

EUROBAROMETER 62

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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NATIONAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ESTONIA

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Executive Summary

This Standard Eurobarometer survey, carried out between 2 October and 8 November 2004, covers 30 countries: the 25 European Union Member States, the four candidate countries (Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia and Turkey) as well as the northern part of Cyprus. It collects information on a wide range of aspects including support for EU membership in the member countries and attitudes relating to the EU, its institutions and policies.

This survey comes soon after a series of important events had taken place in Europe which witnessed the enlargement of the European Union to ten new Member States; the European elections which have given a new look to the European Parliament; and the new Constitutional Treaty, accompanied by wide-ranging discussions on various key policies of the European Union.

The following summary highlights the opinion of Estonians on various important issues such as their satisfaction with life, their expectations regarding their life, support for European Union membership and trust in its institutions, as well as their knowledge about the Constitutional Treaty and their support for the Treaty. The executive summary focuses on topics that, in the author's opinion, demonstrate the most significant changes of opinion among Estonians. The results are compared with opinions in the 'new member states' and 'old member states'. In most chapters, the current results are also compared with those from the previous survey conducted in Estonia during February-March 2004 (CC EB 2004.1).

According to EB 62, 62% of Estonians expressed satisfaction with their lives; and a further 8% are very satisfied with life. The total figure of Estonians being content with their lives is, however, still one of the lowest compared with other Member States and only exceeds the figures for Greece (66%) and Portugal (59%) from the old Member States. Among the new Member States, lower percentages of people satisfied with their lives have been noted in Slovakia (59%), Latvia (55%), Lithuania (54%) and Hungary (50%). The figure in Estonia is slightly higher than in new Member States overall where the average is 68%.

Nevertheless, Estonians' evaluation of satisfaction with life has turned noticeably more positive compared with spring 2004. There was a 17 percentage point rise in the level of satisfaction observed between the two surveys in Estonia – the largest increase recorded in the new Member States.

When we look at opinions expressed by different socio-demographic groups, it appears that those with the most positive towards their lives are students (83%) and managers (81%). Least satisfied with their lives are the unemployed (41%). Comparing age groups, it may be seen that the most satisfied with their present life are younger people. As age rises, the amount of people claiming they are satisfied falls.

Estonians' expectations of their life over the next 12 months have risen by 17 percentage points compared with autumn 2003. This has been the most remarkable change among the 25 EU Member States. 42% of respondents now look optimistically towards the future and only 11% have negative expectations. Nevertheless, 45% do not expect any noticeable change. Similar changes were also seen in the other new Member States, with the exception of Cyprus.

This trend continues if we look at Estonians' expectations regarding their country's economic situation and employment within the next twelve months. For example, 38% of Estonians expect that the Estonian economy will improve within the next year. An improvement in the employment situation is expected by 33% and 34% expect their household's financial situation will improve. Once again, a noticeable increase in positive opinions since spring 2004 can be observed.

The above-mentioned developments in Estonia and in most of the other new Member States can be explained by a general change in their attitudes towards the European Union. The incidence of fears and negative arguments being cited has fallen and, as will be seen later in this Summary, these have given way to a realization that European Union membership can bring benefits to the economy and broader opportunities for individual citizens.

The fact that the rise in positive opinion has been higher in Estonia than in other countries may perhaps be explained by the widespread positive evaluation of the Estonian economy by various international bodies and also possibly by statistics that demonstrate the country's continued economic growth.

Compared with Western societies, Estonia cannot yet be termed wealthy. However, people have obtained a certain level of economic confidence. That is the likely reason why general economic problems, pensions, health care, unemployment and so forth are no longer the issues of greatest concern in the country.

Instead, 43% of Estonians share the opinion that the most serious problem is crime. Approximately six months previously, when the Eurobarometer was carried out in the then candidate countries, the main problems cited were

unemployment and rising prices/inflation. The latter is no longer seen as being of such importance and has fallen by 14 percentage points compared with the previous survey. This can also be explained by the change in the climate of opinion before accession and the real situation after it had taken place. Inflation was one of the main arguments put forward by the Eurosceptics. However, the real situation after accession to the EU has proven that the general price increase did not affect life in general.

Nevertheless, unemployment is still recognized in Estonia as a problem by 37% of inhabitants, a figure that is considerably lower than both the average for the new Member States, where it was cited by 62%, and for the EU-15, where it is seen as a major problem by 43%. At the same time, there have been no significant changes in the Estonian labour market.

An interesting difference can be noted when comparing average opinions of old and new Member States on issues such as terrorism and immigration. Only 5% of NMS citizens cite terrorism as a problem, while, in the EU 15, this figure is 18%. A low figure of 2% of respondents in the new EU member countries mention immigration as a major problem, whereas the corresponding figure in the EU15 is 15%.

Summarizing the opinion of Estonians regarding their satisfaction with life, their expectations and the main problems they perceive, it can be seen that some significant changes have taken place since the survey carried out in spring 2004. The increased levels of positive opinions could lead us to conclude that European Union membership, once it became a reality, appears to have been a motivating factor to many of those who previously held opposing or uncertain viewpoints prior to accession. It will be seen that this observation is borne out when the results of the survey are further analysed.

Those who might have seen Estonia as a country with a high proportion of Eurosceptics might have to reconsider this view having seen the results of the current Eurobarometer survey.

According to EB 62, 52% of the Estonian poll view EU membership as a positive thing. 36% hold a neutral position (they opted for the "neither good nor bad thing" response) and 10% see it as negative. While the number of Estonians evaluating membership positively is still not as high as in other countries, the increase in those supporting it is noteworthy. Within the half year between the spring and autumn Eurobarometer surveys, the number of Estonians seeing membership in a positive way has increased by one-fifth or, more precisely, 21 % - the highest increase in any of the European Union Member States. This also means that Estonians have moved closer towards

the average level of opinion in the EU 25 overall where 56% consider EU membership as a positive thing, 13% see it as negative and 28% hold a neutral position.

At the same time, however, a majority of Estonians (51%) says they would be indifferent if they were to hear tomorrow that the European Union had been scrapped. However, the overall average of indifferent people in the 25 Member States, at 43%, does not stand far behind the Estonian figure. Not surprisingly, the highest share of citizens who are indifferent about the EU come from the new Member States where people have not had much time to evaluate in depth the impact that European Union membership has had on their country.

For most Estonians (50%) the European Union is associated with freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the European Union. Bearing in mind Estonia's history of foreign occupation and the life behind the so-called Iron Curtain, this outcome is no surprise. For 44%, the European Union means bureaucracy. It is interesting to see that, in spite of the generally more positive approach that was noted before, the proportion of those who associate the EU primarily with bureaucracy has increased by 14 percentage points since spring 2004. This shows that European Union membership, even within a short period of time, has had the effect of making more people aware of the bureaucracy within the Community.

Bureaucracy did not have much influence when Estonians were asked whether, on balance, their country benefited or not from being a member of the European Union. Again, there has been a significant shift in opinion when the figures from spring and autumn 2004 are compared. 56% of Estonians – a figure 15 percentage points higher than six months previously – expressed opinion that Estonia had benefited from its EU membership. Higher figures were recorded by young people aged between 15 and 24 (62%) in contrast to a figure of only 45% for those aged 55 or more who shared this opinion.

The highest proportion of people in the new member states who consider EU membership to be beneficial is recorded in Lithuania (78%), whereas in Cyprus the corresponding figure was only 40%. Cyprus, along with Hungary and Slovenia, is one of the few countries where the number of those seeing the benefits of EU membership has fallen by as much as 16 percentage points. Nevertheless, a majority of people in the European Union consider membership to be beneficial and their number has even increased by 9 percentage points in the traditionally Eurosceptic United Kingdom.

It is no surprise to see that Estonians show low levels of awareness of the various European Union institutions and bodies. Furthermore, when they were asked whether or not they trusted EU institutions or bodies such as the European Parliament, the European Commission and the Council of Ministers, between 22-35% of Estonians gave a 'don't know' response. However, it also emerges from the survey that lack of awareness in the EU institutions and bodies is not by any means solely the case for Estonians. In fact, this is the case in most of the Member States. For example, overall in the EU25 countries, 26% are unable to say whether or not they trust the Council of Ministers of the European Union.

In Estonia, the highest level of trust is in the European Parliament (62%), followed by the European Commission (58%) and the Council of Ministers (50%). Estonians have least trust in the European Ombudsman (30%) and the Committee of the Regions of the European Union (40%). It is difficult to explain why exactly these institutions inspire least trust but very possibly this is simply due to a lack of awareness of their roles.

European Union: a political union

One of the widespread fears related to Estonia's accession to EU membership was that life in the country would be ruled from Brussels and that it might lose its political independence. Before the referendum on membership, the majority of those who campaigned against it suggested that it would be better for Estonia to agree certain economic ties with the EU but not to go for full membership so that it could retain its political independence.

The majority of Estonians chose full membership and, according to Eurobarometer 62, would also support development towards a European political union. 62% shared this opinion - which is higher than the EU25 average of 58%. Support for political union in Estonia is even higher than in Luxembourg, France and the Netherlands - those Member States that are generally known to be most in favour of further integration.

Estonians appear to be very supportive of the Common Foreign Policy (70%) as well as of the Common Security and Defence Policy (84%). 72% of would also accept the further enlargement of the European Union. At the same time, people are still doubtful about the single currency, as support for the EURO was expressed by noticeably fewer people (55%).

Bearing in mind such a climate of opinion, it should be noted that 64% of Estonians expressed support for the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe. Support has increased by 10 percentage points since spring 2004. However, it should be noted that 25% of the Estonian poll has no opinion about the Treaty and this can clearly be explained by their lack of knowledge of the Treaty's meaning and main contents. It is interesting to note that

highest levels of support for the Constitutional Treaty are found among students and the unemployed (72%).

The Eurobarometer survey carried out in autumn 2004 shows that European Union membership has been accepted and is appreciated by a majority of Estonia's citizens. In a few countries, there has been a negative trend but that does not change the bigger picture. The shift in opinion among Estonians is remarkable and proves that when confronted with it, reality can transform opinions that have been largely based on myths. The main reasons for the more positive feeling of Estonians towards the EU have already been mentioned in this summary: the sense of greater opportunities, freedom to travel, study and work, economic growth and reduced fears concerning possible inflation and the loss of political independence.

However, these trends still do not give sufficient grounds to conclude that Estonian people hold unambiguously positive views about the European Union and its membership. As has been seen, there are still significant numbers who are indifferent about the European Union and those who see membership as a negative factor. It should also be borne in mind that the results of the survey carried out in spring 2004 yielded some of the most negative opinions observed in recent years. This is why, without wishing to diminish the fact that the share of positive opinion in the country has increased substantially, the results of this latest survey need to be treated with a certain degree of caution.

Perhaps it will be possible to draw more far-reaching conclusions after the next Eurobarometer survey when Estonians' awareness about the European Union and aspects of their country's membership will most likely have risen to a higher level. At that point it will be possible to judge whether the shift towards a more positive outlook about life and the EU detected in this latest survey is momentary or more deeply rooted.