

10 Years in the EU

10 Years in the EU: Public Opinion and Bulgaria's Membership in the EU¹

Assessment of EU membership. Support to membership in a “referendum”. Trust in Bulgarian and European institutions. Advantages of European integration. Support to anti-EU parties. Membership in the Eurozone and Schengen. Social and demographic profile of the respondents.

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It is often assumed that Bulgarians met the entry in the EU with high expectations and enthusiasm, which however immediately started to dissipate and cool off following a steady downward trend. But data shows a different dynamic. It seems that initially EU membership was met with a dose of realism (or skepticism), which was followed by a period of positive experience and higher esteem and only after that rise in negative attitudes was registered.

¹ This brief is part of the “10 Years in the EU” series of the Open Society Institute – Sofia in regard to one decade of EU membership of Bulgaria. The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect an official position of the Open Society Institute – Sofia.

The used data is from public opinion surveys, conducted by the Open Society Institute – Sofia in the period 2008-2016. From the beginning of 2008, OSI-Sofia follows public opinion and social attitudes in Bulgaria through regularly conducted standardized surveys with nationally representative samples among the adult population of the country. The surveys are “omnibus” type and include different topics. In any case, whenever possible the questionnaires included the same questions so that ensure compatibility of data from different surveys and to follow trends in public attitudes

During the first couple of years of EU membership, the shares of positive and negative assessments had less than 10% difference (2008). This was followed by a period of significant increase in positive attitudes (with 2/3 of respondents at its highest peak), accompanied by decrease in negative attitudes. Only after that there was a drop in positive and rise in negative assessments, but there wasn't a return to the initial situation. It can be assumed that the superimposition of crises in the EU – the start of the global economic crises, which coincided with the beginning of Bulgaria's EU membership, the troubles in the Eurozone, the refugee crisis of 2015, the Brexit debate – were among the factors shaping the public attitudes in the country. Domestic political events were also a factor for opinion formation - including on European affairs – for example, over 20% of those who did not support Schengen membership (March 2015) stated that they did not support any initiatives of the cabinet at the time.

The attitudes towards support for EU membership (i.e. at a hypothetical "referendum") have also started at a lower position in the beginning (2009), then grew (around 2013) and after this registered decrease in the last couple of years. This was accompanied by a rise in anti-EU sentiments and support for anti-EU parties, which reached about 20% of respondents.

Trust towards European and Bulgarian institutions varied through the years, but in general trust in EU institutions stayed three times higher than the trust in Bulgarian institutions. There is a worrisome trend of increased distrust as in Bulgarian as well as in European institutions, which reached 20% of the respondents.

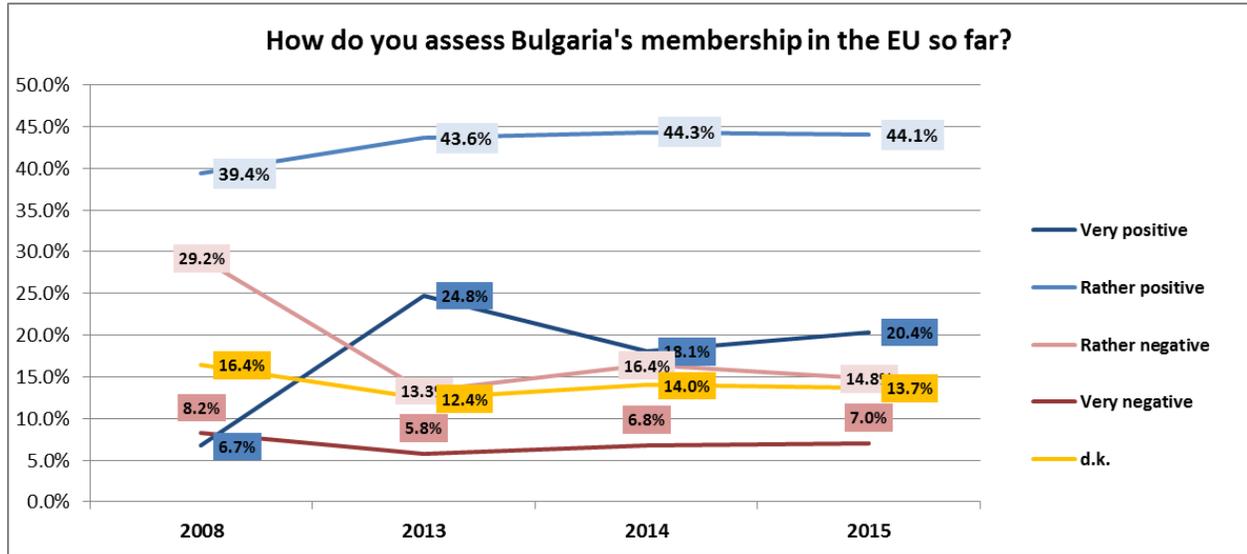
In terms of advantages of EU integration, people singled out job opportunities, travel and education opportunities as the three biggest benefits.

In regard to other mechanisms of further integration into the EU, support to changing the national currency the lev for the euro decreased twofold between 2011 and 2015, but the trust towards the currency board with the lev pegged to the euro remained high. Support to Schengen membership started from a high level, but started to fall gradually even before the refugee crisis of 2015. In both cases – Eurozone and Schengen, Bulgaria's own unpreparedness was among the cited reasons to disagree with those policies.

In the first years of EU membership, the share of support to EU integration was high among respondents with diverse profiles in terms of residency, age, religious affiliation, education. But in 2016, there was already a different profile of people, who supported EU membership: residents of bigger cities, younger, those with higher education.

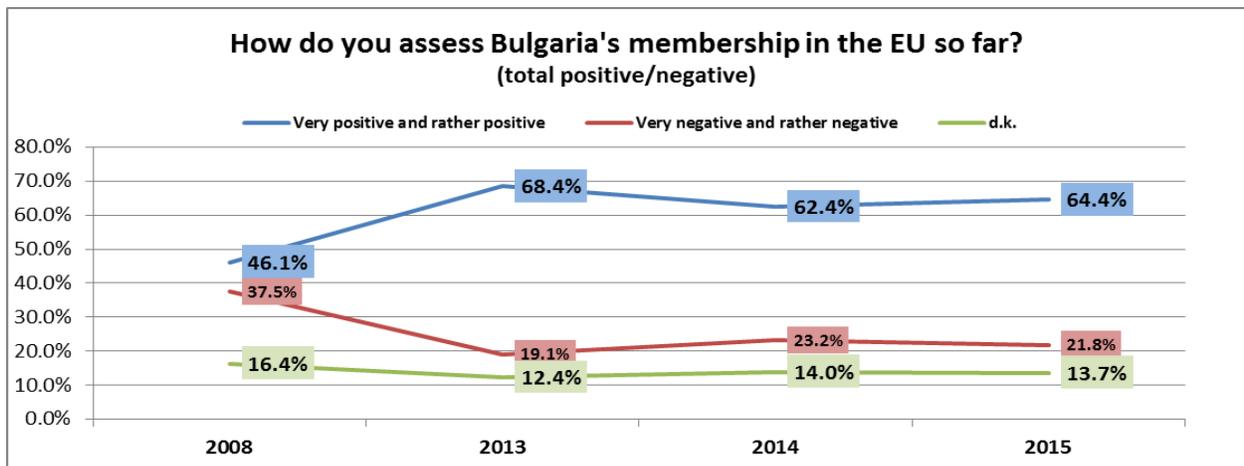
According to the political leanings of respondents, only the supporters of the nationalist Ataka had clear anti-EU positions. Even among parties with relatively high shares of anti-EU sentiments – the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), small parties and non-voters – ultimately those that supported EU membership were more numerous.

How was EU membership assessed?



The favorable assessment of EU membership increased threefold in the period 2008-2015. Those who assessed EU membership as “very positive” increased three times from just 6.7% in February 2008 to 20.4% in 2015. The assessment varied between 2013 and 2014 with a certain drop, only to rise again in 2015. The share of moderate approval – “rather positive” answers – also increased with 5% between 2008 and 2015 to 44.1%.

The extreme negative views decreased from 8.2% in 2008 to 7% in 2015. The moderately critical views (“rather negative”) have also decreased by nearly 14% between 2008 and 2015 from 29.2% to 14.8% respectively.

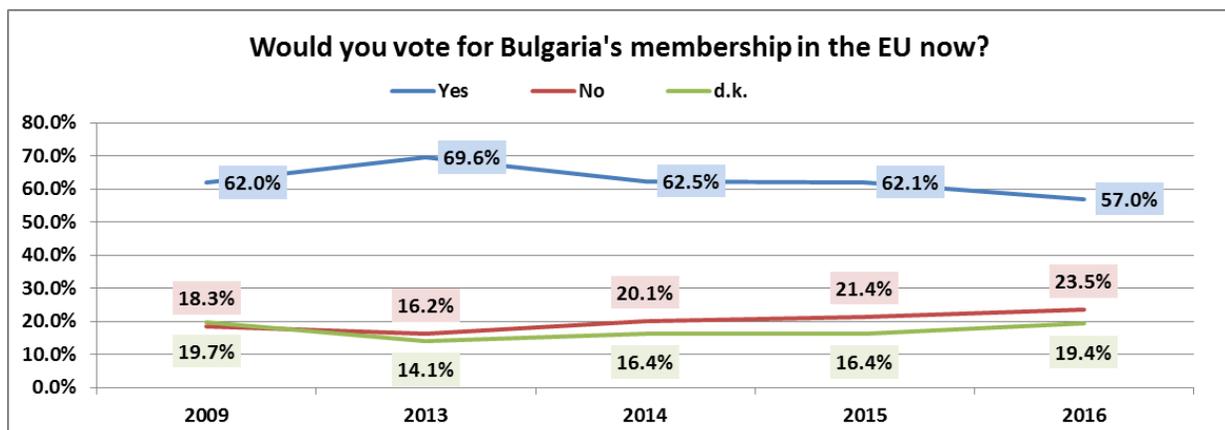


However, if all negative and positive answers are added together, it can be seen that at the very beginning of EU membership, the negative and positive assessments were relatively close – 46.1% positive and 37.5% negative (2008). After that the negative answers fell by over 18% and the positive ones increased by over 22% to 68.4%, which was the highest level of positive attitudes with nearly 2/3 of respondents (2013). This was followed by a drop to 62.4% (2014) and after that a certain increase to 64.4% for the positive views.

Unfavorable views fell twofold between 2008 and 2013 to 19.1% (2013), followed by a slight increase in 2014 to their highest level of 23.2% and then a drop to 21.8% the next year. But those approving of the EU remained three times more numerous than those disapproving of it. The share of people, who could or didn't want to answer varied between 16.4% and 13.7% in the beginning and the end of the period and did not change substantially.

Support to EU membership

The question posed at a hypothetical “referendum” regarding Bulgaria’s EU membership would be decided in favor of “the Remainers”, according to data for the period 2009-2016. But the results also showed a certain decrease in the share of those, who would vote in favor of membership and at the same time small, but steady increase in the share of those who would vote against Bulgaria’s membership in the EU.

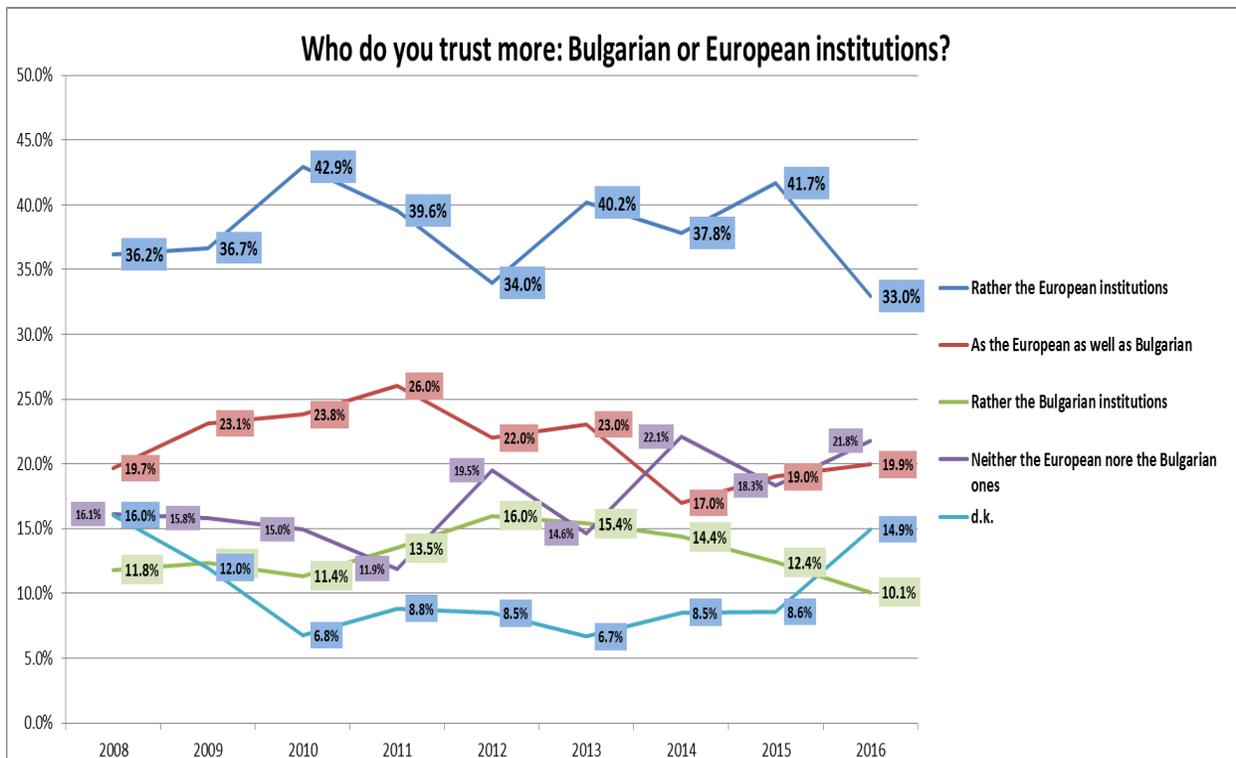


There was a substantial increase in support to EU membership between 2009 and 2013 with nearly 8% - from 62% to about 70%. After that, support started to decrease again and the levels in 2014 and 2015 were almost identical – about 62%. The lowest level of support was in the spring of 2016 with 57%, which was the last year with available data.

The share of respondents who would not support Bulgaria’s EU membership grew by almost 5% from 18.3% in 2008 to 23.5% in 2016.

The share of respondents, who didn’t know is similar in the beginning and the end of the period - 2009 and 2016 and was between 19.7% and 19.4%. In 2013, 2014 and 2015, their share dropped and was between 14% and 16.4%.

Trust in Bulgarian and European institutions



Trust in institutions varied during the observed period, but what remained constant is the ratio of trust in EU and Bulgarian institutions respectively. Trust in European institutions remained three times higher than trust in the Bulgarian institutions. In 2008, 36.2% of respondents trusted the European institutions more against 12% who trusted the Bulgarian institutions more. In 2016, the ratio was identical with 33% trust in the EU and 10% in the Bulgarian institutions.

Trust in the European institutions reached two peaks – in 2010 with nearly 43% and in 2015 with nearly 42%. Trust in the Bulgarian institutions was highest in 2012 and 2013 with 16% and 15.4% respectively.

Trust in both the Bulgarian and the European institutions was also very similar in 2008 and 2016 – about 19% and in the rest of the period it was somewhat higher with a peak of 26% in 2011.

It is worth noting that distrust in institutions – both Bulgarian and European – gradually increased and from 16% in 2008 it reached over one fifth of respondents – 22% in 2016. In other words, there was 6% increase in distrust at the background of decreased trust in national and European institutions.

The share of those who answered “don’t know” was identical during the first and last year of the surveys (2008 and 2016) and the rest of the time it stayed at a lower level.

Advantaged of the European integration

According to you, which of the following potential advantages of European integration is of greatest importance?										
Year/Advantages		2008		2013		2014		2015		2011-2015
		(%)	(#1-8)	(%)	(#1-8)	(%)	(#1-8)	(%)	(#1-8)	change
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	More job opportunities	30.7%	1	27.3%	1	29.7%	1	52.4%	1	■ ■ ■ ■ ■
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	More opportunities for travelling abroad	17.1%	3	19.0%	2	16.2%	2	47.6%	2	■ ■ ■ ■ ■
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	More opportunities for education	5.3%	6	7.6%	6	7.7%	6	37.6%	3	■ ■ ■ ■ ■
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Provides access to EU funds	n.a.	n.a.	16.3%	3	11.2%	4	30.6%	4	■ ■ ■ ■ ■
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Introduces rules and rule of law	19.9%	2	6.7%	4	7.6%	7	14.0%	5	■ ■ ■ ■ ■
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Provides more guarantees for social welfare	5.3%	7	5.4%	8	3.9%	8	12.5%	6	■ ■ ■ ■ ■
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	d.k.	8.4%	5	8.2%	5	13.6%	3	9.9%	7	■ ■ ■ ■ ■
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	There are no advantages	11.2%	4	9.6%	4	9.7%	5	9.8%	8	■ ■ ■ ■ ■

The methodology of surveys does not allow for direct comparison between questions on advantages of European integration, but there is enough information to draw some conclusions by looking at the ranking of listed answers between 2008 and 2015.

Job opportunities were assessed as the most significant advantage of EU integration in all four surveys, when the questions were asked – 2008, 2013, 2014 и 2015 – and the share of answers was twice as big as the second-ranking answer (i.e. when there was only single choice) – 30.7% versus 17.1% for 2008 and 29.7% versus 16.2% for 2014.

Opportunities for travelling abroad were ranked third in 2008 and second in 2013, 2014 and 2015 in the list of preferred advantages of EU integration, although with two times smaller share than the first preference of “job opportunities”.

The hopes that the EU will introduce “rules and rule of law” seems to have been much higher in 2008, when the answer ranked second, but then fell to fourth place in 2013, seventh in 2014 and fifth place in 2015.

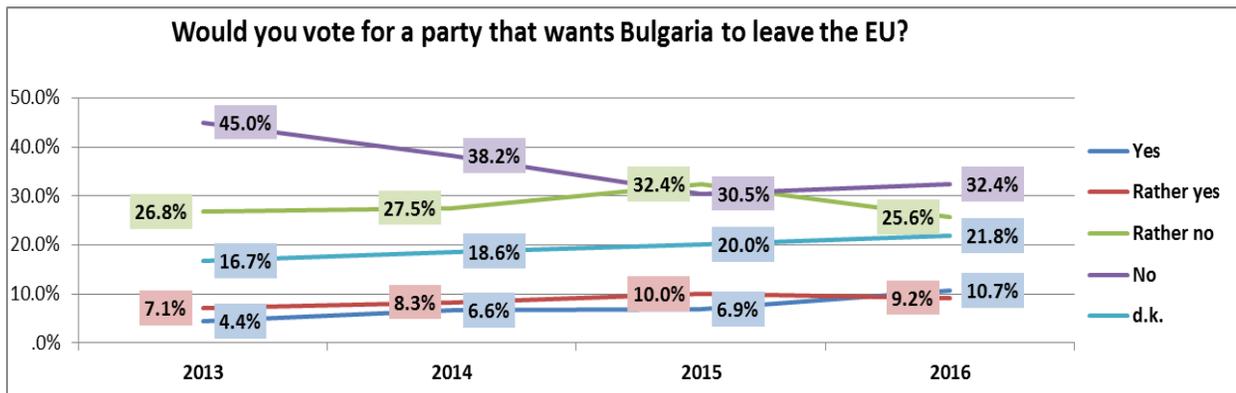
The advantages of EU integration for education has increased in public perceptions as from six place in 2008, 2013 and 2014 it was placed on third position in 2015.

The European funds as an advantage were placed on third position in 2013 and fell to fourth place in 2014 and 2015 (in 2008, there is no such an answer as an option).

The opportunities for social welfare were realistically assessed as low by the respondents and placed on seventh (2008), last eighth place (2013, 2014) and sixth place (2015).

It is worth noting that the answers “don’t know” and that European integration “has no advantage” fell from fifth and fourth place in 2008 and 2013 to respectively seventh and the last eighth place in 2015. The data shows that most Bulgarian citizens have formed opinion (only about 9-10% doesn’t have) and just a small share thought (about 10%-11%) that EU integration has no advantages (this is twice less – or with 10% less – that the share of those, who do not support EU membership).

Support for anti-EU parties

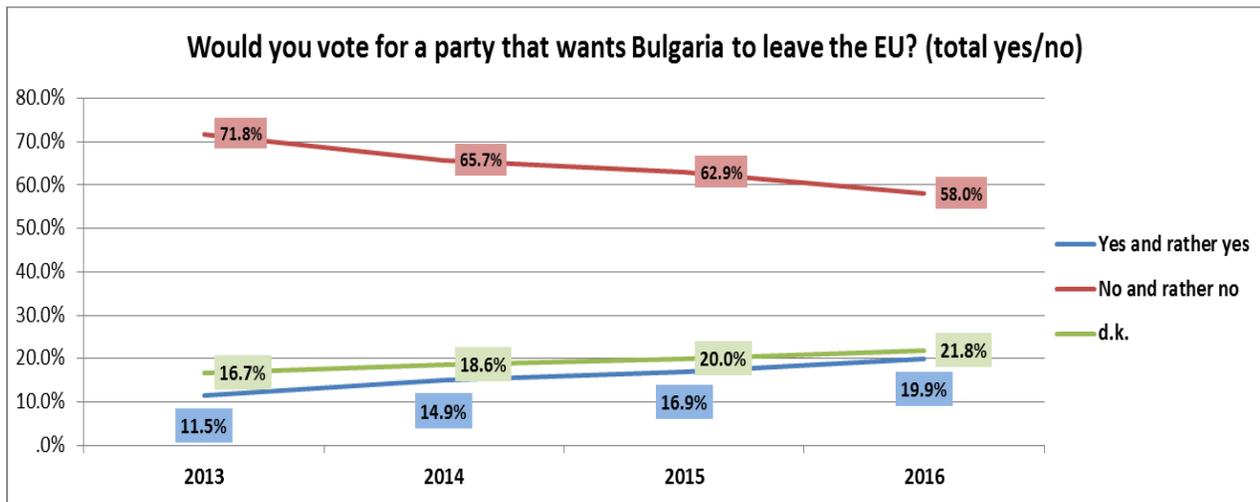


In regard to support for anti-EU parties (i.e., those who want Bulgaria to leave the EU), the questions asked distinguished between a hard core, who would certainly vote and those, who were inclined to support such a party. Those opposing such parties also had hard core and those, who were rather not inclined to support such parties.

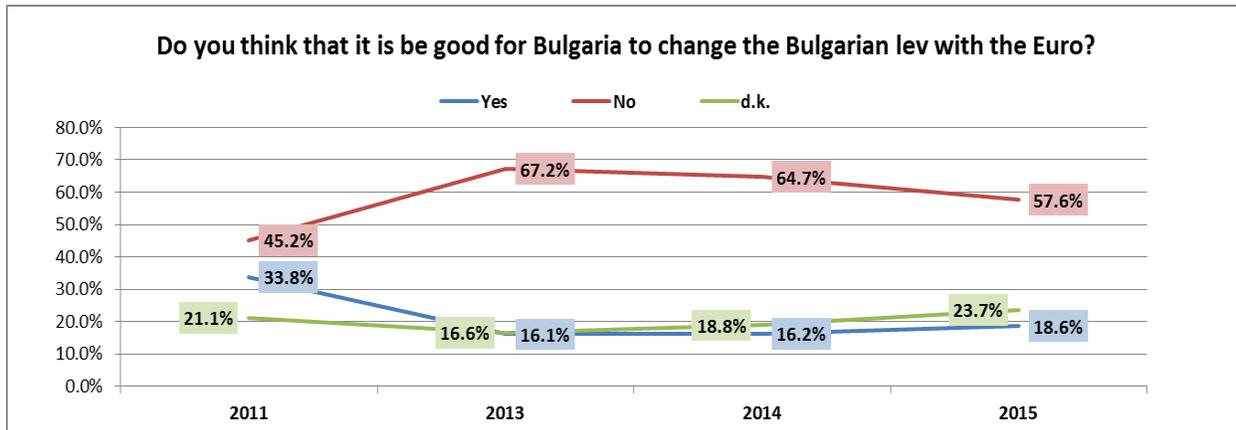
The hard core support to anti-EU parties rose twofold for three years from 4.4% in 2013 to 10.7% in 2016. The share of those, who were rather inclined to vote for such parties rose at a slower pace between 2013 and 2016 – from 7.1% to 9.2%.

The share of those, who would definitely not support anti-EU party fell from 45% in the start of the period (2011) to 30.5% in 2015, after which there was a certain increase in 2016 to 32.4%. The share of those, who would rather not vote for such a party was over ¼ of the respondents in 2013, reached a peak in 2015 with 32.4% and fell to 25.6% in 2016.

If all supporters and opponents of anti-EU parties were added together, there are several visible trends. The share of respondents, who would not support anti-EU parties, fell significantly from nearly 72% in 2013 to 58% in 2016. But nonetheless this group remained three times bigger than the group of supporters of anti-EU parties, whose share gradually rose from 11.5% in 2013 to 19.2% in 2016, which is one fifth of respondents. There was an increase also in the share of “don’t know” answers from 16.7% in



Further EU integration: Eurozone and Schengen membership

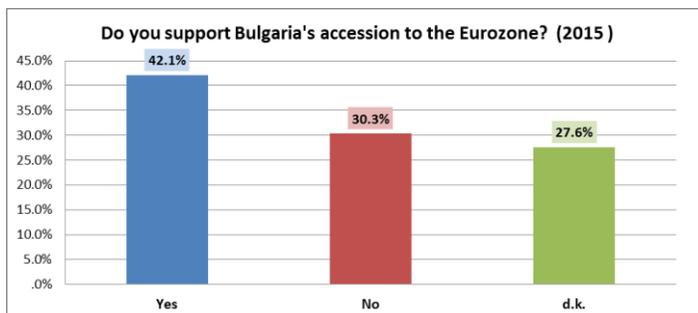


Data from 2011 to 2015 shows that most respondents did not agree Bulgaria’s national currency to be changed for the euro and their share grew from over 45% in 2011 to over 67% in 2013 – increase by 12% for just two years. After the peak in 2013, the opposition against introduction of the euro begun gradually to decrease and became 65% in 2014 and 58% in 2015.

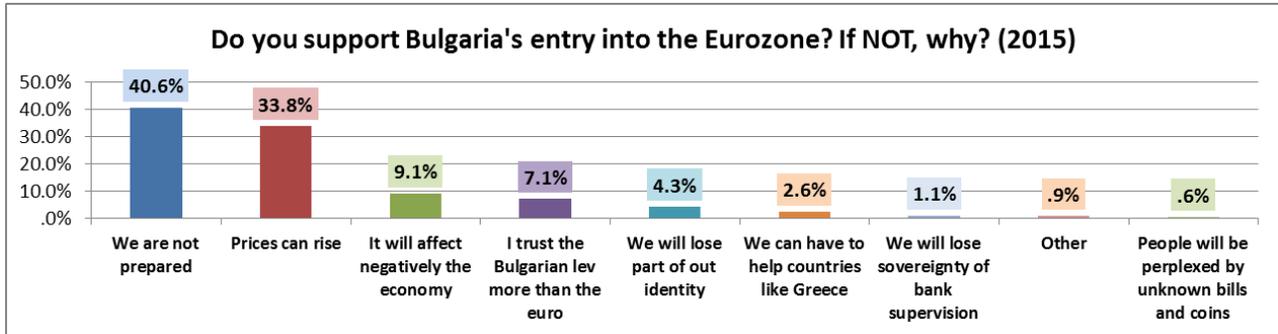
The share of those who supported changing the lev with the euro declined twofold in the period 2011-2015 as from 33.8% in the beginning it fell to 16.2% in 2013 and 2014 to rise slightly to 18.6% in 2016. One probable explanation for the fluctuations is the economic crisis of 2008 and the Eurozone crisis, which effects were felt later on in Bulgaria – and respectively the improvement in 2015, which was reflected in the public opinion.

The share of “don’t know” was about one fifth of respondents – from 21% in 2011 to nearly 24% in 2015, when in parallel the support to the euro started to grow and the opposition to it started to fall.

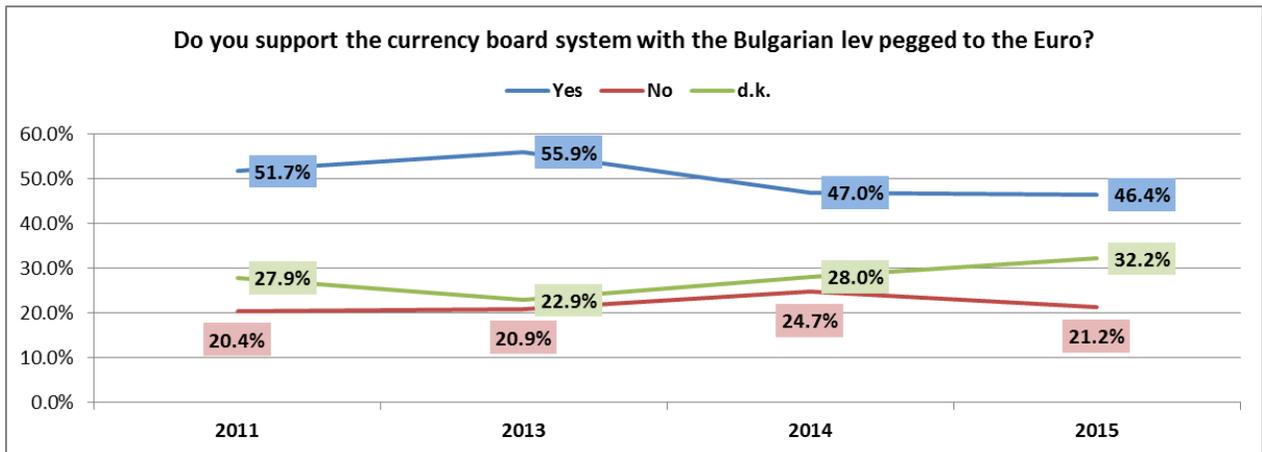
In a direct question whether they would support Bulgaria’s entry into the Eurozone (asked only in 2015), nearly 42% said they would agree, 30% were against and over 30% said they didn’t know.



The main reason of those opposing EU’s entry into the Eurozone in 2015 was that “Bulgaria was not ready” – i.e. 41% of those who said “no” to Eurozone membership. Over a third – 34% - were concerned about price hikes and about 9% thought it will be bad for the economy. Just 7% trusted the Bulgarian currency more than the euro, 4.5% were concerned about loss of identity and only 1.1% of people were concerned that the bank supervision would lose sovereignty.

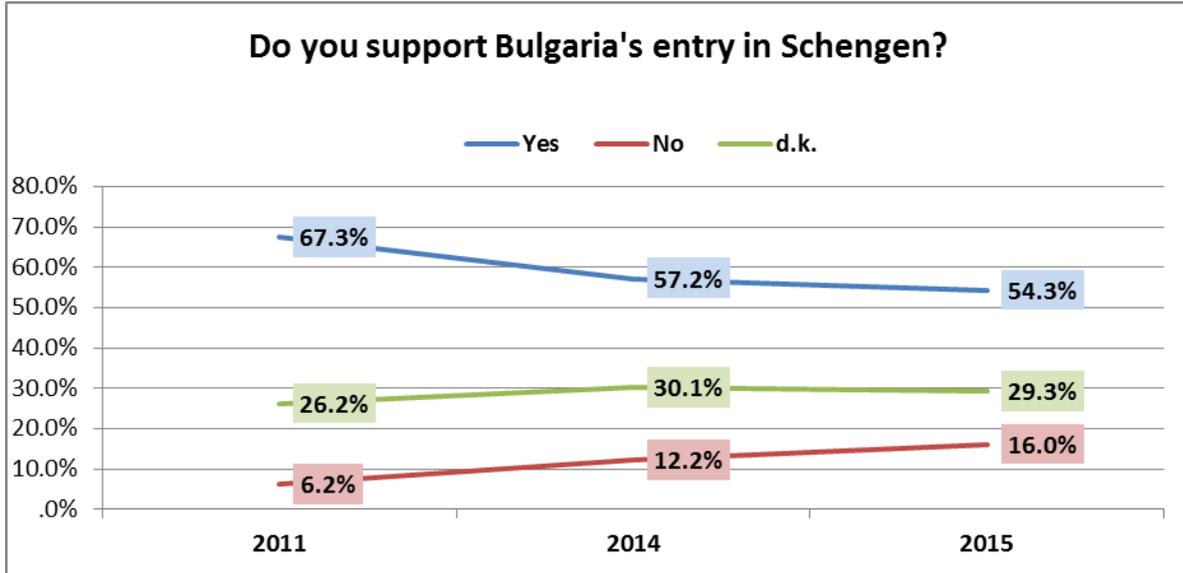


It is interesting to note that despite disagreeing with changing the lev for the euro, the currency board with lev pegged to the euro remained with high support: nearly 52% in 2011 versus 20% disagreeing and 46.4% support in 2015 against 21.1% disagreeing. The highest support for the currency board was in 2013, when 56% supported it. The share of “don’t know” remained high with about one third of respondents – nearly 28% in 2011 and over 32% in 2015.

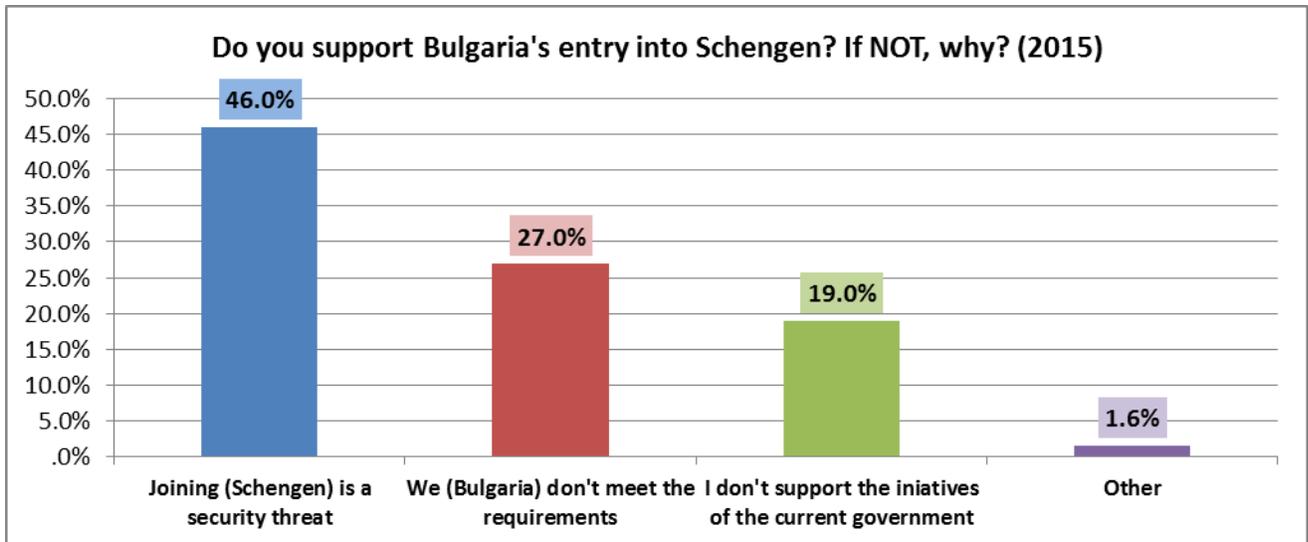


Bulgaria’s expected membership in Schengen remained relatively popular in the observed period, but fell with 13% between 2011 and 2015 from 67.2% (2011), 57.2% (2014) to 54.3% (2015). At the same time, disagreement about Schengen membership grew from 6.2% in 2011 to 16% in 2015.

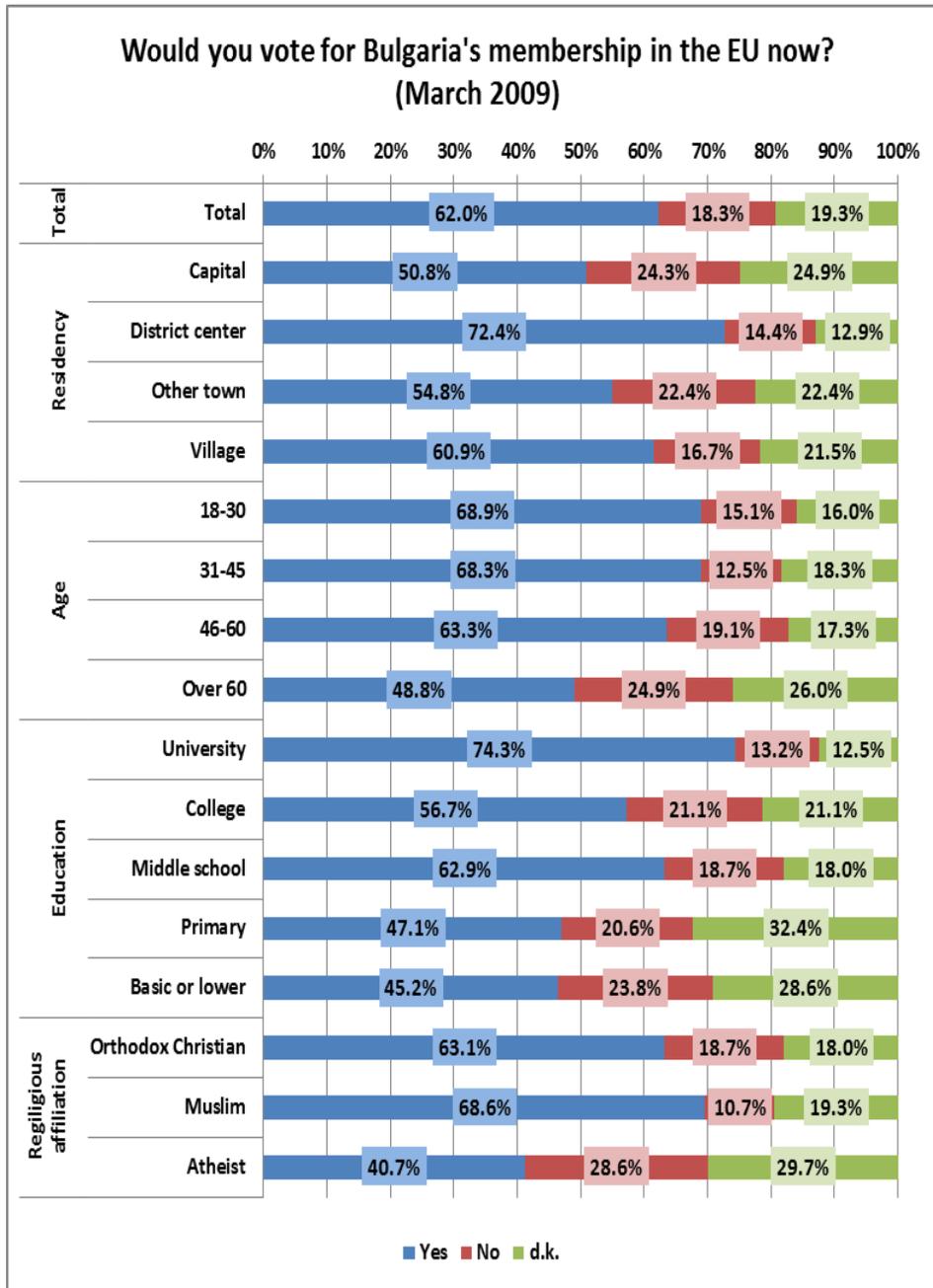
Having in mind the refugee crisis started in the beginning of 2015, it could be factor in shaping opinion only to a certain degree because support for Schengen membership started earlier.



The reasons for disagreeing with Schengen membership (2015) were mostly because of “security threats” – 46%. Nearly one third thought that the reason was Bulgaria itself, which did not meet the requirements. One fifth (19%) did not approve of it as they disapproved in principle of any initiatives of the government in that period.



Social and demographic profile of respondents in the surveys



In 2009, the overall support to EU membership of Bulgaria was 62%, the negative answers were 18.3% and 19.3% didn't know.

People from the biggest cities (72.4%), younger people between 18-30 and 31-45 years (nearly 69% of them), people with higher education (74.3%) were most inclined to support Bulgaria's membership in the EU. In regard to religious affiliation, the majority of Orthodox Christians (nearly 63%), Muslims (nearly 67%) and atheists (nearly 41%) would support EU membership.

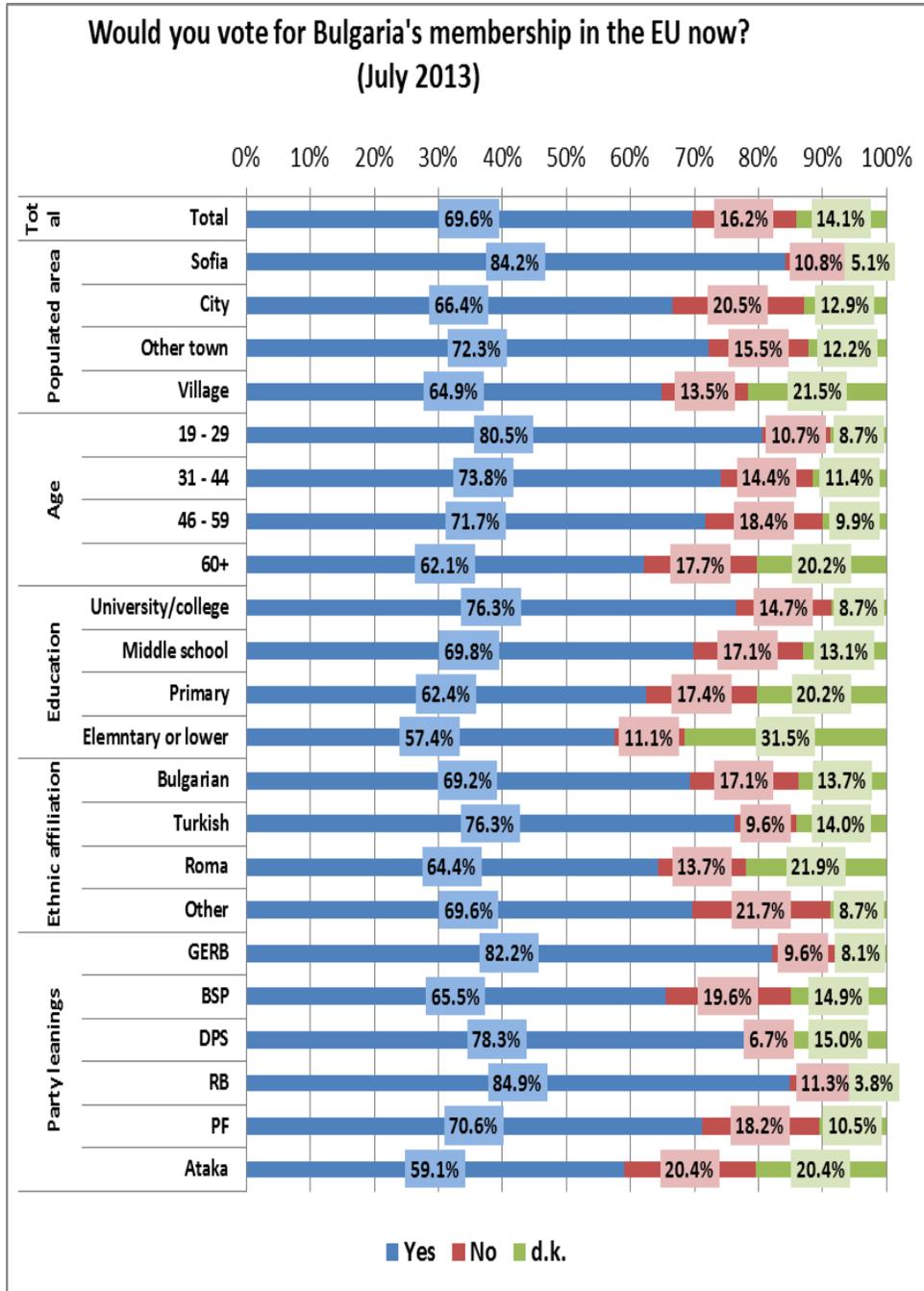
Among those, who would not vote for EU membership in 2009, the highest share was among the

residents of the capital and the smaller towns (24.3% and 22.4%), people over 60 (24.9%), people with basic or lower education (23.8%). In the group of those, who identify as atheists there was the highest share of rejecting EU membership – nearly one third (28.3%) in comparison to other groups by religious self-identification.

Among those, who didn't know were nearly one third of the residents of the capital (24.9%), 22.4% of the residents of smaller towns and 21.5% of village residents, over one fourth of those above 60 years old (26%), about one third of people with elementary, basic or lower education (32.4%, 28.6%) and one third of atheists (29.7%).

In 2013, the total share of those who supported EU membership was two thirds of respondents (69.6%), nearly 16% would not vote for EU membership and 14% didn't know.

The supporters of EU membership were most numerous among residents of the capital (84.2%),



smaller towns (72.3%), over 80.5% of young people (18-29 years), among people between 30-44 and 44-59 (73.8% and 71.7%), people with university and high-school education (76.3% and 69.8%). Among the groups by ethnic self-identification, over 76% of Turks, nearly 70% of Bulgarians and nearly 65% of Roma supported EU membership.

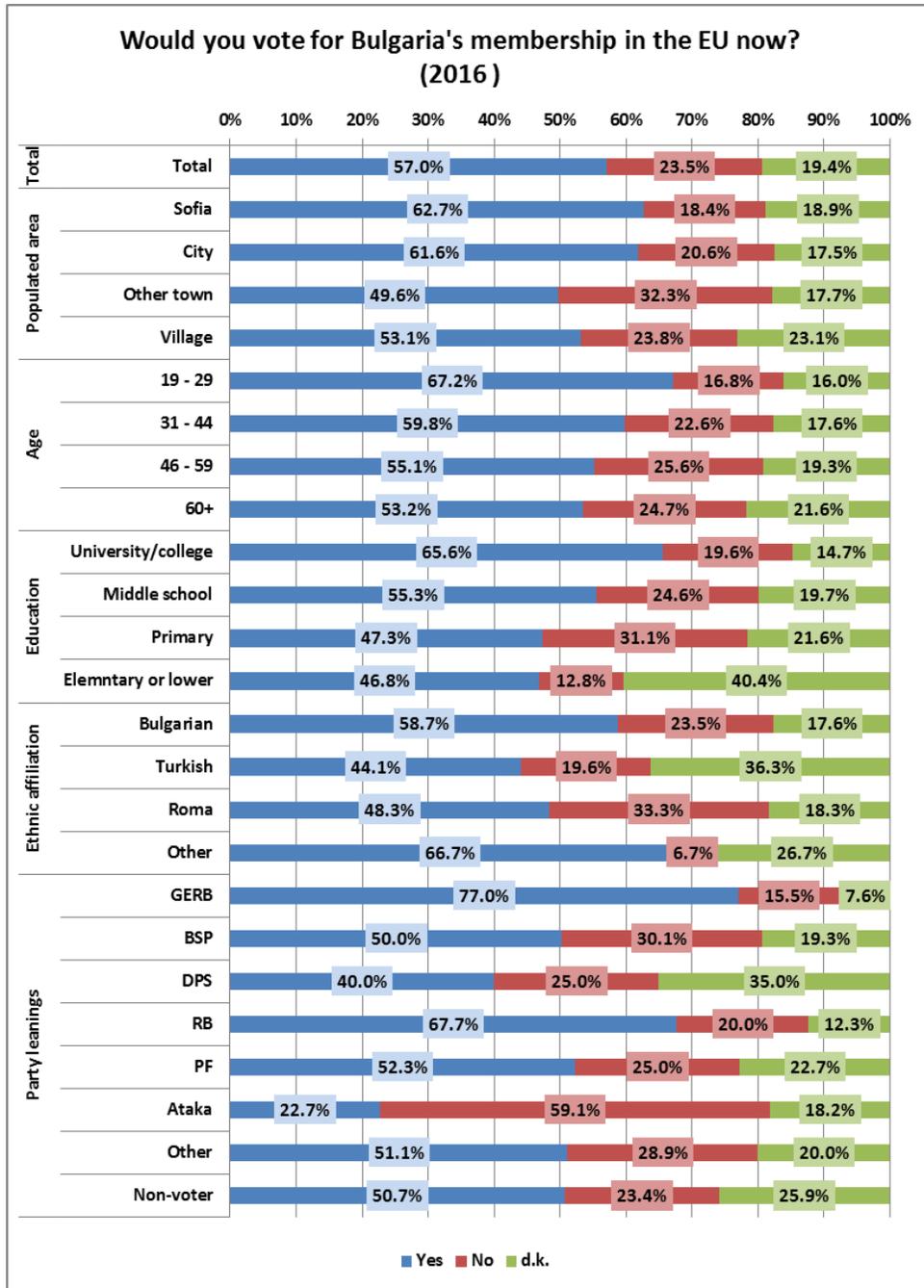
Among supporters of political parties, in the group for those voting for the Reformist Bloc there was the highest support for EU membership (nearly 85%), followed by GERB supporters with similarly high result (over 82%), those of DPS (over 78%), those voting for smaller parties (nearly 71%).

There was a relatively lower support among those voting for BSP, but over 65.5% of them were ready to support EU membership. About 60% of non-voters did not support membership, which was the lowest level in the “political affiliation” section for 2013.

The highest share of those, who would not vote for EU membership was among residents of bigger cities (one fifth of them), people between 45-59 years and those over 60 (18.4% and 17.7%), people with secondary or elementary education (17.1% and 17.7%), people from smaller ethnic groups (22%), followed by Bulgarians (17%). In the profile of political affiliation, nearly one fifth of the non-

voters, supporters of BSP and the smaller parties would not support EU membership. The highest share of people without opinion was in the villages (21.5%), among those over 60 years (20.2%), people with elementary or lower education (over one third), one fifth of the non-voters.

In 2016, support for membership dropped to 57%, as 23.5% would not vote for it, and one fifth (19.4%) didn't know. The highest share of EU membership supporters was among residents of the capital and the district centers (62.7% and 61.6%), the younger people between 19-29 years (67.2%), people with university education (65.6%), people of smaller ethnic groups



(67%), followed by 59% of Bulgarians, half of Roma (48.3%).

In 2016, GERB voters had the highest support for membership (77%), followed by the Reformist Bloc voters (68%). Half of the voters of BSP, the Patriotic Front, the smaller parties and non-voters were also ready to support EU membership.

The most skeptical towards EU membership were among the residents of the smaller towns (over one third) and villages (over one fifth), one quarter of people between 45-59 years and those over 60, over one third of people with lower and one fifth with secondary education. The highest share of euro-skepticism was among the Roma (over 33%) and a quarter of the Bulgarians (23.5%).

In terms of political affiliation, the highest share of membership rejection in 2016 was among the voters of Ataka (nearly 59%), which also had the lost support for the EU membership (22.7%). One third of BSP voters and the smaller parties would not support EU membership.

Among those who didn't know, there were nearly 23% of village residents, over one fifth of those over 60 years, over 40% of those with lower education, over 36% of Turks. According to the political affiliation profile, 35% of DPS voters didn't know as well as one third of non-voters.

 <p>European Policies Initiative Open Society Institute – Sofia</p>	<p>POLICY BRIEF 51</p>
<p>This brief is part of the “10 Years in the EU” series of the Open Society Institute – Sofia in regard to a decade of EU membership of Bulgaria. The policy brief series is a product of the European Policies Initiative (EuPI) of the Open Society Institute – Sofia.</p> <p>The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Open Society Institute –Sofia.</p> <p>Please, check EuPI’s web-site at www.eupi.eu regularly for new policy briefs, other publications and events. You can subscribe to EuPI’s updates via the RSS or the subscription services at the bottom of the web-page.</p> <p>© 2017, Open Society Institute – Sofia</p> <p>About the author</p> <p>Marin Lessenski is Program Director of the European Policies program, Open Society Institute – Sofia.</p>	<p>July 2017</p> <p>About EuPI</p> <p>The European Policy Initiative (EuPI) aims at stimulating and assisting new Member States from CEE to develop capacity for constructive co-authorship of common European policies at both government and civil society level. As a new priority area of the European Policies and Civic Participation Program of Open Society Institute – Sofia, EuPI will contribute to improving the capacity of new Member States to effectively impact common European policies through quality research, policy recommendations, networking and advocacy. The initiative operates in the ten new Member States from CEE through a network of experts and policy institutes.</p> <p>Contact</p> <p>Address: 56 Solunska Str. Sofia 1000 Tel.: (+359 2) 930 66 19 Fax: (+359 2) 951 63 48 E-mail: eupi@osi.bg Web: www.eupi.eu</p>
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