

EUROBAROMETER SURVEY ON EUROPEAN CITIZENS' RIGHTS

By Brenda Azzopardi



In February, the European Union published a Eurobarometer survey on European Union citizenship, where more than 27,000 citizens from the EU-27 were interviewed - either over fixed telephone lines, mobile phones or even face to face. According to the EU Treaty, every person holding the nationality of a Member State should also be a citizen of the European Union. This citizenship complements national citizenship but does not replace it.

In the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, EU citizenship was established, giving it a legal status to stabilise and enhance participation of EU citizens in the integration process. But how much do European Union citizens know about the significance of such status, and how familiar are they with their status and the various rights they possess? This Eurobarometer survey examined these issues extensively, comparing the current situation to that of the EU-15 in 2002.

A large percentage of EU citizens claim to be familiar with the term 'citizen of the European Union', but as a matter of fact, there are differences regarding the extent to which respondents knew what the term actually means. Italian and Spanish citizens are at the forefront in so far as awareness is concerned. However, an average of only 41% of EU citizens knew its meaning, while less than one third feel well informed about their rights as citizens of the EU. While Estonia, Romania and Hungary carry the highest percentages of familiarity with the term, the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany have the lowest percentages in this regard. When compared to results of a similar survey carried out in the EU-15 in 2002, familiarity with the term improved by 7% among the citizens of the EU-15. Furthermore, during the last five years, they have also shown an 8% increase insofar as feeling informed about their rights as EU citizens is concerned.

As little as 3% of respondents across the EU-27 countries feel they are 'very well informed' about the European Union, while 19% feel 'not informed at all'. This is where Malta is at the forefront, scoring the best result, since half of the Maltese respondents feel 'very well informed'. It was only in Finland, from the EU-15, that the level of information on EU citizen rights decreased in 2007, when compared to 2002. Although

there is a 90% awareness among those interviewed on the question about their knowledge of being both citizens of the EU as well as of their own country, one fifth of them think that they have to ask to become EU citizens or that they have a choice of becoming EU citizens. Along with Bulgaria, Romania and Italy, Malta places among those with the highest percentage of citizens who consider themselves both citizens of the EU and as well as of their own country.

The Eurobarometer also reveals that most of the variations of correct answers were the result of substantial variations in the levels of education, since 66% of well-educated participants, and less than half of those who finished their studies before or at the age of 15, gave correct replies. Moreover, an interesting fact is that opinions vary, according to urbanisation level - metropolitan areas seemed to be more exposed to information than rural areas. There is also a trend for males to be usually more aware of these features of EU citizenship than their female counterparts.

The Eurobarometer survey also highlighted EU citizens' rights regarding municipal elections in another Member State where they could be residing. Whilst the majority are aware of the freedom of movement and residence, voting rights still remain a confusing issue for EU citizens. It is quite surprising that only half of those interviewed have ever heard of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. On this matter, the awareness of the EU-15 participants has slightly increased in 2007 when compared to 2002, and the survey concludes that 43% of those interviewed in the new Member States are aware of the existence of the Charter. ☺

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