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PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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NATIONAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BELGIUM

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Belgians are not keen on politics. With the exception of the inhabitants of Brussels, they rarely discuss politics with their friends, and seldom try to convince them when their opinions diverge on any subject.

They are fairly satisfied with the life they lead, and think it has undergone little change for the past five years. When asked to think of the near future, the future of their household, of their profession and of their life in general, they also tend to think that it will not change.

Belgians believe that unemployment and crime represent the main problems that their country is currently facing, while immigration is seen as the second main issue for right-wing people.

Although they are rather optimistic about themselves, they feel less so regarding the future of the economic situation and unemployment in Belgium. They seem convinced that, in the worst case scenario, the economic situation will decline, or, at best, that it will not improve in the next 12 months. Regarding unemployment, about 48 % of the Belgians consider that it will not improve in the coming year.

Among the institutions they are dealing with in their everyday life, it seems that **the media are the ones they tend to trust most.** Radio and television are at top of the list. Voluntary or charitable associations also seem reliable to them. They rank third. Political parties, the national justice system and the Belgian Government are the institutions they most distrust.

Perception of the European Union

Belgians generally appear **poorly informed about the policies and institutions of the Union**, as well as about enlargement. The European Parliament, the European Commission and the Court of Justice are the institutions they know best. However they do have some knowledge of the main features of the Union, especially the flag.

Their main source of information about the European Union remains the television. Daily newspapers and radio are also favoured by a large number of Belgians. However many Belgians admit they don't try to obtain information on the EU.

They think that the media give enough coverage to EU matters and that this information is objective.

Their perception of the Union is rather neutral, even positive, and the European currency (euro) is the first thing that comes to their mind when they think about the Union. Freedom to travel, to study and to work anywhere in the Union, peace and economic prosperity are

also strongly associated with the EU. They feel nevertheless that the EU also brings more crime and unemployment.

While the Belgians think that the vote of Belgium has some weight among its partners, they believe that it has less weight than those of the largest countries. They also feel that their votes as citizen do not count much

They are not very satisfied with the functioning of democracy either in Belgium or in the Union.

Organization of the European Union

The European Parliament and the European Commission are the two entities that, for the Belgians, play the most important role in the Union. The European Court of Justice, the Council of Ministers of the European Union and the European Central Bank also play an important role. In fact, of nine cited institutions/bodies, six are considered influential.

The trust granted to these entities by the Belgians depends on their knowledge and the estimated importance of the institutions.

Belgians think that the Presidency of the European Council should be extended to more than six months in order to obtain more significant results. They also believe the right of veto should be maintained and that every Member State should have one vote in the Council of Ministers of the EU.

In the eyes of the Belgians, administrative, staff and buildings expenses represent the largest part of the spending of the Union's budget, followed by foreign policy and assistance to non-EU countries.

The future of the European Union

Overall, the Belgians consider that the current speed of the European integration is not fast enough. Apart from the inhabitants of Brussels, they do not think that the European Union will have more impact on their everyday life in five years than now, even if the majority, excluding the Flemish, wish it did.

They are concerned with the evolution of the Union, mainly with **the risk of transfer of jobs towards other member countries where production costs are lower**. They are also afraid of an increase in drug trafficking and international organized crime. In addition, they fear that Belgium would have to contribute even more to the budget of the European Union.

On the other hand, the loss of social benefits, the loss of their language, identity and national culture do not seem to be a cause of major concern.

Belgians are very much in favour of more substantial integration in the Common Foreign & Security Policy and the European Security and Defence Policy, as well as in all areas that were cited to them in the survey.

Globalisation

The Belgians do not perceive globalization in a very positive way.

Most of the people surveyed consider that it leads to a concentration of power in the hands of large companies and that quality control of foodstuffs sold in the country is more difficult.

Belgian citizens primarily rely on the European Union to control globalisation, but also on themselves as citizens. According to respondents, consumer associations and the Belgian Government should also be able to accomplish this task.

On the other hand, political parties, multinationals and the US government, in particular, are the least trusted.

Being a member of the European Union

Lastly, Belgians consider that their country's membership of the European Union is a good thing. They also consider that this membership has been beneficial to Belgium and the number of people believing this has been increasing over the years. Higher income groups in the population are generally more satisfied than lower ones.

European elections

In this last section, some elements are highlighted that provide an explanation for the positions adopted by the Belgians in the European elections of June 13th, 2004.

Belgian people feel concerned about the June 13th ballot and with national and European political life, and the issues at stake. **Left-wing voters generally seem to feel most concerned.**

Unemployment and crime are the main concerns of Belgian citizens of any political affiliation. Issues relating to immigration also seem very important to both right- and left-wing people. Belgians are not very keen to know the Members of the European Parliament any better.