

EUROBAROMETER 65

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Spring 2006

NATIONAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BELGIUM

This survey was requested and coordinated by Directorate-General 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.

Introduction

Wave 65.2 of the standard Eurobarometer was conducted during spring 2005, between March 28 and April 26. Shortly before the launch of the survey, the Spring Council, a summit focused on the relaunch of the Lisbon Strategy, took place in Brussels. Drawing on lessons learnt from five years of implementing the Strategy, the European Council confirmed on this occasion that the further reduction of unemployment, raising productivity and the increase of potential growth remain the key challenges for the Union.

Having endeavoured to highlight the state of mind of Belgian citizens and their perception of the European Union in spring 2006, the Eurobarometer 65.2 asked them to think about the actions to which the European Union should give priority. Based on the responses obtained, the following findings are worth highlighting:

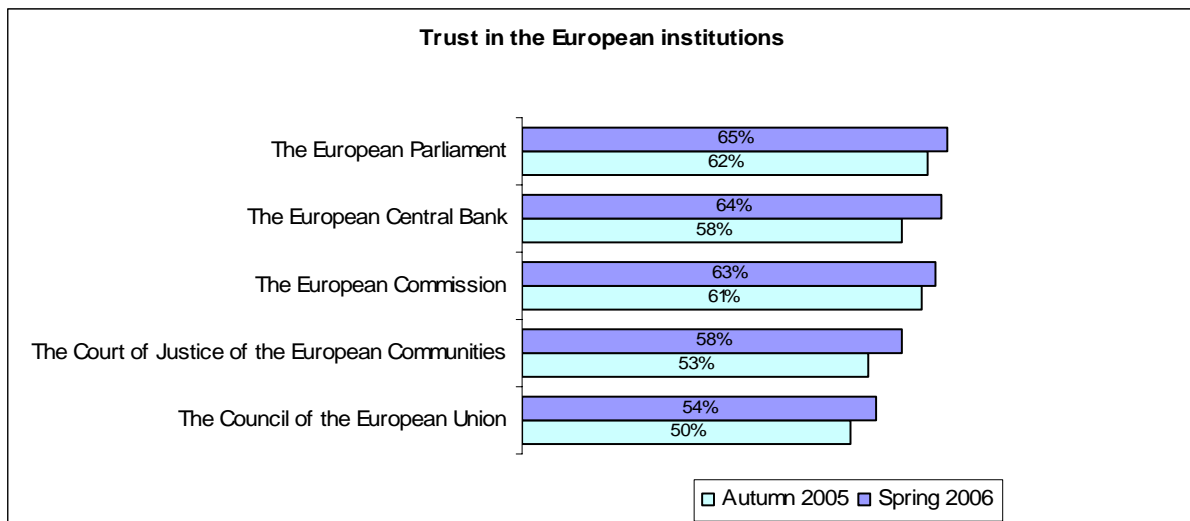
- Belgian citizens think that the European Union give priority to the fight against unemployment (55%) and the fight against poverty and social exclusion (51%).
- They also insist on the need for the European Union to get closer to European citizens, for example, by giving them more information about the European Union, its policies and institutions (28%).
- In addition, they underline that it is important that the European Union maintains peace and security in Europe (27%).
- Among the priorities defined by Belgian citizens, welcoming new Member States is in last position, with only 4% of incidences.

To a large extent, the priorities identified by Belgian citizens for the European Union are related to their current concerns:

- Belgian citizens are worried about the job situation and the situation of the economy in Belgium. In their view, unemployment (50%) and the economic situation (24%) are, together with insecurity (25%), the most important issues facing their country.
- With 53% of unfavourable responses, Belgian citizens are in sixth position among those European citizens who most strongly oppose further enlargement of the European Union, i.e. Germany (66%), Luxemburg (65%), France (62%), Austria (61%) and Finland (60%).

The Climate of the Belgian Public Opinion in Spring 2006

- When they compare their situation in spring 2006 to their situation five years ago, the Belgians consider that it has improved (39%) or that it has stayed the same (35%). They are satisfied with the life they lead (92%), but preoccupied by a number of issues facing their country. The most important issues they identify are unemployment (50%), insecurity (25%) and the economic situation (24%).
- Indeed, they believe that the job situation in Belgium is bad (73%), even if it is better than the job situation in other European Union countries (49%). The Belgians have a less clear idea as regards the economic situation of their country: 51% think that it is good and 48% that it is bad. However, they agree on the fact that the Belgian economic situation is on average better than the economic situation in other Member States of the European Union (67%).
- In the near future, the Belgians expect that their life in general will not change (59%) and that the job situation will get worse (44%) or stay the same (37%). In the same way, they feel that Belgium's economic situation will not evolve (43%) or will get worse (40%).
- The Belgians are all the more pessimistic about the resolution of the problems that affect their country in that they distrust their political institutions. Only the Belgian Parliament stands apart from this trend, with a trust index of 50%. In general, Belgians tend rather to trust the European Union (61%) and its institutions. Since autumn 2005, their trust in these institutions has increased: +6 points for the European Central Bank (64%), +5 points for the Court of Justice of the European Communities (58%), +4 points for the Council of the European Union (54%), +3 points for the European Parliament (65%) and +2 points for the European Commission (63%).

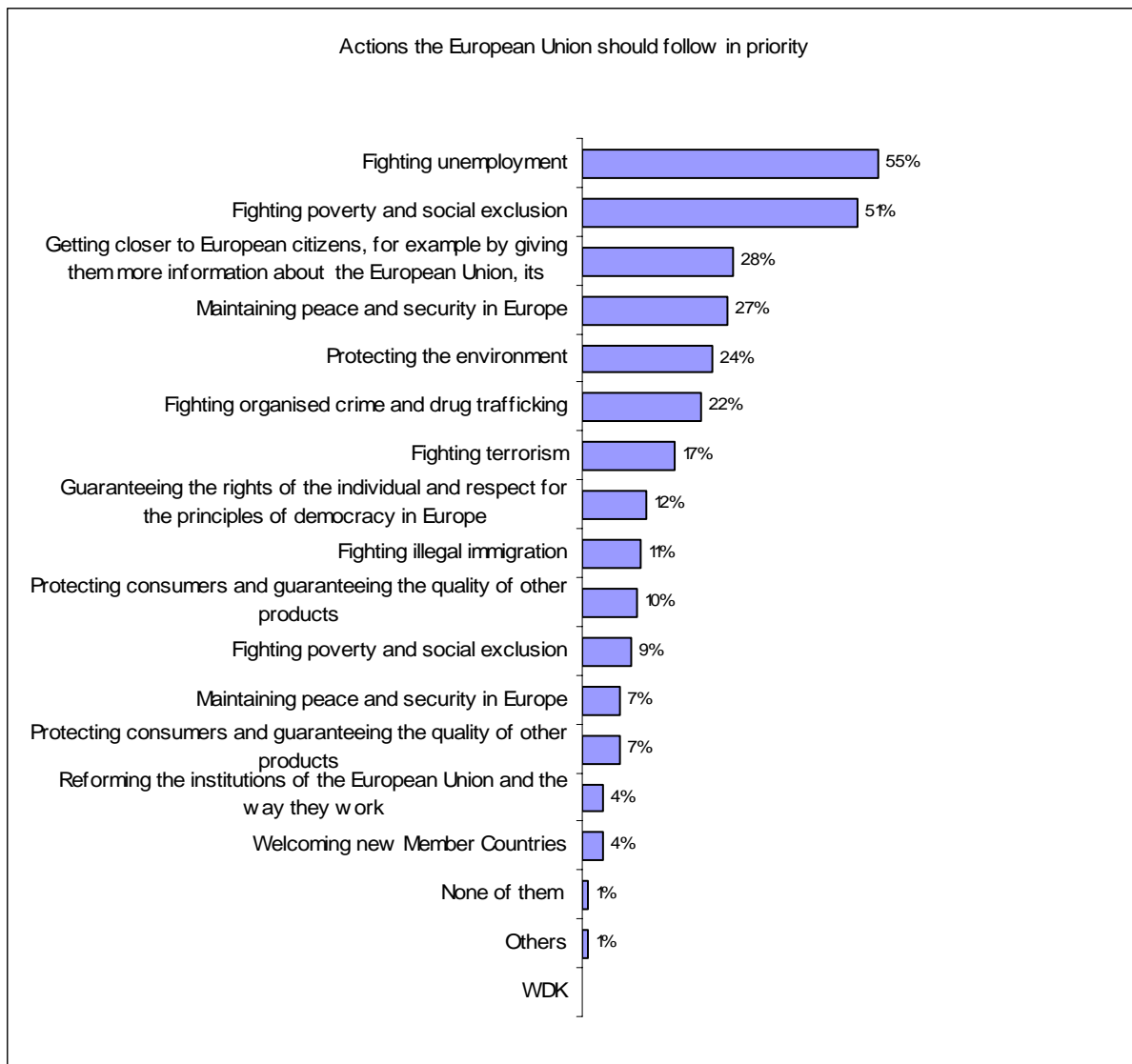


Belgians' perception of the European Union

- In spring 2006, the Belgians consider that they have an average knowledge of the European Union, its policies and its institutions (4,7 on a scale from 1 to 10), but they say that they understand better how the European Union works than six months ago (55%, + 9 points).
- Since the previous wave of the Eurobarometer, the Belgian population's perception of the European Union has evolved in a positive way (+9 points). Whereas the European Union conjured up a positive image for only 45% of the Belgians in autumn 2005, it does so now for 54% of them.
- Belgian citizens consider that membership of the European Union is a positive thing (65%). Taking everything into account, they consider that Belgium had benefited from being a member (66%). Among other things, they feel that Belgium is more stable politically (54%) and economically (43%) because it is a Member State of the European Union. In addition, 39% of the Belgians feel safer because Belgium is a member of the European Union.
- In a general way, the Belgians are satisfied with the way democracy works in the European Union (67%) and consider that the interests of their country are well taken into account in the European Union (53%). However, they do not think that Belgium will become more influential in the European Union in the future (63%).

Questions and priorities of the Belgians vis-à-vis the European integration process

- When they are asked to identify the actions to which the European Union should give priority, the Belgians mention: the fight against unemployment (55%) and the fight against poverty and social exclusion (51%). 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%). In addition, they underline that it is important that the European Union maintains peace and security in Europe (27%). Among the priorities defined by Belgian citizens, welcoming new Member States is in bottom position, with only 4% of incidences.



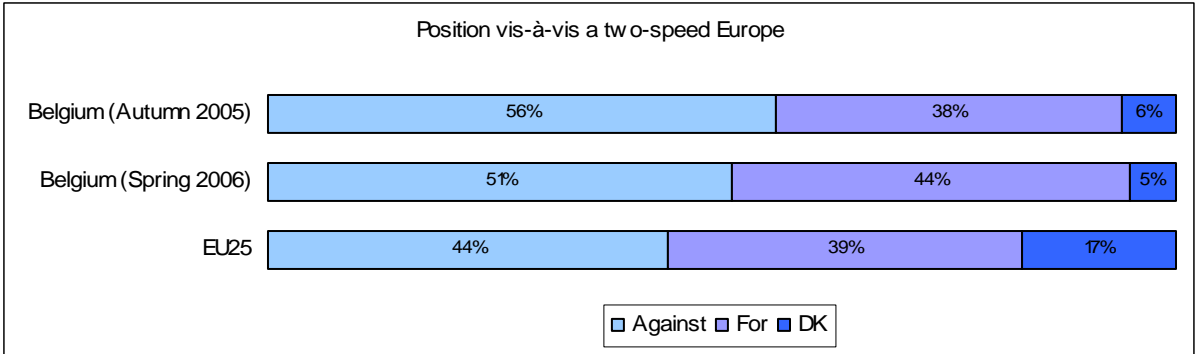
➤ In spring 2006, the Belgians think that the European economy is performing well (58%), and even better than the Japanese (60%) and Chinese (58%) economies. In order to improve the performance of the Belgian economy, Belgian citizens suggest improving vocational training and education (68%) and facilitating the creation of companies (53%).

➤ As the Commission is envisaging setting up a European Globalisation Adjustment Fund, the Eurobarometer 65.2 looked at Belgian citizens' views on the globalisation of exchanges. According to the answers they gave in this context, Belgian citizens are in favour of free trade (75%) and judge that competitiveness is a good thing (68%). Their attitude towards globalisation is nevertheless divided: 49% think that it is a positive phenomenon and 48% that it is rather a negative phenomenon. On the other hand, more than one Belgian citizen in two (51%) looks upon protectionism in favourably.

➤ The majority of Belgian citizens are in favour of a European security and defence policy (85%) and of the development of a common foreign policy (76%). Among other things, the Belgians consider that the European Union's foreign policy should be independent of that of the United States (84%) and the European Union should have its own Foreign Minister who can be the spokesperson for a common European Union position (77%).

➤ The Belgians strongly support the project of a constitution for the European Union (75%). They anticipate that if all Member States adopt the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, it will make the running of the European Union more democratic (79%), more efficient (79%) and more transparent (69%). In addition, in their view, it would make the European Union stronger in the world (83%), more competitive economically (76%) and more socially-minded (68%). In view of the current state of the ratification process, the Belgians however suggest that the Constitution should be renegotiated (61%).

➤ The negative results of the referenda on the Constitution have led the Member States to think about possible solutions. One of these would be the creation of a 'core' group of Member States that would proceed more quickly with the building of Europe than the others. In Belgium, 51% of those polled say they are in favour of this option and 44% oppose it. Since autumn 2005, Belgian opposition to the adoption, by a group of countries, of a faster speed of building Europe has increased (+6 points).



➤ In its conclusion, the Presidency of the European Council of 23-24 March 2006 notes that Europe is facing a number of challenges in the energy field and calls for an Energy Policy for Europe. According to the results obtained in the framework of the Eurobarometer 65.2, the Belgians support this initiative. As a matter of fact, 50% of the Belgians consider that the European level is the most appropriate level to take decisions in order to respond to the new energy challenges that they have to face for the year to come.

➤ At the level of the European Union, the Belgians (53%) are ranked in sixth position among the European citizens who most strongly oppose a new wave of enlargement of the European Union i.e.: the Germans (66%), Luxemburg inhabitants (65%), the French (62%), the Austrians (61%) and the Finns (60%).

Since autumn 2005, the Belgians' opposition to a new wave of enlargement of the European Union has increased: 50% of the Belgian citizens then opposed a new wave of enlargement of the European Union and 47% were in favour of it.

