



Standard Eurobarometer



EUROBAROMETER 62

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

AUTUMN 2004

NATIONAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BELGIUM

The survey was requested and coordinated by the Directorate General Press and Communication.

This report was produced for the European Commission's Representation in Belgium.

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.

The standard Eurobarometer 62.0 was conducted in the autumn of 2004, after a particularly eventful year for the European Union. On May 1, ten new countries mostly from Central and Eastern Europe, joined the 15 Member States. On October 19, the 25 EU leaders approved the draft European Constitution which is meant to answer the new needs of an enlarged European Union, after its ratification in 2006. On November 18, the European Parliament approved a new European Commission. José Manuel Durao Barroso, the President-designate of the European Commission, had postponed the planned vote on October 27, because of some controversial nominees, and had put forward a proposal for a revised Commission on November 4.

The first part of Eurobarometer 62.0 tries to measure the climate of Belgian public opinion: how Belgian citizens see their personal situation, their concerns and expectations. The second part tackles a number of topics that were already dealt with in wave 61.0: how Belgian citizens relate to the European institutions, what kind of image the European Union conjures up for them, whether they think that their country has benefited from being a member of the European Union, how they perceive the roles assumed by the European Union and European integration in general.

More specifically, Belgian citizens expressed their views on several important European topics: further enlargement, the European monetary union, the European Constitution and the development of the Common foreign policy and the European security and defence policy. Since many of the questions of the Eurobarometer 62.0 had already been used in the Eurobarometer 61.0, it was possible to pinpoint trends in Belgian public opinion.¹

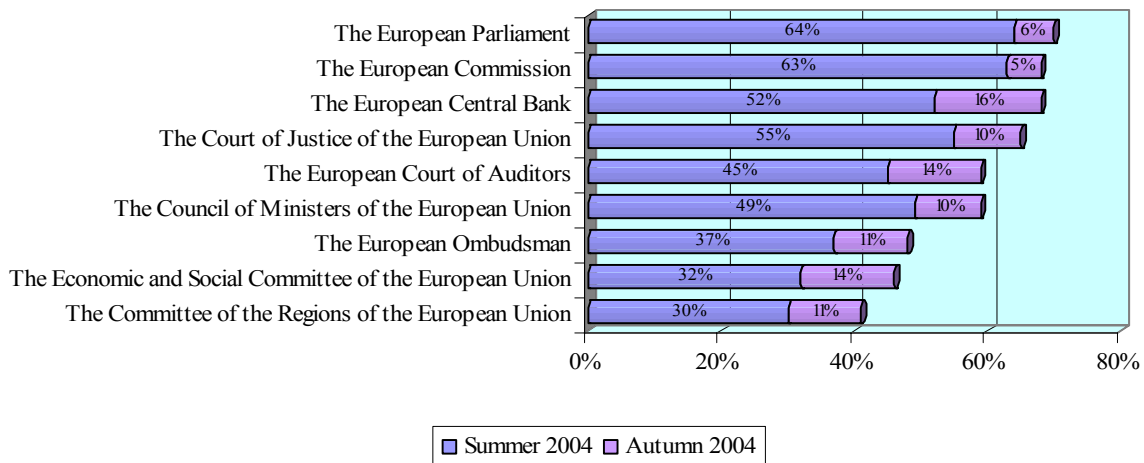
¹ These trends will be indicated between brackets.

➤ **Getting an insight into the climate of opinion in Belgium – between optimism and pessimism**

91% of Belgian citizens are satisfied with the life they lead. According to 43%, their situation has improved over the past five years. In the near future, they tend to think that their life in general (53%), the financial situation of their household (61%) and their personal job situation (66%) will stay the same. Belgian citizens are more pessimistic about problems their country faces, mostly concerning unemployment (55%) and the economic situation (26%). Belgians think that the job market (62%) and the economic situation (52%) will deteriorate in the next twelve months.

Belgians (68%) show more interest in politics than earlier in 2004, but are inclined not to trust the national political institutions. They have greater trust in the European institutions, especially the European Parliament (70%) and the European Commission (68%) and this trust has increased: +7% for the European Parliament and +6% for the European Commission, among others. Although they have different attitudes towards national and European institutions, the Belgian people (70%) say they are satisfied with the way democracy works both in Belgium and in the European Union.

Trust in the European Institutions



As far as their national identity and their attachment to the European Union are concerned, Belgian citizens appear to feel very attached to their country (83%) and to Europe (74%). In the near future, more than 40% of them see themselves as « Belgian and European ».

➤ **The European Union seen by the Belgian citizens – A more positive perception**

In a rapidly changing institutional and political context, one Belgian citizen in four stresses that getting closer to European citizens, for example by giving them more information about the European Union, its policies and its institutions is a priority action that the European Union should take. Belgians have already heard of most European institutions, particularly the European Parliament (96%) and the European Commission (92%), but they consider that their general knowledge of the European Union and its policies is not that strong. When they look for information about the European Union, they watch TV (75%), read daily newspapers (53%) or listen to the radio (39%). They trust these media, which, according to them, talk about the right amount about the European Union (56%) and present it objectively (64%). However, their trust in the press has become weaker (-10%) in the past six months.

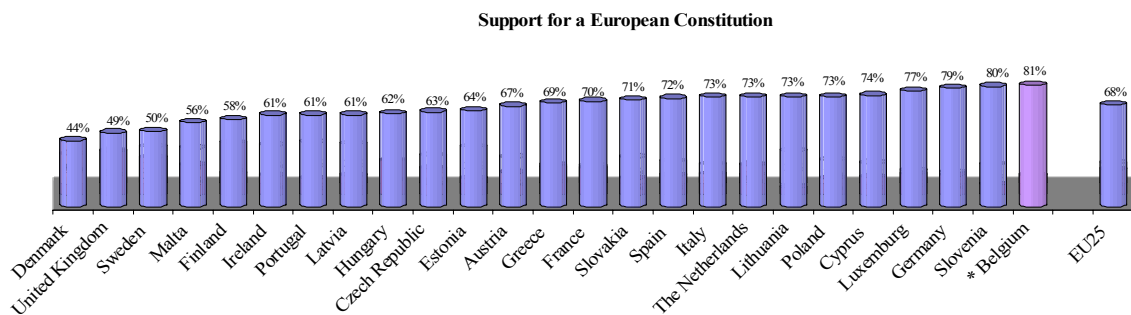
Between spring and autumn 2004, the percentage of Belgian citizens who have a positive perception of the European Union has increased from 41% to 59% (+18%). Positive opinions are mostly held by Belgians who reside in the Brussels area (75%), are aged between 15 and 24 years and have a higher level of education. Among various other positive things, the European Union represents for Belgian citizens the monetary union (66%) and the freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in Europe (63%).

Following enlargement, EU membership is increasingly perceived in a positive way in Belgium. A growing number of Belgian citizens (73%, +16 points) see EU membership as a positive thing. They believe that Belgium, as a Member State, is more stable economically (44%) and politically (43%). They also feel safer because Belgium is a member of the European Union (53%). In addition, Belgian citizens (55%) think that Belgium's influence in the European Union is growing.

According to a majority of Belgians, the European Union plays a positive role on the international scene, in the protection of the environment (68%), maintaining peace and security in the world (68%), foreign policy (63%), defence (61%), the fight against terrorism (61%), the growth of the world economy (59%) and the fight against poverty in the world (57%). On the contrary, the perception of the role played by the United States has deteriorated. More than one Belgian interviewee in two thinks that the United States play a negative role in the various domains mentioned above, except for the growth of world economy (46%).

➤ **Looking into the future of the European Union – stronger support for European integration**

When they are asked about the future of the European Union, Belgian citizens say they want European integration to speed up. They are in favour of development towards a European political union (70%). More precisely, they say they are in favour of the development of a common foreign policy (90%) and a European security and defence policy (82%). Among other things, they think that the European Union should have its own Foreign Minister who can be the spokesperson for the European Union and its own seat on the United Nations Security Council. Belgian citizens are the citizens of the European Union who show the strongest support for the single currency (89%). Lastly, Belgium is also the Member State where the draft European Constitution receives the most positive feedback, with 81% of opinions in favour, i.e. 9 percentage points more than in the spring of 2004.



Belgian support is much more moderate with regard to a further enlargement (50%). Welcoming new member countries is not an action that the European Union should follow as a priority, according to Belgians. In spite of the support they show for European integration, Belgians admit that they have fears about the building of the European Union, mostly regarding the transfer of jobs to other member countries which have lower production costs (83%).

Reflecting their concerns with regard to the problems that Belgium faces and to their fears about European integration, Belgian respondents say that the actions that the European Union should follow in priority are fighting against unemployment (44%) and fighting against poverty and social exclusion (40%).

➤ **Conclusion :**

The main results of the Eurobarometer 62.0 should be seen in the light of the numerous institutional and political changes that characterized the climate of public opinion in the autumn of 2004:

- Belgian citizens are more satisfied with their personal situation than six months ago (91%, +8 points), but they remained concerned with unemployment (55%).
- Belgian citizens' trust in the European Parliament (70%, +7 points) and the European Commission (68%, +6 points) has increased.
- The European Union's image (59%, +18 points) and the perception of membership of the European Union (73%, +16 points) have evolved in a positive way.
- The perception of the role played by the European Union internationally has progressed favourably, whereas the perception of the role played by the United States has deteriorated.
- 50% of Belgian citizens are in favour of a further enlargement of the European Union in the coming years, but only 4% of them think that welcoming new members is an action that the European Union should follow as a priority.
- Belgium is the Member State where the support for a European Constitution is the strongest (81%, +9 points).
- The large majority of Belgian citizens support the development of a common foreign policy (90%) and of a European security and defence policy (82%).