

EU Enlargement and Public Opinion in Bulgaria

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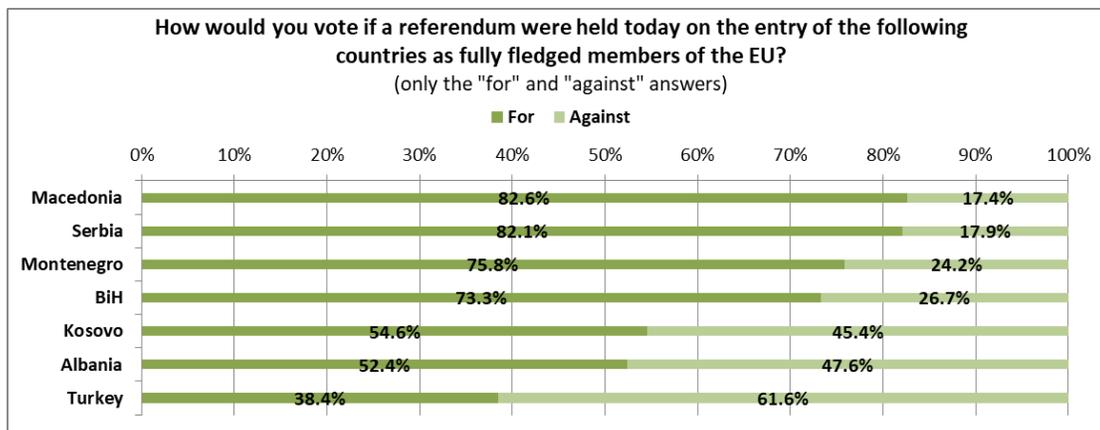
The majority of Bulgarian citizens would support the accession of the Western Balkans to the EU, but not that of Turkey, if a referendum were held on the issue in the spring of 2018. This is shown by the data of a nationally representative public opinion survey by the Open Society Institute – Sofia conducted in April 2018, which included a question on attitudes in Bulgaria in regard to the process of EU enlargement.¹

According to the survey, among the Western Balkan countries Macedonia would receive the strongest support² as it gathers the approval of nearly 83% of respondents who have an opinion on the issue, followed by Serbia with a support by nearly 82% and Montenegro would have 76% support. The membership of Bosnia and Herzegovina would be supported by over 73%, of Kosovo – nearly 55% and of Albania – 52.4%. Support to Turkey’s candidacy is expressed by just over 38% of those with an opinion on the issue.³

¹ The data is from a nationally representative survey of public opinion, conducted among the population over 18 years old in April 2018 using the face to face method with standardized questionnaire. The sample is probabilistic two-stage cluster. The maximum permissible error is $\pm 2.85\%$. The survey is conducted and financed by the Open Society Institute – Sofia.

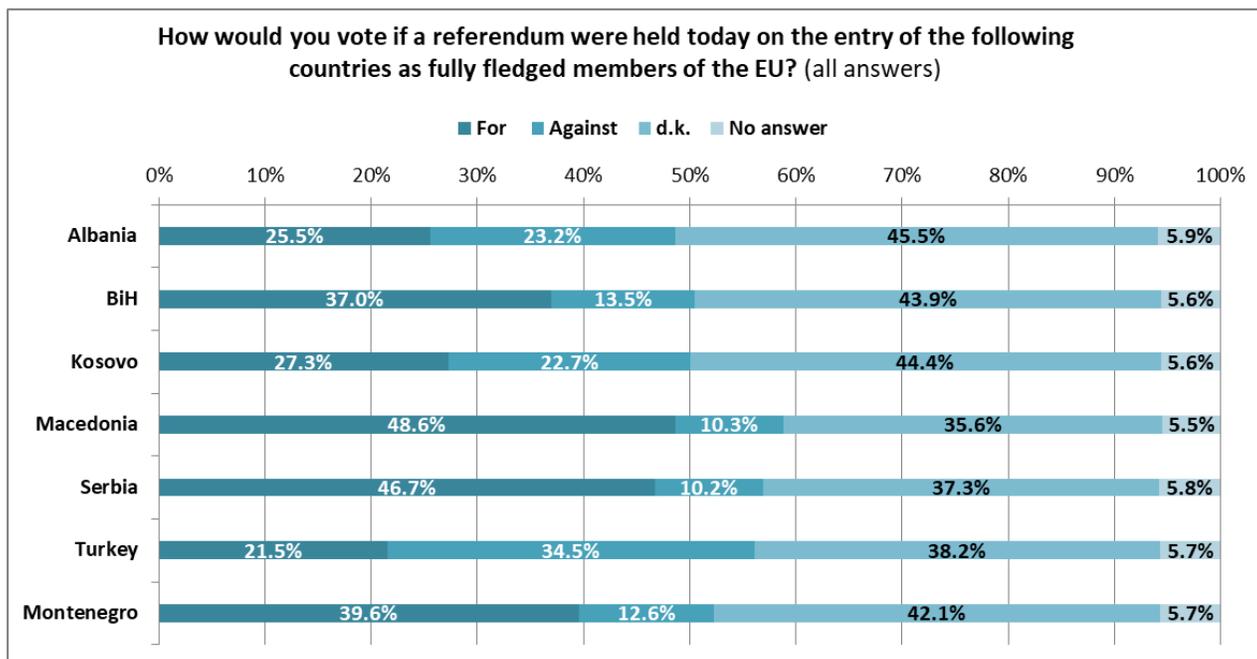
² In this case, only the hypothetically valid answers in a referendum are considered, which includes only the “for” and “against” without the rest of the options – “don’t know” and those who did not answer at all. The results with all answers are presented below in the text.

³ The current survey includes also for comparison Iceland, which was negotiating for EU membership until 2013 and officially ended its candidacy in 2015, though later on deliberated the opportunity to renew negotiations. A hypothetical candidacy of Iceland receives the highest support by Bulgarian citizens with nearly 87% “for” and about only 13% “against” of those who expressed their opinion in the 2018 survey.



Turkey’s membership bid would receive the strongest opposition with about 62% share of “against”⁴ of those who of respondents who has an opinion, followed by Albania with nearly 48% and Kosovo with over 45%. Slightly over one quarter of those who expressed an opinion – 26.7% would be against the accession of BiH to the EU and 24.2% would be against the membership of Montenegro. Serbia’s membership would receive disapproval by 18% and that of Macedonia by 17.4% of those who answered.

The survey included questions for all candidate and potential candidate countries – the Western Balkan countries and Turkey. The question was formulated as “How would you vote if a referendum were held today on the entry of the following countries as fully-fledged members of the EU?” and the possible answers were: “for”, “against”, “don’t know” and the table shows the share of those who did not provide any answer.

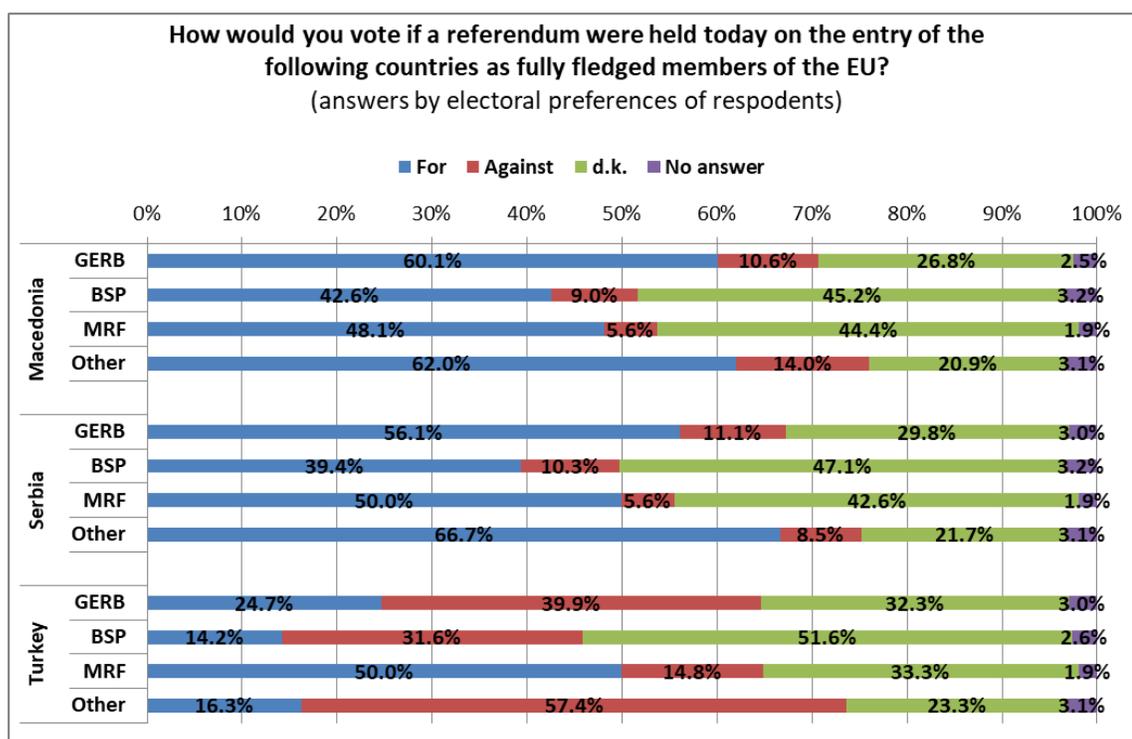


⁴ Please, refer to footnote 2 above.

When all possible answers are taken into consideration in regard to possible EU membership of the Western Balkans and Turkey, the candidacy of Macedonia receives the highest support with nearly 49% of all respondents with just 10% disapproval, and Serbia has the support of about 47% of those who took part in the survey with about 10% disapproval. The question of the membership of Montenegro in the EU receives the approval of close to 40% with 13% disapproval, of BiH – 37% support and about 14% disapproval, Albania – 25.5% “for” and 23% “against”, Kosovo – 27.3% “for” and 22.7% “against”. The question for Turkey’s candidacy receives 21.5% answers “for” and 34.5% answers “against” and it is the only case with higher disapproval than approval.

When all possible answers are considered, between 41% and 51% of respondents did not have an opinion or did not answer at all. The highest level of uncertainty is registered in the cases of Albania, BiH and Kosovo – about 50% and the lowest level – in the case of Macedonia with 41% of respondents, who did not have an opinion or did not answer.

In regard to political preferences, it is interesting to note that the highest support to the membership of Macedonia and Serbia is registered among the voters of the smaller parties (i.e. those beside GERB, BSP and MRF) – respectively 62% for Macedonia and close to 67% for Serbia, followed by the GERB supporters – respectively 60% and 56%, and MRF supporters – respectively 48% and 50%. The comparatively lowest support is registered among BSP supporters – 43% for Macedonia and 39% for Serbia. BSP supporters are not against the membership of Bulgaria’s neighbors, but have the highest share of people with no opinion on the issue – 45% and 47% respectively said they don’t know.



Turkey's membership bid receives the highest support among MRF voters – 50% of them say they are “for” it – but there is also a high level of uncertainty among them – over one third of MRF supporters do not have opinion on the question of Turkey's accession to the EU. There is considerable split within GERB supporters in regard to Turkey as close to one quarter would vote in favor of Turkey's membership bid, but 40% would reject it. It is interesting to note that there is hesitation among BSP supporters too in regard to Turkey as nearly half of them don't have opinion, one third would reject it and only 14% would support it. Among the supporters of small parties only 16% would vote for Turkey's membership bid and over 57% would reject it.

There are no substantial differences in regard to the demographic characteristics of respondents with just few exceptions. For example, in regard to the questions of membership of Macedonia and Serbia, the biggest support is registered among people between 45-59 years old with respectively over 56% and 55%, followed by those between 18-29 years old with respectively 48% and 50% and this group has the highest level of rejection of Turkey's membership bid – over 43% (with 34.5% for the country). The group of people over 60 years old has the highest level of uncertainty in regard to Serbia and Turkey – over 45%, and in regard to Macedonia – over 42% of them.

When the 2018 data is compared to a similar survey in 2011, there are several similarities and differences. In 2011, the support to EU membership of Macedonia and Serbia was respectively 71% and 74% as a share of those who answered “for” and “against”.⁵ This is a lower result compared to the current 2018 results of 83% in favor of Macedonia and 82% for Serbia. In 2011, the disapproval of EU membership bid for Bulgaria's two neighbors was a little bit higher – close to 29% in the case of Macedonia and about 26% of Serbia compared to respectively 17.4% and about 18% in 2018 as a share of the “for” and “against” answers.⁶

In regard to Turkey, in 2011 there was higher support to its EU membership bid – nearly 42% of those in favor and those against were 58%, when the “for” and “against” answers are taken into consideration. In comparison, in the current 2018, the support fell to 38.4% and the disapproval increased to 62%.

It is worth noting that in 2011, there was higher support to the EU membership of Serbia than that of Macedonia and the disapproval of Macedonia's membership was higher than that of Serbia. It is possible that the recently signed Agreement of Friendship, Good-neighborly Relations and Cooperation between the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia may have had positive impact on the public opinion in Bulgaria too.

⁵ The numbers take into consideration only the “for” and “against” answers and their shares, excluding the share of don't know answers.

⁶ Croatia was also included in the 2011 survey as a candidate country at the time. It received the highest level of support by the Bulgarian citizens with close to 78% “for” and the lowest disapproval with 22% “against”.

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