

EUROBAROMETER 72

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Autumn 2009

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BELGIUM

The autumn wave of Standard Eurobarometer was undertaken in Belgium between 30 October and 17 November 2009. On this occasion, 1006 Belgian citizens expressed their opinion vis-à-vis their personal situation and the socio-economic situation in their country and in the European Union, in a context marked by the effects of the financial and economic crisis and of the globalisation of exchanges. They also voiced their views on their country's membership of the European Union, the potential influence of the various levels of public authorities and the way competencies are shared between these authorities. Lastly, they defined the priorities they wish the European Union would adopt and said their feeling about the possibility of a new enlargement wave. The most salient opinion trends which emerge at the end of the survey are the following:

1) *Although Belgians are happy about their country's membership of the European Union, they judge that the Union has grown too rapidly and that a new wave of enlargement is not something to be wished for*

- The analysis the Belgians make about their country's membership of the European Union is positive: according to them, it is a "good thing" (64%) and, everything taken into account, Belgium has benefited from it (65%). In a general way, the European Union conjures up a positive image for Belgian citizens (50%) and, in their view, embodies values such as human rights (44%), democracy (41%), peace (40%), solidarity (21%) and the Rule of Law (20%). In addition, it appears to generate some cohesion between the citizens of its different countries (79%). More concretely, for them, the European Union above all represents the Euro (59%).
- Despite the satisfaction they express vis-à-vis their country's membership of the European Union, the Belgians tend to take a critical stance towards the European integration process: the European Union has grown too fast (71%) and is now be short of ideas and projects (52%). Furthermore, with regard to the possibility of a new enlargement wave of the European Union in the coming years, the Belgians express their opposition. With 53% of unfavorable opinions, Belgium thus ranks, as in Spring 2009, sixth among the Member States in which an absolute majority of negative opinions is registered towards a new enlargement, i.e. Austria (65%), Germany (60%), France (60%), the United-Kingdom (55%), Finland (55%), Luxemburg (54%), the Netherlands (51%) and Denmark (50%).

2) *While inflation is Belgians' main preoccupation at a personal level, it is to unemployment that they point as the most important problem their country is faced with*

- In their personal life, the Belgians say they are more affected by the rise in prices (43%) than by the economic situation (22%) or unemployment (15%). In their view, the cost of living in general (52%) and energy prices in particular (77%) are higher in Belgium than in other European Union countries.
- Paradoxically, as in Spring 2009, it is, nevertheless, unemployment (42%) which they designate as being the main problem their country is faced with, ahead of the economic situation (35%) and inflation (24%). As a matter of fact, the job situation in Belgium appears to them to be "bad" (77%)

and they fear it will further deteriorate, the impact of the crisis on the job market having, according to them, not yet reached its peak (55%).

3) *The Belgians note that the Euro has mitigated the negative effects of the financial and economic crisis and call for greater coordination of economic and financial policies between the Member States*

- In Autumn 2009, the Euro is supported by 78% of the Belgians – a percentage that places them amongst the most convinced supporters of the single currency in the European Union, after the Slovaks (88%), the Slovenians (86%), the Irish (86%), the Netherlands (81%), the Finns (81%) and the Luxembourgers (80%). This important support may, among other things, be explained by the fact that Belgian citizens are convinced that the Euro has, overall, mitigated the negative effects of the financial and economic crisis (56%).
- From the range of measures aimed at combating these effects which are being discussed in the European institutions, the Belgians believe, above all, in the efficacy of the stronger coordination of economic and financial policies between all the Member States (80%), the supervision by the European Union of the activities of the most important international financial groups (74%) and whenever public money is used to rescue a financial institution (74%), as well as a more important role for the European Union at an international level in regulating financial services (75%).

4) *In the face of climate change, the Belgians recognise that the European Union's action is indispensable, but judge that the economic affairs are a priority*

- The environmental situation in Belgium in Autumn 2009 is judged "good" by a majority of Belgian citizens (50%) and better than that of the average of the other countries of the European Union (58%). The Belgians are therefore not very much preoccupied by this situation: only 5% consider that it is a major problem in their country. In the future, moreover, they hesitate as to the necessity of making the environment a national priority: according to 72%, this should be the case even if economic growth is thereby impaired, while 54% rather recommend encouraging economic growth whatever the effects on the environment would be.
- Although the Belgians admit that the European Union is indispensable in coping with global threats such as climate change (83%), they tend to think that it is ahead the United-States as regards protection of the environment (62%). In the years to come, they suggest that the European institutions emphasise economic affairs (34%), rather than the fight against climate change (20%) and environmental issues (18%).

5) *Belgian citizens trust the European institutions, as well as the local and regional authorities, rather than their Government; however, they concede that it is the latter which is most in a position to influence their living conditions*

- As was observed in relation to previous results, the European institutions benefit, in Autumn 2009, from the trust of a majority of Belgian citizens (82% for the European Parliament, 58% for the European Commission, 55% for the European Central Bank and 52% for the Council of the

European Union). In the same way, the regional or local public authorities enjoy the support of 59% of the Belgians. On the other hand, they continue to show a reserved attitude towards their national institutions: they thus say that they "tend not to trust" political parties (77%), the legal system (64%), the Government (61%) and their national Parliament (58%).

- The Belgians recognise that it is at national level (46%), rather than at regional or local (32%) or European (17%) levels, that public authorities have the most impact on their living conditions. Nevertheless, they highlight the fact that the economic power and the political influence that characterise the European Union (80% and 74%, respectively) are the most determining factors in term of influence in the world (82% and 69%, respectively). They call, furthermore, for the greater involvement of regional or local authorities in policy formulation at the European Union level (65%).