

# Life and society in the EU candidate countries

## Introduction

Over the years, Eurofound's European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS) has developed into a valuable set of indicators that complement traditional indicators of economic growth and living standards, such as gross domestic product or income. The EQLS indicators provide a broad range of evidence that can contribute to monitoring and priority-setting for the candidate countries for European Union membership, which are expected to harmonise specific policies with those of the EU and implement reforms.

The five current EU candidate countries – Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey – were included in the 2016 wave of the EQLS, and information on changes over time is available for some, based on the previous survey rounds (2003, 2007 and 2011). This report reviews three broad areas – quality of life, quality of public services and quality of society – and covers indicators on:

- subjective well-being, standard of living, aspects of deprivation and the work-life balance
- healthcare, long-term care, childcare and other public services
- social insecurity, perceptions of social exclusion and societal tensions, trust in people and institutions, participation and community engagement, and involvement in training

The report consists of an introductory overview chapter and five country profiles.

## Policy context

The indicators on quality of life, quality of public services and quality of society help to bring the perspective of citizens into policy planning and outcome assessment. Where social indicators for the candidate countries are not available or fully comparable with the those of the EU, the survey data can be used instead to help gauge country differences and potential areas of interest for national policy.

The findings on quality of life, public services and society in this report are relevant both from a national perspective and in the context of the areas addressed in the EU enlargement process. They are also relevant in the broader context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which countries sometimes struggle to assess due to a lack of comprehensive monitoring measures.

The comparative perspective of the EQLS can help with understanding the medium-term developments in society as well as improving quality of life in both the EU and its partner countries.

## Key messages

- Levels of life satisfaction and happiness in the candidate countries continue to be at the lower end compared to the EU Member States.
- As in many countries, the level of happiness is higher than the level of life satisfaction. The gap between happiness and life satisfaction suggests that despite limited satisfaction with life, people may derive a certain amount of emotional fulfilment from family and social relationships.
- The candidate countries score below the EU28 average on several living conditions indicators including the extent of housing inadequacies, energy poverty and material deprivation. However, in areas such as the perceived quality of certain public services, the candidate countries appear at less of a disadvantage than some eastern European Member States, particularly in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis.
- In terms of demographic structure, some of the candidate countries have relatively young populations (especially Albania and Turkey) in comparison to most Member States. This is reflected in their relatively good performance on a number of health indicators, although these indicators are considerably lower for older groups.

- In general, people in the candidate countries are fairly optimistic about their future and particularly optimistic about the future of the next generations (except for Turkey), possibly due in part to the prospect of EU integration and the perceived benefits of being an EU Member State. However, demographic ageing and particular material hardships and deprivation should be recognised as they could challenge the current positive climate.
- Most candidate countries have considerable gaps between men and women in terms of the amount of domestic and care-related work they undertake. While the quality of care services is seen as higher than that of other public services, their availability may not be sufficient to have an effect on work–life balance deficiencies. Change in how work and life are organised may also depend on the types of jobs available and the economic profile of the country. However, countries do not appear to be preparing for such changes in advance as participation of adults in training, for either professional or other reasons, is low.
- Social cohesion comes under strain on a number of fronts. Certain groups report high levels of social exclusion as well as poor mental health; these include older age groups, people on low incomes and, in some cases, women. In addition, a relatively large proportion of people in some candidate countries report tensions between rich and poor and between management and workers. The estimates of income inequality captured by the EQLS are consistently higher in most candidate countries compared to national statistics. This finding could be an additional impetus to improve the measurement of such inequality and to the use of such measures in assessing policies designed to address inequality.
- There are relatively large differences between rural and urban areas in terms of both quality of life and the quality of public and local services. This is a particular challenge in the candidate countries as they have large rural populations. The EQLS 2016 specifically highlighted the lack of availability of recycling services for the rural population.
- Improving quality of life at local level – both rural and urban – in the candidate countries is likely to be complicated by the pattern of trust in national institutions. Unlike most Member States, where local authorities are trusted more than national institutions, local authorities do not have this relative advantage in the candidate countries.

#### Further information

The report *Life and society in the EU candidate countries* is available at <https://eurofound.link/ef18032>

Research manager: Tadas Leončikas

[information@eurofound.europa.eu](mailto:information@eurofound.europa.eu)