

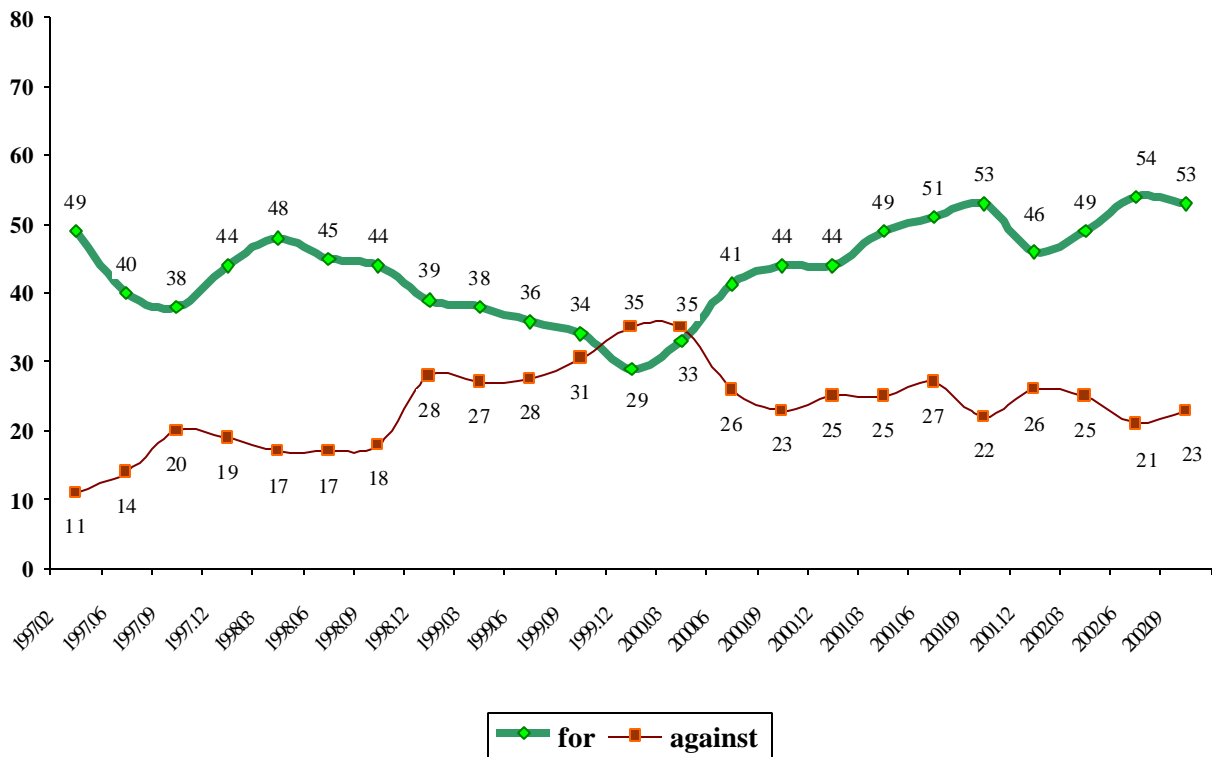
## Attitudes towards the European Union in Lithuania: 1997-2002

Vladas Gaidys, [vladas@vilmorus.lt](mailto:vladas@vilmorus.lt)

Institute for Social Studies,  
Vilnius, Lithuania

In Lithuania, the first survey on eurointegration was carried out in June 1992. The question was worded as follows: “Are you “for” or “against” Lithuania’s becoming a member of the European Community in the nearest future?” 63,5 per cent of the respondents answered “yes”, 4,3 per cent answered “no” and 32,3 per cent opted for the answer “hard to say”. Thus at that time, the attitudes towards the European structures were highly favourable. Regular surveys on the attitudes towards the European Union were started in the early 1997. The wording of the question was: “If a referendum on Lithuania’s accession to the European Union were held, how would you vote: “for”, or “against”? (The responses: for, against, wouldn’t vote, undecided; since March 2001 only three answers: for, against, undecided – have been proposed).<sup>1</sup>

Fig. 1. Attitudes towards the European Union: voting intentions in the referendum



<sup>1</sup> The surveys referred to in the text were carried out by the Public Opinion Research Centre “Vilmorus”. In all the cases, multi-stage, random sample was used, the interviews took place in respondents’ home; at least 1000 adult people were surveyed. The surveys were contracted by the European Commission Delegation to Lithuania and the European Committee to the Government of Lithuania.

The lowest number of eurosceptics was registered in the early 1997. At that time, an idealised image of the EU and other western countries prevailed in Lithuania - they were treated as no-problem “welfare states”, affiliation to which would automatically improve the situation in Lithuania. At that time, practically no discussions were held on the subject in the country.

Analysis of the attitudes dynamics revealed a strengthening of negative and a weakening of positive attitudes in February-September 1997. At that time, a few discussions were held in mass media between the europroponents and euroopponents, during which the eurosceptics expressed an open and dramatic concern about the sovereignty problems of Lithuania, about potential immigrants, etc. Meanwhile, the eurosupporters were not able to present their arguments in such a heated and dramatised way.

The growth of favourable attitudes towards the European Union at the end of 1997 – beginning 1998 could be explained again by the moves of the mass media: on TV a special programme “Europe Square” appeared, the daily “Respublika” launched a weekly supplement “Euro Plus”.

The decreased share of eurosupporters in November 1998 - November 1999 could be explained by the unfavourable reception in Lithuania of the EU conclusions on the conditions for Lithuania’s accession, which also had a cooling effect on the europroponents. At the same time, requirements to close down the Ignalina atomic power plant and to abolish the death penalty were voiced, meanwhile, the November 1998 survey showed that 80 per cent of the country’s population were against the closure of the plant and only 10 per cent were in favour of it; correspondingly, 78 per cent against and 10 per cent for the abolition of death penalty. In our opinion, these and other unpopular demands thinned the ranks of europroponents. One of the specifics of the period was that some functionaries based unpopular decisions which they made on the “requirements of Brussels”.

In December 1999, the proportion of eurosceptics was higher than that of europroponents. This period was characterised by discussions and arguments concerning the oil refinery, one of the largest enterprises of Lithuania. Mass media presented arguments to the effect that the privatisation of the establishment included provisions detrimental to the interests of Lithuania, which were concealed from the people. Although the establishment was privatised by an American company, doubts on the expediency of the steps made by the authorities and, particularly, suspicions that the information was concealed, was related with the question of Lithuania’s joining the EU. The people became aware that they had very poor knowledge both of the EU and of the terms of accession.

The period was characterised by a strong correlation between the (decreasing) ratings of government institutions and the increase of the proportion of eurosceptics.

A rapid growth of europroponents in the year 2000 could be explained by two causes: an onset of an intensive information campaign for the population, and by the emerging new political forces which were advocating Lithuania’s accession to the EU.

An abatement of eurooptimism at the end of 2001 could be interpreted as difficulties of the negotiation period, when a lot of discussions on the future of agriculture (the problem of direct payments), on the permission for foreigners to purchase the land intended for agricultural purposes, on the closure of the atomic power plant, were raised. Later, the situation was stabilised and since the spring of 2002 the proportion of those who would vote for the accession has constantly exceeded 50 per cent.

In analysing the dynamics of the attitudes on the accession to the EU, a few factors influencing public opinion could be singled out (these regularities are hypothetical and hardly verifiable empirically):

- Trust in state and political institutions. In considerations on Lithuania's joining the EU, it is stressed that this affects the life of every citizen of Lithuania, therefore people must be well aware of the accession terms and to have an idea of the prospects for the future. In fact, the majority of the population do not make any study of the materials related to the negotiations, but rather either trust or mistrust the experts who submit the evaluations in mass media. Here, the experts from state and government institutions (Government, the Seimas) play an important role, for decreasing trust in them would have the same effect on the projects under way.
- Negotiations and accession terms ("signals from Brussels"). Quite naturally, the population is very sensitive to the requirements which are presented to Lithuania in the course of the negotiations. At present, the most sensitive issues are agriculture and atomic power plant. However, at a certain time, other topics, e.g. the size of excise duties on cigarettes, etc. might acquire more importance.
- Behaviour of foreign companies in Lithuania. Activities of these companies are, in a way, treated as a miniature relations model of the west with Lithuania. If those relations are fair and useful, a liking for the west increases, and vice versa. For Lithuania, the performance of the companies Williams and Telekom have been most topical in this respect, significantly playing into the hands of euroscepticism at the end of 1999.
- Rhetoric of Lithuanian functionaries and politicians. In making unpopular decisions, implications to the "requirements of the EU" are most handy. The rhetoric of the type is regularly augmented, later, when the consequences are perceived, it diminishes.
- Mass media. In comparison with the other East and Central European countries, in Lithuania this institution is in an exceptional position – trust in the institution is unusually high (e.g. in September 2002, trust in mass media was expressed by 61 per cent, and mistrust – by 10 per cent of the population). Naturally, the attitudes of the journalists have a significant impact on the opinion of the population about the accession to the EU. It could be argued (nevertheless, in order to prove it a content analysis of the press is required), that in 1997-2002, the mass media gave

an overall positive picture of the EU accession issue and became a positive factor in shaping the level of eurooptimism.

- Intellectuals. Scientists, representatives of art boast a high prestige in the society. Their attitudes are highly important for popular support of eurointegration. In Lithuania, no significant movements of anti-European intellectuals have been formed (there are such movements in some countries), only sporadically some moderately critical ideas are voiced.
- Elections. The arguments of eurosceptics are rather emotional and potentially strong: weakened sovereignty, emigration – immigration, “melting” of the nation, “dictatorship” of Brussels. During the election campaigns such texts could win over part of the electorate. This is tempting, particularly for weaker candidates. However, lately (during the 2000 elections and the coming 2002 presidential elections) this type of rhetoric has been seldom used.
- Social protest. It could be guessed that part of the respondents give a negative answer to the question on referendum not from their inner belief, but as a kind of dissatisfaction at their economic and social position. They are aware that such an answer would not be to the liking of the ‘authorities’. An improving economic situation should exhaust this factor.

With respect to an individual, the factors analysed above are more “external” in character. It is important to know, how the arguments “for” and “against” are worded by the respondents themselves. An “open-ended” question, i.e. the one with no prepared alternative answers helps best in this case. In May 2002<sup>2</sup>, the key arguments “for” sounded like this: “economic situation of Lithuania will improve” – 32 per cent (of all population), “unemployment will decrease” – 28 per cent, “people will be able to seek employment abroad” – 26 per cent, “foreign investments will grow” – 22 per cent, “Lithuania’s security will increase” – 11 per cent. It should be noted here that economic arguments prevail. In the previous surveys “employment abroad” was rarely mentioned, whereas in this survey it was already mentioned by one respondent in four. This corresponds to the emigration attitudes registered during other surveys as well.

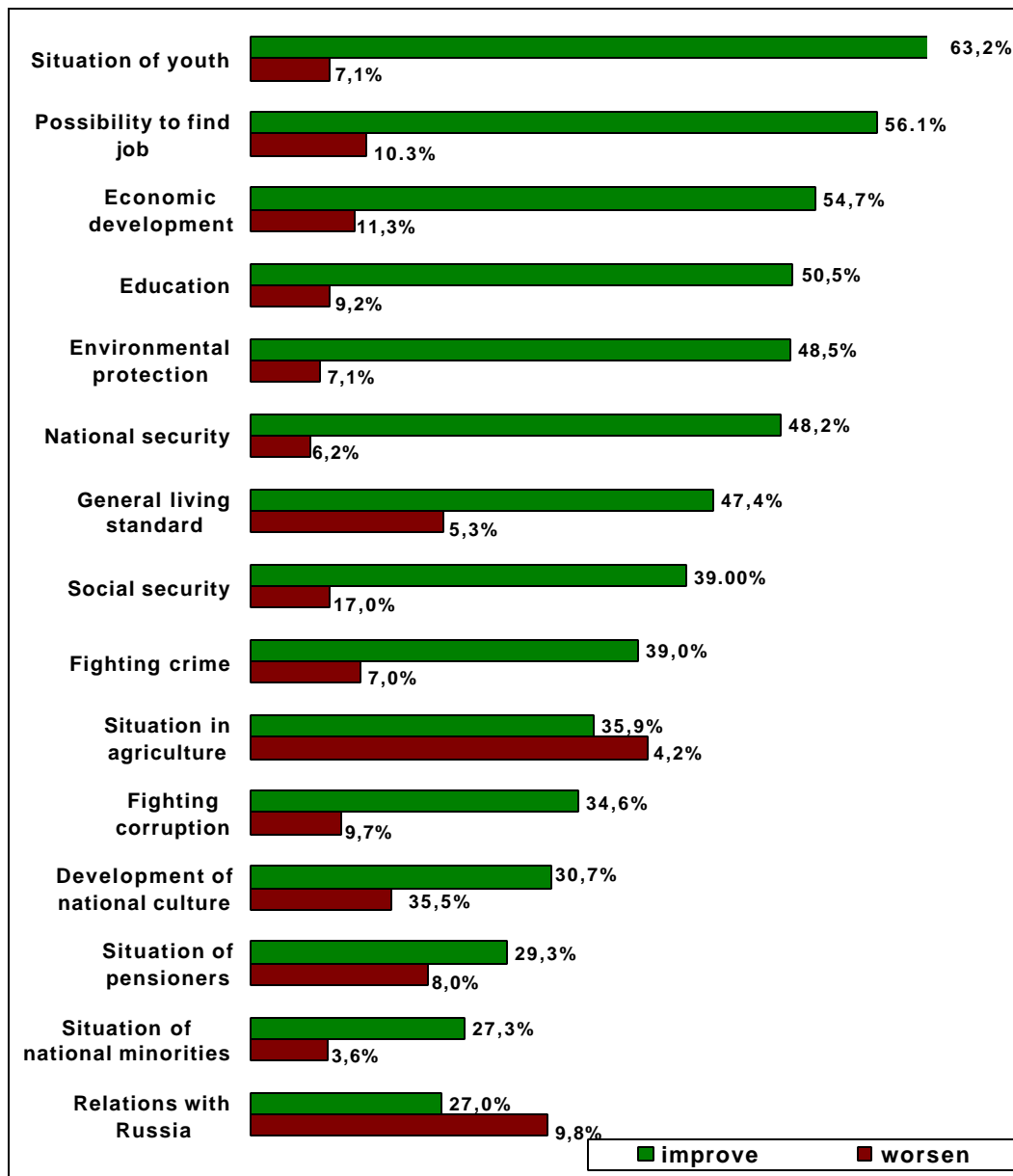
The key arguments “against”: “other countries will make use of cheap workforce” – 10 per cent, “negative consequences for Lithuanian agriculture” – 8 per cent, “people’s life will worsen” – 7 per cent, “the most talented people will leave the country” – 6 per cent, “prices will grow” – 5 per cent, “foreigners will rule Lithuania” – 4 per cent, “Lithuania will lose sovereignty” – 4 per cent, “Lithuania will become a backyard of Europe” – 3 per cent. Part of these arguments are also economic in character (prices, agriculture), but quite a few contain emotional, moral weight (“rule”, “backyard”, “exploit”).

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<sup>2</sup> The survey was carried out on 2 – 19 May 2002, 2523 respondents were surveyed (a large number of respondents not only gives the results with a higher accuracy, but also enables to analyse small groups of the population, e.g. answers of Russians and Poles). The survey was contracted by the European Commission Delegation to Lithuania.

The respondents were asked to make evaluation of changes in different spheres of life upon Lithuania's accession to the EU (overall – 21 spheres, the diagram shows 15 which are more important).

Fig. 2. *If Lithuania joined the European Union, in which fields the situation, in your opinion, would improve, and in which – worsen? (May 2002)*



Here (fig. 2), as in the open question, considerable optimism with respect to economic growth, a possibility to find job, and national security is expressed. The respondents see the best prospects for the youth upon Lithuania's accession to the EU. High expectations are given to education, as a field related to the youth. But the respondents are also optimistic about the situation of pensioners (although most do not have opinion).

Rather critical evaluations are made about the prospects of agriculture upon EU membership; here, pessimists outweigh optimists.

Relations with Russia is another field in which worsening is expected. However, bearing in mind the fact that such answers to the open question are practically non-existent, it could be maintained that worsening relations with Russia is a statement of the fact of the future but not a concern about the problem.

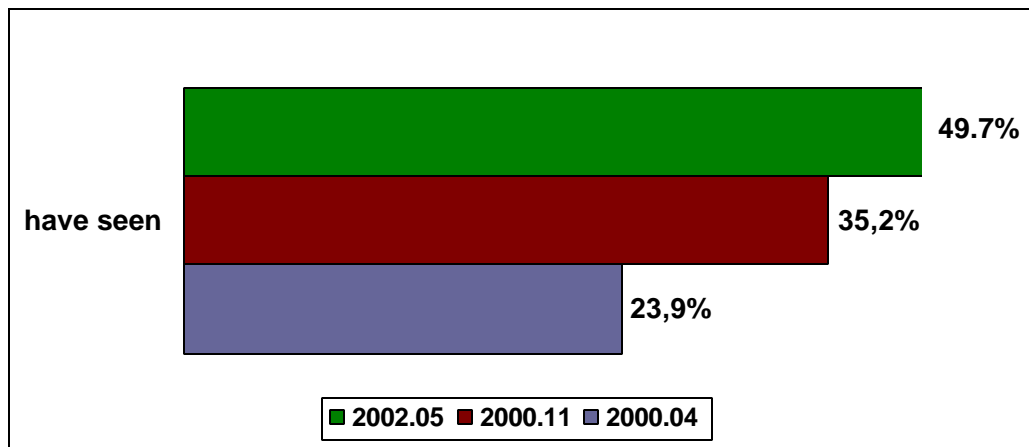
Again, it should be noted that the position “opportunity to find job” ranks very high. The survey conducted in July 2002 shows that among the youth (18 – 30 years), an interest to go for temporary work or study abroad was expressed by 63 per cent, and to emigrate – by 16 per cent.

In the surveys of 1997-2002 the same regularity is seen – the youth, people with university education, higher income group and residents of large cities are more in favour of joining the EU. Euroopponents are mostly seen among the lower educated, lower income people and among rural residents. The 45-55 year age group also stands out, for which not only euroscepticism, but scepticism of any reforms carried out, is typical.

The first group (younger, educated, good wages) might be called the “winners”, the ones who managed to adapt to the changing conditions during the ongoing social and economic reforms and see their place in contemporary Europe. The second group, the “losers”, comprises those who lost their social position during the reforms and are afraid of not finding their place in modern Europe. Among the “losers” the number of eurosceptics is twice as high as among the “winners”.

The majority of the population are interested in the course of the negotiations and follow the information on the process in mass media.

*Fig. 3. Within the last four weeks, have you seen a TV programme on the conditions for Lithuania’s accession to the EU?\**

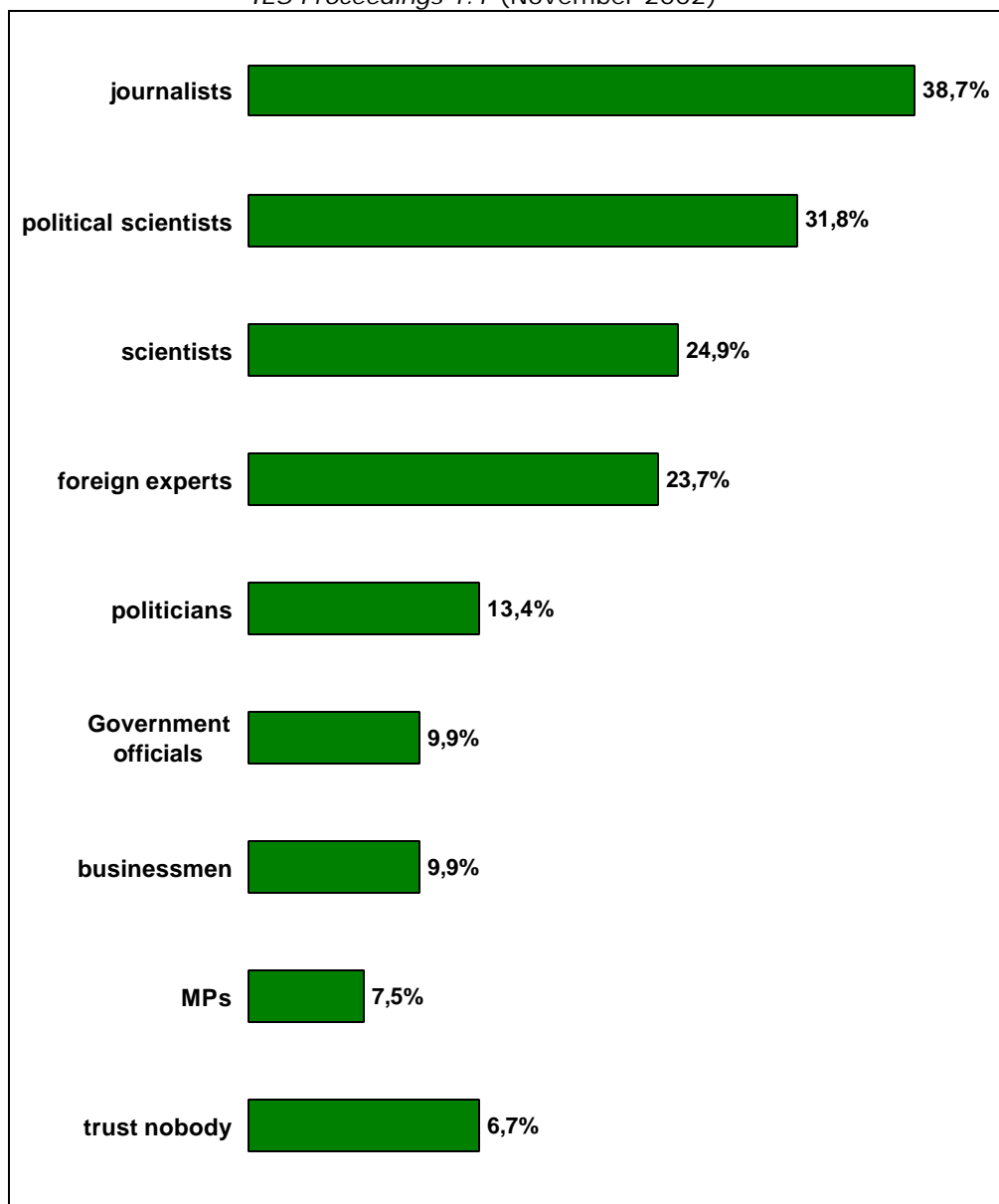


Within the last two years the number of those who have seen TV programmes on the problems of Lithuania’s accession to the EU has risen twice. These

programmes are watched less frequently by the youth (36 per cent), Russians (35 per cent), Poles (38 per cent).

It is important whether the people have sufficient information on the course of the negotiations and on the EU. A lack of information could be interpreted by some people as concealment of information. In May 2002, 52 per cent of the respondents indicated that the information is sufficient, and for 27 per cent it was insufficient. Thus, the situation is not bad (especially, in the context of the fact that in the year 2000, the figures were, correspondingly, 32 and 47 per cent, i.e. a significant shortage of information was felt). On the other hand, 30 per cent of the respondents stated that the information was biased, for 25 per cent it was not full, for 26 per cent – incomprehensible, for 24 per cent – not interesting. Here, the problem of evaluating impartiality – bias of the information is important. If the information is perceived as biased, the trust in the process and the results of the negotiations will decline.

*Fig. 4. “Whose information supplied on Lithuania’s accession to the European Union do you trust most?” (May 2002)*

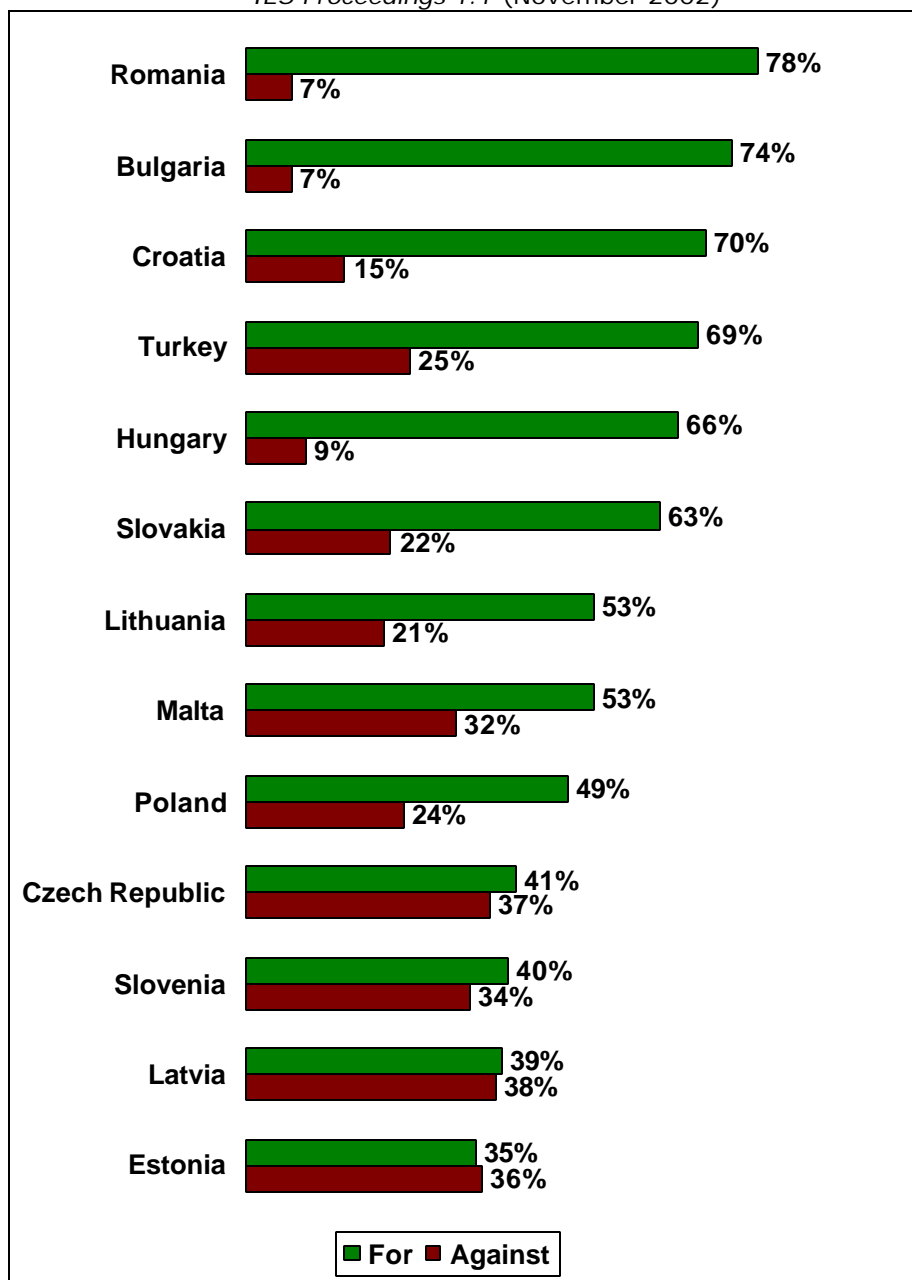


Most trust is shown in the information on the EU supplied by journalists, however, political scientists and scientists, whose prestige in the society is high, are also very influential. Only a small proportion of the surveyed indicate that they trust the information supplied by the members of the Seimas, which corresponds to the constantly low level of trust in the Seimas.

Among other countries, Lithuania has, for a couple of years, been taking the “golden mean”; there are countries in which an absolute majority of the population want to join the EU, and there are countries in which the eurosceptics and eurooptimists are, approximately, on a par.

*Fig. 5. If a referendum on your country’s accession to the EU is held, how would you vote? (May – June 2002, GfK group)*





Euroenthusiasm of Romanians and Bulgarians can be explained by major economic difficulties faced by the populations of these countries, therefore, the EU membership is treated as a way to solve their problems. The europessimism of Estonians will be explained during the conference in Pärnu (October 2002).

And still, is it possible to forecast the result of the referendum, which is to take place in a year's time? Naturally, such forecasts cannot be reliable, since public opinion is influenced by multiple factors. However, in the present situation (which is a rather stable one), where one euroopponent is counterbalanced by more than two europroponents, the optimism of the eurooptimists (who are more determined about their attitudes than euroopponents) could be strengthened.