



Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau

# Dutch citizens' expectations and perceptions of the European Union



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## 1. Introduction: public opinion research on the European Union (EU) for the EU-wide citizens' consultations

The Conference on the Future of Europe started on 9 May 2021.<sup>1</sup> The Conference, which lasts until spring 2022, is a wide-ranging consultation exercise which enables EU citizens to participate in a dialogue focusing on the challenges and priorities for the European Union. The Conference is a joint initiative of the European Parliament, the European Council and the European Commission.<sup>2</sup> The citizens' consultations take place partly at EU and at national level. The citizens' consultations at EU level are organized, for example via the European Citizens' Panels and a specially created website on which people can debate the future of the EU.<sup>3</sup> At national level, they take place through activities and citizen consultations being developed within the various member states, both by civil-society organisations and national governments.

The outcomes of the European and national citizen consultations will be discussed in the Conference Plenary session.<sup>4</sup> The Plenary session is organised around ten topics stemming from the European Commission's Strategic Agenda 2019-2024.<sup>5</sup> They are:

1. Climate change and the environment
2. Health
3. A stronger economy, social justice and jobs
4. EU in the world
5. Values and rights, rule of law, security
6. Digital transformation
7. European democracy
8. Migration
9. Education, youth, culture and sport
10. Other ideas

In the light of this Conference, the Dutch government has taken the initiative to organise a series of citizens' dialogues which enable members of the public to join in the discussion about the future of the EU in relation to the above ten topics.<sup>6</sup> The government has also asked the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) to provide access to its knowledge about what Dutch citizens want from the EU.<sup>7</sup> That is the purpose of this memorandum.

### Memorandum based on existing SCP research on what Dutch citizens want from the EU

This memorandum is based on existing SCP research on Dutch public opinion about the EU. A round of citizens' consultations about the future of the EU was also held in 2018.<sup>8</sup> As part of this EU-wide public consultation exercise in 2018, SCP was asked by the government to carry out a study of the

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<sup>1</sup> TK (2020/2021).

<sup>2</sup> EK (2020/2021).

<sup>3</sup> See <https://futureu.europa.eu/>.

<sup>4</sup> See EK (2020/2021) (in Dutch) for details of the organisation of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

A Conference Plenary will be held at least once every six months to discuss the recommendations emanating from the national and European citizen consultations. As well as representatives of the EU institutions, representatives of the national parliaments will also participate on an equal footing. Citizens, the European Committee of the Regions, the Economic and Social Committee, social partners and civil-society organisations will also be represented. The Executive Board will compile and publish the conclusions of the Plenary.

<sup>5</sup> See European Council (2019).

<sup>6</sup> For more information, see <https://www.kijkopeuropa.nl/>.

<sup>7</sup> TK (2020/2021).

<sup>8</sup> European Commission (2019).

Dutch public opinion on the EU and the EU agenda for the near term. The research consisted of an analysis of existing datasets on public opinion about the EU, new quantitative research among 1,000 Dutch citizens, an online dialogue with 300 participants focusing on the topics to which they believe the EU should devote more and less attention, and eight focus groups in which that substantive agenda was discussed.<sup>9</sup> The findings of this research were sent to the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs in October 2018. The Ministry subsequently distributed those findings to the government, Parliament and the European Commission. Prior to the European Parliamentary elections on 23 May 2019, SCP published the research findings in the report ‘What do the Dutch want from the European Union?’ (*Wat willen Nederlanders van de Europese Unie?*).<sup>10</sup>

We believe that the findings set out in that report about what citizens want from the EU are still relevant for the current round of citizen consultations – in the first place, because attitudes and opinions towards the EU are relatively stable: the picture we painted of the public opinion on the EU in 2018 does not differ substantially from earlier SCP studies carried out in the period 2003–2009.<sup>11</sup> To test the assumption that attitudes have remained stable – including during the coronavirus crisis – in the appendix to this memorandum we explore to what extent Dutch public opinion about the EU has changed since the report was published in 2019 (Appendix A is available only in Dutch). The main conclusion in the appendix is that there are no indications that public opinion about the EU in the last two years has been essentially different from the period prior to that. A second reason for believing that the findings from 2019 are still relevant for the present round of citizens’ consultations is that the picture of Dutch public opinion about the EU presented at that time, with all its divisions, ambiguity and contradictions, can help in shaping and interpreting the outcomes of the new round of citizens’ consultations.

To supplement the 2019 report, we also present the main findings from other recent SCP studies of Dutch public opinion about the EU and international issues, such as ‘Dealing with the big wide world’) *Dealen met de grote wereld*)<sup>12</sup> and ‘Citizens’ Outlook Barometer’ (Continu Onderzoek Burgerperspectieven (COB)).<sup>13</sup> We do this in order to try and provide an insight into how Dutch citizens view the EU and European cooperation in general, and in particular the specific policy domains which the EU wishes to place at the heart of the citizens’ conference. This memorandum is a descriptive summary of existing research on public opinion towards the EU.<sup>14</sup> It is intended to serve as input for the national citizen consultations. It makes no pretence to study the substance of all ten topics in detail.

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<sup>9</sup> The full report *Wat willen Nederlanders van de Europese Unie?* (Dekker & Den Ridder 2019), the research accountability statement and reports of the online dialogue and focus groups can be consulted (in Dutch) at <https://www.scp.nl/publicaties/publicaties/2019/05/17/wat-willen-nederlanders-van-de-europese-unie>.

<sup>10</sup> Dekker & Den Ridder (2019).

<sup>11</sup> At that time SCP, together with the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (CPB) published an annual report on exploratory studies focusing on Europe (*Europese verkenningen*). The publications (in Dutch) are available from the SCP archive site and the CPB website.

<sup>12</sup> Dekker (2020).

<sup>13</sup> COB 2020|1 looked in more detail at public opinion on the EU, while COB 2021|2 contains the most recent data on support for EU membership. The COB bulletins can be consulted (in Dutch) at <https://www.scp.nl/publicaties?refwoord=kwartaalbericht&startdatum=&einddatum=&type=Monitor>.

<sup>14</sup> This memorandum incorporates suggestions from Adriaan Schout, senior research fellow at the Clingendael Institute and professor of an endowed chair in European Public Administration at the Faculty of Management Science at Radboud University; and Theresa Kuhn, associate professor at the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences at the University of Amsterdam. We would like to thank both for their input.

## Structure of this memorandum

In section 2 we describe how citizens regard Dutch membership of the EU. We also explore two characteristics of Dutch public opinion about the EU, namely divisions between groups of citizens regarding further European cooperation and the ambivalence of people's attitudes towards the EU. It is not something that tends to occupy most people's minds on a daily basis, and public opinion about the EU is characterised by doubts, nuances and inconsistencies. In section 3 we discuss citizens' wishes and expectations with regard to the ten topics chosen as the focus for debate in this round of citizens' consultations. We discuss which are the topics where citizens expect a lot or a little from the EU, and what citizens' underlying (basic) expectations of the EU are. We then look at each of the ten topics in order to ascertain what aspects of them figure in Dutch public opinion and what people expect from the EU in relation to them. One item which is missing from the list of predetermined topics – and one which is important for Dutch citizens – concerns the costs of the EU; we also explore that topic in section 3. We discuss our main findings in section 4, considering what those findings could signify for the citizens' consultations on the future of the EU and highlighting the gaps in knowledge about public opinion towards the EU.

## 2. How do the Dutch see the EU?

Before discussing the substance of what Dutch citizens want and expect from the EU in section 3, here we first discuss more general opinions and attitudes towards the EU in general. We believe it is essential to view citizens' opinions and attitudes in the context of that broader public opinion about EU membership. To simplify, public opinion shows that the majority of Dutch citizens support EU membership, but are not unequivocally positive about the EU. Many see Dutch EU membership as unavoidable. We explore this in more detail below and then examine two features of Dutch public opinion about the EU, namely the differences between groups of citizens and the ambivalences and contradictions in individuals' opinions. At the end of the section, we look at three basic expectations that citizens have of the EU.

### 2.1. Support for EU membership, but not unequivocally positive

Dutch public opinion about the European Union is related to public opinion about globalisation in a broad sense. According to research, a large majority of Dutch citizens take a fairly positive stance on globalisation: the concept is not strongly rejected, and there is also no evidence of growing rejection.<sup>15</sup>

Studies reveal broad support for EU membership, with the number of people who regard EU membership as a good thing or as beneficial (for the Netherlands) outweighing the number who do not support membership.<sup>16</sup> Supporters of EU membership mainly cite economic motives: the Netherlands is a small trading nation, and these citizens believe it cannot stand alone on the world stage. They believe that EU membership makes the export and import of goods easier and therefore

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<sup>15</sup> See table A.1 in the appendix on the recent public opinion about globalisation (source COB 2008/1–2020/2). See also Table 2.1 in Boonstoppe (2020a: 28). 55% of Dutch respondents have a positive image of 'globalisation', and 75% agree with the statement: 'Globalisation is an opportunity for economic growth' (source: Eurobarometer 88.1 (autumn 2017) and 89.1 (spring 2018)).

<sup>16</sup> See figure A.1 and table A.2 in the appendix on Dutch opinions about EU membership (source: EB winter 2020 and CV 1996–2018); see Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 34–36).

contributes to national prosperity.<sup>17</sup> Supporters believe that the ability to join forces with other European countries economically and (geo)politically is advantageous for the Netherlands: ‘together you are stronger’.<sup>18</sup>

People who think Dutch EU membership is not a good idea mainly believe that the EU contributes to the loss of national sovereignty, or that the EU costs too much.<sup>19</sup> Some feel that the Dutch contribution to the EU is too high. Others think the Netherlands unfairly has to bear the financial consequences of policies in other EU countries.<sup>20</sup> Some people also think that living in the Netherlands has become more expensive since the introduction of the euro.

These responses do not come only from opponents of EU membership who are critical about the EU; supporters also have criticisms.<sup>21</sup> For example, a majority believe that the Netherlands has handed over too much power to the EU.<sup>22</sup> The average affinity with the EU is low in the Netherlands.<sup>23</sup> Satisfaction with European democracy,<sup>24</sup> politics<sup>25</sup> and trust in the EU<sup>26</sup> are low on average compared with satisfaction with Dutch democracy and trust in national politics.

The group who believe that the Netherlands would be better off outside the EU or who support a ‘Nexit’ is much smaller than the group who wishes to remain. A large majority says that they would vote in favour of remaining in the EU in an exit referendum.<sup>27</sup> Those supporting ‘Nexit’ are a minority,<sup>28</sup> but if all members of that minority were to vote for the same party at a general election, that party would potentially be a significant factor in the current political context.

As we shall see later, Dutch public opinion about the EU is characterised by a fair degree of division, doubt and ambiguity. However, if we were to summarise that opinion in a single sentence, it would be that many Dutch citizens see the EU as something unavoidable.<sup>29</sup> While a majority of Dutch citizens support EU membership, that support does not always appear to stem from a firm conviction about the European project, but rather from a realisation that the Netherlands cannot manage without the European Union. Many regard EU membership as necessary for a small trading nation like the Netherlands, but at the same time some people also feel powerless about this. Public opinion about the EU comes down to a comparison between the benefits that people perceive from the current EU membership and the benefits that people expect from an alternative, i.e. the

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<sup>17</sup> Den Ridder et al. (2015: 41), based on open responses to three statements in the COB survey (‘Dutch membership of the EU is a good thing’; ‘The Netherlands has handed too much power to the EU’; ‘It would be better if the Netherlands left the EU’) and group discussions in Amsterdam and Nijmegen in April 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Den Ridder et al. (2015: 41).

<sup>19</sup> Paraphrased from the open responses by survey respondents and from the focus groups; see Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 104). Also based on support for statements in the online dialogue on EU involvement, see Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 95). The economic and cultural motives for Euroscepticism are also found in other research (e.g. Hobolt & De Vries (2016)).

<sup>20</sup> Paraphrased from respondents’ answers in focus groups; see Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 105).

<sup>21</sup> Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 118).

<sup>22</sup> See table A.1 in the appendix for key figures concerning the statement ‘Politicians in The Hague have handed over too much power to Europe’ (source: COB 2008/1–2020/2).

<sup>23</sup> See Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 20) and table A.3 in the appendix for key figures on the affinity with one’s own country and with Europe (source: ESS 2016/17, ESS 2018/19); table A.4 on perceived attachment to municipality, country, EU and Europe (source: EB 2018–2020 winter); and table A.5 on people’s feelings of attachment to their own country and to the EU (source: EB 2020 summer and winter).

<sup>24</sup> See table A.6 in the appendix for key figures on satisfaction with Dutch and European democracy (source: EC (EB 2018–2020 winter)).

<sup>25</sup> See figure A.2 in the appendix for key figures on satisfaction with Dutch and European politics and the administration (source: COB 2008/1–2021/2).

<sup>26</sup> See table A.7 (source: ESS 2016/17 and ESS 2018/19) and figure A.3 (source: EB 1997–2020 winter) in the appendix for key figures on trust in the European Union and in the European Parliament, respectively.

<sup>27</sup> See table A.8 in the appendix on voting intentions if there were a referendum on EU membership in 2016/17 and 2018/19 (source: ESS).

<sup>28</sup> See table A.9 in the appendix on opinions about leaving the EU (source: COB 2008/1–2020/1) and figure A.4 in the appendix on the statement ‘The Netherlands would be better off outside the EU’ (source: EB 2012 autumn–2020 winter).

<sup>29</sup> See Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 6) and Den Ridder et al. (2015: 39).



Netherlands outside the EU.<sup>30</sup> In the Netherlands (and other north-western member states), this judgement more often weighs in favour of people's own country: they have more trust in their national institutions, rules and policies than in European institutions and European policy.<sup>31</sup> This memorandum – and other research – shows that opinions about the EU are reasonably stable, but we know little about (trends in) the intensity of those feelings.

#### *Opinions on the EU during the coronavirus crisis not essentially different from before the crisis*

The coronavirus outbreak which spread around the world in early 2020 exposed the global interconnectivity and interdependence more than ever before. The EU plays a role in combating the pandemic, both with policy to combat the virus (e.g. the temporary closure of the EU's external borders and the EU-wide vaccination programme<sup>32</sup>) and with its economic recovery policy, such as the Next Generation EU programme.<sup>33</sup>

The Covid crisis temporarily had a major influence on the public mood and public opinion in the Netherlands: at the start of the crisis, trust in politics rose sharply, expectations regarding the economic outlook deteriorated and people's trust in each other increased compared with before the Covid crisis.<sup>34</sup> The coronavirus crisis could also have influenced opinions about the EU. They could have turned more positive, in line with the increased trust in national politics, or because people have become more aware of the Netherlands' international interconnectivity and interdependence. But public opinion about the EU could also have become more negative, because the strong national action by individual governments could have caused citizens to conclude that the EU was less needed. We know from earlier crises – such as the economic crisis and the refugee crisis – that in times of crisis people expect the EU to offer solutions.<sup>35</sup> Data from Eurobarometer reveal that, in the summer and winter of 2020, Dutch citizens were much less satisfied with the European response to the coronavirus crisis than with the national response.<sup>36</sup> Although the Eurobarometer data do not make clear why this was the case, it is clear that people did not think that the EU had the ability to resolve the crisis. That too could have had a negative impact on opinions about the EU.

However, the data in the appendix to this memorandum show that, for the time being, neither of these expectations has come to pass. Based on current information, public opinion towards the EU during the coronavirus crisis was not materially different from previously. Support for EU membership was relatively high before the outbreak of the pandemic in early 2020 compared with the period 2008-2013, and has not changed substantially since the start of the coronavirus crisis.<sup>37</sup> Opinions on EU expansion and further integration also did not change substantially during the crisis.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> De Vries (2018, 2020: 12).

<sup>31</sup> See table A.6 in the appendix for key figures on satisfaction with Dutch and European democracy (source: EB 2018-2020 winter) and figure A.2 in the appendix for key figures on satisfaction with Dutch and European politics and administration (source: COB 2008/1-2021/2).

<sup>32</sup> European Commission (2020a).

<sup>33</sup> European Commission (2020b).

<sup>34</sup> See e.g. Dekker et al. (2020).

<sup>35</sup> Support for the EU was lower during the economic crisis and during the refugee crisis; see e.g. Burgerperspectieven 2020/1 (Dekker & Den Ridder 2020: 44).

<sup>36</sup> See table A.10 in the appendix on satisfaction with the national and European approach to the coronavirus (source: EB 2020 summer and winter).

<sup>37</sup> See figure A.1 in the appendix on support for Dutch EU membership (source: EB winter 2020); and table 1.4 in Burgerperspectieven 2021/2 (Miltenburg et al. 2021: 35).

<sup>38</sup> See table A.11 (source: ESS 2004/'5-2018/'19) and table A.12 (source: LISS 2015-2020) in the appendix on attitudes towards further European integration, and table A.13 (source: EB summer 2020 and winter 2020/'21) on opinions on decisions at EU level; and Reeskens et al. (2021).

### *Diversity of opinions about the EU: wide education-related differences*

There are wide differences in the way Dutch citizens perceive and assess issues relating to globalisation, including the issue of European integration. Scientific research consistently shows that education level draws a dominant dividing line through attitudes towards globalisation and the EU,<sup>39</sup> with highly educated people being substantially more positive on both issues than their lower-educated counterparts.<sup>40</sup> However, although research frequently finds a relationship between education level and opinions about the EU, there is debate about whether it is actually a person's education level that exerts a causal effect on opinions (on the EU), or whether other factors related to education might play a role.<sup>41</sup> The key question is: how does education level manifest itself in people's opinions? It could be that people with a higher education level are also in a better socioeconomic position, are less uncertain about that position and about the potential impact of globalisation on it, and therefore more often take a positive view.<sup>42</sup> Highly educated people themselves more often say that they have benefited from open borders and that in general they experience more benefits from globalisation than most Dutch citizens.<sup>43</sup> The more positive attitudes of people with a higher education level could also be due to the fact that they move in a social milieu where it is usual (or desirable) to adopt an open attitude.<sup>44</sup>

Other sociodemographic characteristics are also associated with opinions about the EU, albeit less strongly. These characteristics will rarely offer an adequate explanation for differences in opinions.<sup>45</sup> They do however offer an insight into precisely who the people are whose opinions about the EU differ. That can be useful when organising citizens' dialogues with the aim of achieving a good representation of different opinions. People from affluent households are more positive towards the EU than people who are financially less well-off.<sup>46</sup> Young people are more positive about the EU than older people.<sup>47</sup> Although earlier research has not always found a relationship with the degree of urbanisation and residential setting, recent research has shown that there is a difference between urban and rural areas in the Netherlands in opinions on the EU and immigration.<sup>48</sup> Residents of urbanised areas are generally more cosmopolitan and therefore have a more positive view of the EU and immigration than residents of more rural regions. These differences between town and countryside have widened over time.

There is also a relationship between opinions about the EU and attitudes towards politics and society in general. People with more negative attitudes towards the EU are more often dissatisfied with national politics, are more often hesitant about other globalisation issues such as immigration, and take a more negative view of the direction in which the Netherlands is heading. Dissatisfaction with the EU thus does not occur in isolation, but is associated with dissatisfaction with politics and society in a broader sense. On top of this, the electoral differences can be considerable: supporters of the left of centre D66 and GroenLinks parties are generally more positive towards the EU than

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<sup>39</sup> See e.g. Kunst et al. (2020) and Hakhverdian et al. (2013).

<sup>40</sup> See table A.18 in the appendix on support for EU membership and education levels (source: EB winter 2020); figure A.5 in the appendix on education-related differences in attitudes to European integration (source: LISS 2015-2020); and table 3.1 on differences between population groups in agreement with four statements about globalisation in Boonstoppel (2020c: 47).

<sup>41</sup> See e.g. Kuhn et al. (2021), Kunst et al. (2020), Margaryan et al. (2021) and Finseraas et al. (2018).

<sup>42</sup> Dekker (2020: 8).

<sup>43</sup> Paraphrased from respondents' answers in peer group conversations; see Boonstoppel (2020b: 77), see also Walter (2017).

<sup>44</sup> See Bornschier et al. (2021) and Stubager (2009).

<sup>45</sup> The conclusions on the relationship between sociodemographic characteristics/party preference and opinions about the EU are based on the multivariate regression analysis in table 3.1 in Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 46).

<sup>46</sup> 'Affluent households' here refers to those with an above-average household income. See table 3.1 on attitudes to the EU by background (in 2018) in Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 46).

<sup>47</sup> Based on appendix tables on average trust in the European Parliament by age and country, in Lauterbach & De Vries (2020).

<sup>48</sup> Huijsmans et al. (2021).

followers of other parties. Supporters of the right of centre PVV and FvD parties are the most negative.<sup>49</sup> The public and political debate about the future of the EU and debates in national politics are thus related to each other.

## 2.2. Ambiguity and ambivalence in citizens' opinions about the EU

The opinions of Dutch citizens about the European Union are characterised by ambiguity and ambivalence.<sup>50</sup> Divergent feelings, values and wishes lead to differences in attitudes to the EU, but citizens themselves also have conflicting feelings, values and wishes. This manifests itself in internal divisions or doubts. Sometimes that is deliberate: people are looking for an optimum, a middle way or a reasonably considered standpoint. However, people often appear to be unaware of this division. The ambiguity and ambivalence are then expressed in inconsistencies in the answers people give or in sudden changes of viewpoint.

### *Ambiguity: vagueness about EU and collaboration*

The ambiguity towards the EU manifests itself mainly in vagueness when people talk about the EU, as well as in the wishes of people which are not specified in detail. This happens, for example, because people have not considered the topic carefully or because they are not always very sure about it. Regardless of their education level, many people have little interest in or knowledge of the EU.<sup>51</sup> The ambiguity can also stem from the different definitions people use to translate abstract ideas (such as EU cooperation and democracy) into concrete and clear images when they are trying to express their wishes and expectations with regard to the EU.

There is for example ambiguity about what 'the EU' is: sometimes it seems to refer to cooperating member states and sometimes to Brussels-based institutions. When citizens say that 'the EU' has a task, it is therefore not always clear precisely who has that task: the EU institutions or the cooperating EU member states. Another related ambiguity concerns the terms 'common' or 'cooperation': when people use these words it is not clear whether they are talking about policy originating from Brussels or about (less binding) cooperation between EU member states.

### *Ambivalence about EU membership: necessary but not loved*

There are several examples of people's ambivalence with regard to the EU. We have already seen one example above, concerning membership of the EU itself. A large group of Dutch citizens support EU membership, but that support is not always fulsome. The general picture is that citizens see EU membership as indispensable for the well-being of the Netherlands, but nonetheless do not perceive the EU in very positive terms. This is sometimes accompanied by frustration and a feeling that the Netherlands is trapped in the EU.

### *'More' and 'less' EU at the same time*

A second ambivalence is that a high proportion of Dutch citizens would like both more and less EU. When people talk about solutions to the great societal challenges, they sometimes follow with

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<sup>49</sup> Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 47).

<sup>50</sup> All conclusions about ambiguity and ambivalence towards the EU are based on the focus groups used in compiling the 2018/2019 report 'What do the Dutch want from the European Union?' (*Wat willen Nederlanders van de Europese Unie?*), facilitated by the agencies Kessels & Smit and Ferro Explore. Members of the focus groups talked about their wishes and expectations regarding the EU, which underpin the opinions of Dutch citizens about the EU. See Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 112). The finding that opinions about the EU are ambiguous is also in line with the literature; see Boomgaarden et al. (2011), Stoeckel (2013), De Vries & Steenbergen (2013) and Lutz (2021).

<sup>51</sup> See Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 124).

arguments in favour of ‘more Europe’, both in terms of more involvement and more unity. At the same time, opinions are divided about further European integration, and there is no support for higher EU expenditure or a system of European taxes.<sup>52</sup> Emotionally, many Dutch citizens would like less EU (no EU expansion, less European intervention, lower EU expenditure or lower EU costs), but rationally they see no alternative to the EU. In the process of talking about major societal problems, they then end up at the view that the EU ought to be assigned a greater role. The ambivalence about EU action is also apparent when the focus is on finance: support for European action is generally not accompanied by support for European taxes or an increase in the national contribution. Where people want something from the EU, they are not willing to pay (extra) for it.<sup>53</sup>

#### *More unity and more respect for diversity: the Netherlands sets the standard*

A third ambivalence which emerged in the focus groups about the EU is that participants favour both greater unity and more respect for diversity. On the one hand, focus group members argue for European unity and strict rules that are enforced, whilst at the same time calling for respect for national identity and autonomy.<sup>54</sup> Large-scale surveys show that a large number of people feel that the Netherlands has handed over too much power to the EU.<sup>55</sup> People are against EU ‘interference’ in matters which they regard as local or national, such as regional products and certain cultural traditions.<sup>56</sup> Citizens are also ambivalent about identity: on the one hand, the EU is seen as a threat to national identity, but on the other as the guardian of European identity against influence from outside the EU.<sup>57</sup>

The reason for these – and the previous – apparent contradictions in views is that many people appear to see the Netherlands as setting the example.<sup>58</sup> They believe that the Netherlands is already doing well in all areas; where they call for greater unity and stricter enforcement of rules, the implicit assumption is that the Netherlands will take the lead and that other countries should adapt to the Dutch example. Citizens therefore appear to assume that greater unity would demand relatively little from the Netherlands and a lot from other EU member states.

### 2.3 Three basic needs with regard to the EU: fairness, stability and protection

The focus groups organised in preparation for the SCP report ‘What do the Dutch want from the European Union?’ (*Wat willen Nederlanders van de Europese Unie?*) held extensive discussions on people’s expectations of the EU in general and in relation to a number of societal challenges in particular. Those discussions revealed that Dutch citizens have at least three basic expectations of the EU which play a role in several policy domains: fairness, stability and protection of the European way of life.

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<sup>52</sup> Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 70); Dekker & Den Ridder (2020: 44) and table A.17 in the appendix on the desired division of responsibilities between the EU and national member states (source: EB winter 2020).

<sup>53</sup> That is in fact something we also see at national level: here too, the desire for more spending in policy areas such as care and education is not accompanied by support for higher taxes; see Dekker et al. (2020).

<sup>54</sup> Based on respondents’ answers in focus groups; see Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 113).

<sup>55</sup> See table A.1 in the appendix.

<sup>56</sup> Based on respondents’ answers in focus groups; Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 49) and on open responses by a selection of respondents to the statement in the COB survey: ‘The European Union (EU) engages in a variety of issues topics. Could you say in your own words what you think the EU should devote more attention to and what the EU should devote less attention to?’ in August 2018; Den Ridder et al. (2018).

<sup>57</sup> Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 109).

<sup>58</sup> Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 8).

### *Need for fairness*

The Dutch express a need for fairness.<sup>59</sup> When talking about societal issues, it emerges that many people experience a sense of unfairness with regard to the present state of affairs. That emerges when they talk about how things are going in the Netherlands,<sup>60</sup> but also in discussions about how the EU works. In the first instance this has to do with the way in which costs and benefits are shared among EU states. Some people feel that, as a net contributor to the EU, the costs and obligations imposed on the Netherlands are too high. They believe that the bar is set higher for the Netherlands than for other EU member states when it comes to observing the agreements made by EU member states. Among other things, people refer to the '3% rule'.<sup>61</sup> These people believe that the rules are stricter for the Netherlands than for other countries, for example because the retirement age in the Netherlands is higher than in other EU member states. Some people also feel that the austerity measures taken in the Netherlands after the economic crisis in 2008 were much more severe than in other EU countries, in order to restore the balance payments. Some think that the Netherlands pays a disproportionately high contribution to resolving common issues that also affect other member states. Participants in the focus groups often cite the accommodation of refugees in EU member states as an example,<sup>62</sup> citing what they consider to be the unfair distribution across EU member states.<sup>63</sup> What would constitute a 'just' or 'fair' way of sharing the costs and obligations is often not made clear in the focus groups.

### *Need for security and stability*

The second thing that Dutch citizens expect from the EU is that it delivers (policy) solutions that contribute to peace and stability in Europe, the Netherlands and consequently their own daily lives. They feel the EU is there to guarantee peace and (physical) security.<sup>64</sup> It could do this for example by regulating and controlling refugee flows, for example, or, on the climate issue, by contributing to the efforts to prevent sea levels rising. Dutch citizens expect the EU to take responsibility for suppressing cross-border crime and accommodating refugees, as well as for (maintaining) financial stability in the Netherlands.

### *Need to protect the culture, identity and well-being of EU residents*

The third, related expectation of citizens is that the EU will offer (them) protection. They expect the EU to play a role in protecting their culture, identity and well-being as EU residents. Some citizens feel that the European culture and way of life are in danger due to immigration and the arrival of refugees from outside the EU.<sup>65</sup> With regard to concerns about Dutch identity, citizens themselves cite cultural threats due to immigration and Islam, as well as threats to national sovereignty from the EU ('Brussels').<sup>66</sup> They want the EU to limit immigration or to ensure the distribution of immigrants between member states. They want the EU to place refugees in the regions where they come from, and to ensure a fair distribution of refugees between EU countries (for more on citizens' wishes in

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<sup>59</sup> The need for fairness also emerges in discussions with respondents in the study of globalisation in Boonstoppe (2020c: 56).

<sup>60</sup> A sense of unfairness is also an important characteristic of the discontent concerning the way things are going in the Netherlands; see e.g. Hurenkamp et al. (2020).

<sup>61</sup> Under the Stability and Growth Pact for members of the euro area, a country's budget deficit may not exceed 3% of GDP and the national debt may not exceed 60% of GDP.

<sup>62</sup> Paraphrased from respondents' answers in focus groups; see Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 83).

<sup>63</sup> Paraphrased from respondents' answers in focus groups; see Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 85).

<sup>64</sup> Some participants referred to this in the focus groups; see Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 109).

<sup>65</sup> This was raised by some of the participants in the focus groups; see Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 109).

<sup>66</sup> Based on peer group conversations (focus groups) for the SCP report 'Dealing with the big wide world' (SCP-rapport *Dealen met de grote wereld*), published in 2020. In the focus groups, employees discussed globalisation (in small groups together with colleagues). The main purpose of that exercise was to discover how people who work in a globalised setting talk about globalisation. Paraphrased from respondents' answers in focus groups; Dekker (2020: 104).

relation to migration policy, see § 3.2).<sup>67</sup> The desire for the EU to protect ‘the European way of life’ sometimes goes hand in hand with complaints that the EU poses a threat to national cultures.<sup>68</sup>

### 3. The EU agenda in the near future

In section 2 we outlined how the Dutch regard the EU in general terms. In this section we look in more detail at what they expect or want from the EU with regard to a number of societal issues. This reflects the fact that the plenary conferences of EU member states to discuss the citizens’ consultations are organised around a list of ten topics chosen by the EU (see § 1). National member states are asked to formulate their contribution around these ten topics.

First (in § 3.1) we discuss which of these ten topics Dutch citizens consider important for the EU – or in other words: what do the Dutch public think should be on the EU agenda? We then go through the ten topics in section 3.2, considering what the challenges are for each topic according to Dutch citizens and what role (they think) the EU could play in tackling them.

When considering the description in this section of what the Dutch think about the EU agenda for the near future, it is important to bear in mind the findings from section 2, in order to be able to view people’s wishes with regard to these topics in the light of general public opinion about the EU. We thus have to remember that a lot of people support EU membership, but are not unequivocally positive about the EU, and that not everyone is equally well informed regarding how the EU operates. For each topic it is important to remember that many people expect the EU to provide fairness, stability and protection, and that citizens’ views are hedged in by a degree of ambiguity and ambivalence: people are not always explicit about what they mean, and sometimes their opinions are (or appear to be) inconsistent.

#### 3.1. Priorities for the EU agenda: immigration, climate and crime

The European Commission has drawn up a list of topics for the citizen consultations, but how important do Dutch citizens consider those topics to be for the EU? We attempted to ascertain which topics Dutch citizens believe should be the focus of more (or less) attention from the EU in the near term. We did this by means of an open question in a large-scale questionnaire, an online dialogue with 300 respondents, eight focus groups<sup>69</sup> and closed questions on policy priorities in existing surveys.<sup>70</sup>

When considering the various sources together, we find that Dutch citizens mainly look to the EU to address cross-border issues such as immigration/refugees, climate/environment and combating terrorism and crime.<sup>71</sup> The other topics proposed for the citizen consultations received barely any (spontaneous) mention from citizens in research on EU priorities. This does not necessarily mean that people do not consider these topics to be important – they frequently do regard them as

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<sup>67</sup> Some participants referred to this in the focus groups; see Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 107).

<sup>68</sup> Based on the supported statements in the online dialogue that the EU ‘[should] not interfere with countries’ own traditions’ and should also not ‘interfere with typically country or region-specific products’; Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 95). Participants in the online dialogue were presented with (a selection of) statements by the other participants and asked to indicate to what extent they agreed with them. Some of the statements attracted high rates of agreement or rejection; these are referred to here as ‘supported statements’.

<sup>69</sup> All three administered in 2018 as part of the research for the report ‘What do the Dutch want from the European Union?’ (*Wat willen Nederlanders van de Europese Unie?*); also see the introduction to this memorandum.

<sup>70</sup> See Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 12-18) and the introduction (§ 1) in the appendix to this memorandum.

<sup>71</sup> Based on table 4.6 on priorities for the European Parliament in Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 64); and supported statements in the online dialogue in Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 81).

important (for example education and care). But citizens also often think that the other topics are mainly or primarily a task for the national government. One area where many people would like to see more attention from the EU, but which does not appear on the list of topics for the citizen consultations, concerns the high costs of the EU.

When it comes to immigration/refugees, climate/environment and combating terrorism and crime, Dutch citizens mainly expect EU institutions to contribute to resolving societal issues in the Netherlands. Higher-educated people and EU supporters more often demand attention for the climate, while lower-educated people and opponents of the EU more often want to see attention for combating terrorism<sup>72</sup> and tackling the wasting of financial resources on EU bureaucracy. Immigration is an important EU priority for all groups.<sup>73</sup> Data from Eurobarometer<sup>74</sup> show that even during the coronavirus crisis, Dutch citizens express the view that immigration and foreign policy, protecting the environment and biodiversity and combating terrorism and organised crime should be high on the agenda of the European Parliament.<sup>75</sup>

Most Dutch citizens believe that matters which impinge on the national welfare state, such as pensions, taxation, social services, care and education, are primarily the responsibility of the national government.<sup>76</sup> They consistently reject the idea of EU taxes: there was and is no support for this.<sup>77</sup> Many people also think that the EU should not concern itself with matters which relate to the national identity (such as regional products or certain cultural traditions) and should not make too many rules.<sup>78</sup>

Tackling the coronavirus crisis and avoiding a new pandemic have been high on citizens' list of national priorities since the spring of 2020.<sup>79</sup> To what extent citizens (also) see this as an EU priority, and how that priority relates to other EU priorities, is not known. As far as we are aware, no recent research has been carried out on this, though we do know from earlier international crises (such as the economic crisis in 2008 and the refugee crisis in 2015) that citizens look to the EU to resolve such crises. In the Netherlands, we find that people expect the EU to solve problems and are disappointed if this does not happen, as was also the case during the economic crisis in 2008 and the refugee crisis in 2015. We saw earlier that many people expect the EU to offer stability and protection. That would lead us to expect that the Dutch assign a role to the EU in tackling the coronavirus crisis. The EU is judged on its output, on what it achieves, and if it falls short, the reason for supporting the EU also ebbs away.

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<sup>72</sup> See e.g. table A.19 in the appendix on the priorities for the EU (European Parliament) by education level (source: EB winter 2020).

<sup>73</sup> See e.g. table A.19 in the appendix on the priorities for the EU (European Parliament) by education level (source: EB winter 2020) and Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 7).

<sup>74</sup> See box A.1 in the appendix for more information on Eurobarometer.

<sup>75</sup> The statements on priorities during the coronavirus crisis are based on table A.15 (source: EB winter 2020) and table A.16 (source: EB spring 2021) in the appendix on priorities for the European Parliament. The wording used for the topics in the Eurobarometer data deviates slightly compared with the 2018/2019 SCP report by Dekker & Den Ridder (2019).

Table A.15 in the appendix also lists reducing poverty and social exclusion as a desired EU priority, but that is probably because people consider these to be the most important topics, rather than thinking that responsibility for these lies primarily with the EU. Boonstoppel (2020c: 57) shows the following desired distribution of public money for combating poverty: a majority (54%) favour combating poverty at home, followed by combating poverty in Europe (20%) and in developing countries (26%).

<sup>76</sup> See table A.17 in the appendix on the desired division of responsibilities between the EU and national member states (source: EB winter 2020). Also see respondents' answers in Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 97).

<sup>77</sup> See table A.17 on the desired division of responsibilities between the EU and national member states (source: EB winter 2020). Also see respondents' answers in Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 97). Other research also shows that support for measures which cost money, such as taxes, is generally not high; see e.g. Drews & Van den Bergh (2015) and Steg et al. (2005).

<sup>78</sup> Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 80).

<sup>79</sup> See e.g. Burgerperspectieven 2020|4 (Den Ridder et al. 2020: 8); and Burgerperspectieven 2021|2 (Miltenburg et al. 2021: 6).



### 3.2. Wishes and expectations per topic

For each of the topics selected by the EU for the citizens' consultations, we set out below what is known from existing (SCP) research. For each topic we explain what plays a role in public opinion on that particular topic, to what extent people expect something from the EU and what it is that they expect.<sup>80</sup>

#### 1. Climate change and the environment: vision, common agreements and enforcement

Climate change has been mentioned by citizens increasingly frequently since 2017 as an important societal problem in the Netherlands. In early 2020, climate change was named as the second priority for the national political agenda, just below health care.<sup>81</sup> Tackling climate change is also one of the three topics cited by Dutch citizens in 2021 as a priority for the new Dutch government,<sup>82</sup> and it is mentioned consistently when people are asked what they consider to be the most important topics for the future.<sup>83</sup>

There is a tension in the Netherlands between this broadly felt threat, the perceived urgency of the need for global action and public support for general energy transition goals on the one hand, and the role that the Netherlands or Dutch citizens should play in tackling the climate problem on the other hand.<sup>84</sup> A large majority (over three-quarters) of Dutch citizens are concerned about climate change<sup>85</sup> and believe that humanity needs to act as soon as possible to mitigate it. At the same time, there is much less support for the statement that the Netherlands ought to contribute more to tackling climate change, and a large minority feel that too much attention is given to this topic.<sup>86</sup> Some are concerned that the measures taken to combat climate change will mean they will have to change their way of life.<sup>87</sup> Regardless of their stance in the climate debate, many people are concerned about the costs of climate mitigation measures and the energy transition, which they feel fall disproportionately on certain groups (such as citizens themselves and farmers).<sup>88</sup> Like the opinions on the EU cited above, we find large differences in opinions on (tackling) climate change depending on education level; young people and people with a higher education level more often think that the Netherlands should contribute to tackling international climate issues.<sup>89</sup>

When asked who should play a part in tackling climate change, citizens assign a major role to the (national) government and large corporations and – to a lesser extent – to their own and other households.<sup>90</sup> Tackling climate change also emerges in several studies as one of the most important priorities for the EU, according to citizens.<sup>91</sup> The reason for this is that it is a cross-border and global issue, and people think the EU is in a better position than individual countries to operate as a global player. The focus groups held in 2018 discussed at length what the EU ought to do in terms of climate policy. From those discussions it emerged that people hope for a common vision with joint

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<sup>80</sup> N.B. We are trying here to use existing research to say something about the topics selected by the EU; we cannot exclude the possibility that the associations that citizens have when they mention a topic themselves or read about it in a study are very different from the associations that politicians, policymakers or researchers have.

<sup>81</sup> Burgerperspectieven 2020|1 (Dekker & Den Ridder 2020).

<sup>82</sup> See figure 2.1 in Burgerperspectieven 2021|2 (Miltenburg et al. 2021: 6).

<sup>83</sup> Burgerperspectieven 2020|2 (Dekker et al. 2020: 74).

<sup>84</sup> De Kluizenaar & Flore (2021).

<sup>85</sup> See figure 2.2 in De Kluizenaar et al. (2020: 7).

<sup>86</sup> See figure 2.10 in De Kluizenaar & Flore (2021: 47).

<sup>87</sup> See figure 3.2 in De Kluizenaar & Flore (2021: 47).

<sup>88</sup> See e.g. Burgerperspectieven 2020|1 (Dekker & Den Ridder 2020) on the concerns about climate change.

<sup>89</sup> De Kluizenaar et al. (2020: 11).

<sup>90</sup> De Kluizenaar & Flore (2021: 33–34).

<sup>91</sup> See Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 63); table A.15 (source: EB winter 2020) and table A.16 (source: EB spring 2021) in the appendix on priorities for the European Parliament.



agreements which have a broader impact than on the EU alone. When asked, just over half of Dutch citizens say the EU should be a world leader on climate policy.<sup>92</sup> The hoped-for common vision should focus among other things on encouraging alternative energy sources and countering pollution.<sup>93</sup> Second, citizens expect the EU to ensure that all member states stick to agreements made by rewarding desirable behaviour and discouraging or punishing undesirable behaviour. Dutch citizens assume that this will mainly be a matter of punishing other member states,<sup>94</sup> because of their perception that the Netherlands is one of the leaders in this field.

## 2. Health: the health system is a national matter; EU has a role in tackling coronavirus crisis

‘Health’ has been regarded as the most important national problem since the start of the coronavirus crisis, but even before then it was high on the national public agenda.<sup>95</sup> The concerns of citizens about the coronavirus crisis are related to the health of Dutch citizens (and specifically vulnerable groups), the vaccination campaign (is it fast enough? What if mutations emerge?) and the impact of measures to tackle the pandemic on the economy and society.<sup>96</sup> There are many concerns in relation to national health care about the high costs of care, the quality of elderly care and access to medical care.<sup>97</sup>

Health care and the care system are regarded by Dutch citizens mainly as a responsibility of national government.<sup>98</sup> Health is not mentioned either in the survey or in focus groups in response to the question on what topics should receive more attention from the EU. Eurobarometer data suggest that Dutch citizens do see a role for the EU in combating the coronavirus crisis.<sup>99</sup> They think the EU approach to tackling the pandemic should be focused primarily on ensuring rapid access to safe and effective vaccines for all EU citizens and on developing a strategy to prevent a similar crisis occurring in the future.<sup>100</sup>

Several studies carried out during the coronavirus crisis using survey experiments looked at the specific wishes of the Dutch (and other Europeans) with regard to European collaboration.<sup>101</sup> If we look at health, we find that the group who support European cooperation in the procurement, storage and distribution of medicines is larger than the group who reject this notion.<sup>102</sup> Unlike in other EU countries, the Dutch more often prefer an approach in which the national government plays a major role.<sup>103</sup> During the pandemic, there was also public support for EU expenditure on health care,<sup>104</sup> but it is not clear precisely what people would like money to be spent on. Once again,

<sup>92</sup> The Clingendael Barometer shows that 58% of respondents agree with the statement ‘The European Union should be a world leader on climate policy’. See Houtkamp et al. (2021 March: 6).

<sup>93</sup> Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 88).

<sup>94</sup> Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 9).

<sup>95</sup> See Burgerperspectieven 2021|2 (Miltenburg et al. 2021: 7-17) and Burgerperspectieven 2018|3 (Den Ridder et al. 2018: 18).

<sup>96</sup> See Burgerperspectieven 2021|2 (Miltenburg et al. 2021: 11).

<sup>97</sup> Burgerperspectieven 2018|3 (Den Ridder et al. 2018: 20) and Burgerperspectieven 2019|2 (Den Ridder et al. 2019a).

<sup>98</sup> Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 97).

<sup>99</sup> See table A.10 in the appendix on satisfaction with the national and European approach to the coronavirus (source: EB 2020 summer and winter).

<sup>100</sup> European Commission (2021: 22).

<sup>101</sup> The studies by Beetsma et al. (2021, 2020) and Bremer et al. (2021) use a randomised survey experiment in which people are asked to choose between several ready-made options which incorporate multiple policy domains. Randomised survey experiments can sometimes contain fairly complex question formulations, in which some respondents may not be able to adequately assess (in advance) the consequences of the options presented.

<sup>102</sup> Based on the findings of the randomised survey experiment in the Dutch sample in March 2020, in Beetsma et al. (2021). Here the authors also show that in March 2020 the support for a joint (EU) procurement policy for medicines was 45% in the Netherlands (23% were against). The study was carried out in five European countries.

<sup>103</sup> Beetsma et al. (2021: 257): ‘Noteworthy deviations from the pooled results, however, are found for the Netherlands and Italy, where packages with national-level governance are most prized over those with EU-level governance.’

<sup>104</sup> Based on findings of the randomised survey experiment in the Dutch sample in March 2020; in Beetsma et al. (2020). The randomised survey experiment was carried out in five European countries.

it is important to bear in mind the findings set out in section 2 and to see people's wishes in respect of health care in the context of general public opinion about the EU, namely that people want more EU when asked about specific topics, but also that there is no support for more EU expenditure or European taxes. Many people thus support European cooperation on health care, but we know little about what form people imagine that cooperation would take.

### *3. The economy is a topic for the EU: social justice and employment less so*

Generally speaking, the Dutch are satisfied with the Dutch economy; they think the Netherlands is a prosperous country with a strong economy and high standard of living, especially compared to other countries.<sup>105</sup> The unemployment rate in the Netherlands was low before the coronavirus crisis, and partly for this reason it was not a major topic in the public opinion. At the start of the pandemic, citizens were pessimistic about the Dutch economy, but in 2021 they are more optimistic – although many people are uncertain about the economic impact of the crisis.<sup>106</sup> People's concerns relate to the impact of the crisis on employment in the Netherlands in the longer term, and especially employment in certain groups, such as self-employed workers and workers on flexible employment contracts.<sup>107</sup> Social justice and economic redistribution are topics which have been consistently high on the agenda of national problems in the last ten years. Dutch citizens are concerned about inequality, poverty and the widening gap between rich and poor in the Netherlands.<sup>108</sup>

A high proportion of Dutch citizens think that formulating policy aimed at reducing socioeconomic discrepancies and increasing employment is primarily a task for the national government.<sup>109</sup> In Eurobarometer surveys on what the public feel are the main priorities for the EU, combating poverty and inequality often emerge as a priority,<sup>110</sup> but that is probably largely due to the fact that people see it as an important and recognisable topic in a list of otherwise fairly abstract issues. In answers to open questions about EU priorities, combating poverty and inequality are not mentioned.<sup>111</sup>

At the start of the coronavirus crisis, in March 2020, Dutch respondents in a survey experiment were also asked about their preferences for the design of an EU recovery fund. The findings revealed support for a recovery fund targeting education, transport and infrastructure as well as health care,<sup>112</sup> and a lack of support for unemployment policy, banks and bank deposits.<sup>113</sup> However, this support for EU expenditure appears to apply only to combating the Covid pandemic and does not extend to a redistribution of resources from more prosperous countries (such as the Netherlands) to less affluent countries over the long term.<sup>114</sup> When given the option of setting up an EU recovery fund and choosing between a system of loans or grants, Dutch citizens are in favour of loans and strongly

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Comparison of the Dutch samples in this study before and during the pandemic shows that the outbreak of Covid-19 had only a limited impact on Dutch attitudes towards fiscal support at EU level. There was however an increase in support for oversight by the European Commission in the period after the pandemic, probably because citizens thought that the Commission should play a bigger role in ensuring the correct deployment of Covid-related EU expenditure. Dekker and Den Ridder (2019) show that the Dutch regard health care as a national matter.

<sup>105</sup> Paraphrased from respondents' answers in Burgerperspectieven 2020|2 (Dekker et al. 2020: 35).

<sup>106</sup> See e.g. Burgerperspectieven 2021|2 (Miltenburg et al. 2021: 11).

<sup>107</sup> Paraphrased from respondents' answers in Burgerperspectieven 2020|2 (Dekker et al. 2020: 14 and 31); and in De Klerk et al. (2020: 86).

<sup>108</sup> Dekker et al. (2020: 36).

<sup>109</sup> See table A.17 in the appendix on the desired division of responsibilities between the EU and national member states (source: EB winter 2020) and Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 97). The same finding emerges in the study cited later of opinions about the EU recovery fund.

<sup>110</sup> See table A.18 in the appendix on priorities for the European Parliament (source: EB winter 2020).

<sup>111</sup> Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 97).

<sup>112</sup> Based on findings of the randomised survey experiment in the Dutch sample in March 2020; in Beetsma et al. (2020).

<sup>113</sup> Beetsma et al. (2020) and European Commission (2021: 22).

<sup>114</sup> Beetsma et al. (2020).

opposed to EU grants.<sup>115</sup> They express a preference for redistributing existing resources rather than the EU borrowing more on the financial markets.

Based on the existing research, we find wide support for EU expenditure to combat the Covid pandemic.<sup>116</sup> Citizens expect the EU to offer protection in times of crisis, but at the same time prefer a national approach over an EU approach to tackling the crisis.<sup>117</sup> This latter preference applies to combating the Covid pandemic; it is not clear to what extent it also applies to the economic recovery policy. Dutch citizens appear to ‘wrestle with combining the desirability of international coordination and efforts with the need for national protection and first meeting their own needs’.<sup>118</sup>

The economy is however an important topic for the EU, if only because Dutch public support for EU membership is based mainly on economic motives. We saw in section 2 that many Dutch citizens consider the EU to be necessary for the Dutch economy. They see the advantages of the European single market with a common currency and regard it as an indispensable condition for Dutch prosperity. People expect the EU to provide economic stability and make EU-wide agreements (e.g. on budgets) to which all member states adhere.<sup>119</sup>

#### *4. EU in the world: The EU as an economic and geopolitical power bloc*

The topic ‘EU in the world’ receives little attention from citizens when answering open questions about priorities for the EU,<sup>120</sup> with just the occasional respondent saying that the EU ought to be an important and indispensable power bloc in the geopolitical arena. This topic was thus not exactly top of mind, at least at the time of the 2018/2019 SCP study. Other research with closed survey questions does however show that people see a major role for the EU as a power bloc in the world when they are asked specifically about this. Many citizens would like the EU to offer an economic counterweight to (other) power blocs such as the United States, Russia, China and others. They see a role for the EU which a small country like the Netherlands cannot fulfil alone. Citizens are also concerned about strategic dependence and national security in relation to technological development. Research by the Clingendael Institute shows that a majority in the Netherlands would like to see a more autonomous stance from Europe relative to countries such as China on matters relating to essential technology (e.g. the roll-out of the 5G telecommunications network).<sup>121</sup> To what extent citizens see this as primarily a task for the EU (as opposed to other forms of European cooperation) is however not known.<sup>122</sup>

We see something similar for a European defence policy: it is not a ‘top of mind’ priority,<sup>123</sup> but in closed questions about wishes and priorities, a substantial group support a common defence and security policy.<sup>124</sup> In the 2018 focus groups, a small number of participants expressed the view that defence is not an EU priority, because this role can also be fulfilled by NATO.<sup>125</sup> Research by the Clingendael Institute found that a majority believes that ‘Europe’ should be capable of independent

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<sup>115</sup> Bremer et al. (2021).

<sup>116</sup> Beetsma et al. (2020), Bremer et al. (2021).

<sup>117</sup> See Beetsma et al. (2021: 257).

<sup>118</sup> Foreword by Kim Putters in Dekker (2020: 6).

<sup>119</sup> Dekker & Den Ridder (2019).

<sup>120</sup> The conclusions in this paragraph are based on the focus groups in Dekker & Den Ridder (2019).

<sup>121</sup> Dekker et al. (2020, December).

<sup>122</sup> The questionnaire refers to ‘Europe’, and not what citizens precisely expect from the EU.

<sup>123</sup> Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 98).

<sup>124</sup> See table A.14 in the appendix for support for various European goals (source: EB spring2018-winter 2020/2021).

<sup>125</sup> Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 98).

military action, without relying on the United States.<sup>126</sup> Despite the support for greater European military independence, however, citizens do not support a higher defence budget.<sup>127</sup>

#### *5. Values and rights: the rule of law is a national topic, but for combating crime the EU also comes into play*

The Dutch attach great value to equality and freedom and assign a major role to the national government in protecting the rule of law and the Dutch representative democracy, Dutch values and rights and security. Little is known about how Dutch citizens think the EU should act if democratic values in other countries are under pressure.

Crime and security are mentioned relatively frequently as national problems, but have not dominated the lists in recent years. If people have concerns, they are about rising crime, lack of safety or – in their eyes – overly lenient punishments. We saw earlier that the Dutch have expectations of the EU in relation to security and stability. More specifically, they see a role for the EU in combating terrorism and tackling cross-border crime.<sup>128</sup> Crime does not stop at national borders and, although many things are already working well, Dutch citizens believe there is more room for better cooperation in combating international crime, protecting against cyber attacks and combating the threat of terrorism.<sup>129</sup> It is however unclear whether this means cooperation at EU level or whether people are thinking more in terms of cooperation between police or intelligence services within and outside the EU. It is also unclear whether they are thinking of cooperation or of formulating common policy at EU level or common (supranational) institutions.

#### *6. Digital transformation: a new topic for citizens*

Digitalisation is hardly mentioned by citizens in the 2018/2019 SCP study on the topics and priorities for the EU. The occasional respondent who does mention this topic expects the EU to provide online protection of privacy. They believe the EU could play a role in regulating (large) commercial companies that collect and process online data from citizens.<sup>130</sup> Eurobarometer data suggest that people regard ‘digital transformation’ as one of the least important topics for the EU agenda.<sup>131</sup> That is likely to be due in part to the fact that some of them may be unsure precisely what is meant by ‘digital transformation’.

#### *7. European democracy: less satisfied with EU democracy, concerns about handing over sovereignty*

The functioning of European democracy is not often mentioned as a priority for the EU in the 2018/2019 SCP study.<sup>132</sup> We therefore know relatively little from SCP research about people’s preferences with regard to European elections, disinformation and European basic rights.<sup>133</sup> When the topic ‘European democracy’ is mentioned, it is mainly in the context of the remoteness of the EU/Brussels from ordinary citizens, and the lack of clarity about what happens in the EU.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> The Clingendael Barometer shows that 72% of respondents agree with the statement ‘Europe should be capable of independent military action, without relying on the United States’. See Zandee et al. (2020, December: 3).

<sup>127</sup> See annex table 1 in Zandee et al. (2020, December: 7).

<sup>128</sup> See table A.17 on the desired sharing of responsibilities between the EU and national member states (source: EB winter 2020) and Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 91).

<sup>129</sup> Paraphrased from respondents’ answers in focus groups in Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 91).

<sup>130</sup> Based on the online dialogue in Dekker & Den Ridder (2019); see Dijkema et al. (2018).

<sup>131</sup> See table A.16 in the appendix on priorities for the European Parliament (source: EB spring 2021).

<sup>132</sup> Paraphrased from respondents’ answers in focus groups in Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 91).

<sup>133</sup> For the European Commission, these three topics are central elements in European democracy; see <https://futureu.europa.eu/processes/Democracy>.

<sup>134</sup> Paraphrased from respondents’ answers in focus groups in Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 97 -98).

This ‘alienation’ of voters and elected representatives<sup>135</sup> is found at both national and European level. At national level, trust in national politics is relatively high in the Netherlands compared with other countries, and no lower than previously, but there is still a large group who is critical or very critical of politics and politicians. These citizens think that the government and politicians are not responsive, in the sense that they do not listen properly to ordinary people and do not know what is going on in their lives.

Various indicators show that the perceived remoteness is even greater at European level, and support for the EU as an administrative layer is lower (see also § 2). The satisfaction with democracy in the EU is substantially lower than the satisfaction with Dutch democracy.<sup>136</sup> The turnout at European Parliamentary elections is much lower than for national elections.<sup>137</sup> Trust in the EU and the European Parliament is lower than trust in national politics.<sup>138</sup> And the emotional attachment to the EU is low:<sup>139</sup> people feel much more affinity with compatriots than with other EU residents.<sup>140</sup> The perceived remoteness of the EU and ‘Brussels’ cannot be seen in isolation from national politics and the political debate in the Netherlands about the relationship between the national and European governments. We saw in section 2 that a majority of Dutch citizens believes that the Dutch government has handed over too much power to the EU, and that opinions are divided on whether European integration should go any further. There does appear to be support for European cooperation, but much less so for further integration. The future configuration of the EU and the role of the Netherlands in it is not just a question to be discussed at European level, but also forms part of the Dutch political debate. It is a debate that has never been a central topic during national elections, but which was raised before and after the referendums on the European Constitution (in 2005) and the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement (in 2016), for example.

If we look at what the Dutch expect from European institutions in terms of reducing the perceived distance between voters and politicians (both elected representatives and administrators), two points emerge from the research carried out in 2018/2019. The first is that participants in focus groups think that the distance could be reduced if the EU were more transparent about what it does and what that costs. However, it also emerged from the discussions that most people do not know what the EU already publishes or where that can be found. The participants also say they do not actively go in search of information about the EU.<sup>141</sup> The second potential option for reducing the distance has to do with European bureaucracy, and particularly the moving back and forth between Brussels and Strasbourg. People see this as symbolic of European waste (for more on this, see section 10. ‘Other ideas’) and as typical of the EU, which has done nothing to change it, despite persistent public criticism.

## *8. Migration: fair distribution, rapid procedures, repatriation and prevention*

Immigration is a topic that has been high on the public agenda in the Netherlands for years. During the refugee crisis in 2015 and 2016, it was by far the most frequently mentioned societal problem by

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<sup>135</sup> ‘Alienation of voters and elected representatives’ is mentioned on the citizens’ consultations website; see <https://futureu.europa.eu/processes/Democracy>.

<sup>136</sup> See table A.6 in the appendix for key figures on satisfaction with Dutch and European democracy (source: (EB 2018–2020 winter).

<sup>137</sup> Kiesraad (2019).

<sup>138</sup> See table A.7 (source: ESS 2016/17, ESS 2018/19) and figure 3 (source: EB 1997–2020 winter) in the appendix for key figures on trust in the European Union and the European Parliament, respectively.

<sup>139</sup> See table A.3 in the appendix for key figures on attachment to one’s own country and to Europe (source: ESS 2016/17, ESS 2018/19).

<sup>140</sup> See table A.3 in the appendix for key figures on attachment to one’s own country and to Europe (source: ESS 2016/17, ESS 2018/19); table A.4 on perceived attachment to municipality, country, EU and Europe (source: EB 2018–2020 winter); and table A.5 on the affinity that people feel with their own country and with the EU (source: EB 2020 summer and winter).

<sup>141</sup> See Tjepkema & Kabalt (2018: 48).

citizens. That has now receded again, partly because the refugee crisis has become less urgent and partly because of the coronavirus crisis.<sup>142</sup> Even during the coronavirus crisis, however, citizens were anxious about increasing migration pressures on Europe's external borders due to population growth, and regard the regional instability around Europe as the biggest threat to security in Europe.<sup>143</sup> When they think of 'migration', most people think of the immigration of asylum-seekers or refugees to the Netherlands (and the EU). There is a group of Dutch citizens who are concerned about refugees coming to the Netherlands.<sup>144</sup> They are worried about the impact this will have on the Dutch national identity, as well as the pressure on the welfare state.<sup>145</sup> Others take the opposing view, namely that the Netherlands actually takes too few refugees or that refugees do not receive sufficient support to integrate into Dutch society.<sup>146</sup> We also see these differences of opinion in relation to integration: some people are concerned about the integration of ethnic minorities, while others are concerned about the discrimination and racism faced by people with a migration background in the Netherlands.<sup>147</sup>

Integration is not seen as an area where the EU has a role to play, but Dutch citizens do see a major role for the EU in relation to immigration.<sup>148</sup> A large group of citizens would like to see some regulation or restriction on the arrival of refugees and asylum-seekers from outside the EU, and would therefore like to see immigration high on the EU agenda. This group feels that there is something substantial at stake here. According to this group, the arrival of large groups of refugees could adversely affect the provision of social services in the Netherlands and be detrimental to the European and national identity.<sup>149</sup>

Focus groups were used to discuss further what people want from the EU in relation to the topic of migration. First, the participants expect a clear, uniform vision and common policy on migration from outside the EU. Among other things, that policy should incorporate uniform admission criteria, rapid asylum procedures and the same level of reception facilities and identical rules everywhere in the EU. Second, people would like to see a fair allocation formula for the distribution of refugees across countries, and enforcement of agreements in this regard. They do not know precisely what a fair allocation formula would look like. Thirdly, some participants would prefer refugees not to come to the EU. To prevent this, they would like the EU to establish reception facilities in the regions from which people are fleeing and to guard the EU borders more effectively (or even close them). Participants in the group discussions believe that if refugees were screened whilst still in their region of origin, this could prevent economic refugees coming to the EU.<sup>150</sup>

#### *9. Education, youth, culture and sport mainly seen as national matters*

In general, Dutch citizens feel that the Netherlands should devote more attention and resources to education. Education is one of the themes which citizens believe should be central in the

<sup>142</sup> See e.g. Burgerperspectieven 2020|2 (Dekker et al. 2020: 48) and Burgerperspectieven 2021|2 (Miltenburg et al. 2021: 32).

<sup>143</sup> The Clingendael Barometer shows that '[the] fear of growing migration pressure on Europe's external borders due to high population growth and regional instability around Europe' is seen as the biggest threat, with an average score of 7.61. See Houtkamp et al. (2021 February: 3).

<sup>144</sup> See e.g. Burgerperspectieven 2018|3 (Den Ridder et al. 2018: 20) and Burgerperspectieven 2020|2 (Dekker et al. 2020: 9).

<sup>145</sup> See e.g. Burgerperspectieven 2018|3 (Den Ridder et al. 2018: 9) and respondents' answers in Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 82).

<sup>146</sup> See Burgerperspectieven 2020|4 (Den Ridder et al. 2020: 47).

<sup>147</sup> Burgerperspectieven 2019|4 (Den Ridder et al. 2019b).

<sup>148</sup> Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 82) and Burgerperspectieven 2018|3 (Den Ridder et al. 2018: 26). Migration within the EU, such as labour migration, is cited much less often as a societal problem or as a topic for the EU. In COB 2014|4 we looked in more detail at labour migration and the arrival of Eastern European labour migrants in the Netherlands.

<sup>149</sup> Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 107).

<sup>150</sup> Paraphrased from respondents' answers in focus groups in Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 85). 9.



forthcoming government term.<sup>151</sup> In addition to care provision, education is almost always the most popular choice for additional spending by the national government.<sup>152</sup> Citizens are concerned about the quality of education: dealing with the teacher shortages, the work pressure, low wages and the lack of status given to teachers (from primary school to university) are all cited as priorities for the national government.<sup>153</sup>

Education is hardly mentioned by citizens in the 2018/2019 SCP study on the topics and priorities for the EU. Eurobarometer data suggest that citizens do also see education as a task for the EU,<sup>154</sup> but as with other areas of the welfare state, this is probably because they consider this to be an important topic. Citizens feel that education and education policy in the Netherlands leaves something to be desired, and would like to see an improvement in the quality of education. They hope this can be achieved with European cooperation, but do not think in the first place about common European policy in this area.<sup>155</sup>

#### *10. Other ideas: Dutch want more focus on reducing EU bureaucracy and lowering EU costs*

In a 2018/2019 study on what the Dutch want from the EU, respondents also mentioned a topic that does not map exactly onto the ten topics selected by the EU, namely the high costs of the EU. This topic is mentioned particularly often by people who are critical of the Netherlands' EU membership. They think the EU should devote more attention to reducing EU bureaucracy and the costs of the EU. They are critical about the costs of EU institutions and, to a lesser extent, about the accountability of EU policy, especially with regard to the way financial resources are spent. This group regards it as a priority for the EU to reduce its own costs. The 'commuting' between Brussels and Strasbourg also remains a thorn in the flesh for many people. In addition, they think that the EU should devote more attention to being accountable: they would like to see more transparency around EU spending and budgets. The need for greater transparency on the use of financial resources is probably also linked to the way in which citizens receive information about the EU and its spending; The large amount of detailed and technical information that is available appears not to meet the needs of citizens for transparency. On the other hand, citizens also say that they do not go in search of such information themselves (see also under 7 'European democracy' above).

## 4. Conclusion and discussion

This memorandum summarises existing (SCP) research on what Dutch citizens think, want and expect of the EU. It was written in response to a request by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and is intended to serve as input for the EU-wide citizens' consultations on the future of the EU. Firstly it paid attention to the general opinions of Dutch citizens on the EU and then focused in more detail at their wishes and expectations with regard to ten topics formulated by European institutions.

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<sup>151</sup> Burgerperspectieven 2021|2 (Miltenburg et al. 2021: 37).

<sup>152</sup> Burgerperspectieven 2020|2 (Dekker et al. 2020: 49).

<sup>153</sup> Burgerperspectieven 2020|1 (Dekker & Den Ridder: 11).

<sup>154</sup> See table A.17 in the appendix on the desired division of responsibilities between the EU and national member states (source: EB winter 2020).

<sup>155</sup> Dekker & Den Ridder (2019: 97).

## Majority support EU membership, but also lots of criticism

Generally speaking, many Dutch citizens see the EU as something unavoidable. The group who supports Dutch EU membership is larger than the group who do not, but supporters of membership are also critical of the European project. Support stems mainly from a realisation that the EU is necessary for a small country like the Netherlands, both economically and geopolitically. The satisfaction with European democracy and politics, as well as trust in the EU, is low on average in the Netherlands compared with the satisfaction with Dutch democracy and trust in national politics.

## Divided opinions about the EU

Dutch public opinion about the EU is characterised first and foremost by considerable differences in opinions between groups, as well as by the high degree of ambiguity and ambivalence in individual attitudes to the EU.

Although a majority supports EU membership and also thinks that the Netherlands has handed over too much power to the EU, there are consistent and substantial minorities who take a different view. There is also a consistent difference in opinions based on education level, with highly educated people being substantially more positive about the EU than lower-educated people. Lower-educated people less often see the benefits of EU membership, more often support a 'Nexit' and more often think that European integration has already gone too far. The way a person's education level works through into their opinions about the EU is the subject of scientific debate; among other things, it may be due to differences in socioeconomic position, differences in experiences with the EU or differences in the social milieu in which a person lives and in which it is seen as desirable (or otherwise) to adopt an open attitude.

## Ambiguity and ambivalence about the EU

In addition to the divisions in public opinion on the EU there is also ambiguity and ambivalence in individual attitudes. This ambiguity manifests itself in the vague terms in which some people talk about the EU. It is often not clear precisely who they are thinking of when they talk about 'the EU' or 'Europe': do they mean cooperating member states or EU institutions in Brussels? It is also not always clear what people mean by 'cooperation'. Support for 'more cooperation' is however always evident – after all, who could be against cooperation? – but it is often unclear when people think of cooperation whether they mean that there should be more common European policy, or whether they are thinking of looser alliances between EU member states.

Ambivalence manifests itself mainly in (apparent) contradictions in people's opinions. People support EU membership, but not wholeheartedly. They want the EU to enforce rules (for example the fiscal rules), but also want less interference from Europe. They want greater unity and at the same time more diversity. A factor that appears to play a role here is that some people think that the Netherlands is setting an example, and that the way we do things in the Netherlands should be the norm. In the eyes of Dutch citizens, therefore, a call for the enforcement of rules or for greater unity is something that will mainly affect other countries and will not result in 'more EU' for the Netherlands. Dutch people believe that the Netherlands is already doing extremely well – even when the facts sometimes suggest otherwise. People are happy to have the benefits of the EU – security,



stability and solutions to collective problems which cross national borders – but are not so keen on the burdens, such as the costs of the EU and the perceived interference.

### Need for fairness, stability and protection

In conversations about the future of the EU, three basic expectations or needs can be distilled which people (broadly speaking) have of the EU: fairness, stability and protection. These expectations can be applied to many societal issues. People expect the EU to ensure a just and fair distribution of costs and benefits – and EU critics, in particular, feel that the Netherlands currently bears too much of the cost of (bad) policies in other countries. People expect the EU to provide stability, both in a material sense (prosperity, a strong economy) and non-materially (peace, well-being). This also means that when there is a threat of instability, for example because of an economic or other crisis or a terrorist attack, people expect decisive action from the EU. As a corollary to this, many Dutch citizens see the EU as a protector and guardian of ‘the European way of life’, in relation to both prosperity and culture.

### Topics for the EU: main focus on cross-border themes

Cross-border issues such as immigration/refugees, climate/environment and combating terrorism and crime are the topics where citizens expect something from the EU. In their eyes, immigration and the climate should be priority topics for the EU. It is known what citizens want and expect from the EU with regard to these topics. Matters traditionally pertaining to the welfare state, such as pensions, taxes, social services, care and education, by contrast, are topics which most Dutch citizens see mainly as a responsibility of the national government – though research suggests that there is support for European policy which provides financial support to these sectors during the Covid pandemic. There is no support for more EU spending or European taxes to facilitate this, however.

### Reflection and further research

As stated, this memorandum summarises existing research. It is descriptive in nature and explores the question of how the Dutch view the EU in general and the differences in public opinion across different groups in Dutch society. The research on which the memorandum is based identifies Dutch attitudes and opinions, for example based on open responses and focus groups, thus providing a greater insight into what it means when people say they support – or oppose – EU membership, and which basic needs underlie their opinions on the EU.

The underlying research is however not explanatory, and does not explore the question of how public opinion on the EU is formed and what factors influence it. We know from earlier research that the way people form their opinion is a complex process, in which both traditional media and, increasingly, social media play an important role. There are numerous actors in this complex web, such as politicians, who also influence or shape people’s opinions. How people form their opinions about the EU, which actors play a decisive role in this, and which mechanisms are at work, is a subject for further research.

Another limitation of this research is that, while it paints a broad picture of public opinion and policy preferences, it offers no specific action perspectives. Policymakers seem to need, in particular, more tangible information about public preferences regarding (European) policy and European solidarity. The research on which this memorandum is based suggests that many Dutch citizens think from the

perspective of Dutch interests. That begs the question of the extent to which solidarity with other EU residents plays a role in people's expectations and wishes with regard to the EU, and how people weigh Dutch interests against European solidarity. Gaining a greater understanding of specific policy preferences with regard to European cooperation, EU policy and European solidarity will require further research. In our view, that could be based on a thematic approach, involving extensive discussions with respondents on their wishes with regard to a specific topic, and exploring which administrative layer has which tasks in relation to that topic; this would thus be a broader discussion than simply discussing what people *expect from the EU*. Another option is to use a survey experiment design, such as the *conjoint experiment*<sup>156</sup> in which respondents (who have been properly informed in advance) are asked to choose between specific policy options. The caveat that applies for both options is that opinions can change when people are asked for their views on issues which do not concern them in their day-to-day lives, and even more so when those issues become a subject of public and political debate, also given the complex process of how opinions are formed.

### This memorandum and the EU-wide citizens' consultations

This memorandum provides information that the Dutch government can use as input into the EU-wide plenary sessions on the future of the EU. What can the insights about public opinion outlined above contribute to the citizens' consultations?

In the first place, this memorandum forms part of those consultations. In the 2019 report we wrote that there '[is] no hard boundary between consulting the public and research on the public's wishes. The emphasis in citizens' consultations is on the politician seeking advice; in research, it is on the researcher seeking objective knowledge, but the questions of the politician can play a major role in research, and research can be a key element in the consultations'.<sup>157</sup> Citizens' consultations and research on the public's wishes can both help provide a good impression of what citizens want from the EU. Although the caveat applies to both instruments that certain population groups do not participate, or participate less often, this distortion will be greater in open citizens' consultations about the EU where people take part on their own initiative, than in opinion research in which we deliberately select people to participate. Properly conducted opinion research is therefore better suited to obtaining a representative picture of what the Dutch want from the EU than citizens' consultations where we know that people who have little interest in the EU will not take part. An advantage of discussions with an open invitation is that everyone who wishes to take part can do so, which means the consultation is open to all European citizens, whereas with opinion research only the group falling within the sample can participate. In short, opinion research and citizen consultations can complement each other, with the former attempting to portray as representative picture as possible and the second enabling everyone who wishes to participate to do so. In the latter case, it is advisable to make extra efforts to promote the participation of groups which generally less often take part in conversations of this type, such as people with a lower education level, less political self-confidence or less political interest.<sup>158</sup> Our research shows that the way these

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<sup>156</sup> This approach was used in studies on citizens' preferences with regard to the EU recovery fund in the light of the coronavirus crisis in Bremer et al. (2021); and European cooperation on health care, again in the context of the coronavirus crisis, in Beetsma et al. (2020, 2021).

<sup>157</sup> Dekker & Den Ridder (2019).

<sup>158</sup> See e.g. Boogaard et al. (2016).

groups think about the EU is very different from groups which generally participate more often in citizens' consultations.

In the second place, this memorandum can help in the design of citizens' dialogues and in interpreting the outcomes of such dialogues. The purpose of the citizens' consultations is to enable EU citizens to join in a conversation about the future of the European Union. The Conference aims to involve citizens in shaping policy and to translate their input into EU policy.<sup>159</sup> The thematic approach, where citizens are asked to give their opinions, wishes and priorities on different topics, meets the need of the European Commission to secure citizens' input for its agenda for the future. From the perspective of citizens, however, this division into predetermined topics is less well aligned with the purpose of the consultations, namely getting citizens to talk openly about what they consider important. As a result, there is a danger that the large(r), overarching questions about the future and the configuration of the EU – about which citizens can also have opinions – will be ignored. That was also the case in the previous round of citizens' consultations in 2018, when the topics for the future were placed at centre-stage and questions relating to the configuration of the EU were not a priority.<sup>160</sup>

That is a problem, because the SCP study 'What do the Dutch want from the European Union?' (*Wat willen Nederlanders van de Europese Unie?*) showed that, in a thematic approach, citizens are willing to share ideas on what the EU should be doing, and especially where they see a major role for the EU, while at the same time thinking that there needs to be less EU. The SCP study from 2019 shows that public opinion about the EU is hedged in by a degree of scepticism, doubt, ambiguity and ambivalence. That is partly conscious: people have doubts about their opinions, or else those opinions are nuanced. Sometimes, however, people are unconsciously vague or appear to contradict themselves without being aware of this. All of this is probably also related to the fact that the interest in and affinity with the EU as an administrative layer is relatively low. It is important to bear these characteristics of opinions about the EU in mind when organising citizens' consultations and interpreting the results. When using a thematic approach, the conclusion should not be drawn too quickly that citizens want more European policy. In a sense, the thematic approach bolsters the apparent interest in and need for European involvement. A thematic approach based on preset topics also carries the risk that some topics (which may be considered more important by citizens) will receive too little attention.

To avoid citizens unconsciously talking themselves into a 'more EU' stance when that is not their wish, the best approach both in citizens' consultations and in follow-up research on public opinion about the EU would be to question people about ambiguities and any contradictory expectations and wishes with respect to the EU. Researchers or interviewers could ask citizens precisely what they mean by 'the EU' and European integration: do they mean more unified policy or more cooperation between autonomous member states? An approach could also be chosen in which a particular topic is explored in more depth, with the question of who should be responsible for resolving that issue only being addressed afterwards (with one option there being that people do not mention the EU at all).

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<sup>159</sup> TK (2019/2020).

<sup>160</sup> European Commission (2019).

## Concluding remarks: make clear what is to be done with the results of the citizen consultations

To conclude, we would like to raise an issue that has not yet been aired in this memorandum, but which is based on the literature on citizens' participation and consultation. A wealth of experience has now been gained, especially at local level, in enabling citizens to participate in the thinking about priorities for local policy. This has been done in relation to solutions for specific local policy issues, for example in 'citizen summits' or 'G1000' citizens' consultation meetings. A good deal of research has also been carried out on the impact of consultation instruments of this kind. Examples include research on the trust of participants in local politics or the support of participants for a given policy. That research consistently shows that, to enhance trust and willingness to participate, it is important to be clear in advance about what will be done with the results of the consultations. It is also important, both during the process and afterwards, to be transparent about how the results have been processed and how politicians or administrators have subsequently incorporated them in policy. In evaluations of participation and consultation meetings, researchers find that it is here that things often go wrong: the linkage between the outcomes of the citizens' consultation and the political and administrative system (at local level: the municipal council) is not always well organised.<sup>161</sup> This gives participants the feeling that nothing has been done with their input, and that can lead to declining trust and lack of support.

This issue – the relationship between the input of citizens in citizens' consultations on the one hand and politics and the administration on the other – is also relevant for this Conference on the Future of Europe. To ensure that the citizens' consultations are successful, it is important to be clear in advance about what will be done with the EU-wide input and precisely how that input will work through into areas such as the EU agenda for the future or the policy choices that will be made. It is also important that there is clarity on this both during and after the Conference. That is often a challenge at local level, and the challenge will be even greater at EU level, given that consultations will be taking place in 27 member states, with the potential for differences of opinion within member states and between citizens from different member states in terms of what they want and expect. It is therefore not impossible that the citizens' consultations will not deliver a uniform voice. Added to this is the fact that there is a variety of actors at EU level, such as the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council, which also need to agree with each other on the future of the EU. The design of the Conference on the Future of Europe is convoluted and complex in this regard, and it may be a good thing to acknowledge that complexity when citizens are asked for their input. The slogan for the Conference on the Future of Europe is 'The future is in your hands'. That is quite a promise. If subsequent disappointment is to be avoided, it would be wise to be clear in advance as to how this promise to European citizens will be met.

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<sup>161</sup> See e.g. Caluwaerts & Reuchamps (2015); Boogaard et al. (2016).

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