

EU CONSTITUTION FEATURES LOW ON CITIZENS' LIST OF BENEFITS FOR EUROPE

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Not many European considers a common EU constitution helpful for the future of the European Union (Photo: EUobserver.com)

A European constitution is low among the issues EU citizens think would be helpful for the future of Europe, according to a new poll published on Friday (5 May).

In a special eurobarometer survey on the "future of Europe", a constitution comes in third out a list of six with 25 percent of Europeans thinking it would be helpful.

Belgians show the most faith in an EU constitution being beneficial for Europe at 36 percent while Estonians and Latvians are the least inclined to believe this (12%).

In France and the Netherlands, the two countries that rejected the EU constitution last year - prompting the whole new debate about where the bloc should be heading - 29 percent and 32 percent respectively think a common constitution would be helpful.

In the UK, 17 percent sees a constitution as helpful closely followed by Poland (15%) while Germany (32%) and Italy (28%) are more supportive of a common text.

Generally citizens from old member states put the constitution higher on their list of what would be helpful for the future of Europe (27%) than those in the ten new member states (16%).

By contrast, over half of the 25,000 polled (51%) believe the "most helpful thing" for Europe to succeed would be comparable living standards, followed by the introduction of the euro in all member states (26%).

Some 22 percent chose a common language as being the most helpful criterion for Europe.

Europeans are particularly concerned about social and economic issues with almost half considering globalisation a threat to employment.

While most people praise peace among the member states (60%) and free movement (56%) as the EU's greatest achievements, the bloc is not seen as performing well in curbing unemployment which is the single most crucial issue for Europeans.

"The EU is expected to harness globalisation, bring solutions in terms of peace, democracy, living standards as well as research, innovation and economic performance," said EU communications commissioner Margot Wallstrom in a statement.

"This should be the foundation of the EU policy agenda, which will help reinvent and renew the EU ahead of its 50th anniversary," she added.

The social and economic sentiment is also portrayed in opinions about what the EU should focus on in future.

A "European social welfare system" would be a key element to strengthen people's feeling "about being a European citizen" for 32 percent respondents, with six in ten citizens favouring harmonization of the

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bloc's welfare systems, mainly in central and eastern Europe, such as Poland (86%), Latvia (82%) and Hungary (81%).

On the other hand, several western European countries feature as the most pessimistic on globalisation with 72 percent of the French and Greeks viewing it as a "threat," followed by Belgians (64%) and Germans (59%).

Although the fear of globalisation is associated with competition from low labour cost countries - highlighted as key outcomes of the latest EU's enlargement - a majority of Europeans (55%) still consider the bloc's expansion as "something positive."

Individual differences among member states, however, show that only 40 percent of Austrians and 42 percent of French believe that enlargement is positive with old member state citizens generally being less enthusiastic at 53 percent than new member state citizens (69%).

Meanwhile, 63 percent of respondents fear that further enlargement will increase problems on their national job market and only a minority (34%) believe that product prices fell due to the EU's expansion. The eurobarometer survey also shows a drop in support for EU membership in Latvia, Austria and the UK.

According to the poll almost one in two Europeans (49%) think their country's membership in the EU is "a good thing," with Luxembourg (71%), the Netherlands (71%) and Ireland (68%) featuring as the greatest EU enthusiasts.

Spain, Denmark, Belgium, Slovakia, Germany, Lithuania, Poland and Greece are also above the average rate, while Finland (36%), the UK (33%), Austria (31%) and Latvia (29%) stand at the bottom of the table.

France and the Netherlands feature with contrasting scores: 44 percent and 71 percent respectively. The poll has also revealed that citizens view the union as modern and democratic (67%), but almost half of the respondents think it is technocratic (49%) and inefficient (43%).