

## Integration vs Contestation? Belgian Perspectives on the Future of Europe

The [Future of Europe](#) study conducted by Chatham House across different EU member states offers revealing insights on the splits both within and between elites and the general public in their attitudes towards the EU. When zooming in on the Belgian dataset, these divides are loud and clear. The Belgian general public is considerably less enthusiastic about the EU than the average of European elites. Moreover, both elite and public opinion display deep internal splits.

Yet when [comparing Belgian data](#) to those from other member states, one also encounters surprising similarities, suggesting strong commonalities across the European continent even when cleavages within societies seem pervasive. In that sense, Belgians remain true Europeans: somewhat split internally, yet representative of wider European trends and convinced that the EU has considerable room for improvement.

If politics is about emotion, it is worth noting that the Belgian public displays much more negative feelings about the EU than the elites. The emotions that most frequently spring to mind among the general population are 'pessimistic' (48%) and 'disgusted' (35%): high scores that put average Belgians at the very unhappy end of the European spectrum. On the opposite end of the spectrum, European elites feel mostly 'positive' and 'confident' about the EU.

These results corroborate the answers elites and the general public provide to the question on the perceived benefits the EU. Whereas European elites overwhelmingly agree that they have benefited from EU membership, this support drops sharply amongst the Belgian public: no less than 47% strongly disagree. As such, the EU continues to be perceived as an elite-driven project that benefits some parts of society much more than others.

When it comes to European policies and achievements, the Belgian public puts considerable stock in the single currency. While most elites may believe peace on the European continent to be at the core of the Union, it is the euro that wins the general appreciation of the Belgian public. In this regard, Belgium – together with France – stand out as the only two countries who regard the single currency as the EU's greatest achievement.

Yet when it comes to the greatest failure of the EU, the Belgian public clearly reflects the European mainstream view in which mass immigration and the refugee crisis top the list of public concerns. Moreover, Belgians view the debate on freedom of movement very much through a regional lens. They seem quite at ease with citizens from western Europe living in Belgium, but such support is more limited when it concerns citizens from eastern EU member states. Moreover, over half of the Belgian public feels decidedly negative about refugees and asylum seekers: even more so than in Hungary or indeed any other country in the survey.

Similar public concerns can be observed in the debate about the architecture of the EU. The Belgian public is convinced that EU enlargement has gone too far and is opposed to further candidate states such as Turkey joining the club. In fact, Belgian citizens are considerably

more skeptical about enlargement than national publics in every other country save France. Yet when it comes to Brexit – enlargement in reverse – the Belgian public largely sees this development as weakening the EU. At the same time, the expectation that other member states may leave the Union is relatively high (59%), as is the case in most other countries. Also noteworthy is the fact that public support for shifting more policy competences to the European level is lukewarm at best: 26% of those surveyed in Belgium support giving the EU more powers, whereas 44% oppose this proposal and another 30% sit on the fence.

The most curious aspects of the survey undoubtedly concern cultural values. Most striking is the fact that the death penalty is considered acceptable to more than half of the Belgian public – similar to France, the UK, Hungary and Poland. Furthermore, a large majority of the Belgian public (64%) would support a stop on immigration from Muslim countries. In this regard the Belgian public is closer to those of Austria, Hungary and Poland than to Germany or the UK.

Yet on other cultural themes (such as same sex marriage) the Belgian public is much more at the liberal forefront and displaying a broad societal consensus. The main take-away from these data may be that even when societies are internally divided, many European similarities can be identified, albeit with at different degrees and with regional variation.

The Belgian results from this study are sobering. They carry relevance for Belgian policy-makers as well as for European elites. Even in a country that is traditionally considered very pro-European, enthusiasm for carrying integration forward can hardly be called widespread. [Others have already argued](#) that the traditional pro-European consensus among political parties in Belgium has effectively splintered. As such, those who do not want to see the European project fail would do well to avoid pursuing policies that prompt further societal polarization.

Belgium seems to be something of a microcosm of Europe as a whole. Comparing survey results across member states suggests that a more cautious approach towards immigration and freedom of movement may help heal the dangerous rifts that have opened up in European societies. Neither policies, institutional architecture or the division of policy competences are ever set in stone.

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