

Big hopes, big fears

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GfK study on the expectations of citizens in the new EU Member States

Nuremberg, February 8, 2006 - Eighteen months after joining the EU, the majority of new EU citizens are still counting on a steady improvement in terms of job and educational opportunities in other European countries. Many see rising prices, a lower standard of living, increased corruption and lower job security in their own countries.

Given that their countries joined the EU only recently, citizens in the ten accession countries continue to have mixed feelings about EU membership. Compared with the prior year, they were more hopeful about educational and job opportunities in other EU Member States, but their concerns regarding rising prices and widespread corruption have also slightly increased. Overall, however, many citizens in the new EU countries expect positive developments over the coming five years.

These findings and the results outlined below are taken from the EU Index survey carried out by GfK, which involves around 9,300 people in ten countries.

A wealth of educational and job opportunities

Shortly after their countries had joined the EU in 2004, around 75% of citizens in the new Member States believed that opening the borders would create new educational and job opportunities in other European countries. Early in 2005, less than 60% agreed with this. In the third survey wave, two in three respondents said that they would agree with the statement.

As was the case previously, students were particularly positive about the new situation. Around 75% assumed that by joining the EU their country facilitated good educational and job opportunities in other EU countries. Citizens with only the minimum school education were less confident with 56%, although the trend in this group is positive as well (prior year: 45%).

Lithuanians in particular (84%), Estonians (79%) and Latvians (77%) expect to find good job opportunities in other European countries. In addition to Estonians and Lithuanians, Slovaks, in particular, regarded the opportunity of education in other EU Member States favorably.

In response to the question as to how secure they thought jobs in their own country were, 44% of respondents did not expect any changes. 32% thought that they would worry more about job security. Only 16% thought that job security would increase. Citizens of Lithuania are particularly optimistic, with around four in ten respondents believing that job security in their country is steadily rising. Malta's citizens are less optimistic about the future and the majority believes that job security will diminish.

Standard of living and healthcare

The hopes expressed in 2004 by citizens of the new EU Member States have been put into perspective. At the time, almost one in three respondents expected that EU membership would result in a higher standard of living, whereas by last year only one in eight had such expectations and now the figure is one in seven. The number of those who anticipated an improvement in the healthcare system as a result of their country joining the EU is also down. In 2004, one in three believed that this would happen, but now only 12% think so.

Price trends

Eighteen months after joining the EU, concerns about rising prices are slightly up again. In 2004, 81% believed that the new EU membership would mean an increase in prices. In 2005, this figure was down to 73%. The current study results showed a renewed increase to 78%. As in prior years, the citizens of Latvia and Lithuania proved particularly concerned, with 98% and 93% respectively expressing anxiety about price increases.

Corruption and fear of loss of identity

Asked whether EU membership would change corruption in their country, the number of those believing that the situation

would improve was significantly lower than in 2004, as was already the case in the study carried out 12 months ago (8% vs. 18%). Around four in ten citizens in the new EU Member States thought that corruption was likely to become more widespread in their country, despite EU legislation. The number of those expecting no change in the situation following EU membership stood at around the same level.

As in the prior year, 16% of respondents expressed a fear of loss of traditional values and culture in their own country as a result of joining the European Union (2004: 24%). 61% do not believe that opening the borders to the West will impact on the values and tradition of their country. 14% even thought that EU membership would promote sentiments of national identity.

A bright outlook on the future

Today, only around one in seven respondents believed that the standard of living would improve following EU membership. The study established that more than a third of citizens in the new EU countries answered the question of how the standard of living might develop over the next five years by indicating that they expected an improvement. Job security in the medium term was also assessed positively: 31% expect more job security in their own countries. However, only 16% thought that this would be the case in the short term.

Over a five-year term, the trend in healthcare was also assessed more favorably. Currently, 12% believe that EU membership will improve healthcare in their country in the short term, but 37% believe that this will be the case in the medium term. There is no change over the five-year period in the pessimistic assessment of price trends. 75% of respondents anticipated an increase in prices in the medium term.

The Study

For this most recent EU Index Study, GfK Custom Research Worldwide surveyed 9,300 respondents in the ten countries which joined the European Union on 1 May 2004. Respondents were asked the following questions: "How do you think the following will develop now that your country has joined the EU and what developments do you expect five years from now? Job security, healthcare system, job and educational opportunities in other EU countries, national identity, customs and values, standard of living, corruption, prices." The study covers the following countries: Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia and Cyprus. The study was carried out between October 20, 2005 and November 28, 2005.

GfK Custom Research Worldwide

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