

EUROBAROMETER 71

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

SPRING 2009

NATIONAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BULGARIA

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The Eurobarometer 71 data, a standard edition of the Eurobarometer survey, conducted in June 2009, show the first indications of the recovery of the optimistic attitudes among Bulgarian citizens on some of the main political, economic and social aspects of public life.

The increase in positive attitudes is most distinct when comparing the current data with the data from the beginning of 2009. The difficulties that Bulgaria went through during the first months of the year had a marked influence on public opinion – both on general socio-political attitudes and expectations and on trust in Bulgarian and European institutions.

We observe a slight decrease in the pessimistic attitudes which have evolved into more moderate views and, in some cases, even into positive opinions. This slow and still unstable change occurred in the context of the upcoming Parliamentary elections – both European and Bulgarian – and raised hopes for finding a successful political alternative for the governance and development of the country.

Bulgarians' feeling of belonging to the European 'family' has strengthened. This trend is supported by various factors such as: the successful European efforts in overcoming the 'gas crisis' at the beginning of 2009, the belief that the European Union is capable of protecting its citizens from the negative effects of globalization and of helping them benefit from the changing world, the trust that EU has established and the high standards and criteria it consistently sustains, including those in regard to European funds management.

An additional factor moving in the same direction was the pre-election campaign for the European Parliament elections. It appears that Bulgarian citizens feel safer and better protected as part of the common European 'family'. As a result, the common positive trend in the public's attitudes has recovered and we even observe the highest levels of optimism for a long time.

The greatest revival in levels of optimism may be seen in:

- ❖ The overall attitude of Bulgarians to the European Union - a positive image of the EU is again upheld by the majority of Bulgarians in June 2009 (a rise of 14 percentage points compared to the beginning of 2009). The country ranks second among the 27 EU member states in terms of positive opinions towards the EU;
- ❖ There is a similar trend in terms of declared trust in the European Union institutions. We record not only a reduction in the levels of respondents not trusting them, but also the highest levels of confidence since the country joined the European Union. We also see a strengthening in the optimistic attitudes in regard to the trust in the European Parliament;
- ❖ Support for the country's EU membership – an increase in the positive evaluations is observed (the share of people who think that the country has benefited from its EU membership) in the Spring of 2009, which has interrupted the negative trend that started in the Spring of 2008;
- ❖ An increase in the positive expectations is noted regarding the short-term development of the world and European economies. This trend is valid both on an EU27 basis and among Bulgarians. The strong pessimistic expectations seen in the Winter of 2009 have now been overturned.

In addition to the stabilized positions of optimism for the present and the near future, Bulgarian citizens are also positive with respect to the long-term development of the European Union. In general, Bulgarians' vision of the future of the European Union in 2030 is more positive than the vision of the average European citizen. The majority of Bulgarians think that, in 2030, life in the European Union will be easier than it is nowadays and that people will have more time to spend with their families than at present.

Bulgarians predict that, in 2030, the public priorities will be different to those of today and expect that both the European Union and Bulgaria will reorganize their priorities. Bulgarians envisage socio-economic problems to be of less importance whilst problems relating to environmental protection to dominate the main tasks facing Europe in the future.

The majority of Bulgarian respondents expect that, by 2030, the European Union will have achieved much when it comes to gender equality. Most Bulgarians believe that, in 20 years' time, men and women in the European Union will be equally paid for their labour (assuming they have the same qualifications) and will have equal political representation.

The topics for which positive evaluations, attitudes and expectations are observed are mainly the topics referring to the European Union as a whole, the institutions of the Union and the international socio-economic situation.

At the same time, negative attitudes dominate in the main spheres of the socio-political and socio-economic situation in Bulgaria. The concerns of Bulgarian citizens are intensified both by the negative effects of the world financial and economic crisis and by the internal political insecurity and their lack of trust in national institutions.

Bulgarians' trust in all national institutions is not only lower than the average level of trust of other Europeans in their national institutions, but further decreases in the spring of 2009. The opinions and expectations of the Bulgarians on all socio-economic indicators relating to the situation at national level are more negative than those of average Europeans.

The pessimistic line in Bulgarians' attitudes can be seen in:

- ❖ A rise in Bulgarians' concerns relating to the economic situation as a whole and the rise in unemployment. The importance of these two problems continues to increase according to the data from the last few editions of the Eurobarometer survey.
- ❖ The vast majority of the evaluations on the Bulgarian economy are negative. The country ranks low on the list of European countries in relation to this indicator.
- ❖ The perceptions on the employment situation in Bulgaria have reached their lowest levels since 2007. The same applies to the assessment of personal job situations of the Bulgarian citizens.
- ❖ According to the Bulgarian public, high qualifications and skills are not sufficient to counter the difficult situation on the labour markets in Europe and Bulgaria. Europeans in general, as well as Bulgarians, think that finding a job nowadays is difficult even for highly qualified people.
- ❖ The negative opinions and expectations in Bulgaria are further aggravated by the perceived lack of an adequate and effective social welfare system. Bulgarians see their national social system as being too expensive for the society, but, at the same time, incapable of providing a sufficiently broad range of services. The vast majority of the Bulgarians feel insecurity when it comes to their pensions.

We record a slight increase in trust towards only one national entity– political parties. These gained a higher confidence rating as a result of the pre-election campaigns for the European and national parliament elections.

Despite the dominance of negative attitudes regarding the situation in Bulgaria as a whole, the data from Eurobarometer 71 show a slight stabilization in public attitudes and even a slight decrease in the level of negative and pessimistic opinions. For example:

- ❖ Short-term expectations for the national economy are traditionally pessimistic and remain pessimistic in the current edition of the Eurobarometer survey. Nevertheless, it appears the trend of intensifying pessimism has been overturned. In comparison with the results from the beginning of the year, the data recorded in the spring of 2009 show indications of stabilization and a slight increase in the optimistic expectations in regard to the short-term development of the Bulgarian economy.
- ❖ A similar trend of increased optimism and decreased pessimism may be seen in the expectations regarding the short-term welfare of Bulgarian households.