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NATIONAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE NETHERLANDS

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Summary and conclusions

Dutch context

Financial crisis or not, Dutch citizens remain amongst the EU's most satisfied citizens when it comes to their daily lives. The Netherlands heads the list in this regard, closely followed by Sweden and Denmark. They rate aspects such as the quality of life, employment, the economy and the environment positively, and they also feel that their home country is doing better than the average EU country. Like the average EU citizen, the Dutch still feel that energy prices in their home country are not better than in the average EU country.

The financial crisis has had an impact on Dutch citizens' expectations for the future. Most people still do not expect their life in general to undergo significant changes in the coming year, but the Dutch have become a lot more pessimistic about the economic situation and employment, in particular, in the near future. Nearly two out of three (64%) Dutch citizens expect economic conditions to worsen over the coming year (as against 44% six months ago) and over half (55%) expect employment levels to fall. The Dutch are therefore even slightly more pessimistic than the average European. Despite the fact that the Dutch – just like the average European – think that life will become harder for future generations, more people still believe that the Netherlands is developing in the right rather than the wrong direction.

After a substantial drop in confidence in the national government in the autumn of 2007 and a stabilisation in the spring of 2008, confidence has increased considerably in recent months. This must be linked to the government's performance during the financial crisis. Elsewhere in Europe, confidence in the national government did not rise on average.

The economic situation is the most important issue for nearly two out of three (64%) Dutch citizens, with crime and healthcare following a long way behind. Europeans feel that rising prices/inflation are just as important as the economic situation. Rising prices/inflation are comparatively less important for the Dutch. Unemployment is also an important issue to the average European, but this is hardly the case at all for the Dutch. Dutch citizens are still positive about the current economic and financial situation, but in view of the importance that they attach to the economic situation (and their pessimism about the near future) they are concerned that this will not change for the better.

The European Union

Despite the European Union's efforts to tackle the looming economic recession with a joint plan of action, confidence in the European economy is very low. In the autumn of 2006, 58% of Europeans were still positive about the European economic situation. In the autumn of 2008, this has fallen to 33%. People in the Netherlands are slightly more positive, but, here too, there has been a sharp decline; in 2006, 77% of Dutch citizens believed that the European economy was in good shape, now it is 'only' 57%.

The number of Dutch citizens who say that they know how the European Union works has fallen slightly again, for the first time in two years. 56% of Dutch citizens now say that they understand how the EU works. The European average is less, namely 41%.

Dutch citizens are very familiar with the European institutions: 95% have heard of the European Parliament, 91% of the European Central Bank and 85% of the European Commission. The Council of the European Union is slightly less well-known: 69% of Dutch citizens say that they have heard of it. The Dutch are better informed about the European institutions than the average European.

Slightly more than half the inhabitants of the Netherlands know that the European Union does not consist of fifteen Member States and a small majority know that the presidency of the European Union changes every six months. Lastly, four out of ten Dutch citizens know that the eurozone does not consist of twelve countries. The Dutch score slightly higher than the average EU citizen on these knowledge questions.

Confidence in the European Union is above average in the Netherlands compared to the average European. More than six out of ten Dutch citizens (64%) say that they have confidence in the EU, as against 47% of Europeans. Dutch citizens' confidence in the European Central Bank and the European Commission has been rising since the autumn of 2005. The European Central Bank enjoys the highest level of confidence: 79% of the Dutch trust this European institution. Dutch citizens' confidence in the European Parliament has fallen slightly for the first time to 58%. As a result, the European Commission enjoys greater confidence amongst the Dutch than the European Parliament, for the first time. The Netherlands is also a lot more positive about the EU in general than in the spring of 2008. At that time, 43% of Dutch citizens were positive about the European Union, whilst in the autumn of 2008, that figure is 52%.

Despite the positive attitude with regard to the European Union, Dutch citizens are negative about the prospects for the European economy: 63% think that the European economy will deteriorate. The Dutch are even more pessimistic about the global economy: 71% think that the global economy will deteriorate. The Netherlands is more negative than the average European in this regard. 41% are pessimistic about the future of the European economy and 49% are negative about the global economy's prospects.

The highest level of support for membership of the EU can be found in the Netherlands. Eight out of ten Dutch citizens believe that membership is a good thing. A small majority (53%) of Europeans have the same opinion. For the Dutch, the European Union means the freedom to travel, work and study anywhere in the EU, the euro and greater influence in the world.

Membership of the EU offers benefits for the Netherlands. Hence, three-quarters of Dutch citizens feel that the Netherlands is economically more stable by being in the eurozone. Nearly eight out of ten Dutch citizens think that the Netherlands' voice is heard in the EU. Yet 55% of the Dutch say that the EU forces its views on its Member States.

Dutch citizens feel that the European Union must give priority to fighting crime and environmental issues. Europe's inhabitants believe that the emphasis should be on energy issues, following by fighting crime and immigration. Social issues have less priority in an EU context for the Dutch than for the average European (13% of Dutch citizens, as against 27% of Europeans).

The level where decisions should be made (European or national level) differs greatly according to the issue and is fairly constant compared to a year ago. Hence, Dutch citizens would prefer issues that relate to combating terrorism, support to economically deprived areas and environmental protection to be dealt with at European level. The Dutch would like to see social issues, taxes, the educational system and pensions handled at national level.

About one third of Dutch citizens say that they are not aware of a budget for the European Union. Expectations on where the budget is spent and their wishes as to where it should be spent vary greatly. Hence, Dutch citizens want the budget to be spent on education and training (38%, as against 6% expected), climate and environment (37%, as against 16% expected), health issues (35%, as against 8% expected) and employment and social issues (34%, as against 13% expected). The Dutch, in particular, believe that too much money is being spent on administrative and staff costs and on agricultural and rural development.

More than six out of ten Dutch citizens see globalisation as a positive development and nearly six out of ten think that the European Union can protect the Member States from the negative effects of globalisation. People in Europe are slightly more pessimistic: 36% are positive about globalisation and 43% expect the European Union to be able to do something to protect the Member States from negative effects.

Georgia

Most Europeans were aware of the conflict which took place in the summer of 2008 on the edge of Europe between Georgia and Russia. On average, more than eight out of ten people heard something about the conflict in some way. This was the case for no less than 95% of Dutch citizens. The Dutch are thereby almost as well-informed as inhabitants of Estonia and Latvia.

Europeans feel that the EU was the main 'peacemaker' in the conflict. A quarter of Europeans on average have that opinion. This applies to four out of ten Dutch citizens.

Six out of ten Europeans fear that the conflict will have a greater or lesser impact on the security of energy supplies to the EU. The same proportion of people in the Netherlands have that fear.