



ENC ANALYSIS



Perceptions of Elites on the European Union and Europeanization: The Belgian Case

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Abstract

This analysis explores Belgium's pro-European consensus, a defining element of its political and media landscapes. Through a discourse-analytic approach and insights from interviews conducted under the [MEDIATIZED EU - Mediatized Discourses on Europeanization and Their Representations in Public Perceptions Project](#)¹, the research highlights how Belgian elites engage with key EU-related issues, including migration, security, and economic solidarity, while interpreting the meaning of European identity and values. The analysis uncovers the nuanced and dynamic nature of Belgian elite's relationship with the European project, where consensus provides a foundation for both cohesion and contestation.

Key words: Belgium, European Union, Europeanization, European integration



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Introduction

Belgium has long been a strong supporter of European integration and the European project. As one of the founding members of the European Union, Belgium's political and media elites have been committed to the European project since its inception. Even the Flemish nationalist movement rarely questions European integration. In the words of one of its founding fathers: “We are Flemish to become European.” This widespread pro-European sentiment is deeply embedded in Belgium’s political culture and national identity. Belgium’s pro-European consensus is well-documented in the scientific literature and has been mapped and described in detail. However, the effect of this pro-European consensus on the public debate is not as straightforward or monotonous as one may suspect. The debate about Europe in Belgium’s political and media landscape is a nuanced and fragmented terrain where multiple interpretations of Europe coexist, sometimes in stark contrast with one another. This way, Belgium’s pro-European consensus provides an arena for intense political debates, which often reveal deeply divergent ideological views about the nature of European identity, solidarity, and values. Politicians and journalists navigate the complex terrain of this incomplete consensus using various discursive strategies that allow them to interpret, negotiate, contest, and sometimes even weaponize the European project. This ENC analysis examines these strategies, showing how Belgium’s pro-European consensus, while strong, is far from monolithic and leaves ample room for ideological confrontation and political agency. Using a discourse-analytic lens to explore a series of semi-structured interviews utilizing Q-methodology conducted in the framework of the MEDIATIZED EU project, it explores how various actors in Belgium’s political and media spheres make sense of Europeanization and the European Project.

Points of Convergence and Divergence Among Belgian Elites

The consensus among Belgian elites regarding the European Union and the European Project is remarkably strong, particularly on core values such as human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. Across political and media spheres, there is widespread agreement on the importance of collective EU actions in areas like migration policies, addressing external crises such as the war in Ukraine, and promoting inclusivity and solidarity. But though there is quasi-universal agreement with the idea that European integration and the European project are forces for good, both remain the subject of intense political arguments. Despite an overarching pro-European narrative, debates about what ‘Europe’ means and what the future of European integration should concretely look like in practice remain contentious. The Belgian political and media elite may agree about the need for European integration, the existence of European norms and values, and the merit of the European project; but they do not agree about what these ideas entail or what they imply on a policy level. Furthermore, these disagreements intersect with various regional tensions and ideological divides. This way, beyond this shared foundation, elites may diverge in their views on issues such as EU enlargement, migration, economic implications of collective measures, and security concerns.

Distinct patterns of thought emerge among Belgian elites, revealing both shared values and diverging priorities on key EU-related issues. One prominent group, labeled “Supporters of a Liberal European Identity” comprises a broad mix of actors emphasizing values like human rights, democracy, and inclusivity, with strong support for EU-NATO coordination and enlargement policies. This group is notably diverse, crossing linguistic and ideological lines. It includes politicians from both the Flemish right-wing N-VA and the Francophone ecological party ECOLO, as well as progressive and liberal-leaning parties such as Open VLD and MR. Media actors within this group are equally varied, featuring representatives from outlets like Euractiv, Politico, and VRT, among others. Despite their differences, members of this group share a unified belief in the EU as a cohesive and liberal entity while rejecting Euro-skeptic narratives around sovereignty and cultural erosion.

A second group, “EU Human Rights Critical Actors” is smaller but distinct, consisting of environmentally progressive politicians from Groen and ECOLO alongside a journalist from the left-leaning outlet Medor. This group champions inclusive values, advocating for both Ukrainian refugees and broader human rights concerns while sharply criticizing EU policies, particularly Frontex’s handling of migration at borders like Belarus. Their stance reflects a universalist commitment to progressive ideals, emphasizing the importance of supporting all refugees equally while remaining critical of specific EU practices that they see as inconsistent with human rights.

The third group, labeled “Proponents of the EU’s Enhanced Security” brings together a pragmatic coalition of political and media actors focused on collective responses to economic and security challenges. Politicians from the Flemish-speaking Open VLD, social-democratic Vooruit, and Francophone PS are joined by media representatives from Scibus and independent journalists. While supportive of Ukraine, they express caution regarding the broader consequences of the conflict, such as rising energy prices and inflation. They advocate for EU strategies that balance economic stability with enhanced security measures, reinforcing the EU’s role as a stabilizing force in addressing crises. Together, these groups illustrate the diversity of elite engagement with the European Project, balancing shared support for EU principles with differing priorities and approaches.

In addition to these findings, the separated data analysis for politicians and journalists reveals further nuances. Within the journalist data set, the Medor journalist’s critique of Frontex and emphasis on solidarity with Ukrainian refugees stand out as particularly significant. Notably, this journalist is the only interviewee to offer a fully critical perspective on the EU regarding human rights. While many participants acknowledge that Frontex’s practices raise concerns about human rights, they still maintain that the EU, overall, supports and upholds human rights in other areas. Meanwhile, the politician data set highlights a group featuring members from N-VA, ECOLO, Groen, and Open VLD, showcasing an evolving cross-party convergence on geopolitical and security concerns. This group strongly supports statements such as “The EU and NATO are collectively more effective and cost-effective against Russian aggression” while expressing skepticism about deeper internal integration, particularly regarding increased EU budget sharing.

The Pro-European Consensus: A Strong but Flexible Framework

From the Q analysis, it is readily apparent that Belgium's political and media elites share a deep commitment to the European Union, and the European project. Across the political spectrum and across linguistic divides, politicians and journalists generally agree on the value of European integration, supporting key EU policies, and endorsing abstract European ideals such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. This support is so far reaching that commitment to the European project is occasionally construed as a part of Belgium's national identity as a country.

A liberal politician from the Belgian MR (Mouvement Réformateur) party, for example, frames the EU as a force that enhances Belgium's culture and identity: "the European Union reinforces Belgium and its culture, and supports it and allows it to be put in the spotlight." His colleague from Open VLD, another pro-European party, concurs, arguing "[the EU] enforces [Belgium] and it makes it stronger. It puts more emphasis on Belgium and the Belgian culture (...) it does not erode, it is a cooperation of the forces (...) it does not take the way, it adds." Both politicians express themselves in very explicit and colorful terms, speaking fast, with a rich vocabulary, without hesitation, demonstrating the depth of their conviction. For these politicians, being both Belgian and European is clearly not a contradiction but a mutually reinforcing relationship.

These affirmations are not just lip service. They reflect deeply ingrained beliefs about the political and cultural value of Europe for Belgium. Europe is not merely a topic of debate or a political issue—it is a foundational element of how these politicians understand their national and civic identity. As such, the idea of Europe is an integral part of the natural, consensual, depoliticized, and unchallenged framework within which politicians and journalists operate on a day-to-day basis. The idea that joining the EU implies ceding some degree of national sovereignty is not seen as something negative, but rather as a logical and acceptable trade-off.

However, while this rhetoric of a Europeanized national identity is widespread, it does not account for the full complexity of Belgium's relationship with the EU. The pro-European consensus may provide a shared foundation, but it is anything but uniform in practice. Disagreements emerge when it comes to how the values of European integration should be applied in specific policy areas, from financial solidarity to human rights. There may be agreement on the fact that Belgium needs 'Europe', but not on what 'Europe' represents and how Belgium 'needs' it.

The Ambiguity of Europe: Navigating and Concretizing the Pro-European Consensus

An interesting example of the complex discursive landscape through which Belgian politicians and journalists travel when discussing Europe can be found in the interview with Flemish Nationalist politicians from the N-VA (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie). One may, superficially, assume that support for the European project entails solidarity with other European member states. However, the N-VA politician rejects the idea that Belgium has an obligation to financially support fellow European states, especially those facing structural economic challenges. However, well aware of the risks involved in positioning himself in a manner that may be perceived or construed as eurosceptic, he develops a very rich and intricate historical narrative about cultural and economic differences between northern and southern Europe, which effectively argues that his stance is, in fact, pro-European and fully supportive of the European project. For him, the financial discipline typical of northern Europe is a fundamental part of European identity, which he contrasts with the more "easy going" approach of southern European countries. He believes that the former, rather than the latter, best incarnates European values.

In many parts of Europe, the claim that financial problems warrant discipline and austerity rather than solidarity would not require a historical or cultural legitimation. One could simply make this case in economic terms. However, in the context of Belgium's pro-European consensus, a refusal of solidarity, while economically sound, may be construed as eurosceptic, and the N-VA politician carefully constructs his argument to avoid being branded as such. He invokes a

European historical context to show that his position is actually consistent with the values of fiscal responsibility and accountability which, in his view, define Europe. By embedding his argument in a historical narrative about the cultural differences between Europe's northern and southern regions, he frames his stance as a legitimate expression of European values, even though it fundamentally opposes financial solidarity in the context of the EU.

Interestingly, this line of reasoning is not unique to the N-VA. It can also be found in the position of a journalist from *Politico*, who argues that Belgium, as a wealthy European nation, does in fact have an obligation to share resources and support EU countries that are less well off. This view frames solidarity as an essential part of European identity. Despite their diametrically opposite stances, both the N-VA politician and the *Politico* journalist refer to the idea of a European identity to justify their policy preferences. The idea that such an identity exists unproblematically and imposes a political imperative is taken for granted by both. Yet their respective interpretations of what constitutes this European identity and what it entails could hardly differ more sharply. Quite simply, at an identitarian level, their disagreement concerning European financial solidarity is not over whether Europe should be supported, but rather over how the European identity should be applied in practice.

This reveals an important point: the quasi-universal consensus on Europe in the Belgian public sphere does not close off the debate on European politics. Instead, it structures and organizes the way arguments are framed, shaping the political discourse and allowing for a diversity of views within the boundaries of what is considered 'European'. The pro-European consensus, in other words, provides a framework for debate, but it does not delimit or constrain the conclusions that can be reached within that framework.

Weaponizing the Consensus: Accusations of Being 'Uneuropean'

One particular discursive strategy that becomes very powerful in Belgium's pro-European context, is the charge of being 'anti-European'. The accusation of

Euroscepticism is a powerful rhetorical weapon. Politicians and journalists frequently use accusations of Euroscepticism or anti-Europeanism to discredit opponents and delegitimize their positions. This strategy works precisely because the idea of being pro-European is deeply embedded in Belgium's political and cultural identity. To be accused of being anti-European is to be cast as an outsider, someone who rejects the fundamental values of the nation.

An example of this phenomenon can be found in the rhetoric of a Groen politician's appreciation of the EU's approach to migration. Groen being strongly in favour of human rights and democratic values, she identifies a paradox: the EU, as the incarnation of the European project, ought to support human rights as fundamental European values, but at the same time, the Frontex agency implements policies that fundamentally violate those very rights and those very values. The politician uses this tension to critique the EU's concrete policies as being 'uneuropean'. She argues that the EU's failure to live up to its own democratic values undermines its credibility as a European institution. In her view, the EU effectively falls short in its attempt to embody the European project. It is crucial to note, however, that this failure does not lead to her giving up on the European project – it clearly emerges from the Q-analysis that she still believes in an EU that supports human rights.

The accusation of being 'uneuropean' or eurosceptic is often directed at countries like Poland and Hungary, which are seen as not fully embracing European values, especially when it comes to issues like LGBTQ+ rights. A Flemish Open VLD politician, for instance, in his interview contrasts Western European acceptance of LGBTQ+ rights with Eastern European resistance, framing the latter as a cultural 'exception' to the European identity. This narrative casts Eastern Europe as lagging behind in the progress toward full European integration – these countries will need to become more European, currently they fall short of the standards that the European identity imposes. However, he suggests that this is only a matter of time, as respecting LGBTQ+ rights is integral to what it means to be European, and these countries are, after all, European. In this example, the European identity is weaponized both as an accusation – the severe charge of being 'uneuropean' is levelled at Eastern European countries – and as an imperative – since they are European, these countries are teleologically destined to become more accepting of LGBTQ+ rights.

The power of this discursive strategy lies in its ability to position political opponents ‘outside’ the pro-European consensus. By framing disagreements over policies like migration or LGBTQ+ rights as matters of European identity and by claiming that their proposal embodies this European identity, political actors can force their opponents into a position where they must either accept a policy they oppose or be labeled as anti-European and therefore out of tune with the national consensus. This discursive weaponization of European identity of course contributes to the reproduction of Belgium’s pro-European consensus, but it also reveals how Europe is continually contested, even within Belgium’s pro-European public sphere.

Securitizing the Consensus: Temporarily Escaping the Pro-European Framework

While Belgium’s pro-European consensus provides a stable framework that structures and organizes many political arguments and media debates, it is not a constant or permanent feature of the public sphere. One way in which political actors temporarily ‘escape’ the constraints of the pro-European consensus is through the process of securitization. By framing a particular issue—whether it’s migration, energy policy, or foreign relations—as a matter of national or international security, actors can temporarily suspend the normative implications of European values and priorities, thereby allowing themselves for a short moment the flexibility to be ‘uneuropean’ or to rearticulate what it means to be ‘European’.

For example, a journalist discussing the EU’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic frames the health crisis as an “assault” by an “aggressor,” using a security discourse reminiscent of foreign policy debates to justify the EU’s forceful approach to vaccine distribution. This reframing allows the EU to act outside the usual constraints of European identity, as the urgency of security concerns outweighs normative questions about solidarity, democracy, or human rights. Similarly, when discussing the potential enlargement of the EU to include countries like Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, some of the interviewed politicians frame the matter exclusively in terms of geopolitical considerations. By framing

the question of who gets to be European as a geopolitical matter that has to do with security, the implications of the European identity can be avoided. As such, even though these countries may share cultural ties with Europe, and the European identity would entitle them to be part of Europe, no EU membership needs to be granted to them per se, as this would not necessarily be in the geopolitical and security interests of EU member states.

Securitization is a well-described discursive strategy, and the examples above once more illustrate that it is a powerful one: even though there is a broad and encompassing pro-European consensus in Belgian politics, securitization allows a politician to legitimately act in a manner that is ‘uneuropean’. It does this by temporarily allowing the debate to take place outside the constraints of the European identity and values, allowing actors to pursue policies that might otherwise be highly controversial. At the same time, these examples illustrate once again how Belgium’s pro-European framework is not rigid but can be strategically mobilized or temporarily suspended depending on the issue at hand. As the war in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic have made such security threats more tangible, both the strength of securitization discourses and the frequency with which they are used has increased.

Conclusion: A Complex, Multifaceted Consensus

Belgium’s generalized pro-European consensus is far from a single, unified ideology that encompasses the public sphere. Instead, it provides a shared framework that is constantly being debated and reinterpreted, with different views on Europe coexisting and occasionally clashing. Politicians, journalists, and other public figures navigate this space using various discursive strategies to negotiate and contest what European identity means. Even though Europe is a central part of Belgian political culture, its meaning is fluid and often a point of disagreement.

Belgium’s pro-European functions both as a battleground where different visions of Europe are constantly being articulated, reshaped, and used to challenge political rivals, and as a frame of reference, providing politicians and journalists

with constraints and limits on what can and cannot be legitimately said in the public debate. In other words, the consensus around Europe may be strong, but it's also adaptable—able to include a range of political viewpoints while still defining the boundaries of acceptable discourse.

Ultimately, the significance of Europe in Belgium's political and media landscape is not as a particular narrative or ideology, but rather as an ongoing process of debate and reinterpretation of what it truly means to be European. This analysis highlights the dynamic nature of Belgium's conversations about Europe, showing that the European project is both a force for unity and a topic of division in the Belgian public sphere. Europe is not just a political entity; it is an idea that continues to evolve, influencing and being influenced by Belgian politics.