

# **Communicating European Citizenship**

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## **Miscommunicating Europe? Evidence from Central and Eastern Europe**

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In 2009 the European Parliament elections confirmed that the general turnout was decreasing. Also, the 'Eurogap' between old Member States plus Malta and Cyprus (54.01 per cent) and the post-communist new EU Member States (22.93 per cent) was almost unvaried to that of 2004. This paper presents a comparative qualitative analysis of the Polish and Bulgarian cases before and after the 2009 EP elections. Focus groups held in Bulgaria and Poland on Friday 5th June 2009 and a follow-up questionnaire on both citizens' interest towards the EU institutions and on the role of information explain to what extent citizens from the 'new Europe' feel engaged with the EU political process. An overview on further focus groups carried out in Poland in 2007 on the role of information shed light on citizens' trusted sources of information. If in Central and Eastern Europe the quality of information on the EU is 'abysmal', citizens are interested in basic information on the EU and trust the information provided by the Centres of European Information, think tanks and politicians they personally know. This paper answers the questions what information can be conveyed to the citizens and whether it was Europe or domestic political issues that mobilised (or not) citizens to turn out and vote in 2009.

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## **Introduction**

In 2004 the European Parliament (EP) elections brought citizens of 27 EU countries out to vote, highlighting a wide 'Eurogap' between the old member states, plus Malta and Cyprus, and the eight former communist new member states. 55.63 per cent voted in the 'old Europe' and Malta and Cyprus, compared with only 31.19 per cent who casted their vote in the new EU member states. When Bulgaria voted in May 2007 turnout was at 29.22 per cent and in November 2007 in Romania it halted at 29.47 per cent. In 2009 the general average decreasing trend, registered since the first EP elections took place, did not alter. Also, the 'Eurogap' between old member states plus Malta and Cyprus (54.01 per cent) and the post-communist new EU member states (22.93 per cent) was almost unvaried.

This analysis addresses the reasons for the very low levels of turnout in Central and Eastern Europe, and specifically explores the factors that can *qualitatively* impact on turnout.

In order to answer this question, the study presents a comparative qualitative analysis of the Polish and Bulgarian cases before and after the 2009 EP elections. Poland was selected as not only was one of the first post-communist states to join the EU in 2004, but voter turnout remained very low since 1991 (Markowski 2006). Bulgaria was selected as it joined with Romania in 2007 and has been considered Russia's Trojan horse in the EU (Tcherneva 2009). Thus, both can show whether there are reasons to consider the post-communist environment as an explanatory variable and how this can contribute to explain low levels of turnout.

Focus groups held in Bulgaria and Poland on Friday 5th June 2009 and a follow-up questionnaire on both citizens' interest towards the EU institutions and on the role of information show to what extent citizens from the 'new Europe' feel engaged with the EU political process, although the small research design cannot provide generalisations. Participants' contributions highlight the importance of information, while the Eurobarometer (EB 69.2 and EBS 303) surveys carried out in 2008 still point to a lack of information perceived by the EU citizens prior to the 2009 EP elections.

Firstly, this analysis addresses the question of whether EP elections in Central and Eastern Europe can be explained as second-order elections, as they are in Western countries. High levels of volatility and instability in the party systems of these young democracies do not allow an analysis of these countries using the same framework offered by Reif and Schmitt (1980). Nevertheless, there may be characteristics that these countries share in common with the old member states that the qualitative analysis can highlight.

Secondly, this study presents its empirical analysis. Wessels (2007) responded to the low voter turnout characteristic of the 2004 EP elections, by pointing to the equation of 'identity and information'. If the new EU member states cannot possibly have developed a European identity yet, lack of information can be explored in order to provide a contribution on how this may help to foster a European identity and whether this can create more participation in the European political process. The amount of information provided before the accession referendum was probably important in order to mobilise the new European citizens of Central and Eastern Europe. Also, symbolically the accession referendum is an event with a mobilising force, for citizens from post-communist countries, that cannot be replicated in any other European election or referendum. However, listening to the young citizens of the new Europe, specifically in Poland and Bulgaria, this analysis explores citizens' interest in Europe and in the EU political process.

Finally, the analysis tries to illustrate possible comparative implications. Central and Eastern European countries register lower voter turnout compared to Western member states. Nonetheless, in half of the new EU member states turnout increased in the 2009 EP elections. If, in post-communist countries, the first election euphoria did not boost a high turnout, this analysis offers an explanation linked to the post-communist past. Similarly to Western European member states European elections are likely to be debated at the domestic level and register lower turnout compared to the national elections. However, this analysis addresses the quality of disaffection that can be detected in Central and Eastern Europe: it is likely to be related to disengagement with politics - linked to the 'post-communist environment' - and distrust towards politicians and institutions, because of scandals emerged since the process of democratisation took place.

In all former communist new member states surveys show distrust toward politics and politicians. This is likely to have an impact on an already fragile relationship between citizens and politics, and also result in an enduring legacies for political culture. In addition, distrust, in some cases (as in a focus group in Warsaw) towards journalists, does not allow for the expansion of any communication between citizens and politics. Conversely, the length of EU membership positively correlates with the affective dimension of EU integration (Gabel 1998), and that can be expected to be in the making, as the length of membership increases.

Findings give evidence that low turnout in EP elections is not likely to represent any rejection towards the process of European integration, but the EU vote is, depending on the electoral cycle, partially a domestic vote. The qualitative analysis suggests that Europe can

use alternative and more capillary sources of information, through EP candidates themselves, information on local papers, internet - with young citizens, and civic initiatives.

### **Can EP elections in Central and Eastern Europe be second-order elections?**

The case of second-order elections with lower turnout, where smaller parties 'do better', larger 'do worse', and governmental parties suffer losses is a tested characteristic in Western member states (Reif and Schmitt 1980; van der Eijk and Franklin 1996), but low turnout in the 2004 and 2007 EP elections raised the issue in the eight and then ten former communist new EU member states. Up to date the comparative study by Schmitt (2005) suggests that the former communist countries have not yet developed a 'consolidated party system' and the high volatility and low party attachment does not permit a similar analysis to that outlined for Western member states. In the article by Koepke and Ringe (2006) the application of the second-order model does not explain the empirical evidence in Central and Eastern Europe.

#### TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Looking in detail at the level of turnout for the post-communist new member states in the 2004 EP elections and those considered as first-order (*table 1*), it is possible to detect a substantial difference both with the previous and the following national parliamentary elections in all the cases. However in six out of eight cases (those countries that joined the EU in May 2004: Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia) the trend at the domestic level is decreasing as well. The data show only one case (Lithuania) in which the EP election does not lose much ground on the national elections, but Lithuania represents the exception in 2009 for its extremely low turnout.

It is worth noting that the record low turnout at the 2004 EP election does not follow a similar trend in the accession referenda of the previous year. Only Hungary registered similar very low record turnout, and Lithuania just registered 15 per cent votes less compared to the 2003 referendum. In all the other cases almost 30 per cent or more (40 per cent in Estonia and Poland) decided not go to the ballot for the 2004 EP elections compared to the referendum the year before.

It is likely that *table 1* illustrates the strong mobilising force of the accession referendum that, at least, in half of the cases, was capable of moving a larger share of electorate compared to the national parliamentary election. In a focus group held in Zielona Góra in

2007, a participant asserted, while talking about turnout in the accession referendum in June 2003 and the EP election in June 2004, 'people would have voted (yes) anyway for the accession referendum, they did not need information, it is different for the European Parliament election'. Willing to probe the possible factors impacting on the low turnout of the 2004 EP elections, the moderator expanded conversation on that specific election. In the first focus group, students raised the domestic dimension of the debates, but the second focus group pointed to the lack of information on the work of the EP itself.

Discussing this point with Beata Roguska (Centre of Research on Public Opinion, *Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej*: CBOS), Roguska did not agree that more information on the EP could have changed the turnout in June 2004. Not many EU citizens can generally respond to a question on the work of the EU institutions. Roguska suggested that the time of the election did not favour the turnout, as Poland joined the EU just the month before, and voted on accession the year before. That may have created a situation where it was more difficult for citizens to be mobilised.

These findings give strength to the idea that remote governance can be difficult to be communicated (Wallace 2006). Accession is the end of the transformation process and can represent the country's successful accomplishment of the changes and response to EU conditionality (Grabbe 1999). People could perceive it as a duty, and had already accepted the idea of integration. That cannot be replicated in elections and further EU referenda, in addition a student added 'that may be more a problem of Poland than of the sources of information', referring to low levels of turnout in the country (*see* Guerra and Bil, 2009).

The fatigue of voting, pointed in the Slovenian case (Krašovec et al. 2004) in 2004, is not always accepted (Franklin 2007a), but information and identity were found as determinant factors (Wessels 2007). Citizens can feel less engaged, but information matters (De Vreese et al. 2006). Although information is not necessarily the only factor that can impact on citizens' engagement with Europe, knowing Europe is a process in development in Central and Eastern European countries and information can play a fundamental role between the average citizen and the EU. Citizens have very limited knowledge on policy issues (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1991), particularly at the EU level (Hobolt 2009), but we can expect that they can feel more engaged with the EU when information is provided and when they feel informed on the source of this information

## **The EU and information**

News and visibility during an electoral campaign are fundamental (de Vreese et al. 2007). However, debates on the role of media and information have recently raised also the issue of whether information can have a 'malign' impact on attitudes toward politics (Webb, Bale and Taggart 2006). In the case of new member states it is likely that information can help the process of societal integration taking place after joining the EU, increasing knowledge on the EU, and participation in European elections.

De Vreese et al. (2006) examine the news coverage of the 2004 EP campaign across the 25 member states. Their study examines three national newspapers and two television news programmes two weeks before the referendum. Although EU representatives are increasingly present in television programmes, in comparison with the 1999 EP election, domestic political elites remain predominant, and generally 'tabloid press was the most negative'. (de Vreese et al. 2006: 499) It is also worth noting that negative tones of information on the EU do not appear to have a negative impact on participation in the election. However, the analysis does provide evidence of a possible correlation of visibility between EU news on television and levels of turnout.

Among the new member states Poland had 'less visibility' for EU news on television (only Latvia and the Czech Republic had less televised news), fifth after Malta, Cyprus, Hungary and the Czech Republic in the newspapers (de Vreese et al. 2006: 489-490). That was confirmed by the focus group organised and carried out in Warsaw in 2007, when a group of young university students were asked about the role played by sources of information on the EU. Although they did not recognise great credibility to any source of information - they spoke about 'manipulation' and the fact that 'information is not really useful if it is not objective' - they agreed that they received a great amount of information before the referendum, but the same did not happen before the EP election. The Polish Public Opinion Research Centre also found that generally more informed respondents were also more likely to hold higher levels of support for the EU. In the case of the EP election in Poland, it seems possible to suggest that citizens did not receive the information they needed to structure their vote.

Concerns over a lack of information was raised before the accession referendum: the negotiation process built structures, which primarily affected the development of governance. The administrative and legislative procedures did not create any public debate that could have an impact on the 'democratic deficit' of the enlarged EU, with the 'danger for democracy (...) that only the top layer of central state officials (would) have become

‘Europeanised’, while the public (would) remain(s) excluded from European integration’. (Grabbe 2001: 1029). However, before the referendum, information was spread, and citizens recognised it was useful to get closer to the institutions. In the 2004 EP elections, in Lithuania much less financial resources were used, because of the close national parliamentary elections (10<sup>th</sup> October 2004). In Slovenia politicians did not engage in mobilising already exhausted citizens (by the number of referendums taken between 1994 and 2004), while the mass media presented the EP elections as second-order elections with an average low turnout (Krašovec et.al. 2004).

It has further to be added that the tone of the coverage also has also an important effect, particularly on the EU debate. Peter (2007) found that disagreements on European integration among political elites raised the salience of the EU, but an agreement had ‘a numbing effect’ – although Siune and Svensson (1993) reached the opposite conclusions on the Danish Referendum on the Treaty of Maastricht. In addition, contextual factors and the overall context of information (whether negative) provided were found equally important (2007: 141).

That strengthens the idea of the mobilising force of the accession referendum. Within a pro-accession context, most (but not all) of the parties, were in favour of EU membership. In the Polish case the pro-EU camp immediately appeared as the strongest. In 2003 the majority of the political cues (Democratic Left Alliance, *Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej*: SLD; Labour Union, *Unia Pracy*: UP; and Civic Platform, *Platforma Obywatelska*: PO) agreed that membership was the right choice. The president, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, personally campaigned throughout the country to support the European issue, and the governing parties, SLD-UP, even if not representing any longer the majority, were two of the main actors of the Yes-campaign. Also civic organisations cooperated to involve local movements and famous people in a network, ‘Civic Initiative Yes in the Referendum’ (*Inicjatywa Obywatelska Tak w Referendum*). In the end the pro-EU campaign was led by the majority of the political parties, the social and cultural key actors supported it<sup>1</sup>, and the Pope, John Paul II, closed the possible harsh anti-EU campaign of the extreme Catholic side, politically represented by the League of Polish Families (*Liga Polskich Rodzin*: LPR), making it impossible for them to oppose their moral guide, or any other critical campaign

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<sup>1</sup> Also the national TV and Radio (*Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji*) covered the information campaign before the referendum days through regional (1,200 minutes), national (740, 370 and 740 minutes on the three channels) and international programmes (for the foreign countries, 480 minutes), (Lichota 2005: 140).

from the social political side (with Self Defence, *Samoobrona Rzeczpospolitej Polskiej*: SRP).

Overall, it results that the coverage of the EU issue and the tone of the campaign are likely to be critical in mobilising the electorate. Analyses on the 1999 EP election (de Vreese et al. 2007; Peter 2007) show that the situation was ‘gloomy’, as EU news were placed low both in the news and among political actors. Domestic politics and domestic political actors were at the centre of the news and ‘the campaign ... did not enable the European electorate to make an informed choice’ (de Vreese et al. 2007: 129) in 1999, and also in 2004. Not good news towards the 2009 EP elections.

### **The 2009 EP elections and information**

After the very low levels of turnout in the 2004 EP elections, surveys reported the willingness of potential voters to take part in the following 2009 elections. Between March and May 2008 the European Commission carried out a survey on the state of public opinion a year before the elections. A low percentage of Europeans knew of the elections (16 per cent), but more than in the previous six months (only 10 per cent). Young people were the ones that were ‘least likely to know’ about it. 46 per cent felt interested in the elections, but more, 51 per cent, asserted they ‘were not interested’. That is particularly important as detected in the new member states (EB 69.2 2008).

#### FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

90 per cent of Bulgarians did not know when the elections were taking place in April 2008, as well as 84 per cent of Romanians, 85 per cent of Lithuanians and 83 per cent of Latvians. Interest was low particularly in Latvia (79 per cent asserted they were not interested), in the Czech Republic (71 per cent) and Slovakia (68 per cent).

If the newest member states clearly show that identity (as Wessels, 2007, observed in the case of the 2004 EP elections) is important, the length of membership often correlates with the affective dimension of the EU (Gabel 1998). It is not surprising, therefore, that the affective dimension is ‘in the making’. Even though post-communist countries before accession agreed that the reasons why the EU had a positive image were due to ‘economic improvements’ (14 per cent) (CEEB 6 1996: 52-4) and ‘(U)nspecified positive statements based on emotions or general image perceptions – General positive’ (CCEB 2001 2002: 41),

they are still in the process of knowing about the EU. Also, the EU is likely to be represented in people's perceptions by this double component.

## FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

The trend on the likelihood to go to vote registered a year before the elections (EB 69.2 2008) can indicate that the possible turnout could be again expected to be low in all the EU member states. Percentages were particularly low in the case of Romania (19 per cent) and Slovakia (15 per cent), that registered the lowest turnout also in the 2004 EP elections (17 per cent). Particularly, 60 per cent of those responding they were not going to vote in the EU27 asserted 'they (did) not know enough about the European Parliament's role' (similarly to what said in the focus Group in Zielona Góra in 2007), 'compared with 32 per cent who take the opposite view' (EB 69.2, 2008). Information was considered as fundamental in order to make also 'hesitant or even recalcitrant' EU citizens 'change their minds and turn out to vote on 4-7 June 2009' (EB 69.2 2008).

However, in October-November 2008 (EBS 303 2009) Europeans did not seem much more informed or interested. 26 per cent replied they knew about the 2009 EP elections and more than in the previous EB survey, 54 per cent (+ 3 per cent) was the average across the 27 member states asserting they were 'totally disinterested'. In the 10 new member states, Latvia (80 per cent), the Czech Republic (74 per cent), Slovakia (65 per cent), Poland (59 per cent and 5 per cent did not know), Bulgaria (48 per cent and 8 per cent did not know) and Lithuania (54 per cent) were among those countries less interested in the EP elections.

As it can be expected, the more respondents trusted the EU, the more willing they were to vote in the EP elections. Notably, however, more respondents, compared to the previous survey, were not willing to vote (15 per cent. + 1 per cent), and less Europeans asserted they were going to cast their vote (34 per cent, -3 per cent). The likelihood of going to vote was lower than the EU average in Romania (31 per cent), Hungary (29 per cent), Bulgaria (26 per cent), Czech Republic (25 per cent), Slovakia (23 per cent) and Poland (19 per cent). Nevertheless, the new member states had received better media coverage on the EP compared to the 'old' ones (50 per cent vs. 43 per cent).

In the run-up to the 2009 EP elections the likelihood of high levels of turnout was scarce. It was also anticipated that a similar turnout gap between old (plus Malta and Cyprus) and new member states would occur. Further, in the 2004 and 2007 EP elections, both the two cases studies here analysed, Poland and Bulgaria, showed the salience of the domestic

dimension. The Polish case is likely to be partly explainable through Franklin's thesis (2002) as it was refined in his response to Svensson (2002). Franklin's thesis focused on referenda, but still the low or high salience of the EU issue is likely to impact on European elections, as in Poland, where the contemporary presence of a low salient EU issue (Szczerbiak 2004) and the high salience of the domestic political situation (as in second-order elections, *see* van der Eijk and Franklin 1996) are likely to explain the extremely low turnout.

Similarly, in 2007 the Bulgarian case showed high levels of support for the EU, but a debate that was contested at the domestic level. Also when issues had a EU dimension, for examples concerning EU funds or the fight against corruption, under the special 'cooperation and verification mechanism for monitoring progress' implemented by the EU, information retained a domestic context (Stefanova 2008: 567).

In 2009, EP elections took place in a moment when Poles felt less and less trust toward the EP (Poland registered the biggest decline across all the EU member states since the previous Eurobarometer survey, -9 per cent). Further, the Bulgarian EP election had a mid-term dimension in 2007, and it was held in the run-up to the July national election in 2009.

### **Polish and Bulgarian young voters before the 2009 EP elections**

The research design plan included two focus groups. The theme of interest was attitudes toward EU integration, EP elections and the role, and possible impact, of information. While quantitative analyses can provide explanations and causes, focus groups can allow the researcher to listen to people's conversation and understand the basis of their attitude. As Kucia (1999: 143) reported '(m)uch research has been carried out into public opinion' in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly through surveys and opinion polls, as the Central and Eastern Eurobarometer'. Quantitative analysis gives answers to questions such as '*how many* people think in a particular way', where as qualitative analysis and focus groups seek 'to uncover data on *what* and *how* people think' (Kucia 1999: 143), as in this study.

Focus groups 'originated in the work of the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University in the 1940s' (Bloor et al. 2001: 1), as a market research tool. Individual in-depth interviews were later adopted, as an alternative to that. In contrast to in-depth interviews, in a focus group people are free to express and interact. As a group they engage in the topic, and often reply to particular assessments, showing the reasons underlining groups' and individuals' behaviours. Clearly, as stressed by Bloor et al. (2001: 17) a focus group cannot be representative, but it can be helpful in order to understand

meanings and underlying reasons, and that is why it is a particular useful method of research when examining public opinion and voting behaviour.

In the two focus groups carried out on Friday, 5th June 2009 in Sofia, Bulgaria, and Zielona Góra, Poland, two days before the 2009 EP elections, and the role of information resulted as critical. In Bulgaria, a participant stressed that since accession the EU had become a very 'popular topic', but 'if you want to know about the EU, no one knows, ... What does the European Parliament do? What does the European Commission do? Do you elect them? Who is elected? How do the European institutions work?'

Similarly, in Poland, students agreed that 'knowledge on the EU increased, mainly because of our studies, but ... if someone liked to establish his own business, he would be interested in more information in the future'. In both focus groups participants detected a 'lack of useful information'. 'Most people use local sources' that do not provide much information on the EU, a participant asserted in Sofia, 'What is the current agenda of the European Parliament? What does the European Commission discuss?' To what extent 'does the EU affect us?', another participant added.

However, the Eurobarometer survey before the 2009 EP elections found that according to the subjective evaluation of their knowledge, citizens in Central and Eastern Europe generally have some knowledge on the EP and how it works. Still, in 2004 the Eurobarometer gave evidence that despite a slightly higher self perception of knowledge of the EU, the actual knowledge held was lower. In Poland, limited knowledge of the elections was revealed by the earlier fieldwork carried out by the Gallup Organisation in February-March 2004 in the survey on 'The Actual Knowledge of the EU'<sup>2</sup>. In response to the assertion that 'the next EP elections (would) take place in 2005', a large majority of respondents said they did not know or did not answer (49 per cent), while 25 per cent said it was true and 26 per cent that it was false (CCEB 2004.1 2004: 36-37).

In fact, sources of information are not likely to help citizens from the 'new' Europe, participants in the focus groups asserted that newspapers were not helpful. In Bulgaria newspapers 'just talk of scandals, specialist' magazines 'are too expensive for the ordinary citizens ... if you need to buy three or four papers, then it's too expensive'.

In Poland students can rely on the newspapers, but 'some ... are not objective'. Television is less credible both in Poland and Bulgaria, particularly in the latter case, as 'the

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<sup>2</sup> Respondents had to evaluate ten different statements concerning the EU, from the number of the member states to the existence of a common European day passing through the EU headquarters.

TV supports the party in power'. As a participant highlighted, 'there is no neutral information, they all have interests'.

That is further supported by the previous two focus groups held in Poland in 2007. In Warsaw students asserted they had to study about the EU 'at school', although they stressed they could trust neither newspapers, as there is 'manipulation', nor politicians, referred to as 'demagogues'. On sources of information before accession, participants in the focus group in Zielona Góra in 2007, spoke about the official sources of information, of the programme PHARE, the Centres of European Information and civic initiatives. However, one student stressed that they did not receive any information on the role of the institutions. In 2007 one third of the participants in Warsaw felt 'rather ill informed' and all those taking part in the focus group in Zielona Góra (10) felt 'rather ill informed'.

In 2007, during both the discussions, students were very critical towards the information they received, criticism that was repeated again in 2009. In 2007 participants in Zielona Góra seemed to underline that there were more information programmes before accession than currently - even though the Eurobarometer data reported that in the run-up to the elections the new member states had more media coverage than the old ones. In 2009, they similarly found that general information was not useful.

Politicians do not receive a better feedback, also in 2009. None of the participants in the focus groups in Poland asserted they trusted politicians. In Bulgaria 'actually, our politicians don't say anything useful for us'. Also, 'our trust is undermined in the moment we see mistakes ... we begin to see their mistakes, ... there are mistakes', and another participant explained 'why we don't believe in our politicians, ... because they talk about the EU as the EU is perfect (with emphasis), it's perfect, it's ideal, it's something without problems, with no discussions, no debatable questions'. In Poland, 'better don't trust politicians, MPs are not competent...Ministers avoid detailed answers'.

Distrust is not a new phenomenon. The overlap of the transformation costs on the passive civil society can have produced a situation where the bonds between citizens and politicians – and politics, as a consequence – are looser. If in Western Europe disaffection - a phenomenon, which started in the Seventies in Britain, and thereafter appeared in the rest of Europe – towards political parties and politicians, 'a necessary evil' (Dalton and Weldon 2005), is increasing, in CEE it is likely to be the product of the past, the social costs of the triple transitions, and cases of bribery and corruption. That is likely to impact on an already fragile relationship between citizens and politics across all the post-communist member states. In the Czech Republic citizens had the perception of 'dirty' or 'bad' politics

(Mansfeldova 2006: 105). In 1998 in Slovakia surveys 'indicated intensified corruption', whilst the growing number of 'scandals' involving politics and state institutions decreased levels of trust towards their legitimacy, and 'in all political institutions' (Mihailova 2006: 184-195). In Lithuania citizens were dissatisfied with their 'passive' role in politics (Alisauskiene, 2006: 275) and in Estonia political parties were the most distrusted, together with labour union (Titma and Rämmer 2006: 296-297). Findings from Western countries report that when citizens trust parties, they are likely to be more politically active, as distrust is likely to be linked to low turnout (Dalton and Weldon 2005).

However, when voting in the 2009 EP elections, candidates are trusted, when voters (among those taking part in the focus groups) personally know them – as one participant asserted in Poland; in Bulgaria one participant added that he 'never looked at the programme ... I will vote the party, but because I know about the people'.

In June 2009, the two focus groups gathered eight participants, fifteen voted in the EP elections. In a follow-up questionnaire filled the week after the 2009 EP elections, the participant who did not vote wrote he 'went to the voting station three times during the day. There was a long queue, so' he 'had to wait for too long and' he left without voting. Among those who voted, three decided their vote a long time before or two months before (two in Bulgaria, one in Poland), one decided two weeks before (in Poland), five decided a week before (three in Bulgaria, two in Poland), one a few days before (in Bulgaria), one a couple of days before (in Poland), one 'the very same day of the election' (in Poland) and at the 'last minute' (in Bulgaria).

Sources of information, particularly websites, were generally considered helpful. In Bulgaria a participant underlined that 'websites (ie.: <http://euobserver.com>; [www.europarl.eu.int](http://www.europarl.eu.int); <http://europartv.europa.eu/StartPage.aspx>; [www.euronews.net](http://www.euronews.net); <http://edition.cnn.com/EUROPE>; [www.seenews.com](http://www.seenews.com)) provide(d) (me) with a great range of information on various topics ... so I use(d) them selectively ... practical implications and meanings of the policies and disputes are(were) rarely explained on mass media, local TV programmes...'. Another Bulgarian student added that he used 'those sites (ie.: [www.dnes.bg](http://www.dnes.bg), [www.focus-news.net](http://www.focus-news.net)) and televisions because they are(were) most interesting for me and (I think) they provide(d) detailed and unbiased information'. Internet is definitely the most accessed source of information during the electoral campaigns for young citizens, as it generally results in the Eurobarometer surveys, 'I prefer mostly internet and use it most. I prefer the websites: [dnes.bg](http://dnes.bg); [news.bg](http://news.bg), and the international news agencies. I also use [euobserver.com](http://euobserver.com) and [le monde diplomatique](http://lemonde.diplomatique) ... the information in the

websites is specialised and it is also dynamic, it changes every minute or hour'. In Poland a website, [www.latarnikwyborczy.pl](http://www.latarnikwyborczy.pl) was opened for the election and a participant stressed he 'found out more about candidates ... read the programmes'.

Finally, as before the elections participants stressed that knowing the candidate, more than the party, can make the difference. Fourteen out of sixteen participants in the focus groups voted the candidate, 'I supported a good candidate and great ideas', 'I trust the candidate', 'the candidate is from my city and read lots of good things about him ... I chose the best in my opinion', 'because in the European Parliament people are more important than parties', 'the candidate was ... responsible. My choice was thought over' (in Poland); 'because I know the candidate myself and I trust him and the party', 'I was looking for candidates with proven capabilities and willingness to work for the EU and not only represent the views of the political leader of their party', 'I personally think it's better to vote a person, because I am aware of that person's qualities, I am aware of his work so far and I know his future ambitions, and they well correspond to my future vision of perspective' (in Bulgaria).

Comments on domestic political characters are usually quite negative. It clearly emerged in Bulgaria, as the national political election was quite close (July 2009). A participant reported that 'the governing party failed to do its job with its candidates, so that means we need to change the people representing us in the European Parliament', another underlined that he 'considered the election for the European Parliament as the first round of the election battle in ... 2009'.

Findings in a small comparative perspective, using a qualitative approach on the 2004 and 2009 EP elections, show that the interest in politics and the low salience of the EU issue with a high salience of the domestic context can result in second-order elections 'in a CEE way' - due to the high rates of volatility. The 2004 EP elections were generally debated at the domestic level where the election salience 'arose from its domestic significance, not its European significance' (van der Eijk and Franklin 1996: 368, referring to the Western EU member states). In 2009 the EU issue seems not to have increased its salience. Distrust towards sources of information, towards politicians and more attention towards local politics do not favour a spread of information on the EU. The second-order dimension of the EP elections is still likely to be partly valid in Central and Eastern Europe, but undeniably knowing candidates and accessing updated information, and internet are likely to enhance citizens' willingness to go to vote.

### **The 2009 EP elections' results in Poland and Bulgaria in comparative perspective**

Both the 2009 Polish and Bulgarian EP elections had a domestic dimension. That was certainly clear in the Bulgarian case, as the national parliamentary elections were held in July, just one month after the EP elections. Levels of turnout were higher compared to the previous EP elections, 24.53 per cent, +3.66, in Poland, and 38.99 per cent, +9.77, in Bulgaria. Polish voters did not punish the incumbent government, 44.4 per cent voted for Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*: PO), the Polish liberal right party and 7 per cent casted their vote for the Polish Peasant Party (*Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe*: PSL), the incumbent parties, elected in October 2007. In Bulgaria, the domestic situation, and, as asserted in the focus group held in Sofia, the willingness to dismiss the incumbent rewarded the mayor of Sofia Boyko Borisov's Party, Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (*Граждани за европейско развитие на България*: ГЕРБ/GERB) with 24.48 per cent of the votes.

#### TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

In Poland, the main opposition party Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*: PiS) lost compared to the previous national election (Guerra and Bil 2009). In June 2009, Polish citizens confirmed their support for the governing parties, without rewarding any opposition parties. Conversely, protest parties did not gain any vote in this election that manly centred on domestic issues and the internal debate between Civic Platform and Law and Justice and the economic situation. The EU became a more salient issue, when the Prime Minister, Donald Tusk (PO), asked for the vote to the electorate to give more chances to Jerzy Buzek, former Polish Prime Minister (1997-2001), to become president of the EP. Further debates arose from some important candidates that had also a European dimension, as Danuta Hübner, former European Commissioner. The European dimension of the EP elections is slowly increasing. In 2004 Poland was moving toward the 2005 political and presidential elections, and voted as a consequence of that. Disaffection for the incumbent government (SLD-UP) was high and more critical attitudes emerged. The low level of salience of this particular election - because of the political situation impacted not only on the turnout, but also on the high 'apparent' increase of support for Eurosceptic political parties. However, Poland was still Euroenthusiast, surveys carried out in August, three months after accession confirmed the positive trend: before accession, the long wait for membership created disillusion in most of citizens, and, as already underlined in the focus groups, the absence of

any (in some of the cases, described) ‘tragic’ change did not have any influence on the 2004 EP vote. In 2009, the salience of the EU issue slightly increased. However, the vote still presents a domestic dimension. As stressed, in 2004 Poland presented an interesting case of mismatch between public attitudes and political elites toward the EU. This is particularly important, because it appears to be a structural problem of the EU, where the public place the EU low on their list of priorities when voting for political parties. Hence, European elections become second-order elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980) and punishment traps (Schneider and Weitsman, 1996); as it happened in Bulgaria.

### TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

The Bulgarian governing parties, the socialist based Coalition for Bulgaria (*Коалиция за България: БСП/BSP*), the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (*Движение за права и свободи: ДПС/DPS*) and the National Movement for Stability and Progress (previously, National Movement Simeon II; *Национално движение за стабилност и възход: НДСВ/NDSV*) were swept away by citizens’ general discontent for their government (2005-2007). In the first two years Bulgaria finalised its accession to the EU; after achieving EU membership (2007-2009), the government was under fire from the EU, facing criticism regarding the mismanagement of EU funds. The current economic crisis also impacted on the vote, particularly on the electorate of the main coalition party, the socialist Coalition for Bulgaria. Borisov’s Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria gained those voters who were disengaged with Coalition for Bulgaria, as their programme seemed to answer the EU, more than the salient issues at the domestic level, and those disappointed with the charismatic, but authoritarian, leadership of Simeon II. The EU issue remained rather silent, as corruption and energy security, after the dispute between Russia and Ukraine, were the two most debated themes. Only Ataka (National Union Attack, *Национален съюз Атака*) used Europe, in order to campaign against minorities and Turkish membership to the EU. A similar rhetoric, using corruption, as Ataka, but as a central theme of its electoral campaign, was used by the centre-right Order, Law and Justice Party (*Ред, законност и справедливост: ПЗС/RZS*). Overall, ‘a lack of debate’ on Europe was registered (Savkova 2009), as also the focus groups detected.

The 2009 Polish and Bulgarian EP elections were debated at the domestic level, similarly to 2004 and 2007, when the election salience arose from its domestic significance. Both Poland and Bulgaria saw an increase in the levels of turnout; in the short term, Jerzy Buzek,

as President of the EP, can possibly raise the EU debate in Poland. In the case of Bulgaria, Europe has not yet acquired a debate of its own; as a participant in a focus group asserted, 'no one knows' about the EU, and corruption can represent a salient theme also in the next legislature.

### **Conclusions and implications**

In Poland, in the run-up of the accession referendum a broad information campaign was launched and monitored, particularly by the Office of the Committee for European Integration (*Urząd Komitet Integracji Europejskiej*: UKIE) and the Institute of Public Affairs (*Instytut Spraw Publicznych*: ISP). The main organisation interacting in the campaign was the Office of the Committee for European Integration: after the referendum campaign most of respondents in the ISP survey asserted they came across their campaign, finding it useful. Furthermore, the civic 'Initiative Yes for the Referendum' is one of the most cited organisations (Ciężka 2005: 172-3). In addition, a particular programme for the information of civil society (*Program Informowania Społeczeństwa*) has acted all across Poland, while also Regional Centres for European Information (*Regionalne Centra Informacji Europejskiej*) were acting in the different regions.

These types of organisations, outside the government, were recognised as a peculiar character and efficient instrument of the Polish campaign. (Fałkowski 2005: 101) In practice, organisations often played a role as the '*liaison*' between the government and civil society, involving representatives of the Ministries and the UKIE itself for meetings and seminars. This well organised and capillary information, which was successful in the referendum, could have increased participation in the following year EP election. Fałkowski underlines that it is important for the future that 'both the media and the government' can work to 'fill the gap' and help the potential of these organisations linking society to government and institutional elites (Fałkowski 2005: 102-4). Local sources, as asserted in the focus groups, do not help increasing the debate on the EU. In case of the EP elections, knowing the candidates has an important impact on the willingness to go to vote. The socialists in Bulgaria 'remained true to their established style of door-to-door campaigning' (Savkova 2009: 5), and that can have a positive impact on European elections as well.

We cannot expect that 'everybody perceives the European integration process and the European Union in the same way' (Medrano 2003). Nonetheless, in Central and Eastern Europe, the EU meant benefits at all levels. It benefited students, workers, citizens in

general – who could now travel abroad – farmers, and consumers, when buying food or other products (as toys for children) (as asserted in the focus groups in Poland in 2007). The EU has already delivered, and information remains of fundamental importance when it comes to EU-related issues. Mistrust for journalists and parties, as qualitatively detected, can hinder citizens' engagement. Also, perceived benefits alone cannot drive citizens' decision when taking their choice, as in EP elections.

The focus groups in Poland and Bulgaria provided clear indication that the role of information cannot be neglected. Lack of information was a perceived issue that emerged from focus groups research, conducted also before (Kucia 1999) accession.

With the odd exception, the quality of media coverage of the EU in new member states is abysmal. There are few stories and many have glaring mistakes in them – but no one seems to care. Editors seem to hate the subject. They will tell you that it's "boring" and "technical"... It may be an extreme example, but the "no" popular referendum votes in France and the Netherlands in 2005 over the EU constitution and the political near-meltdown that followed them were in part products of a simple fact: the press and those who read it have no idea about the EU.' (Szlancko, 2008)

The information gap is going to be filled through European Councils and meetings, as Szlancko (2008) suggested, but official and local sources of information, and civic initiatives are likely to play a fundamental role between the average citizen and the EU. Accession referenda do represent an easier electoral appointment, due to the amount of information generally provided and the mobilising force of the referendum itself, which is a positive note in view of further enlargements and accession referenda. On the contrary, further elections and referenda should be accompanied by 'basic' information, as focus groups underlined, in order to avoid an uninterested and rejective attitude also among those citizens that are usually supportive of EU integration.

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**Table 1. Eurogaps: Turnout at the national and European elections, and EU accession referendum<sup>3</sup>**

Country	A. (%)	B. (%)	C. (%)	D. (%)	E. (%)	C-A (%)	D-A (%)	D-B (%)	D-C (%)	E-D (%)
Czech R.	57.9	64.5	55.21	28.32	28.22	-2.69	-29.58	-36.18	-26.89	-0.1
Estonia	58.2	61.91	63.00	26.83	43.2	4.8	-31.37	-35.08	-36.17	16.37
Hungary	73.51	67.83	45.62	38.5	36.29	-27.89	-35.01	-29.33	-7.12	-2.21
Latvia	71.51	62.23	72.53	41.34	52.56	1.02	-30.17	-20.89	-31.19	11.22
Lithuania	58.63	46.8	63.37	48.38	20.92	4.74	-10.25	1.58	-14.99	-27.46
Poland	46.2	40.6	58.85	20.87	24.53	12.65	-25.33	-19.73	-37.98	3.66
Slovakia	69.99	54.67	52.15	16.97	19.64	-17.84	-53.02	-37.70	-35.18	2.67
Slovenia	70.3	60.5	60.44	28.35	28.25	-9.86	-4.95	-32.15	-32.09	-0.1
Bulgaria	55.7	NA	NA	29.22	37.49	NA	NA	NA	NA	8.27
Romania	56.5	NA	NA	29.47	27.4	NA	NA	NA	NA	-2.07

*Legenda:*

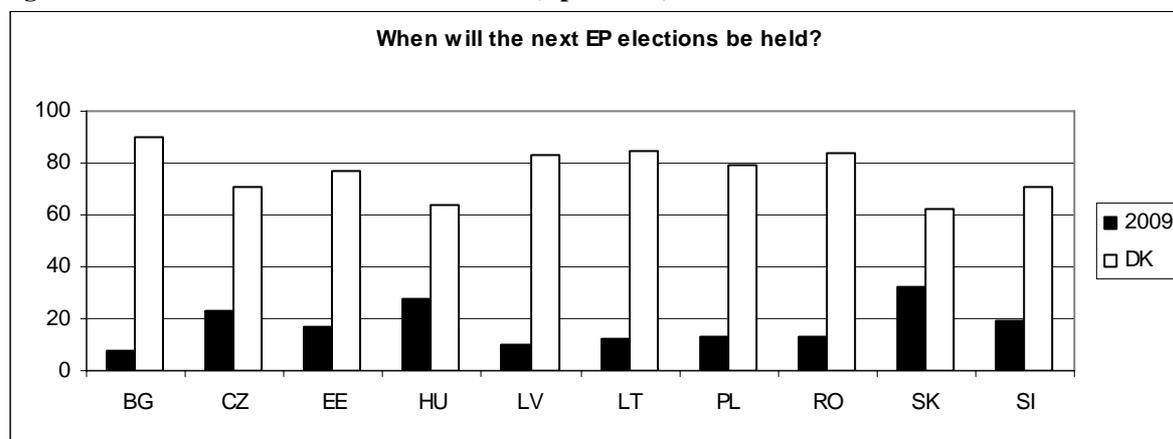
A = National parliamentary election prior to 2004 EP election (2007 EP election).

B = National parliamentary election after 2004 EP election (2007 EP election).

C = 2003 EU accession referendum.

D = 2004 EP election (2007 EP elections for Bulgaria and Romania).

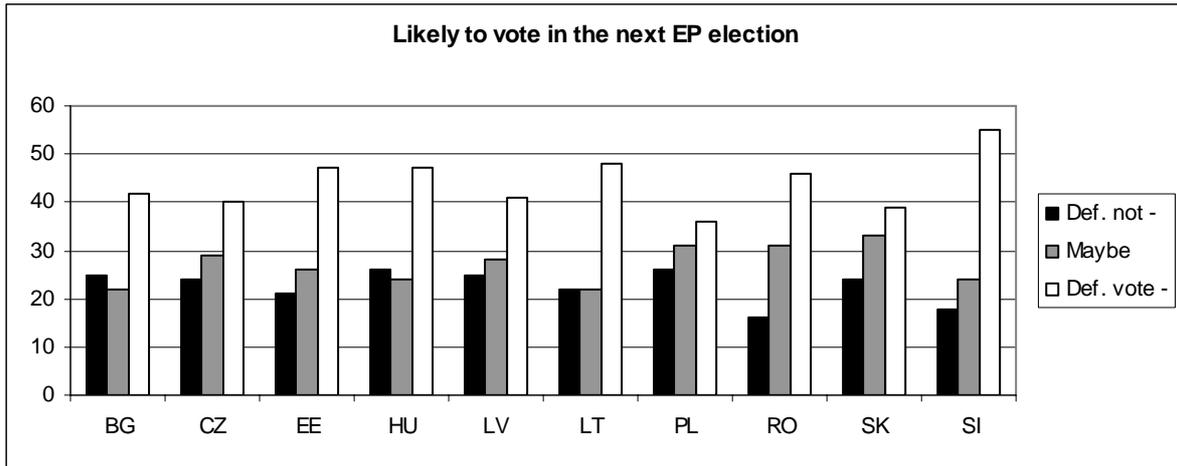
E = 2009 EP election.

**Figure 1. Information on the 2009 EP election (April 2008)**

Data source: Special Eurobarometer 299 'Citizens and the 2009 European elections'.

<sup>3</sup> Data from the EU website, available at: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2004/ep-electionssites/results1306/turnout\\_ep/index.html](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2004/ep-electionssites/results1306/turnout_ep/index.html) (accessed 22 June 2007), the Sussex European Institute website, <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/1-4-2-2.html> and <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/1-4-2-9.html>, and the official data provided by the national Ministries websites. The table is published in S. Guerra (2010) 'Le elezioni europee in Polonia e Repubblica ceca', *Officina della Storia*, No. 2/2009.

**Figure 2. Likelihood to vote in the 2009 EP elections (April 2008)**



Data source: Special Eurobarometer 299 'Citizens and the 2009 European elections'.

Answers from 1 to 4 are recoded 'definitely not', answers from 5 to 7 are recoded as 'maybe' answers, and from 8 to 10 are recoded as 'definitely vote' in order to simplify the analysis.

**Table 2. The 2009 Polish EP elections**

Political party	2005 National parliamentary election (%)	2007 National parliamentary election (%)	2009 EP election (%)	Seats (2009 EP)	Seats (2004 EP)
Civic Platform	24.14	41.64	44.4	25	15
League of Polish Families	7.97	1.28	/	/	10
Law and Justice	26.99	32.04	27.4	15	7
Self-Defence	11.41	1.54	1.5	/	6
Democratic Left Alliance – Labour Union	11.31*	13.17	12.3	7	5
Freedom Union /Democrats 2005	2.45			/	4
Polish Peasant Party	6.96	8.83	7	3	4
Polish Social Democracy	3.98			/	3

Sources: [www.pkw.gov.pl](http://www.pkw.gov.pl) (Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza, Polish Electoral Commission) and [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/parliament/archive/elections2009/en/poland\\_en.html](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/parliament/archive/elections2009/en/poland_en.html) (European Parliament elections websites)

**Table 3. The 2009 Bulgarian EP elections**

Political party	2005 National parliamentary elections (%)	2009 National parliamentary elections (%)	2009 EP election (%)	Seats (2009 EP)	Seats (2007 EP)
Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB)	-	39.72	24.36	5	5 (GERB-BANU PU)
Coalition for Bulgaria (BSP)	34.17	17.70	18.5	4	5
Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS)	14.17	14.45	14.14	3	4
ATAKA	8.75	9.36	11.96	2	3
National Movement Simeon II/National Movement for Stability and Progress (NSDV)	22.08	3.02	7.96	2	1
The Blue Coalition (SDS-SDB)	-	6.76	7.95	2	-
Order, Law and Justice Party (RZS)	-	4.13	4.67	-	-

Source: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/parliament/archive/elections2009/en/bulgaria\\_en.html](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/parliament/archive/elections2009/en/bulgaria_en.html) (European Parliament elections website) and Savkova (2005).