Citizens’ perceptions of fraud and the fight against fraud in the EU27

Summary

Fieldwork: June 2008
Report: October 2008

This survey was requested by the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) – Directorate D / Unit D.1 “Spokesman, Communication, Public Relations” and coordinated by Directorate-General Communication.

This document does not represent the point of view of the European Commission. The interpretations and opinions contained in it are solely those of the authors.
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Citizens’ perceptions of fraud and the fight against fraud in the EU27

Survey conducted by The Gallup Organization, Hungary upon the request of the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) – Directorate D / Unit D.1 “Spokesman, Communication, Public Relations”

EUROBAROMETER

Coordinated by Directorate-General Communication

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THE GALLUP ORGANIZATION
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Introduction

The mission of the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) is to protect the financial interests of the European Union, to fight fraud, corruption and any other irregular activity, including misconduct within the European Institutions. The European Commission has been studying fraud and corruption in EU Member States for several years. In 2003, a survey was conducted about “Attitudes related to defrauding the EU and its budget” in the EU15 and the candidate countries (Special Eurobarometer N° 200 – Wave 60.1 and Candidate Countries Eurobarometer N° 2003.04).

Although the current Flash Eurobarometer on “Citizen’s perceptions of fraud and the fight against fraud in the EU27” (N° 236), requested by OLAF, builds on these earlier surveys, there are differences: the questionnaire has been re-designed and telephone interviews have replaced face-to-face discussions.

This Flash Eurobarometer's objective was to study EU citizens' attitudes and perceptions about the issues of fraud and corruption in the EU. The report includes items such as:

- ways of fighting EU budget fraud
- EU citizens’ familiarity with OLAF
- the trust in various organisations to fight fraudulent use of the EU budget
- actual reports of bribery in the EU
- the preferred sources of information concerning the fight against EU budget fraud.

The survey’s fieldwork was carried out between 26 and 30 June 2008. Over 25,000 randomly selected individuals were interviewed across the EU. The survey was carried out by telephone, with WebCATI (web-based computer assisted telephone interviewing). To correct for sampling disparities, a post-stratification weighting of the results was implemented, based on socio-demographic variables.
Main findings

- Seven out of 10 respondents thought that state budget fraud happened rather frequently in their own country and 63% of all EU respondents reasoned that corruption occurred in their national government. The corresponding percentages concerning the perceptions of EU budget fraud and corruption in the EU institutions were significantly lower, 54% and 44% respectively.

- Respondents in most of the new Member States (Czech Republic, Estonia, Malta, Cyprus, Slovenia, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Lithuania and Latvia), more often than those in most of the ‘old’ EU15 countries (Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Greece, Spain, France, Ireland, Italy, Austria, Portugal, Finland, Sweden and the UK), thought that fraud and corruption were common in their own countries; these perceptions were reversed when interviewees commented on similar problems at a European level. The exceptions are Malta and Cyprus among the new member states, where the perceived level of corruption in their own countries is not higher than in most EU15 countries, and Greece among the ‘old’ EU 15 countries, with the highest level of perceived corruption.

- Member States’ citizens gave their support to cooperation with other anti-fraud services and to EU-level anti-fraud investigations. Faced with several statements regarding the ways of combating EU budget fraud, the vast majority of respondents in all Member States agreed that:
  - their country should co-operate with the anti-fraud services of the EU institutions,
  - cooperation is also needed with such services in the other Member States,
  - the EU should coordinate national investigations into EU budget fraud, and
  - the EU needed its own EU-level anti-fraud organisation.

- Awareness of the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) was not high; the levels of recognition ranged from 8% in Finland, Sweden and Ireland to 29% in Bulgaria.

- When EU citizens were asked which national institutions they would trust in the fight against fraudulent use of the EU budget, the national police forces and the national customs services came top of the list (three out of 10 respondents said they completely trusted these institutions).

- Respondents felt less informed about the work of OLAF and other European bodies in fighting EU budget fraud: 59% of respondents who had not heard of OLAF and 20% of those who had heard of it, were unable or unwilling to say to what extent they trusted the organisation.

- Focusing solely on respondents who formulated an opinion, it was noted that OLAF and other European-level bodies were trusted as often as national organisations.

- Only a small minority of EU citizens (4%) reported being asked to pay a bribe in return for services in the past 12 months. The prevalence of bribery was higher in the new Member States (NMS) than in the EU15 countries (12% vs. 2%).

- Three out of 10 respondents said it had been an inspector (for example, in the domains of health, construction or food quality) who asked them for a bribe. Half as many respondents were asked to pay a bribe by someone involved in private business (18%) or by a police officer (14%).
Two-thirds (67%) of respondents selected “radio and TV” as the preferred means of receiving information about the fight against EU budget fraud. They were followed by newspapers, selected by half (51%) of the respondents. Just over a third opted to inform themselves by searching the Internet or by using other web-based tools (e.g. YouTube).
1. Citizens’ perceptions about fraud and corruption in the EU27

More EU citizens reasoned that there was fraud, corruption and other wrongdoing at national level than at the EU level or within the European institutions.

Seven out of 10 respondents (71%) thought that state budget fraud happened rather frequently in their country and 63% reasoned that corruption and other wrongdoing occurred in their national government and institutions. The corresponding percentages concerning the perceptions of EU budget fraud and corruption in the EU institutions were, respectively, 54% and 44%. An equally large proportion (43%) thought that corruption occurred rather frequently in international organisations (see Chart 1).

Furthermore, EU citizens found it more difficult to assess the scale of fraud and corruption at an international level than at a national level: while 14% of respondents could not estimate the extent of state budget fraud and national institutional corruption, more than a quarter could not answer the question relating to such problems at the EU and international levels.

The country results showed a large variation in the perceptions about the extent of fraud and corruption at the national level. The numbers estimating that fraudulent use of the state budget was rather frequent in their country ranged from 37% in Estonia to 91% in Greece. Similarly, the proportion who thought that corruption occurred frequently in their national institutions ranged from a quarter of respondents (23%) in Denmark to 84% in Lithuania.

The country rankings, however, also showed that a large majority of citizens in most of the new Member States in Central and Eastern Europe tended to think that fraud and corruption were common in their country, while those in most of the EU15 countries were much less likely to take that view. Estonia was a notable exception in the former, with the lowest number of respondents having a perception of state budget fraud (37%). Greece was the most significant exception among the EU15 countries, where 91% of respondents had the perception that state budget fraud happened rather frequently.

When asked to comment of the extent of fraud and corruption at European and international levels, the results from individual Member States also showed wide variations:

- EU budget fraud: the proportion of rather frequently answers ranged from a quarter – 24% – in Estonia to three-quarters – 73% – in Germany.
• Corruption in the EU institutions: the *rather frequently* answers ranged from 23% in Estonia to 61% in Austria,
• Corruption in other international institutions, such as the UN or the World Bank: the *rather frequently* answers ranged from 16% in Estonia to 57% in Germany.

New Member States’ (NMS’) respondents, more often than those in the EU15, thought that fraud and corruption were common in their own countries. When European and international institutions were examined, however, it was the EU15 citizens who tended to see more problems of this kind.

2. Ways of fighting EU budget fraud

_A majority of EU citizens supported more cooperation with the anti-fraud services of the EU institutions and other Member States_

Faced with several statements regarding the ways of combating EU budget fraud (see Chart 2), the vast majority of respondents agreed with each one:

• almost nine out of 10 respondents (87%) agreed that their country should co-operate with the anti-fraud services of the EU institutions and 83% said the same about cooperating with such services in the other Member States,
• four out of five (81%) tended to agree that the EU should coordinate national investigations into EU budget fraud, and
• slightly less than eight out of 10 (78%) agreed that the EU needed its own EU-level anti-fraud organisation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Tend to agree</th>
<th>Tend to disagree</th>
<th>DK/NA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[COUNTRY] should co-operate more with anti-fraud services of the EU institutions</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[COUNTRY] should co-operate more with anti-fraud services of the other EU Member States</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The EU should coordinate national investigations of defrauding the European Union budget</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The EU needs its own European Union level anti-fraud organisation/institution to fight fraud</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q2. For each of the following statements about defrauding the European Union budget, could you please tell me if you tend to agree or tend to disagree?

**Base: all respondents, % by EU27**

_EU citizens were nearly unanimous in their support for the suggestion about their country’s increased cooperation with the anti-fraud services of the EU and other Member States in order to more effectively fight EU budget fraud. Except for Ireland and the Netherlands, more than eight out of 10 respondents tended to agree that there should be more collaboration with the anti-fraud services of the EU institutions and just one in 10 respondents disagreed. In the aforementioned two countries, 79% and 74%, respectively, agreed about the need for more collaboration and 15% and 18%, respectively, disagreed._
Respondents in the Netherlands were also the most liable to disagree (35%) that their country should co-operate more with the anti-fraud services of the other Member States. It was the only country where less than six out of 10 respondents (59%) agreed that there should be more collaboration between Member States.

**Member States give support for EU-level anti-fraud investigations**

A large majority of respondents in all Member States agreed with the statements about the EU actively coordinating the national anti-fraud investigations and about the need for an EU-level anti-fraud organisation. The level of agreement for the former ranged from two-thirds (65%) in Estonia to 88% in Cyprus, and for the latter from 63% in the Czech Republic to 88% in Greece.

The opposition to coordination of the national investigations by the EU was highest in the Czech Republic (19%), followed by Estonia (17%). In Finland (27%), the Czech Republic (24%) and Germany (22%), more than one-fifth of respondents tended to disagree that the EU would need its own EU-level anti-fraud body.

### 3. Familiarity with the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF)

*Awareness of the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) was not high: a majority of respondents said they had no knowledge about the anti-fraud body (86%).*

Awareness of OLAF – whose mission is to fight fraud, corruption and other irregular activities, including misconduct within the European Institutions – was not high: only slightly more than one-tenth of respondents (13%) had heard of this organisation, while a large majority of respondents said they had no knowledge about the anti-fraud body (86%).

**Chart 3: Have respondents heard of OLAF?**

Chart 3 shows that awareness levels of OLAF ranged from 8% in Finland, Sweden and Ireland to 29% in Bulgaria. Recognition was highest among Bulgarian and Romanian respondents with almost three out of 10 having heard of the anti-fraud unit (29% and 28%, respectively). Austria and Slovenia followed with awareness levels of 26% and 23%, respectively. In the Nordic countries and Ireland, on the other hand, citizens had very little knowledge of OLAF – less than one in 10 respondents said they had heard about this institution.
Socio-demographic considerations

Men, older and the more highly-educated respondents were the most likely to have heard of OLAF: while 15% of men and the same proportion of respondents aged 55 and over knew about the organisation, only 11% of women and 8% of the 15-24 year-olds did so. Similarly, while 18% of the more highly-educated respondent had heard of OLAF, only 10% of respondents with the lowest levels of education recognised the institution. The aspect of education was also apparent in the finding that the self-employed (15%) and employees (14%) were more aware about OLAF than manual workers (11%) or those without paid work (12%).

4. Trust in organisations to fight EU budget fraud

When EU citizens were asked which national institutions they would trust in the fight against fraudulent use of the EU budget, the national police forces and customs services came top of the list.

Approximately eight out of 10 respondents said they trusted the national police forces and customs services (84% and 78%, respectively), and three out of 10 interviewees trusted them completely (30% and 28%, respectively). Only slightly more than one in 10 said they did not trust their national police force and customs service to fight EU budget fraud (see Chart 4).

Among the listed institutions, the “press and media” was the most actively distrusted body in the fight against EU budget fraud: 37% of respondents had no trust at all in the “press and media.” Nevertheless, a majority still showed a level of trust in these organisations (60%).

EU citizens found it difficult to judge the work of OLAF, and other European bodies such as Eurojust, Europol, the Court of Auditors and the Court of Justice, in fighting EU budget fraud.

As described earlier, awareness of OLAF was low: in Europe as a whole only 13% of respondents had heard of the organisation. Among those with such knowledge, 80% were
willing to express an opinion. The majority of respondents who had not heard of OLAF were unable or unwilling to say to what extent they trusted OLAF: 41% were willing to offer an opinion about OLAF’s ability to fight EU budget fraud.

Focusing solely on respondents who formulated an opinion about trust in organisations to fight fraud (see the right hand side of Chart 4), it was noted that they had as much faith in European-level bodies as they had in national organisations. More than eight out of 10 respondents – who answered this question – said they trusted these European institutions, and three out of 10 interviewees trusted them completely. Only slightly more than one in 10 said they did not trust OLAF or other European bodies to fight EU budget fraud.

Furthermore, a substantial difference was seen between the level of trust in OLAF of those who were “guessing” or giving an uninformed opinion and those who claimed that they were aware of its existence. The amount of trust in OLAF was almost three times greater among those familiar with the organisation. It can be safely concluded, therefore, that there is a favourable disposition towards OLAF: 37% of those familiar with OLAF completely trust it, and 53% partially trust the European anti-fraud office. A quarter (26%) of those not familiar with OLAF, but still willing to give an opinion, expressed complete trust.

As for other European bodies such as Eurojust, Europol, the Court of Auditors and the Court of Justice, two-thirds (65%) of respondents expressed a level of trust and a quarter even said they had complete trust in those organisations. Looking solely at those respondents who expressed an opinion, the aforementioned European bodies received the same high level of trust (88%) as national bodies such as the police forces (86%) and the national customs services (87%).

Country-level results

A majority of respondents in most of the Member States could not say how much they trusted OLAF – see Chart 5. In Latvia and Italy, three-quarters of respondents could not answer this question (77% and 74%, respectively); in comparison, only a third of British and Irish respondents gave a “don’t know” answer (32% and 35%, respectively).

The Maltese were the ones most frequently placing complete trust in OLAF (34%), followed by the Dutch (25%), and the Cypriot and Irish respondents (both 22%). Furthermore, although only a minority of Bulgarian and Estonian respondents could say how much they trusted OLAF, they were more likely to express greater or similar levels of complete trust than partial trust in the organisation.

Only a small minority of respondents in each of the Member States distrusted OLAF. The most scepticism concerning OLAF was found in the UK (12%), followed by the Czech Republic (10%); only a handful of Dutch and Italians (both 3%) shared these opinions about the organisation.
A significant number of respondents in most Member States also found it hard to evaluate the level of trust they had in other European bodies, e.g. Eurojust and Europol, in the fight against EU budget fraud. The proportion of respondents who did not know how to answer this question ranged from 7% in Luxembourg to a majority in Bulgaria (53%) and Latvia (60%).

The Luxembourgish and Dutch respondents were the ones showing the most trust in other European bodies (89% and 82%, respectively), and were also the respondents who were the most likely to show complete trust (39% and 38%, respectively). Once more, it was noted that only a minority of respondents distrusted organisations such as Europol or Eurojust. The highest level of scepticism against such European institutions fighting EU budget fraud was, however, again found in the UK (15%), followed by the Czech Republic (13%). By comparison, only a handful of Luxembourgish and Dutch respondents (4%) said that they distrusted such institutions.

When looking at the individual country results in terms of the level of trust in the national institutions fighting fraudulent use of the EU budget, the following patterns were observed:

- respondents from the Nordic countries – Finland, Denmark and Sweden – were generally the most likely to trust national institutions, such as the police force or the legal system and courts
- the level of trust in national institutions shown by Luxembourgish and Dutch respondents was also frequently above the EU27 average
- respondents from the EU’s newest Member States, Bulgaria and Romania, however, were generally the least likely to say that they trusted national institutions
- distrust was also more often expressed in the Baltic countries – Latvia and Lithuania – and in Greece.

Respondents were also asked how much they trusted the national anti-corruption body. Here, the answering patterns differed significantly from the ones found for other national institutions. While the Nordic countries showed an average level of trust, it was the Irish and British respondents who most often said that they trusted the national anti-corruption body (both 87%). Nearly half of the Irish (45%) said they completely trusted this institution.
Socio-demographic considerations

For some of the national institutions (the police, customs services and tax authorities), younger respondents were more likely to express their distrust, whereas older respondents were more likely to say they had complete trust. This picture was reversed for the European bodies fighting EU budget fraud: younger respondents had the higher levels of trust.

The more highly-educated respondents expressed higher levels of trust than the less-educated ones. The exceptions to this pattern related to trust in the “press and media.” The more highly-educated respondents were the ones that tended not to trust the press and the media.

Women, the older and the less-educated respondents, manual workers and those without a paid job were the most likely not to give – or have – an opinion.

5. Actual reports of corruption in the EU27

*Only a small minority of EU citizens (4%) said that they had been asked to pay a bribe in return for services in the past 12 months (see Chart 6).*

The prevalence of bribery was higher in the NMS than in the EU15 countries (12% vs. 2%). Nevertheless, in almost all Member States the proportion of interviewees who said they had been asked to pay a bribe was less than 10%. Attempts of bribery were, however, more common in Romania (23%), Lithuania (16%), Hungary (13%) and Greece (13%).

**Chart 6: Have respondents been asked to pay a bribe? (in the last 12 months)**

Respondents who said they were asked – or expected – to pay a bribe in the past 12 months were also requested to state the last time this happened and who had demanded or expected them to pay this bribe. Three out of 10 respondents said it had been an inspector (e.g. in the domain of health, construction or food quality) who asked them to pay a bribe (31%). Half as many respondents were asked for a bribe by someone involved in private business (18%) or by a police officer (14%). Only a minority said the bribery involved a tax officer (4%), a customs officer (3%), a judge, magistrate or prosecutor (2%) or a politician (2%).

Virtually none of the respondents said an official from the European institutions asked them to pay a bribe.

One-fifth of respondents answered that the attempt at bribery was initiated by another type of official or institution than the ones listed in the survey.
The type of official or institution most often initiating the attempt at bribery varied across Member States. For example, in Poland, Romania and Latvia, respondents most often said it was an inspector who asked them for a bribe, while Bulgarians and Czechs most frequently came in contact with a corrupt police officer. In Belgium and Estonia, on the other hand, the largest group of respondents had been asked for a bribe by someone in a private business.

6. The fight against EU budget fraud: sources of information

“Radio and TV” was by far the preferred option (67%) as a means of receiving information about the fight against EU budget fraud.

“Radio and TV” received the most support as a means of learning more about fighting EU budget fraud: two-thirds (67%) of respondents selected this option from the list. Furthermore, a quarter of respondents would like to watch a TV mini-series or short TV movie about the topic – watching television was by far the most preferred way for receiving information about the fight against fraud.

Newspapers followed, with 51% of respondents opting for this as a preferred channel. Slightly more than a third of respondents said they would prefer to inform themselves by searching the Internet or by using other web-based tools (e.g. YouTube).

A quarter of respondents would like to read a brochure or leaflet on this subject. For 10% of respondents a CD-ROM, DVD or video would be a preferred channel.
Respondents in almost all of the Member States frequently selected the same information channels, i.e. “radio and TV” in first position, followed by newspapers (in second position) and the Internet (in third position).

Some differences could, nevertheless, be observed in the importance of each of these channels between Member States. In Bulgaria, for example, “radio and TV” clearly stood out by far as being the most popular channel, selected by 77% of respondents. The second and third most-mentioned channels, newspapers and the Internet, were selected by just 41% and 24%, respectively, of Bulgarian respondents. This difference was smaller in other countries: in Luxembourg, for example, 77% of respondents opted for “TV and radio” (in first position) compared to 74% who preferred reading newspapers (in second position).

In Ireland, the UK and Malta, “radio and TV” was also the most popular choice, followed by newspapers (Ireland and the UK) or the Internet (Malta). However, in these countries, a TV mini-series or short TV film was placed in third position (IE: 59%, UK: 57%, MT: 27%).

Brochures and leaflets, on the other hand, were the third most popular choice in Sweden (32%) and Romania (27%).

In regard to being informed about the fight against EU budget fraud, the analysis by socio-demographic groups showed that:

- Men, younger respondents, those with the highest levels of education, city dwellers, employees and the self-employed were more likely to prefer the Internet or other web-based tools as a way of gaining information about the fight against EU budget fraud.

- Women, older and less-educated respondents, those living in rural areas, manual workers and those not working, on the other hand, preferred to receive information by watching TV or by listening to the radio.