

# **EUROBAROMETER 69**

**PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION**

## **SPRING 2008**

**NATIONAL REPORT**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**LITHUANIA**

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## Introduction

In spring 2008, a standard Eurobarometer survey was carried out in all 27 Member States of the European Union. This report aims to review the key results of the study.

The report presents an analysis of the responses given by the Lithuanian population to the main questions in the survey. Moreover, these responses are compared to the mean scores of the responses among all the 27 European Union Member States. In addition, where relevant, the report presents comparisons with data from preceding studies and an analysis of the survey results in terms of various social and demographic groups of respondents.

During the survey, 1021 respondents were interviewed throughout Lithuania. The sample of respondents (aged 15 and over) was selected by applying a random-probability sampling method and it represents the opinion of the Lithuanian population. The survey was carried out in the form of a personal interview in respondents' homes, using the CAPI (*Computer Assisted Personal Interviews*) system.

The survey was conducted from April 1-22, 2008.

## Lithuania in the European Union

Half a year has passed since the last Eurobarometer survey – another six months of European Union (EU) membership. What seemed like mere speculations and forecasts six to twelve months ago, such as whether a crisis would strike Lithuanian and other Baltic States' economies resulting in a sudden slowdown of growth, started coming true during the last half of the year. The growth of neighbouring countries' economies has more or less slowed down and inflation is reaching a record level every month in all three Baltic States. Public debate is ongoing as to what sort of a landing of the economy should be expected, that is "soft" or "hard". The Eurobarometer survey shows that people tend to expect the "hard" variant of landing. Although the current state of the country's economy and the financial situation of households are not considered to be bad,, optimism regarding the near future is fading very rapidly. The proportion of people thinking that next year will be better has decreased by more than ten percentage points.

When responding to the questionnaire, respondents indicated the reasons for the above change in attitudes. While 4 out of 10 respondents considered inflation an important problem a year ago, two-thirds are already concerned by it this year. Inflation, which has

already reached a two-digit figure and which, according to experts, will keep on growing, frightens Lithuanians most of all and causes the greatest anxiety about the future. Moreover, inflation instigates the same feeling amongst the majority of EU citizens.

In fact, in some cases high inflation has fuelled a more negative opinion in some people. Compared to previous years, attitudes towards the Euro have become slightly more favourable. One of the main reasons why the Lithuanian population did not want the Euro to be introduced was due to the fear of prices rising.. However, whilst the Euro has not been introduced there, prices are rising at rates which have never been seen before. Thus, the introduction of the Euro is no longer such a frightening and daunting prospect, since Lithuanian residents have seen that prices might rise even without the introduction of a new currency.

Still, uncontrolled inflation undoubtedly has a negative influence on respondents' trust in state institutions. Trust in the government has dropped by 9 percentage points over the year, and trust in the Parliament – the Seimas – dropped by 5 percentage points. It is likely that the new Seimas Parliament and the government will receive more support from the population following elections. In reality, it is likely that there is more than inflation to blame for this declining trust in state institutions. Doubts about the establishment of LEO LT, teachers' protests and strikes regarding salaries have also had a negative impact on the authority of state institutions.

Notwithstanding the negative circumstances mentioned above, Lithuanians remain some of the strongest supporters of the European Union. Few countries have a greater proportion of residents who think their country has benefited from the European Union (and the difference is significant). Yet, the latest results of the Latvian Eurobarometer survey can be considered a warning signal. In Latvia, the share of people thinking their country has benefited from EU membership decreased from 57 to 48 percent. When asked why EU membership had been of no benefit, people claimed membership was the reason behind people's declining standard of living and the slowdown in economic growth. It is likely that a proportion of Latvian respondents relate the economic difficulties of their country, especially inflation, with EU membership.

Thus far, Lithuanians hold a very favourable opinion of the European Union. Greater opportunities to travel after the Schengen air space has opened, an increasing flow of European Union support funds and other benefits have maintained the Euro optimism of the Lithuanian population thus far.

## **Satisfaction with various life spheres**

Compared to spring 2007, the proportion of Lithuanians satisfied with their current lives has slightly decreased, i.e. 6 out of 10 Lithuanians are satisfied with their current situation.

A larger proportion of respondents in Lithuania (41 percent) claim their purchasing power has increased compared to that of five years ago, whereas, a considerably larger share of respondents throughout the European Union claim that their purchasing power was greater five years ago (52 percent).

58 percent of the Lithuanian population claim they have difficulties paying all their bills at the end of the month. The proportion of Lithuanians experiencing such difficulties has increased by 4 percentage points over two years. The share of EU citizens in a similar situation has increased by 11 percentage points over two years, and currently almost a half of respondents claim they have difficulties paying bills at the end of the month.

## **Expectations for the next year**

As in spring 2007, Lithuanian residents are more optimistic about their future than the average European is, i.e. the share of people thinking the next year will be better is larger in Lithuania by 5 -12 percentage points than throughout Europe on average. However, in terms of the financial situation of their household and their employment situation, there is a marked difference between the expectations of Lithuanians and EU citizens. .

However, a comparison of the results obtained in the surveys of 2008 and 2007 reveals the optimism of Lithuanians is fading rapidly when forecasting the future situation in their country. This declining optimism is particularly felt when talking about the situation of the Lithuanian economy. In spring 2007, almost three times as many respondents thought the next year would be better for the country's economy, compared to those who thought the next year would be worse. Yet, in 2008 almost twice as many respondents think the next year will be worse for the country's economy, not better.

## **Trust in institutions**

As in previous years, Lithuanians demonstrate little trust in state institutions. 77 percent of Lithuanian residents do not trust the Lithuanian Government (67 percent in spring 2007) and 84 percent (79 percent in spring 2007) do not trust the Lithuanian Parliament.

Compared to spring 2007, Lithuanians' trust in television has decreased (-6 percentage points), as well as in internet media (-3 percentage points). Moreover, their trust in the European Union slightly decreased (from 65 percent to 62 percent).

### **Benefit of European Union membership**

Residents of Ireland, Denmark, Estonia, Poland, Slovakia and Lithuania demonstrate the most positive opinions towards EU membership: more than three-quarters of the population of these countries think EU membership is beneficial for their countries. Nevertheless, this favourable attitude towards the European Union has declined both in Lithuania and throughout the European Union during the past year.

The majority of Lithuanians claim the benefit of membership is new work opportunities. In addition, many people mention that the EU contributes to economic growth of the country.

Respondents who think their country has not benefited from EU membership emphasise two aspects: firstly, that membership lowers the standard of living; and, secondly, that Lithuania and its people have very little influence on decisions made at European Union level.

### **Key problems**

As in recent years, Lithuanians attach greatest importance to problems related to the economy, crime and the health care system. However, the last survey clearly reveals an additional problem - inflation- which is important to almost two-thirds of the Lithuanian population.

### **Image of the European Union**

Regarding what the EU means to them, the opinions of Lithuanian residents and of Europeans concur only partly. For the Lithuanian population, the European Union first of all means freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the EU. Furthermore, Lithuanians associate the European Union with economic prosperity, democracy and peace, whereas Europeans generally associate the EU with the Euro, peace and a stronger say in the world.

### **Future of the European Union**

Lithuanians remain positive when evaluating the future of the EU, i.e. 73 percent of them claim they are optimistic about the future of the European Union, whereas across Europe the proportion of people holding such an opinion is only 63 percent. 69 percent of Lithuanians and 47 percent of the EU population on average are in favour of a further enlargement of the European Union. The accession of rich countries (Switzerland, Norway, and Iceland) to the European Union is considered most favourably both in Lithuania and in the European Union in general. Turkey and Albania, however, are considered less favourably.

### **Attitudes towards the key issues of the European Union**

More than two-thirds of Lithuanians and EU citizens are in favour of a common defence and security policy among EU Member States, and a common foreign policy among EU Member States towards other countries. On the other hand, a smaller proportion of Lithuanians (57 percent) approve of a European Monetary Union with one single currency, compared to residents of other EU countries on average (60 percent).

### **Aspects of the united European Union**

According to the Lithuanian poll, social and energy issues as well as the fight against crime should be emphasised to strengthen the European Union in the future, whereas cultural policy, solidarity with poorer regions and common defence policy deserve the least attention.

### **European Union institutions**

The European Parliament and the European Commission are the best known institutions of the European Union. Two-thirds of the poll claim they are aware of the European Central Bank and the Council of the European Union. Trust in all the EU institutions also remains quite high: almost half of all Lithuanian and EU residents trust these institutions.

Lithuanian residents think the EU institutions are more transparent than those of their country. At EU level in general, the activities of European institutions are considered slightly more transparent than those of local public administration. Nevertheless,, more than half the EU poll interviewed think the latter institutions are not transparent.