

EUROBAROMETER 63.4

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

SPRING 2005

NATIONAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BULGARIA

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The Spring 2005 Eurobarometer survey was conducted in a particularly eventful environment for Bulgaria and its integration into the European Union. The interviews, carried out between the 17th and the 31st of May, were soon after the Bulgarian Parliament ratified the Treaty for the Accession of Bulgaria into the EU and coincided with the launch of the parliamentary election campaign. In the EU itself, this period was marked by the difficult debates on the EU Constitution and the budget of the Union beyond 2007.

To understand the views of the citizens in the 25 EU Member States and the Accession and Candidate Countries on key issues in the debate on European integration, the current 63.4 wave of the Eurobarometer also included special questions on the Treaty on the European Constitution and Europeans and EU Enlargement, the results of which are presented in this report.

The Bulgarian data for the survey were collected by BBSS Gallup International, using a representative national sample of 1018 people, aged 15 and over.

The national analysis of the data aims to draw a picture of Bulgarian public opinion on the eve of the EU accession and to show how it compares with the views of the citizens, recorded in:

- the EU Member States, including both the old (EU15) and the new (EU10);
- the other EU accession country, Romania;
- the two EU Candidate Countries - Croatia and Turkey;
- other countries with similar views.

Where relevant, the analysis also draws comparisons with public opinion in France and the Netherlands, whose citizens have become more sensitive to the issues of EU integration during the period when the survey was conducted.

The particular focus of these comparisons is to show the opinion of the “average Bulgarian” versus the average European citizen. It also shows the trends in Bulgarian and European public opinion compared to the previous Eurobarometer survey¹ and takes a closer look at the view of the young people on key issues for the future of Europe and the European Union.

Bulgarians and the European Union– more realistic perceptions and attitudes

Bulgaria remains among the countries for which the EU has the most positive image (60%), after Ireland (68%), Romania (67%) and Italy (64%). This percentage has decreased by 3 points in the last half-year, without, however, any increase in negative attitudes, which remain at a 9% low (EU25 – 19%). Some of the “very positive” opinions have been transformed into “fairly positive” (+3 points), shaping a more realistic image of the EU in Bulgaria.

The forthcoming EU membership of Bulgaria is perceived as something good by 54% of the citizens surveyed and this figure coincides with public opinion in the

¹ See Standard Eurobarometer 62.0, Autumn 2004, published in February 2005 at: www.europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb62/eb62_en.htm

EU25. While remaining significant, this support has decreased by 5 points over the last half year. The share of neutral positions (30%) has increased by 4 percentage points, while the negative opinions remain almost unchanged (+1 point) at a 7% low. A large majority of Bulgarian citizens believe that forthcoming EU membership will increase the economic (64%) and the political stability (57%) of their country, as well as their personal security (64%).

Bulgarians have become more self-critical, but more realistic regarding their awareness and knowledge of the EU. According to their self-assessment (using a scale of 1 to 10, where 1-4 means “know nothing at all” and 7-10 “know a great deal”) now they know less about the EU than the average European, while six months earlier it appeared that they knew more. Their current average score is 4.1 (EU25 – 4.5), while before it was 4.5 (EU25 – 4.3). More precisely, at present:

- nearly one-quarter (23%) of Bulgarian citizens consider they know nothing at all about the EU (marks 1-2 on the scale)
- nearly half of them (47%) know very little (marks 3 to 5)
- less than one-fifth (17%) are well informed (marks 6-8)
- 4% consider themselves as very knowledgeable (marks 8-10)
- the considerable share of those who cannot judge their knowledge remains unchanged at 8%

As a whole, seven out of ten Bulgarian citizens say they know nothing at all, or very little about the EU. Demographic analysis shows that those who consider themselves least informed are also those who do not perceive the forthcoming EU membership as something good for them and for their country. These are mainly elderly and retired people, those from the rural areas, least educated, unemployed, as well as some managers and some of the most highly educated.

The reality of this self-assessment is largely confirmed by the results of a knowledge test included in the standard Eurobarometer questionnaire. The Bulgarian poll on the whole scores better than six months before but had the lowest scores in the entire survey. One quarter of those interviewed (26%) provide correct answers to the general questions about the EU and its institutions (EU25 – 41%), nearly one-fifth (18%) are wrong (EU25 – 33%) and the highest of all countries, more than half of the Bulgarian poll (56%) does not offer any answers at all (EU25 – 26%).

Increasing interest in information about the EU. The current Eurobarometer survey has registered a sharp decrease (7 percentage points) in the share of those who never seek information about the EU. It is now 9% and remains lower than the EU average (10%). This may be explained by the sharp increase (+6 points) of the role of informal communication (discussions with relatives, friends and colleagues) as a source for information on the EU, which was already the case for nearly one-third of the Bulgarian respondents (32%).

Television has increased its role (+2 points) as the preferred information source on the EU (77%) for Bulgarians (EU25-70%). It is followed by the radio (34%) (EU25-32%) and discussions with relatives, friends and colleagues, which now rank third and have become, over the last six months, even more important as an information source than the press (29%). This is evidence that issues related to the EU have become part of the daily life of Bulgarian citizen.

Bulgarian media coverage of the EU tends to be overly positive. The Bulgarian poll is generally positive regarding the amount of information on the EU provided by the national press, radio and TV, but to a lesser degree than the public in the EU25. 45% of Bulgarian citizens consider they get sufficient news and information on the EU from television, 37% - from the press and 35% from the radio. For half of those interviewed in the Member States, the main source of news on the EU is the press (50%) (13 points higher than in Bulgaria), followed closely by television (48%) and the radio (41%).

Only around one-third of Bulgarian respondents trust the media for providing them with objective information about the EU. Television is mostly over-positive for at least four out of ten interviewed (42%); slightly more than a third of them find it objective (34%) and one-fifth do not take any position. The results for both radio and the press are very similar, with 31% considering their information about the EU objective, slightly less (27% for the radio and 29% for the press) overly positive and the highest percentage of the poll (39% for the radio and 37% for the press) without any opinion.

The results for Bulgaria are characteristic for all countries outside the EU, while EU citizens, even in the most Eurosceptic countries, think that the media and especially television provides them with objective information on the EU.

The European Union triggers positive feelings among Bulgarians. Both in the EU and in Bulgaria the main feelings associated with the EU are **hope** (for every six out of ten respondents, EU-25 – 44%) and **trust** (for every fourth respondent, EU 25 – 22%). **Enthusiasm**, which was third on the Bulgarian list six months before, has diminished by half (-7 points) (8%) has now been replaced by **anxiety**, shared by 15% of the Bulgarian respondents and 20% of those in the EU. Bulgarian feelings towards the EU coincide largely with those of the average European citizen. They are more intensive (expressed in higher percentages) if positive and less intensive in the negative spectrum.

For Bulgarians, the EU means mainly freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the EU and economic prosperity, e.g. a personal solution to the two most important issues for the country, according to public opinion, unemployment and the economic situation. Although to a lesser degree than before, the EU is associated only with positive things: freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the EU (45%), economic prosperity (38%), peace (34%) and social protection (29%). For a quarter of those polled, it also means democracy, and for one-fifth - cultural diversity (18%), as well as a stronger say in world politics (18%), and the euro (15%). Negative associations, such as unemployment (11%), bureaucracy (8%) and wasting money (6%) have also diminished and continue to rank last.

Although increasing, fears regarding European integration remain lower than in the EU. Trends in the development of public opinion for the last six months show that Bulgarians, as well as Romanians, have already started to feel some of the typical enlargement blows on the eve of the EU accession. More than half of Bulgarian respondents (52%) fear difficulties for their farmers (10 percentage points more than six months before), which is 25 points less than similar fears in Hungary and other

agricultural countries among the EU Member States. Every second Bulgarian citizen is concerned that their country may have to contribute more than it can receive from the EU budget. This stands at 12 points lower than the EU average (62%). Other fears, such as the increase in drug trafficking and international crime (49%) are not typical for at least half of the Bulgarian citizens.

National and European in terms of the Bulgarian public opinion

Strengthening the European identity of Bulgarians. As a result of a positive trend (10 points) three-quarters of Bulgarians now feel more attached to Europe. This is higher than the average for the EU, where two-thirds of citizens share the same view.

Bulgarians are increasingly dissatisfied with national democracy and increasingly satisfied with European democracy. While the majority of EU citizens are satisfied with the functioning of democracy in their countries (53%), only one-fifth of Bulgarian respondents share the same opinion regarding their national democratic system. Over the last half year, satisfaction has decreased by 2 points, to top further feelings of dissatisfaction, expressed now by three-quarters (76%) of the poll. Similar trends dominate public opinion in some of the EU10, particularly Latvia and Hungary (10 percentage points) and in neighbouring Greece, where dissatisfaction is up by 14 points.

Bulgarian satisfaction with EU democracy is twice as high (46%) as satisfaction with national democracy (20%). Nearly four out of 10 Bulgarians surveyed do not express any opinion regarding satisfaction/dissatisfaction with EU democracy. Almost the same share (41%) say they do not understand how the EU functions.

Bulgarian institutions face a crisis of confidence. The low level of trust, recorded in the previous Eurobarometer survey, has stayed the same for most of the national political institutions. Some of the “don’t knows” have been transformed into negative opinions, resulting in a 10 point increase in mistrust in the national Parliament (81%), a 6 point increase in political parties (83%), a 7 point increase in national government (70%) and a 5 point higher mistrust in the Bulgarian justice system (70%). Whereas in the EU, one in two citizens says he/she trusts their national justice system, Bulgarians appear to trust least their national legal system (20%) of all the countries surveyed by the Eurobarometer.

Trust of Bulgarians in the European Union remains high. Although it has decreased by 2 points, trust in the EU in Bulgaria (56%) remains higher than the EU average (44%) and in most of the EU Member States. Due to a strong decrease in trust in the EU institutions, half the Bulgarian poll does not have confidence in them. Trust in the European Court of Justice (most probably confused previously with the European Court of Human Rights) has fallen by 13 points (40%), trust in the European Parliament – by 11 points (46%) and trust in the European Commission – by 9 points (41%). This corresponds with the general mood of Europeans, following the negative referenda results in France and The Netherlands, where trust in the European Commission has fallen by 6 points (EU25 – 46%), while trust in the European Parliament remains at 52%, following a decrease of 11 points.

Trust in the EU institutions depends on awareness about them and the perception of their role in European integration. Most Bulgarians have heard of the European Commission (62%), with nearly the same percentage (59%) considering that it plays an important role in the life of the EU and 41% tending to trust it. In Bulgaria, as in the EU, the European Parliament is most well known and trusted by citizens: 71% have heard of it, 65% think it plays an important role and 46% tend to trust it. It is also noteworthy that in Bulgaria the most trusted EU institution following the Parliament is the European Central Bank (44%) with three points higher than the European Commission (41%).

Climate of Bulgarian public opinion – between pessimism and optimism

The survey showed that, of all the countries polled, Bulgarians and Romanians are the most dissatisfied with their quality of life. This opinion is shared by 70% of the Bulgarians and 55% of the Romanians polled, an upward trend of 4 percentage points.

Pessimistic expectations of life over the next twelve months. Looking ahead, at least half of EU25 and Bulgarian citizens do not expect any changes in their standard of living over the next year. While for the EU citizens (51%) this means the prospect for personal satisfaction, for 56% of the Bulgarian poll it means the opposite – continued dissatisfaction with the way of life. The share of such opinions in Bulgaria has increased by seven percentage points over the last half year. In Bulgaria, as in the new Member States (NMS), citizens have higher expectations regarding the forthcoming improvements in the public sphere, while in the EU15 citizens are more positive regarding the improvements in their personal situation. One fifth (22%) of Bulgarians surveyed see improvements in the quality of their life, 17% - in the country's economic situation and 16% in the financial situation of their households; 15% are optimistic about the country's employment situation, while those expecting improvements in their personal job situation stand at 2 percentage points lower (13%).

Unemployment and the country's economic situation continue to be citizens' main concerns in both the EU and Bulgaria. Nearly six out of ten (57%) Bulgarian respondents consider unemployment, and four out of ten, the economic situation as the most important issues facing their country. For the EU25 these figures are 50% and 27% respectively. Over the last six months, these concerns have decreased by 3 percentage points regarding unemployment, and increased by 4 percentage points, regarding the economic situation in Bulgaria.

Bulgarians believe that EU plays a positive role in solving these issues. Nearly four out of ten Bulgarians polled (39%) feel that the EU can help the fight against unemployment and nearly half of those polled (48%) believe the EU could help improve the economic situation. 65% think the EU plays a positive role in fighting terrorism and crime (63%), as well as in defence and foreign policy (52%). Regarding social policies, such as housing, healthcare and education, the EU is mainly seen as playing neither a positive nor negative role. Only one-fifth of respondents are convinced of the positive role of the EU as regards rising prices/inflation and taxation.

EU accession is related to reforms, which require public support and citizens' participation. The results of the Eurobarometer survey show that, unlike for the

citizens in some of the new Member States, such as Slovakia and Latvia, in Bulgaria for the majority of those polled (52%) the term 'reform' has a positive meaning (59% in the EU25). For one-third of Bulgarian respondents and for fewer citizens than that in the EU 25 (29%) it has a negative meaning.

Expectations regarding the future and EU membership

For personal life

The majority of the Bulgarian Eurobarometer respondents expect that during the next five years, when Bulgaria is expected to become a member of the EU, the Union will play a much bigger role in their everyday lives (54%). Moreover, this is perceived positively, since more Bulgarians (up by 12 percentage points) would like the EU to play an important role in their everyday lives (66%) - to a much higher degree (+15 points) than EU citizens (49%). This could be explained by the positive role, which is assigned to the EU for solving the major problems facing Bulgaria (unemployment and the economic situation). It is also indicated by the fact that Bulgarians, compared with other countries' citizens, are among the least optimistic about their personal situation improving over the next five years (BG-28%, EU25-42%).

For the country

Six out of ten Bulgarians questioned believed that their country will take advantage of its future EU membership. This optimism has become more moderate in the course of the last six months (- 3 points). However, it compares with the high level of confidence in the new Member States that following the first year of EU membership their countries have been able to benefit from it (EU10 59%).

Bulgarians are equally optimistic as EU citizens regarding the economic situation in their countries in five years' time (56%). 45% of them also believe that as a result of EU membership their country will become more influential in the EU; 31% take the opposite view and a quarter are hesitant to express any opinion.

For the European Union

A large majority of Bulgarians are in favour of the developments towards a European Political Union (73%), and a European Constitution (64%). When it comes to the Treaty on the Constitution, it appears that nearly half of them (47%) have never heard of it, 50% have heard of it, but know very little about it, and only 4% consider they know enough about what it is about. Support for the Constitution demonstrated by the Bulgarian poll (46%) is close to the EU average (48%). 55% of Bulgarian respondents say they would support the EU Constitution because they see in it an opportunity to advance further the European integration process. Four out of ten interviewed see in it more democratic opportunities and the strengthening of European institutions. Among its disadvantages, half of them point out the danger of losing national sovereignty, as well as the lack of information (44%) and the complexity of the text (22%).

The desire for more information is strongly reflected in the Bulgarian opinion on the key priorities for the future of the EU. A growing number of Bulgarians (+6 points) - close to the EU average (BG-17%, EU25-19%) - consider that getting closer to European citizens by providing them with more information about the EU policies and institutions should be a priority for the EU.

The Bulgarian and EU preference for retaining and advancing further the EU social model is also well reflected in the current public opinion poll. Both Bulgarian and EU

respondents consider that the first priority for the EU should be the fight against unemployment and social exclusion. This percentage is higher for Bulgaria (69%) than for the EU25 (44%).

Alongside their Balkan neighbours, and mainly Greece and Turkey, Bulgarian citizens believe strongly that in the next five years the European Union will achieve its goal of becoming the most competitive economy in the world (63%), while the general moods in the EU are rather negative (35% “yes”, 54% “no”).

The most optimistic of all regarding the European Union and its role for Bulgarians’ future are young people, aged 15-24. They have stronger beliefs than half a year ago (+4 points) that Bulgaria will benefit from its EU membership (75%) and show stronger support for Bulgarian membership (+5 points) than the average Bulgarian (85%).

Bulgarians and EU Enlargement

One in two EU citizens supports Bulgarian accession to the EU. This is due mainly to the strong support in the new Member States (70%) and the opinions of the young generation, whose support is 6 percentage points higher than the EU average. Support in the EU15 is 45% and has increased, over the last years² by 7 points. Among the EU Member States, support is strongest in Poland (75%) and lowest in Austria (21% - “for”, 68% - “against”). The results of the survey show that Bulgarians and Romanians show mutual and the highest support for each other’s EU membership (80% Romanian support for Bulgarian membership and 75% Bulgarian support for Romanian membership).

Bulgarians are quite supportive of EU enlargement to their Balkan neighbours. Bulgarian opinions about future enlargements of the EU coincide largely with those of EU citizens. Possible enlargements towards EFTA countries and especially Switzerland (BG and EU25 - 78%) and Norway (BG- 76%, EU25 – 78%) top the list. Bulgarians are also more supportive of an EU future for their Balkan neighbours than EU citizens. Their support for a future enlargement towards Turkey (45%) is over 10 points higher than the EU average (32%), but slightly lower than the average for the new Member States (48%). There is also a very high support for a possible enlargement towards FYRO Macedonia (64%), Croatia (61%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (55%) and neighbouring Serbia and Montenegro (60%).

To summarise, the key message from this Eurobarometer report is that, over the last six months, Bulgarian citizens have become less pessimistic in national terms and more realistic in their Euro-optimism and Europe’s role in the future of their country.

² See Standard Eurobarometer 58.1. autumn 2002 www.europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/