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Public Attitudes towards the EU in Candidate Countries

Chairman
Horst Günter Krenzler

Rapporteur
Ania Krok-Paszkowska

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Public Attitudes towards the EU in Candidate Countries

Report of the Working Group
on the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union

Chairman: Horst Günter KRENZLER

Rapporteur: Ania KROK-PASZKOWSKA
List of Working Group Participants
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Chairman: Dr. jur. Horst Günter Krenzler
Former Director General for External Relations, EC Commission

Rasa Alisauskiene, Baltic Survey Gallup, Vilnius
Gabriel Badescu, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca
Giedre Bielskye, Political Weekly “Atgimimas”, Vilnius
Jean Blondel, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, EUI, Florence
Irina Bokova, National Assembly of Bulgaria, Sofia
Andras Bozoki, Central European University, Budapest
Ali Carkoglu, Sabanci University
Bridget Czarnota, European Commission, Brussels
Petr Drulak, Institute of International Relations, Prague
Piret Ehin, University of Tartu, Tartu
Paul Gillespie, The Irish Times
Aylin Guney, Bilkent University, Ankara
Olga Gyarfasova, Institute of Public Affairs, Bratislava
Christian Haerpfer, Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna
Hans-Dieter Klingemann, Wissenschaftszentrum, Berlin
Alenka Krasovec, University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana
Ania Krok-Paszkowska, (Rapporteur) European University Institute, Florence
Jacek Kucharczyk, Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw
Robert Manchin, Gallup International Research and Education Centre, Budapest
Rubén Mohedano-Brethes, DG Press and Communication, European Commission, Brussels
Cas Mudde, University of Antwerp, Antwerp
Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, Romanian Academic Society and Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, EUI, Florence
Artis Nigals, Official Newspaper of the Republic of Latvia, Riga
Jolanta Piekowska, Polish Television, Warsaw
Andrei Raichev, BBSS Gallup International, Sofia
Andu Rammer, University of Tartu, Tartu
Matthias Ruete, DG Enlargement, European Commission, Brussels
Ritma Rungule, University of Latvia
David Ringrose, DG Enlargement’s Information Unit, European Commission
Renata Siemińska-Zochowska, University of Warsaw, Warsaw
Kancho Stoychev, BBSS Gallup International, Sofia
Sona Szomolanyi, Comenius University of Bratislava, Bratislava
Victoria Timofte, Romanian Academic Society, Bucharest
Ilze Trapenciere, Foundation for the Advancement of Sociological Studies, Riga
Helen Wallace, Director of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, EUI, Florence
Krzysztof Zagorski, Public Opinion Research Center
Simona Zimic Zavratnik, The Peace Institute, Ljubljana
Jan Zielonka, (Project Co-ordinator) Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, EUI, Florence
Summary

The majority of voters in candidate states have been consistently in favour of joining the EU, but support has decreased from initially high levels of support for a rather abstract concept of a “return to Europe” and its association with security, stability and prosperity to a more realistic cost-benefit assessment of membership. There are many issues that govern attitudes and perceptions underlying pro-/anti-EU sentiment. In the literature there are various theoretical explanations of how the costs/benefits of EU membership can be perceived and what factors shape these attitudes. Support for the EU is related to liberal political values and a commitment to individual liberty and equality. It has been noted that political elites are more supportive of EU integration than the general public. Support for EU membership can be seen as being in the national interest as a way of expanding influence and increasing security through participation in a larger entity, but it can equally be perceived as an unacceptable ceding of sovereignty or as a threat to national identity. It has been argued that national publics will support national political elites in supranational activities provided these activities serve the social and economic interest of their states. With respect to voting behaviour in referenda, some authors have contended that voters will follow their government’s stance on the EU, while others have pointed to the importance of partisanship. It has also been argued that the level of political awareness about the EU is positively associated with public support for the EU.

The empirical evidence of referenda mobilisation and outcomes in previous enlargements support a number of these explanations. They also show that although some appear to be competing explanations, others are interrelated or overlapping. Several country case studies have highlighted other factors, such as specific fears related to loss of sovereignty on a wide range of country-specific issues, such as defence, monetary union or abortion.

Accession referenda will be held in all the Central and East European candidate states (CEECs) as well as Malta. In most candidate countries there is no constitutional obligation to organise a referendum on accession to the EU. However, there is a political consensus that the general public should approve the accession through a referendum, the more so since accession engenders a partial transfer of sovereignty to the EU.

The referenda will follow information campaigns by governments and communications strategies by the EU. Supporters and opponents of membership will state their cases. People will have to decide on which way to vote in a referendum, or whether to vote at all. Their decisions will be shaped by many reasons; domestic as well as international. How people vote may
depend on how they view the Union. Do they see the EU as a “common market” or a community of values? How deeply held are their convictions for or against membership? Do they see any alternatives to membership? “Technical” factors that can make a difference to the results are the wording of the questions and the organisation of the referendum itself. The binding or non-binding nature of the referendum can affect turnout and even how people vote. The size of the turnout will in many cases be crucial.

In the CEECs given the generally low participation rates in elections, low levels of trust in state institutions, a lack of communication between state and citizen, a lack of identification with and loyalty to parties as well as the large number of undecided voters, the outcomes of referenda on accession are far from predictable. Governments and the media need to explain the broader benefits of membership in terms that address the specific concerns of people who have emerged from years of authoritarian rule, who may still be wary of certain aspects of a market economy, and who in some cases fear the loss of newly established independence.
Introduction

Referenda in the candidate countries will be held following difficult negotiations with the EU on issues such as agriculture and regional and social funds. There will be political tensions about the distribution of power and the extent to which the candidates will fully engage in various aspects of EU integration. The referenda will follow information campaigns by governments and communications strategies by the EU. Supporters and opponents of membership will state their cases. People will have to decide on which way to vote in a referendum, or whether to vote at all. Their decisions will be shaped by many reasons; domestic as well as international. Will joining the EU be understood principally in terms of internal market and the economy? Will it be seen as a guarantee of security and stability? Or will it be seen as a symbol of deeper integration and the elimination of all types of boundaries in Europe? In other words, is support for EU membership based on rational choice or is it based on a belief in the myth of European unity? Recent examples of EU disunity will only make the decisions more difficult. In many of the Central and East European candidate states (CEECs) that are now members of NATO, the reasons for joining have shifted towards economic and financial ones. In other candidate countries such as Cyprus the reason for joining is still overwhelmingly to do with a feeling of greater security and stability. However, evidence from opinion surveys shows that public perceptions and motivations can change over time. In preparing their information campaigns and trying to motivate voters, governments, political parties and NGO’s must be prepared to deal with changing political dynamics.

Opinion polls and levels of support

The majority of voters in candidate states have been consistently in favour of joining the EU, but support has decreased from initially high levels of support for a rather abstract concept of a “return to Europe” and its association with security, stability and prosperity to a more realistic cost-benefit assessment of membership. There have been some changes over time and data from different polls are not necessarily comparable, but country trends have been fairly consistent. Romania and Bulgaria which have not yet completed accession negotiations and which are not included among the 10 candidate members due to join the EU in May 2004, are the most enthusiastic supporters of membership. Hungary, Poland and Slovakia have generally been more enthusiastic about EU membership than countries such as the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, and Malta.
The Eurobarometer surveys have measured attitudes to and support for the EU over time. These surveys, and in particular the First Candidate Country Eurobarometer of October 2002, which, among other questions, asked respondents how they would vote in a referendum on accession show fairly strong support for EU membership in the candidate countries and give rise to rather optimistic expectations with respect to accession referenda.

Those most in favour of their country’s accession to the EU are the Romanians (78%) and the Bulgarians (68%), followed by the Hungarians (67%). Confidence in the EU is also highest in these countries, with far lower confidence in the EU in Estonia and Latvia. Indeed, only 32% of respondents in Estonia and 35% in Latvia felt that their country’s accession to the EU would be “a good thing” and only 41% and 45% respectively thought their country would benefit from EU membership. Nevertheless, according to most surveys, those against membership have rarely reached above 30% over a period of years. Opinion polls in most candidate states show between 15% and 20% of respondents against membership.

According to the Eurobarometer poll, 84% of respondents in Romania and 77% in Hungary would vote yes in a referendum on accession. However, there was much lower support in Estonia (39%), Latvia (45%), and Malta (47%). Other opinion polls in which respondents were asked how they would vote in a referendum on EU accession show similar trends. However, only 54% of respondents said they planned to vote in a referendum, with 27% saying they would definitely vote.

There have, moreover, consistently been quite large numbers of undecided voters, both with respect to attitudes (support, trust) towards EU membership and with respect to how they would vote in a referendum. Various recent surveys have shown between 22% and 30% undecided voters in the Czech Republic with most other candidate states showing percentages of undecided voters in double digit figures. In some countries, the number of undecided voters may be a stumbling block. In Estonia and Latvia, and Slovenia (where support for membership has been hovering under 40% in Estonia and Latvia, and around the mid-40% in Slovenia), if all those declaring they are undecided voted against joining, the result would be a “No”.

Although the Eurobarometer and other surveys show us how attitudes and support vary over time, it can be argued that the results do not necessarily predict what the outcomes of referenda in these countries are likely to be. They tell us little about how deeply-rooted attitudes to the EU are and which groups are likely to have very fixed attitudes that would be difficult to change. The questions are not asked in a political context. Even though the same questions...
are asked over a period of time, they are essentially a snapshot. The process is rather hypothetical and abstract and it may indeed be portraying an overoptimistic scenario. It is also important to bear in mind that opinion polls are conducted by different agencies using different methodologies and samples. While most polls come up with roughly similar results, placing too much faith in one or another could lead to quite different predictions. Recent polls (autumn 2002) in Estonia gave quite dissimilar results: one poll put public support for EU membership at 57% with 36% against; another gave only 35% support with 36% against; while a third had 39% for and 31% against.

One should be careful about extrapolating how many voters will actually participate in a referendum from the percentage of respondents who say they will vote in public opinion surveys. Opinion polls expressing support for the EU do not necessarily translate into mobilisation. There may be a participation rate that is up to 20% lower than one would be led to believe from respondents’ answers to questions. A certain percentage of respondents also give “politically correct” answers rather than declaring their real intentions. Thus the professed intention to vote is much higher than the actual turnout is likely to be with a lack of fit between declarations and behaviour. People’s voting behaviour may depend on their feelings of alienation, their attitudes to foreign investment, or their anticipation of greater investment or benefits of membership. Indeed, levels of support have been considerably affected by what happened in the EU itself and how voters have assessed the accession negotiations. Negotiations have been dogged by problems of financing the accession and many in the candidate countries have raised questions of whether they are being fairly treated.

Public attitudes to EU membership

There are many issues that govern attitudes and perceptions underlying pro-/anti-EU sentiment. Distinctions need to be made between broad ideas and beliefs shaping pro- and anti-EU sentiments, judgments about the respective costs and benefits of membership, and other electorally salient issues upon which the EU dimension has an impact.

A closer look at several types of theoretical explanations of how attitudes to EU integration are shaped show that people can be motivated by very different issues in referenda, making the whole process very difficult to predict. In the literature on public opinion and the process of European integration, at least six basic theoretical explanations can be identified of how the costs/benefits of EU membership can be perceived and what factors shape these attitudes. The empirical evidence of referenda mobilisation and outcomes in
previous enlargements, as well as the debates and results of referenda on the Maastricht, Amsterdam and Nice treaties support a number of these explanations. They also show that although some appear to be competing explanations, others are interrelated or overlapping.

*Political allegiance*

One of the explanations for attitudes to EU integration is based on the premise that national publics will support national political elites in supranational activities provided these activities serve the social and economic interest of their states. The EU has emerged and consolidated despite the absence of widespread support for shifting authority to the European level. National publics understood that integration was necessary and in their own interest – giving rise to the phenomenon of what Van Kersbergen has called “double allegiance” with secondary allegiance to the EU derived from, and dependent on, primary allegiance to the nation-state. Van Kersbergen characterises allegiance through the relationship between the rulers and the ruled, including not only loyalty, trust and obedience of the ruled, but by an exchange between a ruler and the ruled in the form of a trade-off between security and prosperity offered by a government and support for that government. If the government does not, or cannot deliver economic and social security, allegiance becomes problematic. Thus European integration enjoyed tacit support because it improved the capacity of nation-states to guarantee physical and economic security. Since the early 1990s, increasing concern that integration may negatively affect national economic and social policies has undermined support.

Thus, it is argued that public support for the EU will vary according to national economic and social performance, both over time and cross-nationally, and is little affected by concerns about legitimacy or with the problem of identity, unless these concerns are coupled to a sense of insecurity among national citizenries.

Public support for EU enlargement in the current 15 member states is low. According to the latest Eurobarometer poll, in Austria, Britain, and Germany less than half of the electorate support enlargement. Eastward enlargement is often seen as leading to costs rather than benefits. For the candidate countries redistribution and catch-up growth is crucial. If EU conditionality is seen as putting undue constraints upon governments in the candidate states, or if conditions under which they join are perceived as being biased in favour of current member states, i.e., seen as having shown unwillingness to be flexible and recognise special needs, support for integration in the candidate states is likely to falter.
Trust in and support for the government

A related explanation of attitudes to the EU is that the public will support the government stance on the EU, provided the government is popular and trusted. A number of studies have concluded that referendum outcomes are related to the popularity of the government in power. Franklin et al. (1995:102) argue that “referenda conducted in the context of national party politics, with the government of the day urging ratification of a treaty they have themselves negotiated, will inevitably be contaminated by popular feelings about the government”. In the case of Maastricht referenda in France and Denmark in 1992, the results may have more closely reflected the unpopularity of government performance than the unpopularity of the European project. However, several country case studies have highlighted other factors, such as specific fears related to loss of sovereignty on a wide range of country-specific issues, such as defence, monetary union or abortion.

In the Central and Eastern European candidate states the outcome of accession referenda may hinge on whether the public link the vote to approval or disapproval of market reforms in general rather than to membership of the EU. These are after all states, which recently made the transition from a planned to a market economy. Thus, voters’ behaviour may be affected by their interests and attitudes to the market economy and by their perception of being winners or losers of the process of transition in their countries. Moreover, because successive governments have been both pro-reform and pro-EU, it is likely that the link between market reforms and membership of the EU will be made and, given that so far voters’ preferences have made little difference to governments’ reform agendas, the accession referenda may be the first time voters can make a real difference.

Cognitive mobilisation

The accepted wisdom is that there is an increasing gulf between the political and business elites in the candidate states who want to join the EU as soon as possible and the doubts among many voters whether their economies would be strong enough to stand up to the competition, whether the EU would benefit more than the new members, whether they want to pool their sovereignty, and whether traditional values would not be swept away by Western liberal values. Indeed, a similar gulf between elites and the mass publics exists in EU members states as well. The EU remains an elite project, with more Eurosceptics in the general population than among political elites.
There is some evidence that greater information about the consequences of enlargement (or of membership, how the EU works, etc.) does lead to greater support. The more educated are more likely to support membership than the less educated, although one could argue that the more educated are also more likely to reap the benefits than the less educated. Economically and socially deprived sectors of the population are less likely to be convinced. Moreover, the issues on which political elites decide to take a stand are not always the issues that worry the public the most. Public perceptions of the accession negotiations or particular issues being addressed in accession negotiations have not always been similar to elite perceptions.

Political values

Support for the EU is related to liberal political values and a commitment to individual liberty and equality rather than nationalist, populist values. Faced with taking in fragile democracies the EU devised the Copenhagen political criteria to supplement the acquis which imposes the directives of the single market but says nothing about liberal political values. The prospect of an enlarged Union that would include the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe brought the democracy debate into the EU. The “East” is often still perceived as being “underdeveloped, politically and legally unstable and even corrupt, economically inefficient and possessing different cultural values and mentality” (Inotai 2000: 58). However, it is not always true to say that liberal values decrease in a straight line from West to East and indeed not all the states in the EU are necessarily paragons of liberal values.

In Scandinavia and Austria a traditionalist/moderniser cleavage emerged in the course of debate on accession. Agriculture, fishing, and forestry were seen as sectors that would lose from the EU and rural voters were strongly opposed to membership. Small businesses and sectors dependent on state aid were also opposed. Populists and nationalists defended national traditions and lifestyles. There are clearly some parallels with the anti-EU constituency in candidate countries. In the CEECs the problem of populism/nationalism is related to the “losers” of transition. Moreover, there are not only (often well-grounded) fears of competition, changes in lifestyles, etc., but some sectors of the population have attitudes that are based on a fundamental ideological opposition to the very concept of EU integration on the grounds of (cultural) diversity. Many of the candidate countries have a strong sense of history, with public opinion being influenced by national myths, stereotypes and recent historical experiences. Ongoing questions about whether there is a European identity, and if so, whether it is based on norms and values, on the Copenhagen criteria or on geography do not make it any easier to structure this debate.
Pooling sovereignty

Membership of the European Union can be seen as being in the national interest as a way of expanding influence and increasing security through participation in a larger entity. In Austria and Finland, EU membership was seen as offering security; in the former against Balkan instability, in the latter against a history of domination by Russia. It can be argued in the case of Ireland that pooling sovereignty was a liberating experience that allowed it to come out of the shadow of its larger neighbour. Membership of the EU can be seen as protecting national sovereignty but it can also give rise to worries about pooling sovereignty.

Thus the three Baltic republics, Slovakia and Slovenia have an interest in the security the EU can offer them (over and above NATO membership), but as new states they may also be particularly concerned about questions of recently (re)gained national sovereignty and identity. In such cases, the economic argument for or against joining the EU may be less important to people than the question of national identity and whether the EU poses a threat to that identity. There may also be an underlying feeling among significant sectors of the population that they need more time to develop their identity before being taken up in such a community. There is understandable concern in the Baltic republics about ceding even a small amount of sovereignty in the light of recent experience as part of the Soviet Union.

In a country such as Poland, the EU as a modernising influence is seen by some as being a potential threat to traditional national identity, expressed in both ethnic and religious terms. There are some parallels with countries such as Denmark, the UK or Norway in which sovereignty as “part of the cultural self-image of a people may generate resistance to more supranational forms of EU cooperation” (Zetterholm 1994:9). Similar debates about the desirable “depth” of integration are now emerging in some of the other candidate states.

Parties: their role and preferences

Partisanship

Another explanation of how attitudes to EU integration are shaped and how people might vote in accession referenda is related to the role of political parties. One explanation of voter behaviour is that voters will follow their party’s line on the EU or will support the EU to the extent that it provides a vehicle for promoting their programmatic preferences. Parties are meant to express the preferences of their members but in some CEECs there are some
doubts about how representative parties are of their voters’ opinions. In most countries voting behaviour is congruent with party programmes but there is not such a good fit in Poland, Romania, Slovenia and Estonia. In Slovenia, for instance, there is a high degree of pro-EU consensus among political parties, despite relatively high levels of opposition or at least ambivalence towards EU membership among the electorate compared to many other candidate states. This means that a significant proportion of voters are not represented by political parties on this issue and it is left to civil society organisations to bring opposition to the EU into the public debate.

In the CEECs there was no mention of the EU in early party programmes and the question of whether or not to apply for membership did not form a major conflict dimension in these countries. So far, electoral campaigns in the candidate states have not centred on the question of enlargement or on EU issues. The EU was not an issue that affected how people voted. Indeed, the problem in studying anti-European sentiment in the context of party systems even in current member states is that attitudes to EU and integration do not really form a cleavage; at most it is an issue and a secondary one at that (Mair 2000). Indeed, the core of most party systems in the EU (as is also the case in most candidate states) share a broad pro-European consensus and anti-Europeanism is mainly used by parties that want to set themselves up as protest parties or outsiders. All the major parties in the candidate countries have so far supported EU membership, leaving voters with few alternatives except to resort to populist/nationalist parties. The desirability of joining the EU has largely been treated as a “given” and therefore few mainstream, i.e., electorally significant parties have expressed anti-European sentiment. For instance, in Slovakia all seven parties represented in parliament, even Vladimir Meciar’s nationalist Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) and the communists, have pledged their support for EU membership in the run-up to the accession referendum. Only in Malta has there been a clear and consistent divide between the two major parties on EU membership. In the run-up to the consultative referendum on 8 March 2003, the opposition Labour Party said it would seek alternative partnership with the EU if it came to power. It urged voters to vote “No”, to invalidate the vote or to abstain in the consultative referendum.

With enlargement drawing nearer parties are beginning to adopt a more policy and issue based stance towards the EU. The EU is also increasingly being treated as a domestic issue rather than as a foreign policy issue. This means that the EU has greater salience than was the case until recently and voters are now more likely to feel that membership of the EU will have a direct impact on their daily lives.
Referenda in the candidate countries are being held following difficult negotiations with the EU on issues such as agriculture and regional and social funds. There have been political tensions about the distribution of power and the extent to which candidate countries will fully engage in various aspects of EU integration. Most recently, there have also been considerable tensions about the role the EU should play in relation to the United States and differences between some member states and many of the candidates with respect to the importance of the transatlantic relationship. Opposition parties in a number of candidate countries are taking an increasingly critical stance as the price of membership becomes clearer and as they argue that governments could have negotiated better deals.

The experience of previous enlargements has been that when faced with a referendum on EU membership party positions polarise. Moreover, parties may be faced with conflicting aims – maximising votes in parliamentary and local elections and winning the referendum on EU membership. Different electoral strategies may lead to either a strong emphasis on the EU issue or a downplaying of the issue. Even pro-membership opposition parties may find it difficult to decide whether to side with a government advocating membership, if the negotiated conditions of membership are seen as being less than optimal.

In previous referenda on membership and on treaties aimed at deepening and extending integration, EU issues have also divided opinion within political parties and cut across traditional cleavage patterns. Intra-party divisions may appear in the run-up to a referendum. This has been seen in other countries, i.e., UK, before their accession referenda, and has led to the formation of cross-party coalitions of supporters and opponents. In Poland, Prime Minister Miller has already said he would be willing to work together with politicians from the opposition in a “yes” campaign. Poland has had a number of openly Eurosceptic parties represented in parliament since the most recent parliamentary elections on 23 September 2001. The opposition is made up of both pro- and anti-EU parties. The picture has been further complicated by the collapse of the governing coalition made up of the Alliance of the Democratic Left (SLD)/Labour Union (UP) and the Polish Peasant Party (PSL), just three months before the accession referendum is due to be held. The PSL has been very unhappy about what they see as unfair treatment of Polish farmers and may be tempted to lobby against membership of the EU under the negotiated conditions. In Lithuania opposition to the EU comes mainly from small populist parties, although they tend to be more issue specific than broadly anti-EU.

How much of such sentiment will be reflected in “no” votes in the accession referenda remains to be seen. Party positions on the EU are not
necessarily one-dimensional. It would therefore be useful to be able to disaggregate and nuance anti-European sentiment among political parties into “hard” and “soft” Euroscepticism as a way of gaining greater insight into the “type” and degree of anti-European sentiment that translates into “no” votes in referenda.

Support for the EU can be divided into diffuse support for the general idea of a single market and the idea of integration or specific support for the EU as it is on the ground. In the same way, a negative attitude to the EU can be based on a total rejection of the very idea of EU integration or on a very critical evaluation of the current functioning of the European Union. Kopecky and Mudde (2002) have suggested a two-dimensional model of party positions with respect to the EU, taking into account attitudes of the ideal of European integration in general and attitudes to the EU in particular. They have divided parties into those that are Europhile (those that believe in EU integration regardless of how it is defined in practice) and those that are Europhobe (those who are against or fear the idea of EU integration for whatever reason). Among Europhiles there are EU-optimists they call Euroenthusiasts, and EU-pessimists they call Eurosceptics. Among Europhobes there are EU-optimists they call Europragmatists and EU-pessimists they call Eurorejects.

In an accession referendum, presumably Euroenthusiast parties would urge their voters to vote for joining the EU, while Euroreject parties would campaign for a “No” vote. Eurosceptic parties would be critical of the negotiated conditions of membership but not against the principle of joining the EU. Europragmatic parties would take a more opportunistic approach – unconvinced about the ideas underlying the process of European integration, but calculating that access to structural and cohesion funds may mean that it would be better to be “in” than “out” of the EU. It is likely that in Eurosceptic and Europragmatic parties, intra-party divisions will appear in the run-up to a referendum making it difficult to present a clear preference either one way or the other. The Polish Peasant Party (PSL) well illustrates the problems faced by such parties.

Anyway, with low levels of party loyalty, membership and identity in the CEECs, it is unclear to what extent voters can be expected to follow their party’s line on accession. In some of the candidate countries, pro- and anti-EU sentiment cuts across party affiliations, so that referendum results may be quite different from results in parliamentary elections. Then again EU membership has not until recently been much of an issue in domestic politics so is also difficult to tell how responsive parties will be to their constituencies. Moreover, very few voters feel that they know enough about the EU or about their own country’s accession process.
Communication strategies and the role of the media

The EC’s Communication Strategy

It has been argued that the level of political awareness about the EU is positively associated with public support for the EU. Among the general public attitudes to integration tend to be relatively unstructured and not to be well grounded in knowledge of the Union and its affairs and institutions. There is confusion and concern in candidate states, but also in member states about EU decision-making. Citizens often have the feeling that they have little involvement in or influence upon decision-making at EU level. They have vague worries about the transfer of sovereignty to the EU and fears of a loss of national identity.

In the Eurobarometer survey, 44% of respondents claimed they had a little knowledge of the EU and 14% said they had no knowledge at all. Seventy percent felt poorly informed or uninformed about their country’s accession process. There is a clear need for more information. In 2000 the European Commission launched a “comprehensive communication strategy”. The strategy will run until 2006 and it is aimed at both member states and candidate countries. Almost 150 million Euro have been allocated for the programme over the six year period.

For the candidate states, about 10 million Euro have been put aside per year for the campaigns. The Commission has set the following objectives for the communication strategy in the candidate countries: to improve public knowledge and understanding of the EU; to explain the implications of accession; and to explain the link between the pace of preparations for membership and the progress of the negotiations. In the candidate states, the EC delegations are to coordinate the strategy and to set up information centres. The campaigns are run on the hypothesis that there is general support for the EU, but in some of the candidate states attempts to run effective information campaigns have been slow to get off the ground and have been hampered by a lack of active participation.

In recent years, communication about the EU has been largely targeted towards those that are already convinced of the need to be in the EU and has not been accessible to the majority of citizens. In the run-up to accession referenda there is a greater need for relevant information about the EU to be directed towards those target groups that are uninformed, concerned or hesitant about membership of the EU. In most candidate states these are rural rather than urban dwellers, especially farmers, older people and pensioners. A differentiated approach is needed to cater for different social groups with
various fears or aspirations. Issues also differ between countries and levels of knowledge about the EU vary between countries and layers of the population. For instance, in Estonia or the Czech Republic the EU is seen by some as being over-regulating and socialist. In Poland, there are significant territorial differences in levels of support for membership in the EU. Regions along the eastern borders are at least 5% less supportive of EU membership than the national average, while support in western regions is at least 5% higher than average.

The Slovenians are among the most well-informed on the EU, but also among the less enthusiastic. Various recent opinion polls have shown rates of support for EU membership of between 55% and 62%. The three Baltic republics and the Czech Republic have had consistently low support rates for EU membership. Hungary and Slovakia have been among the most Euro-enthusiast, apart from Bulgaria and Romania for whom the prospect of membership is somewhat more distant. The link between levels of information and the degree of support for EU integration is complex because the reasons may be not just the amount of information people have, but they may be less enthusiastic because they are a newly independent country, or because they are a very small country or because they are a relatively rich country with less access to structural funds and financial and technical assistance.

The communication strategy is also aimed at current EU member states. There will be no referenda in the member states, but it is still important to inform the public about enlargement. There is a lack of basic knowledge about new members and many stereotypes remain strong. As things stand the newcomers are not often made to feel welcome and the current members need to become more enthusiastic. Within the EU, the strategy has three key objectives: to communicate the reasons for enlargement to the public and its likely impact; to promote dialogue between policy-makers and the public on issues related to enlargement; and to provide information about candidate countries.

Public information campaigns

The issues and preoccupations of voters in the candidate states reflect the theoretical explanations outlined above and show up the complex nature of how attitudes to the EU are shaped. Issues and preoccupations have shifted over time. In the early 1990s, EU membership was seen primarily as a security guarantee, especially in the Baltic republics. As accession came closer and with tough negotiations taking place, the emphasis in the late 1990s shifted towards protecting the national interest and securing a fair deal from the EU.
In the past few years, several governments have adopted information strategies and set up bodies – often attached to European Integration Bureaus – to co-ordinate and implement public information activities. For instance, in Latvia a government public information strategy was adopted in 1998, in Slovakia in 1999. In most countries public information campaigns are set to target the various focus groups that are most likely to have negative attitudes to EU integration: rural communities, the elderly, women, and in some cases minorities. There are projects aimed at managers and entrepreneurs from small and medium sized enterprises who are worried about competition from EU counterparts. The campaigns will be run through the media, cultural events and debates. Regional European information centres have been set up, for instance in Lithuania where there are nine. Poorer regions in particular have been targeted.

In conjunction with the EC’s Communication Strategy, the stated aims of most of these information campaigns are to promote understanding of the implications of accession and the conditions of membership, to highlight advantages and disadvantages of membership, to stimulate debate and initiate discussion, to focus on provision of information to those target groups most in need of it. However, although public information strategies and action plans have been set up, the actual campaigns – and in particular referendum campaigns - are barely past the planning stage. It is still not very clear just how many people are being reached and how effective the campaigns are likely to prove to be.

One of the problems is that the issue of “government propaganda” is a particularly sensitive one in post-communist states. Governments should take care to provide as much information as possible without overtly trying to shape the debate. In the Irish referendum on the Nice Treaty some voices questioned whether public money should be spent supporting the government’s position. Such misgivings may emerge in the CEECs as well once public information campaigns are in full swing. There are also questions about who will have access to the media. In Poland, for instance, the draft referendum bill provides for free access to public radio and television for all parties that gained at least 3% (6% for coalitions) of votes in the last elections, as well as foundations, organisations and associations dealing with EU matters (although the latter must have been registered at least one year prior to the holding of the referendum). However, as in a number of other candidate states there is no guaranteed equal access to supporters and opponents of membership.

Moreover, in candidate states when politicians have talked about the EU, they have tended to present membership as a panacea for all their country’s problems; everything would improve once the country joined the EU. They
have put forward broad and sweeping arguments about why membership of the EU would be beneficial and have not concentrated on specific issues of interest to different sectors of the population. At the same time, they have also blamed the EU for painful reforms. The messages have been mixed at best. Voters now want to know the concrete reasons why they should join and what they will get out of it. As enlargement is getting closer, people are gradually becoming aware of the less attractive conditions of EU membership and the price they may have to pay for it. They are worried about the cost of rapid adoption of EU technical, social and environmental standards.

The importance of being seen to have negotiated a good deal was shown during and after the December 2002 Copenhagen Summit. Polish Prime Minister Leszek Miller made a last minute stand in Copenhagen on direct payments to farmers, milk quotas and other issues. One of the main problems in negotiations was that of agriculture and the levels of direct payments to farmers, which were to be phased in over 10 years starting at 25% of the full EU rate upon accession in 2004. This was seen as being detrimental to CEEC agricultural interests and difficult to sell. Moreover, there was a danger that some candidates would actually contribute more than they would get back from the EU in 2004-2006 due to the time-lag in releasing payments. Poland, but also the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia held out for a better deal. In the end Poland held out longest and got a “cash flow mechanism” allowing it to receive extra cash through the conversion of long-term aid earmarked for poor regions into cash up-front to ease the initial expense of accession. The Czechs also managed to reap this benefit. There was so much haggling and talk about money, that a number of prominent former dissidents and intellectuals were prompted to remind negotiators in Copenhagen that “the original idea of solidarity in a united and democratic Europe should not be buried under the negotiations and group and local lobby interests” (Letter in Gazeta Wyborcza 12 December 2002). Initial reactions by candidates talked up the significance of last minute improvements to the deal. They also emphasised the historical significance of the event.

In the run-up to accession referenda the onus is on governments to present the deals in a good light to public opinion. They need to sell the end-package as being the best that was available and the best that could be negotiated. This will not always be easy. In Hungary, the government has been criticised by the opposition for not being tough enough in negotiations, for failing to win favourable budget conditions and for giving in too easily to agricultural quotas, thus getting a package that was not the optimal achievable for Hungary. There has been controversy in Poland about the exact terms of the deal verbally agreed upon at the December EU summit in Copenhagen on the sensitive issue of the distribution of EU payments to Polish farmers. The Poles
understood that the deal would include payments to all farmers whereas the EU proposed a mixed system that would distribute funds only among selected producer groups. The immediate reaction of the Polish Peasant Party was to threaten to vote against membership in the referendum.

With the debate heating up, some populist parties are using the EU as a scapegoat. They blame the EU for problems that already exist and raise people’s fears about the future. The signals from the general public on the EU are mixed. In most countries, opinion polls in the run-up to the Copenhagen Summit showed an increase in support for membership and intentions to vote “yes” in a referendum. At the same time, in recent (November 2002) local elections in Poland, Eurosceptic parties such as Samoobrona (Self-Defence) and the League of Polish Families (LPR) did better than other, pro-EU, opposition parties. Most probably, such results reflected people’s disappointment at the lack of immediate benefits from the EU, the fear of second class membership and with the deal Poland was perceived to be getting. It is certainly to be hoped that the levels of knowledge about the EU will have increased by the time referenda are held. The fact that in Estonia, the numbers supporting EU accession jumped by 10% following Estonia’s winning of the Eurovision Song Contest in 2001 does not point to a thorough understanding of the advantages or disadvantages of membership.

A more informed and nuanced debate is needed. In Hungary, all four parliamentary parties issued a joint statement to the effect that the administration should provide citizens with information on the possible effects of accession. This would include the results of the accession negotiations to be made available to all citizens, a translation of complete 1,000-odd page version of the Accession Treaty, as well as studies on the consequences of the negotiations and their influence on the economy and various groups in society. Concrete programmes should be made available to help those disadvantaged by accession. That it all well and good, but it is unlikely to cut much ice with the average farmer or small town dweller. These are the people who are most sceptical and who are unlikely to bother to vote in a referendum. These are the people who need to be reached, and they will not respond to translations of the complete version of the Accession Treaty. They need clear and simple explanations from politicians who will take the time and effort to address their specific concerns and visit their towns and villages.

People who are ideologically opposed to EU membership on the basis of fears of loss of national, religious or ethnic identity will be the most difficult to convince. However, if there are adverse political and economic developments in a given country the job of convincing a sceptical general public will not be easy either. High unemployment, rising prices, new taxes are all closely
associated, rightly or wrongly, with EU membership. A worsening of economic indicators in the run-up to a referendum may swing public opinion against membership.

There is also still a large degree of apathy. The “don’t knows” are not only not informed, they are often not interested in getting more information. Those that are interested in integration or who need to know due to their professions or business already have access to enough information to know how they will vote. But will more information lead to greater support? A high-profile, big-spending government campaign in a deteriorating economic climate might be perceived as squandering tax-payers’ money. Moreover, some aspects of integration may be politically unpalatable, such as questions of sovereignty or the complexity of the EU. Deeper integration has not always been popular with the European public and elites have often followed a strategy of “integration by disguise”, a step-by-step approach of deepening integration across various functional fields without clearly defining the final destination as a way of maintaining a degree of consensus.

Public information campaigns and the EC’s communication strategy are aimed at improving such knowledge about the EU, but the fact remains that voters can have all kinds of reasons for voting for or against membership or indeed for voting at all.

Role of the media

In past years, the media in candidate states have tended to downplay the difficulty of negotiations. Certain myths were widespread: there would be no passport controls, there would be free movement of labour, free movement of capital (selling land), and there would be direct payments to farmers on an equal basis with farmers in current member states. It turned out that governments could not deliver on any of these promises.

More recently, the media have started to devote increasing space to more critical discussion of the advantages or disadvantages of accession. National or central media have far wider coverage of the EU than regional or local media. However, it is often at local and regional level that the information is most needed. Although there are differences in the amount and depth of EU coverage between different countries, in general the media have not been very successful in dealing with the gap between the general consensus among the political elites of the benefits of EU membership and people’s doubts and apprehension about various aspects of membership. Much of the coverage is news value driven rather than informative. Negative events, such as embezzlement of Phare monies in Romania are often considered more newsworthy than a discussion on
the future shape of the EU or how the relationship between candidates and their eastern neighbours will be affected by enlargement.

The debate on the EU can be approached from two perspectives: a) as an historical event or b) as a process of instrumental compromise and adaptation (the more technocratic aspect). In the run-up to a referendum, however, information should not be restricted to technical issues that tend to portray EU enlargement as being limited to adoption of the acquis and legislative screening. News forms attitudes more than campaigns. The media’s role is not only to report what is happening in Brussels and what is expected of the candidates. If greater support and legitimacy for accession is to be achieved, the media need to explain the broader benefits of membership in terms that address the specific concerns of people who have emerged from years of authoritarian rule, who may still be wary of certain aspects of a market economy, and who in some cases fear the loss of newly established independence.

The impact of the media of course depends on the degree of trust in the media. Comparative surveys indicate that people in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovenia tend to have relatively high levels of trust in the media and to make greater use of them than people in Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Malta and Hungary generally show lower levels of trust in the media but have relatively high levels of newspaper readership while in Bulgaria, Romania, Cyprus and Turkey there are low levels of trust and low levels of use.

**Referenda**

In most candidate countries there is no constitutional obligation to organise a referendum on accession to the EU and strictly speaking parliaments alone could ratify the accession treaties. However, there is a political consensus that the general public should approve the accession through a referendum, the more so since accession engenders a partial transfer of sovereignty to the EU.

All of the states have to amend their constitutions before acceding to the EU in order to transfer part of their legislative authority to the EU. Indeed, until recently most CEEC constitutions did not contain provisions on transferring competences to international organisations. In most parliaments, governments need the support of the opposition to secure the majority needed to amend the constitution. For instance, in Hungary where the constitution had to be amended both for a transfer of competences and for holding a referendum on membership of the EU, a two-thirds majority is needed to amend the constitution. Slovenia had to pass legislation on simultaneous referenda for accession to the EU and to NATO. The government wanted to have a
referendum that was only consultative, while the opposition pushed for a legally binding referendum. The government won through, but parliament cannot adopt any laws contrary to the outcome for 12 months following the referendum. The bill on Slovenia’s accession to the EU also states that Slovenia wants to become a full-fledged member of the EU and is prepared to adopt and adhere to the EU’s acquis. In addition to the referendum, the EU accession treaty must be ratified by the parliament and the constitution needs to be changed to allow for certain legislative, judicial and executive powers to be transferred to the EU institutions. In Estonia, 88 out of 101 deputies voted for holding a referendum on EU accession, even though there is no constitutional requirement for one. The text of the amendment to the constitution will be included on the ballot paper followed by the question on membership of the Union.

Accession referenda will be held in all the Central and East European candidate states (CEECs) as well as Malta. Cyprus is the only candidate country that will not hold a referendum on accession. The Greek and Turkish Cypriots failed to reach a settlement on a united island. The UN plan for Cyprus had envisaged a referendum to approve the plan on 30 March 2003. The four-part question to be answered with a simple yes or no included in its fourth part approval of the accession of a united Cyprus to the European Union.

Recent referenda on EU membership have seen results varying from 66.6% in favour in Austria to only 47.5% in favour in Norway. Given the mixed results of prior referenda on European matters (the results of referenda on Maastricht, Amsterdam and Nice reflect declining support for integration since the early 1990s) and often competing explanations of the results, it is not that easy to understand and explain the dynamics of support. Indeed, public opinion does not translate into a referendum outcome in a simple, linear way. The results of referenda can be affected by multiple factors.

Once a decision for an accession referendum has been made and a date set, the campaign turns into a domestic rather than foreign policy issue. The linkage to domestic politics means the referenda are politically charged and inevitably partisan. Voters may vote on all manner of issues that may or may not be directly related to the question at hand. The results may be affected by domestic political issues or economic concerns. They will be affected by voters’ perceptions of the consequences of not joining the EU. The results will also depend on levels of knowledge about the EU and the degree of trust in those supplying that knowledge. More “technical” factors that can make a difference to the results are the wording of the questions and the organisation of the referendum itself. The binding or non-binding nature of the referendum can
affect turnout and even how people vote. The size of the turnout will in many cases be crucial.

**Timing and organisation of accession referenda**

Given some of the uncertainties in predicting the outcomes of referenda, the sequence and timing of the accession referenda have been carefully considered. The Visegrad Four, i.e., the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia agreed on 5 September 2002 to coordinate and to all hold their referenda between April and June 2003. With higher levels of support, Hungary and Slovakia are to hold their referenda before the Poland and the Czech Republic. In Hungary, after weeks of haggling, the four parliamentary parties signed an agreement on the date of the accession referendum and the constitutional changes needed for Hungary to become a member of the EU. The original date proposed for the referendum was 15 March but the conservative opposition argued that such an early date would not give voters sufficient time to familiarise themselves with the EU’s conditions for membership. Initially, Hungary, with consistently high levels of support for EU membership was to be the first candidate country to hold a referendum. However, Malta decided to hold its accession referendum at the same time as local elections on 8 March. An additional reason for the early date for its referendum was to avoid it being too close to the next general election which has to be held before January 2004. In the run-up to the referendum opposition Labour Party leader, Alfred Sant said that if his party wins the next elections he would put membership on ice again. Malta’s referendum will be followed by Slovenia on 23 March. Both countries have had significantly lower levels of public support than is the case in Hungary.

Among the Baltic States, Lithuania with the highest percentage of support will hold its referendum first. Estonia and Latvia will be the last countries to hold a referendum. In Estonia this followed heated debate in parliament about the timing of the referendum. Estonian deputies decided to postpone their referendum in order to allow time for public discussion of the accession agreement. Another factor in this decision was the timing of parliamentary elections on 8 March 2003 and the wish to avoid the EU issue being used in party political electioneering.

The formal requirements of laws on referenda can be quite stringent. Despite opinion polls showing up to 60% support for EU membership, politicians in Lithuania have been worried about whether this will translate into a positive result in the referendum of 11 May 2003. One of the problems is that for the result to be binding, more than half of the eligible voters must cast a vote. But for a “yes” to be binding, no less than one-third of all eligible voters
must vote in support. This means that a low turnout with a very close pro-accession vote may still fall short of the high threshold. However, proposals to soften the requirements were met by protests that this would be changing the rules of the game to secure a favourable outcome. With public distrust of the democratic process already fairly high, it was argued that this would certainly be seen as manipulation. A non-binding referendum was rejected for similar reasons. In such a referendum, there would be no minimum turnout requirement and a simple majority would suffice for a positive or negative result. However, the fear was that if the referendum were a consultative one, and one that could be overruled by the parliament, even fewer voters would want to bother to vote.

The wording of the questions also led to heated and lengthy debates. This was the case in Poland where the presidential draft of the law on the referendum proposed an extremely complex question:

Do you agree to the ratification by the President of the Republic of Poland of the international agreement of 16 April 2003, the Treaty [full title] between Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Greece, Spain, The Netherlands, Ireland, Luxemburg, Germany, Portugal, Sweden, United Kingdom and Italy – member states of the EU – and the Czech Republic, Estonia, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Republic of Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia in the accession of the Czech Republic, Estonia, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Republic of Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia to the EU?

Deputies rightly queried whether people would understand the question. A much simpler alternative version was proposed: Do you agree to the ratification of the agreement on the accession of Poland to the EU? In the absence of an agreement, it was decided the parliament would propose a question at a later date.

There were also discussions about the length of polling. In some of the candidate states polling will take place over a period of two days in the hope that turnout will then be higher.

Mobilisation

An important factor in the results of the referenda will be which side, supporters or opponents of enlargement will be more successful in mobilising their voters. The importance of mobilisation was clearly shown in the Irish referenda on the Treaty of Nice. The first referendum had a turnout of only 35% with the “No” camp much more successful at mobilising its voters. The
vote went 54% against to 48% for, despite the fact that those who believed EU membership was a good thing formed a majority within the Irish electorate. Public opinion polls suggested that low levels of information among the electorate led not only to large numbers of voters staying away, but also to a high “No” vote. People simply did not understand the implications of rejecting the Nice Treaty. After a strong government-sponsored campaign the second time around that laid the emphasis on the importance of a “Yes” vote for enlargement (changing the salience of the issues being voted on) there was a clear victory for the “Yes” camp (63% for, 37% against). At 49%, the turnout was also noticeably higher, but still lower than the 50% threshold required for a valid result in a number of candidate country referenda.

At least 25 referenda have been held in the CEECs (including Bulgaria and Romania) since 1989. In recent years, the majority have been declared invalid due to low turnout. Lithuania has had seven and Slovakia has held four (all invalid since the turnout was under 50%) since independence in 1993. Slovakia launched a large-scale information campaign in March 2003 to ensure a large turnout in the accession referendum to be held in May. According to respondents in an opinion poll held in early February, 79.9% said they would vote in the referendum, 13.5% said they would not participate and 6.6% were still undecided. Among those that said they would participate, 77.9% would vote for membership while 17.9% would vote against. On this basis political elites are reasonably confident of a positive result. In Hungary the referendum on NATO membership held on 16 November 1997 was passed by a huge majority of 85%. However, only just over 49% of voters participated. Fortunately, just before holding the referendum on NATO membership, the Hungarian parliament passed legislation that lowered the threshold requirement for referenda from 50% to 25%. Among the candidates for membership in 2004, Lithuania, Slovakia, and Poland still have 50% turnout requirements.

Latvian legislators suggested reducing the turnout requirement for the accession referendum from 50% to half of the participants of the previous parliamentary elections, but the latest draft law has kept on the 50% rule. In Estonia, former President Meri suggested that a referendum should be held only after several years’ membership of the EU and then people should be asked whether they want to remain in or secede from the Union. However, a decision was taken in March 2001 to hold an accession referendum. In Lithuania, which is to hold a referendum on May 11, the Working Group on EU-related constitutional amendments had initially stated that a referendum was not required at all since the EU forms a traditional international organisation and as such does not impinge upon Lithuania’s independence. However, the Referendum Law refers to “partial transfer of competences of Lithuania’s public bodies […]” with a mandatory referendum deemed necessary due to the
delegation of certain powers to EU institutions whose decisions will be binding for Lithuania. In the Czech Republic the referendum law was long delayed because of concerns about minimum turnout requirements.

Moreover, in many of the candidate states, the possibilities to reinstate a referendum after an unsuccessful one are limited by lengthy prohibition periods. One of the ways to get around this is to hold non-binding or consultative referenda so that if turnout is too low, or more controversially if the result is “wrong”, parliament may decide by default. In Poland, amidst fears of a low turnout the law has been amended to allow parliament to ratify the accession if a referendum is rendered invalid. However, in Malta, where there was a 91% turnout and 53.6% vote in favour of membership, the opposition was still able to force a snap election (to be held on 12 April, just before the Treaty of Accession) by questioning the validity of the result. The referendum was non-binding allowing the opposition to say it would overturn the decision if it won the next elections. Despite the huge turnout and a positive outcome, the opposition argued that just under half those eligible to vote actually voted “yes”.

Despite the uncertainties posed by referenda, all the countries (except Cyprus) are putting the question to the people. Out of nine countries, five will hold binding referenda and four non-binding ones, but with even non-binding referenda often followed by lengthy prohibition periods. Although there have been attempts to find safety nets or loopholes in some cases to overrule the will of the people (especially if turnout is low), the fact remains that political elites in the candidate states feel they need this legitimising act even though they are largely a ratification of a process already agreed upon. A recent opinion poll in Poland found that if turnout was lower than 50% for the accession referendum, 35% of respondents thought the parliament should make the decision, but another 35% thought a new referendum would have to be held. A minority of 13% would want new negotiations in such a case while 17% did not know (Gazeta Wyborcza 14 February 2003).
Referenda – type and timing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Is Vote Binding? – Turnout Requirement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malta</td>
<td>8 March</td>
<td>No - no constitutional requirement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>23 March</td>
<td>No – but no laws contrary to its outcome can be adopted by parliament for 12 months following referendum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyprus</td>
<td>30 March</td>
<td>With no agreement on an undivided island, House of Representatives of Republic of Cyprus will ratify</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>12 April</td>
<td>No – but PM wants a public mandate before signing the Treaty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16 April</td>
<td>Signature of Accession Treaty in Athens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>11 May</td>
<td>Yes – with at least 50% turnout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>16/17 May</td>
<td>Yes – with at least 50% turnout, after ratification by parliament. If lower turnout, referendum is invalid and new referendum cannot be held for 3 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>8 June</td>
<td>Yes - 50% turnout. If lower turnout, need 2/3 majority in parliament.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>15/16 June</td>
<td>Yes - constitutional requirement. No minimum turnout rule. Referendum must be held within 30 days of signing the Accession Treaty. Repeat referendum cannot be held for 2 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>14 September</td>
<td>No - no constitutional requirement. No minimum turnout rule.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>20 September</td>
<td>Draft amendment to Constitution envisages binding referendum, with 50% minimum turnout</td>
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Intangibles

There can be all kinds of reasons why people vote for or against membership. On what basis are people going to decide? How people vote may depend on how they view the Union. Do they see the EU as a “common market” or a community of values? How deeply held are their convictions for or against membership? Do they see any alternatives to membership?

Those against membership of the EU are often not absolutely against it, but against the package as it stands, *i.e.*, they would join under better conditions, at a later date, etc. In the Estonian electoral campaign for the March 2003 parliamentary elections, EU membership was not really an issue. All the parties entering parliament support Estonia’s membership of the EU. Nevertheless, Edgar Savisaar, leader of the Centre Party, which narrowly won the largest number of votes, did mention in a television debate that he had some misgivings about the kind of EU Estonia was joining. Vaclav Klaus, ex-prime
minister and recently elected President of the Czech Republic has been a constant critic of the EU, but, describing himself as a “eurorealist” has said that he supports EU accession because there is nothing better on offer. He remains opposed to any move towards a federalist EU. Nevertheless, his criticism will not make it any easier for the government to convince an already rather sceptical Czech electorate to vote for accession. Support in Hungary dropped slightly from levels close to 80% to 77% in the weeks following the Copenhagen Council amid claims from opposition parties that Hungary had secured a worse accession deal than other states.

However, from the administrative and economic points of view, so much has been invested in transposing and implementing the acquis communautaire, that anything less than membership would be difficult to accept. Although some opponents of EU membership have suggested that an alternative would be to join the European Economic Area (EEA) together with Norway, Liechtenstein and Iceland, others claim that such a move would make little difference and might even prove costly. As beneficiaries from the single market, members of the EEA are being asked to share the costs of enlargement. The EU will call for the three countries’ contribution to be raised from 24 million euro a year to 500 million euro in return for improved access to new members’ markets. Indeed, supporters of the EU in Norway want another referendum on membership, claiming that its negotiating position outside the EU is too weak and that it has no voice in the EU. If membership is seen in terms of a “return to Europe” there is no other alternative anyway.

Opponents of membership have raised concerns that membership will have a negative impact on agriculture or on small business. In addition to feelings of having received a less than optimal or fair deal from the EU, remarks such as those made by President Chirac about the candidates’ backing for US policies on Iraq and calling them “irresponsible” and “childish” for daring to voice their views has revived memories of the Soviet bloc with some commentators even referring to a “western Brezhnev. The EU has emerged through a process of ongoing negotiations among member states in which decision-making has not been marked by transparency or accountability, but by achieving a degree of consensus. This consensus has been possible because member states could draw upon a reservoir of interdependence and trust. Much of the accession process has been marked by a certain lack of trust and reciprocity and such outbursts will not help. In the run-up to referenda, western politicians would do well underline that this is not an “enforced” union, and that the EU is not a monolithic and authoritarian structure seeking to impose its will through the preconditions of entry and implementation of the acquis.
In some candidate states, rather different issues are emerging in the debate on membership. In Poland the fundamental Catholic League of Families has raised the issue of values, claiming that membership of the EU would introduce much more liberal views on abortion, euthanasia and homosexuality. The association of traditional “morality” issues with voting intentions makes Poland similar to Ireland.

Nevertheless, even in Poland, where the political consensus on the desirability of EU membership has been somewhat dented by the existence of a significant Eurosceptic representation in parliament, opponents have little in common except their opposition to membership. Although they have been increasingly vocal and have been given greater prominence in the media, their opposition has ranged from fears of a loss of “national identity” to much more concrete fears of the possible economic consequences for groups such as farmers. However, ideologically motivated politicians may be able to exploit latent economic fears, which are far more widespread. Recently, nationalist opponents of EU membership have also voiced more pragmatic arguments about “unfair” treatment of farmers or “unfair” competition by large (foreign) supermarkets in media outlets such as Radio Maryja (a nationalist Catholic broadcaster), and newspapers such as Nasza Polska (Our Poland) and Nasz Dziennik (Our Daily).

Conclusions

The majority of voters in candidate states have been consistently in favour of joining the EU. The results of most public opinion surveys held in the candidate countries give rise to rather optimistic expectations with respect to accession referenda. However, opinion polls expressing support for the EU do not necessarily translate into mobilisation. The professed intention to vote is probably higher than the actual turnout is likely to be.

The first applicants to hold a referendum on accession have voted in favour of joining the EU. In Slovenia, with a turnout of 60.3% there was an unexpectedly large vote (89.6%) in favour of accession. In Malta there was a 91% turnout and 53.6% vote in favour of membership. However, Malta is an atypical case with attitudes to the EU divided straight down the middle among political elites. The referendum was non-binding allowing the opposition to say it would overturn the decision if it won the next elections. This pushed the government to announce a snap election (to be held on 12 April, just before the Treaty of Accession) to confirm approval. In the Central and Eastern European candidate states, turnout is likely to be significantly lower. There have, moreover, consistently been quite large numbers of undecided voters. Political
elites are largely agreed upon the desirability of joining the EU, with the general public being somewhat more sceptical. The referenda will be held in following long and difficult negotiations and in a particularly harsh economic and political climate. The recent disunity within the EU does not make the task of governments to convince the public to turn out and vote for accession any easier.

The decision on how to vote may be affected by economic concerns such as high unemployment, domestic political issues or be influenced by international events (for instance, attitudes to the US and the war in Iraq). Thus, in some cases predicted outcomes may well be overtaken by unexpected events and issues.
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