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PUBLIC OPINION IN THE CANDIDATE COUNTRIES

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NATIONAL REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY HUNGARY

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Executive Summary

Hungary in Europe

We Hungarians sometimes complain about the problems we face, the huge difficulties that burden us and how pessimistic we are. At the same time, we are proud of our other features, our European identity, our scientists, our history, our sportsmen and sportswomen. If we look around us in Europe – something we have to confess we rarely do – we suddenly find that other nations are even more pessimistic than we are, have even better football players than we do and have to face even more problems than we, Hungarians have to face.

The Eurobarometer survey the EU has been operating for 30 years provides us with an opportunity to compare ourselves with the 24 other Member States of the Union and to put our perceptions about ourselves into perspective. For example, such comparisons indicate that as regards their short-term perspectives, Hungarians are actually less pessimistic than the average of the ten acceding countries and profess to greater optimism than the average of all the twenty-five members in their expectations about the future employment situation in their own country. Hungarians are also more optimistic in their medium range expectations than the average of the ten acceding countries. Though the citizens of the new Member States were more pessimistic than the average of the twenty-five members during the period just prior to the accession, we have to note that 2004, the year of the European Elections is not one that is full of great expectations anywhere in Europe.

Satisfaction with the various areas of life

Over one half of Hungarians (51%) believe that their lives will remain more or less unchanged during the course of the coming year. In this respect, Hungarians appear to be better balanced than the average of both the 25 Member States and the ten new members, where this belief is shared only by 49% and 42% of the population respectively. 31% of the citizens of the twenty-five Member States expect that their lives will change for the better during the next 12 months, while only 18% of the Hungarian population expects such improvement, a figure that seems to reinforce the widespread stereotypes about the inbred pessimism of Hungarians. At the same time, on average in the accession countries more people expect a deterioration in their personal situation, and this seems to suggest that although Hungarians look forward to the coming year sceptically, their outlook is not overly pessimistic.

During the last couple of years the Hungarian economy has witnessed a decrease in the pace of growth. The Hungarian public was deeply shocked by the fact that a number of multinational companies decided to move further eastward, claiming that South-East-Asian labour is even cheaper and therefore offers a greater advantage. Besides, as the populist economic policy related to the 2002 electoral campaign wound down, the country once again had to face its economic and financial limitations. During the second half of 2003, the government introduced a number of economic measures aimed at enhancing competitiveness, and imposed significant restrictions on the public budget to put a halt to the rapid increase of deficit. During 2003, the country also had to face a minor currency crisis: the Hungarian Forint was exposed to speculative attacks on several occasions and suffered a significant and lasting fall as a result. All these events directed attention to the sharp dispute between the government and the central bank – something that projected the image of a mismanaged country to the public. Meanwhile, the economy was in a rather difficult state all over Europe; the economy of the European Union showed almost zero growth and pessimism increased in the Member States as well.

Given all this, it is no surprise that in Hungary, just as in any other EU-member countries, confidence in the economy has sunk to a historic low.

Problems Hungary has to face today

As regards the two most important problems the country has to face, the order of mention among Hungarian respondents was almost identical to that of the average of the accession countries.

Most Hungarians – 44% – cited the economic situation as one of the two major problems the country has to face. The second most frequently mentioned such problem was the issue of unemployment (42%), which is interesting because the registered unemployment rate has been continuously decreasing since 2000 and, at 5.5%, it is now one of the lowest in Europe. These same two problems feature most prominently in the average results of the accession countries as well as the 25 EU-Member States, but in reverse order: unemployment is the most often mentioned problem within the average of the ten new Member States (61%) as well as the total 25 members (47%). Within the average of both groups, the situation of the economy was only the second most often mentioned problem (35% in the accession countries, 27% in the EU-25).

It is worth noting that nearly one third of the Hungarians mentioned the situation of the health care system as one of the most important problems facing the country (30%). Among the ten new members, this problem took the third place, but in the average of the EU-25 it only qualified as the fifth most important problem. It is well known that the Hungarian health care system is in bad need of thorough and profound reconstruction that is all the more urgent not only because of the recommendations of the European Union but also because of the dismal health and death indices of the country.

Trust in the various institutions

Following an increase between 2001 and fall 2002, trust in the political system has continuously been on the decline. The largest decrease was measured between spring and fall 2003. During this half-year period, the trust in the government took the greatest blow, falling by 16 percent points. According to the results of public opinion surveys, it was during this period that the popularity of the governing Hungarian Socialist Party also declined and Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Alliance took the lead. During the year as a whole, confidence toward the government fell by 23 percent points between spring and autumn 2003.

Familiarity with the European Union

In Hungary people do not perceive themselves to be sufficiently informed about the European Union and the issues related to enlargement, though they know as much or even more about certain basic facts (e.g. the EU flag, the anthem, etc.) as the citizens of the member States do. Approaching the date of accession the respondents still felt that they did not have sufficient information about the matters that would have a definitive effect on their lives after the enlargement. On the other hand, the intelligence they did manage to gather at the various forums actually worked toward decreasing the level of support for the country's EU membership (see next chapter).

In this chapter we shall depict the Hungarian citizens' level of knowledge about and familiarity with the European Union, its policies, basic symbols and institutional system.

Support for European Union Membership

Changes in the support of EU-membership

The level of support in favour of the country's EU-membership has undergone significant change over the course of the last five years. According to survey results, the level of support had increased continuously until fall 2002: at that time 67% of the 15-year-old+ population, i.e. over two thirds of the respondents professed that membership would be a good thing. (According to a 1990 Eurobarometer survey the level of support was 81% then, within which 51% would have been in favour of immediate membership.) In spring 2003, just prior to the accession referendum, 63% of the respondents said that EU-membership would be a good thing, however, the proportion of the supporters of membership has significantly shrunk since then. In spring 2004, less than one half of the citizens said that EU-membership was going to be a good thing (45%). Compared to the level of support in 2002 autumn this represents a decrease of 22 percent points.

A possible explanation for this is that upon the closure of the accession negotiations with the EU in December 2002, the population became aware of an increasing number of solid facts about the advantages and expected obligations of EU-membership, and it became increasingly clear that the citizens of the new Member States will not be full-fledged citizens of the Union (at least for a transitional period), the borders will remain, employment will be restricted and certain forms of support will not be, or will be only partially accessible to them. Erosion of the support in favour of EU accession may also, to some extent, be attributed to the above described decline of trust in the government.

Decrease in the support in favour of EU-membership is a phenomenon that is not exclusive to Hungary. The overall data for the other acceding states as well as the ten new Member States also show that the level of support was highest at the time of the 2003 accession referenda. Since then, the proportion of those who believe EU-membership is a good thing has significantly decreased everywhere. Especially the period immediately prior to accession proved to have a sobering effect for the countries where the majority of the population used to be pro-accession. (Since fall 2003 the proportion of those in favour of membership has decreased by 12 percent points in Slovakia, 10 percent points in Poland and 9 percent points in Slovenia. The overall data for the acceding countries show a decrease of 9 percent points over six months in the proportion of those who believe membership is a good thing.)

The expected advantages of EU-membership

From the point of view of the advantages expected from EU-membership, Hungary is one of the three most optimistic countries. The first place goes to Slovenia in this respect, while Lithuania and Hungary share the second place as regards their positive expectations related to accession. During the past years Hungary's expectations related to the advantages of EU-membership have consistently been higher than the average of the newly acceding countries.

Just as in the case of the public opinion on EU-membership, the proportion of those who regarded the European Union as advantageous was the highest in autumn 2002 (76%) and has consistently been on the decline since. During the one and a half years when the requirements set and support offered by the Union became clear, the proportion of optimists decreased by 18 percent points by spring 2004, when only 58% of Hungarian citizens professed to believe that EU-membership would be advantageous for the country.

Support of the strategic objectives of the European Union

From among the newly acceding countries it is the Hungarian adult population – on a par with the Slovaks – that is the most supportive of the formulation of a common defence and security policy in the European Union (82%). By fall 2003 the level of support declined by 8 percent points as compared to the 2003 summer survey, but rose again with 3 percent points by spring 2004. Just as in the case of many other countries which not only condemn the American occupation of Iraq, but at the same time

also participate with troops in the actions of the occupation forces, the desire is very strong for a European defence policy that is independent from the United States. The Hungarians are among the most enthusiastic supporters of this – only the Greeks, the Italians and the citizens of Luxembourg are more strongly supportive of the development of an independent, unified and articulate European defence policy.

Hungarian citizens also have a very positive view of the enlargement of the European Union despite the fact that public opinion about EU-membership has continuously deteriorated since autumn 2002. The level of support in favour of the process of enlargement has remained unchanged since the beginning of last year (74%), and the proportion of the process' opponents has not changed significantly in either direction. (The survey question has been slightly modified: the new question inquires about "The enlargement of the European Union with 10 new countries", while the previous question referred to enlargement in general.)

Naturally, the big question now is just how open the citizens of Europe are toward the further enlargement of the Union. Obviously, the most important factors determining the public's opinion in this respect will be the experiences of the present round of enlargement, conclusions that we shall only be able to draw later on.

Nevertheless, the citizens of the majority of the Union's Member States do not reject the possibility of future enlargements, even though such large member states themselves, as Germany, France and Great Britain clearly oppose it. The new arrivals are generally more sympathetic toward those countries that have been left out from the present round; of the 16 countries where the supporters of further enlargement are in majority, 10 joined the Union this May. In spring 2004 the overwhelming majority of Hungarians – 59% - were in support of further enlargement while only 20% rejected it.

The image of the European Union

What sort of image do people have about the European Union in Hungary? As in the case of the other, previously candidate, now newly joined full members, for many years this image only contained positive elements. By the time of our present survey, just prior to accession, the increase of available information rendered this image much more complex as regards the various issues.

Fears related to EU-membership

48% of Hungarian respondents were concerned that **smaller Member States may lose some of their authority**, while 46% were concerned about the cease of the Hungarian Forint as legal tender. **Surrendering the national currency** has given rise to similar fears in all other acceding countries: on average 47% of the citizens share such concerns. (As a reminder: only 23% oppose the introduction of the common currency and the majority of people believe that the country will be able to represent its interests more effectively after accession. Such contradictory data indicate that – especially with respect to the Euro – citizens place a lot of trust in advance in European integration, something that is yet no more than an uncertain concept about which they have basically no factual knowledge. Even though they do have concerns about the eventual outcome of the exercise, at this point they are optimistic and willing to support initiatives enhancing integration. This trend has been discernible in all accession countries during the preparations for EU-membership.)

The budget of the European Union

More than a quarter of Hungarian respondents (27%) were unable to answer the question about the EU budget. This is 4% higher than the average of the newcomer members. Hungarians seem to believe that the major part of the EU budget consists of agricultural expenditure (17%), closely followed by employment-related and social expenses. In this, the respondents were close to reality: the EU spends 40% of its budget on agriculture and 30% on structural policies. According to the Hungarian respondents administrative and personnel costs and foreign policy and aid to non-EU countries each take up 13% of the EU budget. In actual fact these are around 5% and 4% respectively.

Citizens in the other newly joined countries have a very similar idea of this matter, with the exception that on average the new members' public believes that beside agriculture, the largest part of the EU budget is absorbed by administrative costs (19% each). Examining the public opinion of the entire EU-25, the major budgetary item (24%) mentioned is of an administrative nature – this shows the persistence of the image of a bureaucratic European Union in the older member States. That is, the assessment of Hungarian respondents about the size of the EU's administrative expenses proved to be 6 percent points more "realistic" than the average of the new members and 9 percent points more "realistic" than the average of the entire enlarged European Union.

European identity

As suggested by the above too, Hungarians attach great significance to their belonging to Europe. Their sense of national identity, however, is much more important than that. These two attitudes are prevalent in the respondents' answers to the questions about their identity. Since several years, Eurobarometer has regularly inquired into the self-perception and self-image of the citizens of the various countries: to what extent do they look upon themselves as belonging to their own nations exclusively and to what extent do they regard being part of Europe, the European Union as their new identity.

In the ten newly acceding states, the proportion of those who regard themselves as belonging to their own nation and display the lowest level of "European identity" is the highest among the Hungarians. In part, the reason for this may be a strong sense of Hungarian identity, but it may also be attributed to their defeatism in feeling that they fall rather short of the idealized image of the "European". Among the EU25, only the British and the Finns have a stronger sense of national identity than the Hungarians, while the sense of an exclusive national identity is the lowest in Italy, Luxembourg and France.

During the course of the most recent survey in Spring 2004, 61% of the Hungarian respondents professed to be Hungarians exclusively, which represents a 10 percent point rise compared to the results of the survey half a year ago. We should note that the strengthening of the sense of national identity – on average by 12 percent points - is a trend that is present in the public opinion of all the new members. Apart from a few exceptions, similar changes are discernible in the older member States as well.

Altogether, the proportion of those who define their identity in an exclusively national context has increased in 17 of the 25 Member States. This suggests that the strengthening of the sense of national identity is a trend that is prevalent in the entire region on the brink of accession. At first sight this may be surprising, given that enlargement is aimed at creating a new Europe that is complex but built on common principles, however, it might be that it is just in times of overwhelming change like these that people try to find secure footing in their most fundamental values, one of which is national identity.

The Institutional Reform of the European Union

Three quarters of the Hungarians are in favour of the EU having its own Constitution. The highest proportion of those who support this in Hungary has been registered by the present survey. Reviewing the changes in the level of support for the EU Constitution, we may note a rather volatile trend: by spring 2003 the proportion of those supporting the common European Constitution had risen by 4 percent points from the 64% measured in fall 2002, then dropped by 6 percent points to 62% by fall 2003, and has once again risen by 13 percent points during the last half-year to 75%. The proposed amendment, looked upon as the success of the Hungarian government, whereby the Constitution of the EU should address the rights of minorities – including national minorities – has surely contributed to the high level of support.

The planned European Constitution proposed a new set of rules for qualified majority voting in the EU Council of Ministers. The question of the allocation of votes among the individual Member States was raised in this respect. According to the mixed solution proposed by the Convention, an opinion would

qualify as majority in the Council if it is supported by over 50% of the Member States representing over 60% of the total population of the European Union. One radical method would be to grant each and every Member State a single vote – this would obviously go in favour of the smaller members. The other radical method would be the allocation of votes in proportion to the population size of the Member States, which would provide the countries with larger populations with more votes, and would give a lesser say to smaller countries. The majority of respondents in Hungary (55%) are in favour of the one country – one vote principle, while 30% professed to support the allocation of votes on the basis of population size, the system that “favours” larger countries. The compromise reached at the Intergovernmental Conference in June whereby qualified majority will require support from 55% of the Member States representing at least 65% of the total population of the Union is a step further away from the view prevalent in Hungarian public opinion.

Presently the European Council consists of the heads of state and government of the member States and the President of the European Union. The Presidency of the Council is rotated between the individual Member States in 6-month cycles. As a result of the 2004 enlargement of the European Union and the institutional reform necessitated by this enlargement, the question has to be raised eventually, whether or not it is necessary to change this rotating system of the Presidency. According to the Constitutional Treaty, the European Council will be established as a body that is separate from the Councils of Ministers. The President of the European Council will be elected for a term of two and a half years, while the present system will remain in force in the Councils of Ministers (with the exception of the External Affairs Council), with the difference that three countries will hold the Presidency in half-year rotations.