



Trends in quality of life in the EU: 2003–2009

> résumé <

'Poverty is a major issue in the EU and [...] the current economic and financial situation is aggravating the situation further. The crisis is taking its toll and a significant proportion of Europeans today are finding it difficult to make ends meet [...] The EU's new strategy for the next decade – Europe 2020 – and its target to lift at least 20 million Europeans out of poverty by 2020 sends a powerful message about all countries' genuine commitment to visible results for a more just and inclusive Europe.'

*László Andor, EU Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, June 2010
(quoted on European Commission press site)*



Quality of life and European policy

Monitoring changes in Europeans' quality of life and developing policies to boost their well-being are increasingly important in EU debate. Increasingly, it is acknowledged that while economic indicators such as gross domestic product (GDP) are important in assessing the level of well-being in a country, they are not sufficient. More and more, it is argued that public policy should be assessed in terms of how it directly promotes citizens' welfare, taking in considerations of social and environmental, as well as economic, conditions. This viewpoint is reflected in recent initiatives by – for example – the OECD and the European Commission.

Meanwhile, the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress, created on the initiative of the government of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, has sought to identify the limits of GDP as an indicator of economic performance and social progress and to assess the feasibility of alternative measurement tools. Eurofound is making a contribution in this respect with data from its European Quality of Life Surveys (EQLS). These surveys permit some mapping of trends and developments from 2003 to 2007 and, with a smaller number of questions in a Eurobarometer survey, the changes up to September 2009.

When Eurofound carried out the second EQLS in 2007, employment rates in Europe – particularly of women and older workers – were reaching their

highest levels, unemployment rates falling to their lowest levels in March 2008. Even so, the evaluation of the Lisbon Strategy notes that those citizens furthest from the labour market had still not benefited sufficiently from the increases in employment. Moreover, the situation would soon deteriorate: the financial crisis that began in the second half of 2008 led to the deepest recession in Europe since the Second World War. It has affected not only the economic profile of countries and companies, but the daily work and life of people in Europe. Although economic conditions may now be broadly improving, employment has continued to decline, especially in the Baltic States, Ireland and Spain. By the end of 2009, unemployment across Europe had risen to 23 million, with young people – and particularly young men – accounting for almost one quarter of the total increase in unemployment since 2008. Altogether, youth unemployment had risen to 21% in December 2009 and rates were above 40% in Latvia and Spain.

EQLS – successive snapshots of European life

As well as information on objective living and working conditions, policymakers also need to be aware of citizens' own evaluations of the quality of their lives and the quality of the society in which they live: an exclusive focus on traditional economic indicators may mask or obscure differences between the experiences of different social

groups. Eurofound launched the first EQLS in 2003 to capture some of the views, attitudes and experiences of adults in Europe, in order to assess their quality of life. This first survey involved interviews with more than 25,000 adults aged 18 or over in the 15 existing Member States, in the 10 new Member States that would join in 2004, and in Bulgaria, Romania (and Turkey). In 2007, many of the same questions were put to more than 35,000 respondents in the enlarged EU27, and in Croatia, FYR Macedonia, Norway and Turkey. The results from these surveys are both representative for the countries, and comparable between the surveys. Around 20 of the same questions were included in the September 2009 Special Eurobarometer. While the questions are directly comparable, the population sample for the Eurobarometer comprises only nationals of the Member States of the EU27. By contrast, the EQLS interviewed residents in the Member States, 96% of whom were citizens. It is true that the sample sizes of 1,000 persons per country are small if very accurate estimates are sought, and that analyses of change over time in individual countries should be regarded cautiously. However, some consistent findings do emerge, which are broadly compatible with expectations and which illuminate people's experience of the period 2003–2009.

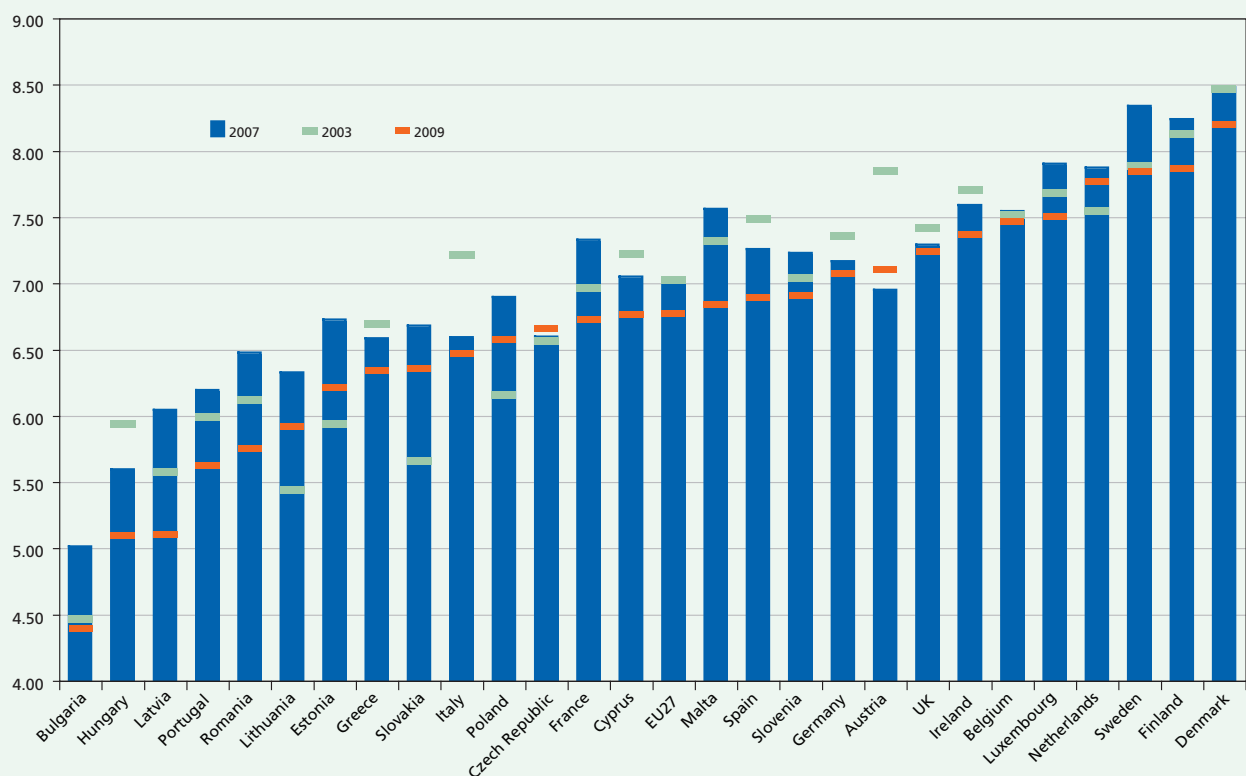
whole, quality of life remained relatively stable between 2003 and 2007, although there were a number of small positive changes. In those countries that joined the EU in 2004, quality of life improved more noticeably than in the older Member States. This was true for people's satisfaction with private spheres of life, such as housing and standard of living, as well as with their level of satisfaction with public services such as education, health and public transport, and for their global assessment of quality of life. Assessments of quality of life in Bulgaria and Romania, which joined the EU in 2007, showed much less progress. In general, people in higher income groups had a better experience of life than those in lower income groups; this difference was more marked than that between men and women, or between older and younger people (and was particularly marked in the new Member States).

Trends in quality of life between 2007 and 2009 are likely to reflect, to some extent, the impact of the economic and unemployment crisis in Europe. It is, however, important to document and interpret the extent of any changes in satisfaction with different aspects of life and to identify groups on which the financial crisis has had the most impact. Data from the surveys can shed light on these issues, if it is assumed that the questions are sensitive to the measurement of such change. It must also be acknowledged that the data can only reflect the views and experiences of relatively large social groups, since the samples are too small to document the changing situation of some groups at risk, such as single parents or migrants, while other socially excluded groups such as homeless people are not represented in the surveys.

Quality of life, 2003–2009

Change between 2003 and 2007 reflects, at least in part, the impact of enlargement on quality of life, with particular relevance in the new Member States for those social groups reporting the most change. In general, for the 27 Member States as a

Figure 1: Satisfaction with life in general, EU27, 2003–2009



Drop in satisfaction with life and standard of living

In general, the most striking changes between 2007 and 2009 were seen in terms of satisfaction with life in general and with standard of living. As Figure 1 shows, between the last quarter of 2007 and September 2009, the average level of satisfaction with life in general across the EU fell from 7.0 to 6.8, or by about 4%. This decline was more marked in the new Member States, where global life satisfaction had been increasing: here, the average score fell from 6.5 to 6.1, this decline of 6% being twice as great as the fall in life satisfaction in the EU15. The biggest falls were in Bulgaria (where average ratings of life satisfaction fell from 5.0 in 2007 to 4.4 in 2009), Romania, Malta, Estonia and Latvia, but also in France where the average life satisfaction rating fell from 7.3 to 6.7. So, in the Baltic States, for instance, the pattern of decline in life satisfaction reflects the drop in GDP. However, it does not correspond to the relatively small declines in GDP in countries such as Malta and France.

There was no difference between men and women in terms of the drop in life satisfaction experienced between 2007 and 2009. However, a clear difference was seen between older and younger people: among people aged between 18 and 34 years, ratings of life satisfaction rating fell by only 1%, while they fell 5% among older people. And people aged 65 years and over in the NMS12 suffered a much steeper fall in life satisfaction than their counterparts in the EU15 – of 10%, compared with 3%. This is consistent with results from the earlier surveys: together, the survey findings indicate that older people in the

NMS12 enjoyed fewer of the benefits of enlargement and are feeling exposed to the risks of the economic crisis. The ratings of life satisfaction among people aged 65 and over were, in 2009, an average of 7.0 in the EU15 countries and only 5.5 in the NMS12, which may in part be related to the poorer health of older people in the NMS12.

Household income and material conditions have a consistent relationship with ratings of life satisfaction. Both the 2007 and 2009 surveys include a question on how easy or difficult respondents found it to make ends meet. In 2007, the average life satisfaction score for those who found it easy to make ends meet was 7.8; in 2009, this was 7.7. The corresponding ratings for people finding it difficult to make ends meet were 5.3 and 4.9. So, the fall in life satisfaction among people who reported difficulty in making ends meet was, on average, 8% between 2007 and 2009. However, this decline was greater in the NMS12 – 15% compared with 6% in the EU15, perhaps reflecting the greater depth of difficulties in the NMS12. The average life satisfaction score for people who were unemployed at the time of the surveys was unchanged among people in the EU15, but fell by 11% among respondents in the NMS12 – from 5.7 to 5.0.

A similar pattern of decline can be seen when people's satisfaction with their standard of living is compared. On average, in the NMS12, citizens' satisfaction with their standard of living increased by 9% between 2003 and 2007. However, it fell by 6% between 2007 and 2009. In the EU15, the decline in satisfaction with the standard of living

Figure 2: Satisfaction with standard of living, EU27, 2003–2009

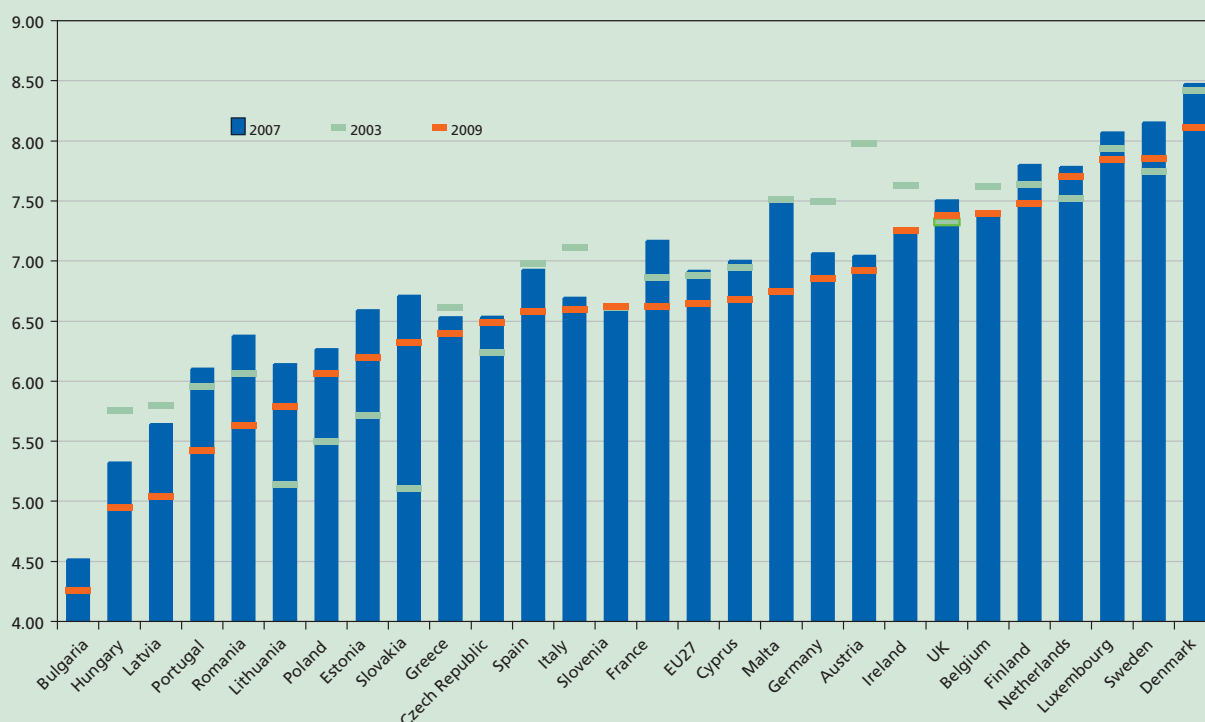
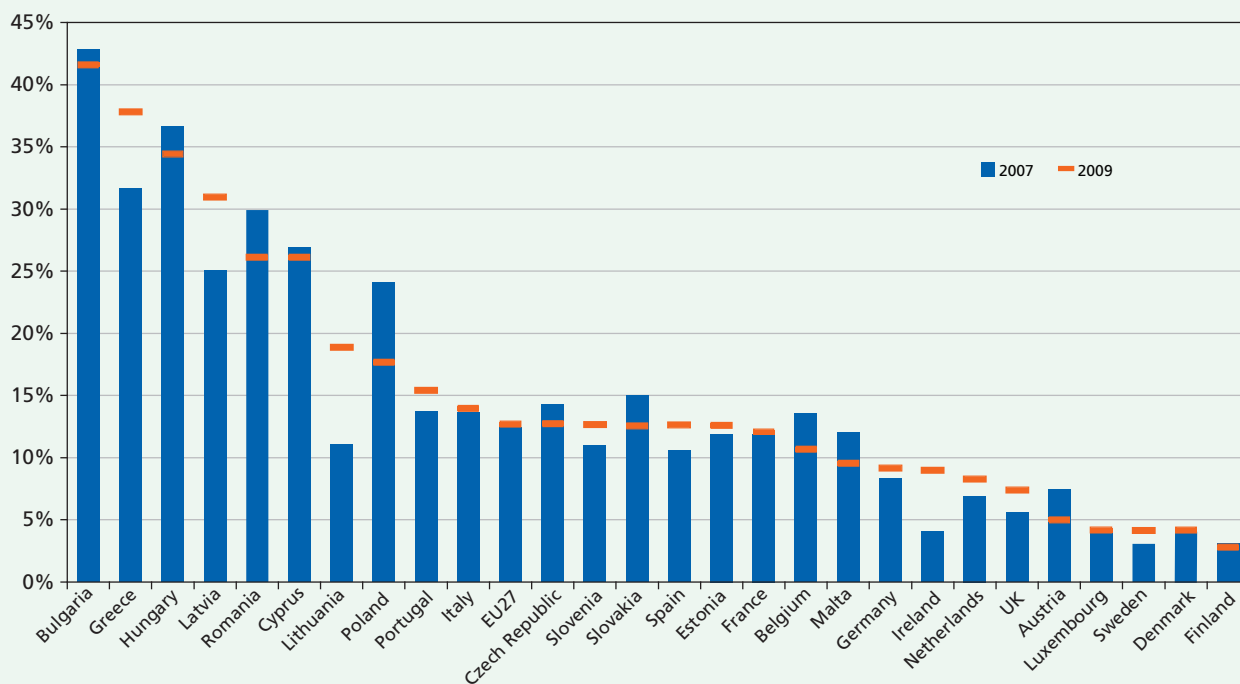


Figure 3: Proportion having difficulty in making ends meet



between 2007 and 2009 was less, at 4%. Moreover, the average rating of satisfaction with standard of living was 6.9 in the EU15, compared with 5.8 in the NMS12. The biggest falls in ratings were in Romania and Malta, followed by Latvia and Portugal, France and Estonia, so the perceived decline in standard of living was by no means only in the NMS12 or those countries most affected by the crisis.

In terms of social groups, older people in the NMS12 would appear to have been most impacted by the economic crisis. Among people aged 65 and over, ratings of satisfaction with standard of living fell by 5% in the EU15, but by 12% in the NMS12. And older people in the NMS12 rate their satisfaction with their standard of living at a lower level than their counterparts in the EU15: in the 2009 survey, among people aged 65 and over, the average rating of satisfaction with standard of living was 6.9 in the EU15 as against 5.2 in the NMS12.

Not surprisingly, people who say that they are finding it difficult to make ends meet are much less satisfied with their standard of living than those who find it easy. In 2009, those with difficulties making ends meet rated their level of satisfaction with their standard of living at 4.5, compared with 7.8 for those who had no difficulties. On average in the EU15, those who found it difficult to make ends meet were no less satisfied in 2009 than they had been in 2007; by contrast, the rating of satisfaction dropped by 12% among the corresponding citizens in the NMS12, suggesting at least a perception of greater hardship.

As Table 1 shows, around twice as many people in the NMS12 as in the EU15 find it difficult to make ends meet. In 2009, the proportion of citizens having difficulties was highest in Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary and Latvia (more than 30% in each country, and more than 40% in Bulgaria). The pattern was little changed from 2007; the greatest increases (of more than 5%) were in Greece, Ireland, Latvia and Lithuania (Figure 3).

Table 1: Elements of economic strain, EU15 and NMS12

	EU15		NMS12	
	2007	2009	2007	2009
'Difficult to make ends meet'	10%	11%	26%	22%
'Cannot afford meat'	4%	6%	20%	21%
'Cannot afford a holiday'	24%	28%	55%	55%

Two particular indicators from the deprivation index were used to identify changes in relatively severe hardship: being unable to afford meals with meat, chicken or fish every second day, and being unable to afford a week's annual holiday away from home. Table 1 shows that the proportions unable to afford these items are much higher in the NMS, but that there was relatively little change overall between 2007 and 2009. The biggest increases in deprivation were found in Hungary, where the proportion of citizens who said that they were unable to afford meat rose from 32% to 42% between 2007 and 2009. Meanwhile, the proportion unable to afford a holiday rose from 61% in 2007 to 73% in 2009; the only other country in which people reported comparable levels of deprivation in 2009 was Bulgaria.

Family life, job satisfaction and health – little change

While between 2007 and 2009 there were noticeable falls in people's satisfaction with their lives, and their standard of living, there was less change in their satisfaction with other aspects of life. Between 2003 and 2007, across the EU27, there had been small falls in the average levels of satisfaction with family life (of -1%) and a similar fall in terms of satisfaction with health; meanwhile, job satisfaction had declined by 2%. Between 2007 and 2009, satisfaction with family life and health fell somewhat more, but job satisfaction remained remarkably stable, as Table 2 indicates.

Table 2: Satisfaction with different aspects of life, EU15 and NMS12

	EU15		NMS12	
	2007	2009	2007	2009
Family life	7.95	7.81	7.70	7.52
Job	7.22	7.21	6.84	6.95
Health	7.44	7.26	6.98	6.7

Note: People rated their satisfaction on a scale from 1 to 10.

Satisfaction with family life is relatively high in all countries, and it is difficult to discern any consistent trend across the three points in time. However, there are two groups of countries in which satisfaction with family life fell between 2003 and 2007, and again between 2007 and 2009 – Germany and Austria; and Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain.

The views of older people appear to have changed somewhat more than those of the average citizen between 2007 and 2009, with a decline of 3% in their level of satisfaction with family life, compared with a fall of 2% for people aged between 35 and 64 years, and no change among those aged between 18 and 34. There was no difference between the ratings that men and women gave to their levels of satisfaction.

Between 2007 and 2009, levels of satisfaction with health fell by 4% among respondents in the NMS12 and by 2% among people in the EU 15, the most marked drops being in Bulgaria, Romania and Portugal. However, people in Latvia were more satisfied with their health in 2009 than they had been in 2007, so it is difficult to know how to interpret such changes.

The apparent changes in levels of job satisfaction are equally perplexing. Overall, average job satisfaction did not change between 2007 and 2009, and in the NMS12 it rose by 2%, on average. This appears paradoxical against a background of economic recession, growing job insecurity and deteriorating working conditions (for at least some workers). It also would seem counterintuitive that job satisfaction increased most in the UK and Ireland, and in the Baltic States, countries that have experienced substantial job loss. Perhaps

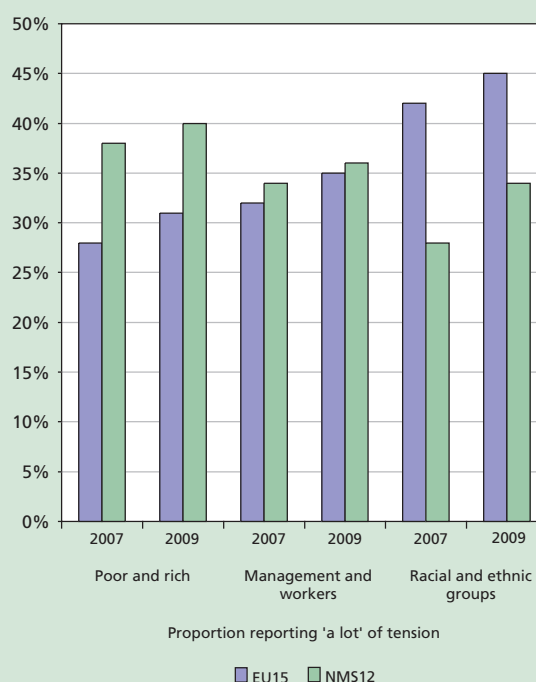
there is an element of relief among those who have a job; perhaps, however, the impact of the recession on job satisfaction will be played out in the longer term.

Rise in societal tensions

The quality of the society that people inhabit is a fundamental aspect of their overall quality of life. The views that people have about the quality of their local environment, public services and democratic institutions are important in themselves and also influence their overall assessment of their quality of life. In order to examine social relations, the EQLS asked people to rate the level of tension in their country between a range of social groups. Although there is much discussion of 'gender' and 'intergenerational' conflict, relatively few people in the EU actually stated that these were major sources of tension in their country. Only seldom do 20% or more of people perceive a lot of tension between men and women or young and old people in their country. On the other hand, around one third or more report a lot of tension between rich and poor, management and workers, and between different ethnic groups.

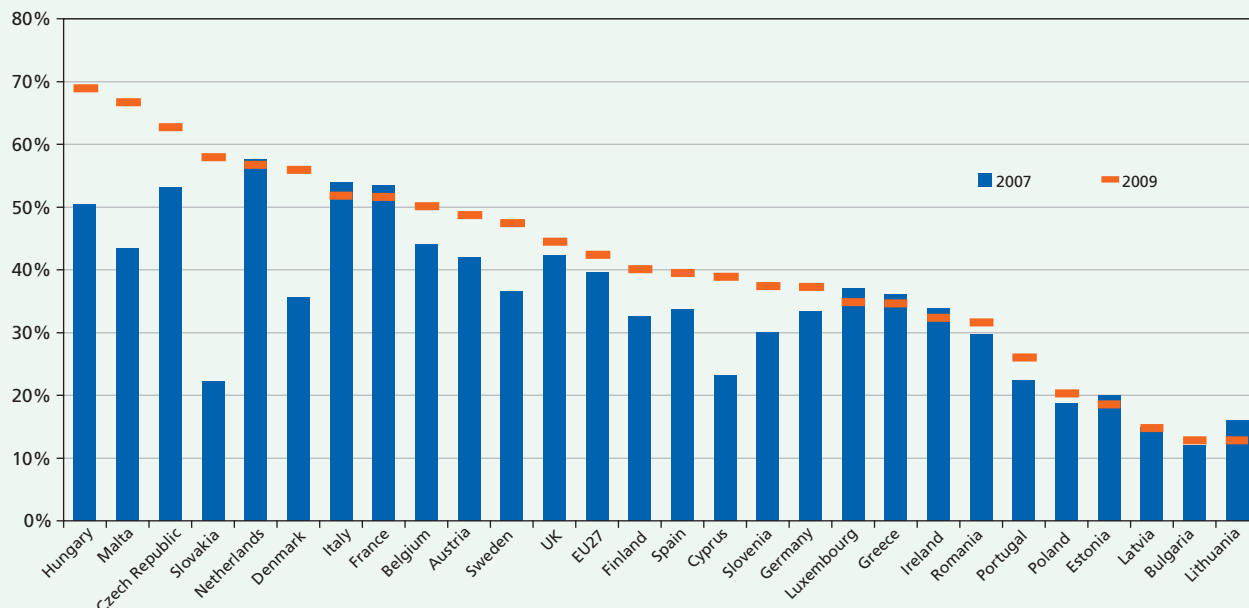
Between 2003 and 2007, the levels of perceived societal tensions dropped, the proportion of citizens reporting 'a lot' of tension – on average for the three sets of groups – falling by between four and six percentage points. However, between 2007 and 2009, the proportions reporting 'a lot of tension' increased by between two and three percentage points on average. And in the NMS12, perceived tensions between different racial or

Figure 4: Tensions between social groups, 2007 and 2009, EU15 and NMS12



Note: Figures are for those reporting 'a lot' of tension for each of the groups, in their country.

Figure 5: Perceived tension between racial and ethnic groups, EU27, 2007 and 2009



ethnic groups rose by around six percentage points. In terms of individual Member States, perceived tensions rose most in Slovakia (by 36 percentage points) and in Malta (by 24 percentage points); they also rose by 19 percentage points in Hungary. The rises in Slovakia and Hungary may reflect increasing awareness of tensions between the majority and the Roma population. In addition, however, the proportion reporting ‘a lot of tension’ rose by 20 percentage points in Denmark and by more than 10 percentage points in Sweden. In countries such as the UK and Ireland, which have experienced considerable immigration in previous years, there was little change in the levels of reported tension.

On the whole, there are only small variations between men and women in their reporting of tension between racial and ethnic groups and no differences in how their ratings changed between 2007 and 2009. In terms of age differences, 40% of people aged 65 and over in 2009 perceived ‘a lot of tension’ between racial and ethnic groups compared with 43% of younger adults; however, the proportion of such responses among people aged 65 and over increased by six percentage points between 2007 and 2009, compared with two percentage points among younger people.

A rise in perceived tensions between poor and rich was also apparent between 2007 and 2009. It was most marked in Malta and Slovenia, where the proportion of citizens reporting ‘a lot’ of tension rose by 13 percentage points. In addition, in a number of countries in northern Europe (Estonia, UK, Finland, Sweden, Ireland and Latvia), the proportion of citizens reporting ‘a lot of tension’ rose by between six and 11 percentage points between 2007 and 2009. (And in Slovakia, it rose by 10 percentage points.) Perhaps not surprisingly, the degree of affluence enjoyed by citizens

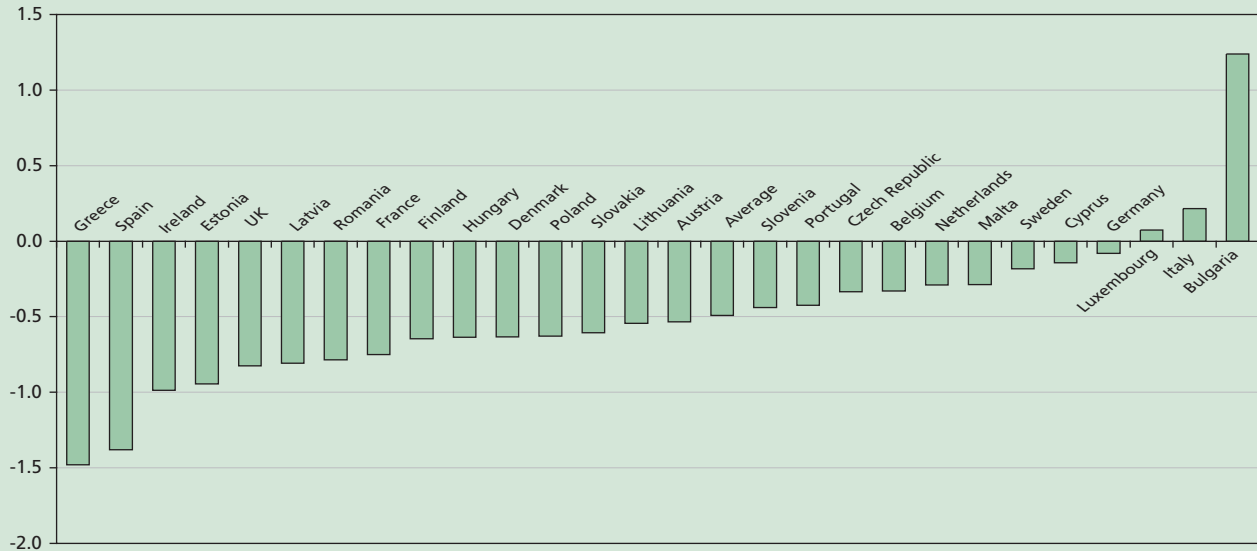
appears to have made a difference in this respect: people who felt that it was easy for them to make ends meet perceived less tension between rich and poor than those who found it difficult, 26% as against 45% reporting ‘a lot of tension’.

On average in the EU, perceptions of tensions between management and workers were slightly more prevalent in 2009 and differed little between the NMS12 and the EU15 as groups. However, there was great variation between individual countries: 4% of citizens in Denmark and 12% in Sweden reported a lot of tension between management and workers, while 57% in France and 56% in Hungary did so. Moreover, this figure rose by more than 10 percentage points between 2007 and 2009 in France, Austria, Estonia, Malta and Slovakia.

Loss of trust in institutions and citizens

While it appears that the quality of society has declined somewhat in terms of perceived tensions between social groups, the picture with regard to indicators of social capital is worse. In 2007, for the first time, the EQLS asked citizens how much trust they had in their national parliament and government. Across the EU, citizens gave an average rating in trust in their government of 4.6 (out of 10). While not high, by 2009 this had fallen to 4.1, a decline of 12%. The average rating in 2009 was 4.3 in the EU15 and 3.3 in the NMS12, national ratings ranging from 6.2 in Luxembourg and 5.3 in Cyprus to 3.2 in Greece and 2.3 in Latvia. The biggest falls between 2007 and 2009 were in Estonia and Latvia, Spain and Greece, Ireland and Romania – largely those countries whose economic situations have deteriorated most in the financial crisis. Citizens’ responses to a second question about trust in their national parliament reveal a similar pattern; the change in levels of trust between 2007 and 2009 is shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Change in trust in national parliament, 2007–2009, EU27



Notably, and running counter to the European trend, citizens in Bulgaria indicated a substantial increase in levels of trust in their national parliament. The anomalous situation in Bulgaria may be due in part, at least, to the experience of a national election, which was held just before the 2009 survey.

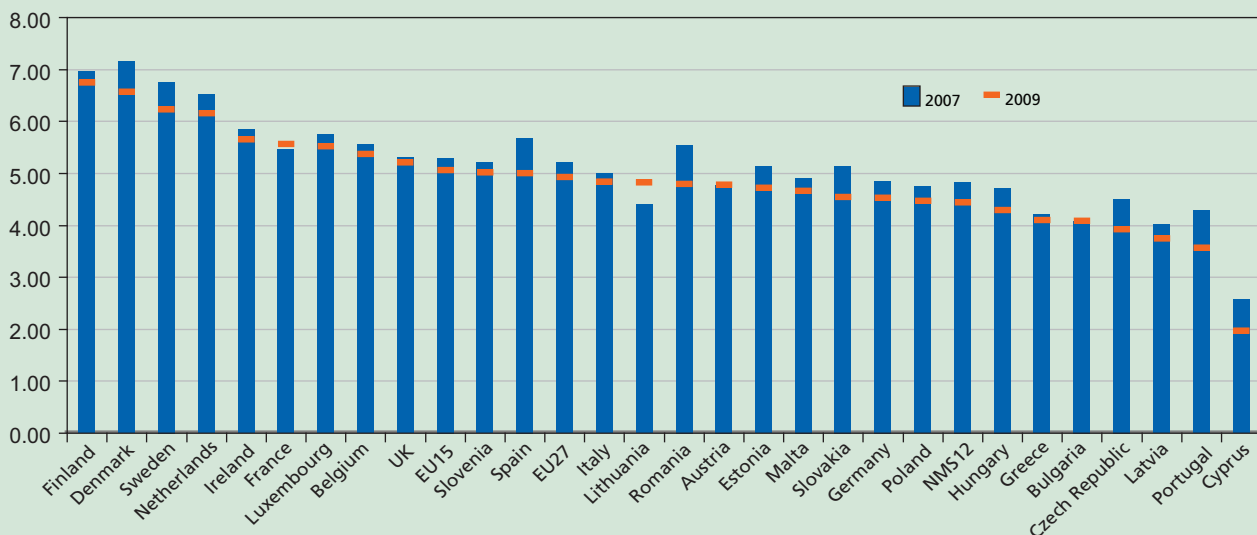
Across Europe, levels of trust in national institutions fell more among people who were finding it 'difficult' to make ends meet than among those who found it 'easy'. However, no clear associations with gender or age were seen.

Much has been written about the social significance of expression of trust in fellow citizens. Respondents were asked in all three surveys how much they trusted other people: the average scores fell from 5.6 for the EU27 in 2003,

to 5.2 in 2007 and 4.9 in 2009. The drops in rating between 2007 and 2009, for the EU15 and the NMS12, are outlined in Figure 7.

On a national basis, there have been some remarkable changes in ratings: over the six years from 2003 to 2009, the average fell by one rating point or more in Portugal and Spain, Austria and Germany, and Latvia and Cyprus. Between 2007 and 2009 the steepest falls were in Spain and Portugal, as well as Romania. Overall, between 2007 and 2009, this indicator of social capital declined by 5% in the EU15 compared with 8% in the NMS12. The average rating of trust in other people that women gave in 2009 was 4.8, compared with 5.0 among men; moreover, the decline was slightly more marked among women than men, levels of trust falling by 6% as against 4% for men.

Figure 7: Social capital – trust in people, EU15 and NMS12



Conclusion

Looking at the findings, it does appear that the financial crisis has been associated with a decline in some aspects of quality of life and in the perceived quality of society. While indicators of both life satisfaction and satisfaction with standard of living did improve between 2003 and 2007, particularly in the new Member States, they fell backwards between 2007 and 2009. The declines are seen in countries that are both more and less marked by the economic crisis: the countries experiencing the deepest recession are not always those reporting the greatest changes in quality of life. However, it does appear that Latvia and Estonia, as well as Bulgaria and Romania, have been slowed in their paths towards improved well-being.

Clearly, changes in the average quality of life in a country do not tell the whole story: it would appear that some specific groups in certain countries have experienced a greater recent decline in their quality of life. In particular, older people in the NMS12 appear to have been more negatively affected by changes between 2007 and 2009. In addition, people who find it difficult to make ends meet also have experienced more negative changes in a number of aspects of quality of life. Still, the impact of the economic crisis on

daily economic experience should not be exaggerated: at least until September 2009, there was almost no overall change in perceived financial strain, and only a relatively small deterioration in indicators of deprivation.

Among the most marked changes between 2007 and 2009 was a decline in many Member States in reported levels of trust in the government and the national parliament. Here, the changes were often in those countries most affected by the recession. However, the decline was not consistent and was less marked than might have been expected in some countries. Again, the sense of trust among people who were experiencing the most financial hardship declined more than it did among those who found it easier to make ends meet.

The loss of trust in democratic institutions was accompanied by a (continuing) fall in the traditional measure of social capital – trust in fellow citizens. This is a key resource for coping with social change and should receive more attention. In particular, steep falls in social capital were sometimes seen in countries where perceptions of social tensions had increased. There is a need for more extensive monitoring of these trends in the quality of society, and of trends in satisfaction with other aspects of quality of life, in order to analyse the impact of the economic crisis as it works its way through European societies.

Further information

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Quality of life in Europe, 2003–2007
www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef0977.htm

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ISBN 978-92-897-0872-2



9 789289 708722



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