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Portugal and Europe: Public Opinion Barometer

This Eurobarometer demonstrates a pattern of continuity in Portuguese pessimism concerning the economic performance of the country. In fact, a majority of the Portuguese believes that the country's economic situation will worsen in the next year. Similarly, 84 per cent of the Portuguese consider that the average standard of living in the EU is higher than in their country. Despite being among the most pessimistic Europeans regarding their life in general, the Portuguese are amongst the most optimistic citizens concerning the improvement of their personal situation in the next five years (with 50 per cent considering that it will get better).

Regarding the European Union's image, the Portuguese share the opinion of the EU average (52 per cent have a positive image). Portugal is not among the most enthusiastic countries regarding the image of the EU (over 60 per cent of positive opinions) but also is not among the least positive countries (40 per cent or less who have a positive view of the EU).

However, when questioned directly if they consider the EU to be inefficient, the Portuguese are among those European citizens who disagree to a large degree which such a claim, with only 26 per cent of the national poll believing the Union to be ineffective, in contrast with 37 per cent of the European poll.

Concerning the levels of institutional trust both at national and European level, it is clear that the Portuguese overwhelmingly trust the European institutions. For all institutions surveyed, namely the European Parliament and the European Commission (62 per cent of Portuguese trust each institution), the Council of the European Union (58 per cent) or the European Central Bank (also trusted by an absolute majority of the Portuguese), the Portuguese level of trust is high and above the EU average.

Even though the Portuguese trust the European Union more than their national institutions, in this Eurobarometer, they also state higher confidence levels in their national institutions than the EU average. 46 per cent of the Portuguese trust their national government, whereas in the EU the corresponding value is 41 per cent. When questioned about the national parliament, the differences between Portugal and the EU average are even greater (49 per cent compared with 43 per cent).

Regarding the different forms of media (including the internet), the Portuguese also trust them more than the EU average. Namely, the large majority of Portuguese (65 per cent) trust the printed press, whereas a majority of Europeans (48 per cent) do not trust newspapers or magazines. Likewise, the Portuguese tend to trust the radio more than Europeans (78 versus 66 per cent), and the differences widen when polled on the level of trust in television: 78 per cent of Portuguese state that they trust it, whereas the corresponding value in the EU overall is 58 per cent.

In terms of affective support for the European integration process, in Portugal, this Eurobarometer shows that it has risen substantially, after a drop in 2006. In the first semester of 2007, 55 per cent of the Portuguese consider their country's membership of the EU "a good thing", whereas in 2006 only 49 per cent shared that view. This recovery appears to be based on a decrease in the percentage of respondents who were previously neutral or did not respond to the question.

Considering the instrumental support for the European Union a similar pattern is detected. Namely, there is a marked increase of those who believe that Portugal benefited from being part of the EU to levels close to those of 2005 (66 per cent who agree in this semester versus an average of 59 per cent in 2006). These results appear to be due to a decrease in the number of those who believe that Portugal did not benefit from the European integration process. Thus, both concerning the affective and instrumental support for the European Union in Portugal, the data suggest that the fall recorded in the previous year may have been overcome.

2. Public Policies, European Challenges

When evaluating the EU's public policy process, the majority of the Portuguese agrees with the notion that every European decision is the subject of negotiations in which the opinions of the Member States' governments are taken into account. This result suggests that the Portuguese perceive European decisions as taking into consideration their national interests, which, in turn, may contribute to the relatively high levels of trust they place in the EU and its institutions. When surveyed as to whether decisions in different policy areas should be made by their national government or made jointly within the European Union, the Portuguese – like EU citizens in general – have quite different positions depending on the type of policy in question. In areas related with the transmission of cultural values (such as the educational system) or with social rights

and protection, the Portuguese – like their European counterparts – mostly prefer solely national-level decisions. On the other hand, joint decision-making in the EU is preferred in policy domains that deal with transnational issues, such as fighting crime or protecting the environment. At the same time, it must be noted that the Portuguese are more favourable to joint decision-making within the EU than Europeans as a whole. With one exception, the Portuguese show less preference for solely national decisions than their EU counterparts; and, on average, the percentage of support for joint decisions in Portugal is 20 percentage points higher than for the EU as a whole.

With regard to the future of the EU, the Portuguese are particularly against a Europe at variable speeds. This rejection may derive from the fear that such an integration model might exclude from its hard-core a small and peripheral country like Portugal.

The EU underwent its most substantial change in composition to date with the enlargement by ten new Member states in 2004. Three years on, the majority of the Portuguese (51 per cent) does not consider that this process has been negative. However, the proportion of the Portuguese who hold a negative opinion is higher than the EU average. Still, this does not appear to have changed the perception of the Portuguese with regard to further enlargement of the EU in future years, with a relatively stable majority backing enlargement since 2004. Moreover, the proportion of Portuguese who support enlargement is almost invariably greater than the EU average in this period.

While globalisation evokes more positive than negative sentiments for the Portuguese, the proportion of the former is lower in Portugal than in the EU as a whole. This may be due to the mostly negative perception the Portuguese have of the economic effects of globalisation, which they associate, above all, with the relocation of companies to countries where labour is cheaper and to increased competition for national firms. Although the majority of Portuguese see the EU as attenuating the negative effects (and accentuating the positive ones) of globalisation, this opinion is less prevalent in Portugal than in the EU as a whole. As such, it appears that the Portuguese expect a larger role for the EU in controlling the effects of globalisation. Lastly, for the majority of the Portuguese, as for Europeans in general, global warming is a matter that should be dealt with by the European Union urgently. This overwhelming support for urgent EU intervention in the protection of the environment is maintained when respondents were asked whether they agreed to the urgent adoption by the European Union of policies that can reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 20% by 2020 – a target that

goes beyond the (as yet unachieved) commitments of EU Member States within the Kyoto framework.

3. Overview of the EU at its 50th anniversary and future perspectives

When asked to evaluate the results of 50 years of European integration, the Portuguese overwhelmingly consider the free movement of people, goods and services as the most positive outcome (63 per cent). For EU citizens in general, this is also the most frequently cited consequence of the process. The fact that European integration fostered peace between the Member-States is also mentioned by the Portuguese, but much less frequently than by European citizens overall – the difference between the two figures is close to 20 percentage points. The other significant difference between Portugal and the EU as a whole lies in the fact that the Common Agricultural Policy is mentioned as a positive outcome of integration by only 5 per cent of its citizens, whereas the European average is 10 per cent.

When asked about the foundations of European citizenship as a result of integration, the Portuguese answer differently than their European counterparts, with the former giving more importance to geography (27 versus 16 per cent) and less to economic factors (18 versus 27 per cent). Sports are also more salient to the citizens of EU in general (20 per cent) than to the Portuguese (14 per cent).

Hope is the most frequent feeling evoked by the anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, but a considerable proportion of Portuguese citizens (32 per cent) is worried. Perhaps this is why the levels of optimism towards the future of the Union expressed in Portugal (57 per cent) are somewhat lower than the European average (69 per cent), and are also the third lowest values recorded in the Member-States after Austria and the United Kingdom. In Portugal, the rates of optimism are especially low among women, elderly people, the less educated and housewives.

Despite this lower degree of optimism, the Portuguese support the future political measures presented to them in this Eurobarometer – including a common immigration policy, enlargement, a European constitution and teaching about European institutions. The only proposal that doesn't have the support of 50 per cent or more of respondents, both in Portugal and in the EU as a whole, is the possibility of European integration at variable speeds. Furthermore, the vision of the Union fifty years from now held by the Portuguese is as positive as the one expressed by EU citizens in general. Nonetheless,

it differs in the expectations regarding the probability of the direct election of the President of the European Union, fifty years from now (higher in Portugal than in the EU as a whole).

Regarding the Portuguese presidency of the European Union, the majority of the Portuguese (55 per cent) state they have received information through the media, but the perception of information is lower among women, youths (15 to 24 years) and the elderly (over 55 years of age), the less educated, house persons and those living outside the big cities. The importance of this event is acknowledged by 80 per cent of the Portuguese, and particularly by men, youngsters, the more educated and those who are active in the labour market.