

EUROBAROMETER 71

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

SPRING 2009

NATIONAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PORTUGAL

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1. Introduction

The Eurobarometer 71 survey, carried out on request of the Directorate-General for Communication of the European Commission, continued the biannual analysis of European public opinion on different themes in the economic, political and social domains. The fieldwork for this survey was carried out between 12 June and 6 July 2009 in all 27 European Union Member States, as well as in the three candidate countries (Croatia, Turkey and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) and in the Turkish Cypriot Community. In all these countries, a random sample of the population aged 15 years and over was constructed. In Portugal, the fieldwork was carried out between 16 June and 3 July 2009.¹ This executive summary highlights the main conclusions of the three analytical chapters of the Portuguese national report.

2. The Current State of Portuguese Public Opinion

The first semester of 2009 was marked by the weak performance of the Portuguese economy in key dimensions, namely in terms of GDP growth and labour market trends. According to data published by the Bank of Portugal, the Portuguese economy will contract this year, with an expected decline of 3.5 percent in GDP. The labour market has felt the full impact of this decline in economic activity, with the number of unemployed persons nearing half a million in the first trimester of 2009. In this difficult economic environment, two elections will be held in less than a month's time, in addition to the European elections which took place on 7 June: legislative elections (27 September) and local elections (11 October).

In this context of economic crisis and political uncertainty, public opinion remains pessimistic, both in terms of the national and the individual situation, even if slightly less so than in the previous Eurobarometer in regard to some indicators. Around 90 percent of the Portuguese consider that the economic and employment situation is bad in Portugal. Moreover, the majority of respondents consider that their household's financial situation is also negative. This feeling is pervasive especially among those who are unemployed, the elderly, those who have less schooling and house persons. Looking to the future, the current pessimism continues to predominate in both the social and economic areas under analysis. In contrast

¹ The technical specifications of this Eurobarometer, as well as the questionnaire used, are outlined in the *Portugal National Report – Eurobarometer 71*, pp. 50-116.

to Portugal, pessimism is substantially lower in the EU as a whole, even if it has increased since the preceding Eurobarometer 70.

Taking into account the attitudes in relation to the present and the future, it is not surprising that the Portuguese consider economic issues, namely unemployment, the economic situation and inflation, as the greatest priorities. Nevertheless, there are differences: whereas for the country as a whole it is unemployment which is the main priority, when asked the same question in relation to their household, it is inflation which appears to be the main concern.

Like the majority of Europeans, the Portuguese do not believe that the country is on the right track. It is noteworthy that, in Portugal, around 20 per cent of the population does not feel able to respond to this question. Complementary to that, only a minority trusts the government, the parliament and political parties. This generalized lack of trust in national political institutions is close to the EU average. In this Eurobarometer, it was possible to single out the social groups in Portugal whose lack of trust in government is higher than the European average. These include the inhabitants of small cities and towns, the unemployed, those who completed no more than secondary school and respondents between 40 and 55 years of age.

3. Portugal and the EU: Assessing European Integration

This semester, the Portuguese continue to assess European integration positively: 50 per cent of the citizens believe that Portugal's membership of the European Union is a good thing, and 62 per cent consider that becoming a member of the EU benefited the country. However, the trend of reduced enthusiasm towards the European project, identified at the beginning of 2008, is still observed in this survey. Despite the fact that the majority of the Portuguese considers that integration is a good thing and has brought benefits to the country, the performance appraisal of the European Union in an array of policy areas is not positive. None of the thirteen areas analysed in this survey received a positive appraisal from the national citizens, and the majority (nine of thirteen) were assessed more negatively than the European average. Portuguese evaluation of the European Union's policies tackling unemployment – perceived as the most important issue facing the country, as highlighted above – is quite negative (3.4 in a scale of 1 to 10), especially amongst the social groups most affected by this problem – people who do not have jobs (unemployed and house

workers), who identify themselves as belonging to the lowest social classes or who live in small or medium sized towns.

The future of the European Union is seen with optimism by half of Portuguese respondents, but only 37 per cent consider that the path that Europe is following right now is the most appropriate. In Portugal, there is a larger number of people supporting an enlargement of the European Union in the future (51 per cent) than in the Member States as a whole (43 per cent); however, the concept of differences in the pace of the integration is accepted by just a minority of citizens both in our country (37 per cent) and in the European Union as a whole (39 per cent).

The European institutions – Commission, Parliament and Central Bank – are recognized by the majority of the Portuguese. In addition, Portuguese citizens seem to trust the European institutions more than their national counterparts (national parliament and government). This semester, 36 per cent of the Portuguese said that they trust the national parliament, whereas 57 per cent trust the European Parliament; moreover, 56 per cent expressed trust in the European Commission, versus half that proportion who trusted the Portuguese government (28 per cent). This phenomenon is also observed at the European level as a whole, but to a lesser degree.

Less than half of the Portuguese understand the way the European Union works (44 per cent). Portugal holds the third place in the list of countries with the lowest rates of knowledge about the functioning of the European Union. The lack of awareness of the way the European Union works is especially high amongst Portuguese house persons, but the percentages are also quite low in the case of women, those who perceive themselves as belonging to lower social classes and the elderly, as well as respondents with fewer years of formal education.

Lastly, the proportions of Portuguese citizens who feel that their voice and the interests of their country are taken into consideration in European decision-making spheres are below fifty per cent. At the same time, as with European citizens in general, Portuguese perception of their individual influence in decision-making processes is higher at the European level than at the national level.

4. Social protection in the context of the international economic crisis

The Portuguese are among the Europeans who are most pessimistic about the employment situation in their country. Approximately 94 per cent of the national citizens consider that the labour market situation is bad, against a European average of approximately 85 per cent. The Portuguese also tend to privilege job security as the most relevant aspect in the choice of new employment. About 63 per cent of the national respondents hold that opinion versus only 47 per cent of their European counterparts. The interest of the job itself is almost negligible (nine per cent) in the country. Portugal is also the EU country in which high qualifications are least considered as a factor that helps to find employment. Roughly 92 per cent of the Portuguese consider that they have greater difficulty finding employment, even with high qualifications, compared with a European average of 80 per cent.

The Portuguese are among the European citizens who most consider the coverage provided by their national welfare system to be insufficient. Only 17 per cent of the national respondents consider their social security coverage as sufficient, compared with a European average of 48 per cent. Forty-four per cent of respondents believe that their social security system is too costly. However, this is lower than the EU average of 54 per cent.

Portugal is within the European average in terms of agreement with the notion that the EU has the instruments and power necessary to fight the current economic crisis (64 per cent of the national respondents versus 66 per cent in the European average). However, a considerable percentage (25 per cent) of the Portuguese interviewed did not respond to this question. The Portuguese overwhelmingly (86 per cent) consider that among the two principal measures that the EU should take to lessen the effects of the crisis should be a greater support for the unemployed, the retired and the poor. Other measures considered relevant by the Europeans in general, such as support for small and medium enterprises or investment in education and research, gain less support in Portugal.

The Portuguese are slightly above the European average in their support for policies to promote economic growth to be decided at the European level. About 74 per cent of the national respondents share that opinion, compared with 70 per cent of Europeans as a whole. At the same time, Portugal is also one of the countries of the Eurozone who least considers itself financially secure by virtue of belonging to the single currency. Some 44 per cent of the respondents in Portugal did not consider the country economically more stable on account of the Euro, compared with a Eurozone average of 41 per cent.