

Life Satisfaction of the new EU Members: Recent Trends and Future Prospects

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Based on the experience on previous enlargements, Delhey (2001) predicts that soon after join EU, most of countries will start to “catch up” with older members. A domain with expected significant changes is life satisfaction, an overall evaluation of one’s life, increasingly used as an indicator to guide social policy and to evaluate social change. This paper raises the question of how the enlargement affects the life satisfaction of the citizens. It focuses on eleven post-communist countries that already joined or are expected to join soon EU (including former East Germany). It compares life satisfaction levels around and after the date of the enlargement (2001-2005), evaluates recent trends and predicts further changes. Main data sources used were Candidate Countries Eurobarometer (2001-2004), and Eurobarometers 63 and 64.

Overall, citizens of new member states show a lower level of life satisfaction than those who were there in the first place, but countries like Slovenia and Czech Republic have already similar levels with mean of EU15. Based on 2001-2005 trends, it was predicted that Poland, Eastern Germany) and Baltic countries would catch-up the EU15 group of countries with average performances sooner than Greece and Portugal. Romania and Bulgaria, still waiting to join EU, are struggling at the bottom, with no optimistic prospects concerning life satisfaction.

Key words: subjective well-being, transition studies, social indicators, post-communism, social consequences of EU enlargement.

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Introduction

After the fall of the communism, Eastern European states entered in a complex transition to the market economy and democratic governance. The transition process was long and difficult, and only recently brought, in some countries, positive outcomes. It started, nevertheless, with much disorganization in these countries, affecting on a large scale the disadvantaged groups, transforming privileged or rather well-off groups in losers of transition. The hope of a “happy ending” was only alimented by the long process of preparation to join EU. Some of these states managed to join in 2004, others are still waiting. Now that they try to accommodate with the status of new member of EU, the population expectancies raises again. The next objective is the catching-up with older members.

This paper is about the effects of socio-economic transition. It focuses not on the process itself, but on the subjective outcomes that arise from this progression. It uses life satisfaction, an overall evaluation of one’s life, used more and more often as an indicator to guide social policy and to evaluate social change (Heylighen and Bernheim 2000; Veenhoven 2002). This measure gives a global assessment of how socioeconomic changes affect average people, filtered through their attitudes and experiences.

How the enlargement affects the life satisfaction of the citizens? To answer this question, the focus is on eleven post-communist countries that already joined or are expected to join soon EU (including former East Germany). Comparing life satisfaction around the date of the enlargement (2001-2005), it evaluates recent trends and predicts further changes.

Why this kind of analysis would be relevant for those who study the transition? The answer is twofold. Firstly, the main focus on evaluating transition was on economic indicators. Even when transition hurt most, the economists insisted that the macroeconomic adjustments should be followed without hesitation or sorrows for those most affected. Today, retrospectively, some of them are complaining about the lack of importance given in this process to the discomfort caused to the general public (Stiglitz, 2002). Instead, life satisfaction gives another angle of view on peoples and on how their needs are met in this process. The second argument is also promoted by with those who are arguing that subjective indicators should be used to evaluate social policies (see, for example, a review by Veenhoven, 2002), and maintain that economic indicators give as only a limited account of the progress of a society. The latter indicators do not include measures of “collateral damages” that a developing economy brings to the physical and social environment. That is why supportability of economic policies is rarely a matter of debate. Subjective indicators as life satisfaction take into account a large sphere of socio-economic conditions, some of them impossible to reach with objective measures. If objective and subjective measures clearly diverge on a large time span, it is a sign that something important was left behind in the process. Moreover, life satisfaction is, among other measures, an indicator of the popular support for transition policies. A dissatisfied population is hardly a good resource for convergence policies.

New member’s prospects for catching-up

Delhey (2001) begins his account of the perspectives of catching up of the new member states by reviewing the overoptimistic and the pessimistic expectation of scholars. The optimists argue that, beginning with their candidate status, the more advances post-communist countries will undergo a large-scale and steady economic growth that will bring them to the levels of least prosperous EU member states, and that the “[o]ther post-communist countries will follow” (Rose 1999, cited by Delhey, 2001). The pessimistic view is that, in absence of a master plan from the EU, the discrepancies between Western and Eastern parts of the continent “could grow rather than diminish” (Mencinger 1999, cited by Delhey, 2001). This last opinion seems to be substantiated by some recent approaches. Bornschier, Herkenrath and Ziltener (2004), for example, concludes that the chances for convergence of the new members

would depend on the decisions about the future EU transfer system. They found that EU countries grew faster in the 1980s and 1990s due to transfers within the community. The main gainers have been the poorer EU countries, which experienced faster economic convergence.

How far the scholars envisaging the moment in which the new EU member states would catch-up? In what concerns Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland, based on differences in per-capita GDP, Brüggemann and Trenkler (2005) found that Czech Republic and Hungary are converging towards the Mediterranean group, while only Czech Republic is converging towards EU15. The estimated time for convergence would be of about 20 years. Using a simple extrapolation based of diverse socio-economic indicators, Habich (2005) estimate that for a country like Romania this process would take at least 50 years.

However, the analysis of convergence developments in the new Member States is constrained by the fact that the time series for social and economic indicators are only available for a short time, usually since the beginning of the nineties. This does not help too much the estimation of convergence or divergence, for example, since this requires time series over a much longer period (Commission of the European Communities. 2004). In fact, the available time span is even smaller for some indicators. With respect to life satisfaction, for example, most data series for the transition countries were V-shaped, with a minimum in 1996-1997, supposedly coinciding with or close to the time when transition crisis hurt most. Only recently national averages seem to return to the levels from the early nineties. On the other hand, simple extrapolations are rather futile, because they cannot account for the expected dynamic and cumulative effects of development in these countries.

An alternative is to extrapolate the experience of the late comers in the EU15: Ireland, Greece, Portugal, and Spain. What Delhey (2001) concluded is that process of catching-up is differential. For example, only Greece could not reduce the gap in capita GDP, while others have done this successfully. In case of social expenditures, the gap was reduced in a higher degree by all countries. Only life satisfaction shows, by his computations, no sign of convergence with older members. The author use for this an explanation based on culture, which may not look very trustfully: there is, he argue, a national character that determines the set-point for life satisfaction. This kind of explanation should only be proposed legitimately after all other accounts, based on socio-economic situation, were used. We could use as well the explanation that peoples adapt to their circumstances (Brickman and Campbell 1971), and that causes the national levels of life satisfaction to vary only slightly even after important socio-economic changes. Nevertheless, we should look not only at economic, but also at social and political indicators to explain why life satisfaction in those countries did not change significantly after joining EU.

Anyway, the same author concludes that “although circumstances of enlargements differ from past enlargements [...], one can reasonably argue that at least in the long run, joining the club will be advantageous in several respects” (Delhey 2001, p. 222).

Subjective well-being as an indicator of social change

Subjective well-being is defined as the way peoples evaluate their lives globally (Andrews and Robinson 1991; Diener 1994), and has both cognitive and (*life satisfaction*) and affective dimension (*happiness, positive & negative affect*). It is supposed that there is a general feeling of satisfaction, that peoples are aware of it, and that it could be measured (Schwartz and Strack 1999). Various personal and societal factors are combining in this global evaluation of one's life, and authors opinions are diverging on the importance given to such factors. They are alternatively focusing on the genetic and environmental factors. Stones (1991), for example, suggest that happiness is a psychological trait. Thus, individual differences in subjective well-being are more important in influencing happiness levels and explain greater variance than situational effects (Costa, McCrae, and Zonderman 1987). A

corollary at national level is formulated in the culture theory, which implies the existence of a national character that frames global evaluations of people's lives (Diener and Lucas 2000). A strong support for the opposite statelike theory is given by Veenhoven (1994) who argues that subjective well-being "is quite stable for the short term, but not in the long run, neither relatively nor absolutely". This implies that socio-economical conditions are the most important factor that influences subjective well-being. This approach is also known as the *livability theory*. Its principal proponent, Veenhoven (2000), infers that a person is happy when offers of society are qualitative and requests are reasonable. A third theory is called of "relative standards", implying that evaluation of one's life is influenced by a different kind of comparisons with social environment. In a very influential theory, Michalos (1985) propose that satisfaction with different life domain are influenced by a diversity of intra- and inter-personal comparisons, like one's past standing or aspirations (*multiple discrepancies*). Each of these theories has a relative empirical support so they are deemed to coexist (Diener and Lucas 2000).

Campbell and Converse (1972) argued among the first that the monitoring of social-psychological states (attitudes and feelings in which he includes life satisfaction and happiness) of the population leads to the understanding of social change. In order to be used for such a purpose, extensive researches were dedicated to the stability and reliability of subjective well-being (Cummins 2003; Diener 2004; Fahey 2004; Veenhoven, 2002). Veenhoven, for example, gives five reasons for using subjective indicators for social policies:

1. Social policy is also a matter of mentality.
2. Often subjective measures are better to evaluate progress.
3. Satisfaction measures have a comprehensive quality compared with objective sum-scores.
4. Policy makers need additional information from the public to be informed.
5. Subjective indicators like satisfaction and happiness are measuring the gratification of people's real 'needs', not only 'wants' that can be measured by opinion polls (Veenhoven 2002).

As a result of these efforts, we may consistently use this personal evaluation at societal level as an account of societal conditions filtered by personal experience of individuals.

What we know about subjective well-being in post-communist transition

There are not many description of the subjective quality of life in post-communist transition. This is caused by an unfortunate conjuncture where little emphasis was given to subjective feelings in the process of transformation. The transition was usually conducted by economists, and some important exponents of them are now retrospectively complaining about the lack of importance given in this process to the discomfort caused to the general public (Stiglitz 2002). Another reason, perhaps, is the lack of a powerful infrastructure for social research and lack of specialists in this particularly domain of the study. Some countries (Hungary, Russia, and Romania) produced subjective well-being data early in the nineties. International surveys data are also available, but with rare exceptions they only include a single overall measure of life satisfaction, not allowing the structure of life satisfaction in these countries to be revealed.

It is well known that levels of subjective well-being are almost the lowest in these countries. In an attempt to validate these data using economic indicators, Veenhoven (2001) concludes: "It appears that the Russians are as unhappy as they say they are, and that they have good reasons to be so. The current unhappiness is not due to the Russian national character, but has more to do with the troublesome transitions taking place in Russian society" (p. 128). This seems to apply to many, if not all former socialist countries.

There is no global evaluation of the subjective well-being trends in these societies after the fall of the communism, but only several case studies. The most documented is the

transformation that took place in Russia (Saris and Andreenkova 2001; Veenhoven 2001; Zavisca and Hout 2005), that acknowledged a steady decline after the fall of the communism, at least before 1998, when satisfaction levels seem to slightly recover (Frijters, Geiskecker, Haisken-DeNew, and Shields 2005; Zavisca and Hout 2005). This was, no doubt, closely correlated with the deterioration of the living conditions after the fall of the communism. The same model was documented in and Hungary (Orsolya 2002) and Romania (Bălțătescu 2001, 2004). Even in countries marked by an increase in GDP after nineties, like East Germany, the same decline appears, and is supposedly caused by other economic factors like the increase in unemployment and inequality levels (Yuan and Brockmann 2005).

Life satisfaction after nineties in European post-communist states

Unfortunately, until 2001, in only few of the now new member and accession countries yearly measures of life satisfaction are available, as in the case of older members. Unlike Standard Eurobarometer, neither the Central and Eastern Eurobarometers nor the New Democracies Barometer included a life satisfaction question. The only approach for comparing trends in these countries was to use questions from different surveys, standardized by linear transformations, in a method recommended by Veenhoven (1993). I argued elsewhere that this method implies a certain degree of error (Bălțătescu forthcoming). Nevertheless, the values obtained by these transformations can be interpreted as a rough approximation of the country variations in life satisfaction. The data were extracted from World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2006), and included only life satisfaction measures cited by the same author (from 4-step single satisfaction scale to 10-step single satisfaction scales). In cases where several measures were available for some years, I took the mean of all measures. The results are presented in Figure 1.

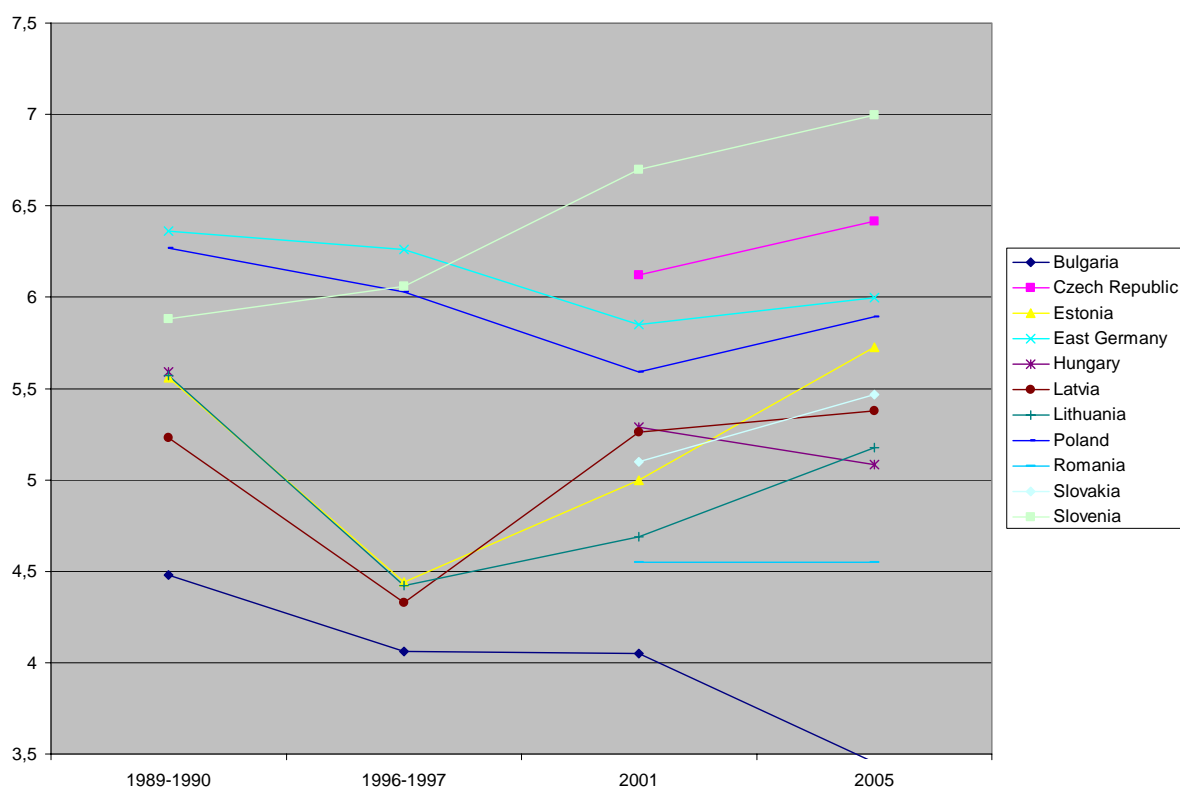


Figure 1. Life satisfaction in new member and accession states, former post-communist, 1989-2005, on a scale from 0 to 10. Source: World Database of Happiness, CCEB 2005, Eurobarometers 63-64, personal calculation.

As we can see also from Table 1, European post-communist countries had different experiences with respect with overall life satisfaction. In the upper part of the ranking stays Slovenia with an impressive increasing (19% from 1989-1990) that brought her in the position of the leader of the group. On the other hand, Bulgaria, with the highest decrease (22.9% compared 1989-1990), detached herself as the lowest achiever from the whole group. In the higher part of the ranking are also staying East Germany and Poland, that experienced rather a decrease from 1989-1990 (around 6 percents). The steep decline stopped around 2001, and they begin to recover the loss. It is remarkable that almost all countries only very recently reached again the levels from the beginning of the transition. Baltic countries experienced steep declines until 1996-1997, but they seem to recover at the fastest pace. Their life satisfaction increase between 1996-1997 and 2006 with a percent of 17-29%, but they still have similar levels compared to 1989-1990, as Table 1 shows.

	increase from 1989-1990	increase from 1996-1997	increase from 2001
Bulgaria	-22,9%	-15,0%	-14,8%
Hungary	-9,1%	n.a.	-3,9%
Romania	n.a.	n.a.	0,0%
Latvia	2,8%	24,2%	2,2%
East Germany	-5,7%	-4,2%	2,5%
Slovenia	19,0%	15,5%	4,5%
Czech Republic	n.a.	n.a.	4,8%
Poland	-6,0%	-2,3%	5,4%
Slovakia	n.a.	n.a.	7,2%
Lithuania	-7,1%	17,1%	10,4%
Estonia	3,0%	29,0%	14,6%

Table 1. Variations in percents in 2005 for each new member and candicountry from 1989-1990, 1996-1997, and 2001. Source: World Database of Happiness, CCEB 2001, Eurobarometers 63- 64, personal calculation.

The rankings of the countries did not change very much in the process of transition. Slovenia, that had even from the beginning a significant increase in mean levels, is rather an exception. For the countries situated in the middle of this ranking, changes would be not so easy to evaluate, because the differences of their levels did not reach the statistical significance threshold.

Development around the date of accession

Let see now the recent experiences that new members and accession countries had around the 2004 moment. For this purpose, data from the Candidate Countries Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2001-2005), and recently from Eurobarometers 63 and 64 (European Commission, 2005a, 2005b), issued by Directorate General Press and Communication can be used. These are surveys with a representative sample of over 1.000 subjects in each country, for a population over 15 years. They are using the following scale for life satisfaction:

„On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the life you lead?

- Very satisfied
- Fairly satisfied
- Not very satisfied
- Not at all satisfied”

Country means were linearly transformed to a 0-10 scale. The variations in life satisfaction between 2001 and 2005 are shown in Figure 2.

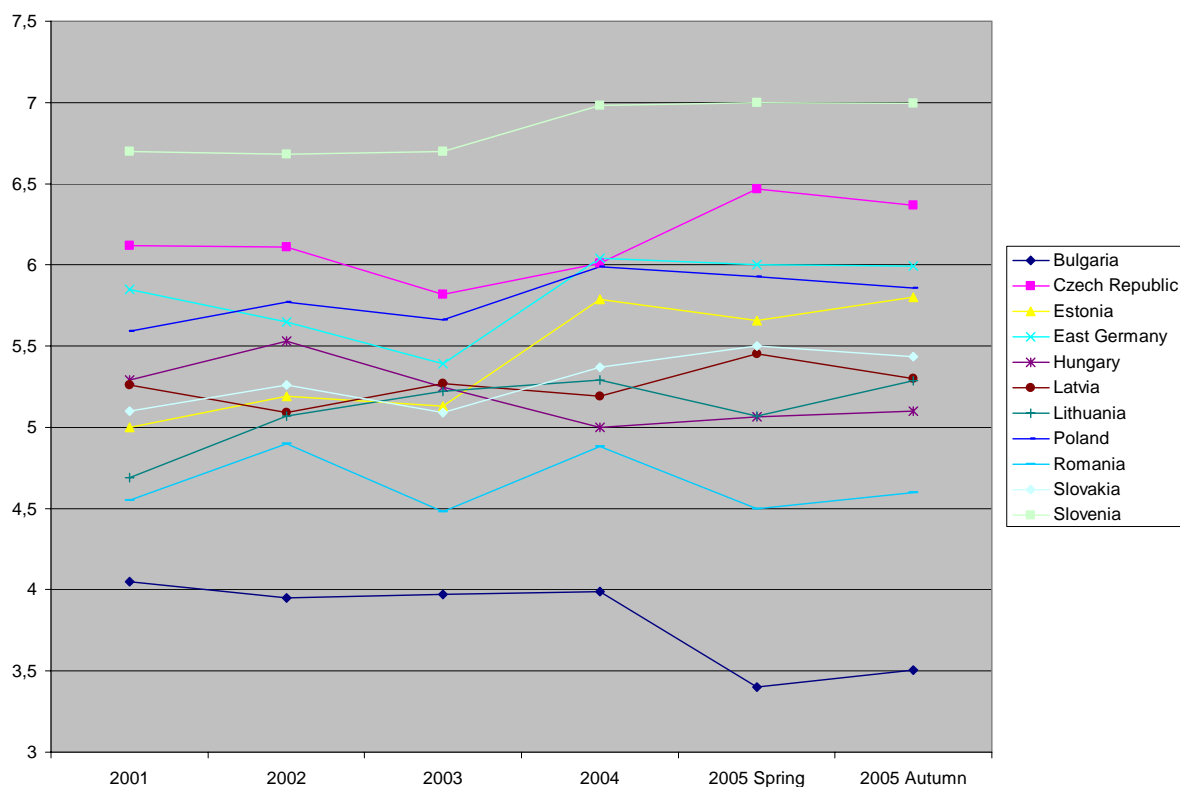


Figure 2. Life satisfaction in new member and accession states, former post-communist, 2001-2005, on a scale from 0 to 10. Source: CCEB 2001-2005, Eurobarometers 63-64, personal calculation.

The highest levels are found in Slovenia (above 6.5, reaching 7 on a scale from 0 to 10). Czech Republic follows, with a final level of about 6.5. At the bottom of ranking, the accession countries: Romania (with a stagnant trend around 4.5-5) and way below Bulgaria (stagnant also until 2004, but decreasing in 2005 to a level of 3.5), are struggling below the median line. Not far above this line, follow the rest of countries with undistinguishable trends. In order to clarify the behavior of these countries, they were classified in three groups, based on their regional position and behavior with respect with the studied variable:

- Central European – high achievers: Czech Republic, East Germany and Poland
- Baltic countries: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania
- Central European – low achievers: Slovakia and Hungary.

As Figure 3 shows, this categorization resulted in a clarification of the trends and positions of these countries.

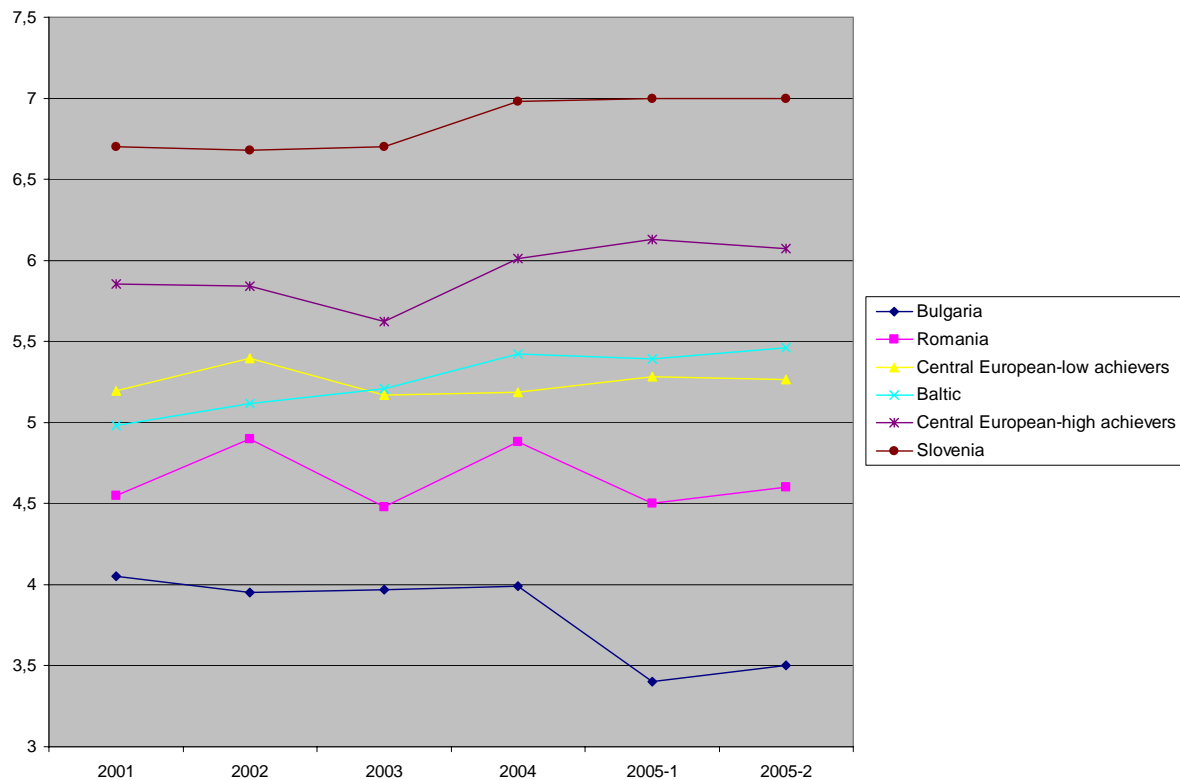


Figure 3. Life satisfaction in new member and accession states (some grouped in clusters), former post-communist, 2001-2005, on a scale from 0 to 10. Source: CCEB 2001-2005, Eurobarometers 63-64, personal calculation.

This categorization seems to clearly differentiate between two groups of countries:

1. Those in upper positions, who undergone also increase in the last five years: Slovenia, Central European – high achievers (Czech Republic, East Germany, and Poland that raised above 6 on a scale of 0 to 10), and Baltic countries, who almost reached 5.5 points and also have an upper trend. These are what we could call now the “advanced new members”.
2. Those in lower positions, with stagnant levels: Central European – low achievers (Hungary and Slovakia), Romania and Bulgaria.

The developments in the first group seem to be most optimistic. They increases in five years little less than five percents (Baltic countries with 9 percents!), and have the most chances to catch-up with the rest of countries (if they didn't done that already). It is important to observe that Baltic countries managed to raise themselves above the median line and also switched places with low achievers Central European countries Hungary and Slovakia. For this last group, and also for the candidate countries Bulgaria and Romania, the time to sit in block-starts of catching-up race, at least from the point of view of life satisfaction, did not seem to come yet.

Life satisfaction in EU15 countries

In order to see how the perspectives of these new members are, we should take a look on the life satisfaction in older EU members.

As data from World Database of Happiness show, countries from EU8 had relative stable levels between 1973 and 2001. In this paper I was interested by the recent trends in life satisfaction in EU15 countries. Figure 4 represents mean levels of life satisfaction in EU15 between 2001 and 2005.

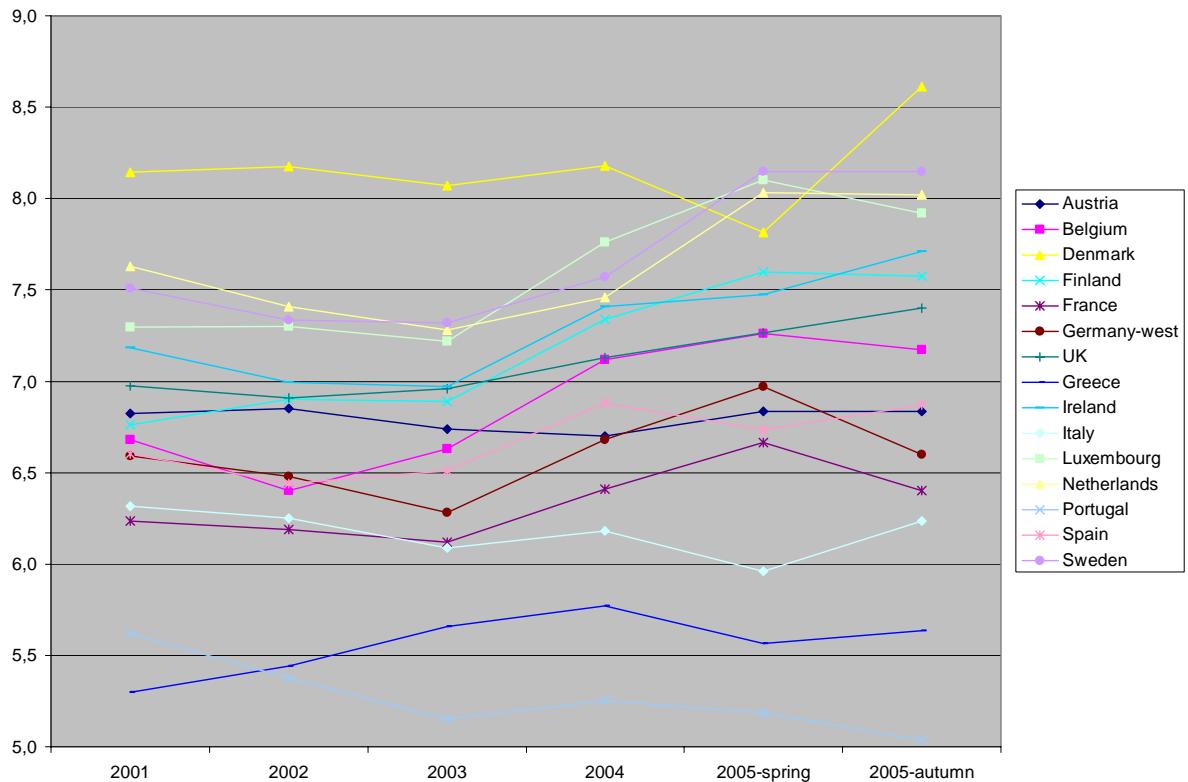


Figure 4. Life satisfaction in EU15 states 2001-2005, on a scale from 0 to 10. Source: World Database of Happiness, Eurobarometers, personal calculation.

EU15 countries are stratified in regard with life satisfaction. First comes Denmark, with levels around 8-8.5, followed by other Northern countries like Sweden, Finland, and also by high achievers like Netherlands and Luxembourg that are close to 8 out of 10. The levels displayed by these countries seem also to grow over this time span. On the other end of the ranking, Greece and Portugal, rather distinct from other countries, seem to struggle with no clear increasing trend, around 5.5. An important observation is that the order in the GDP per capita does not apply in the case of Spain, the other Mediterranean country with unexpectedly higher levels, close to Central European countries like Austria. In the middle are situated a diverse array of countries: UK, Ireland, and other countries from the Centre and Southern part of the continent: Austria, France, and Italy

Comparing life satisfaction levels and trends in EU15, the New Member States and the accession countries

In order to significantly compare the older and the newer members of European Union, a clustering was necessary. This was realized with regard with performances in life satisfaction only.

- EU15-high achievers: Denmark, Sweden, Netherlands, and Luxembourg, Ireland and Finland
- EU15-medium achievers: UK, Belgium, Spain, Austria, Germany-west, France, and Italy
- Low achievers: Greece and Portugal.

These clusters of countries were compared with New Member States and the accession countries, already grouped in clusters. The results were shown in figure 5.

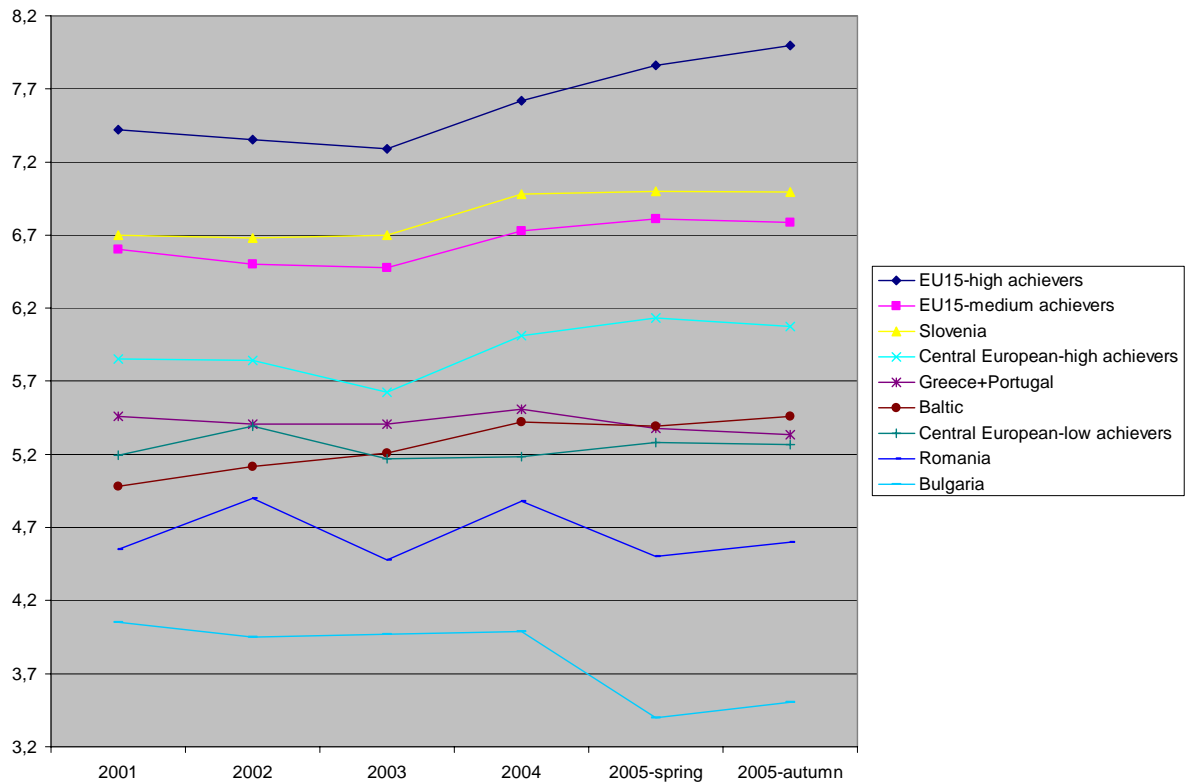


Figure 5. Life satisfaction in European Union by clusters of states. 2001-2005, on a scale from 0 to 10. Source: CCEB 2001-2005, World Database of Happiness, Eurobarometers, personal calculation.

EU15-high achievers come first, with highest means, above 8 of 10. Not all the new members situate themselves, as the GDP per capita and other social and economic indicators would predict, under the older members regarding to life satisfaction. Thus, Slovenia follows, the highest in rank levels among the new members, just above the medium EU15 achievers, with similar levels (around 7) and trends with the latter group. The high achievers among group of new members from Central Europe follow at a distance of one point. Comparable with the last countries in EU, Greece and Portugal, around 5.5 points, are the low achievers among new members and the Baltic countries, but the latter have an increasing trend. Distanced, both from other countries and between themselves are situated the accession countries, Romania, stagnant around 4.7, and Bulgaria, with a decreasing trend below 3.7.

A first observation, when seeing these trends, is that there is a diversity of life satisfaction levels throughout European Union, the highest and the lowest achievers span on an interval of 3 points out of 10. When adding the accession countries Romania and Bulgaria, this interval become close to 5. This gap seems not to narrow but rather to enlarge with the accession of the next states, Romania and Bulgaria. This means that convergence policies are even more necessary, and should be intensified now after the EU enlargement.

A second observation is that groups of countries have upward, stagnant and even downward trends in the years around the new enlargement. Table 2 shows the evolution of life satisfaction between 2001 and 2005.

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005-spring	2005-autumn	% difference from 2003	% difference from 2001
EU15-high achievers	7,4	7,4	7,3	7,6	7,9	8,0	9,7%	7,8%
Slovenia	6,7	6,7	6,7	7,0	7,0	7,0	4,4%	4,4%
EU15-medium achievers	6,6	6,5	6,5	6,7	6,8	6,8	4,8%	2,8%
Central European-high achievers	5,9	5,8	5,6	6,0	6,1	6,1	8,0%	3,8%
Greece+Portugal	5,5	5,4	5,4	5,5	5,4	5,3	-1,3%	-2,3%
Baltic	5,0	5,1	5,2	5,4	5,4	5,5	4,9%	9,6%
Central European-low achievers	5,2	5,4	5,2	5,2	5,3	5,3	1,9%	1,4%
Romania	4,6	4,9	4,5	4,9	4,5	4,6	2,7%	1,1%
Bulgaria	4,1	4,0	4,0	4,0	3,4	3,5	-11,8%	-13,5%

Table 2. Life satisfaction in European Union and accession states by clusters of states, 2001-2005, on a scale from 0 to 10, and variation of mean levels between 2001 and 2005. Source: CCEB 2001-2005, personal calculation.

As it can be seen, highest upward trend is characteristic to the Baltic countries (with almost 10%), but the best situated countries in EU15 have a similar increase (7.8%). Slovenia and the high achievers among the Central European new members have also good trends, around 4% (that is, a percent each year). EU15-medium achievers benefit only from an increase below 3%, while the evolution in Slovakia, Hungary and Romania are rather stagnant. The lowest achievers in EU15, Portugal and Greece, have a slight downward trend, and in the case of Bulgaria this looks like a fall. This different behavior of mean life satisfaction in these clusters of countries invites us to evaluate prospects on catching-up in life satisfaction, at least for the advanced new members.

Prospects for catching-up by the advanced new EU members

In his description on catching-up perspectives, Delhey (2001) argue that the new members from the previous EU enlargements showed no sign of convergence with older members with respect with life satisfaction. There was, he infers, a short initial increase followed caused by an initial “feel-good factor”, then return to the low pre-accession satisfaction levels. This view does not hold when we look at the mean levels in last 15 years, as showed in Figure 4. Ireland, in the first place, is situated among EU15 countries with highest levels, and Spain among the medium achievers, between Belgium and Austria. Only Portugal and Greece still need to catch-up, and, indeed, their perspectives are not so optimistic.

2006 is to close from enlargement date to test the “feel-good factor” thesis. I tried, nevertheless, to compare differences between 2005 and 2001 with those from 2005 to 2003 for the new members. The results are inconclusive, as Table 2 shows. Slovenia, Slovakia, Hungary and Bulgaria have similar levels, while better-off Central European countries and Baltic countries switch between the first and second place.

Only a half of new members and accession countries the group seems to be in a position to start catching-up with older EU members. Slovenia already raised itself to one of the highest levels in EU25, while Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria show no sign of positive trend. We will see how the rest of the countries stand in comparison with EU15 countries and we will estimate, by a simple procedure, the prospected time of catch-up. Firstly, the variation of the gap between 2001 and 2005 with EU15 – high achievers and Italy,

which has the lowest level among the latter group of countries, was computed. This gap has reduced for Central European-high achievers, and also Baltic countries, but deepened for Greece and Portugal. Based on this evaluation, I estimate the annual reduction in percents, and the time when catch-up will take place. This last indicator varies between 10 (with Italy) and 83 years (with the average of the group) for Central European-high achievers, and between 6 (with Italy) and 22 years (with the average of the group) for Baltic countries. Thus, these more advanced countries from the new members seem to have far better prospects for life satisfaction catching-up than Greece and Portugal. Results are showed in Table 3.

	Central European-high achievers	Greece+Portugal	Baltic countries
Variation of the gap with EU15 – high achievers between 2001 and 2005	0,95	1,27	0,82
% yearly decrease of the gap with EU15 – high achievers	1,20%	-6,77%	4,56%
Estimated years of catching-up with EU15 – high achievers	83	n.a.	22
Variation of the gap with Italy between 2001 and 2005	0,35	1,05	0,58
% yearly decrease of the gap with Italy	16,31%	-1,31%	10,52%
Estimated years of catching-up with Italy	6	n.a.	10

Table 3. Variation of the gap, % yearly decrease, and of the gap with EU15 – medium achievers and Italy, and estimated years of catching-up with these countries. Estimation using trends between 2001 and 2005. Source: World Database of Happiness, CCEB 2001-2005, Eurobarometers 63 and 64, personal calculation.

Conclusions and limitations

This paper tried to assess the subjective outcomes of socio-economic transformation and EU integration in eleven new member states, former socialist (including Eastern Germany). The focus was on life satisfaction, the overall cognitive evaluation of one's life. In these societies, trends were U-shaped after nineties, with a minimum around 1996-1997, when presumably transition crisis affected most of their citizens. Differences between the countries were largely maintained throughout transition. Only Slovenia, the leader of the group, and the Baltic countries manage to increase in ranking. While the levels for Eastern European countries were highly correlated with development indicators like GDP per capita, most of them have at least equal life satisfaction levels comparing with the least well-off countries from the former enlargement – Greece and Portugal. Moreover, Slovenia is close to countries with highest levels in Europe. There may be two explanations for this: that the new members' societies are more livable than the economic indicators would suggest (for example, they have more secure workplaces or more social cohesion), or that the aspirations of their members are not as high as in EU15.

An important part of the paper was dedicated to assessing prospects of catch-up with respect to life satisfaction. This enterprise is risky even for economists, which have better time series, giving the non-linear character of the post-accession development. A rough estimation was considered to be utile. Based on data collected between 2001 and 2005, it seems that only some of the new members or accession countries can actually catch-up, because one already done it (Slovenia), and the trends for Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria are not so encouraging. The group who could really catch-up, comprising the best-off Central European countries (Czech Republic, Poland, Eastern Germany) and Baltic countries looks to have more optimistic perspectives than Greece and Portugal. The subjective well-being levels of their citizens would converge in a decade with Italy, although the catching-up with the whole group of EU15 countries with medium performances would take between 20 and 80 years.

The present paper gave a closer look to the evolutions of life satisfaction around the date of 2004 EU enlargement, in the context of the variation of the subjective well-being in the transition process. It contained also a first attempt to model the process of catching-up in life satisfaction by the new members and accession countries, and to estimate time of convergence.

However, the scarcity of the data clearly limits of this kind of approach. A larger measured time-span would be needed for such a forecasting. Economic prognoses should be also taken into consideration, along with important resources public optimism. The experience of former acceding countries must be deeply studied, in order that the process of catch-up to be more accurately modeled.

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