

REPORT ON CONSULTATIONS WITH CITIZENS ON EUROPE IN THE NETHERLANDS

What do the Dutch want from the European Union? An exploratory study using surveys, virtual dialogues and focus groups

Netherlands Institute for Social Research | SCP

I. TIMELINE AND CONSULTATION METHODOLOGY

The Netherlands Institute for Social Research | SCP was requested by the Dutch government to carry out research into Dutch public opinion on the European Union (EU) and the EU agenda for the near term. The starting point for the study was what people want from 'Europe' in practical terms (addressing problems, policy issues), not their opinions on administrative aspects (a federation or not, etc.) – although some information about administrative preferences does emerge when people talk about practical matters.

A multi-mode survey model was used, consisting of four parts. *First*, existing population surveys (e.g. Eurobarometer, the European Social Survey, the Dutch Parliamentary Election Survey and the SCP Citizens' Outlooks Barometer (COB)) were used to obtain an impression of Dutch attitudes to the EU and what they want from 'Europe'. Using data for 2016-2018, the Netherlands was compared with other countries and differences in the Netherlands analysed. This phase also included a historical review. *Second*, in July 2018 a number of open-ended questions were put to a selection of 250 respondents from the COB, asking their views on what the EU should do more and what it should do less. *Third*, an interactive online dialogue (Synthetron) lasting more than an hour was conducted in August 2018 with a random sample of 234 Dutch citizens in order to elicit views about the EU and the EU agenda. *Fourth*, in September eight focus groups were organised to explore themes in more depth.

II. SUMMARY OF THE MAIN OUTCOMES

Numerous studies have shown that there is broad support in the Netherlands for EU membership. Sentiment towards the EU in mid-2018 is more positive than during the recent (euro) crisis, but much less positive than in the early 1990s. Supporters of EU membership mainly cite economic motives (as a small trading country, the Netherlands is economically tightly interconnected with its neighbouring countries and dependent on the internal market) or argue that we are 'stronger together' on the world stage. Opponents mainly use cultural arguments (loss of identity, sovereignty) and point to the high costs of the EU. The average Dutch citizen sees the EU as something more or less unavoidable: they support membership because the Netherlands is a small country which cannot thrive on its own. A small (though electorally not negligible) group believe that the Netherlands would be better off outside the EU.

Opinions on the EU differ widely across the Dutch population, and especially between people with differing educational levels; people with a higher education level more often support the EU than lower-educated citizens. The gap between these two groups is also widening slightly. Young people are more often pro-European in their views than older people. Attitudes towards the EU are also more positive among people who are more self-assured, are less troubled by the multicultural society and globalisation and have more confidence that their opinions count politically. Electorally, the differences are considerable, with supporters of the populist right-wing PVV (Party for Freedom) and the Eurosceptic FvD (Forum for Democracy) parties being the most negative and those supporting the left-of-centre D66 (Democrats '66), GroenLinks (Green Left) and PvdA (Labour) the most positive.

Eurobarometer surveys and this new study have asked questions, in various ways, about themes of which respondents indicated that they should be high on the EU agenda. The choices made depend on the formulations used, but EU involvement in immigration/refugees, climate/environment and combating terrorism and crime consistently receive high levels of support. In this new study, countering wasting money in Brussels also emerges as a priority. Highly educated people and EU proponents more often want attention for climate issues, while lower-educated people and Eurosceptics more often demand attention for combating terrorism and countering waste. Controlling immigration from outside the EU (mainly refugees) has a high priority in all groups.

From the in-depth discussions on the themes citizens placed high on the EU agenda emerged the ideal image of the EU as a group of powerful Member States working together effectively towards common objectives and being able to address complex challenges. An important driver for those who support the EU is a desire for ‘peace and calm’, in other words safety and stability; there is a fear of unrest and uncertainty. This applies particularly to the issue of refugees/immigration; getting a grip on this problem is regarded as essential for the continued existence of the EU.

III. MAIN THEMES RAISED BY CITIZENS

When asked what they feel the priorities should be for the EU agenda, the Dutch respondents cite a number of topics:

1. Immigration from outside the EU/refugees.
2. Environment/climate.
3. Crime/safety/combating terrorism.
4. Reducing the costs of the EU and countering waste.

Themes where people would like to see little or no input from the EU are typically those relating to the welfare state (care, social security, pensions) and defence. People also believe that the EU should leave more scope for national identity and should focus on the main issues rather than dealing with side issues – there is an impression that the latter happens too frequently. The EU should also not consider further expansion; it should first ensure that it functions better.

IV. MAIN INTERROGATIONS/CONCERNS EXPRESSED BY CITIZENS

What are the concerns relating to the key topics cited above:

- Immigration from outside the EU/refugees. People place the theme of immigration and refugees high on the EU agenda because they see it as an urgent topic which affects them in their own lives. The refugee crisis has figured prominently in the news since 2015 and is seen as threatening. A large group of citizens feel that something important is at stake here: the arrival of large groups of refugees is undermining the well-being of people in the Netherlands. It is linked to pressure on the housing market, rising crime

and lack of safety, and the arrival of Muslims in particular makes people worried about the preservation of the Dutch identity. People believe this should be high on the EU agenda because it is a transnational problem which individual countries cannot solve on their own. Many feel that the distribution of refugees across different countries is unfair. Reference is also made to the heavy burden being borne by Southern Member States and the of some countries to respect standing agreements, most notably Hungary and Poland. There is a sense that the Netherlands performs well, but then the Dutch believe this about many issues.

- Climate/environment. This is an international theme and one that is important for the future, and should therefore be high on the EU agenda. It is an issue that needs to be tackled globally, and the EU is in a better position to participate and can achieve more at this level than individual Member States.
- Crime/safety/combating terrorism. People think these issues should be tackled at European level because of their importance (it is important to feel safe), because it is a current problem (people also often think in terms of the refugee question here), because crime does not stop at national borders and because there are good opportunities for more efficient cooperation in tackling cross-border crime (this is already working well, but could be even better).
- Lower EU costs/less waste. The costs of the EU must be reduced. In particular, many object to the monthly meetings of the European Parliament in Strasbourg. Other points of concern are the high costs of the EU bureaucracy, the unfair Dutch position as net-payer and the unfair distribution of resources (with wealthy countries paying for poorer countries).
- No more EU enlargement. The EU is already too big to operate effectively; further expansion would put pressure on the stability of the EU and would disadvantage wealthy countries such as the Netherlands. The EU should absolutely not be enlarged to include countries where democracy is under pressure, such as Turkey.

V. RECURRENT AND/OR INNOVATIVE CITIZENS' PROPOSALS

What people would like the EU to do on the themes that are important for them:

Immigration from outside the EU/refugees:

- A clear, shared vision and common policy, characterised among other things by common access criteria, harmonised reception facilities, uniform and rapid asylum procedures.
- A fair allocation formula and enforcement of agreements in this regard. People do not know precisely what a fair allocation formula would look like.
- Ensuring that refugees do not come to the EU, partly through preventive actions in the regions that people are fleeing, by providing support for people within the region, monitoring the EU borders more effectively (or even closing them), and screening refugees in their region of origin in order to prevent economic refugees coming to the EU. Respondents have high expectations of this measure, believing that if the EU ensures that problems are solved elsewhere, fewer refugees will come to Europe.

Climate/environment:

- A common vision based on joint agreements which will have a broader impact than the member states acting alone. That vision should focus among other things on encouraging alternative energy sources and countering pollution.
- Ensuring that all Member States stick to agreements made by rewarding desirable behaviour and discouraging/punishing undesirable behaviour.
- Support for the EU as more effective global player: stronger in negotiations, setting norms for more sustainable products etc.

Crime/safety/combating terrorism:

Cooperation in the international fight against crime; international cooperation by the police; protection against cyber attacks; a joint approach to combat the threat of terrorism.

Lower EU costs/less waste:

The system needs to be fairer (the Dutch feel that the Netherlands pays a disproportionately large contribution), more efficient/cheaper (managing the

money of citizens and Member States more effectively) and more effective (spending money on the right things, not on meetings, bureaucracy, moving back and forth between Brussels and Strasbourg).

VI. INNOVATIVE AND/OR REPRESENTATIVE QUOTES

Four single quotes and fragments from the focus groups are presented below. They are not representative for the discussions, but they illustrate some issues.

1. How the EU is too remote to mention a single personal positive experience:

“It’s just like electricity: you plug it in, it works, but you don’t know where it comes from. And you pay the bill.”

2. Sometimes bluntly expressed anger related to the immigration issue:

“I think it’s a total mess. I don’t feel safe in my own country. 80% of the prison population are people with a different culture or coloured; it drives me mad. I don’t think the Netherlands is the Netherlands any more. The Dutch are dying out. We’re seeing a population shift. Everyone is moving further and further away from the centre of cities for a quieter life, including the traffic and so on. There are just too many people. The cultures that come here are dominant, or at least they think they are; they want to force their views on us, and I’m radically opposed to that. ... Europe should close the borders, just like it used to be. There are lots of people who don’t say it, but I couldn’t care less about that. Call me antisocial, then.”

3. Why controlling immigration is such an important goal for the EU:

Moderator: “If the EU could develop more joint policy [on immigration] and could act in unity on this issue, what would be the gains?”

A: “In relation to this? Calm and certainty.”

B: “The credibility of the EU is at stake if it isn’t able to deal with this.”

C: “Europe is really just a massive peacekeeping project if they can’t sort this out”

4. Why tackling climate change is another important EU goal:

D: "Much more needs to be done; a bigger approach is needed. The Netherlands acting alone can't achieve anything.

E: "Yes, the Netherlands is just a grain of sand. When you see how big Europe is ...that wins.

F: "The EU should be setting an example in the world. If you start with a group of countries that have been associated with each other for years and do business with each other, and they can manage it, that could be the perfect example. ..."

VII. COMMENTS ON AND/OR EVALUATION OF THE EXPERIENCE

In our view, three basic needs emerge from respondents' answers to questions and discussions about the preferred EU agenda:

First, there is a need for fairness. There is a strong sense of unfairness: unfair distribution of refugees between countries; the Netherlands sticks to the rules while other countries do not; the Netherlands spends more on the climate; the Dutch contribution to the EU is disproportionately high; there is money for the EU and for refugees, but not to help the poor and elderly in the Netherlands. To increase the sense of fairness in Europe, it is important that (citizens see that) all countries are contributing to a solution, that this is done in a fair way and that agreements made are adhered to.

Second, there is a clear need for safety, calm and stability. People expect the EU to contribute to this by doing something about cross-border crime, ensuring that refugees do not end up in the criminal circuit, resolving the refugee question so that tensions relating to this issue are avoided, and preventing climate problems so that people in the Netherlands can continue to live in safety in the future. Immigration is seen as more urgent and a bigger threat than climate change. The need for safety and calm is very prominent in the discussions about refugees. However, it is also clear that the EU is not the only international source of international stability in the eyes of the citizens; it can also be other international for a such as Nato.

Third, and related to this, is a need for protection of important elements of life in Europe (culture, freedoms, prosperity).

In the focus group sessions we found a great deal of ambiguity and ambivalence. People talk about the EU both in terms of Brussels institutions and in terms of collaborating countries. People talk about 'more' and 'less' EU without making explicit what they mean by this. People want more European unity and strict rules which are enforced, but they also want a high degree of respect for individual national identity and autonomy. They want the EU to do more about big issues, but spend less. When talking about solutions to those big issues, people sometimes follow the arguments for 'more Europe', but it is likely that they are thinking more about the acceptance of hypothetical consequences for the duration of the dialogue, rather than expressing a genuine conviction. People sometimes also explicitly state that they do not believe that EU solutions will work. The preferences expressed in surveys and focus groups should therefore not be simply interpreted at face value as genuine (thought-through, experienced, robust) policy preferences.

I. OTHER (e.g. best practices on communication)

Three concluding remarks.

1. To improve the quality of the debate about what people expect from the EU it is important that, rather than simply inviting them to complete wish-lists which carry no cost, they are encouraged to consider the pros and cons of national and European policy options and to think through the consequences. However, the vast majority of citizens have very limited interest in and opportunity to do this. There is little point in submitting more specific questions about EU issues to the general public; the Eurobarometer survey is already often too specific (as well as too pro-EU biased). It would be more fruitful to submit more generally formulated dilemmas to respondents so that they can weigh up the costs and benefits of the different options.

2. The basic needs for fairness, safety and protection identified in our study could also provide a fruitful theme for further discussion about the EU agenda in the coming years. How can those basic needs be met more effectively by national and European policy? As far as Dutch citizens are

concerned at this point in time, controlling immigration is the biggest test case for legitimacy.

3. Knowledge about the EU by Dutch citizens is low, and there are many assumptions about the (excessively) large contribution that the Netherlands makes to the EU. It would be nice if people were better informed, including more testing of the assumptions and debate on these topics. Here again, however, the interest in this exercise will be very limited. There is a major challenge here, especially for the media. Impartiality, neutrality and diversity are of great importance here. The EU being the producer or funder of information probably makes that information suspect from the start.

This is an executive summary of:

Paul Dekker & Josje den Ridder, in collaboration with Adriaan Schout. 'What do the Dutch want from the European Union? An exploratory study using surveys, virtual dialogues and focus groups' (*Wat willen Nederlanders van de Europese Unie? Een verkenning met enquêtes, virtuele dialogen en focusgroepen*).

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Underlying reports on the online dialogue and focus groups:

- Leo Dijkema, Michiel van der Vlist & Jean-Philippe Kalthof, *Hoe kijkt het algemeen publiek aan tegen de EU?* ['What do the general public think about the EU?'], Rotterdam: Synthetron, October 2018.
- Saskia Tjepkema & Joeri Kabalt, *'Focus op de thema's die er echt toe doen'. Verwachtingen en wensen van Nederlanders ten aanzien van de Europese Unie.* ['Focus on the themes that really matter. Expectations and wishes of Dutch citizens regarding the European Union'], Utrecht: Kessels & Smit, October 2018.
- Miriam Winninghoff & Annelies Jansen, *Samen sterk, maar niet ten koste van Nederland! Focusgroepenonderzoek naar verwachtingen en wensen van burgers t.a.v. de toekomst van de EU* [Strong together, but not at the expense of the Netherlands! Focus group study of citizens' expectations and wishes concerning the future of the EU'], Amsterdam: Ferro explore, October 2018.