

DUTCH CITIZENS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE EU REPORT OF A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN THE NETHERLANDS

True Research

This Synthesis presents the results of a group discussion held in Amsterdam on 11 December 2013 on the subject of citizens' involvement in the European Union. It is part of a wider citizenship project managed by Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, with the support of national partners of the European Qualitative Network coordinated by OPTEM, on behalf of the European Commission.

Introduction

This report presents the results of a group discussion held in Amsterdam on 11 December 2013 on the subject of citizens' involvement in the European Union.

It is the Dutch section of a pan-European qualitative study involving 18 of the member states.

In each country the study was carried out by the national partner of the European qualitative network coordinated by optem: in the Netherlands by true research.

This study forms a part of a wider citizenship project managed by Notre Europe – Jacques Delors institute on behalf of the European commission.

BOX 1 ► Composition of the group of respondents

Gender

Women: 3

Men: 5

Age

20-34 years: 2

35-49 years: 4

50-60 years: 2

Social class

Lower-middle social class: 3 (professions of head of household: singer/disc jockey, maintenance sports park, supervisor daycare)

Higher-middle class: 5 (professions of head of household: scientist, executive, self-employed developing games, administration, advisor real estate)

Political opinion

The respondents were also recruited so that diverse political opinions were represented in the group.

Remark: it has to be mentioned that during recruitment it turned out that many citizens, especially

lower classes were not very involved in the European Union and thus reluctant to participate in the study.

This may have led to more positive attitudes than average towards the EU during the discussion.

1. Initial thoughts about the European union

1.1. Spontaneous reactions

- First spontaneous reactions on the European Union are lukewarm yet positive.
- The European Union is seen as **distant, but necessary** for Europe, trying to solve the problems that are there in every country by combining efforts and working together.
- One sees many advantages of the European Union, but finds it hard to mention all advantages very precisely. This as Europe is seen as distant and complex. The **ways decisions are taken are hardly known**. Furthermore as the Netherlands is considered to be small within the total European Union its influence is seen as limited. Also the fact that not all member states participate in all parts of the union is seen as confusing and diminishing the power of the EU.
"Making a union to solve problems."
"It is difficult to measure what it is really giving us. I would like to see that more clearly."
"England is not participating."
"Financially it is really horrible and very complex."
"It is a crisis, so the financial situation would have been as bad as now without the EU as well."
- The fact of trying to solve problems by coming to one common solution is also seen as part of the

problem. It is said that there are considerable differences between countries, both culturally as well as in terms of economic development, so finding one common accepted solution is almost impossible.

It is felt to be important to **keep the Dutch identity**.

Trying to solve economic problems by making common rules for everyone and having completely free migration and trade is seen as threatening and as risky.

"I have lived in the Netherlands for 14 years now, coming from Surinam, but by working hard i can develop myself and earn a living. Getting people here from other countries is just importing problems."

"It offers a lot of opportunities, but it is not right doing everything centrally; you might pull strong countries down. And at the same time not make the others better, by the fact that the good people from the less strong countries will leave their country."

"Countries might want to step out. Germany for example may not want to pay for the weaker countries. I do hope it will not happen, but i am afraid."

1.2. Positive and negative aspects

- Areas where cooperation in Europe is seen as relevant and working relatively well are **security** ("crime does not stop at the border"), **education and science** (education recognised in other countries, cross country cooperation, subsidies), **agriculture** (less than in the past all money to just one or two countries).
- Also the **euro** is mentioned. Where some years ago most comments on the euro were more negative, it now seems to be **accepted** and is seen as fact of life.
"I am used to it."
- Another negative aspect is the removal of the European parliament from Brussels to Strasbourg and vice versa and the money that is seen as wasted there.

1.3. Interest in Europe

Next to interest in Europe, citizens have **reservations** and find it difficult to judge how much good the EU has brought them.

"You see a lot of developments, but also more regulations and bureaucracy, so i can not say it is all positive, but i can also not say we are better off getting out."

2. Sources of information and knowledge on the EU

2.1. Sources mentioned

Most information about the EU comes from reading **papers** and watching **television**.

However one feels that it is impossible to know everything about Europe that one would like to know as it is **all too complicated**. Even within the Netherlands it is already impossible to follow what is happening. Only the topics that are in the news at that time are followed. One feels that one should look at different sources (different papers, different TV channels, media from other countries) to get a more or less objective picture of what is going on in Europe. (Comparison of) programmes of different political parties also are felt to be a good source of information on Europe and on the issues that are important in Europe.

Most single media are not seen as very trustworthy. It is also felt that one needs to have information from different sources to really understand what is going on. Information from the EU itself is also seen as less trustworthy as it is somewhat seen as propaganda and as heavily influenced by all the activities of lobbyists in Brussels.

There is so much information and there are so many rules and regulations that it is difficult to follow and know everything.

"Sometimes i see something from Brussels, but that is mainly when we have to pay or when we get money."

"To me it is not trustworthy at all. It is especially determined by what lobbyists from companies do. News always shows the positive aspects and not what is really behind it"

"I read a French paper every now and then."

"I read the volkskrant and NRC and watch also rtl news. That is a good balance. I also get information in my work from the Dutch government."

"When i go to bed or wake up, i check nu.nl on my mobile."

"When i am trying to find subsidies for my scientific work it is very hard to find. We need a specialised company to find that for us."

3. questions regarding the future of the EU

3.1. Future challenges

The main future challenges are related to the **economy**; managing the crisis, getting a good financial system, restoring stability and becoming, and being able to operate as, a real economic power in relation to the other blocs in the world.

With respect to the economic challenges one is feeling that this is something that should be left to specialists. It is too complex to fully understand so one has to give trust to the people in Brussels working on it. One has limited interest in getting to know much more of all the details.

However the opinion is shared that the Dutch government under pressure of the EU is working too hard on just saving instead of also investing.

All the information that is provided is either too complex or too difficult to find. There seems not to be clear understandable information that is available for everyone.

A second main challenge is regulating **migration** within the EU and asylum within Europe. Here higher classes point out that the migration leads to lower standards in the country of origin, while lower classes are more afraid of competition on the labour market. Also regulation of immigration from outside the EU is seen as important.

[**Note:** the importance of these two areas can also be seen in the election of the politician of the year 2013 in the Netherlands. The minister of finance Jeroen Dijsselbloem was elected politician of the year by journalists and came second among the general public. Geert wilders known for his anti-Europe and certainly anti migration attitude was elected politician of the year by the general public]

Other issues mentioned are a common army/ working together more closely on military issues and the environment.

"It is so big and complex. It is just like large corporations that split up to make it workable again."

"There is too much pressure on control. More involvement should be created."

"The message should be different and simplified. I don't want to hear any longer how bad things are in the Netherlands"

"Migration is the problem in Europe."

"They should include a good policy on asylum it has to stop at some point, otherwise everyone again tries to go to Lampedusa."

"Migration is the basis, if all good young people move away, you beat out the whole future. Look at how the elderly live in Romania, now that the youngsters left."

3.2. Information availability

One feels that there is quite a lot of information available, but that one really has to search for it. Not everything is available in Dutch media and sites from the EU that have been visited are judged as far too complex to find the information one is looking for.

4. Current means of expression of citizens' views

4.1. Getting oneself heard

One feels that **as an individual it is almost impossible to have yourself heard in the EU**. The EU as a whole is too big and complex to achieve that. Even within the Netherlands it is felt to be almost impossible to communicate to politicians/ members of parliament. This difficulty is increased by the fact that there is not much news on the EU and that the members of parliament are unknown. Most citizens never actively tried to have their voice heard in Europe.

The suggestion of someone to mail to a member of the European parliament was an eye-opener to others. It seemed a good way, however one did not know the members of the parliament, so would have difficulty finding e-mail addresses.

4.2. Preparedness to be involved

Even though it is felt difficult to be heard, all respondents indicate that **they would vote** in the elections for the European parliament.

It is felt **difficult to know who to choose** for in the European elections. One tends to choose on big items, where in local politics the motivation to choose a particular party are must more based on small issues.

"The influence of one person cannot be measured."

"I sometimes send emails to members of the Dutch parliament and always get an answer. That gives me the feeling of being heard."

"My vote for Europe is what i want for the country, not for Europe as a unity"

"I cannot judge the economy, so i don't use that when deciding. On a professional level i have more knowledge and take that into consideration."

5. Perceptions of new ways for citizens to get their voice heard

Suggestions to get heard

- Most people find it **difficult to come up with suggestions** how they best can be heard. However a number of good suggestions are made:
"Put someone from the street next to every lobbyist."
"Parties should work together more to be heard better."
"Hold referenda via the internet."
"Make people answer one question every morning."
"Recruit people from the street for different subjects."
"Put a large group together to have a debate."
"Develop an online community."
"Develop a real life game/training."

6. Assessment of several propositions for improving citizens' involvement

Evaluation of propositions

A. An information service on the functioning of the EU and EU policies, comprising an information office open for the public in every large city, a web site, and a service quickly answering any questions asked by telephone, mail or email.

The proposition is seen as consisting of **different parts**. The first part one distinguishes is an office, which by most citizens is not seen as very useful. One would have to go there for simple questions. Then there is a website, which requires again active searching by citizens and finally there is an answering service via online technology, which is seen as very useful.

Anyhow one would like to know that the EU will actively respond to questions.

"The group that has concrete questions on the EU is very small, so an office will not be useful."

"A website seems rather abstract. You really have to search."

"Asking questions electronically would be handy."

B. Debates to be organised in major media between average citizens and experts of EU issues on the directions taken by the EU.

One **doubts** if there would be interest to come to such debates. Furthermore it would have to be not EU experts, but members from the EU (commission or parliament) to give it real credibility.

"i think it might be useful."

"It has to be someone from Europe that comes to the work floor."

"I doubt if people would come voluntarily. The EU already is very distant. Better if you treat it like an opinion poll."

C. Opinion polls on the EU organised regularly in the whole of Europe, allowing citizens to know both what their fellow countrymen and what the citizens of the other countries think.

Opinion polls are seen as **very useful**. One assumes the EU already does polls regularly, but never publishes the results. Seeing the results, also from other countries would give information about the situation in the Netherlands as well as in other member states.

"Most opinion polls are useful."

"It shows everyone has his own opinion."

"Useful for us and for the European commission."

"You can learn from each other and from other countries."

D. The possibility, given several times per year, to meet with your members of the European parliament or other EU politicians in the vicinity of where you live.

The idea is met with some **scepticism**. It is appreciated to meet members of parliament, so one get to understand how the parliament operates. However one questions how efficient it is for the members of parliament. It is good to meet citizens, but will take too much time to visit the whole countries and/or other countries.

"I would like to know how it works from day to day and what the problems are."

"It will not be very useful for the members of parliament."

"It is only a tiny part of reality that they will see. Online college settings might be better to get in touch with much more people."

E. Consultations through the internet organised by the European commission whenever major decisions have to be taken in the EU, open to all citizens.

The idea as such is seen as **positive**, but it is felt that there will **not be much interest** as the distance on a local or national level already is very big. It is said to be more useful if in the consultation national politicians are involved also.

"Good idea to have a forum on specific subjects, for instance in the area of care."

"It might be a start to tighten the gap between citizens and politic."

F. Similar consultations, organised by our national government.

Consultations organised by the Dutch government are seen as they **useful** as they think it will involve Dutch politicians and as the Dutch politicians then will have the opportunity of voicing the opinions of the general public in the EU.

Such a consultation would also diminish the gap between citizens and national politics, as a first step in diminishing the distance towards Europe.

"Dutch members of parliament that collect information to use in European parliament and to tell our problems."

"Too indirect. Better organise a forum with members of parliament. You already see those on LinkedIn."

G. an interactive service using the internet and social networks, to collect on a permanent basis citizens' views, wishes or criticisms on directions taken by the EU.

This proposition is **not seen as very new**. It is understood to be web scraping what already commonly is done by large corporations. One obviously expects the EU to already do this. For oneself one does not see it as very beneficial, for the EU it will be.

"This is just searching the web on key words."

H. Information campaigns to be developed much more actively than in past years, in order to encourage citizens to involve themselves in the debates that are to take place and to take

part in the coming election of members of the European parliament next spring.

Information campaigns are seen as **somewhat old fashioned and abstract**, other media are more useful to really have an interactive communication and giving a clear image.

"No this does not really help me."

Overall evaluation

Making their top three at the end of the discussion citizens saw web scraping (proposition g) as most useful for the EU as it would feedback also their own information to the EU.

The other propositions that were evaluated as positive and useful were the information service (a) where questions would be answered online or via email, meetings with members of parliament (d) and consultations by the own government (f)

APPENDIX - DISCUSSION GUIDE

Checklist ten behoeve van groepen

Onderzoeksdatum: 11 December 2013

Projectnummer: 13-1103

Locatie: inview, Amsterdam

Introductie: 3'

- Welkom
- Doel van het onderzoek: europa
- 2 of 3 in voorjaar weekend naar brussel
- Individuele mening, geen goede/foute antwoorden e.d.
- Uitleg apparatuur en notulist
- Introductie:
 - Voornaam, leeftijd, beroep, samenstelling van huishouden

Thema 1: 10'

Ik wil het vandaag graag hebben over de Europese unie.

Als we praten over de Europese unie wat is dan het eerste dat bij jullie opkomt?

- Spontane reacties
- Vraag door naar:
 - Soort van onderwerpen die men spontaan noemt over de eu
 - Positieve en negatieve aspecten in relatie tot de eu
 - Mate van interesse en betrokkenheid van de respondenten bij onderwerpen die met de eu te maken hebben

Thema 2: 10'

Als we nu eens praten over wat jullie weten en denken over de eu: waar komen die kennis en gedachten vandaan? Wat zijn de bronnen waar jullie informatie of meningen vandaan komen – waarbij ik bij bronnen echt bronnen in de breedste zin van het woord bedoel, dus zowel officiële bronnen als informele gesprekken met vrienden of andere mensen

- Spontane reacties
- Vraag door naar:
 - Mate van verscheidenheid van de genoemde bronnen
 - Aard van verkregen informatie van elke bron
 - Interesse en geloofwaardigheid van elke bron

Thema 3: 15'

Als we nu eens wat meer specifiek praten over de toekomst van de Europese unie en de vragen die jullie jezelf misschien stellen daarover.

Er zijn waarschijnlijk bepaalde aspecten die jullie belangrijk vinden en waarvan jullie meer willen weten en die jullie beter willen begrijpen over hoe de eu werkt en welke richting ze uitgaat aangezien jullie mogelijk niet alle informatie krijgen die jullie willen van de bronnen die jullie eerder hebben genoemd. Over welke aspecten zouden jullie in het bijzonder meer willen weten?

- Spontane reacties
- Vraag door naar:
 - Algemene indruk of men denkt dat men een goede of slechte mate van kennis heeft over deze issues
 - Beeld van de grootste uitdagingen voor de eu in de komende jaren
 - Over welke onderwerpen in het bijzonder zouden jullie meer willen horen en begrijpen
 - In hoeverre en waarin is de informatie over deze onderwerpen die op dit moment beschikbaar is onvoldoende

Thema 4: 15'

Als burger heb je natuurlijk het recht om je mening te geven en om gehoord te worden over de toekomstige richting die de eu uit moet gaan – om die richting goed te keuren of af te keuren of voor iedere andere reden. Hoe kunnen jullie dat vandaag de dag doen?

- Spontane reacties
- Vraag door:
 - Gemeend gemak of moeilijkheid om je mening te geven en om gehoord te worden over eu gerelateerde issues – hoe dan
 - Redenen waarom men denkt dat het moeilijk is
 - Bepaalde onderwerpen waarover men in het bijzonder zijn mening zou willen geven en zou willen worden gehoord als burger; verwachtingen in dat opzicht

Thema 5: 15'

Je kan aan verschillende manieren denken waarop Europese burgers graag gehoord zouden willen worden door de eu. Laten we eens proberen te denken aan alle mogelijke manieren daartoe, laat jullie creativiteit maar de vrije loop, zonder direct al ideeën af te schieten zelfs als we niet weten hoe dat in de praktijk zou moeten worden geïmplementeerd. Wat kunnen jullie je voorstellen

- Spontane reacties
- Stimuleer de creativiteit van de groep, door de respondenten aan te moedigen om van idee naar idee te springen

Thema 6: 25'

Ik laat nu een aantal ideeën horen van mogelijkheden die kunnen worden geïmplementeerd om burgers beter gehoord te laten zijn met betrekking tot onderwerpen die over de eu gaan, die eerder zijn aangedragen. Ik wil graag weten wat jullie van ieder van de mogelijkheden vinden. Laat de respondenten ieder voor zich reageren op iedere mogelijkheid, vraag naar de mate waarin het interessant is en de redenen daarvoor

Afsluiting

Nogmaals heel erg dank dat jullie aan deze discussie hebben willen meedoen. Als er naar aanleiding van deze discussie nog ideeën of suggesties opkomen, laat het me dan alsjeblieft weten. Ik zal dan zorgen dat het op de juiste plaats terecht komt.

Geef mail adres erik@true-research.nl

- A.** Een informatie dienst over het functioneren van de eu en eu beleid, die bestaat uit een kantoor voor het publiek in iedere grote stad, een website en een dienst die snel alle vragen beantwoordt via telefoon, post of email
- B.** Debatten over de richting die de eu uitgaat in belangrijke media tussen gewone burgers en experts over eu zaken
- C.** Opinie peilingen over de eu die regelmatig in de hele eu worden gehouden, zodat burgers weten wat burgers uit nederland en uit andere eu landen denken
- D.** De mogelijkheid om enkele malen per jaar een ontmoeting te hebben met leden van het europese parlement uit nederland en andere eu landen in de buurt van waar je woont
- E.** Raadplegingen via internet die worden georganiseerd door de europese commissie wanneer belangrijke besluiten moeten worden genomen in de eu, waaraan alle burgers mee kunnen doen
- F.** Soortgelijke raadplegingen, maar dan georganiseerd door de nederlandse overheid
- G.** Een interactieve dienst die internet en sociale netwerken gebruikt, om op een permanente basis de meningen, wensen en punten van kritiek van burgers te verzamelen over de keuzes die door de eu worden gemaakt
- H.** Het veel meer actief dan in de afgelopen jaren ontwikkelen van informatiecampagnes, om burgers aan te moedigen om zelf deel te nemen aan debatten die plaats gaan vinden en om deel te nemen aan de verkiezingen voor leden van het europese parlement in het komende voorjaar

WHAT DO CITIZENS THINK THE FUTURE CHALLENGES OF THE EU ARE?

Virginie Timmerman, *Synthesis*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, December 2014

HOW WOULD CITIZENS LIKE TO COMMUNICATE WITH THE EUROPEAN UNION?

Virginie Timmerman and Daniel Debomy, *Synthesis*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, December 2014

HOW DOES THE EUROPEAN UNION COMMUNICATE WITH CITIZENS?

Virginie Timmerman and Daniel Debomy, *Synthesis*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, November 2014

HOW DO CITIZENS SEE THE EUROPEAN UNION?

Virginie Timmerman, *Synthesis*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, November 2014

▶ HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH THE EU? THE OPINION OF EUROPEAN CITIZENS

Video, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, November 2014

CITIZENS FACING "BRUSSELS' EUROPE"

Virginie Timmerman, *Synthesis*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, August 2014

EUROPEAN CITIZENS IN BRUSSELS: WHAT MESSAGES?

Virginie Timmerman, *Synthesis*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, August 2014

THE INVOLVEMENT OF EU CITIZENS IN THE EUROPEAN PROJECT

Daniel Debomy, *Synthesis*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, July 2014

▶ WHAT THE FRENCH TOLD US ABOUT GLOBALISATION

Video, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, May 2014

▶ WHAT THE FRENCH TOLD US ABOUT EURO

Video, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, May 2014

▶ WHAT THE FRENCH TOLD US ABOUT THE EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY

Video, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, May 2014

▶ WHAT THE FRENCH TOLD US ABOUT THE EMPLOYEMENT IN THE EU

Video, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, May 2014

EU NO, EURO YES? EUROPEAN PUBLIC OPINIONS FACING THE CRISIS (2007-2012)

Daniel Debomy, *Policy Paper No. 90*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, March 2013

DO THE EUROPEANS STILL BELIEVE IN THE EU?

Daniel Debomy, *Studies & Reports No. 91*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, June 2012

MIGRANTS – EUROPEAN STORIES

Frédéric Praud, Florence Brêthes, Hamed Borsali and Kiel, *Comics*, Paroles d'hommes et de femmes / Notre Europe, May 2012

THE CITIZENS OF EUROPE AND THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE CURRENT CRISIS

Daniel Debomy, *Policy Paper No. 47*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute / Fondation Jean Jaurès, November 2011

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