

# Quality of life in the EU: Trends in key dimensions 2003-2009

Robert ANDERSON, Branislav MIKULIC and Eszter SANDOR

**Abstract.** The European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS) allows comparisons over time in different dimensions of quality of life. Between 2003 and 2007 during relative economic prosperity there has been a noticeable increase in subjective quality of life, especially in the 12 new EU Member States. Data from 2009 highlight that the economic crisis has had an impact on quality of life, especially for the most disadvantaged groups and for people in the new EU Member States.

## 1. Introduction

The documentation of change in quality of life and the development of policies to increase well-being are increasingly to the fore in EU policy debate. While it is argued that the goal of public policy should be assessed in terms of promoting well-being of Europe's citizens, it is also increasingly acknowledged that economic indicators, such as GDP, are important but inadequate measures of the well-being of countries. A more comprehensive approach to monitoring the complex reality must include consideration of social and environmental, as well as economic conditions. These considerations are reflected in recent initiatives from OECD and the European Commission, including the new Europe 2020 Strategy, which is "putting people first", as well as the Sarkozy Commission report on 'Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress'. They all emphasize a *multidimensional approach* when considering the well-being and quality of life of people. Eurofound is contributing to this exercise in part with its concept (see Box 1) and its distinguished tool to measure it: the European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS) series. These surveys permit some mapping of trends and developments from 2003 to 2007 and, with a smaller number of questions included in a Eurobarometer, changes up to September 2009.

### **Box 1: Quality of life: Eurofound concept**

Quality of life, which has gained prominence in social research study since the 1970s, is a broad concept concerned with overall well-being within society. It refers to the ability of people to achieve their goals and choose their ideal lifestyle. In that sense, the quality of life concept goes beyond the living conditions approach, which tends to focus on the material resources available to individuals. Three major characteristics that are associated with the quality of life concept [2] are:

1. Quality of life refers to individuals' life situations. The concept requires a micro perspective, where the conditions and perceptions of individuals play a key role. Macroscopic features relating to the economic and social situation of a society are important for putting the findings at individual level into their proper context, but they do not take centre stage.
2. Quality of life is a multidimensional concept. As noted above, the notion of quality and the consideration of several areas of life broaden the narrower focus on income and material conditions which prevails in other approaches. Multidimensionality not only requires the description of several life domains, but emphasises the interplay between domains as this contributes to quality of life.
3. Quality of life is measured by objective as well as subjective indicators. Subjective and attitudinal perceptions are of particular relevance in identifying individual goals and orientations. Individual perceptions and evaluations are most valuable when these subjective evaluations are linked to objective living conditions. Applying both ways of measuring quality of life gives a more complete picture.

At the time of the 2007 EQLS employment rates in Europe were reaching their highest levels, particularly of women and older workers, while unemployment rates fell to their lowest in March 2008. However, the Lisbon Strategy evaluation document acknowledges that employment increases had not sufficiently reached those furthest from the labour market. The financial crisis, which began in the second half of 2008 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, Spain and Ireland. Unemployment in the EU rose by the end of 2009 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 increased to 21% in December 2009 and rates were above 40% in Latvia and Spain.

Policymakers need information not only on objective living and working conditions, but feedback from citizens regarding their 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.

## **2. Data**

The data used in this paper come from Eurofound Quality of Life Survey. Eurofound launched the first EQLS in 2003 to capture some of the views, attitudes and experiences of adults in Europe relevant for assessment of their quality of life. This first survey involved interviews with more than 25,000 people aged 18 or over in the 15 existing Member States, as well as the 10 new Member States joining in 2004, and Bulgaria and Romania (together: NMS). In 2007, many of the same questions were put to more than 31,000 respondents in the 27 then Member States. The results from these surveys are both representative for the countries, and comparable between survey rounds. Around 20 of the same items (questions) were included in the September 2009 Special Eurobarometer. While the questions are directly comparable, the population sample for the Eurobarometer includes only nationals of the EU27 Member States, whereas the EQLS covers residents in those countries, among whom 96% were also citizens in 2007. It is also acknowledged that the sample sizes of 1000 per country are small to give very accurate estimates, and analyses of change over time in individual countries should be regarded cautiously. However, there are some consistent findings which are broadly compatible with expectations and which illuminate the population's experience of the period 2003-2009.

### **Box 2: Measuring Eurofound quality of life concept: Key areas covered by EQLS**

Drawing on previous studies, Eurofound covers the following core areas for the EQLS [2]:

- Economic resources and living standard
- Housing and local environment

- Employment and quality of jobs
- Family life and households
- Work-life balance
- Community life and social participation
- Health and health care
- Knowledge, education and training
- Subjective wellbeing
- Quality of society

### **3. General findings**

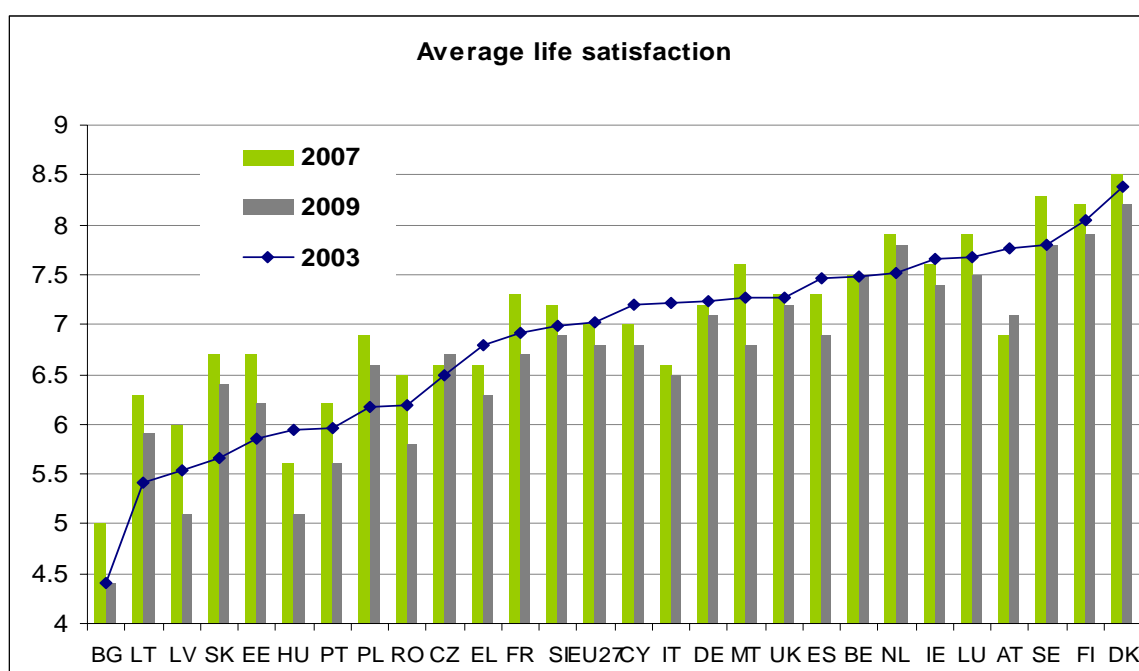
Change between 2003 and 2007 reflects, at least in part, the impact of enlargement on quality of life, with particular relevance in the NMS for the social groups that report most change (the full analysis is available in [1]). In general, for the 27 Member States as a whole quality of life remained relatively stable between 2003 and 2007 although there were a number of small positive changes. In countries which joined the EU in 2004, quality of life improved more noticeably than in the older Member States. This was true for satisfaction with private spheres of life, such as housing and standard of living, as well as for public services such as education, health and public transport, and for overall assessment of the quality of life. Assessments of quality of life in Bulgaria and Romania, which joined the EU in 2007, showed much less progress. In general, the better experience of people in higher than lower income groups was more marked than the influence of age or gender (and this was particularly true in the NMS).

Trends in quality of life between 2007 and 2009 are likely to reflect some impact of the economic – and increasingly 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 most impact. Data from the survey can be used to address these issues assuming 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 as 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.

#### 4. Subjective wellbeing

As Figure 1 shows, satisfaction with life in general fell between the last quarter of 2007 and September 2009, from an EU average rating of 7.0 to 6.8, or by about 4%. This decline was more marked in the countries where global life satisfaction had been increasing – the NMS, where the average score fell from 6.5 to 6.1; this decline of 6% was twice as great as the fall in life satisfaction in the EU15 countries. The biggest falls were in Bulgaria and Romania, Malta, Estonia and Latvia, but also in France where the average life satisfaction rating fell from 7.3 in 2007 to 6.7 in 2009.

*Figure 1: Satisfaction with life in general*



Question 29: All things considered, how satisfied would you say you are with your life these days? Please tell me on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means very dissatisfied and 10 means very satisfied. Source: EQLS 2007.

So, the pattern of change in life satisfaction reflects changes in GDP in countries like the Baltic States, but does not correspond to the relatively small declines in GDP of countries like Malta or France.

There was no difference between men and women in change of scores between 2007 and 2009, but among younger people, aged 18-34, the life satisfaction rating fell by only 1% compared with a 5% decline for older people. People aged 65 and over

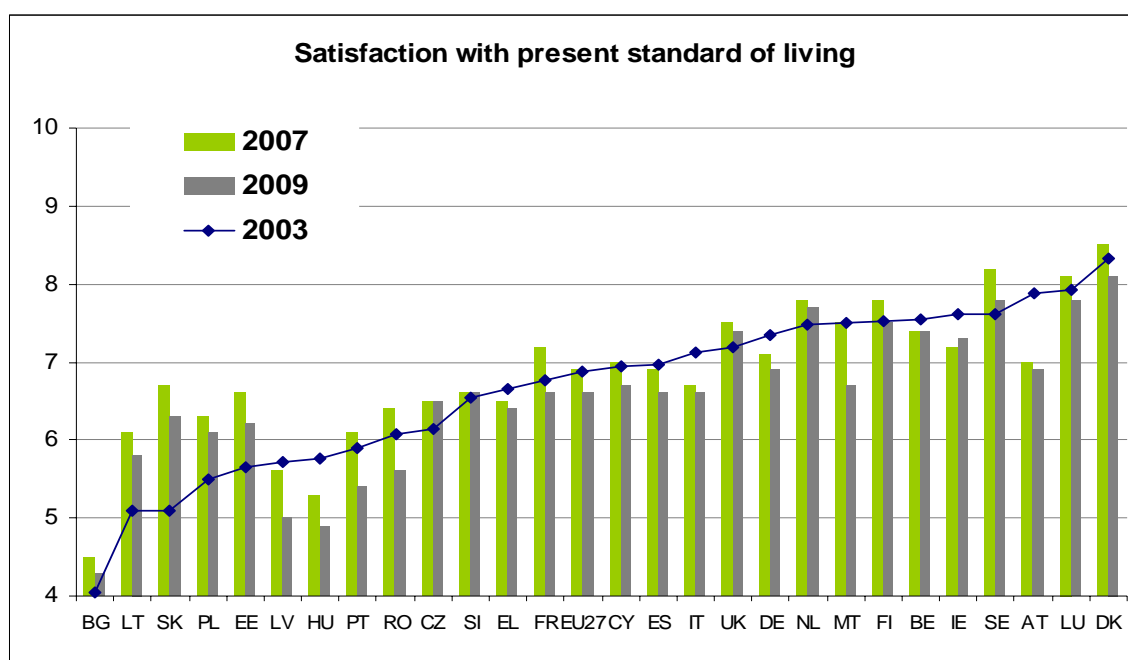
recorded a much steeper fall in life satisfaction of 10% in the NMS, compared with 3% in the EU15. This is consistent with results from the earlier surveys indicating that older people in the NMS enjoyed fewer of the benefits of enlargement and are feeling exposed to the risks of the economic crisis. Incidentally 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 NMS – which may in part be related to the poorer health of older people of the same age as their contemporaries in EU15 countries.

## **5. Economic strain**

Household income and material conditions have a consistent relationship with ratings of life satisfaction ([3] p.6). Both the 2007 and 2009 surveys include a question on how 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 and 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 8% between the surveys; but this decline was 15% in the NMS compared with 6% in the EU15, perhaps reflecting the greater depth of difficulties in the NMS. 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 NMS, from 5.7 to 5.0.

The results from the question about satisfaction with “standard of living” tell a similar story of the changes between the two surveys (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Satisfaction with standard of living**



Question 40d: Could you please tell me on a scale of 1 to 10 how satisfied your present standard of living, where 1 means you are very dissatisfied and 10 means you are very satisfied? Source: EQLS 2007.

While average satisfaction with standard of living had increased by 9% in the NMS between the 2003 and 2007 surveys, it fell by 6% between 2007 and 2009. In the EU15 satisfaction with standard of living also fell by 4% between 2007 and 2009 – although the average score was still 6.9 compared with 5.8 in the NMS. The biggest falls in scores on this indicator 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 NMS or the countries most evidently hit by the financial crisis.

Again there were no differences between the surveys among men and women in the extent of change in scores on satisfaction with standard of living; and for those aged 18-34 there was no change in ratings. However among people aged 65 and over ratings of satisfaction with standard of living fell by 5% in the EU15 compared with 12% in the NMS. Therefore older people in the NMS are consistently reporting satisfaction scores, which reflect a greater impact on them of the economic crisis. 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 countries compared with 5.2 in the NMS.

Not surprisingly people who report 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 the average rating was 4.5 compared with 7.8. Average satisfaction with standard of living was about 3% lower for both groups in 2009 than they had been in 2007. However, it was unchanged among people in the EU15 who reported it was ‘difficult’ to make ends meet, while it was down by 12% among this group in the NMS, suggesting a perception, at least, of greater hardship.

As Table 1 shows the proportion of people reporting that it was ‘difficult’ to make ends meet is twice as high in the NMS as in the EU15. In 2009, these proportions were highest (more than 30%) in Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary and Latvia [4]; the pattern was little changed from 2007 – the largest increases (by more than 5%) were in Greece, Ireland, Latvia and Lithuania.

**Table 1: Elements of economic strain**

	EU15		NMS12	
	2007	2009	2007	2009
<b>Proportion reporting:</b>				
Difficult to make ends meet	10%	11%	26%	22%
Cannot afford meat	4%	6%	20%	21%
Cannot afford a holiday	24%	28%	55%	55%

*Question 57: A household may have different sources of income and more than one household member may contribute to it. Thinking of your household’s total monthly income, is your household able to make ends meet? Categories: 1) Very easily; 2) Easily; 3) Fairly easily; 4) With some difficulty; 5) With difficulty; 6) With great difficulty; 7) Don’t know. Categories 5 and 6 are grouped together and presented in the figure.*

*Question 19: There are some things that many people cannot afford, even if they would like them. For each of the following things on this card, can I just check whether your household can afford it if you want it? 19.d ) Meals with meat, chicken or fish every second day if you wanted it; 19.2) Paying for a week’s holiday away from home (not staying with relatives). Source: EQLS 2007.*

Two indicators from the deprivation index were selected to identify change in relatively severe indicators of hardship: being unable to afford meals with meat, chicken or fish every second day if the respondent wanted it, and being unable to afford a week’s annual holiday away from home. The proportion of people unable to afford these items is much higher in the NMS. Overall there was relatively little



change between 2007 and 2009. The biggest increase in deprivation was found in Hungary, where the proportion reporting that they were unable to afford meat increased from 32% to 42%, while the proportion unable to afford a holiday was up from 61% in 2007 to 73% in 2009. The only other country in which people reported comparable levels of deprivation in 2009 was Bulgaria.

## 6. Satisfaction with life domains

In general the most striking changes between 2007 and 2009 in satisfaction with everyday life were registered for the assessments of life in general and regarding standard of living, while there was altogether less change in satisfaction with more specific life domains. In the EU27, between 2003 and 2007 there had been small falls in the average levels of satisfaction with family life (-1%) and a similar fluctuation in satisfaction with health; 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; the figures are in Table 2.

**Table 2: Satisfaction with life domains**

	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

*Question 40: Could you please tell me on a scale of 1 to 10 how satisfied you are with each of the following items, where 1 means you are very dissatisfied and 10 means you are very satisfied? 40.5) family life; 40.2 your present job and 40.6) your health*

*Source: EQLS 2007.*

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 reported satisfaction with family life fell from 2003 to 2007, and again from 2007 to 2009 – Germany and Austria; and Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain.

There was some indication that the views of older people had changed somewhat more between 2007 and 2009 with a decline of 3% in average level of satisfaction

with family life between the surveys, compared with a fall of 2% for people aged 35-64 and no change among those aged 18-34. Altogether there was no difference between the scores of men and women.

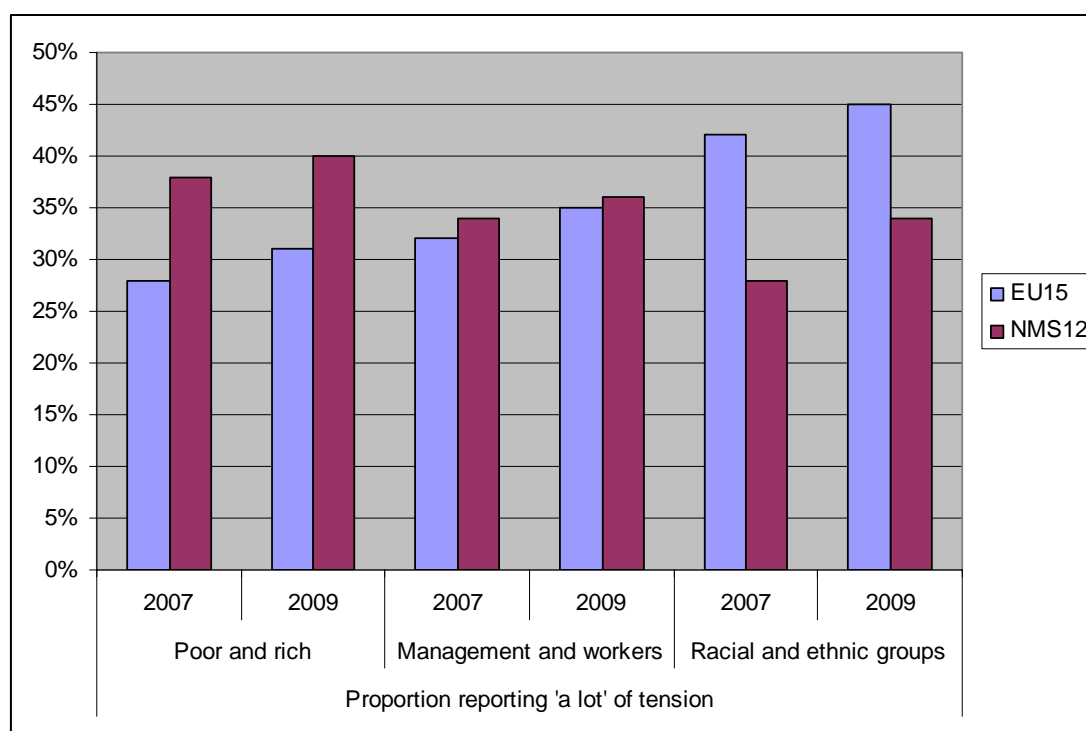
Between 2007 and 2009 satisfaction with health fell by 4% among respondents in the NMS and by 2% among people in the EU15; the most marked changes were found for reporting in Bulgaria, Romania and Portugal, but the rating was higher in Latvia in 2009 – so it is difficult to know how to interpret such changes.

The changes in reported job satisfaction are equally perplexing. Altogether average job satisfaction was unchanged between 2007 and 2009, and in the NMS, the average was, in fact, 2% higher. This appears paradoxical in the face of an economic recession, increased job insecurity and deterioration of working conditions (at least for some workers). It also seems counterintuitive that job satisfaction had increased most in countries like the UK and Ireland, as well as the Baltic States. Perhaps there is an element of relief among those who have a job or maybe the impact of the recession on job satisfaction will be played out in the longer term.

## **7. Social tensions and social capital**

The EQLS aims to capture different aspects of the quality of society as fundamental elements of the multidimensional concept of quality of life. Social relations have been examined in the EQLS by asking people to rate the level of tension – from ‘no tension’ to ‘a lot of tension’ – between different social groups. Although there is much discussion of ‘gender’ and ‘intergenerational’ conflict, relatively few people in the EU actually register these as major sources of tension in their country. It is seldom, that 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 a third of people report ‘a lot of tension’ between social groups such as rich and poor, management and workers, and different ethnic groups (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Tensions between social groups**



*Question 25: In all countries there sometimes exists tension between social groups. In your opinion, how much tension is there between each of the following groups in this country? a) Poor and rich people; b) Management and workers; e) Different racial and ethnic groups; f) Different religious groups.*

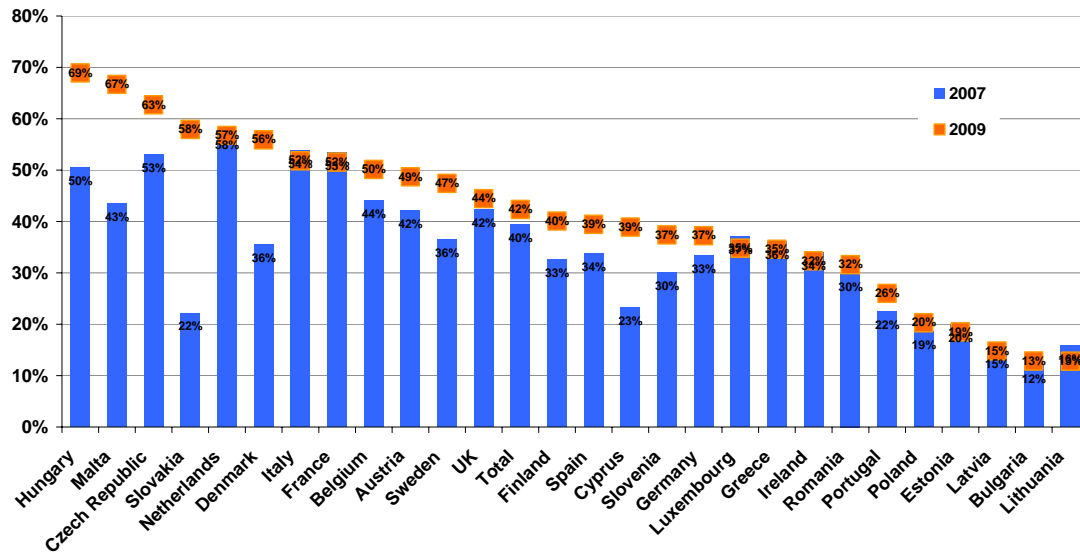
*The data show the proportion of respondents who answered 'a lot of tension' in response to four of the categories. Source: EQLS 2007.*

In the EU27, between 2003 and 2007, reporting 'a lot of tension' had declined by between 4 percentage points and 6 percentage points for the three social groups investigated here. However, between 2007 and 2009 the proportions reporting 'a lot of tension' increased by 2 to 3 percentage points and the increase is most noticeable in the NMS regarding tensions between racial and ethnic groups (7 percentage points, Figure 3).

In terms of individual countries the largest increases were found in Slovakia and Hungary (which may reflect increasing awareness of tension between the majority and the Roma population) and Malta, but the proportion reporting 'a lot of tension' had also increased by 20 percentage points in Denmark and more than 10 percentage points in Sweden (Figure 4). In countries such as the UK and Ireland, which had

experienced considerable immigration in previous years there was little change in reporting tension.

**Figure 4: Perceived tension between racial and ethnic groups**



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 changes between 2007 and 2009. In 2009 40% of people aged 65 and over perceived ‘a lot of tension’ between racial and ethnic groups compared with 43% of younger adults - but the proportion among people aged 65 and over had increased by 6 percentage points between the surveys compared with 2 percentage points among younger people.

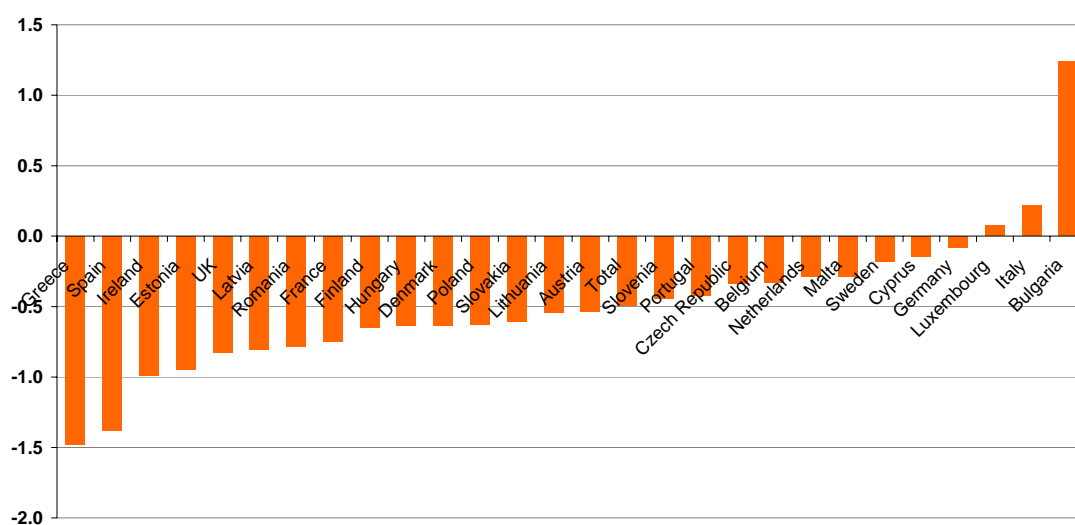
The increased reporting of tensions between ‘poor and rich’ was most marked in Malta and Slovenia, and also Slovakia, but otherwise mainly in Northern Europe – UK and Ireland, Finland and Sweden, Latvia and Estonia – all had proportions reporting ‘a lot of tension’ that were 5 percentage points or more higher in 2009 than in 2007. Perhaps it is not surprising that people who felt it was easy for them to make ends meet perceived less tension in this respect than people who found it difficult - 26% compared with 45% reported ‘a lot of tension’.

Perception of tensions between ‘management and workers’ were slightly more prevalent in 2009 but differed little between the countries of the NMS and EU15. However, there was great variation between countries in reporting ‘a lot of tension’ – from 4% in Denmark and 12% in Sweden, to 57% in France and 56% in Hungary.

This figure increased by more than 10 percentage points between 2007 and 2009 in France, Austria, Estonia, Malta and Slovakia.

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 much clearer – and negative. Questions about trust in their national parliament and government were asked in the EQLS for the first time in 2007. The average score on trust in their government of 4.6 (out of 10) was not high, but it was only 4.1 in 2009, a decline of 12%. The average in 2009 was 4.3 in the EU15 and 3.3 in the NMS; it ranged 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 – tending to reflect countries whose economic situation deteriorated most in the financial crisis. Responses to a second question about trust in their national parliament reveal a similar pattern of responses (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Change in trust in national parliament, 2007-2009**



*Question 27: Please tell me how much you personally trust each of the following institutions? a) [nationality] parliament; e) The government; f) The political parties. Respondents rated their level of trust on a scale of 1 to 10. Source: EQLS 2007.*

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. Changes in levels of trust in these political institutions were not clearly associated with gender or age, but

the ratings among people who were finding it ‘difficult’ to make ends meet had declined further than for those finding it ‘easy’.

Much has been written about the social significance of trust in fellow citizens. Respondents were asked in all three surveys to assess their trust in other people. The average scores have declined from 5.6 for the EU27 in 2003, to 5.2 in 2007 and 4.9 in 2009 [5]. Trust in people declined further between 2007 and 2009, and this decrease was more significant in the NMS (4.8 to 4.4) than in the EU15 (5.3 to 5.1).

There have been some remarkable changes in average ratings: over the six years from 2003 to 2009 the average fell by a point or more in Portugal and Spain, Austria and Germany; Latvia and Cyprus; between 2007 and 2009 the steepest falls were in Spain and Portugal, as well as Romania. So altogether, this indicator of social capital declined between 2007 and 2009 by 5% in the EU15 and by 8% in the NMS. The decline was slightly more marked among women (6%) than men (4%). The average rating in 2009 was 4.8 among women compared with 5.0 among men.

## **8. Conclusions**

In conclusion, it does appear that the financial crisis has been associated with some equivalent change to aspects of quality of life and to the quality of society. While indicators of both global life satisfaction and satisfaction with standard of living had improved between 2003 and 2007, particularly in the NMS, they have fallen backwards between 2007 and 2009. However the declines are found in countries 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 – but it appears that Latvia and Estonia, as well as Bulgaria and Romania have been slowed in their paths towards improved well-being.

Clearly, changes in average quality of life of the country population do not tell the whole story and it appears that some specific groups in certain countries have experienced a greater recent decline in their quality of life. In particular, older people in the NMS appear to have been more negatively affected by changes between 2007 and 2009. And people who feel that it is ‘difficult’ to make ends meet record more negative changes in aspects of quality of life. Still the impact of the economic crisis on economic experiences should not be exaggerated – at least until September 2009

there had been almost no change overall in the measure of economic strain and relatively small deterioration in the 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 although the decline was not consistent and, for example, was less marked than might have been expected in some countries. Again the ratings among people reporting most financial hardship had declined further than for those finding 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 the steepest falls in social capital were also sometimes 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. Likewise there are indicators of trends in domain satisfaction which demand larger surveys in order to analyse the impact of the economic crisis as it works its way through our societies.

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