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European
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EUROBAROMETER 71

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Spring 2009

NATIONAL REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY BELGIUM

Standard Eurobarometer 71 / Spring 2009 – TNS Opinion & Social

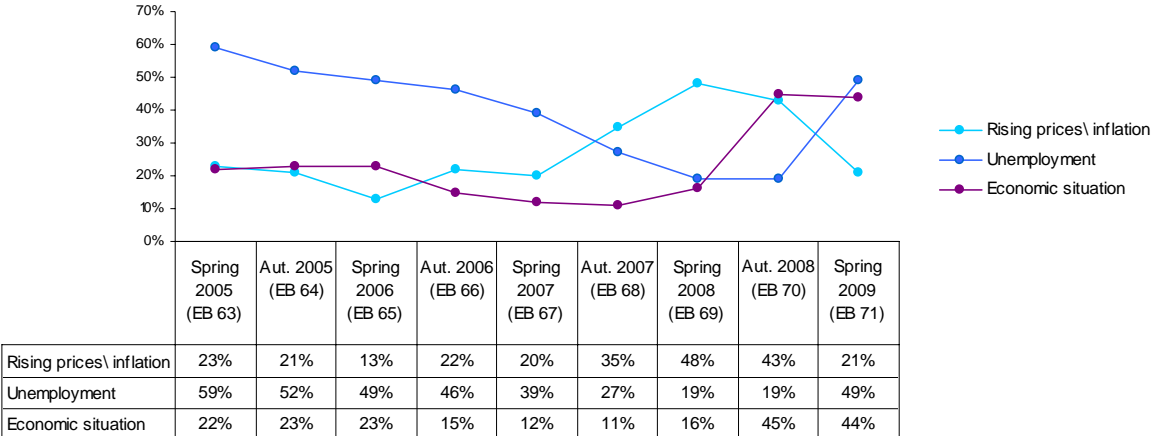
The survey was requested and coordinated by the Directorate General Communication.
This report was produced for the European Commission's Representation in Belgium.
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Wave 71 of the Standard Eurobarometer was carried out in Belgium between 15 and 25 June 2009. On this occasion, 1000 respondents constituting a representative sample of the Belgian population expressed themselves on a selection of topics, i.e. their country's membership of the European Union, the division on competences between the different levels of public authorities, the situation of the economy and of the job market in Belgium and in the whole of the European Union, the role of the European Union regarding immigration or the hypothesis of a new enlargement wave. The main opinion trends which have presented themselves during the survey are outlined below.

➤ **Together with the economic situation, unemployment emerges again as the main problem facing Belgium**

Among the main difficulties Belgium is struggling with in spring 2009, unemployment (49%) is, together with the economic situation (44%), most oftencited by Belgian citizens. In comparison with autumn 2008, they appear more inclined to point at unemployment (+30 points) and less preoccupied by price increases (21%, i.e. -22 points). An inversion of the trend observed during the last waves of the survey, when inflation and the economic situation were the focus of Belgians' worries, thus seems to have been triggered.

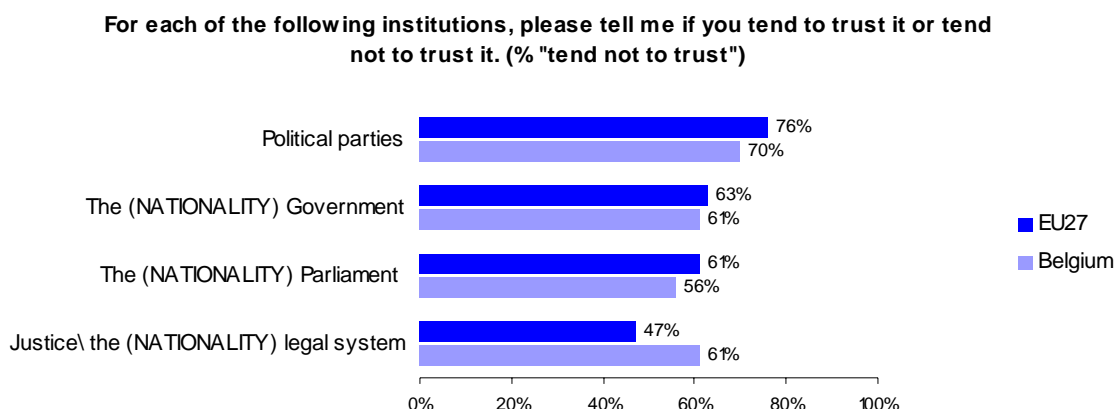
Most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment
 (% Belgium, issues which have been mentioned by a minimum 30% respondents at least once during the years under examination)



In spring 2009, 82% of Belgians, i.e. a percentage which is 22 points higher than the one recorded six months before, indeed complain about the employment situation in their country being "bad". Among other things, they feel that it is difficult to find a job in Belgium, even with high qualifications (73%). Paradoxically, when the national job market is no longer the subject of the question, but rather their individual professional situation, 72% of Belgians show satisfaction. In addition, when they are asked to designate the main problems they meet with in their daily life, Belgians mention inflation (45%) first, then the economic situation (23%), income taxes (16%), and, lastly, only in fourth position, unemployment (15%).

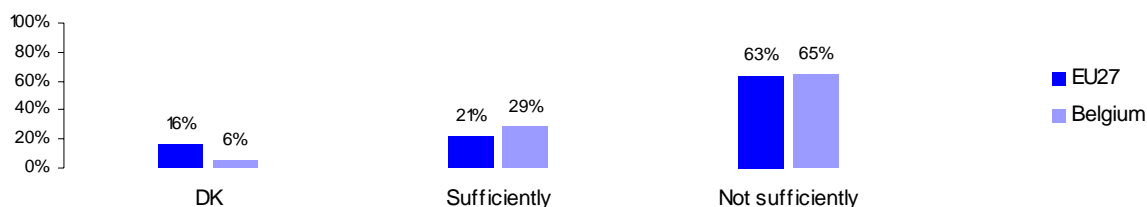
➤ **Belgians trust the European Union and its institutions, but call for increased participation of the regional and national public authorities in the European decision-making process**

In a general way, Belgians consider that their country's membership of the European Union is a "good thing" (66%) and are more convinced of it than their European fellow citizens. They trust the European Union (59%) as well as the main European institutions, i.e. the European Parliament (65%), the European Commission (62%) and the European Central Bank (55%), whereas they show distrust vis-à-vis their national political institutions.



In many areas, Belgian citizens judge that the role played by the European Union is "on average satisfactory" ¹ and should be further developed: the fight against terrorism (89%), the fight against organized crime (89%), promoting democracy and peace in the world (86%), protecting the environment (86%), ensuring economic growth (85%), securing energy supply (84%), cooperation in the field of research and innovation (84%), managing major health issues (84%), ensuring food safety (82%), equal treatment of men and women (81%), protecting social rights (78%), fighting unemployment (78%) and supporting agriculture (76%). This said, they are convinced that it is at national level (51%) and at regional or local level (30%), rather than at European level (15%), that public authorities have the most impact on their living conditions (30%). They, therefore, call for increased participation from regional or local public authorities in the European decision-making process (65%).

In your opinion, are regional or local public authorities sufficiently or not taken into account when deciding policies in the European Union?



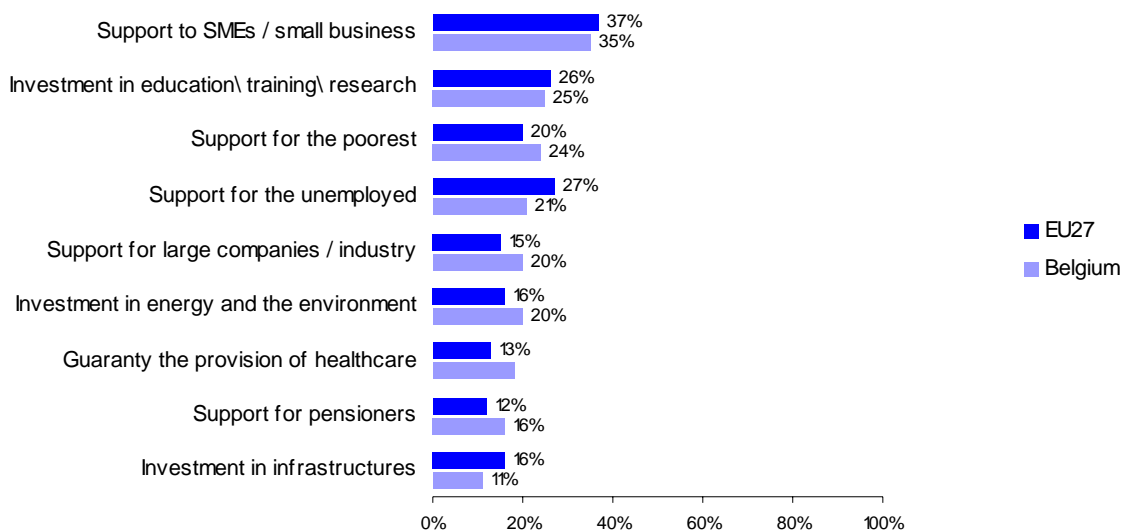
¹ On a scale from 1 to 10 where 1 means « not at all satisfactory » and 10 « very satisfactory », Belgian citizens attribute a score between 4 and 7 to the role of the European Union in those areas.

➤ ***The European Union is able to defend its economic interests on the global scene and to take effective actions against the effects of the financial and economic crisis***

Belgians perceive the European Union as being, above all, characterized by its economic power (76%). It is, according to them, important enough to be able to defend its economic interests on the global scene (69%) and to exceed the performances of the Russian (49%), Brazilian (43%), Indian (43%) or American (42%) economies. In a context marked by the globalisation of trade, Belgian respondents feel the European Union has the capacity to help them optimise the effects of this phenomenon, i.e. to remedy those which are negative (54%) and to help them to better benefit from those which are positive (59%).

Facing the consequences of the financial and economic crisis, the European Union appears to more than a quarter of the Belgian poll (26%) as being the entity which is the best able to take effective actions, ahead of the G20 (24%), the United States (19%), the International Monetary Fund (13%) or the Belgian Government (8%). Among the measures designed to help people overcome the effects of this crisis, Belgians mainly suggest that the European Union prioritizes support to SMEs (35%), investment in education/ training/ research (25%), support for the poorest (24%), support for the unemployed (21%), support for large companies and industry (20%) or investment in energy and the environment (20%).

Measures the EU should prioritise in order to help people overcome the effects of the financial and economic crisis

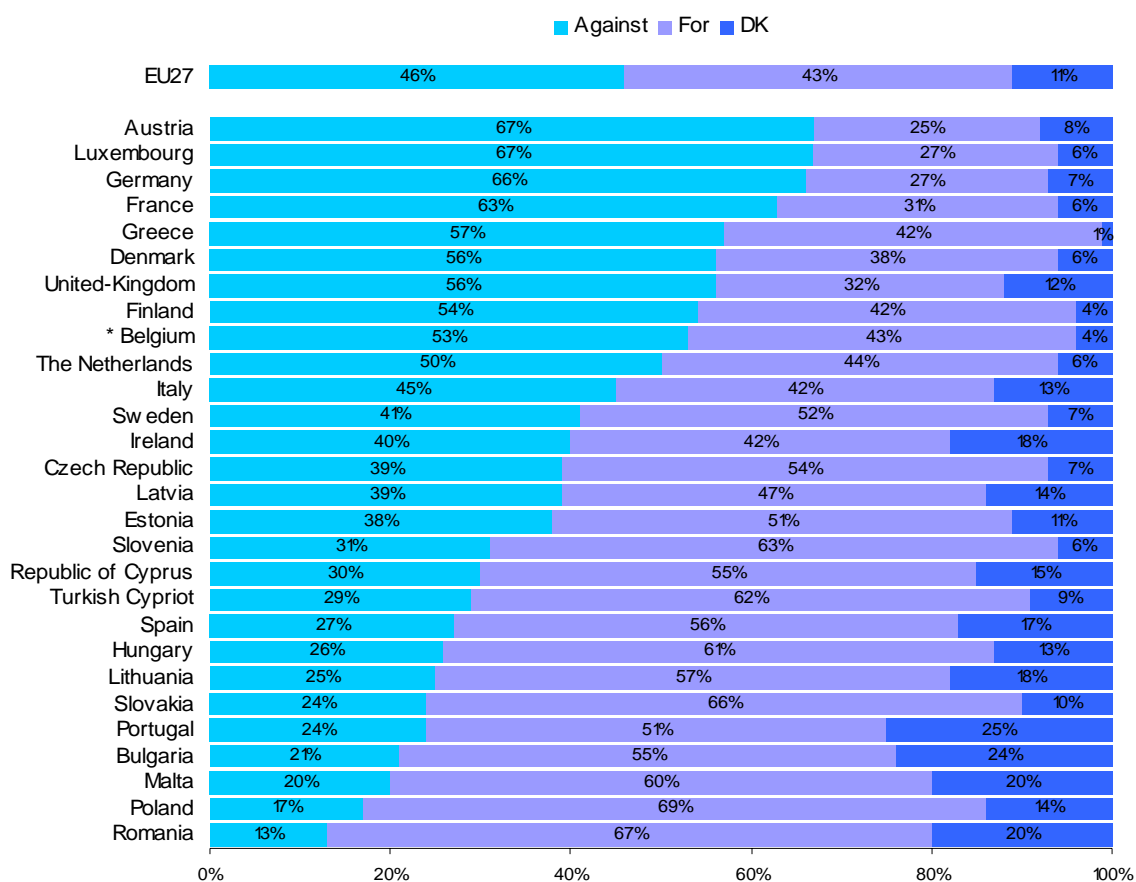


If they encourage investment in energy and environment to fight against the financial and economic crisis, Belgian citizens' positions regarding a balance between the economic and environmental interests are somewhat unclear: 67% say that protecting the environment should be a priority, even if its has an impact on economic growth; while 55% also indicate they agree with the idea that economic growth should be a priority even if it affects the environment.

➤ **Belgian citizens oppose a new wave of enlargement in the coming years and suggest the European institutions rather emphasise economic affairs and immigration issues**

The mention of further enlargement of the European Union in the coming year triggers unfavourable reactions from 53% of the Belgian citizens, a percentage similar to the one which was observed last autumn and 7 points higher than the European average (relative majority of 46%). This result places Belgium in ninth position among the Member States where opposition to further enlargement comes from an absolute majority of respondents, i.e. Austria (67%), Luxembourg (67%), Germany (66%), France (63%), Greece (57%), Denmark (56%), the United-Kingdom (56%), Finland (54%) and the Netherlands (50%).

Position vis-à-vis further enlargement of the European Union to include other countries in future years



In the coming years, Belgian citizens encourage the European institutions to place greater emphasis on economic affairs (37%), immigration issues (29%), the fight against crime (28%) and the social and health issues (27%). When asked to indicate more precisely how they perceive immigration, Belgians recognise that immigrants can play an important role in developing greater understanding and tolerance with the rest of the world (46%), but they also say they fear that the presence of people from other ethnic groups increases unemployment (59%) and is a cause of insecurity (52%). On the other hand, they doubt they need immigrants to work in certain sectors of the economy (44% 'do not need' and 43% 'need') and do not believe that these immigrants can contribute to solving the problem of Europe's aging population (57%).