointly by the Parliament and the Heads of State and Government.
- Only 6% think that s/he should be appointed solely by the Heads of State and Government.

The European Council

Belgians were asked to comment on the **6-months duration of the Presidency of the European Council.**

- **52% of Belgians think that this time-scale is too short to get significant results.**
- 27% think that this is a good system and that it gives each Member State the opportunity to regularly preside over the European Union.

2.1.7. Decision making levels

When the Belgian population was asked whether decisions regarding various issues should be made at national or European level, the answers tended to vary depending on the sector in question. As was already noted in Eurobarometers 58 and 59, **the closer the area in question is to the individual (education, health, social security, police, justice, etc.), the more likely Belgians are to think that the decisions should be made by the Belgian government.** On the other hand, the more the area seems to be remote from the individual, the more Belgians think that decisions on these matters should be taken at European Union level. The areas in question are the following: foreign policy in regard to countries outside the Union, scientific and technological research, defence, humanitarian aid, aid for regions experiencing economic difficulties, the fight against international terrorism and against drugs, etc.

2.1.8. CFSP and the European Security and Defence Policy

Belgians are clearly in favour of more substantial integration in these areas.

- **84% think that when an international crisis occurs, the Member States of the European Union should agree on a common stance.**
- 82% believe that the European Union should guarantee human rights in each Member State, even if this goes against the wishes of some Member States.
- 77% believe that the European Union should work on guaranteeing human rights in the world, even if this goes against the wishes of some other countries.
- 76% think that Member States of the European Union should have a common immigration policy for people originating from countries that are not part of the European Union.
- 76% also believe that Member States of the European Union should have a common asylum policy for asylum seekers.
- 75% think that the Union should have a rapid reaction force that could be sent rapidly in trouble spots when an international crisis occurs.

As in the previous Eurobarometer survey, Belgian citizens would like more autonomy in regard to the European defence policy. 49% think that decisions regarding the European defence policy should be made by the EU, 19% by NATO and 17% by national governments.

2.1.10. Miscellaneous questions

Seven actions and policies were presented to those polled who had to say whether they were in favour or against them. The three suggestions that got the most favourable replies were:

- **Teaching school children about the way European Union institutions work (87% were in favour)**
- A European Monetary Union with a single currency, the Euro (81% in favour)
- A common security and defence policy among the Union's Member States (80% in favour).

2.2. KNOWLEDGE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AND INFORMATION

2.2.1. Knowledge of the European Union

No changes have been observed compared to previous Eurobarometers. Levels of knowledge about the European Union among the Belgians and other Europeans are still poor. Belgians' knowledge is at a slightly lower level than that of the other Europeans surveyed.

Within the Belgian population, the inhabitants of Brussels have the best grasp of the European Union. The Walloons follow and the Flemish come last.

Those with the best level of knowledge of the European Union are:

- Managers
- White-collar workers
- Those who had studied beyond the age of 20
- Those between the ages of 40 and 54

In contrast, those who have the lowest level of knowledge are:

- House persons
- The retired
- Those over the age of 55

2.2.2. Sources of information used

The five main sources that Belgians use to obtain information on the European Union, its policies and institutions are:

- Television (used by 61% of the people surveyed; EB59 = 59%)
- Daily newspapers (used by 41% of the people surveyed; EB59= 27%)
- Radio (used by 33% of the people surveyed; EB59 = 21%)
- Internet (16% of the people surveyed; EB59 = 14%)
- Various newspapers and magazines as well as conversations with family, friends and colleagues (15% of the people surveyed; EB59 = 20%)

Once again, **television, daily written press and radio are the three media that the favourites amongst the Belgians, all categories taken together.** Of all the media, these are the ones most often used to gather information on the European Union. A similar observation was also made in the past. **The Belgians questioned would like to be more informed on the EU via those same three media. Moreover, they think that the Belgian media do not give enough coverage to EU matters.**

In contrast, **the sources least used by the Belgians surveyed are:**

- CD-ROMs (1%)
- The European Union information offices and those of local and national administrations (1.5%)
- Professional associations or trades unions, Members of the European Parliament or Members' of the Belgian Parliament, as well as meetings (2%).
- Notice boards (4%)