PERCEPTIONS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION
A Qualitative Study of the Public’s Attitudes to and Expectations of the European Union in the 15 Member States and in 9 Candidate Countries
Summary of Results

Study by OPTEM S.A.R.L for
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This document does not reflect the views of the European Commission. Any interpretations or opinion expressed in this report are those of the authors alone.
This paper presents a summary of the results and the concluding comments of a qualitative study carried out at the request of the European Commission among the citizens of 24 European countries:

- The 15 current Member States of the European Union: Germany, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Spain, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, the United Kingdom, Sweden.
- 9 candidates for accession to the European Union: Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, the Slovak Republic, the Czech Republic, Romania, Slovenia, making up a varied sample of the candidate countries in terms of their geographical, economic and cultural situation.1

The study was launched at the initiative of:

- the Governance Task Force, which was keen to take account in its discussions of the attitudes, expectations and concerns of the public
- the Dialogue on Europe Unit, to feed into the debate on the future of Europe
- the Education and Culture Directorate-General, which largely took charge of its realisation in practice, and for whose own information activities – particularly its programmes for visits – it must act as a guideline in terms of both form and content, based on the needs and expectations expressed by the public.
- DG Enlargement, which needs it in order to be able to take stock of attitudes, motivations, fears or questions on enlargement, first and foremost in the candidate countries, but also in the Member States.

Overall, its objectives were to identify and describe perceptions of the European Union (attitudes towards it and expectations of it) and, specifically, to clarify the following issues:

- Perceptions and images of Europe and the European Union: the way they are now and what they are based on
- Understanding the objectives behind the construction of the Community
- For what reasons, and to what extent, do people embrace the idea of the European Union
- Fears, reservations and objections, and the underlying reasons for them
- Explicit or implicit expectations of Community action
- The degree of knowledge and understanding of the principal components of Community policy; attitudes towards them and the degree of willingness to endorse them
- Attitudes towards the candidate countries and their future incorporation into the EU as Member States
- Needs and expectations in terms of information on these subjects

The study was carried out on the ground in the second half of January 2001, by means of group discussions: 86 group discussions (lasting an average of 3 hours) were carried out in the various countries, bringing together a total of 694 people, men and women, between 25 and 60 years of age, belonging to the mid-range categories of the population: half the groups were made up of middle to high socio-economic categories, and the other half of middle to low socio-economic categories. Depending on the size of the country, there were either 4 or 2 discussions (if 4, in two different survey locations: a very big city and a medium-sized city; if 2, in a major provincial city).

The conception, international analysis and summary of the study were carried out by OPTEM, which holds the Commission’s Framework Contract for “Qualitative Studies”, in collaboration with, and under the technical supervision of, the unit responsible for analysing public opinion (the Public Outreach Unit in DG Education and Culture when the study was launched and the Press and Communication Directorate-General since 2001). Surveys on the ground and national analyses were carried out in the Member States by OPTEM’s partners, who are responsible for carrying them out under the Framework Contract, and in the candidate countries by partners selected for this project.

This paper was written by Daniel Debomy, Director of OPTEM, as was the general report containing the complete results. The summary refers to chapters in the report.

1 The study was not able to cover all the candidate countries for reasons of budgetary restrictions.
Many citizens of the European Union are pessimistic about the situation in their country and express concern about the future.

The causes of these concerns fall mainly into three categories:

- **The speed of current change, and great uncertainty as to its consequences**, whether the change is technological or economic. The new information and communication technologies open up a broad array of opportunities for those who master them, but disorientate many others; there are ever fewer points of reference for understanding an economy that is increasingly virtual, volatile and cut off from its roots (with the proliferation of mergers and acquisitions and continual radical changes to the shape and scope of businesses that used to be stable and familiar); with mad cow disease resulting from the introduction of unnatural foodstuffs, genetically modified organisms and the recent discovery of the use of depleted uranium shells in former Yugoslavia, mankind is playing at being the sorcerer’s apprentice; etc.

- **The widespread feeling of a loss of values and a once-cohesive social fabric**: the persistence or growth of large pockets of poverty in supposedly advanced countries; a dilution of the values of solidarity and community; isolation of young people who spend a lot of their time in a virtual world; increasing drug use, crime and insecurity and a fear of destabilisation of society by uncontrollable immigration are some of the signs that people mention.

- **A feeling that economic liberalism has gone too far or gone wrong**: some people condemn it in these terms, while others, without arguing for any ideological position, are equally disturbed by the deterioration of essential public services (health, education, public transport), the growing gap between rich and poor, or more generally the increasing influence of money on people’s mentality.

It is worth noting that the recent improvement – indeed a marked improvement – in the economic situation of many countries, is rarely mentioned. Countries which are partial exceptions to this are:

- The countries of southern Europe, which have enjoyed spectacular economic and social development over the last 10 to 20 years – and in which the importance of the Community contribution to this development is generally acknowledged: Portugal, Spain, Ireland and, to a lesser degree, Greece (where this is only true for the middle and upper socio-economic categories)
- Finland, which has also seen a marked economic improvement over the last few years
- The Netherlands and Sweden (in the middle and upper strata of the population in the latter), whose citizens tend to consider the economic and social bases on which their countries are built as solid, and to feel confident about the future.

However, that is not to say that these countries are totally free of concerns.

We can also state that the European citizens interviewed have virtually no awareness of the positive effects of competition for them as consumers; apart from a few exceptions, they notice price increases; not decreases.

To paraphrase Jacques Delors, who, as President of the European Commission, said that “you don’t fall in love with a internal market without borders”, this shows that **you don’t get passionate about a growth rate, a performance indicator, or a declaration of added value either, when what you want is for society simply to be organised around core values.**
The same observations apply, only more so, to the candidate countries.

In most of them, the general impression that prevails – and is felt particularly painfully by those in the middle to lower socio-professional categories – is not only of an unequal distribution of the economic cake or a vaguely threatening future, but actually of a real deterioration over the last 10 years: a gap between the privileged few and the great mass of the population without the existence of an intermediate middle class, crumbling public services, the disappearance of the safety net of the State, and growing uncertainty about the future.

The citizens of these countries also note the dissolution of social ties, the disintegration of the social fabric, the rise in crime – while commenting, much more explicitly, on the mediocrity of politicians and political leaders, who are sometimes even described as being at the core of the corruption poisoning the country.

The observation of a gap between them and the countries of Western Europe, and the idea that this has not been narrowed at all, also adds to the pessimism.

It is true that no one in the countries of the former Eastern bloc regrets the demise of Communism; the freedom acquired through the establishment of democratic government is welcomed by all, but in economic terms the tangible advantages of liberalism are scarcely in evidence except for the fact that there is a greater variety of consumer goods in the shops – which not everyone can afford.

Whilst many recognise that the new situation is likely to open up opportunities that did not previously exist for the youngest, most dynamic and best educated, most people do not fit this description.

However, there are differences between those candidate countries which have achieved a relatively high level of development (Slovenia, Estonia, Cyprus and the Czech Republic), where recognition of the progress made and a measured optimism about the future can be seen at least in the middle and upper categories, and the others, of which Poland and Latvia are affected by a particularly gloomy pessimism. (The Romanians have an unusual position within this panorama: they consider their country to be in a state of unparalleled dilapidation and chaos, but express a solid hope of better days to come).

Chapter 1 of the general report contains a country-by-country analysis of the perceptions of the situation and prospects for the future.
⇒ Europe can be defined geographically, but this definition is of secondary importance. When it is mentioned – mainly in the candidate countries – it is to exclude countries or areas which do, nevertheless, objectively constitute part of the European continent according to criteria other than geography, i.e. Russia (with the sole possible exception of its far western fringe, accepted by some as being historically European) and, by extension, Ukraine and Belarus. Turkey is also often spontaneously considered to be non-European.

⇒ What makes Europe Europe is mainly its history and culture. When perceptions of its identity and the feeling of being European are analysed, we can see that the main dividing line runs between a very big South and a very small North.

• This “South” includes the vast majority of European countries, both Member States and candidate countries, geographically in the south, centre or east of the continent, whose citizens, who are strongly aware of the existence of cultural ties, see in Europe first and foremost a historical entity, a land – even the land – of culture, a place of constant intermingling and exchange over the centuries between diverse peoples but with common roots.

These relationships have loosened in certain periods of history and degenerated into conflict, but their existence down the ages is undeniable.

Citizens of all these countries feel, more or less spontaneously, that this model, built on the foundations of cultural and humanistic values, is unique. It sets Europe in opposition to the United States, whose collective mentality is broadly perceived as very different and which, in some of the countries studied, is lampooned as a people without a history, materialist, bereft of these values, and which also arouses intense hostility; this is the case not only in France (whose Gaullist tradition of distrust of the Americans is well known), and in Germany (whose citizens seem to have undergone a sea-change on this front over the last 10 years), but even more so in Member States such as Spain or Greece, and in many of the candidate countries.

There is a more or less spontaneous empathy for other Europeans – even if people are not very familiar with them, or attribute certain flaws or different ways of seeing things to them.

The force of cultural ties is felt with particular intensity in the Latin countries, Belgium and Luxembourg, and in most Central European countries. It has less of a pull for the Germans (who aspire to Europeanness but at the same time are sensitive to disparities), the Irish (who are rather cut off from the others by virtue of being an island and the fact that many of them lack knowledge of the languages of the other countries, but who are open to new ideas) and the Finns (also somewhat isolated in their corner of the far Northwest of the continent, but very curious and contact-friendly).

• Conversely, in a few countries located in the northern part of Europe, the concepts of roots and cultural proximity are given much less prominence, and the sense of common historical and cultural ties is much less present in people’s minds.

Of the Member States, this applies to the UK – many of whose citizens, when asked, refused point-blank to consider themselves as Europeans, the Netherlands, Denmark and (less strongly) Sweden: in these countries there is a deep-seated conviction of the superiority or specificity of the model of society that the country has developed with its own values, and a weak propensity to share with others, who tend to be seen as a threat.

These countries have only weak empathy with other Europeans, particularly with those from the South, whose mentality is seen as very different, and who are even quite overtly despised (for not being responsible, hard-working, orderly, etc.)

In the candidate countries, some Estonians and also some Czechs have a similar stance, restricting the Europe for which they feel an affinity to the most highly developed, most organised countries of the Northwest of the continent – even if they also strongly assert their awareness of both historical and cultural values and the contrast between Europe as a whole and the US. The Latvians questioned seemed rather to be more introspective, but this may be for reasons linked to their feeling of great vulnerability.
The countries in the first group, which make up by far the majority, are roughly those which, over the course of their history, have belonged to larger entities in which they mixed with others: the Roman or Byzantine Empires, the Holy Roman Empire, the Habsburg Empire, and even the Napoleonic Empire by virtue of the influence it has had on legal systems in spite of being short-lived and autocratic.

Furthermore, the countries in the second group are characterised by the predominance of strict Protestant values, whereas the others are imbued, at least in part, with a culture rooted in Catholicism (or Orthodoxy).

Another possible framework for interpretation is that proposed by the French demographer Emmanuel Todd in his work “The invention of Europe” which distinguishes 4 basic family types in Europe: one of them, the “absolute nuclear” family, characterised by the significance of the values of freedom and non-equality, is typical of the population of England (except for the West), the Netherlands and Denmark (as well as the south of Norway, which was long under Danish influence); and he also considers this to be the geographical area with the greatest reservations about a conception of Europe as a strong community.

These hypotheses about historical explanations suggest that the distances seen here are not circumstantial, but based on age-old, lasting foundations – even though the feeling of closeness or distance between European nations may, of course, vary over time.

**Compared with similar studies carried out by the same consultant over 15 years** (at least among the West European countries), this North–South divide has deepened. The feeling of “Europeanness” has been diluted in the northern countries mentioned above; and, in the countries of southern Europe which have recently joined the European Union (at a time when accession meant joining the modern age, as incarnated by the more northerly countries), the attraction for the northern values of modernity and organisation has faded: no aggression is expressed towards the peoples who symbolise it, but compared with 15 years ago there is a clearer distancing from its lifestyles and character traits, which are perceived as austere, lifeless, and lacking in colour and imagination.

⇒ The country-by-country analyses of images of Europe and the feeling of belonging are detailed in Chapter II of the general report.
KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Attitudes to the European Union in the various countries reflect first and foremost the differences in intensity of the feeling of belonging to Europe, but other factors also come into play.

THE GENERAL IMAGE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE MEMBER STATES

⇒ The citizens of the countries in the geographical South are generally favourable towards the idea of a strong European Union, with the purpose of bringing together and federating Europe’s nations and States at every or almost every level – above and beyond merely economic issues, with the clear objective of asserting itself as a great power vis-à-vis its major global competitors and adversaries, prime among them the United States.

The Irish also endorse this idea of a close-knit Europe, although the feeling of opposition to the United States is less in evidence there.

In all these countries, there is a clear awareness of the benefits gained from belonging to the Union, and of its major contribution to economic and also social development, and of the Structural Funds as the tangible evidence of Community solidarity.

Support for Europe is very strong, with virtually no reservations, in Portugal and Ireland. It is tempered in the other countries by a relative disappointment that the reality of the Union does not live up to this aspiration of a unifying entity in all spheres; in Italy, there is also a tendency to keep one’s distance from any kind of institution (which applies at least to the same extent with national institutions); in Spain and Greece, there is veiled frustration due to the persistence of a marked economic gap between them and the more developed countries, and also the feeling that their countries do not count for much in Europe, that they are not given the recognition they deserve, and even that their interests and opinions are somewhat neglected.

⇒ The citizens of Belgium and Luxembourg are traditionally pro-Community and also have a vision of the European Union as a kind of egalitarian melting-pot, and a broad conception of its legitimate scope – in addition to the fact that they are clearly aware that, for small countries, belonging to this kind of group is an unavoidable necessity if they are to have a place on the international stage. While the EU today is principally an economic construction, it must have broader political designs – in part to act as a counterweight to the United States.

⇒ The Finns and the Austrians also come out as largely pro-Community, both emotionally and rationally, and open to an EU with broad powers beyond the economy. The former, made less isolated by their accession to the Union, are particularly keen on contacts with the others, and their accession also gives them security against their huge neighbour with its history of dangerously protective tendencies; the latter, also sensitive to the still recent presence of the Eastern bloc on their doorstep, and also with the memory of the rifts of the Second World War still alive, value the ideal of peace and cooperation, at the same time as recognising the EU’s contribution on the economic front – even though they also express concern about certain implications of accession for their country, or about its lack of clout in Community decisions. In both cases, there is also a strong awareness that it is impossible for countries of this size to remain isolated.

⇒ The French and the Germans – both aware of the original political aim behind the construction of the Community (developing cooperation to avoid the risk of new wars) – also clearly support the ideal of a European integration process heading in the direction of a united Europe and a closer alignment of its countries in all spheres. The French are quick to point out the obvious aim of mutual reinforcement as a counterweight the United States, which is no surprise; but it can be seen that the Germans, too, have become very aware over the last 10 years of the fact that Americans’ interests, viewpoints and values are quite different from our own.
However, in these two countries there is a serious discrepancy between what the Union should do and the image it projects today, which shows it as being too confined to the field of the economy, weakened by disagreements between (the governments of) its Member States, devoid of vision, complex and impenetrable. It is in dire need of a clearly formulated plan, a strategy, a guiding theme that would enable people to understand it and fully endorse it.

As far as the French are concerned, this guiding theme, which, for them, was as clear as daylight in the days when the Commission was presided over by one of their own (one of France’s most highly respected figures, moreover), who proposed and explained the overall plan to them, has completely disappeared.

The Germans express the same feeling, and, what is more, it can be seen that they have very strong prejudices against an institution perceived as ponderous, bureaucratic, only interested in details while neglecting core issues, and financially burdensome – with the ever-present idea of Germany as a milch-cow: it is not opposed to the notion of solidarity, but believes that it is paying more than its fair share. It is also clear that the “Cresson affair” has exacerbated the Germans’ suspicions about the integrity of the Community institution in general.

⇒ In the 4 countries whose citizens have a tendency to exclude themselves from Europe, to feel little empathy for the other Europeans and to focus exclusively on their own models and values, these general attitudes translate into a strong distrust of the European Union and a desire to contain its scope for action.

It can be seen, rationally and pragmatically, that belonging to the European Union is useful for the economic interests of the country (its businesses, its exports), but in all other fields it appears to be more of a threat: interventionist, potentially undermining the national values and traditions or damaging the model of society: any “harmonisation” tends to be perceived as a downward harmonisation, to the lowest common denominator, or as contrary to the interests of the country.

It is these countries that have the most widespread caricatures of the Community being only concerned with pointless, absurd, even freedom-infringing measures (how curved a banana should be, what shape a cucumber should be, what grade strawberries should be, banning chewing tobacco, imposing the metric system, etc.), a perception of a sprawling, inefficient, spendthrift bureaucracy, and a general suspicion of the existence of illegal benefits and payments, and corruption.

As regards the image of the European Union as well as the general feeling of Europeanness, there has been a deterioration since our previous studies (at least in the three countries which are already members of the Union, for which we have comparative evaluations).

The Swedes appear to be a little less virulent in their criticisms.

LEVEL OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE MEMBER STATES

⇒ The degree of knowledge about what the European Union does varies greatly.

If it is assessed on the basis of the variety of spheres of activity mentioned, it is generally greater:

• In the pro-European countries of the “South” (including Ireland), where even people in the middle to low socio-economic categories can name many of its spheres of public activity (except in Italy, where there was more vagueness, especially in the medium-sized provincial city chosen as a second location for the study, and in Spain, also in the provincial location).

• In other traditionally pro-Community countries – Belgium and Luxembourg; also France, but to a lesser degree.

• In the countries which have joined more recently, whether or not they are inclined to see the European Union as a good thing: Sweden, Finland, Austria; this can be explained by the fact that accession and the accompanying debates are still recent.

It is generally weaker in the big countries of the EU than in the small ones: Germany and, especially, the UK being those where there is the greatest lack of knowledge.
Most of all, it can be seen that even those interviewees who know a lot about the European Union and its spheres of activity often express the feeling of knowing little about it or having only patchy knowledge – evidently because of the lack of the clear expression of a vision, a plan, a strategy – in short, a guiding theme, as mentioned above.

The lack of knowledge about the institutions and the institutional system is startling.

There is relatively less ignorance in Portugal, Greece, Ireland, Belgium, Luxembourg, Finland and Austria (at least in the middle to upper socio-economic categories), that is, in the small pro-European EU countries; a fairly high number of interviewees could at least identify the Commission and Parliament, and had an approximate idea of their respective composition and role, and were aware (albeit fairly vaguely) of the existence of institutional mechanisms.

There is a considerable, sometimes abysmal, lack of knowledge, in the other countries, where ignorance, confusion or very rough approximations are a general phenomenon. The Commission and Parliament are often known only by name; the two are sometimes confused; knowledge of their roles and responsibilities is very vague; there is often almost total ignorance of the institutional mechanisms; it all seems extremely remote. This ignorance and perception of remoteness are particularly striking inasmuch as they can be seen just as much in the big countries such as France, Germany or Italy, the founders, driving forces and supporters of European integration, as in the countries which are less psychologically involved.

Overall, it can be seen that only the Commission and Parliament are recognised as institutions – even if people barely know what they do – (sometimes the Court of Justice is also recognised, though this is partially confused with other European or international courts). The Council of Ministers is not generally known, the European Council even less so, and when they are, they are perceived more as talking shops or forums for negotiating different interests than as institutions participating in an organised fashion in the decision-making process.

The sources of knowledge about the European Union that the interviewees mentioned were generally confined to the media. They were not aware of information put out by the Community institutions themselves or by their national authorities, which seemed to them to be largely absent from the debate on Europe in their own country.
GENERAL IMAGE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE CANDIDATE COUNTRIES

⇒ The citizens of the countries applying for accession generally have a broader, and fairly clear, view of what the European Union is and what it aims to do.

It seems to most to be a union in the strongest sense of the word, both economic and political (and, from now on or at least potentially, military), with the aim of mutual strengthening in a whole array of fields, by developing cooperation and putting in place common rules, and affirming Europe as a power vis-à-vis the United States and the other major countries or groupings in the world. This objective, of putting Europe in a position of strength with regard to the US, is also often perceived as having been the main aim when the EU was created, alongside the objective, at that time, of standing up to the Soviet-dominated Eastern bloc and Comecon.

Implicitly, or even sometimes very explicitly (such as in Slovenia, where people are familiar with the concept), the EU is indeed perceived as a federal grouping or one with federal aspirations.

⇒ The citizens of four of the candidate countries, however, tend to have a more restrictive vision of it, more limited to the economy and less imbued with an ideal.

This is the case for the Czechs (who are not unaware of the larger scale of the general plan, but who believe they can observe a marked gap between it and reality, and who sometimes express criticisms of the German type), the Estonians (who are somewhat Scandinavian in their sensibilities), the Latvians (who are very caught up in their fears and whose attention is focused on the economic problems afflicting their country), and the Poles (who aspire to a Europe with a broad scope of action, but who see it primarily as a club of rich countries looking to mutually reinforce each other and among whom they are afraid of always being the poor relations, ignored or looked down on).

⇒ Attitudes towards the European Union appear to be the most open in Slovenia (where people already feel close to it), Romania (where accession is seen by everyone as a historical necessity, an opportunity and a pressing obligation), than in Cyprus, Hungary and the Slovak Republic. The Czechs are not against it, but they have a more pragmatic approach, as do the Estonians.

Generally, attitudes are most positive (or least hedged about with questions and doubts) in the most dynamic categories of the population (the middle or upper social strata, the youngest, the best educated), but there are exceptions to this general rule.

LEVEL OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE CANDIDATE COUNTRIES

⇒ Overall, it can be seen that the degree of knowledge about the scope of the European Union’s activities is not less – in fact it is rather greater – than in the average Member State.

It is clear that, in all these countries, the question of accession is the key question for the future, and that the public is particularly attentive to it.

It is also clear that, for the citizens of these countries, Europe is fully embodied by the European Union that they aspire to join and that they sometimes mythologise, although in some countries they still have very real apprehensions and even profound anxieties about it.

The Slovenes, Hungarians, Czechs, Cypriots, and the Romanians have the most extensive knowledge (with a logical, though not systematic, correlation with socio-economic level and level of education) – but it is not bad in the other countries.

⇒ Knowledge of the institutions is generally weak, though it is somewhat better in some countries than in the average Member State: this is true for Slovenia (whose citizens are amazingly well informed), Romania (not everyone is knowledgeable, but those who are are practically experts on the subject), Hungarians in Budapest, and some Estonians, Cypriots, Slovaks and Poles (particularly in the upper social strata).
By contrast, it seems to be very weak in Latvia, and only average in the Czech Republic.

Obviously this knowledge is rarely very accurate – like that of the institutional mechanisms; but people often know or at least have a sense that these mechanisms exist and that the European Union is a grouping organised around rules and decision-making procedures.

The European Parliament is, without a doubt, the best-known institution – if only by assimilation to the national parliaments, which at least leads to the assumption that it has a legislative role. The Commission, when it is a little more clearly identified (which is not always the case) is then, by analogy, taken to be the executive.

Perceptions of the Council of Ministers and the European Council and the role of these institutions are very vague – as indeed they are in the Member States.

⇒ The sources of information on the European Union cited by the interviewees are first, and sometimes only, the media, as in the Member States – but here a more active word-of-mouth is also mentioned.

Generally, the Community authorities are not perceived as being direct providers of information to the public at large – except for the notable exception of Slovenia, where the Eurobus traversing the length and breadth of the country and the freephone line Europhone seem to be having real success.

As for the national authorities, or political figures more generally, obviously they express opinions on questions relating to the European Union, but they are rarely perceived as sources of objective information (all of them saying that accession is necessary, without saying why, and without launching a debate on its advantages and constraints). However, a number of cases with apparently greater credibility were cited (in Slovenia, and in the Czech Republic – specifically the accession negotiator, who appears to be well known and respected).

⇒ The detailed analyses by country of perceptions and knowledge of the European Union are set out in Chapter III of the general report.
After discussing the subjects of the analyses above, the participants at the meetings organised in the various countries were asked to read two documents one after the other:

- The first was 3 to 4 pages long, and presented and explained the history of the European Union and the main spheres of Community activity.
- The second was a one-page summary of the five main EU institutions and the way they work.

The reactions to these documents, which were very similar from one country to another, are summarised (not on a country basis) in Chapter IV of the general report, and it is difficult to summarise them further. However, we set out below the main lessons which we believe can be drawn from the exercise.

The reactions show very clearly that when people are given basic information, expressed in simple (though not simplistic) language and clearly structured, letting them know that the European Union does things which concern them, suggesting a guiding theme and highlighting the ways in which the various Community policies interlink, it generates a lot more interest and credibility than it might believe.

In many groups, the participants asked to keep the documents and expressed satisfaction that “at last they had really understood something” about the European Union.

In several extremely Eurosceptic countries, the presentation of these texts partially overturned a number of negative attitudes towards the EU, or at least led people to question the stereotypical ideas they might have about it: of the Member States this was true of Germany and the Netherlands, and – albeit less conspicuously – in the United Kingdom and among some Danes and Swedes. In the candidate countries, lukewarm Europhiles or those who were neutral towards Europe tended to start to see accession in a more positive light, and those who were opposed to the EU at least became aware of a number of positive points which they had been unaware of or disregarded. In both groups of countries those in favour of the EU came out of it better equipped to express and back up their position.

However, it is obvious that this kind of information has never been brought to the attention of the vast majority of the citizens either of the candidate countries or of the Member States.

Some points that this analysis highlights are:

- The interest generated in most countries by all the EU’s activities aimed at constructing a more united Europe: the single currency, promotion of cooperation between Member States, structural policies – which most people have not heard of apart from in the southern countries (where their existence cannot pass unnoticed), legislation on public health, the environment, consumer protection, social legislation, the collective fight against crime, a common defence policy, etc.

In the most Euro sceptic or Euro-resistant countries, the reservations naturally persist, but in a noticeably weakened form.

In contrast, it is considerably more difficult to get people’s support for competition policy (many continue to doubt that it can really be made “fair” or simply that their country’s businesses can withstand it) and its extension within a framework of globalisation, or a complex agricultural policy which people are ambivalent about: explaining the logic behind these policies and how they tie in with others is less straightforward.

- The fact that it is possible to convey very simple basic elements of Community constitutional law to the average citizen.

The proposed presentation, of the Commission as executive, like a government, and a two-branch legislature made up of Parliament and the Council, clarifies certain things that had hitherto been very vague, and is fairly uncontroversial.
Of the information provided, the fact of the Commission’s neutrality and the independence of the Commissioners from their country of origin is entirely new for many, and very positive – which puts the automatic criticism of the fact that an unelected body holds power into perspective. In the current climate of growing mistrust of traditional politics, suspicion of politicians, and enhancement of judicial bodies, this status looks more reassuring than otherwise; and the unanimously positive reactions to the role of the Court of Justice confirm this.

In fact, of all the institutions, the Commission is the one which, after an explanation of its status and role, comes out of this exercise with the most credibility. Parliament, while it is still tarnished with the discredit which now affects politicians of all kinds, also sees its image strengthened; but the information given is rarely enough to increase the credibility of the Council of Ministers, let alone the European Council, as real institutions which help solve problems or set guidelines.

⇒ One last text (tested on the initiative of the consultant) was submitted to the participants in the groups at the end of the meetings, presenting the Commission as a driving force for the future of Europe, based on the ideas:

- That many problems need to be dealt with at a more global rather than national level.
- That its multinational composition means that it benefits from a variety of points of view and experiences.
- That its neutrality and independence automatically give it objectivity and the capacity to propose sometimes difficult but necessary measures.

A detailed analysis of the reactions to this text is given in Chapter VIII of the general report.

Overall, it shows that if a strong, ambitious position is carved out for the Commission, it meets with very broad approval - provided that it is explained.

In the Member States reservations persist, but not systematically, in Germany, the UK and Sweden; but even in the Netherlands and Denmark, a majority endorsed the European Union and the Commission which, more than any other institution, embodies it, even though initially they were strongly opposed to them.

In the candidate countries too, in spite of the persistence of certain reservations in the Czech Republic, Poland and Latvia, the broadly positive reactions also show that it is possible for the European Commission to position itself strongly as a guide and coordinator for the future of Europe – as long as it avoids giving the impression of imposing its authority.
EXPECTATIONS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

⇒ The expectations expressed were also fairly homogeneous from one country to another; they are presented in the form of a general summary in Chapter V of the general report.

⇒ Expectations are many and high, and some of them are widely held throughout the various countries. They can be classified roughly as follows:

• Expectations raised by the failure or inadequacy of national public authorities.
  These are expressed mainly in the Member States of the “South” of Europe with regard to social affairs (in the fields of consumer protection, health, the educational system, basic public services), but also in the UK, whose citizens are seeing an alarming deterioration in their country.
  They are even stronger in the candidate countries, in the same areas and additionally those of economic development and the standard of living.

• Expectations of support for economic and social development
  Cohesion policies: In the Member States which benefit the most from these, it is expected that they will continue, at least until these countries catch up. In other Member States whose citizens are just discovering their existence, their support is being called for to compensate for the failures of the national state (the UK). In the candidate countries, there is a strong expectation in this regard, though there are serious doubts in several as to the willingness of the current Member States to make this gesture of solidarity.

• Evidence of the need for the Community to deal with essentially cross-border problems.
  This is the case with environmental conservation, protection of public health and consumer protection (a field in which the Union’s credibility is seriously suffering on account of the way the BSE crisis has been managed), the fight against crime and control of immigration – all considered by the public to be essential, priority areas.

• Evidence of the need for general strengthening of Europe on the global stage
  This what is understood in most countries, whether current members or candidates, to be the purpose of the European Union, which is expected to be able to effectively oppose antagonistic moves by the Americans (and, to a lesser extent, those of other big competitors).
  This includes economic, monetary and technological matters as well as the cultural sphere and the establishment of a defence capacity independent of the United States and NATO.
  For the first of these fields (the economy), however, the citizens of the candidate countries are, for the time being, less sensitive to global issues than to the practical consequences of the opening up of Europe’s internal market, which generates as many fears as hopes for them.

• Expectations of fair economic treatment
  What is at issue here is whether truly fair competition will be established – many we spoke to doubted it – and, in the candidate countries, people are calling for minimum protection of their economies, which they know to be in a very precarious situation.

• Expectations of mobility and exchanges
  Clear expectations towards the Union are expressed in this area, including real labour mobility, harmonisation and mutual recognition of qualifications, educational and cultural exchanges, and support for heritage conservation. They are particularly strong in the candidate countries.
ATTITUDES TO ENLARGEMENT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE PROSPECT OF NEW COUNTRIES JOINING.

⇒ In the Member States, attitudes towards enlargement are directly linked to general attitudes towards Europe and the feeling of Europeanness analysed in Chapter II of the general report.

- In most countries – those that were defined in this chapter as making up the “South” in the broad sense of the term – the legitimacy of the candidate countries’ accession is not contested, and it is felt most strongly in the countries of the geographical South which are least economically developed and which show particular empathy and solidarity with the candidate countries, whose difficulties they understand better by virtue of going through or having gone through the same difficulties themselves.

While the citizens of these countries would probably not be prepared to accept the Structural Funds which they receive being completely cut or drastically reduced, they at least spontaneously declare themselves willing to participate in the common effort to help the newcomers.

Naturally, the arrival of new Member States also arouses real concerns, for the country and, collectively, for the Union (there are sometimes fears that it will become “unmanageable”) – but there is also a sense that there will be benefits at national and Community level.

- Conversely, the citizens of the “North” in the narrow sense of Chapter II – the Dutch, Danes and Swedes – are particularly resistant to enlargement, which they oppose or accept as inevitable only reluctantly, seeing almost exclusively negative effects for themselves; many of them are clearly impervious to considerations of solidarity beyond their own borders. The British are no more willing either to “pay” for future members, towards whom they are rather indifferent.

⇒ In the candidate countries, common characteristics can be seen but there are also discernible differences from one country to another and sometimes from one category of the population to another.

- Of the countries with which accession negotiations were started earliest, the Slovenes appear to be broadly very much in favour, in spite of reservations in the oldest and least dynamic section of the population; broadly, the same can be said of Cyprus, and, with more pragmatic and less emotional considerations, in the Czech Republic and Estonia; the Hungarians certainly see accession as a necessity, which generates great hopes as well as strong fears; as for the Poles, the fears clearly prevail over the hopes, which their very great pessimism somehow prevents them from expressing.

- Among the countries with which negotiations have been started more recently, there is a huge contrast between the Romanians, who are unanimously enthusiastic at the prospect of joining the European “family” (even though they foresee serious difficulties, given the decay and disorganisation of their country), the Slovaks, who have contrasting attitudes, but with hardly any radical opposition to accession, and the Latvians, who are particularly anxious about its consequences for their country, which is economically very vulnerable, and, particularly, about maintaining the country’s capacity to take decisions autonomously – though not about the risk of threats of force (the word “Union” sometimes conjures up the spectre of the Soviet Union): it is only with great reservations that a majority seem to accept joining the European Union as inevitable.

- Very broadly, citizens of the candidate countries seem to accept the length of the process leading to accession without impatience, and are aware of the extent of the preparation which remains to be done.

⇒ Chapter VI of the general report gives a detailed analysis of attitudes on enlargement and the prospect of accession.
EXPECTATIONS OF INFORMATION ON THE EUROPEAN UNION

⇒ Here we sum up the results which are set out in more detail in Chapter VII of the general report.

⇒ It can be seen that there is a need for information, which is strongly and spontaneously expressed by many citizens in the candidate countries, and that the citizens of the Member States have expectations which are not so strong until their attention is drawn to the fields of EU activity, which they (in some countries at least) initially perceive as abstract and remote, and which there is less of an active demand to know more about. In these countries (broadly speaking, the least Europhile ones or those in which the Union’s image is the least positive), expectations do nonetheless develop from the point at which their interest is piqued by being made to feel that what the EU does concerns them.

⇒ As far as the content of the information is concerned, it is expected to:

- Inform and give a sense of how Community activities concern the country and the individual in his or her daily life

  This is a very widespread demand, particularly among the citizens of the candidate countries, who particularly wish to form their own opinions with clearer knowledge not only of the positive effects expected from enlargement (which they hear about) but also its downsides (which their national politicians do not tend to talk about). Clarifying both, and thus reducing uncertainty, could also reduce the partly irrational anxieties.

- Furnish people with a better general knowledge of EU affairs, its plans, activities, decisions and workings.

  It is true that not everyone shows the same “cultural” appetite for knowledge of the EU, especially in the most Eurosceptic countries; but overall there is evidence of a desire to know more and understand better that is more widespread that one might think, and, at the same time, a desire for discussion and debate (which is currently totally unsatisfied).

  In both cases, concrete, tangible information must be given to paint a picture of the European Union and its activities.

⇒ As far as the form and tone of the communication is concerned, there is – unsurprisingly – a very broad consensus rejecting anything dry, boring or written in technocratic jargon or officialese, and in favour of lively presentations which involve as well as explain, and appeal to the emotions as well as to reason.

  The reactions recorded, for example to the idea of actual or virtual visits to the Commission, certainly confirm the perceived need for direct, “in-the-flesh” contacts, and presentation formats which mix information with more subjective impressions which bring it to life and the possibility of exchanging ideas and dialogue.

⇒ Regarding possible channels and relays for information on the EU:

- Unsurprisingly, the interviewees mentioned the media first and foremost, while acknowledging that they often switch channels or mentally tune out when they hit information about the Community – obviously less enticing than entertainment programmes – but many of them then made an effort to suggest formats or time slots which would catch their attention.

- The Internet as a way of accessing information was mentioned by a substantial minority (smaller in the candidate countries) – the principal limitation of this medium being that it presupposes a sufficiently active initial interest in Community affairs to actually log on.
In the current Member States, at least, including the most Eurosceptic, people often spontaneously suggest that children should be “immersed” in Europe and the European Union at school from an early age. This is less the case in the candidate countries whose adult interviewees felt that it was more of a priority that they themselves should be well-informed.

Even though it was relatively rarely mentioned spontaneously, not being thought of as a real possibility, people would in fact be in favour of local, open debates in which they could participate – the meetings in which they have just taken part being a notable example of this.

Of a series of possible “players” or “mediators” for Community information proposed to them, national political figures were often automatically discredited. The idea of information being presented by a European Commissioner was, in spite of some lingering reservations, received much more favourably – which confirms the Commission’s potential credibility.
REACTIONS TO THE FACT THAT THE STUDY WAS FINANCED BY THE COMMISSION

When they were informed, right at the end of the meetings, that this study had been carried out at the request of the European Commission, the participants, from all countries, were almost unanimous in welcoming the initiative.

Their reactions, set out in Chapter VIII of the general report, show that they are aware of having learnt a great deal, that they interpret this exercise as the manifestation of a willingness to listen and desire for transparency on the part of the Commission – even as an expression of respect for the citizens, and that they also keenly appreciate, over and above the information given to them, the fact of having been able to discuss and exchange opinions and impressions with others “for the first time”.

As mentioned above, it can be seen that it is possible, within the space of a few hours, to palpably shift attitudes, however circumspect they may be initially, in the direction of better understanding and greater support for the virtues of the European Union, by showing citizens that the EU wants to make itself more accessible to them. Or, to put this conclusion differently: the Commission has much less to fear than to hope from the debate.