Mixed feelings On EU Accession

Contributed by GFK
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GfK survey of the expectations of people in the EU accession states about life after 1 May 2004

Nuremberg, 20 February 2004 - People in the countries which will be member states of the European Union (EU) after 1 May 2004 generally believe that EU membership will result in good employment and education/training opportunities. This belief is chiefly based on the opportunities associated with cross-border mobility. However, there are also concerns. The main anxieties the new EU citizens harbour are potential price increases in their own countries. These are some of the findings of the latest EU Index survey conducted by GfK Ad Hoc Research Worldwide.

Opinions are divided with regard to the future standard of living in the new EU countries and not everyone is sure that unlimited mobility will result in an improvement. Many people are worried that EU membership will lead to price hikes in their own countries. However, most people in the accession states were far more optimistic about the future of healthcare systems in their respective countries. Most respondents had little hope of EU membership changing existing corruption in their countries for the better. At the same time, most of those questioned did not believe that being part of the EU would mean a loss of cultural identity and traditions in their own country.

These are some of the findings of the EU Index survey carried out by GfK in the ten countries that will be joining the European Union on 1 May this year. The 9,600 respondents were asked how they thought various aspects of life would develop following their country's accession to the EU. These aspects included job security, the healthcare system, employment and training opportunities in other EU member states, standard of living, corruption, prices and whether national values and traditions would continue to be retained. The following chart illustrates the hopes and fears of inhabitants in the EU candidate countries. For some aspects, the responses varied widely between the different countries.

People mostly see chances in terms of work and training

The majority of people in the countries joining the EU on 1 May 2004 see new opportunities in the opening of the borders and the resultant possibility of working anywhere in the EU. Irrespective of their nationality, three in four respondents believe that EU membership promises good opportunities in terms of work and training in other EU member states. Most optimistic of all are Lithuanians, 85 per cent of whom see positive future opportunities.

The number of students in all of the accession states who also rate EU membership positively is above average. Almost 90 per cent think that their country joining the EU will lead to the opportunity of studying in another member state, partly because of their own country will be able to take part in EU education programmes.

Opinions vary widely when it comes to the question of job security in their own country. While 31 per cent believe that nothing will change with regard to the security of their job, the same percentage think that they will have more cause for concern about job security. However, almost 30 per cent expect a positive development. Again, students are the most optimistic, with almost 50 per cent concluding that jobs in their country will be safer in future.

Citizens have a bad feeling about price developments

People are less optimistic about how prices will develop in their respective countries. Eight in ten respondents in the countries surveyed feared that joining the EU will result in price increases. On average people expect that the price will go up for 30 per cent. In Cyprus and Slavakia this increase is expected to be over 40 per cent.

People's opinions with regard to changes in the healthcare system and the standard of living differ

Almost a third of the people in the EU accession states are of the opinion that open borders, free trade and the opportunity of cross-border employment will result in a better standard of living. With 50 per cent and 42 per cent, this opinion is shared by the Maltese and Cypriots respectively.

However, one in four new EU citizens believe that everything will remain as before. At 38 per cent, the majority is concerned that the expected price rises will mean a lower standard of living. Pessimism is rife, in particular among people in Slovakia (60 per cent), the Czech Republic (55 per cent) and Poland (51 per cent). Irrespective of nationality, at 40 per cent, the number of graduates expecting a higher standard of life following EU membership is above average.

With regard to developments in healthcare, only one in four respondents believe that the situation will deteriorate. One in three expect to see no change and the same percentage expect to see improvements. Here too, the Maltese and Cypriots, with 56 per cent each, are particularly optimistic.

People do not expect improvements with regard to corruption

Over a third of all people believe that despite the fact that EU law will in future apply in their respective countries, there will be even more corruption following EU membership. Another third think that joining the EU will change nothing with regard to the situation in their country. Less than one in five hope that new legislation will curb corruption. In Cyprus people's attitude is particularly pessimistic, with 75 per cent believing that conditions will take a turn for the worse in the future.

People not worried about losing their national identity

Almost 50 per cent of respondents do not expect the opening of borders in the wake of EU membership to impact on their national identity and traditions. Only 25 per cent are concerned that these may be neglected. 25 per cent believe that, if anything, national identity will grow stronger in future. People in the Czech Republic show above-average pessimism and 37 per cent fear for their national identity and traditions. Almost one in ten, however, think that these will not be affected by EU membership.

The survey

As part of the most recent EU Index survey carried out by GfK Ad Hoc Research Worldwide, 9,557 respondents in the ten countries that are due to join the EU on 1 May 2004 were asked about their expectations regarding employment, education and training, prices, healthcare, corruption, the standard of living and national values. The countries covered by the study are the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. The survey was carried out between 2 October 2003 and 24 November 2003.

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