

EUROBAROMETER 70

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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NATIONAL REPORT
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
BULGARIA

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Summary

This report presents the national analysis of the results from the Standard Eurobarometer Survey, carried out in the autumn of 2008 among more than 30 000 citizens from all EU Member States, Candidate Countries and the Turkish Cypriot community. It is the fourth since Bulgaria joined the EU. The survey provides a picture of Bulgarian public opinion, along with the trends and changes in national and European public opinion, compared with the previous six-month period, as well as in a longer term - since Bulgaria joined the EU, and prior to its membership. Eurobarometer also offers a unique opportunity to show the opinion of the “average Bulgarian” versus that of the “average” citizen of the EU and of the New Member States.

The analysis is based on the data collected by means of face-to-face interviews, carried out simultaneously in 31 countries and territories with the use of a standard questionnaire, which provides the basis for national comparisons. The Bulgarian sample is homogeneous and, like in all the other countries, it is representative of the opinion of citizens aged 15 and above.

The time when the poll took place in Bulgaria (9 – 20 October 2008) coincides with the escalating global financial crisis and the ongoing financial sanctions imposed on the country by the EU. Both have a strong influence on the socio-economic and political views of Bulgarians and on their self-confidence as EU citizens.

The results of the survey reveal that, during this period, characterised by low electoral activity, the majority of Bulgarians (56%) feel only “occasionally” engaged in political discussions. This shows no major difference with the average EU citizen (55%). On the other hand, 13% of Bulgarians polled say they “often” take part in political debates, and nearly three out of ten – “never”. In times when Bulgaria’s relations with the EU are the main topic in the media, discussions on these issues engage the two opposing ends of the political spectrum and nurture Bulgarians’ interest in political matters.

Social optimism of Bulgarians is now influenced by the economic crisis. However, they are less pessimistic than the average EU citizen

Bulgarians continue to be least satisfied with their way of life of the entire Eurobarometer poll (59%). However, while, in the spring, they felt strongly the positive effects of EU membership and their life satisfaction was on the rise, reaching its highest scores (40%), now – under the influence of the crisis, it has decreased (by 2 points).

This strong dissatisfaction with life may be explained by the unanimous opinion of citizens that **compared to the average in the European countries, the situation in Bulgaria is worse in all areas:** 88% give a negative assessment regarding the situation of the national economy, 77% - regarding the employment situation, 84% - regarding energy prices, and at least nine out of ten interviewed – regarding the cost of living (92%) and the quality of life (93%). Only Hungarians are more extreme in their views, and rank, alongside the Bulgarians, as among the most dissatisfied with their way of life.

Every second Bulgarian now shares, to the same extent with the average EU citizen, the view that his purchasing power has decreased compared to five years ago. In the spring of 2008, Bulgarians were less inclined to think in this way (47%, +3 points), and to a lesser extent (by 5 points) than the average EU citizen (52%).

Citizens' concerns regarding rising prices and inflation, which are seen as the most important issue, both in Bulgaria and in the EU, have increased most of all (+5 points), while, in spring 2008, the opposite trend was observed (-4 points). Bulgaria is now one of the countries with the highest concern regarding inflation (56%), after Austria (61%), Latvia (59%) and Slovenia (57%).

Concern for the economic situation has gone up for the first time since the country joined the EU (by 4 points, to 29%). For citizens of the EU this represents, along with inflation (37%), the second most important issue. For Bulgarians, even in a time of crisis, concerns about crime remain stronger (30%) and rank second, after concerns regarding rising prices and inflation.

Bulgarians have very pessimistic views regarding the economic situation in their country (80%). On the other hand, they are very optimistic regarding the economic situation in the EU (54%), which is in sharp contrast with the strongly negative views of the average EU citizen (58%). As regards the situation of the global economy, Bulgarian public opinion does not yet show a clear view (34% - positive, 35% - negative and 31% - don't know answers).

In their expectations for the following year, Bulgarians appear as more moderate social pessimists than the average EU citizen, but their individual pessimism is stronger:

- The majority of EU citizens (51%) consider that the economic situation in their countries will continue to deteriorate, while Bulgarians expect that, although bad, it will stay the same (40%);
- Bulgaria is one of the countries where positive forecasts for the economic situation in the EU are the highest – along with Malta and Italy (21%), and after Romania (30%) and Poland (23%). However, Bulgarian public opinion, as a whole, is dominated by “don't know” responses (36%);
- After the Hungarians (74%) and Portuguese (68%), Bulgarians perceive as worst their personal financial situation (62%). They also expect, to a higher degree than the average EU citizen (35%, + 10 points), that, in the year ahead, their own financial situation will continue to get worse.

Social and energy policies –priorities for the country and for the European Union

After inflation, crime and the economic situation, Bulgarians are most seriously concerned with social issues: employment (17%), healthcare (17%) and pensions (15%).

Of all Europeans, Bulgarians view the functioning of their healthcare system as the worst: positive answers register the lowest (17%) and negative responses the highest scores (80%) in the entire Eurobarometer poll. This is in sharp contrast with public opinion in the EU, where the majority of citizens (55%) are satisfied with the provision of healthcare in their countries (25 points higher than in BG). **Views regarding the provision of pensions are even more negative** (82%, 27 points more than the EU average). Public opinion regarding the country's employment situation (62%) and the personal job situation of citizens (47%) is also negative, and expectations are for the *status quo* to remain in the following year.

People in Bulgaria want the EU to play a more important role in solving social problems and consider that social issues should be ranked in first place on the EU's agenda (43%). The importance of social issues is now the highest since Bulgaria joined the Union. After Latvia and Croatia (44%), and to the same extent as in Slovenia and Portugal (43%), citizens of Bulgaria assign greatest importance to social issues.

Public opinion in the EU and in Bulgaria shares the view that in a situation of economic crisis, a common European energy policy is of major importance. The average EU citizen (30%) and that of the New Member States (32%) considers that energy issues should rank in first place on the European institutions' agenda. For Bulgarians (28%), energy comes in third place, after social issues (43%) and the fight against crime (31%). Hungarians (54%) and Lithuanians (50%) assign highest priority to a common EU energy policy, while public opinion in Bulgaria is the closest to the EU average (30%).

Considering the high level of public concern regarding inflation and the economic situation, as well as the importance of social issues on the agenda of the EU institutions, it is no surprise that **both Bulgarians and the average EU citizen want the budget of the Union to be spent mostly on policies ensuring economic growth (BG-55%, EU27-37%), and employment and social affairs (BG-37%, EU27-36%).** The views of Bulgarians are more strongly pronounced than in the EU as a whole.

Bulgarians are more euro-optimistic than the average EU citizen

Bulgaria retains its leading position among the countries with the most positive image of the EU, alongside Slovenia (58%), and after Romania (63%), the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (60%) and Ireland (59%). Nearly six out of ten Bulgarians have a positive image of the EU, nearly three (28%) are neutral, and under one (7%) is negative. The positive image of the EU is shared by all age-groups and social groups, but to the least extent by the retired, the unemployed, and manual workers, as well as by people sympathising with left-wing parties.

Following a steady increase since EU membership, Bulgarians' trust in the European Union (58%, -5 points) has dropped for the first time, but remains higher than the EU average. The EU enjoys the trust of the majority of Bulgarian people, unlike in the EU27 (47%). Furthermore, as is the case with **Estonians (21%), Bulgarians show the least mistrust in the EU of the entire Eurobarometer poll,** which is nearly twice as low as the EU average (41%). In Bulgaria, young people and those in active employment (aged 20 – 54 years) trust the EU most, especially those who are students (75%), managers (74%) and other white-collar workers (67%), while the unemployed do not show sufficient trust in the EU, whether in the EU27 (39%) or in Bulgaria (45%).

Trust in the European Union among Bulgarians is higher than trust in other international organisations, such as NATO and the UN. While the average EU citizen has greatest trust in the UN (50%) of all the three organisations, Bulgarians trust the EU (58%) most, followed by the UN (47%) and NATO (37%). Trust in the UN and NATO is matched by a positive image of the EU and trust in it, both for the average citizen of the Member States and for Bulgarians.

The high level of trust in the EU and its institutions is in sharp contrast with the new wave of mistrust in the Bulgarian institutions. Unlike the average EU citizen, but similar to the situation in the new Member States as a whole, **Bulgarians trust only the European Union, its institutions and international organisations.** Following the boost registered by the spring survey, **levels of trust in all EU institutions remains almost without change and higher than the EU average:** at least every second Bulgarian trusts the European Commission (BG-51%, EU27-47%) and the European Parliament (BG-57%, EU27-51%), and almost half of those polled trust the European Central Bank (BG-49%, EU27-48%) and the Council of the EU (BG-46%, EU27-42%).

Mistrust in the Community institutions is on the rise in the EU27, but in Bulgaria it has dropped and is now half the EU average for each and every EU institution (15% or 16% in Bulgaria, compared to 30% or 31% in the EU27). **Mistrust in the European Commission registered the most significant decrease (-4 points, to 15%), regardless of its unpopular measures towards Bulgaria.** It is now measured by one of the lowest scores for the Autumn Eurobarometer, after Romania (12%) and Malta (13%).

While mistrust in the Commission and in the European Parliament among Bulgarians is the lowest ever, mistrust in the country's political and executive power is the highest, registered so far: at least four out of five polled do not trust political parties and the national parliament, nearly three out of four – the national government, and nearly three-fifths – the regional and local authorities, which are managing a significant amounts of EU funds. **Regional and local authorities gain the highest level of trust among citizens in the EU (50%). However, Bulgarians do not trust them.** Citizens' mistrust towards national governments, parliaments and the judiciary has registered again, as in previous surveys, its highest levels, and trust – the lowest scores, in the whole Eurobarometer survey.

More moderate, but positive views of Bulgaria's EU membership

Public support for EU membership continues to decrease. It is now expressed by less than half of the Bulgarians (48%, -3 points), which was not the case in the spring, and does not compare favourably to the current view of the average EU citizen (56%). However, **negative views on Bulgaria's EU membership are also on the decrease (7%, -1 point)** and score now at least twice as low as the EU average (15%). Considerably more people in Bulgaria (37%), than in the EU (24%) take a neutral position. **Bulgaria now ranks last, alongside Finland, among the countries where public opinion has an overall positive view on EU membership.**

Bulgarians are now the least convinced than ever that their country has gained from its EU membership (43%, -4 points), while, in the EU, more than half of the citizens share a positive view (56%). In the course of the last year, since the European Commission imposed financial sanctions on Bulgaria, negative opinions have almost doubled (from 14% to 27%). Furthermore, in autumn 2008, Bulgarians express the greatest uncertainty of all respondents interviewed for the Eurobarometer (30%) in their assessment as to whether their country has gained from its EU membership (EU27-13%).

Disappointment regarding missed benefits has risen most among those who are most enthusiastic in regard to the country's EU membership, such as people with higher education, managers, white-collar workers and supporters of right-wing parties. On the other hand, the young, and mostly students, are even more convinced than before that EU membership is beneficial (69%, +10 points). This can be explained by the opportunities it offers to travel and study everywhere in the EU.

Bulgaria ranks last among the Member States, where public opinion is positive regarding the benefits from EU membership (43%, 13 points less than the EU average). Equal or lower scores are registered only in four countries: Cyprus, Italy, the United Kingdom and Hungary. However, public opinion in these countries is dominated by the negative views.

Of all EU citizens, Bulgarians view their country's position in the EU most negatively. The majority of them think that the EU imposes its views on their country (63%, 3 points above the EU average), but this is also the opinion in all other Member States. However, Bulgarians are the least likely in the entire poll to reject such a statement (14%) and to agree with the opposite view that the voice of their country counts in the EU (35%). **Bulgaria is now one of the few EU Member States where public opinion is dominated by the view of those who think that the voice of their country does not count in the EU.** Furthermore, this represents a negative change of opinion, compared to the spring, when Bulgarians were more likely to agree with the positive statement (38%), and share the views of their fellow EU citizens (EU27-60%).

Confidence in the positive role of the European Union

Both for Bulgarians and for the average EU citizen, the European Union means first and foremost the freedom to travel, study and work anywhere on its territory. This view is more strongly pronounced in Bulgaria (52%), compared to the EU (44%). The economic importance of the Union comes second – expressed by the “euro” (34%) for the average EU citizen, and “**economic prosperity**” – for Bulgarians (29%). Thirdly, for Bulgarians the European Union means “**democracy**” (27%), and the for the average EU citizen – “peace” (27%).

Unlike their fellow citizens in the EU27, Bulgarians see the European Union only in positive terms. Negative statements, such as “bureaucracy” and “waste of money” (5%), “loss of our cultural identity” and “not enough control at our external borders” (4%), “unemployment” (3%) and “more crime” (2%), are not meaningful for Bulgarians and have even decreased following EU membership.

Bulgarians view more positively than the average EU citizen the increased role of the EU in their daily life. While public opinion in the EU is dominated by the view that there are too many areas where the EU can take decisions (39%), Bulgaria is one of the countries where this opinion gathers considerably less support (28%). Among Bulgarians, as well as in some other countries, the “don't know” answers dominate the public opinion. This is evidence that, for ordinary citizens, it remains still difficult to understand and judge EU competences.

Many Bulgarians are convinced that the EU not only enables citizens to benefit from globalisation (47%), but also helps to protect them from its negative effects (44%). The scores for the positive views in Bulgaria are almost equal to those for the EU27 (48% and 43% respectively). Furthermore, for the last six months, they remain almost without any change. However, in times of economic crisis, Bulgarians have become more uncertain in their assessment as to whether the EU can help to protect them from the negative influence of globalisation (39%, up by 4 points). As a result of this, the “don’t know” answers now have a similar score to the positive views (a difference of only 4 points). Such uncertainty of opinions on globalisation is typical for people in the new Member States, but in Bulgaria it is one of the highest.

On the eve of the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Autumn Eurobarometer asks citizens about their views regarding the benefits from this historic change for them, for their countries and for the EU.

Bulgarians are less convinced than the average EU citizen and people in the new Member States that personally they and their country have gained from the fall of the Iron Curtain. In their view, this was most beneficial for the European Union (67%), which enlarged to include 27 countries, then – for Bulgaria (46%) and least – for the citizens themselves (24%). These views are closer to the EU average than to the public opinion in the new Member States, which is most upbeat regarding benefits for all - the EU (71%), their countries (63%), and for the citizens themselves (36%).

The majority of people in the EU and in Bulgaria consider that the European Union and their own countries have gained from the fall of the Berlin Wall, while, in personal terms, the views are negative for more than half of those polled (BG-56%, NMS 12-52%, EU27-63%). Citizens, who have a positive view regarding the benefits from EU membership, are most convinced that their country has gained from the fall of the Iron Curtain. This explains why Bulgaria ranks among the first on the list when it comes to the benefits for the EU, and below the EU average regarding the importance of this historic event for the country and its citizens. For comparison, the highest scores regarding all benefits are registered in the Czech Republic and Slovakia and the lowest are observed in Greece and Cyprus.

In conclusion, it should be noted that there are, indeed, some negative trends in the attitudes of Bulgarians in regard to the benefits of EU membership. However, what stands out is the emerging irreconcilability of Bulgarians against the impossibility of making the best use of its membership of the Union as opposed to a negative attitude towards Bulgaria’s integration within the EU.

While mistrust towards Bulgaria’s institutions is growing, trust in the European Commission and the European Parliament remains at a relatively high level, despite their unpopular measures towards Bulgaria.