

EUROBAROMETER 62

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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NATIONAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CROATIA

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SUMMARY

Introduction

2004 has been an exceptional year in several ways for Europe. Four major events stand out in particular: the enlargement of the European Union to ten new Member States; the European elections which has given a new look to the European Parliament - which now has 732 MEPs; the signature of the new Constitutional Treaty and, lastly, the appointment of a new European Commission. This is the first time that such wide-ranging institutional and political changes have occurred in such short period of time.

In 2004, Europeans became more optimistic, they were feeling more positive about the EU and trust in the main European institutions was growing. This was demonstrated by the 62nd Standard Eurobarometer opinion poll, which was carried out in October and November 2004 among 24,791 citizens of the EU 25 aged over 15 years, as well as 4,043 citizens of the Candidate Countries (including, for the first time, 1,000 from Croatia) and 500 inhabitants of the northern part of Cyprus.

For Croatia too, 2004 was exceptional: in April, its application for membership of the EU received a positive Opinion (Avis) from the European Commission; in June, the European Council granted Croatia Candidate Country status and, in December, it was decided to open accession negotiations with Croatia on 17 March 2005, provided there was full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY).

Unlike in the EU25, however, Euro-scepticism has increased in the last year in Croatia and support for EU membership dropped from three-quarters of the population in early 2004, to around 50% later in the year. The tabloid-

style Croatian press, in their attempts to provide catchy headlines often serve as billboards for Euro-sceptics.

Climate of opinion

When it comes to personal satisfaction with the lives they are living and their future expectations, Croatian citizens differ from the European average. Compared with Europeans in general, Croats recorded more negative figures - ten and eleven percentage points below the respective averages. In the short term, they are a bit more pessimistic than the average EU25 citizen, although, in the medium term, they are slightly more optimistic, regarding both their personal lives and their country's economic situation.

Both the average Croat and the average European expect the economic situation in their respective countries to be worse than their personal one. The biggest concern both among European and Croatian citizens is unemployment, followed by general economic conditions, crime and inflation. In the EU25, terrorism is ranked as the fifth most serious concern, whereas in Croatia it is the lowest in the ranking, perhaps because Croatian citizens have no direct experience of this problem.

Croats get most of their information about the EU via television, and more than half of them also get it from daily newspapers. There are three times as many people who want more information about the EU than those who do not. The majority of citizens thinks that Croatian media are too positive in their coverage of the EU.

Trust in Institutions

Poor confidence in the media both in Croatia and in the EU may be explained by the fact that they are becoming more and more sensationalist. Discussion of corruption scandals in the judiciary, together with a huge backlog of unresolved cases could be the reasons for its poor reputation in

Croatia. The Church continues to be an important moral authority. This reflects the fact that in Croatia (compared with the EU25 countries) there is an above-average number of practising believers and Catholic spirituality is on the rise.

Research shows that political parties are often perceived as interest groups used for acquiring personal wealth. The fact that all Croatian Governments, including the current one, are perceived to have been associated with scandals has resulted in a lack of confidence in the executive's power.

The relatively low level of confidence in the European Union may be attributed to both the ineffectiveness it is perceived to have displayed during the war in Croatia and in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the perception that it is unfairly using stricter criteria when assessing Croatia than for other countries.

Knowledge and opinion about the European Union

Croatian citizens are familiar with the signs and the institutions of the European Union – even a bit more so than the average EU25 citizen. The fact that two-thirds of Croats believe the EU flag stands for something good and that the EU should develop at a faster pace is in contradiction to the low percentage that expressed confidence in it. Croats' answers to the question about what the EU represents to them and how they feel about it do not differ significantly from those in EU25, except in those areas where experience of living in the EU has a direct impact (i.e. the euro, bureaucracy, the mismanagement of EU funds, control of external borders). As far as EU membership is concerned, Croatian citizens most fear an increase in crime and greater hardship for farmers. They are also more concerned than EU25 citizens about the loss of national and cultural identity of smaller states, and about the loss of their country's influence.

Although there are more Croatian citizens claiming trust in all the EU institutions than those who do not, only the European Parliament enjoys the confidence of more than 50% of the poll. Responses to questions about the EU also reflect confusion among Croatian citizens: the majority of them, for example, are in favour of the EU moving towards a political union and its developing more quickly, but, at the same time, they say they would not mind if the EU were dissolved tomorrow. Croatian citizens are in favour of joint decision-making within the EU – rather than at national government level - on most issues, except when it comes to agriculture, fisheries, cultural policy, police, judiciary and the defence policy. Yet, in their responses to another question shortly afterwards, they give strong support to the concept of a joint EU security and defence policy, the rapid deployment of an EU military force, and a joint EU stance in the event of international crises.

The fact that a two-thirds majority supports European Monetary Union and an even greater proportion supports an EU common foreign policy towards third countries, the concept of a European Minister of Foreign Affairs, a common EU immigration and asylum policy, the further enlargement of the EU, the European Constitution and the guarantee of human rights in each member state, even if this is contrary to the wishes of some member states, shows that the majority of Croatian citizens are in favour of a more integrated Europe.

Both Croatian and EU25 citizens see the EU's main role as being to fight against poverty, unemployment and crime, and for world peace.

EU contrasted with the US

While the majority of Croatian citizens perceives the US role in the world as negative, the role of the EU is perceived as a positive one.

EU-Croatia

More than 50% of Croatian citizens see themselves first as Croats and then as Europeans, while a little more than one-third of them see themselves only as Croats. The vast majority of Croats, like EU25 citizens, have a strong sense of belonging – at local, regional, national and European levels. Almost nine-tenths of citizens in Croatia are proud to be Croats, and two-thirds are proud to be Europeans too.

While almost three-fifths of citizens of the EU25 are satisfied with how democracy works in their country, only one-quarter of citizens in Croatia feel the same way. On the other hand, more than two-fifths of Croats and a little less than half of EU25 citizens are satisfied with how democracy works in the EU.

Conclusion

Opinions about the EU among Croatian citizens are still volatile and influenced by daily events. Yet, looking towards the longer term, Croats are nevertheless very much in favour of faster and deeper integration of the European Union.