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The Social Perception of the Results of Poland's EU Membership

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The Polish public support for integration with the European Union

The beginning of the process of the systemic transformation was accompanied by the slogan: „return to Europe”. Soon after, the idea gained more substance in the postulate of Poland’s integration with the European structures (initially the EEC, and then the EU). As early as in February 1994, the Association Agreement between Poland and EC, signed in December 1991, entered into force. Just thirteen years later, on the 1 May 2004 – 6 years after the beginning of the accession negotiations – Poland became a member of the European Union.

The idea of Poland’s accession to the European Union was met with a very positive attitude of the society already in the beginning of 1990s, at the time of its appearance in the public discourse. The public support for Poland’s entry to the EU then reached 80%. This exceptionally high support weakened during the next years, yet still the majority of the Polish society supported Poland’s membership in this organization. Undoubtedly, among the reasons for the public support for the idea of European integration were the unambiguously pro-integrationist policy of all successive governments of the III Polish Republic as well as a general support for integration of the majority of social and political elites. The EU membership was recognized as one of the Polish politically strategic goals following from the Polish national interest. The extent of the influence of the unambiguously pro-integrationist policy of successive government cabinets can be illustrated by the lack of sharp difference in the support for the EU membership among people with left- or right-wing political inclinations.

The stabilization of the support was assisted by the presence of a conviction about this process being inevitable and having no alternative. A vast majority of the society saw the EU membership not just as a choice, but as an inevitability resulting from the advanced globalization processes – deepening of mutual political and economic

dependences and connections between different countries. There was a common feeling that there was no coming back from Poland's membership in the EU. Remaining out of the EU was accompanied with no less anxiety as accessing the EU, but certainly lacked the hope granted by the prospect of the membership in the community.

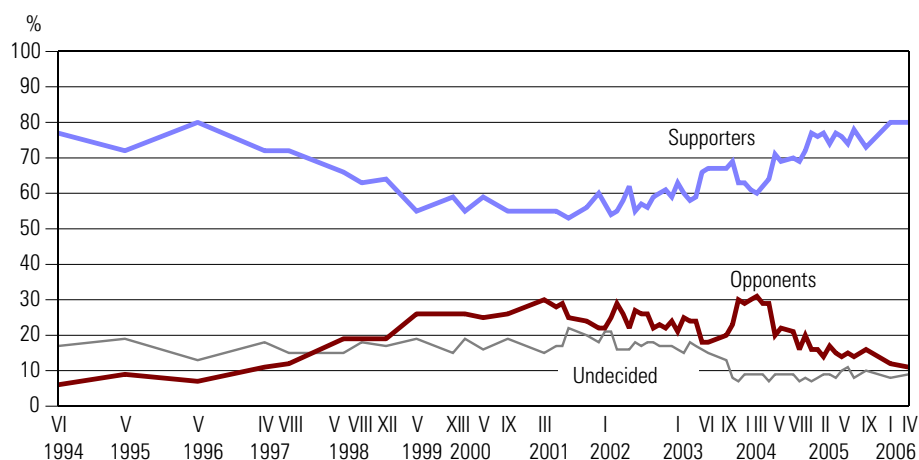
In the pre-accession period the support for the EU weakened, but it was also becoming much more conscious. If in the beginning it was based on the general expectations for a civilisational and cultural advancement of Poland and swift joining the community of the Western countries, in time this support was gaining a more substantive basis. The awareness of the adjustment problems connected with integration as well as the civilisational distance between Poland and EU member states was increasing. Moreover, the expectations associated with Poland's membership in the EU became more balanced— the expected benefits were considered in a more long-term perspective, with an assumption that only the next generation of Poles will benefit from them to the fullest.

Poles entered the EU with a mixture of hopes and anxieties, not sure of what would happen after 1 May 2004. On the one hand, they hoped for the acceleration of the economic development and drop of unemployment rate (which reached 20% in 2002), on the other, they were afraid of the rise of prices and thus the worsening of living standards. Such worries began to increase dramatically in the course of the last few months before the referendum. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the voters (77,45%) supported Poland's membership in this organization. Such considerable support in the referendum was possible on the one hand, due to the pro-integrationist attitudes which have become more consolidated. On the other hand, many Eurosceptics were convinced that it was pointless to oppose what was inevitable, and just did not turn up at the polling stations.

After the accession of Poland to the European Union Poles were relieved to see that the dark scenarios, assuming the failure of the economy as a result of EU integration, had not fulfilled, and that no dramatic changes had taken place in our country. The diminished uncertainty and reduced fears associated with the EU membership, and the following increasingly visible positive effects led to the greater

support for the EU in the first few months after the accession. Two years after the accession the percentage of the supporters of the EU membership is considerably bigger than that from just before the accession. 80% of Poles declare themselves as the supporters of the Poland's membership in the EU, whereas only 11% are opponents. This means that the public support for the EU membership today is the highest for the past 10 years.

Picture 1. Attitude towards integration among all respondents



Source: CBOS.

As follows from the Eurobarometer research, Poles' satisfaction with our country's membership in the EU is higher than the average in the EU. Among the new member countries only Lithuania has a higher support.

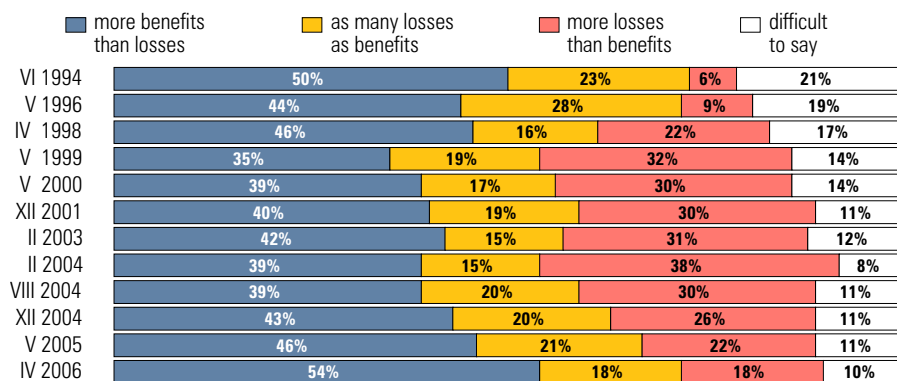
Weighing benefits and losses

Consolidation of the public support for Poland's membership in the EU results predominantly from the fact that the benefits of accession are gradually becoming more visible with the passage of time. Just three months before the accession, in February 2004, the number of people believing that the accession will bring about more losses than benefits was almost the same as that of people believing in more benefits than

losses. First attempts at assessment of the membership three months after the accession were better than the expectations expressed earlier. In the next months the number of people seeing more benefits than losses of our EU membership was rising. Three months after Poland's accession to the European Union two in five Poles were convinced that the membership brought more benefits than losses, whereas today – after two years of membership – this opinion is shared by more than half of the population.

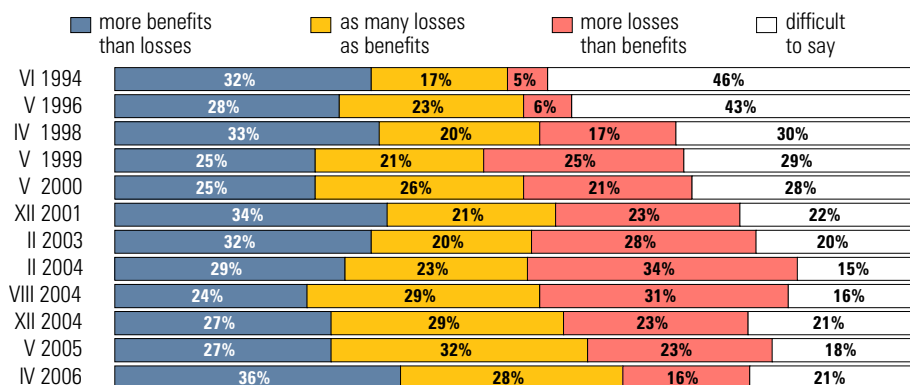
At the same time, the percentage of people negatively evaluating the membership effects was diminishing. Two years after Poland's membership in the European Union, the number of people convinced that the EU integration brings more benefits than losses to our country is almost three times bigger than the number of people believing the contrary.

Picture 2. Integration with the European Union (will bring) brings Poland:



Source: CBOS.

Yet, although more than half of Poles see positive effects of the EU membership for our country, considerably less people declare that they personally perceive benefits of the integration. Notwithstanding this, the attitudes in this regard are becoming more positive. 2 years after the accession, the percentage of people declaring that the EU membership brought them personally more benefits than losses is almost twice as big as the number of people rather suffering from its negative effects.

Picture 3. Integration with the European Union (will bring) brings you personally:

Source: CBOS.

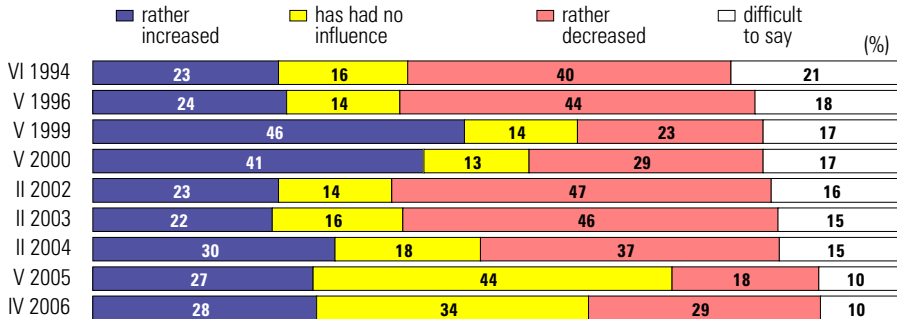
Socio-economic effects of the integration

The EU accession boosted the economic growth in Poland. The first year of membership was already regarded as beneficial for the Polish economy. 2 years after the EU accession the positive economic effects became even more visible. Now more than half of the Polish society sees the positive influence on the state of the Polish economy (57%, 10 points more than a year ago). The evaluation of the economic effects of the membership is varied for different sectors of the economy. Contrary to earlier opinions, the sector which in the public view benefited most is the agricultural sector due to the EU system of agricultural direct subsidies.

An increasing number of people see the positive effect of integration for the functioning of business, both private and public. Yet, it does not change the fact that in the public opinion it is rather private companies (47%) that benefit from the EU membership than the public ones (32%).

Moreover, although already a year after the EU accession Poles noticed a positive effect of integration on the economy, they did not see positive changes on the labour market. Today, the number of people seeing improvement in this area is increasing. Nevertheless, the opinion that the integration has no influence on unemployment still prevails.

Picture 4. Do you think that as a result of Poland's accession to the EU the unemployment in Poland has rather increased, has rather decreased, or the integration has had no influence on that?*



Source: CBOS.

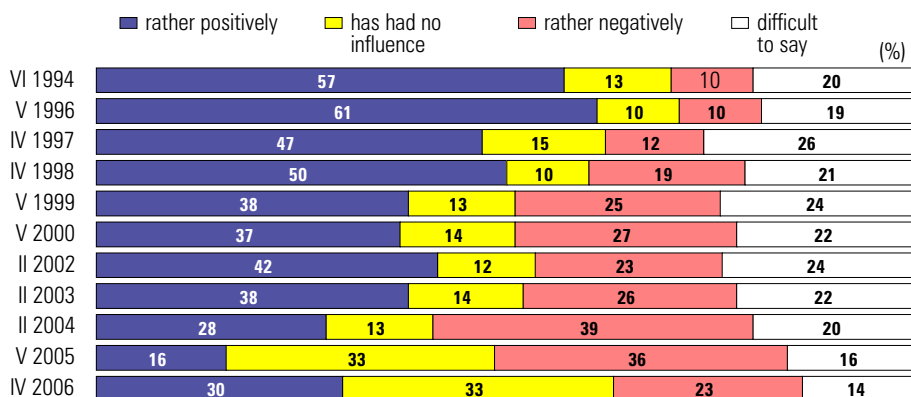
* Until February 2004 the question concerned the expectations associated with the EU accession.

Unhappy about the high level of unemployment in Poland, Poles strongly value the opening of the labour markets by some of the EU member states. They consider this opportunity as one of the most important benefits of the EU membership. About a year after the EU accession, one in seven Poles declared that after the 1 May 2004 somebody from their closest family left for one of the EU countries to work there. According to polls (as well as the official statistics) the most popular destination for economic migration was Germany, where Poles were predominantly employed in seasonal jobs. The second most popular country was Great Britain. Poles are employed there in administration, marketing, hotel business and gastronomy. Relatively many Poles work in Italy, Ireland and the Netherlands. According to the statements of migrants' families, the bulk of Poles who have migrated to the EU member states, are legally employed. Yet, the majority of persons interested in economic migration to one of the EU member states declared their readiness to work there illegally.

The gradual improvement of the state of economy, as well as the fading away of bad connotations associated with EU because of the rise of prices shortly after the accession result in more positive perception of the effect of the integration on the material situation of Poles. If a year ago the dominant opinion was that integration had

a negative impact on the living conditions of Poles, presently it is just the contrary. More people notice the positive rather than negative effects of the integration on material living conditions.

Picture 5. Do you think that Poland's accession to the EU influenced the material living conditions of Poles rather positively, rather negatively, or it has had no influence on that?*



Source: CBOS.

* Until February 2004 the question concerned the expectation association with the EU accession.

Before the accession to the EU many people expressed fears regarding the level of preparation of Poland for the membership and for the EU funds' absorption. Many feared that because of the government's indolence or too complicated procedures and too high demands from the EU, Poland would not be able to use the structural funds and other EU assistance monies. According to the Ministry for Regional Development, Poland has spent only 11% of the money granted for 2004–2006. Local governments and the business managed to absorb the largest amount of money. It is expected that the simplification of the procedures of granting the EU funds should result in the ability to spend 40% of the granted money. Despite the low absorption capacity so far, structural funds considerably boosted the GDP growth, as well as – even if it is not so visible yet – contributed to the decrease of unemployment in Poland. The flow of money from the EU funds is also better noticed by an average Pole. More people see changes in their environment associated with the absorption of the EU

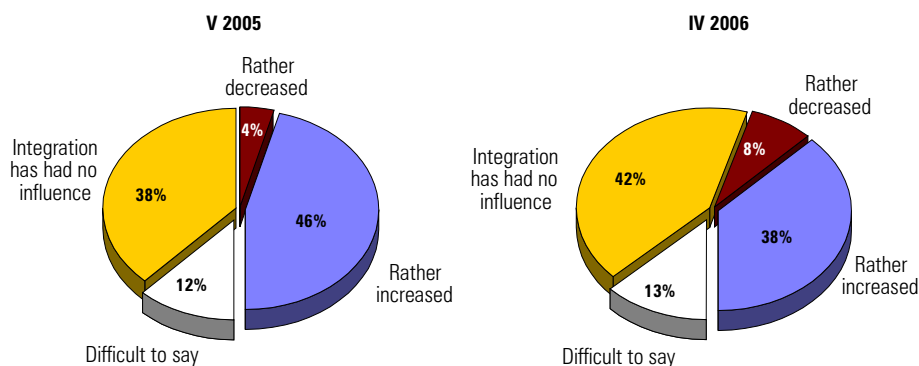
funds – the development of municipal investment, e.g. a sewage system. Yet, the most common example of investment co-financed by the EU funds is the building and repair of roads, as well as building of motorways.

Civilisational and cultural effects of the integration

Even if socio-economic effects of the integration can be noticed within a relatively short period of time, one may expect that its civilisational and cultural consequences will only be seen in the future, as a result of long-term processes. Nevertheless, more and more people see the influence of the EU integration in this sphere as well. What is more, the awareness of the civilisational-cultural effects of the EU integration strongly shape the attitude of Poles towards the integration. More than a half of the population see positive effects of the integration for the natural environment in Poland. Almost half of Poles consider that the EU membership contributed to better state of knowledge and level of education as well as better attitude towards work. Two in five Poles notice the rise of work efficiency after joining this organization. More than four in ten Poles see the positive effect of the EU membership on the functioning of the political system in Poland, rule of law, as well as the cultural life of Poles. There is a widely held opinion that the EU membership has not caused considerable changes in the areas fundamental for the Polish national identity: the Polish religiosity and patriotism. Yet, a slightly bigger number of people (22%) than from a year ago, mention the diminishing of the stability of the Polish family. More often than a year ago, Poles notice the integration's influence upon interpersonal relations – benevolence and tolerance for others.

When comparing the auto-stereotype of a Pole and a stereotyped perception of an average EU citizen, it can be seen that we evaluate ourselves better and better and feel increasingly similar to Western Europeans. The success of the first year after the accession has boosted the self-esteem of Poles. A year after the EU accession almost one in two, and now two in five Poles believe that after joining the EU the self-esteem of Poles has improved. This is also an important factor in consolidation of the public support for the integration.

Picture 6. Do you think that as a result of Poland's EU accession the self-esteem of Poles has rather increased, has rather decreased or the integration has had no influence on that?



Source: CBOS.

Socio-demographic differentiation of the assessment of EU integration results

Public attitudes towards the integration have always depended on the respondent's socio-economic status, as defined by education and income as well as the rural/urban divide. Strong support for the EU as well as optimism as to the future effects of the integration were associated with higher level of education, relatively high income, good evaluation of own material situation, living in a big city as well as non-agricultural sources of income. These interdependences are still viable. The greatest supporters of the EU integration are people with higher education, people in managerial positions, specialists and private entrepreneurs. These groups evaluate the present effects of the Poland's membership in the EU better than the average. Age is also an important factor. Young people, especially pupils and students, belong to the groups which shows the highest appreciation of the positive effects of the integration (more than 90%).

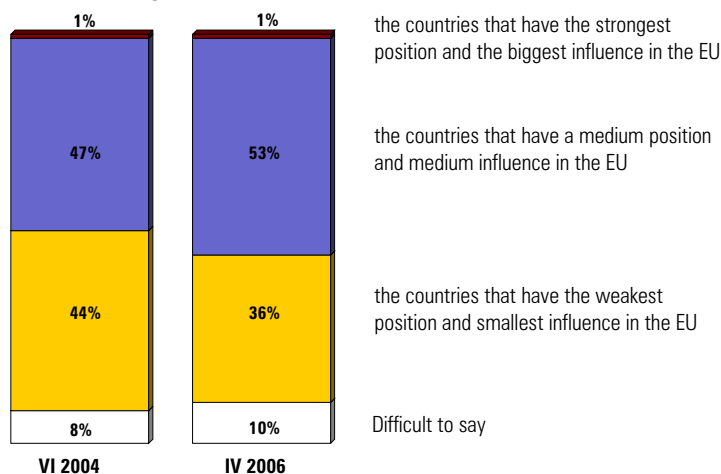
Farmers are the group whose attitudes evolved in an interesting way. For many years scepticism and opposition towards European integration were characteristic of this group, and fears associated with its effects were the most common. In the beginning of 2004, just several months before the EU accession, opinion polls showed that a dominant

opposition towards integration among farmers. The majority of them were afraid that the EU accession would have a negative effect on their farms. However, farmers' attitudes to the EU membership improved considerably in the first months after the accession. Supporters of the EU membership among them outnumbered the opponents. One of the factors of this change, often ignored in different sorts of forecasts of the effects of the EU integration, was the increased demand for certain agricultural products. The increased demand for Polish products surprised farmers, especially taking into account that they had been afraid that trade liberalisation would lead to flooding Poland with foreign agricultural products. Yet, first of all, the rise in support for the EU membership among farmers was connected with the hopes to receive direct subsidies for agricultural products. Two years after joining the EU, farmers' opinions about the effects of the EU integration for themselves are still evolving. The support for the membership in this groups is not as high as it was shortly after the accession, although it remains higher than it was before the accession (up to 60%). Farmers complain about the drop in purchase prices for agricultural products, rise in prices on means of agricultural production, too high standards on milk products. Although the subsidies are an unquestionable asset of the EU membership, yet in the opinions of some farmers, these subsidies are too low, procedures too complicated and waiting time too long.

The position of Poland in the European Union and the perceived attitude of other members of the EU towards Poland

In the public perception one of the vital positive effects of the EU membership is the improvement of the position of Poland in Europe. The increased significance of Poland in Europe after the accession to the EU is noticed by 60% of Poles. Just after joining the EU in June 2004 there were just slightly more people who considered our country to have medium position and influence than those that saw Poland among the least significant countries. At present, Poles much more commonly place Poland among the countries of medium position.

Picture 7. How do you assess Poland's position in the European Union?
Does Poland belong to:



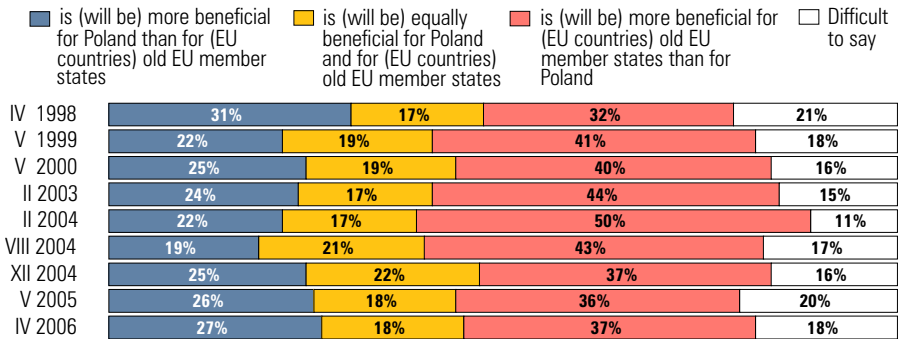
Source: CBOS.

These changes were accompanied by the perception of improved attitudes of other EU states towards Poland. Two years ago, Poles were convinced that the two biggest states of the EU, France and Germany, are not welcoming towards Poland's aspirations to play a more significant role in Europe. Both these countries were considered as unfriendly towards Poland. Such opinions were triggered by disagreements over the Constitutional Treaty as well as the Iraq intervention. In both questions Poland's position (similarly to the position of Spain under the premiership of Aznar) was different than that of France and Germany. What we in Poland defined as independence in foreign policy, some of our EU partners interpreted as lack of loyalty and overgrown ambitions. Poles had an impression then that their country was not treated as an equal partner and that it was allowed less than the core 15 countries. Nevertheless, the growing scepticism towards the Iraq intervention, suspension of the constitution ratification process, the change of governments in Spain and Germany, the positions of the main EU countries in the budget negotiations as well as general satisfaction with the effects of the EU membership contributed to the change in the Polish perceptions of these countries. At present time, Poles find it difficult to indicate our allies in an

unambiguous way, yet, no countries are perceived as obvious adversaries. More often than other countries, Polish respondents choose Germany as our ally. This shows that the basis for good Polish-German relations formed during Helmut Kohl’s chancellorship was strong enough to ensure good relations despite difference in opinions regarding EU policy as well as recurring historical debates.

However, in spite of the improving assessment of the integration results and more universal personal experience of its positive effects, the opinion that the old members benefit from the EU enlargement more than Poland is still dominant.

Picture 8. The EU accession



Source: CBOS.

In Poles’ opinion the greatest beneficiaries of the EU enlargement are the biggest and most important EU Member States: Germany, France and Great Britain. In July last year only 8% of Poles believed that Poland was among the countries benefiting most from the EU membership. It is worth noting that Poles’ opinions regarding the beneficiaries from the EU membership do not match with the perceptions of respondents from other EU countries. The Eurobarometer survey from the last year shows that the Irish perceive benefits the strongest (87%), and then the inhabitants of Luxemburg (72%), Lithuania (72%), and Denmark (70%). The satisfaction from the effects of the membership is also expressed by the inhabitants of the new member states with the exception of Cyprus, including Poles (62%). The prevalence of the positive rather than negative effects of

the EU membership is also clear in France (53%). Respondents from Germany and Great Britain, however, who are indicated by Poles as the greatest beneficiaries of the EU membership, believe that they do not really benefit from it (43% and 42% accordingly).

Preferences regarding the model of European integration

The focus of debates and political cleavages in Poland is shifting from support for our membership to the questions of the future shape of this organization. All significant political forces and their electorates in Poland now accept EU membership, even those who opposed it two years ago.

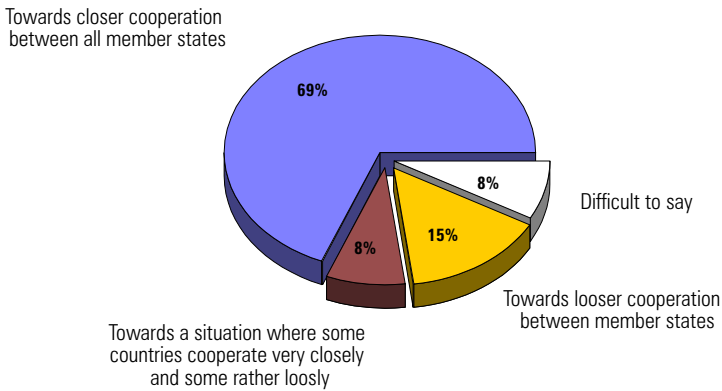
Poles have always agreed that the EU should be, first of all, an economic community. Satisfaction from the present effects of Poland's membership in the Community contributes to the consolidation of support for the economic dimension of integration. Economic unity with Europe is supported by 80% of Poles. Yet, the support for political, axiological and cultural dimensions of integration grows much slower. More than half of Poles (54%) support Poland's unification with the EU on the level of political structures, and half believe that integration should also concern people's values and life goals. It is still a common opinion that our country should keep distinctiveness in the sphere of culture and traditions. The cultural dimension of integration is supported only by one in four Poles.

Most Poles believe that the need for the future EU enlargement warrant the necessity of institutional changes towards deeper integration of the EU member states. At the same time, Poles also believe that no country should be excluded from this process. For this reason, they reject the development of "the hard-core" or "two-speeds Europe". The majority of Poles (57%) believe that it would be bad if there formed a group of countries cooperating closer than the rest in the EU. If, nevertheless, such a group was formed, Poland should join it (75%), in order avoid marginalization.

Considerable support is given to the formation of supranational political and military structures in the EU. More than half of Poles

support the establishment of the office of Minister for foreign affairs as well as the creation of army units under the common command. Almost half of Poles believe that there should be an institution functioning as a common government in the EU. However, the idea of establishing the office of the EU president is met with rather negative reactions.

Picture 9. In what direction, towards what, in your opinion, should the European Union



Source: Institute of Public Affairs.

Table 1.

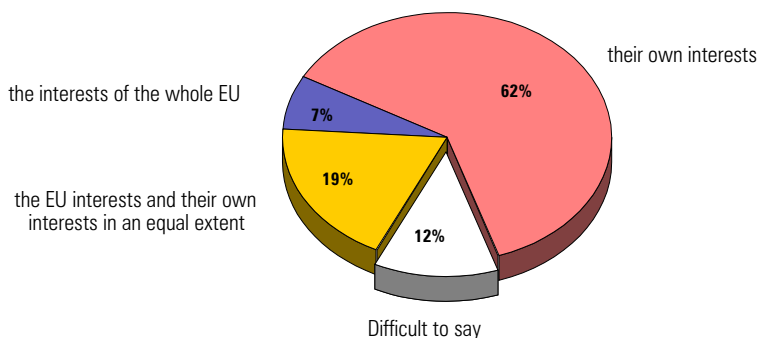
In your opinion, should the EU have:	Yes			No			Difficult to say		
	III '03	VII '03	IV '06*	III '03	VII '03	IV '06	III '03	VII '03	IV '06
	%								
– An institution functioning as a common government	52	47	49	23	29	39	25	24	12
– President	39	32	33	34	41	53	27	26	14
– Army units under the common command	44	52	51	32	26	37	24	22	12
– Minister for common foreign policy	–	45	52	–	29	35	–	26	13

* III, VII 2003 – the CBOS data, IV 2006 – the Institute of Public Affairs data.

Although Poles see the necessity of closer cooperation in the unified EU, they are afraid of the vision of the EU as a super-state. The majority (56%) support a model of the EU which assumes that member states should maintain the largest possible scope of sovereignty. Yet, it is also worth noting that today more Poles support deeper integration, and believe that Europe should be headed in the direction of a federal state similar to the United States of America. Such a vision is supported today by one in four Poles. The federalist model is most commonly supported by pupils and students (48%) and generally by young people – between 18 and 34 – (37%) as well as businessmen (44%).

The focus on the necessity to preserve state sovereignty in the EU structures as well as a negative attitude towards deep integration may follow from the fact that Poles are afraid of the EU being dominated by the European biggest and strongest states. Although the majority believe that harmonious reconciliation of national interests and the EU interests is possible, they also think that so far national egoisms have won over the common good. The conviction that Europe lacks solidarity and thinking in categories of common good may be supported by such facts as: some countries are still afraid to open their labour markets for the citizens of the new member states, farmers cannot use the benefits of the Common Agricultural Policy to the fullest, and the richer countries are not very willing to share their money with poorer countries, trying to pay as little as possible to the common cash-box.

Picture 10. Do you believe that UE member states are primarily concerned with:



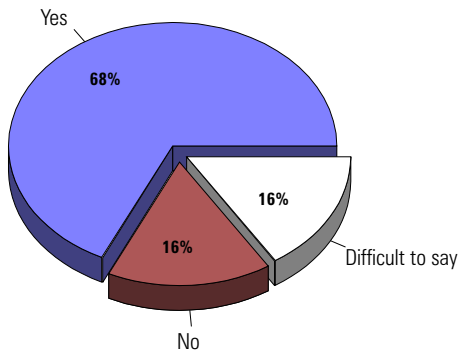
Source: CBOS.

Opinions regarding the European Constitution

A majority of Poles has always supported the ratification of the Constitutional Treaty. This fact demonstrates their understanding of the necessity of establishing legal basis for closer cooperation between member states. Public support for the European Constitution has been dominant despite reservations towards some of its provisions, especially those regarding the new voting procedures in the EU Council. Under the influence of the uncompromising position of a part of Polish political elites, Poles supported preserving the Nice system of voting, which they considered to be more beneficial for Poland. However, they also believed that blocking the agreement on the constitution may have long term negative political and economic consequences for Poland.

Despite the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in the French and Dutch referendums, a majority of Poles believes that the EU needs a constitution.

Picture 11. Does the European Union need a Constitution or rather not?



Source: Institute of Public Affairs.

In their opinion, the Treaty is vital for effective functioning of the EU (59%), including “tidying up” of legislation (51%). Constitution is also believed vital for the interest of the Community inhabitants (49%). Poles are skeptical about the chances of ratification of the Constitutional Treaty in its present shape, after its previous rejection

by the French and Dutch people. The dominant opinion is that it is necessary to write a new constitution (44%).

Final Remarks

Polish attitudes towards the European Union are characterized by certain duality. On the one hand, the vast majority of Poles support Poland's membership in the EU and assess the accession effects increasingly well. On the other hand, deeply rooted distrust not only towards the EU, but also towards the biggest EU states and their motives can be observed. We can hope that the growing satisfaction with the membership effects, the improving position of Poland and Poles in Europe, as well as a feeling that Poland plays the role according to its aspirations will contribute to the growth of trust towards our partners and support for deeper European integration. It seems unlikely that the new government coalition will negatively influence the pro-European attitudes of the general public. Although the elites have shaped Poles' attitudes towards European issues for some time, there is also an opposite process, whereby the public opinion influences the attitudes of political parties. The evolution of the League of Polish Families and Samoobrona (Self-defence) – parties which opposed the integration or were deeply skeptical about it before the accession, and now support Poland's membership in the EU, can serve as a good example.