

# User language preferences online

## Summary

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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.

Flash EB Series #313

# User language preferences online

Survey conducted by The Gallup Organization,  
Hungary upon the request of  
Directorate-General Information Society and  
Media



Coordinated by Directorate-General  
Communication

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**THE GALLUP ORGANIZATION**

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## Introduction

The Flash Eurobarometer *User language preferences online* (Flash N° 313) was conducted to examine Internet users' attitudes and opinions towards the use of different languages on the Internet. In detail, the survey examined:

- Languages, other than respondents' own, that are used on the Internet: (a) when reading or watching content on the Internet, and (b) when writing on the Internet
- Use of a language, other than respondents' own, for different Internet activities
- Opinions about the availability of websites in several languages

The survey obtained interviews – fixed-line, mobile phone – with nationally representative samples of Internet users (aged 15 and older) living in the 27 Member States. The target sample size in all countries was 500 interviews; in total, 13,752 interviews were conducted by Gallup's network of fieldwork organisations from January 28 to February 1, 2011.

Readers of this report should bear in mind that Flash Eurobarometer (N° 313) only included Internet users and that the proportion of Internet users varied greatly between EU Member States:

- In countries, such as the Netherlands and Sweden, more than 90% of all individuals contacted during the survey's fieldwork reported having used the Internet in the four weeks prior to the survey. In other words, a survey among Internet users – such as this Flash Eurobarometer – covers almost the whole adult population of these countries.
- Other countries, such as Greece, Romania and Bulgaria, had lower Internet penetration rates and less than half of all individuals contacted reported having used the Internet in the past four weeks. In these countries, the *population of Internet users* represents a selective group of the *total adult population* – a group of adults that was more likely to be male, younger, highly educated and living in urban/metropolitan areas; in other words, a group of adults that was more likely to have literacy and language skills in a language, other than their own.

## Main findings

This survey interviewed **Internet users in the EU** about their language preferences when using the Internet. A large majority of respondents had used the Internet on a daily basis in the past four weeks: 54% said they had gone online *several times a day* and 30% said it had been *about once a day*.

### *Languages, other than respondents' own, that are used on the Internet*

A slim majority (55%) of Internet users in the EU said that they used at least one language other than their own to **read or watch content on the Web** and slightly more than a third (35%) used another language when **writing emails, sending messages or posting comments** on the Web.

In 23 of the 27 EU Member States, at least half of Internet users used a language other than their own to **read and watch content on the Internet**. In Italy, the Czech Republic, Ireland and the UK, a majority of Internet users said that they only used their own language to read and watch content on the Internet (between 52% and 85%).

A similar picture emerged when looking at the proportions that used a language other than their own when **writing on the Internet**. Nonetheless, in all countries, Internet users were more likely to say that they used a different language than their mother tongue for reading or watching content than for writing on the Internet.

**English was by far the most frequently used language**, other than respondents' own, when going online: 48% of Internet users in the EU mentioned using English for reading or watching content on the Internet and 29% said the same for writing on the Internet.

### *Use of a language, other than respondents' own, for different Internet activities*

The survey also found that Internet users – who used a language other than their own when going online – carried out several Internet activities in this language. For example, 81% of these respondents said they *at least occasionally* used another language when **browsing to get information, or when reading or watching the news**, 62% said they **communicated online with friends and acquaintances** in a language other than their own and 57% said the same for **searching and buying products and services** on the Internet.

In all countries, browsing the Internet to get information, reading or watching the news and communicating with friends and acquaintances were mentioned by some of the largest proportions of respondents as online activities that they *at least occasionally* carried out in another language.

### *Respondents' opinions about the availability of websites in several languages*

Although 9 in 10 Internet users in the EU said that, when given a choice of languages, they always visited a website in their own language, a slim majority (53%) would **accept using an English version of a website if it was not available in their own language**. Internet users in Cyprus and Malta were the most willing to use an English language website if this website was not available in their language (90% and 97%, respectively).

Almost 9 in 10 (88%) Internet users in the EU agreed that **all websites produced in their country should be available in their country's official languages**. At the same time, about 8 in 10 (81%) interviewees thought that all websites produced in their country should also have **versions available in other languages**.

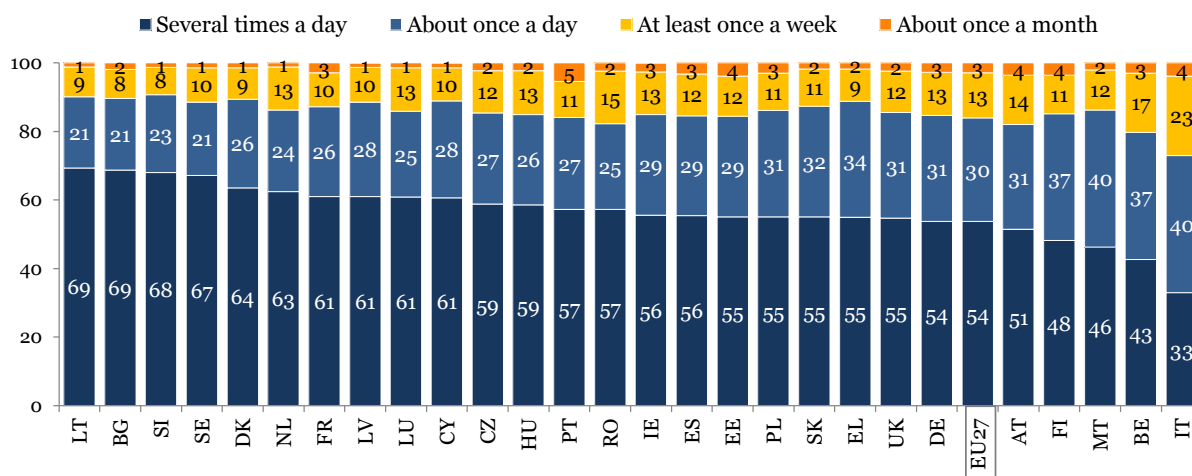
Finally, more than 4 in 10 (44%) Internet users in the EU thought **they missed interesting information because websites were not available in a language they understood**. In Romania, Bulgaria, Portugal, Cyprus, Spain and Greece, a majority of respondents agreed with this statement (between 51%-60%).

# 1. Frequency of the Internet use

A great majority of Internet users in the EU had used the Internet on a daily basis in the past four weeks: 54% said they had gone online *several times a day* in that timeframe and 30% said it had been *about once a day*. Just over a tenth (13%) of interviewees said they had used the Internet *at least once a week* in the past four weeks, while a minority (3%) had used it *about once a month*.

In almost all EU Member States, with the exception of Italy, at least 80% of Internet users answered that they had used the Internet on a daily basis in the four weeks prior to the survey (from 80% in Belgium to 91% in Slovenia). Furthermore, two-thirds – or more – respondents in Sweden (67%), Slovenia (68%), Bulgaria and Lithuania (both 69%) said they had gone online *several times a day* in the past four weeks, compared to only half as many Italians (33%).

## Frequency of Internet use



S1. In the last four weeks, how often have you used the Internet – whether at home, at work, or somewhere else?  
Base: all respondents, % by country

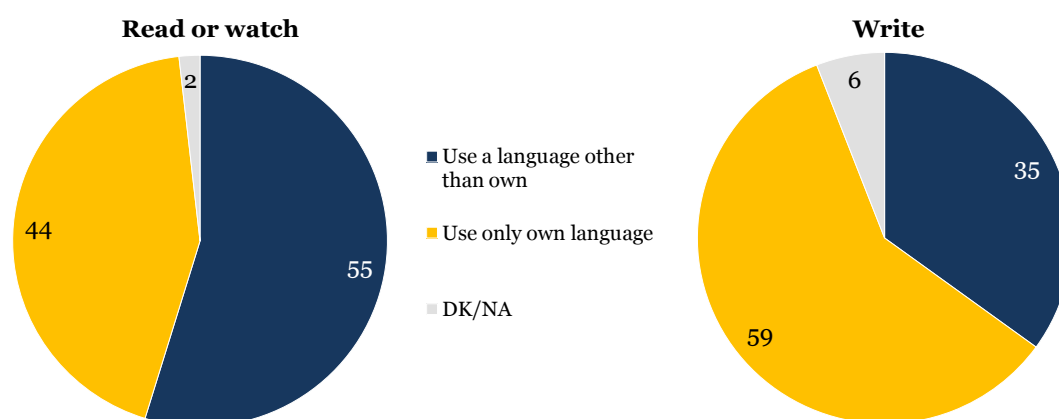
Large differences between the various socio-demographic groups were seen in the proportions of “heavy” Internet users. For example, men were more likely than women to have gone online *several times a day* in the past four weeks (58% vs. 50%). Similarly, while 36% of respondents with the lowest level of education used the Internet this frequently, this proportion increased to 62% for those with the highest level of education and 65% for full-time students.

## 2. Languages, other than respondents' own, that are used on the Internet

### 2.1 Use of foreign languages when using the Internet

A slim majority (55%) of Internet users in the EU said that they used at least one language other than their own to **read or watch** content on the Internet, while 44% said that they only used their own language. Respondents were considerably less likely to say that they used another language when **writing** emails, sending messages or posting comments on the Web: 35% said they did and 59% said they did not.

#### Languages, other than respondents' own, that are used on the Internet



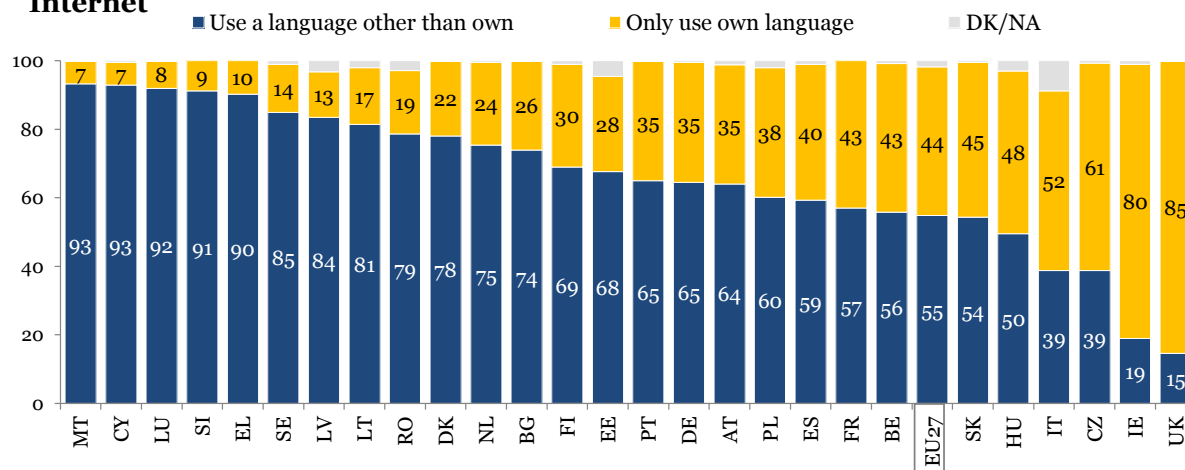
Q4A. Which languages, other than your own, do you use to read or watch content on the Internet – and how often?

Q4B. Which languages, other than your own, do you use to write (e.g. emails, comments, messages posted on a website) on the Internet – and how often?

Base: all respondents, % EU27

In 23 of the 27 EU Member States, at least half of Internet users used a language other than their mother tongue to **read or watch content on the Web**; this proportion ranged from 50% in Hungary to 90%-93% in Greece, Slovenia, Luxembourg, Malta and Cyprus. In the remaining four countries, a majority of Internet users said that they only used their own language to read or watch content on the Internet: 52% in Italy, 61% in the Czech Republic, 80% in Ireland and 85% in the UK. A similar picture emerged when looking at the proportions of those who used a language other than their own when **writing on the Internet**.

#### Use of a language, other than respondents' own, to read or watch content on the Internet



Q4A. Which languages, other than your own, do you use to read or watch content on the Internet – and how often?

Base: all respondents, % by country

“Heavy” Internet users, as opposed to less frequent users, were more likely to use a different language when using the Internet. Roughly two-thirds (65%) of “heavy” Internet users used at least one additional language to read or watch content on the Internet; this proportion decreased to 27% for the least frequent Internet users (i.e. those who had used the Internet about once in the past four weeks). The corresponding proportions for writing on the Internet were 45% for “heavy” users compared to 11% for the least frequent users.

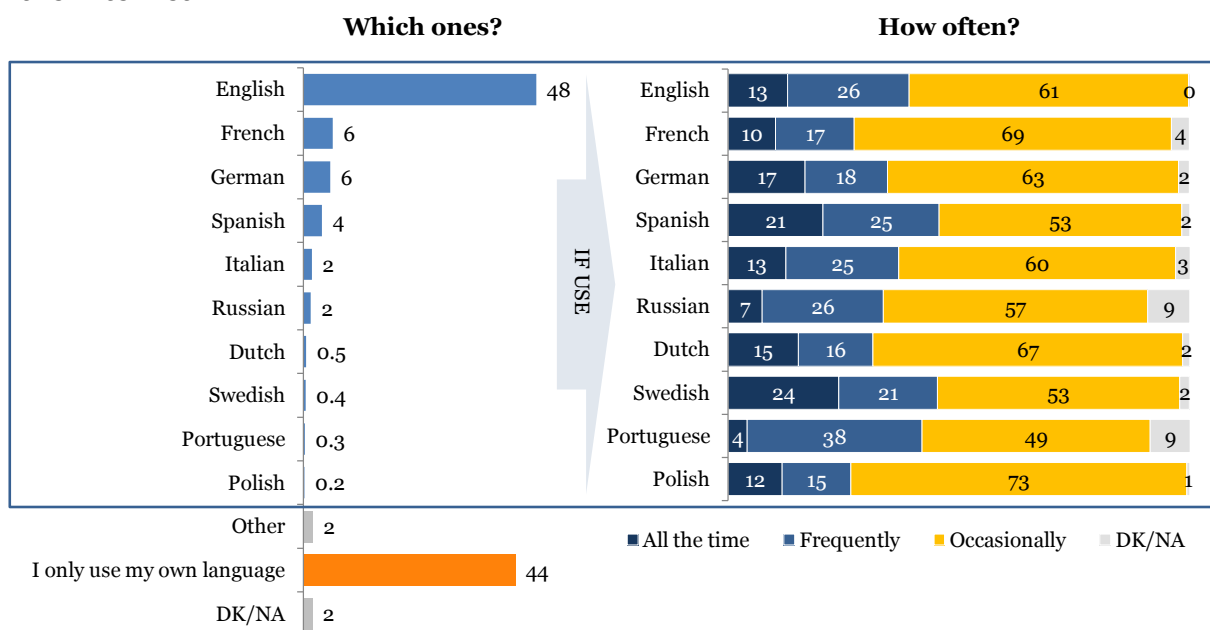
Men, 15-39 year-olds, full-time students, respondents with the highest level of education, employees and the self-employed were also more likely than their counterparts to say that they used at least one language other than their mother tongue to read, watch or write content on the Internet.

## 2.2 Most frequently used language

**English was by far the most frequently used language**, other than respondents’ own, when going online: 48% of Internet users in the EU mentioned using English for reading or watching content on the Internet and 29% said the same for writing on the Internet. Spanish, German and French were other languages that were mentioned by a relatively high number of respondents.

In almost all countries, English was the most frequently mentioned language for reading, watching or writing content on the Web. For example, the proportion of Internet users who said that they *at least occasionally* read or watched online content in English ranged from 35% in the Czech Republic and Italy to 90%-91% in Cyprus and Malta. Furthermore, in almost all countries, the second and third most frequently mentioned languages were used by considerably smaller proportions of respondents.

### Languages, other than respondents’ own, that are used to read or watch content on the Internet



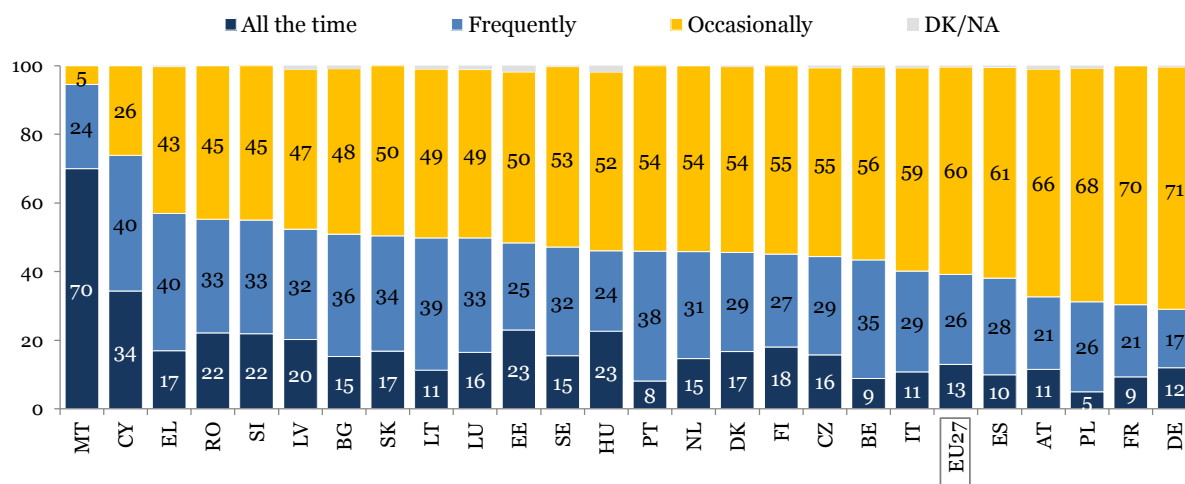
Q4A. Which languages, other than your own, do you use to read or watch content on the Internet – and how often?  
Base: all respondents, % EU27

When looking at the frequency of using English on the Internet, it was noted that those who used this language *occasionally* outnumbered those who used it *frequently* or *all the time*. For example, among those who used English for reading or watching content on the Internet, 13% said that they used this language *all the time* and 26% said that they used it *frequently*, while a majority (61%) answered that they *occasionally* used English for reading and watching content on the Internet.



In Malta, 70% of respondents who used English to read or watch content on the Internet used this language *all the time*, while 24% said they used it *frequently*. The corresponding proportions for Cyprus were 34% and 40%, respectively. Respondents in Germany, France, Poland and Austria were the least likely to use English *frequently* or *all the time* for reading or watching content on the Web (between 29% and 32%). The individual country results for the use of English when writing on the Web were similar to those observed for reading or watching content on the Internet.

### Use of English, rather than respondents' own language, to read or watch content on the Internet



#### Q4A. Which languages, other than your own, do you use to read or watch content on the Internet – and how often?

Note: UK and IE not shown (in these countries, less than 50 respondents said their mother tongue was not English)

Base: those who use this language (which is not their own) to read or watch content on the Internet, % by country

Across all socio-demographic groups, English was the most frequently mentioned foreign language for reading, watching or writing content on the Internet. Frequent users of English – using this language *frequently* or *all the time*, rather than *occasionally*, to read, watch or write content on the Web – were more likely to be men, those with the highest level of education and full-time students, younger respondents and the self-employed. For example, the younger the respondents were, the more likely they were to say that they used English *frequently* or *all the time* to read or watch content on the Internet: 49% for 15-24 year-olds vs. 33%-34% for over 40 year-olds.

### 3. Use of a language, other than respondents' own, for different Internet activities

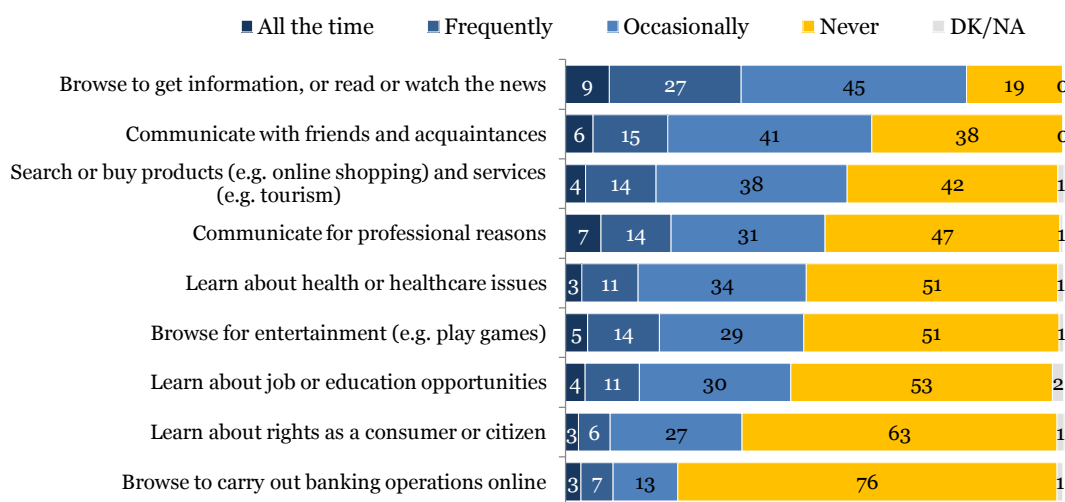
Chapter 3 focuses solely on respondents who said that they used a language other than their own to read, watch or write content on the Internet.

When these respondents were asked for which Internet activities they used a language other than their own, the largest proportion (81%) said that they *at least occasionally* used another language when **browsing to get information, or when reading or watching the news**. Roughly 6 in 10 (62%) interviewees said they **communicated with friends and acquaintances** in a language other than their own and slightly more than half (52%) said the same about **communicating for professional reasons**. The corresponding proportion for “**searching or buying products (e.g. online shopping) and services (e.g. tourism)**” was 56%.

All other activities were mentioned by less than half of interviewees; respondents were the least likely to say that they *at least occasionally* used a language other than their own for **carrying out banking operations online** (23%) or for **learning about their rights as consumers or citizens** (36%). This may be explained in part by the smaller proportion of respondents who carry out these activities on the Internet regardless of the language used.

For each of the online activities listed in the survey, respondents who said they *occasionally* used a language other than their own outnumbered those who said they did so *frequently* or *all the time*. For example, 41% of respondents who used a language other than their own when online said they *occasionally* used another language to communicate online with friends or acquaintances, compared to 21% who said this happened “frequently” or “all the time”.

#### Frequency of using a language, other than respondents' own, for various Internet activities

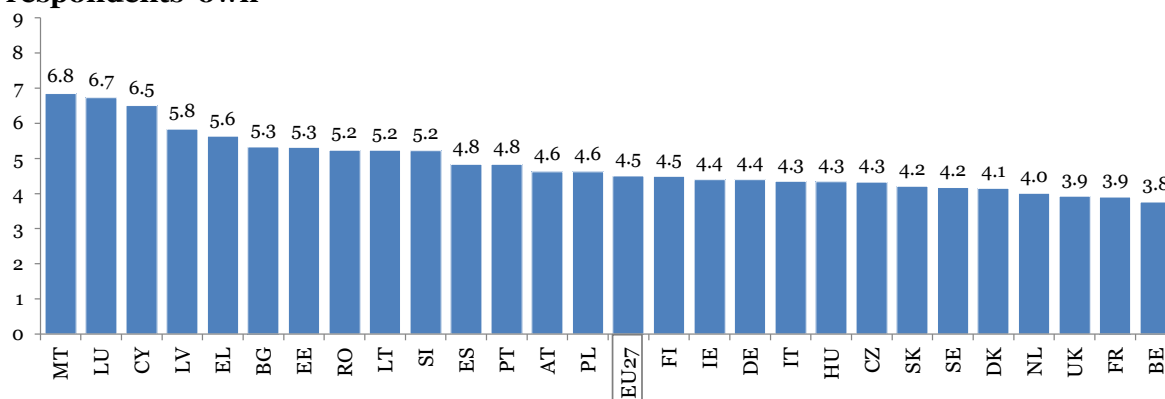


Q5. For each of the following Internet activities, how often do you use a language different from your own language?

Base: those who use a language other than their own to read/watch/write on the Internet, % EU27

Respondents in Cyprus, Malta and Luxembourg were the most likely to perform the listed activities in a language other than their own; the average number of online activities carried out in a different language was as high as 6.5 in Cyprus, 6.7 in Luxembourg and 6.8 in Malta. Latvia and Greece followed with average scores of 5.8 and 5.6, respectively. In comparison, in Belgium, France, the UK and the Netherlands, respondents performed – on average – four or fewer of the nine online activities in a language other than their own (between 3.8 and 4.0).

### Average number of Internet activities performed in a language other than respondents' own

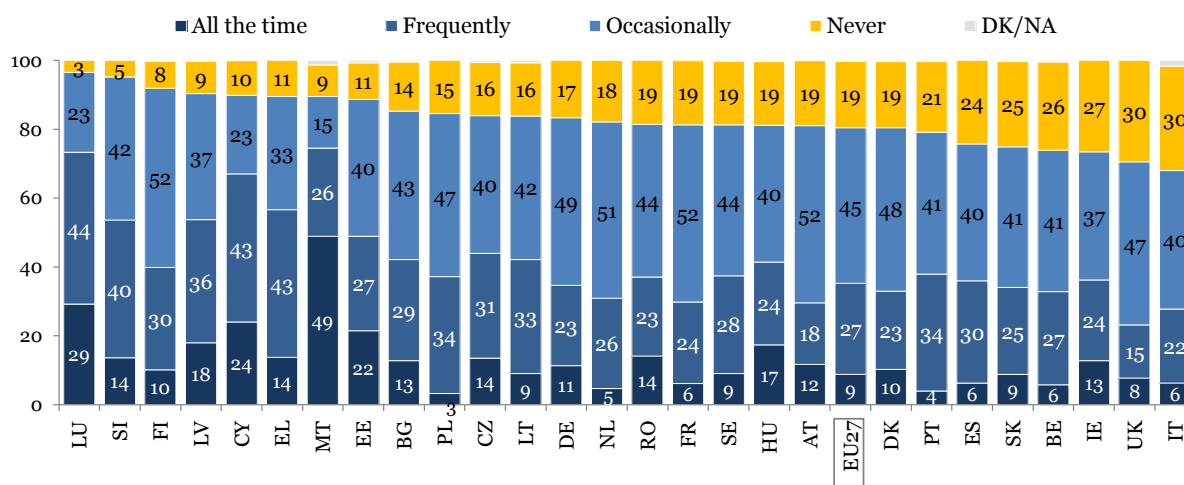


Q5. For each of the following Internet activities, how often do you use a language different from your own language?

Base: those who use a language other than their own to read/watch/write on the Internet  
Average number of the 9 tested Internet activities that were carried out "all the time" or "frequently" or "occasionally"

Across almost all EU Member States, **browsing to get information, or reading or watching the news** was the most frequently mentioned online activity performed in a language other than the respondent's own. Respondents in Luxembourg and Slovenia were the most likely to say that they *at least occasionally* used a language other than their own when browsing to get information or reading or watching the news on the Web (both 96%). Furthermore, 49% of respondents in Malta and 29% of those in Luxembourg said they used another language *at all times* for this activity.

### Browse to get information, or read or watch the news

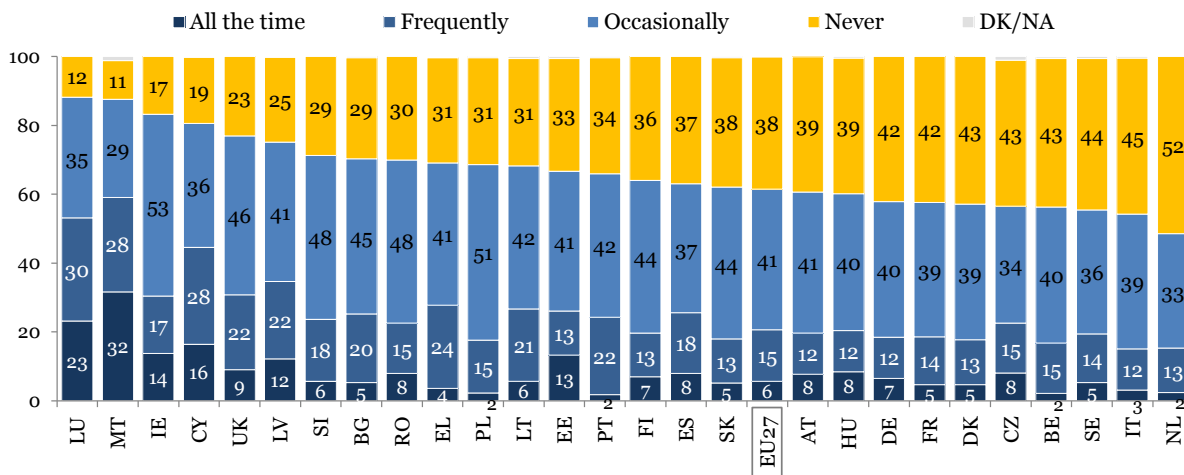


Q5. For each of the following Internet activities, how often do you use a language different from your own language?

Base: those who use a language other than their own to read/watch/write on the Internet, % by country

In Ireland and the UK, on the other hand, the highest proportion of respondents said they used a language other than their own when **communicating with friends and acquaintances** (83% and 77%, respectively). The proportion of respondents who communicated with friends and acquaintances in another language was also higher than three-quarters in Cyprus (80%), Luxembourg (88%) and Malta (89%).

### Communicate with friends and acquaintances



Q5. For each of the following Internet activities, how often do you use a language different from your own language?

Base: those who use a language other than their own to read/watch/write on the Internet, % by country

For many online activities, women, older respondents, those with the lowest level of education and non-working respondents were less likely to say that they *at least occasionally* used a language other than their own. For example, the largest differences across educational groups were seen when looking at the proportions of respondents who said they used a language other than their own when going online to communicate with friends: 77% of full-time students and 63% of the most educated, compared to 40% of the least educated.

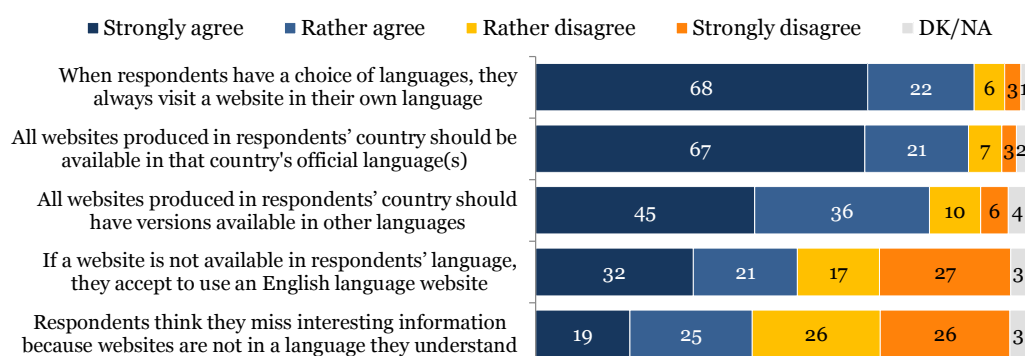
## 4. Opinions about the availability of websites in several languages

Although 9 in 10 Internet users said that, when they had a choice of languages, they always visited a website in their own language (68% *strongly* agreed and 22% *rather* agreed), a slim majority would accept using an English version of a website if it was not available in their own language (32% *strongly* agreed and 21% *rather* agreed).

Slightly less than 9 in 10 interviewees agreed that all websites produced in their country should be available in their country's official languages (67% *strongly* agreed and 21% *rather* agreed). At the same time, about 8 in 10 interviewees thought that all websites produced in their country should also have versions available in other languages (45% *strongly* agreed and 36% *rather* agreed).

More than 4 in 10 (44%) respondents in total agreed – about a fifth (19%) *strongly* agreed – that they missed interesting information because websites were not available in a language they understood.

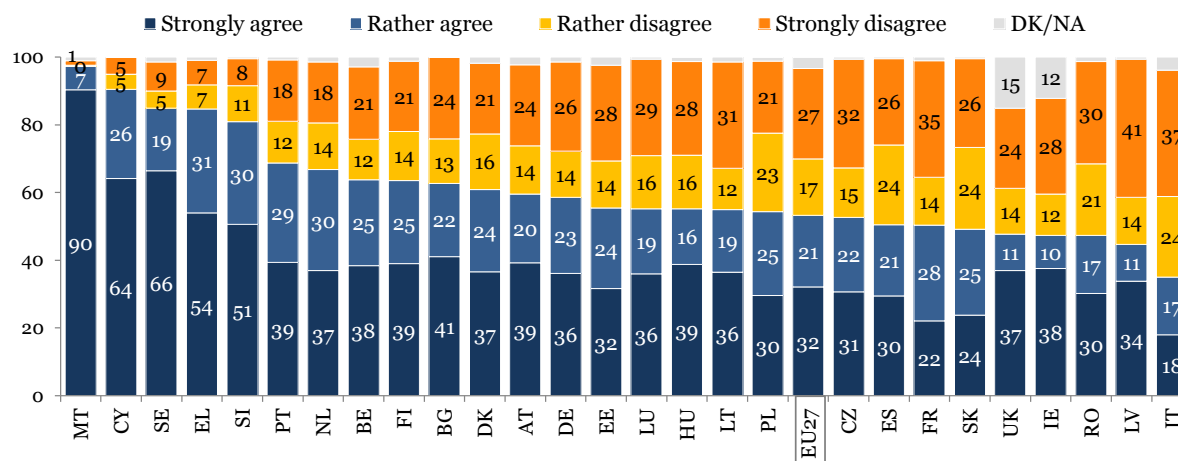
### Opinions about the availability of websites in several languages



Q6. I am going to give you some statements. Please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with each of them. Do you strongly agree, rather agree, rather disagree or strongly disagree that ...  
Base: all respondents, % EU27

Respondents in Cyprus and Malta were the most **willing to use an English language website if this website was not available in their language** (90% and 97%, respectively). Other countries with a high proportion of respondents willing to use an English language website were Slovenia (81%), Greece and Sweden (both 85%). Over half of respondents in Italy (61%), Latvia (55%) and Romania (51%) *rather* or *strongly disagreed* when asked if they would accept an English version of a website.

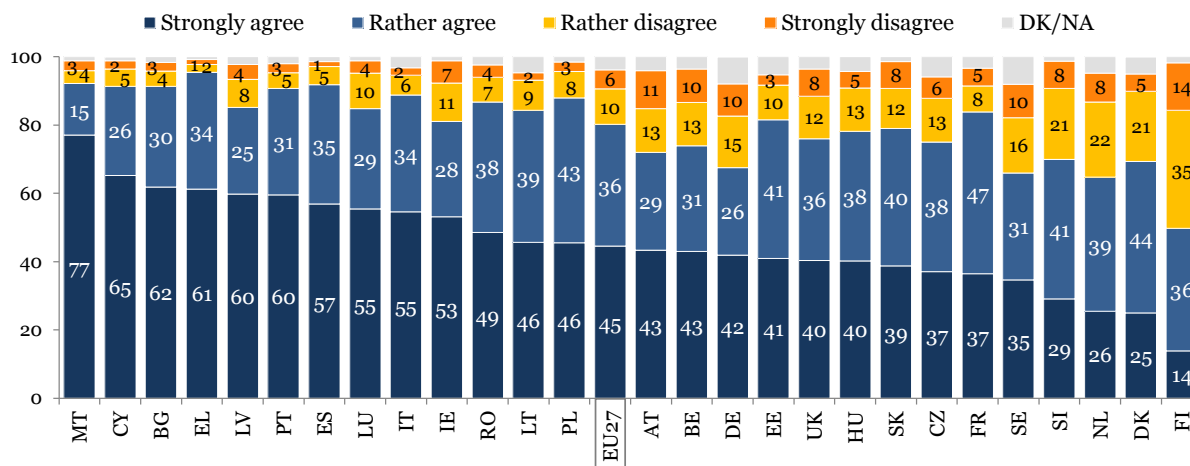
### If a website is not available in respondents' language, they accept to use an English language website



Q6. I am going to give you some statements. Please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with each of them. Do you strongly agree, rather agree, rather disagree or strongly disagree that ...  
Base: all respondents, % by country

A strong majority of Internet users in all EU Member States agreed that **all websites produced in their country should be available in their country’s official language(s)**; the total level of agreement ranged from 73% in Sweden to 98% in Bulgaria. A larger variation was seen in the total level of agreement for the statement that **all websites produced in respondents’ countries should have versions available in other languages**; ranging from 50% in Finland to 95% in Greece.

**All websites produced in respondents’ country should have versions available in other languages**



**Q6. I am going to give you some statements. Please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with each of them. Do you strongly agree, rather agree, rather disagree or strongly disagree that ...**  
 Base: all respondents, % by country

Respondents with low or average levels of education were more likely to *rather* or *strongly* agree that, when given a choice of languages, they always visited websites in their own language (91%-93% vs. 86% of the most educated). Women, rural residents, employees and manual workers were also more likely to agree with this statement.

Younger respondents (and those still in education), self-employed respondents and “heavy” Internet users were more likely than their counterparts to accept using an English language version if a website was not available in their own language. For example, while 65% of 15-24 year-olds *rather* or *strongly* agreed that they would accept using an English language version of a website, this proportion decreased to 49% for the over 54 year-olds.