

EUROBAROMETER 66

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Autumn 2006

NATIONAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BELGIUM

Introduction

This Eurobarometer survey was conducted during autumn 2006, between **September 6 and October 10** as the debate on the future of the Constitutional Treaty was being relaunched and as the European Union prepared to welcome two new Member States, Bulgaria and Romania, on 1 January 2007. The survey endeavoured to determine how the European integration process is perceived by the Belgian population and how they envisage the future of Europe. The following findings are worth highlighting:

- The idea of a constitution for the European Union is welcomed favourably by Belgians (81%), who consider that such an act is necessary to ensure that the operation of the European institutions proceeds smoothly (39%). Nevertheless, after the negative outcomes of the French and Dutch referenda, two Belgians out of three think that the European Constitution should be renegotiated (66%).
- The Belgians are opposed to a further enlargement of the European Union in the years to come (51%). More precisely, they say they are not in favour of Turkey (61%) joining the European Union. As far as Bulgaria and Romania are concerned, 50% of Belgians are in favour of Bulgaria's accession, but 50% are against Romania's accession.
- The Belgians think the European Union should fight unemployment (49%), poverty and social exclusion (47%) as a priority. Reforming the institutions of the European Union and the way they work (5%) or welcoming new member countries (3%) are not priorities for Belgian citizens. They, however, consider that it is up to the Belgian Government, rather than the European Union, to take measures designed to fight unemployment (58%).

I. Climate of Belgian Public Opinion: Distrust of “Politics”

➤ In autumn 2006 – before the announcement of thousands of job cuts in VW Forest – the Belgians are satisfied with the life they lead (90%), but consider that the employment situation in Belgium is bad (62%).

➤ Although they regularly discuss political matters (66%), the Belgians say they are not interested in politics in Belgium (51%) or in European politics (60%). In an election campaign period, the Belgians distrust their political parties (67%), but say they trust their Government (51%) and their Parliament (55%). In a general way, the Belgians support more strongly the European Union (61%) and its institutions, mainly the European Commission (68%) and the European Parliament (67%).

II. Perception of the European Union in Belgium

➤ The European Union has a positive image among the population (54%), who consider that the fact that Belgium is part of the European Union is a good thing (69%). All things being equal, the Belgians think that their country benefited from its membership of the European Union (67%), and, among other things, in terms of security (75%), economic performance (70%) and standard of living (64%). Lastly, as a result of its membership, Belgium has been able to increase its influence on the international scene more easily (77%).

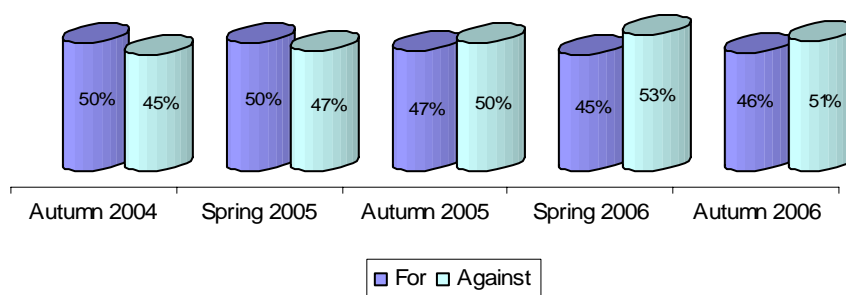
➤ According to a majority of Belgians, the European Union plays a positive role as regards peace in the world (71%), the protection of the environment (68%), the fight against terrorism (64%), the growth of world economy (56%) and the fight against poverty in the world (56%). The European Union would therefore be more apt to take decisions in relation to the fight against terrorism (87%), defence and foreign policy (74%) and the protection of the environment (68%), among others. On the other hand, the Belgians consider that it is up to the Belgian Government to take decisions in relation to pensions (79%), taxation (72%), health and social security (72%), education (71%), as well as the fight against unemployment (58%).

➤ The Belgians think that the globalisation of trade represents a threat to employment and companies in Belgium (56%), but that the European Union can protect them from this threat (55%). The setting up of the European single market without borders has contributed to improving the international competitiveness of Belgian companies (40%).

III. Perception of the European Integration Process and Definition of Priorities

➤ At EU level, Belgium (51%) comes seventh among the Member States that are most strongly opposed to a new wave of enlargement of the European Union, i.e. Germany (64%), Luxemburg (64%), France (58%), Austria (57%), Finland (52%) and the United-Kingdom (51%). Since autumn 2005, the Belgians' opposition vis-à-vis a new wave of enlargement has got stronger: 50% of the Belgians were in favour of a new wave of enlargement of the European Union then and 45% were against it.

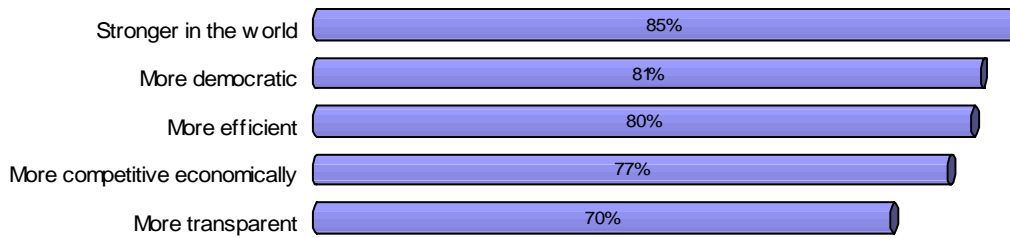
Position of the Belgians vis-à-vis a new wave of enlargement of the EU



➤ Among other things, the Belgians oppose the accession of Turkey (61%). They fear that the accession of this country would encourage immigration towards more developed countries within the European Union (69%). In their opinion, cultural differences between this country and the Member States of the European Union are too important (64%).

➤ The Belgians are in favour of a European political union (61%) and welcome the idea of a constitution for the European Union (81%). Such an act seems necessary to ensure the smooth running of the European institutions (39%). If all the Member States adopted the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, this would make the European Union stronger in the world (85%), more democratic (81%), more efficient (80%), but also more competitive (77%) and transparent (70%). However, after the negative results of the French and Dutch referenda, the Belgians think that the European Constitution should be renegotiated (66%).

If all Member States adopt the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, it will make the running of the European Union...



➤ In the future, the European Union should, according to the Belgians, concentrate its action on the following priorities: fighting against unemployment (49%), against poverty and social exclusion (47%), maintaining peace and security in Europe (27%), protection the environment (23%) and fighting against terrorism (22%). They also insist on the need for the European Union to get closer to European citizens, for example, by giving them more information about the European Union, its policies and its institutions (28%).

Actions the European Union should follow in priority

