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SUMMARY

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European Union Candidate Countries: 2003 Referenda Results

The Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia held public referenda from March through September 2003 on becoming members of the European Union (EU). These nine countries plus Cyprus are expected to accede to the EU in May 2004, bringing the EU's total membership to twenty-five. This report briefly analyzes the referenda results and implications. It will not be updated. For additional information see CRS Report RS21344, European Union Enlargement.

Background to the Referenda

The European Union is embarking on a major enlargement process that will expand the Union from fifteen to twenty-five members by mid-2004, and potentially more in the coming years. The current round of enlargement is notable for its size (which will expand the EU zone from 378 to over 450 million people) and inclusion of many former Communist bloc countries. Ten candidate countries—Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia—concluded accession negotiations in December 2002 and signed the Treaty of Accession on April 16, 2003 in Athens. Bulgaria and Romania aim to join the EU by 2007. Turkey is recognized as an EU candidate, and the countries of the western Balkans also seek eventual EU membership, although no target entry date has been identified for these states.

From March through September 2003, nine of the ten acceding countries held public referenda on joining the EU according to their own constitutional procedures (Cyprus did not hold a referendum but ratified the accession treaty through a parliamentary vote). While individual results varied, all of the referenda outcomes favored EU membership, paving the way for the acceding countries to become full members by May 1, 2004, and participate in the June 2004 elections for the European Parliament. The fifteen current EU member states as well as the European Parliament must also ratify the accession treaty (the European Parliament did so in April 2003).

Outcome Trends

Within a six-month period (March-September 2003), nine acceding countries held referenda on joining the EU. Opinion polling data in advance of the votes suggested that, on average, over a majority of the populations in the candidate countries would support EU accession. Polls also indicated that support for the EU had increased from earlier polls, as the prospect of joining the Union became more imminent.[1] This overall trend prevailed in the referenda outcomes, with most countries registering large majorities in favor of EU membership (see table, below).

Table 1. 2003 EU Referenda[a]

Date	Country	Yes %	[EU poll[b]] %	No %	Turnout %
Mar 8	Malta	53.6	[55]	46.4	91.0
Mar 23	Slovenia	89.2	[79]	10.3	60.3
Apr 12	Hungary	83.8	[71]	16.2	45.6
May 10-11	Lithuania	91.1	[75]	8.9	63.4
May 16-17	Slovakia	92.5	[70]	6.2	52.2

[1] Eurobarometer CC-EB 2003.2. Public Opinion in the Candidate Countries. June 2003. Available at http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/cceb_en.htm.

Date	Country	Yes %	[EU poll[b]] %	No %	Turnout %
Jun 7-8	Poland	77.5	[70]	22.6	58.9
Jun 13-14	Czech Rep.	77.3	[58]	22.7	55.2
Sept 14	Estonia	66.8	[41]	33.2	66.0
Sept 20	Latvia	66.9	[49]	32.4	72.5

Source: European Commission, data available at http://europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/negotiations/accession_process.htm.

Data note: In some countries, small percentages of votes cast were invalidated.

a. Cyprus did not hold a referendum, but parliament ratified accession treaty on July 14.

b. Spring 2003 Eurobarometer poll of 12,000 persons, % saying they would vote for EU membership in a referendum (see footnote 1).

Rather than outcome, the most uncertain factor in many of the candidate countries was voter turnout, since low participation levels threatened to invalidate the referenda in some countries, such as Poland. The perception that a positive outcome was a foregone conclusion fostered greater voter apathy in some countries. Governments heavily promoted the votes and made public relations efforts to redress common criticism about a lack of information and knowledge about the EU. Lithuania, Slovakia, Poland, and the Czech Republic held their referenda over two days in order to increase participation. On the other side, "Euroskeptics" on the political left and right implicitly or explicitly encouraged voter abstention, rather than a "no" vote, as a means to demonstrate opposition to the EU.[2] A result of this trend may have been to skew the results in support of EU membership to a greater extent than was reflected in public opinion polls in most countries, as reflected in the above table.

Some pre-referenda polling showed particularly low levels of support for EU membership in Estonia and Latvia, the final two countries to hold referenda. The anti-EU lobbies in those states raised concerns about the potential loss of national identity to Brussels and stoked popular resistance to foreign influence, stemming from Baltic experience under Soviet domination and occupation. Proponents of EU entry, above all the Estonian and Latvian governments, emphasized the economic growth potential with EU membership and warned of resurgent Russian influence, if their countries remained outside of the EU. Ethnic Russians comprise the largest minority groups in Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania, and the poorest of these groups generally opposed EU membership. However, in the end EU supporters outvoted opponents by wide margins. The Baltic governments hailed the results as a major step towards a "return to Europe."

[2] Quentin Peel, "Europe will not divide into old and new," *Financial Times*, May 13, 2003.

Implications

The EU-favorable outcomes of all of the referenda in the candidate countries fulfilled an important prerequisite for achieving their goal of joining the EU in 2004.[3] Beyond meeting this immediate objective, any broader consequence or significance of the referenda is difficult to measure. For example, while the successful votes provided a temporary boost to the governments of the candidate countries and vindicated their lengthy and often difficult accession negotiations with the EU, this victory may not translate into any lasting benefit in terms of domestic political support for the current candidate governments. Some governments—for example, in Poland and the Czech Republic—remain deeply unpopular for a variety of reasons and face strong domestic political opposition. Coalition infighting continues to threaten political stability in Latvia.

In addition, the large majorities that favored joining the EU may register different opinions on upcoming EU issues, some of which may require passage of additional referenda. The EU is currently considering a draft constitution, and some candidate governments have already voiced concerns about proposals to reduce the representation and influence of smaller EU member states.[4] In the coming years, new EU members will also be working toward joining the European Economic and Monetary Union and adopting the euro currency. Public support for these measures is by no means guaranteed and may present challenges in potential future referenda. Moreover, unrealistic expectations of immediate benefits from EU membership may sour public opinion on EU issues.

Analysis of the EU referenda may also inspire speculation on broader public opinion trends in the candidate countries. On the one hand, the imminence of EU entry may have increased public trust in the EU as an institution. Some analysis suggests that the trans-Atlantic rift over the 2003 war in Iraq may have fostered greater public confidence among the candidate countries in the EU than in the United States, and greater support for an independent EU foreign policy.[5] On the other hand, many of the candidate governments, led by Poland, have opted to contribute military forces to the U.S.-led stabilization effort in Iraq, in contrast to such EU members as France or Germany. Some candidate countries, especially those formerly under Soviet domination, generally still look to the United States for security. Many wish to develop a European defense identity but not at the expense of NATO. Their inclusion into the EU may provide new dimensions to the trans-Atlantic relationship in foreign policy and security issues.

[3] The new entrants will also need to implement multiple reform tasks, to be outlined by the European Commission in its next annual progress report on the candidate countries.

[4] For more information, see CRS Report RS21618, The European Union's Convention on the Future of Europe and Draft "Constitution," September 11, 2003.

[5] Eurobarometer, op. cit., p. 2.

Figure 1. Map of Europe

Source: [http://www.politicalresources.net/europe-map.gif]

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