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THE NETHERLANDS

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Summary and Conclusions

Dutch context

The majority (95%) of Dutch citizens are happy with the life they are leading and describe their own financial situation as 'good' (86%). The Dutch are satisfied more often than the average citizens in the European Union. Four out of ten Dutchmen (44%) believe that their current circumstances have improved compared to five years ago.

In particular, the Dutch are more positive than a year ago about the Dutch economy (71% feel it is good compared to 53% one year ago) and employment in the Netherlands (59% believe it is good as compared to 38% last year).

Four out of ten of the Dutch expect the economic situation in the Netherlands to improve in the next year. About one-third expects employment rates to rise in the next twelve months. The Dutch are more optimistic in this respect than the average citizen in the European Union. In Europe, as a whole, only two out of ten citizens expect their national economic situation to improve. In terms of employment rates, the Dutch are more positive than average. More than four out of ten expect higher employment figures in the next year.

The Dutch are even more positive in the longer term: seven out of ten expect their national economy to improve in the next five years, while six out of ten expect employment rates to rise in the same period.

When comparing the status of several aspects against the average of the other European countries, the Dutch are most positive about the quality of life in the Netherlands, the Dutch social security system, and the Dutch economy. About eight out of ten of the Dutch believe that the Netherlands does better on these aspects than the average in the other European countries.

The Dutch are least positive about the situation of their educational system compared with those of other European countries (about six out of ten feel it is better in the Netherlands). However, the Dutch achieve higher scores for all aspects overall.

Compared with the European Union as a whole, the Dutch tend to have greater than average faith in their national institutions. Both the Dutch and the average European citizen have most trust in the national legal system (62%), followed by the national parliament (55%). These are followed by the national government and national political parties (both 42%). Compared with the average European, the Dutch have greater faith than average in the national political parties in particular. Moreover, faith in the national political parties has grown by eight percent compared to the previous measurement in the autumn of 2005.

The Dutch feel that the most important issues for the Netherlands at this time are the economic situation (35%), health care (32%), and crime (31%). Terrorism has clearly fallen in importance as an issue when compared with autumn 2005. At that time, four out of ten

Dutch respondents listed this as one of the most important issues but this has now dropped to two out of ten (19%).

The European Union: Information, Knowledge and Trust

To keep up with the news, the Dutch use the television as their primary source of information. Three-quarters of Dutch citizens (76%) watch the news every day, followed by those who read the newspaper (60%) and listen to the radio (53%). The Dutch read the newspaper daily more often than average in Europe.

Well over half of all Dutch citizens (55%) feel that there is too little news about the European Union on television. This is less than in autumn 2005 (when 65% believed this). The Dutch are more satisfied with the printed press. No more than one-third feels it contains too little news about the European Union. Half feel that the amount of news in the printed press is just right. The Dutch are less clear about the amount of news concerning the European Union on the radio. Three out of ten do not know, and four out of ten feel that the radio does not devote sufficient attention to the European Union.

Approximately half of all Dutch citizens (57%) say they understand how the European Union works. This is higher than the European average (46%). On average, the Dutch give themselves 5.4 points on a scale from one to ten for their own knowledge of the European Union. Of all the countries in the European Union, the Dutch give themselves the highest score.

Where it concerns the European institutions, the European Parliament is the best known of the institutions among the Dutch (94%), followed by the European Central Bank (89%) and the European Commission (86%). The awareness of the European Central Bank is particularly notable. It may be explained by the fact that the former President of the European Central Bank was the late Wim Duisenberg, a Dutchman.

Faith in the European Union has risen a little since the autumn 2005 survey. Nearly half (49%) have 'reasonable faith' in the European Union compared to four out of ten in the previous poll in autumn 2005 (41%).

Trust in the European Parliament and the European Commission seems to have stabilised after a drop in the spring of 2005. Over half of all Dutch citizens (54%) trust the European Parliament and the same percentage trust the European Commission. The Dutch have most trust in the European Central Bank (70%).

Nearly half of all the Dutch (45%) correctly believe that the European Union does *not* have fifteen Member States at present. However, over half incorrectly believe that this is true or do not know. Half of the Dutch citizens (52%) are aware that the Members of the European Parliament are elected directly by the citizens of the European Union. It is notable that four out of ten Dutch (40%) respondents and four out of ten Europeans (41%) believe that the EU spends most of its budget on administrative and personnel costs. In reality, only 6% of the

total EU budget is spent on this.¹ Previous surveys showed that a majority of the Dutch have an incorrect perception of the nature of the European Union's expenditure on administrative and personnel costs.

Nearly all Dutch citizens, like nearly all Europeans, recognise the European flag and know what it stands for (Europe, the European Union, the European Community or the Common Market). However, the Dutch identify less with the flag than Europeans on average and do not feel as strongly as the average European that it should be displayed on all public buildings next to the Dutch flag.

Significance of Europe in the Netherlands

Seven out of ten Dutch citizens (74%) feel that it is right that the Netherlands is a member of the European Union. This is well above the European average (55%). Furthermore, three out of five of the Dutch (63%) believe that, all things considered, the Netherlands benefits from its membership of the European Union. This, too, is above the European average (54%).

Compared with their satisfaction about the functioning of democracy in their own country, the Dutch are, relatively often, dissatisfied about the functioning of European democracy. While three-quarters of all Dutch citizens are satisfied with the manner in which Dutch democracy functions, only four out of ten (44%) are happy about European democracy. The Dutch are dissatisfied about the functioning of European democracy more often than the average European citizen (34%), but they also have a more explicit opinion on the subject than average.

As regards the expansion of the European Union, the Dutch are afraid in particular that it will result in a relocation of jobs to other Member States with lower production costs (74%). Furthermore, almost three-quarters of Dutch citizens (73%) are afraid that it will lead to more trouble for Dutch farmers and stockbreeders. This is higher than the European average (61% of European citizens on average are afraid of this). Six out of ten of the Dutch (57%) say that they are afraid of a possible loss of influence of the smaller Member States. This, too, is above the EU25 average (40%). It is not surprising that the Dutch worry about this, since the Netherlands is a small country.

The Dutch have an above-average belief (86%) that the biggest countries have the greatest power in Europe. However, the percentage of Dutch citizens who believe that their country will exert more influence in the European Union in the future is below average (21%).

Overall, the image of the European Union among the Dutch population is positive. 45% have a positive perception of the European Union, 17% a negative perception, and 37% a neutral perception of the European Union. Last year, this positive perception had dropped slightly

¹ Source: Dutch Representation of the European Commission in The Hague

compared with the autumn 2004. However, it remains at the same level as in the autumn of 2005.

The Dutch feel that the personal significance of the EU relates primarily to 'the freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the EU' (59%), followed by 'the euro' (51%) and a 'stronger influence in the world' (40%).

The main issues for the Netherlands at this point are the economic situation, health care, and crime. The Dutch perception of the European Union's role in terms of the first and second issues is generally positive. The role of the European Union in regard to 'health care' is perceived as neutral in the Netherlands.

Role of the European Union

71% of the Dutch believe that the Dutch economy is good ('very good' or 'fairly good'), but they are less positive about the European economy. 59% rate this as 'good'. However, the Dutch are positive about the European economy slightly more often than the average European (53%).

The Dutch are more optimistic than the average European in terms of their long-term expectations for the European economy. 71% of Dutch citizens believe that the European economy will do better in five years compared to 54% of all Europeans.

When asked to select three options from a series of proposals to improve the performance of the European economy, the Dutch select the option 'improve education and professional training' most often (75%). 'Invest in education and innovation' came second (55%), followed by 'invest in the transport infrastructure' and 'use energy more efficiently' (42% and 40%, respectively). Investing in infrastructure is much more important to the Dutch than to the average European (23%).

Both the Dutch (70%) and Europeans in general (65%) are clearly in favour of an EU Minister of Foreign Affairs. 73% of the Dutch and 80% of all Europeans believe that the EU's foreign policy should be independent of the foreign policy of the United States.

More often than the average European, the Dutch feel that the European Union should prioritise actions that would bring Europe closer to the citizens (39%). This is a relatively high percentage compared to the European average of 19%.

Where it concerns priorities in the European policy, the Dutch feel that two issues are particularly important: combating poverty and social exclusion (40%) and bringing the EU as 'organisation' closer to European citizens, for instance by informing them about the European Union, its policies and institutions (39%). This last aspect, in particular, is mentioned much more often than on average in the European Union (19%). The complaint that the Dutch felt that Europe is not close enough to the citizen was often heard at the time of the Dutch referendum on the European Constitution. A relatively large share of Dutch citizens is also in

favour of safeguarding human rights (22% versus 12%) and a reorganisation of the European institutions (13% versus 6%).

The European Constitution

59% of the Dutch and 61% of the Europeans are in favour of *one common* European Constitution.

The majority (94%) of Dutch citizens have heard about *the* European Constitution. This is higher than in the rest of Europe (82%). Three out of ten Dutch (27%) say they are generally aware of its content (EU25 average is 15%); two-thirds (67%) say they know 'very little' about the content.

The majority of Dutch citizens (>60%) believe that if the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe were accepted, it would mean that Europe would improve its position in the world (73%) and become more efficient (70%), democratic (65%) and transparent (60%).

Support for a continuation of the ratification process in the Netherlands is below average compared with the rest of Europe (17% versus 23%). Most Dutch citizens believe that the European Constitution should be re-negotiated. There is more support in the Netherlands for this than the European average (60% compared to 47%).

Conclusions

Positive

The great majority of Dutch citizens are happy with the life they lead - more so than the rest of the European Union.

The Dutch are more positive than a year ago about the Dutch economy and employment in the Netherlands. The Dutch are more satisfied with their national economy and employment figures than the average European. The Dutch are also more optimistic about the prognosis for their national economy and the development of employment rates in their country than the average European.

The majority of Dutch citizens feel that the current situation in the Netherlands is better than the European Union's average in terms of the quality of life, the social security system, and the economy.

Despite the fact that the press often talks about a 'crisis of trust', the Dutch also continue to have more trust in their national institutions (parliament, government, political parties, legal system) than the European average.

Trust in the European Union has risen a little since the autumn 2005 survey.

Trust in the European Parliament and the European Commission has not dropped any further since the deterioration in the spring of 2005. Approximately half of all Dutch citizens trust the European Parliament and the European Commission, which is comparable to the rest of the European Union.

The Dutch say they understand how the European Union works more often than the EU average. Of all countries in the European Union, the Dutch give themselves the highest score as far as their knowledge about the European Union is concerned.

On the whole, the image of the EU is positive in both the Netherlands and the European Union countries (on average). It also appears that the European Union's reputation in the Netherlands is starting to improve after a deterioration observed during the previous survey.

A majority of the Dutch feel that it is right that the Netherlands is a member of the European Union and that, all things considered, the Netherlands benefits from its membership of the European Union. The Dutch believe this more often than the average citizen in the European Union.

The Dutch perceive the European Union's role, taken as a whole, as positive, particularly where it concerns two of the three most important issues in the Netherlands: the economic situation and crime.

Negative

The Dutch are less positive about the European economy than about the Dutch economy. However, they are positive about the European Union's economy slightly more often than the European average. They are also more optimistic than the average European in terms of their long-term expectations for the European economy.

Compared with the satisfaction regarding the functioning of democracy in the European countries, the Dutch are more often dissatisfied about the functioning of European democracy. They are also dissatisfied with European democracy more often than the average European.

As far as enlargement of the European Union is concerned, the Dutch – like the average European – are afraid that it will result in a relocation of jobs to Member States with lower production costs.

Furthermore the Dutch are more afraid than average that it will lead to more trouble for Dutch farmers and stockbreeders and a loss of influence of the smaller Member States.

The Dutch have an above-average belief that the biggest countries have the greatest power in Europe. However, the percentage of Dutch who believe that their country will exert more influence in the European Union in the future is below average.

The Dutch feel more often than the average European that the European Union should prioritise actions that would bring Europe closer to the citizens. The complaint about the feeling that Europe is not close enough to the citizen was often heard at the time of the Dutch referendum on the European Constitution. A relative large number of Dutch also advocate a reorganisation of European institutions.

Four out of ten Dutch citizens feel, incorrectly, that the EU spends most of its budget on administrative and personnel costs.

Support for a continuation of the ratification process of the European Constitution in the Netherlands is below the European average. Most of the Dutch believe that the European Constitution should be re-negotiated.

Conclusion

Compared with the average European citizen, the Dutch remain warm supporters of the European Union. They are fairly satisfied with a considerable number of aspects. The Dutch have an eye for the opportunities, but are also aware of the potential weaknesses of the European Union.

They have an explicit opinion about the functioning of European democracy. The Dutch are dissatisfied about this more often than the average European. They are also more dissatisfied with the functioning of European economy than that of the Dutch economy.

Furthermore, the Dutch continue to feel that Europe is not sufficiently close to the Dutch citizen.

As far as EU enlargement is concerned, the Dutch are afraid about several issues. Their main fears are:

- Relocation of jobs to Member States with lower production costs
- More trouble for Dutch farmers and stockbreeders
- Loss of influence of the smaller Member States

The Dutch give themselves an above-average score regarding their knowledge about the European Union. Yet more than half do not know how many Member States there are in the European Union. Furthermore, a majority of the Dutch have an incorrect perception of what the European Union does with its budget.