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PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BULGARIA

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This report presents the results from the latest Standard Eurobarometer survey before the start of Bulgarian EU membership on 1 January 2007. It samples the state of public opinion in the current and future EU Member States on key issues relating to European integration, their countries' EU membership and the future of the Union. Nearly 30 000 citizens from 30 states and territories answered the autumn 2006 Eurobarometer questions between 6 September and 10 October 2006.

The Bulgarian data for the survey were collected by BBSS Gallup International between 6 and 20 September 2006, which coincided with the campaign for the presidential elections. A representative and homogeneous national sample of 1035 persons, aged 15 and over was used.

The results from the Autumn Eurobarometer survey are presented against the trends in the changes of the national and European public opinion, compared with the previous six-month period and since Bulgaria was first included in the Standard Eurobarometer in 2004. The national analysis of the data aims to provide a picture of Bulgarian public opinion on the eve of the country's EU accession and to show how it compares with the views of the citizens, recorded in:

- the 25 EU Member States, including the old (EU15) and the new (EU10);
- the other EU accession country, Romania;
- two EU Candidate Countries - Croatia and Turkey;

The particular focus of these comparisons is to show the opinion of the "average Bulgarian" versus the average EU citizen. Frequent comparisons are also made with Romania, which is also joining the Union from 1 January 2007. Furthermore, the survey is a unique source of information regarding the public acceptance of Bulgarian EU membership by the citizens in the current EU Member States. The autumn report also includes, for the first time, compared with previous Standard Eurobarometer surveys, a chapter on the values of European citizens and those representing the EU.

Bulgarians and the European Union – upbeat on EU membership

Of the entire Eurobarometer poll, Bulgarians claim to be most interested in European affairs. This is claimed by 30% of those interviewed in Bulgaria, ahead of the Danes (29%) and the Italians (27%) and 11 points more than the average EU citizen.

The overwhelming national support for EU membership has gone up by 1 point during the last year (85%), with practically no opposition (4%) and one out of ten polled undecided. In contrast with this, the average EU citizen is now more reserved regarding Bulgaria's EU accession than a year before. Negative attitudes are on the rise (by 3 percentage points) and public support has decreased to 46%. The distance between the supporters and the opponents of Bulgarian EU membership among EU citizens has decreased by five points and remains at a six points low. However, the general mood towards Bulgarian entry remains positive, whereas the attitude towards Romanian membership is already negative, with an average of 46% of EU25 citizens against it.

The strongest opposition to Bulgarian membership is seen again among the Austrians (69%) and the Germans (56%), but notable trends in that direction have been observed among the Irish and the British (by 9 points), influenced by the national debates on the opening of the job market to the two new EU entrants. Along with this, over the last year, public support for Bulgarian EU membership has increased in 12 out of the 25 EU Member States. Among these are also Austria (+3 points) and Denmark (+7 points), which was among the last to sign the Accession Treaty. The socio-demographic analysis shows that the attitudes of EU citizens towards Bulgarian EU membership are influenced by their professional status, political orientation, knowledge and support for European integration.

Bulgarians will enter the EU with a higher degree of confidence than before, as well as than the average EU citizen, that this is something good for them and for their country. Positive views are up by 2 points (55%) and exceed the EU average (53%) for the first time since 2004. Negative attitudes (9%) remain unchanged and among the lowest for the entire Eurobarometer poll. Furthermore, nearly six out of ten Bulgarians interviewed believe that their country will benefit from its membership, and the distance between them and their opponents (16%) has increased by another seven points. These results are close to the average score for the EU10 (67%). The latter figure remains significantly higher than the EU average (54%) and confirms the success of the fifth EU enlargement, to which Bulgaria belongs.

Following the Irish and the Romanians, Bulgarians have the most positive image of the EU. While the positive perceptions of the EU among its current citizens have started to wane in the last half year, in Bulgaria, they have received a new impulse as EU membership nears. The positive image of the EU among Bulgarians is now scoring as high as in the autumn of 2004 (63%), just after the previous wave of the fifth EU enlargement.

Economic and social aspects of European integration

For the first time since their involvement in the Standard Eurobarometer surveys, the Bulgarian public claims higher satisfaction with their way of life. Personal life satisfaction has increased by 11 points and has reached its highest score since 2004 (36%). At the end of 2006, more than one-third of those Bulgarians interviewed say they are satisfied with the way they live. However, this positive trend is not enough to shift the Bulgarian position from being the least satisfied in the entire Eurobarometer poll. **Social optimism is, for the first time, clearly on the rise, but, as in the EU25, the prevailing views are for preserving the status quo.**

Citizens in Bulgaria and in the EU25 judge the employment situation and that of the national and European economy as better than before. As in Romania, the positive views on the national economy represent less than a fifth of the Bulgarian poll, but they are the result of a positive trend (+8 points) that is very close to the average for the EU25 (+10 points). Similarly, those who judge as positive the employment situation in the

country are now twice as many as six months ago, but they represent only 12% of Bulgarian views. This figure is 15 points less than the EU average. The Bulgarian score is just 1 point higher than that of Romania and equal to that recorded in some bigger countries, like neighbouring Greece, as well as Poland and France.

For Bulgarians and the average EU citizen, the economic situation and unemployment are the two most important problems facing their countries. The economic situation now causes greater concern among Bulgarians compared with spring 2006, when unemployment was seen as a more important issue. After Hungary and Romania, and alongside Greece and Portugal, Bulgaria is now among the countries showing greatest concern over the economic situation (40%). This is 6 points higher than in the spring and 17 points higher than the EU average (23%).

Bulgarians are more concerned by unemployment than Romanians (38%; +17 points), but less so than the citizens in the ten new Member States (by 14 points). Crime, which in the spring was of greater concern than the economic situation, is now less of a problem (- 6 points), but remains an issue for every fourth Bulgarian.

Bulgarians are again among the most upbeat on the positive role of the EU for solving their country's most important problems. Seven out of ten interviewed, (13 points higher than the EU average) believe that EU membership will play a positive role for the country's economy. Six out of ten are optimistic regarding its influence on the employment situation, which is by 22 points higher than in the EU25. Furthermore, they believe to the same degree as EU citizens (42%) as a whole that, compared with the situation 10 years before, and thanks to the Internal Market, the competitiveness of national companies has increased. Negative and neutral views are considerably fewer than in most other countries, while the share of undecided responses (31%) is among the highest of all.

Four out of ten respondents in Bulgaria and the same number in the EU25 think of globalisation as an opportunity for national firms, thanks to the opening of new markets. However, public opinion remains split, both in the EU and in Bulgaria. In the EU25, optimistic views have the same share as negative ones, while, in Bulgaria, they equal the share of the 'don't know' responses. At the same time, Bulgarians fear globalisation half as much as the average EU citizen.

Regarding the future, there is a convincing majority of views in all countries covered by the Eurobarometer poll that improving education and professional training is the most important factor for the effectiveness of the European economy. The majority is at its lowest in Romania and Bulgaria, although the score is as high as 57%. Furthermore, the average EU citizen and Bulgarians agree to a similar extent (47% and 44% respectively) that investment in research and innovation is the way ahead for improving the effectiveness of the European economy. In third place, EU respondents point to the need to facilitate the setting up of new companies (47%), while Bulgarians see the more effective use of energy (42%) as being more important.

European Political Union

Bulgarians start EU membership with a confident majority trusting in it and in its institutions. This figure remains unchanged since spring 2004 (56%) and, compared with six months ago, it is once again higher (by 12 points) than the EU average (45%).

Bulgarians are among the strongest supporters for developing European political union. Nearly three-quarters of Bulgarians (72%) are upbeat about future developments in regard to European political union in which they will be taking part as EU citizens. This shows an increase of 3 points and is 18 points higher than the EU average (54%). Of the entire Eurobarometer poll, support is highest in Slovenia and Slovakia, and in the three Balkan countries, including Greece, Bulgaria and Romania. However, Bulgarian support remains more emotional, than rational, given the fact that only slightly more than a third of those interviewed claim to understand how the EU works. Those who admit the opposite represent 44% of the Bulgarian poll, while one-fifth find it difficult to answer the question.

Asked which policies should be decided in the national capitals and which at EU level, the average EU citizen and Bulgarian shares similar views. A significant majority consider that the Community approach is most relevant for the so called “power” policies, such as the fight against terrorism and crime, as well as common defence and foreign policy. Policies contributing to economic growth are also seen as European, rather than national. These include policies supporting the less-developed regions, research and innovation, environment, energy and competition. On agriculture and fisheries, views diverge, with the majority of Bulgarians (52%) showing a preference for national rather than EU decision-making.

In the social, educational and financial spheres, where policies touch more directly upon citizens, both Bulgarian and EU citizens support the subsidiarity principle. This is even the case for consumer protection, which is designated as the portfolio of the incoming Bulgarian EU Commissioner.

Bulgarians are more supportive than before for continuing the EU enlargement process. Two-thirds are positive, which is 5 points more than in spring and 21 points more than the EU average (45%). This is closer to the results recorded for the 10 new Member States, where nearly three-quarters of citizens are in favour of future EU enlargements. On the specific case of Turkey, Bulgarian support (45%) is close to the level of the highest support in the current EU Member States, which is expressed by Sweden (46%). Opposition in Bulgaria to Turkish EU membership has dropped by 3 points and represents the views of around one-third of citizens. In the EU25, nearly six out of ten citizens are against the idea of enlarging the EU to include Turkey, while a little more than a quarter of the poll remains in favour.

The European Constitution is seen as very important for the future of Europe by both Bulgarian and EU citizens. Two-thirds of Bulgarians are in favour of the idea, and this positive view coincides with the EU average. More than a quarter of Bulgarians and

three out of ten EU citizens think that, along with comparable living standards, the Constitution is the most important aspect for the future of Europe. Seven out of ten Bulgarians think to the same extent that, if ratified by all countries, the Constitutional Treaty will make the EU more democratic, more efficient and more powerful in the world. For the average EU citizen, the Constitution means, first and foremost, strengthening the international position of the EU, while Romanians, above all, see more democracy for the EU in it.

Trust in political parties remains low and without change, both in Bulgaria (10%) and in the EU25 (17%). Trust in the national governments and parliaments has dropped by 5 points each in the EU25 and by 3 points in Bulgaria. Mistrust in the national governments is on the rise by 3 points, both in Bulgaria and the EU25. The result is that Bulgarians continue to trust much less their political institutions than the average EU citizen: with 7 points less for the political parties (10%), with 9 points regarding the government (21%) and with 19 points regarding the parliament (14%).

Seven out of ten Bulgarians do not trust the national parliament and the government, and eight out of ten – political parties. National political parties and the parliament have the trust of only one in ten Bulgarians, and the government is trusted by two out of ten. The average EU citizen continues to trust his national parliament more than the government, with a 3-point difference, while Bulgarians demonstrate, with the same difference, more trust in the executive than in the institution representing citizens' interests in the decision-making process.

The autumn Eurobarometer found that, for Bulgarians, it is now more difficult than before to judge their judiciary. The share of those who cannot provide clear views has increased by 8 points and is now second highest (15%), alongside with Ireland, and after Latvia (17%). This reflects the increased uncertainty among both positive and negative opinions – a 5-point drop in the share of those who trust the judiciary (15%), and by 3 points – of those who show mistrust (70%). As a result, there are now as many Bulgarians who find the judiciary credible as there are of those who do not have an opinion. Seven out of ten say they mistrust it, a figure which is equal to that in Croatia and 22 points higher than the EU average.

Trades unions are trusted only by one in ten Bulgarians, compared with the EU25, where nearly four out of 10 have a positive attitude. The level of Bulgarian mistrust, which exceeds one-third of the poll, is equal to the trust in them shown by the Finns (67%).

Bulgarian and European Values

Now that Bulgarians are becoming EU citizens, they feel more European than before, and more proud of this. Compared with the autumn of 2005, Bulgarians are now more outspoken about feeling European (+4 points). The majority of the poll (52%) now says they often feel not only Bulgarian, but also European, and those who never had such a feeling are now 39%, compared with 49% a year previously. Every second Bulgarian is proud to be European, every fourth rejects this idea and every fifth says he

does not feel European. Those who are most proud of being European are citizens in the new Member States and Bulgarian pride in this equals the levels in Latvia and in Cyprus.

The autumn Eurobarometer asks EU and Bulgarian citizens their views on contemporary socio-political and moral issues. Nine out of ten Bulgarians agree that nowadays there is too much tolerance which may become an obstacle for fighting crime effectively; over two-thirds also share the view that there is a need for more equality and justice, even if this means less freedom for the individual. At the same time, nearly every second Bulgarian disagrees with the average EU citizen that the state intervenes in citizens' private life.

Two-thirds of Bulgarians (4 points more than the EU average) consider that free competition is the best guarantee of economic prosperity. At the same time, neither Bulgarians nor citizens of the EU25 appear open-minded towards immigration. They both state, with an equal majority of 52%, that immigrants do not contribute a lot to their country. Over two-thirds of Bulgarian citizens disagree with the statement that the place of religion in our society is too important, while, in the EU25, public opinion does not have a clear consensus on that issue.

Bulgarians, Romanians and the citizens of the New Member States remain very critical regarding the possibility for recognition of homosexual marriages across Europe and the adoption of children by such couples. Public opinion in the EU25 remains rather split on this issue, while the large number of Bulgarian answers without an opinion (29%) reflects the lack of public debate on these issues.

Bulgarians' individual values coincide with those of the average EU citizen.

Both Bulgarians and EU25 citizens say that the most important values for them are respect for human life, human rights and peace. What matters most to the every second Bulgarian is respect for human life, while EU citizens rank as the most important priority the universal importance of peace. Furthermore, for both Bulgarians and EU citizens in general, the image of the EU reflects these two most important values for them.

Unlike the average EU citizen, Bulgarians believe strongly that, in terms of shared values, EU Member States stand close to each other. This opinion is shared by nearly two-thirds of Bulgarians, while, in the EU, this is the case for less than half of the poll. However, in the majority of EU Member States, positive views predominate. Every fourth Bulgarian has difficulty in taking a clear position on this issue.

The socio-demographic analysis demonstrates that shared values among EU citizens and states are important to move European integration forward, after nearly 50 years of peace and prosperity in the enlarging European Union.