



# Life satisfaction in an enlarged Europe

## Summary

**Introduction**

**The challenge of enlargement**

**Defining the basic concepts**

**Differences between the ACC 13 and EU 15**

**Differences in satisfaction levels among social groups**

**Main drivers of life satisfaction**

**Varying satisfaction levels among the ACC 10**

**Conclusion**

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## Introduction

This document summarises the findings of a research report from the European Foundation for the Improvement and Living Conditions on the subject of individual life satisfaction. It forms part of a series of reports on quality of life in an enlarging Europe, drawing on the findings of the European Commission's Eurobarometer surveys carried out in the 15 EU Member States and the 13 acceding and candidate countries (here termed EU 15 and ACC 13) in Spring 2002, as well as standard EU 15 Eurobarometer studies. Examining quality of life in 28 European countries, the report provides, for the first time, an analysis of the views and experiences of the citizens of the new Europe on selected aspects of living conditions, such as social exclusion and poverty, the relationship between quality of life and quality of work, fertility, migration and mobility, satisfaction with quality of life, and health and health care.

The report shows how people across the continent of Europe define quality of life for themselves; how they assess their own lives and living conditions; what aspects do they feel would lead to greater personal satisfaction; and how material resources and a person's position in the social structure impacts on satisfaction levels. It takes as its starting point the idea that quality of life cannot be adequately described by objective living conditions (such as income, health, number of friends or working conditions) but is also influenced by a subjective assessment of life circumstances in terms of good and bad, satisfied and dissatisfied, happy and unhappy. It explores the relationship between an individual's current situation and their aspirations in order to understand what factors can bring about an improvement in the general well-being of all citizens. Since data collection began on the eve of enlargement, the report can be seen as a baseline study for measuring quality of life in the acceding and candidate countries before they enter the Community.

## The challenge of enlargement

The accession of 10 countries to the European Union in May 2004 is the biggest challenge the Community has ever faced. It is hoped that enlargement will cement over the old divide between the western part and the former communist eastern part of the continent. However, while enlargement will open up many opportunities for these countries, it also presents many challenges. What distinguishes this phase of enlargement from previous ones is not only the quantity of new members, but the low level of income and living conditions currently prevailing in many of these countries compared to the average social situation in the EU 15. The standard of living in all the new Member States is below the EU average. Per capita national income is much lower in the acceding and candidate countries than in the Member States, ranging from three-quarters of the EU 15 average in Slovenia to only one quarter in Bulgaria and Turkey. In eleven of the 13 countries, income level is below that of Greece, which is the least affluent country in the EU 15. Hence, although the 13 new members will increase the geographical size of the Community by 23% and its population by 20%, GDP will only increase by 5%. Moreover, most acceding and candidate countries lag behind the EU 15 countries in measures of social progress other than standard of living. This gap in development, or in 'quality of life', has huge implications for EU policy. One of the European Union's central aims is to achieve social cohesion among its Member States: this means not only a steady improvement in the living and working conditions of EU citizens, but also the reduction of existing differences between countries. Eastward enlargement will make it much more difficult to reach this aim.

Against this background, the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions launched a research project to examine and compare quality of life in the acceding and candidate countries and the current Member States of the EU 15 and to find out how large is the gap between these two groups of countries. A survey on quality of life in the acceding and candidate countries, the European Commission's 'Candidate Countries Eurobarometer', was carried out in 2002. Around 1,000 respondents per country were interviewed, with around 500 respondents in the population-poor countries. The report compares information from this survey with information about the EU 15 countries taken from standard Eurobarometer surveys. By comparing and analysing subjective quality of life in the

acceding and candidate countries and in the current EU Member States, it throws light on some of the challenges enlargement will bring to the Community from a quality of life perspective.

## **Defining the basic concepts**

The issue of quality of life underpins many EU policies. This is most obvious for EU cohesion policy, but also for other policies which focus on exclusion, poverty and on the European social model in general. How, then, is quality of life defined? Quality of life indicates how well people fare along several dimensions of life, which are more or less consensually defined as reflecting important societal values and goals. Hence, the concept is much broader than economic level of living alone. It comprises what people have ('having'), how intact their intimate social relations are ('loving'), how well integrated into wider society they are ('being'), and how healthy they are ('living'). Defined in such a way, quality of life can be observed either by objective indicators, or by subjective ones, i.e. how citizens themselves evaluate their quality of life. The report deals mainly with subjective quality of life as the sum of people's experiences of the opportunities open to them, the actual choices they make and the life results they achieve within their social contexts. The primary focus is on levels and determinants of satisfaction as self-evaluations of certain living conditions or of life as a whole.

Subjective assessments of quality of life are highly valuable – and even indispensable – to policymakers in three ways:

1. Asking people's opinions about quality of life is the easiest and best way to get an idea of what people really want. Without such information, there is a danger that policy will not serve the true needs of people.
2. Satisfaction measures, especially those concerned with overall life satisfaction, are the best available indicators of the degree to which true needs are met. In other words: only subjective indicators can reveal how central certain life domains are to the quality of life of Europe's citizens.
3. Only subjective indicators allow for a comprehensive assessment of quality of life. It is not possible to make an overall assessment of the quality of life of individuals, groups or nations with piecemeal objective information alone.

These three advantages of research into subjective quality of life can help policymakers develop appropriate policies to improve living and working conditions in Europe. To do so, however, requires insights about the relationship between certain dimensions of life, and the underlying mechanisms used to evaluate and summarise subjective quality of life. For this purpose, the report uses analytical reporting, as opposed to a mere description of subjective well-being in the 28 countries.

## **Differences between the ACC 13 and EU 15**

The most striking result of the research is the lower level of subjective well-being in most of the acceding and candidate countries in comparison with the EU Member States. While around 88% of citizens in the EU 15 are satisfied with their lives, only around 65% in the ACC 10, and around 62% in the 3 candidate countries are. Although the data cannot show precisely whether and to what extent these differences can be attributed to diverging aspirations, the figures clearly prove that living conditions are worse in the ACC 10. It follows that in an enlarged EU, the gap in subjective quality of life will be much wider than the current gap between the Nordic and the southern Member States in the Community of 15. It is a known fact that the Danes and the Dutch enjoy better living conditions and higher subjective well-being than the Greeks and the Portuguese. Enlargement will bring about a new, east-west gap in subjective well-being within the Community, which will replace the former north-south gap.

The good news, however, is that a historical comparison shows that the population of 10 of the 13 acceding and candidate countries do not have lower levels of life satisfaction than the Greeks and Portuguese did when their countries joined the Community in the 1980s. The exceptions are the Bulgarians, Latvians and Romanians. In Bulgaria and Romania, dissatisfaction with life is the dominant experience, and only a minority report having a satisfactory life (these are candidate countries not due to join EU in 2004). Similar levels of dissatisfaction are unknown among the current Member States, also in previous decades (the Eurobarometer surveys were launched in 1973, therefore the time-series go back to the early 1970s). In Latvia, the population is divided equally between contented and discontented people, a situation which has occurred only once since 1973 in a Member State: Greece in 1993.

The gap in subjective quality of life is also revealed when specific aspects of people's lives are assessed. ACC 13 citizens are much less satisfied with their financial and employment situations than citizens of the EU 15. Hence, 'having' turns out to be the major difference between the EU 15 (where people have a lot) and ACC 13 (where people have less). While the majority of citizens in the acceding and candidate countries are dissatisfied with their financial situation, in the EU 15 countries the majority, even in the least well-off countries, is satisfied. Similarly, people are less satisfied with their personal safety and social life in ACC 13, pointing to the fact that it is not only aspects of 'having' which need to be improved, but the other dimensions as well. Factual evidence is there to show that, on the date of accession, the degree of social cohesion as defined by the EU will be much lower than it was in the past. Levels of regional (i.e. cross-national) disparities in subjective quality of life will greatly exceed not only that of the former EU, but also regional differences prevailing in large federal states like the US, Germany, or Italy.

## **Differences in satisfaction levels among social groups**

The second striking finding is the much higher degree of inequality in life satisfaction between social groups prevailing within many of the acceding and candidate countries, albeit not in all of them. In particular, life satisfaction in the former socialist countries varies more strongly across demographic and social groups than in most Member States. Hence, in these countries the individual's position in the social structure shapes subjective quality of life much more strongly than in almost all of the Member States, which are more egalitarian in this respect. This is especially true for age. There is no generation divide in life satisfaction in most Member States, but in many former communist countries the huge transformation of the economic and political systems put younger and older cohorts on very different opportunity tracks. The result is that younger people are much more satisfied with life than their older fellow citizens.

Income position, level of education and occupational class are also strongly associated with subjective quality of life in the ACC 13, a trend which is already known from previous studies about less affluent societies. In the ACC 13, having a low income often goes hand in hand with dissatisfaction, whereas even the low-income groups in most Member States do not report major dissatisfaction. The reason is that in the ACC 13, low income means experiencing severe problems in making ends meet, (not 'just' social deprivation at a still relatively comfortable level of living) and this obviously affects life satisfaction negatively. Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Poland and Slovakia all show high levels of internal inequality. Among the EU 15, only in Portugal are similar levels of internal inequality found.

The structural determinants examined in the research show that gender differences in subjective quality of life are small everywhere. By and large, urban-rural differences are also minimal (although the measure available for urban-rural differences is not the most reliable, and so this issue needs further investigation). Progress in EU terms means both an increase in average satisfaction and a more egalitarian distribution of satisfaction among the population. However, the research shows that with enlargement, differences in life satisfaction found within individual acceding countries are much larger than in the current EU Member States, especially with regard to age, income, occupational class and education. Hence, quality of life issues will have to be dealt with in the European policy agenda. The problem of inequality increases in two ways, cross-nationally, and across social groups within countries.

## **Main drivers of life satisfaction**

The third research finding is that in nearly all countries, both ACC 13 and EU 15 and affluent as well as less affluent, quality of life cannot be attributed to one single dimension. Quality of life is a multi-dimensional concept, comprised of several aspects, in particular having, loving and living a healthy life. The abstract idea of what constitutes quality of life does not differ greatly across Europe; and if there are differences, there is no clear divide between current members and new members. The reason for this similar point of view is that the dominant concerns in all countries are found to be making a living (having an income), enjoying a satisfactory family life, and having good health, and these are the concerns that ordinarily determine people's satisfaction. The notable exception is having children, which tends to be viewed as a necessity of life in ACC 13 but not in the EU 15. Hence, the current EU population is revealed as more individualised in this regard and less inclined to put a strong emphasis on having children. This is highly important for the present debate on the demographic problems all European societies are facing.

Whereas abstract ideas about a good life are quite similar, actual determinants of life satisfaction, as revealed by further analysis, are not. In many acceding and candidate countries, income satisfaction is of paramount importance for overall life satisfaction. Hence, improving income satisfaction is seen as the best way to improve life satisfaction. This reveals a desire for economic catch-up. Economic gains, however, must trickle down to the middle and lower income strata in order to reveal an impact on average subjective well-being. Typically, next to income, satisfaction with health and family life also have a strong impact on how people evaluate their lives. In the EU Member States, income satisfaction is not a huge determinant on life satisfaction. In these countries, satisfaction with family life and social life are seen as the strongest determinants of subjective quality of life. A top priority here is to create the basic conditions for a good family and social life, for example by making it easier to reconcile the demands of work and family, or by fighting unemployment, which is a major driver of stress, especially within families. The paramount importance of income in ACC 13 and its relatively low importance in EU 15 demonstrates the fact that in many of the former communist countries materialist needs are still largely unfulfilled.

## **Varying satisfaction levels among the ACC 10**

The fourth striking finding is the huge differences apparent among the group of acceding and candidate countries. Although these countries share the same status as future members of the Community, they are far from forming a homogenous group of countries. There are great differences in terms of subjective quality of life: the level, distribution, and main drivers. By and large, cross-country differences within this group are larger than within the group EU 15. For example, there are greater differences in many respects between Bulgaria and Slovenia than between Denmark and Greece. European policy which aims to improve quality of life in these countries will have to take into account these differences, the different characteristics and different stages of development of each of the countries. Due to the vast heterogeneity in the ACC 13 and the lower but still not negligible heterogeneity in the EU 15, there is no absolute divide in subjective quality of life between Member States on the one side and acceding and candidate countries on the other. Rather, there is some overlap between the two groups of countries, which reflects the overlap in economic level of living and modernisation to a large extent.

For example, the citizens of the small, but more affluent countries Cyprus, Malta and Slovenia enjoy life as much as the average citizen of the EU 15 does. The Czechs have a slightly below-average life satisfaction, but are still more satisfied with their lives than the Greeks and Portuguese. Cyprus, Malta and Slovenia (and to some degree also the Czech Republic and Turkey) are similar to most Member States in having comparably low satisfaction differences between rich and poor, upper occupational class and lower occupational class, employed and unemployed, and young and old. Finally, the Czech Republic and Slovenia are comparable to most Member States in that income satisfaction only has a small influence on overall life satisfaction. It is not a coincidence that the countries mentioned here belong to the richest and

most developed countries of the acceding and candidate countries. The countries that differ most from the Member States are the poorest and least modernised countries, notably Bulgaria, Romania and also to some extent Latvia and Lithuania. This implies that the general degree of social development in a country is an underlying factor shaping citizens' subjective quality of life.

## **Conclusion**

The research project on which the report is based has greatly improved the collection of comparable statistics for the 28 countries. Hence, the report serves as an important baseline study for monitoring subjective quality of life in an enlarged Europe. Nevertheless, there are some limitations: comparability has been limited by the fact that information for the two country groups stems from different surveys conducted over different years. In addition, there were only a few questions in the data set which were suitable for answering analytical questions, especially with regard to the impact of aspiration levels and reference groups.

Future research could be concentrated in two areas. First, a continuous monitoring of subjective quality of life is necessary in order to find out how EU and national policies could improve living conditions and hence enhance people's satisfaction; whether the gap revealed between the two country groups is narrowing; and whether all major groups, and especially the disadvantaged, have an equal share in improved living conditions. Such monitoring would depend on continuous research into these topics in the enlarged Europe, preferably by means of a single survey covering all 28 countries together. In addition to tracking economic figures such as national per capita income and unemployment rates, or other social indicators, subjective indicators and survey research could serve as a useful tool for monitoring the success of the EU's social and cohesion policy.

Second, more research is necessary to evaluate what people expect from life, and what yardsticks they use to evaluate their living conditions. Previous research has shown that assessments of quality of life depend not only on living conditions but also on aspiration levels, preferences, and comparisons with other situations. These issues need to be researched more extensively in order to understand the degree to which differences in life satisfaction can be explained by diverging levels of aspirations, or by different reference groups. In the first place, this means carrying out a more in-depth analysis of aspiration levels, which may or may not vary greatly across Europe. In the second place, it means exploring the influence of comparison groups like friends, neighbours, and fellow citizens. With respect to the ongoing processes of Europeanisation, it is important to know whether people in fact compare themselves with other Europeans (other regions or countries) when evaluating their own living conditions, and if they do so, to what effect. The issues of aspiration levels and social comparisons will give a better understanding of how objective living conditions are converted into subjective well-being, and will make research on subjective quality of life even more valuable for policymaking.

The report, *Life satisfaction in an enlarged Europe*, is available online at [www.eurofound.eu.int/publications/EF03108.htm](http://www.eurofound.eu.int/publications/EF03108.htm)

The other reports in the Foundation's 'Quality of life' series and accompanying summaries are available on the Foundation website at: [www.eurofound.eu.int/living/qual\\_life/index.htm](http://www.eurofound.eu.int/living/qual_life/index.htm)

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**EF/04/37/EN**