

EUROBAROMETER 63.4

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

SPRING 2005

NATIONAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BELGIUM

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This document does not represent the point of view of the European Commission.

The interpretations and opinions contained in it are solely those of the authors.

Introduction

Wave 63.4 of the standard Eurobarometer survey was conducted during spring 2005, between 9 May and 14 June, as the ratification process of the constitutional Treaty for Europe was proceeding. Halfway through the survey, two founding Member States rejected the Treaty: France and the Netherlands. The results of the French and Dutch referenda, according to the Heads of State and Government of the European Union, “do not call into question citizens' attachment to the construction of Europe” nor “the validity of continuing with the ratification processes”, but express “concerns and worries which need to be taken into account” during a period of reflection.¹ The Eurobarometer 63.4 can be seen as being part of this quest for an improved dialogue between European citizens and decision-making bodies.

Throughout the survey, it appears that the trust relation that had been well-established between the Belgians and the European Union has somewhat waned during the last six months. Despite this decline in the trust they show towards the European Union, the support of Belgians for European integration remains higher than in most EU countries. The main results of the Eurobarometer 63.4 could be summarized as follows:

- 47% of Belgian citizens oppose further EU enlargement. More precisely, they are against the accession of Turkey to the European Union (61%).
- Support of Belgian citizens for the Euro has declined (-5%), although Belgium (84%) ranks third among the Member States in which the support for the single currency is the strongest.
- The support of Belgian citizens for the European Treaty (76%) has also decreased (-5%), but remains stronger than the European average (61%).
- The majority of Belgian citizens support the development of a European security and defence policy (89%) and of a common foreign policy (75%). The percentage of Belgian citizens in favour of a common foreign policy has decreased (-7%).

¹ Declaration by the Heads of State or Government of the Member States of the European Union on the Ratification of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, European Council, 16 and 17 June 2005.

➤ **The Belgians and politics - Getting an insight into the climate of opinion in Belgium in spring 2005**

The Belgians think that the quality of their present life is good (91%), and even better than in most countries of the European Union. They say they are rather satisfied with the life they lead (89%), and even more satisfied than six months ago (+6%). They feel that their situation has improved over the past five years (40%) or has stayed the same (32%). In five years' time, they hope they will benefit from a better quality of life (52%) and they expect that their personal situation will have remained the same (47%) or will have become better (40%).

The main concerns of Belgian citizens in spring 2005 are the employment situation (84%) and the country's economic situation (64%) that they judge to be bad. Belgian citizens indeed identify unemployment (59%) as the biggest problem that their country is facing, followed by inflation (23%) and the economic situation (22%). Since autumn 2004, the Belgians show more concern about unemployment (+4%) and inflation (+8%) - problems that their country is facing, but are less worried with regard to the economic situation, which they still judge better than in most European countries (67%). Belgian expectations regarding the employment situation (52%) and the economic situation (46%) in Belgium are pessimistic for the next twelve months. In the longer run, however, Belgian citizens hope that their country's economic situation (50%) and employment situation (46%) will improve.

Although they still distrust their national institutions, the Belgians tend to trust them more than in autumn 2005: +6% for the Government, +7% for political parties, +9% for the Parliament, and +11% for the legal system. Belgian citizens have greater trust in international organisations, such as the United Nations Organisation (60%) and the European Union (58%). However, since autumn 2005, their trust in the European Union has declined (-5%). Despite their diverging attitudes vis-à-vis national and European institutions, 65% of Belgian citizens say they are satisfied with the functioning of democracy both in Belgium and in the European Union.

➤ **The European Union seen by the Belgians – A perception that is still positive, but coloured by anxiety**

Belgian citizens consider that they have an average knowledge of the European Union and its policies and say they are familiar with the European institutions, especially the European Parliament (96%) and the European Commission (92%). When they are looking for information about the European Union, Belgian citizens watch TV (72%), read daily newspapers (44%) or listen to the radio (35%). They trust their national media, which, in their view, talk about the right amount about the European Union and present it objectively.

The European Union conjures up a positive image for the majority of Belgian citizens (56%), but, during the last six months, this image has somewhat changed (-3%). For most Belgian citizens, the European Union represents the monetary union (66%), as well as the freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the European Union (58%); the euro (57%); peace (42%); a more important voice in the world (36%); cultural diversity (32%); economic prosperity (30%) and democracy (29%). However, according to the Belgians, the European Union also has a negative influence with respect to inflation (57%), taxes (45%), the fight against unemployment (45%) and immigration (44%).

Belgian citizens consider that membership of the European Union is a positive thing (67%), and that Belgium has benefited from it (67%). They feel more stable economically (54%) and politically (38%) because Belgium is a Member State of the European Union. However, Belgian citizens are less strongly convinced of the benefits of being an EU member when compared to six months ago (between -3 and -5%).

According to a large majority of Belgian citizens, the European Union is currently playing a more important role on the international scene than five years ago. Among other things, the European Union is playing a more important role in maintaining peace and security in the world (+10%) and the protection of the environment (+7%). The role of the United States has become stronger regarding the fight against terrorism (+8%).

➤ **The Belgians and the European integration process – Continuing support for European integration, but opposition to further enlargement**

The attitude of Belgian citizens with regard to further EU enlargement is divided: 50% of them are favourable to the enlargement of the European Union to other countries in the years to come and 47% of them oppose it. More precisely, Belgian citizens are against Turkey's accession membership of the European Union (61%). The Belgians fear that the accession of Turkey would favour immigration to more developed countries in the European Union (70%). Among other things, they consider that the cultural differences between Turkey and the EU Member States are too significant to allow for this accession (59%).

The support of Belgian citizens with regard to the European Constitution (76%) has declined during the six last months (-5%), but is still higher than the European average (61%). The Belgians are in favour of the European Constitution because it appears to them to be indispensable if European integration is to proceed (42%) and to manage the integration of new Member States (23%). Among the reasons for which they oppose the European Constitution, Belgian citizens mostly mention the lack of information (37%) and the refusal of the inclusion of Turkey in the European Union (24%).

The majority of Belgian citizens are in favour of the development of a common foreign policy (89%) and a European security and defence policy (75%), although during the last six months the percentage of Belgian citizens in favour of a common foreign policy has decreased (-7%). Among other things, they think that the European Union should have a common asylum policy (84%) and a European immigration policy (83%). In a general sense, Belgian citizens see developments towards a European political union (66%) in a positive light.

Belgians think that the standard of the quality of life in Europe at the moment is better than in India (90%), China (85%), the United States (76%) and Japan (65%). However, according to Belgians, the European economy is performing worse than the Japanese (54%), Chinese (49%) and American (38%) economies. In order to improve the performance of the Belgian economy, Belgian citizens suggest improving vocational training and education (59%), facilitating the creation of companies (55%) and investing in research and innovation (53%).