

## The European Parliament. Social trust and ignorance

In 2014 eight direct European elections are taking place. In Poland the citizens will vote for the third time. In the previous European elections – 2004 and 2009 – the turnout in Poland was extremely low – nearly the lowest in the entire European Union – and especially surprising in view of the very high acceptance of Polish membership in the EU. Although the perceived advantages of membership were much higher than the costs of the accession, it did not help, however, to motivate Polish citizens to participate in elections to the EP nor to be interested in European issues.

Today the situation ahead of the May 2014 elections seems to be even more complicated. There are some negative tendencies to be seen that show the Polish people are no longer so sure about the advantages of EU-integration. Instead ambivalent opinions are more and more present. Also the acceptance of membership has fallen in recent years. These changes can negatively influence voters' readiness to go out and vote.

That is why the Institute of Public Affairs have conducted an opinion poll supported by qualitative research (group discussions) to find out what the current Polish views are and the extent of their knowledge of the European Parliament, the elections to this institution and the European Union in general. Below we present the main conclusions of these studies.

### Opinion polls results

- Nearly a half of Poles assess Polish membership in the European Union neutrally (47%). There is a great advantage of positive opinions of the integration's results (37%) over the negative ones (12%). However, support of the Polish membership in the EU is falling.
- The Poles perceive EU-institutions: the European Commission (47%) and the European Parliament (48%) positively.
- A relatively positive Polish assessment of the EU and its institutions clearly contrasts with their scant knowledge about them. Only 40% of Poles know that the Members of the European Parliament are elected in the common elections by all citizens, a drop of 17 percent points from the survey in 2009 conducted a few weeks after the last European elections. 27% of Poles believe the Polish MEPs are chosen by the national parliamentarians from their circles, 14%

think they are nominated by the Polish government and one in five cannot answer this question.

- The best known Polish MEP is Jerzy Buzek, however, in general the percentage of identification is very low. Nearly 70% of Poles cannot name any MEPs. In spite of this the Polish MEPs as a group have a fairly positive image.

*This opinion poll survey was conducted among 1000 Poles over 15 years of age between the 7th and 11th of September 2013. The field work commissioned by the Institute of Public Affairs was done by TNS Polska.*

### **Conclusions from the group discussions**

- Those being asked expressed very clear feelings of discouragement towards politics, caused by the tone of public debate in Poland.
- Those asked assess Polish membership in the EU very positively. As for the greatest advantages they point to progress in the field of infrastructure, to freedom of movement and to access to the job market in the EU.
- They mention the main negative results of integration as being the disproportion of salaries, worries concerning the appropriate use of EU-funds and the necessity of paying them back in the future.
- Knowledge about how the EU works is very low and often incorrect.
- Despite their low knowledge about EU-issues, those asked trust EU-institutions much more than Polish ones.
- The respondents see democratic governance as not really effective, however, they believe democracy is an important value – for the youngest generation this is even something obvious.
- Knowledge of how the European Parliament works is very low. This is a result of both a lack of interest and the lack of easy accessible information. Those asked are, however, not interested in actively looking for information concerning the EP.

- The European Parliament is still seen as a necessary institution, as it is democratic and creates a forum for discussion.
- Those asked are divided in their opinions regarding whether sending a person to the European Parliament is a form of prize or punishment.
- The main argument for participation in elections is fulfilling one's obligation as a citizen. Those asked claim that those who do not vote cannot complain about the situation in the country later on. Still respondents expressed feelings of discouragement regarding taking part in voting and a feeling of vanishing ties between one's voice and the election results.

*The focus group interviews were conducted in August 2013 in two capitals of Polish regions and in two smaller cities in their neighborhood among people aged 18 to 24 and 25 to 45 years claiming to have general interests towards politics.*

**Full version in Polish:**

M.Dudkiewicz, A.Fuksiewicz, J.Kucharczyk, A.Łada, *Parlament Europejski - społeczne zaufanie i (nie)wiedza*, Instytut Spraw Publicznych, Warszawa 2013

*This project was supported by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.*

*The qualitative study was commissioned to the Institute of Public Affairs by the Representation of the European Commission in Warsaw.*



*The views presented in the publication represent the opinions of the authors and the Institute of Public Affairs only. They do not represent the official position of the European Commission or the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.*