



Standard Eurobarometer



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EUROBAROMETER 62

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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NATIONAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MALTA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The report examines the results of a public opinion survey held in Malta as part of wave 62 of the standard Eurobarometer. The survey was carried out during October 2004.

Expectations

An evaluation of trends in short-term expectations indicates that, in spite of high pessimism on the short-term prospects of the country's economy, the large majority of Maltese believe that they will be able to maintain or improve their personal financial situation and the quality of their own life. The survey results suggest that the Maltese believe, at a personal level, in their ability to overcome the challenges presented by economic restructuring in the country. This could also be a reflection of the growing importance being assigned to non-financial life domains, such as the quality of the environment, and the role of the EU in introducing higher standards to those domains.

Perceptions on the prospects of the quality of life tend to reflect the age of respondents. A majority of those in the 15-24 age segments expect their life to get better in twelve months' time. On the other hand, those aged between 40 and 54 years are the least optimistic about their life prospects. This could reflect the difficulties that those in the more mature age groups expect to face due to the changing work environment.

In the medium term (five years' time), about half the respondents believe their personal situation will improve. Nevertheless, the Maltese who said they did not know what their position would be in five years' time was the highest recorded among the 25 EU member countries.

Issues facing the nation

The state of the economy was identified as the most important challenge for Malta at present. This was followed closely by the level of unemployment and the inflation rate, which are both closely tied to the prevailing economic situation. The survey results mirror Malta's current phase of below-potential economic growth.

The immigration issue, which had been ranked in ninth place in the autumn 2004 survey, was considered the fourth most important issue facing Malta. Increasing concern on this issue is likely to reflect the influx of a relatively large number of illegal immigrants during summer 2004. When compared to the 25 EU member countries overall, Malta's respondents placed more emphasis on the economic situation, but expressed less concern on the issue of crime.

Trust in Maltese Institutions

Survey participants said they mostly tend to trust charitable or voluntary organizations. Many of these organizations are administered by the Catholic Church, which retains a strong influence over Maltese society. The army and the police also enjoy a high level of trust. A majority of respondents affirmed they do not trust the political parties and the media (which themselves are partly owned by the political parties).

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Politics occupies a central role in Maltese society, with voter turnout in national elections exceeding 95%. Support for the government peaked in spring 2003, but has declined since then. Trust in the Maltese government remains high when compared to the situation in the 25 EU member countries in general.

Knowledge about the European Union

Maltese respondents believe they have a modest level of knowledge about the European Union. Perceptions on knowledge about the EU were related to respondents' opinions about Malta's membership of the EU, with those against Malta's membership reporting low levels of perceived information.

However, when questioned about basic facts concerning the EU, Maltese respondents performed very positively when compared to the participants elsewhere in the 25 member states. The information campaigns before the high profile EU accession referendum in 2003 and the elections for the European Parliament representatives in 2004 sustained a high interest in the subject among the population.

The low level of perceived knowledge and the relatively high level of actual knowledge on basic issues contrast sharply. This could in part reflect an aspiration to understand the more detailed workings of the EU.

Television is by far the most popular source for EU-related information, followed by radio and the daily newspapers. A classification of respondents by age bracket shows that television is the most popular medium for all age groups, but it is the least popular with those aged between 15 and 24. The Internet is especially popular with those aged between 15 and 24, with half of them saying they referred to the Internet for their EU information needs. A breakdown of respondents by main occupation shows that, among the student population, the Internet is even more popular than television.

Awareness of EU institutions was very high among Maltese respondents. The EU institution about which the Maltese said they had mostly heard was the European Parliament, an institution that enjoyed widespread publicity in Malta as a result of the June 2004 elections.

Support for EU Membership

The share of respondents who believe that Malta's EU membership will be a positive development for their country continued to drop from its peak in autumn 2003. However, this decline has not been accompanied by an increase in those who say that EU membership will be detrimental to the country. Instead, there has been a shift towards the opinion that EU membership will have an overall neutral effect.

This shift in opinion probably reflects increased awareness that the country's challenges, particularly those related to public finances and international competitiveness, cannot be solved through EU membership alone. Instead, there appears to be a growing acceptance that these challenges require domestic solutions.

When asked about their opinion on key EU projects and policies, the Maltese mostly agreed with teaching school children the way EU institutions work, having a European Commission composed of commissioners from each member state and further enlargement of the EU. As in the other EU member states, the Maltese expressed low support for having one group of countries proceeding at a faster speed than the others in the building of Europe. Maltese respondents were also the most uncertain as to whether or not they supported a monetary union, indicating a lack of information on this issue.

Meaning of the European Union

For most Maltese, the EU mostly means freedom to travel, study and work, as well as a stronger say in the world. This reflects the wish to overcome some of the drawbacks of living on a small island state through EU membership. The Maltese also associate the EU with democracy and peace. The share of respondents

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who said the EU is linked to economic prosperity was particularly high when compared to the average in the 25 member states.

Most Maltese agree that Malta's voice matters in the EU and that the country will become more influential in the EU in future. Maltese respondents believe the EU plays a positive role in environmental protection. On the international front, the Maltese believe the EU has been performing positively in the fight against terrorism and in general external relations.

Overall, the Maltese expressed a lower level of fear about the building of Europe than respondents in the 25 member states. As in the other member states, the Maltese are highly concerned about the transfer of jobs to countries with lower production costs. Increased drug trafficking and international organized crime, possibly facilitated by the removal of cross-border controls and the freedom of movement for people, are also an important source of concern. On the other hand, the Maltese do not think a decline in the use of their language or the loss of national identity is likely.

European Identity

Maltese respondents share a strong sense of European identity. The percentage of Maltese who say they identify with their own nationality only is lower than that reported in the 25 member states overall. Most Maltese said they felt equally Maltese and European. Maltese females tend to sense a European identity to a lesser extent than males.

EU Reform

Support for the EU Constitution fell to 56% according to the latest survey, down from 70% in the spring of 2003. Support in Malta is also lower than in the 25 EU member states in general. This is unlikely to be directly connected to the contents of the Constitution that grants the country an additional seat in the European Parliament. About a quarter of respondents say they do not know whether or not they support the Constitution.

Among the 25 EU member states and the candidate countries, the Maltese have expressed the lowest level of support for a rapid reaction force that would be used to deal with situations of international crisis.