
SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES¹

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Abstract: *Quality of life is a top issue in European social policy agenda. Quality of life is an important source of comparative information on living conditions and opportunities for Europeans, as well as how they assess their own life. Quality of life can provide data to elaborate social policies at European level, in order to reduce social inequalities and increase social cohesion. Subjective indicators of quality of life are increasingly used in social policy proposals.*

The paper aims to describe the changes in the subjective well-being of European citizen during the period of 2003-2012 and to highlight economic crisis effect on quality of life. The analysis is based on three waves of the European Quality of Life Survey (2003, 2007, 2011/2012) conducted by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. The work is done in terms of quality of life and focuses on subjective well-being indicators, such as life satisfaction, satisfactory to the areas of life, happiness and perception of social exclusion.

Keywords: *quality of life, life satisfaction, happiness, economic crisis.*

Introduction

Quality of life is a top issue in European social policy agenda. Quality of life is an important source of comparative information on living conditions and opportunities for Europeans, as well as how they assess their own life. Quality of life can provide data to elaborate social policies at European level, in order to reduce social inequalities and increase social cohesion. Subjective indicators of quality of life are increasingly used in social policy proposals.

Promoting quality of life in terms of individual well-being and social cohesion is a long term objective, but also a priority in terms of European policies (Eurofound, 2013a).

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Financial and economic crisis that affected Europe, but also many other countries around the world since 2008, has led “led to deterioration in living and working conditions, with significant negative impacts on the everyday lives of some citizens” (Eurofound 2012:7). In this context, European institutions have developed new policies and strategies to maintain and improve quality of life. Some of the documents made for this purpose are as follows: “*GDP and Beyond*” (European Commission, 2009), Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress (2009) and the strategy “*Europe 2020 strategy for smart, Sustainable and inclusive growth*” (European Commission, 2010).

The 2020 European strategy promotes an intelligent growth (developing an economy based on knowledge and innovation); sustainable growth (promoting a more efficient economy considering resources, a more environmental-friendly and competitive one); inclusive growth (an economy with high levels of labor market participation, which is transmitting social and territorial cohesion) (European Commission, 2010).

This strategy set five ambitious and measurable targets on: employment, innovation, education, social inclusion and climate change, and energy. These targets need to be achieved by 2020:

1. 75% of the working age population (20-64 years) to be employed;
2. 3% of EU's GDP is invested in R&D (research and development);
3. increase of 30% greenhouse gas reduction;
4. dropout rate should be below 10% and at least 40% of the younger generations have tertiary education;
5. reduction of 20 million people in the poverty rate (idem).

At European level, a wide number of programs and policies have as main scope to improve quality of life and reduce inequalities between countries and within countries (Eurofound, 2013a). The focus on economic indicators is not enough to understand or evaluate differences in the welfare of different social groups in Europe. So, policymakers should take into account people's perceptions of their quality of life or quality of their society where they live (idem).

Conceptual background

Quality of life refers to the overall well-being of people in a wide and multidimensional sense (Böhnke, 2005). Quality of life can be considered an umbrella concept covering all spheres of human life, referring to conditions, resources and opportunities available to people, and the results obtained by them. Quality of life is an evaluative concept, consisting of outcome “(...) reporting on living conditions and activities that make-up human life, needs, values, human aspirations” (Zamfir, 1993/1998: 79).

Quality of life represents the assembly of the elements making reference to the physical, economic, social, cultural, and political situations in which people live; their health status; the content and nature of their activities; the characteristics of social relations

and processes to which they participate and the services they have access to; the patterns of consumption they adapt to; their way and style of life; the evaluation by the population of the circumstances and results of the activities; the expectations of the populations; and the subjective states of satisfaction/dissatisfaction, happiness, and frustration (Mărginean, 2002, Mărginean, 2014).

Research activities regarding quality of life are rooted in the concern to define national objectives and to measure the fulfillment of these objective through social indicators in North American society in the '60s (Mărginean, 2002). Completion of economic indicators with social indicators in order to measure social welfare was the beginning of the research activities on the quality of life (idem).

At European level, the activity of The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) plays an important role in research and promoting the quality of life. Since the establishment of this foundation in 1975 to 2001, the research activities were focused on living and working conditions, but the 2001 outlook research has expanded through a new program for research and monitoring of quality of life (Mărginean, 2003).

In addressing quality of life developed under Eurofound, “quality of life in a society can be defined as the overall well-being of those living there. Well-being then reflects not only living conditions and control over resources across the full spectrum of life domains, but also the ways in which people respond and feel about their lives in those domains” (Fahey, Nolan and Whelan, 2003:14). The concept of quality of life is multidimensional and it is measured both by objective and subjective indicators, referring to living conditions, resources and opportunities available and the results achieved by the people. T. Fahey, B. Nolan and Ch. Whelan (2003) believe that, from the conceptual point of view, the objective and subjective aspects are intrinsic to the notion of quality of life, and using both types of indicators can give a complete view of people's lives.

The role of Eurofound is to provide information for social policy and employment domains. Recognizing the need for comparable data on quality of life, Eurofound proposed to establish a European comparative research at European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS), which was implemented (in an increasing way) in 2003 for 28 countries, in 2007/2008 for 31 countries, and in 2011/2012 for 34 countries.

“The concern for a decent quality of life has become increasingly important in recent years both in the scientific world, governments and public policy makers but also for ordinary humans” (I. Precupețu, 2011: 39). The author has highlighted several sources of this interest for quality of life: the attractiveness of the concept of quality of life that comes from the fact that it involves “a positive purpose and generous, that of a good life” (ibid), wide recognition as social well-being is just a component of human life, the need for sustainable development of society and economy development with syncope.

In the 2009 the paper *Report by the Commission work appears on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress* appears, developed by Joseph E. Stiglitz, Amartya Sen and Jean Paul Fitoussi. The appearance of this report at a time when the economic crisis already manifested, is an important moment for the development paradigm because

“places quality of life in a central place to assesses social progress, and it contributes to wider legitimizing this paradigm focusing on that being the purpose of developing people's lives, departs economic approach and highlights the importance of the social” (Precupețu, 2011: 44).

Starting from the Stiglitz report, the concern for quality of life was also included in the work of Eurostat and the OECD¹. Eurostat research included in EU-SILC (EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions), from 2013, the quality of life indicators, considering a module on subjective well-being. Eurostat aims to present different aspects of well-being, thus combining objective indicators with the subjective evaluation, covering various aspects of quality of life (Eurostat, 2014). Subjective indicators have been introduced, in a natural way, in the Eurostat database.

The OECD report, “*How's Life?: Measuring well-being*” (2011), continues the approach suggested by the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi report. To measure people's well-being both objective and subjective aspects are taken into consideration, because they beyond of the importance of living and working conditions, we must to consider how people perceive them.

“Subjective well-being is the contemporary translation of the happiness term” (Bălțătescu, 2009: 28).

Subjective well-being represents how people evaluate their lives. It is believed that subjective well-being includes three distinct dimensions (Diener, Suh and Oishi, 1997, Delhey, 2004, Böhnke, 2005):

- a cognitive dimension (life satisfaction, satisfaction with different areas of life),
- a positively affective dimension (happiness and other positive feelings), and
- a negative affective dimension (unpleasant feelings, stress, anxiety, alienation).

Sirgy treats the subjective well-being as an umbrella concept and defines it as a “long-term condition” resulting in three parts:

1. happiness and positive emotions experienced cumulative key areas of life;
2. cumulative depression and negative emotions experienced in key areas of life;
3. overall evaluation of life and essential areas of life assessments (satisfaction)”. (Sirgy, 2002: 10 cited Precupețu, 2011: 145).

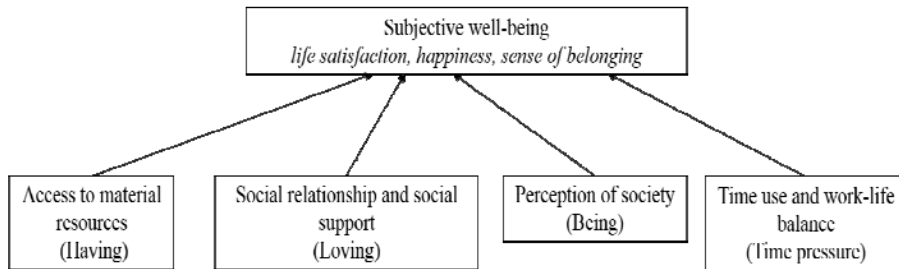
In this context, the subjective well-being can be considered as “an overall assessment of how ordinary people affects socioeconomic changes, filtered through attitudes and experiences” (Bălțătescu, 2007: 24).

If the use of subjective indicators is now widely accepted to describe the quality of life concept, their use in social policies represent a new direction. R. Veenhoven (2002), P. Böhnke (2005), J. Delhey (2004) and others advocate the use of subjective indicators in the social policies. R. Veenhoven (2002) argues the need to use subjective indicators in

¹OECD = The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

the social policies, considering them indispensable both for selection of social policy goals and for evaluating the success of these policies. The author shows that the use of subjective indicators in social policies contribute to the selection of targets, the goals of these policies according to the needs identified by the people, and according to their wishes, their aspirations, their preferences, their level of satisfaction and their worries people have.

Figure 1. *Subjective well-being and its determinants.*



Source: Böhnke, 2005: 4.

D. Watson and C. Wallace F. Pichler (2010) show where subjective well-being research can help:

- the indicators such as life satisfaction or happiness capture people's assessments of their own lives through their own values and preferences;
- the levels of subjective well-being can provide external verification of the economic indicators and can act as a correction thereof;
- the results of subjective well-being research can be used as input data for assessing the costs and benefits of policies;
- the changes in levels of subjective well-being can be used to guide progress and measure the success of policies aimed at increasing social cohesion and social inclusion.

Data

Secondary data analysis is based on three waves of the European Quality of Life Survey¹ (EQLS) carried out in 2003, 2007 and 2011/2012. The research was designed as a tool that can provide information for social policies in Europe (Anderson, Mikulić, Vermeylen, Lyly-Yrjanainen and Zigante, 2009). EQLS provides information on the

¹Access to the EQLS (2003, 2007, 2011/2012) database through UK Data Services (<http://ukdataservice.ac.uk/>).

objective circumstances of Europeans' life, but also on how they evaluate their lives and the circumstances in general.

The strength of the research is to bring together information from a wide range of areas of life relevant to quality of life, such as economic resources, employment, health, family status, social support, perceived quality of society and subjective well-being (Watson et al., 2010).

In 2003, the research was conducted in 28 countries (EU Member States, the Member States that joined in 2004 and 2007 and Turkey). The next wave of research from 2007 involves 31 countries (the 27 EU member states, Macedonia, Croatia, Turkey and Norway). The research in 2011/2012 included 34 countries (the 27 EU member states, Croatia, Iceland, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Turkey and Kosovo). The indicators included in EQLS for the measurement of subjective well-being underwent changes and additions in these three rounds of research.

In the first round of EQLS research (2003), subjective well-being comprised indicators of satisfaction (satisfaction with life, satisfaction with areas of life), positive feelings (happiness) and indicators on belonging and integration feelings (pessimism, detachment from social order, social exclusion and anxiety).

In research from 2007, indicators of satisfaction (satisfaction with life in general satisfaction with the areas of education, employment, standard of living, housing, family life, health, social) and the indicator on the state of happiness remained the same as in the previous research. The research also included indicators on emotional wellbeing (mental health) and indicators about perception of social exclusion.

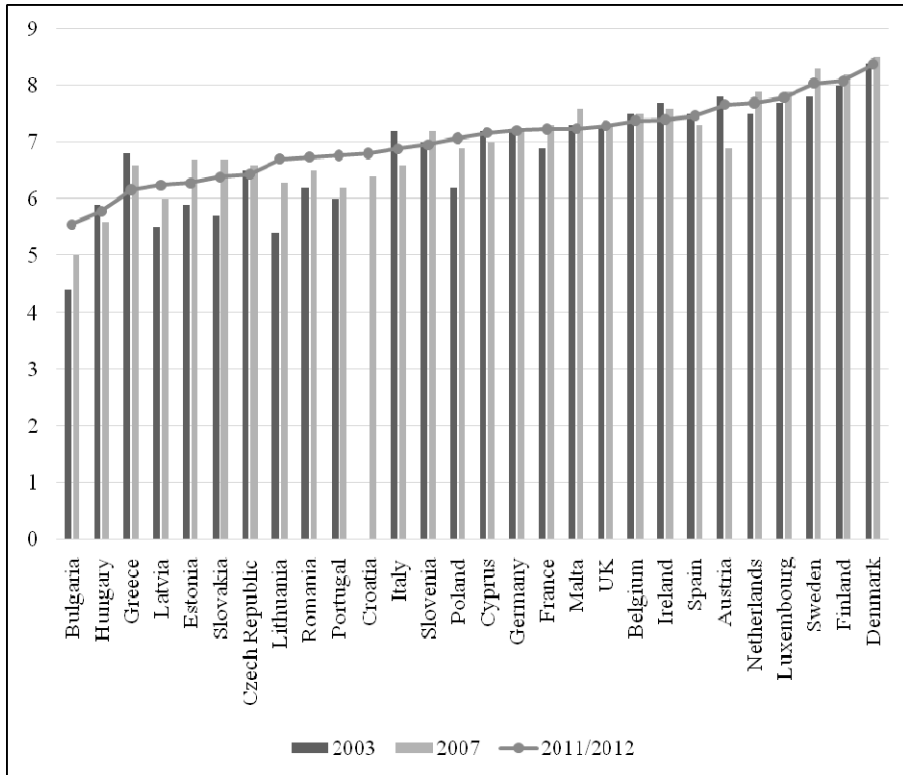
The third round of research has added a set of subjective indicators, and other indicators have changed. Among the indicators are the ones included that relate to the feeling that life is worth living, sense of control over their lives, the feeling of closeness to people in the community, and indicators on the state of depression or loneliness.

In this article, I will focus on indicators of satisfaction with life, happiness, satisfaction with the important areas of life and the social exclusion.

Overall life satisfaction

Life satisfaction is an evaluative indicator, widely used in the research on subjective well-being, being considered a holistic measure of quality of life. "It represents the final synthesized output of all conditions that people experience in their lives, while also capturing the values, expectations and desires that individuals have in relation to their lives" (Mărginean et al., 2006: 59).

In the EQLS, life satisfaction is measured on a scale between 1 to 10 through the question "All things considered, how satisfied would you say you are with your life these days?". The value 1 represents "very dissatisfied" and 10 "very satisfied".

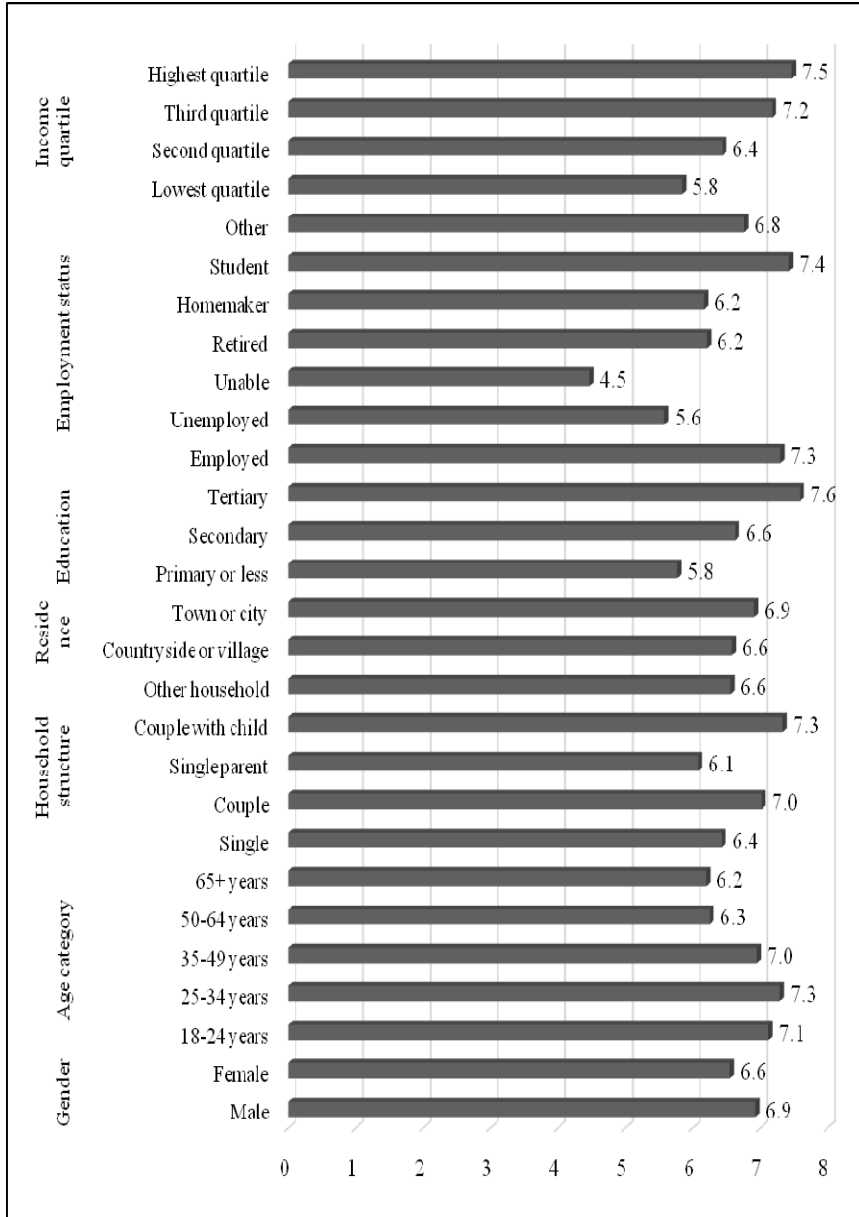
Figure 2. Life satisfaction in the European countries during 2003, 2007, 2011/2012 (mean)

Source: EQLS 2003, 2007, 2011/2012 (own calculation).

Q30. All things considered, how satisfied would you say you are with your life these days? Please tell me on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means very dissatisfied and 10 means very satisfied.

Figure 2 shows satisfaction with life during the three rounds of the EQLS research in the Member States of the European Union. The figure highlights maintenance of a pattern known as the level of satisfaction with life in Europe. Life satisfaction grows from east to west and also from south to north. The Nordic countries have populations with the highest level of satisfaction with life through the entire period presented. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe have the lowest level of satisfaction.

In some countries, such as Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Portugal, life satisfaction experienced a significant increase over the presented period. However, Bulgaria remains at the lowest level of satisfaction in Europe. In some countries, life satisfaction increased during 2003-2007 and then declined in the next period (2007-2011/2012). Greece and Ireland have recorded a significant decline from 2003 to 2011/2012.

Figure 3. Life satisfaction in Romania in 2011/2012 by socioeconomic variables (mean)

Source: EQLS 2011/2012 (own calculation). Note: Differences significantly tested using Anova. Q30. All things considered, how satisfied would you say you are with your life these days? Please tell me on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means very dissatisfied and 10 means very satisfied.

Precupețu I. and Precupețu M. (2013) emphasized that satisfaction with life depends on the structural circumstances and opportunities provided to people by the society they live in and contribute to how people can fulfill their goals and live life as they want. “Generally, wealthy countries, characterized by political stability, important system of social protection, high quality education and health systems provide their citizens with good conditions and opportunities for living a good life and are usually rich in subjective well-being, while poor countries are deprived in satisfaction.” (Precupețu and Precupețu, 2013: 98).

Since the income and living conditions affect subjective well-being, it is likely that the economic crisis has had a greater effect in countries affected by it. The decrease in GDP and rising unemployment have affected several countries in Southern Europe, particularly Cyprus, Greece, Portugal and Spain (Eurofound, 2012). In Northern European countries (Sweden, Finland, and Denmark) level of satisfaction with life has remained fairly stable.

In Romania, the level of satisfaction with life increased slightly from one wave to another wave of research: 2003 (6.2), 2007 (6.5), and 2011/2012 (6.7), but it remained at a modest level compared the countries of Northern and Western Europe.

At the individual level, the position occupied by individuals in society greatly influences their quality of life. Social characteristics that places the individual in the social structure, both “vertical” (education, income, status, occupational) and the “horizontal” (sex, age, household type) influence the way in which people define and evaluate their life (Mărginean et al., 2006).

Figure 3 shows life satisfaction, based on socioeconomic variables only for Romania. The differences are statistically significant. Thus, people with higher incomes have a life satisfaction level higher than of people with low incomes. Also, people with higher education have higher level of satisfaction with life. Employed people recorded a higher level of satisfaction with the retirees or housewives, especially to the unemployed or those unable to work. Those living in urban areas are generally more satisfied with life than those living in rural areas. Couples with children have the highest life satisfaction compared with those living alone, couple without children or other form of household. Men are more satisfied with their lives than women, and the group with age between 24-35 years presents the highest level of satisfaction with life.

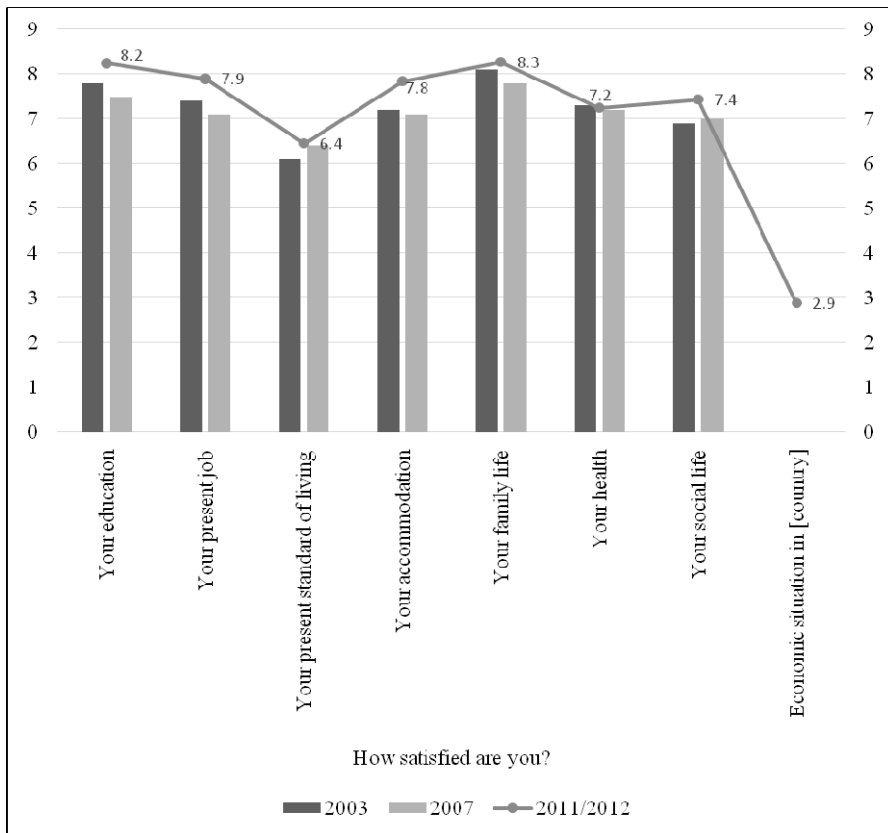
Satisfaction with life domains

In all waves of EQLS were included as evaluative indicators, in addition to satisfaction with life in general, new indicators of satisfaction with different spheres of human life: education, employment, standard of living, housing, family life, health state, social life. Satisfaction with economic situation is a new indicator included in 2011. All indicators are measured, as well as satisfaction with life, the scale of 1 to 10. The question formulated to measure these indicators is: “Could you please tell me on a scale of 1 to 10 how satisfied you are with each of the following items, where 1 means you are very dissatisfied and 10 means you are very satisfied?”

Figure 4 shows the level of satisfaction in each area for Romania in the three points of the research. From all domains of life, satisfaction with standard of living is lowest. The domains with the highest satisfaction is family. The family was in the transition period to the present, the main point of support in the lives of individuals to face the difficulties of all sorts, even in the non-interventionist policy of the state to support the families (Popescu, 2014).

Table 1 of Annex presents the results in terms of satisfaction with aspects of life in European countries in 2011. In addition, satisfaction with family life is highest for most countries, while satisfaction with standard of living and satisfaction to the economic situation in the country had the lowest level.

Figure 4. Satisfaction with life domains in Romania (mean)



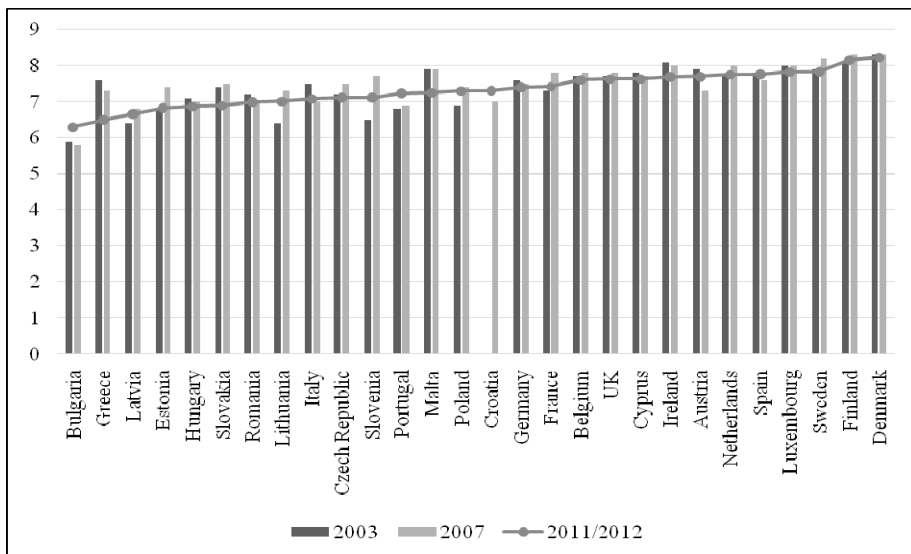
Source: EQLS 2003, 2007, 2011/2012 (own calculation).

Q40. Could you please tell me on a scale of 1 to 10 how satisfied you are with each of the following items, where 1 means you are very dissatisfied and 10 means you are very satisfied?

Happiness

Happiness is another indicator of subjective well-being, representing the emotional concept. “Happiness is a state of mind, incorporating both the existence of positive emotions and the absence of negative emotions,1 which means that someone can be happy without evaluating their life as good” (Watson et al., 2010: 16). In the EQLS, happiness is measured as the satisfaction with life on a scale from 1 to 10, where the subjects were asked: “Taking all things together on a scale of 1 to 10, how happy would you say you are? Here 1 means you are very unhappy and 10 means you are very happy”.

Figure 5. Happiness in European countries during 2003, 2007, 2011/2012 (mean)



Source: EQLS 2003, 2007, 2011/2012 (own calculation).

Q41. Taking all things together on a scale of 1 to 10, how happy would you say you are?
Here 1 means you are very unhappy and 10 means you are very happy.

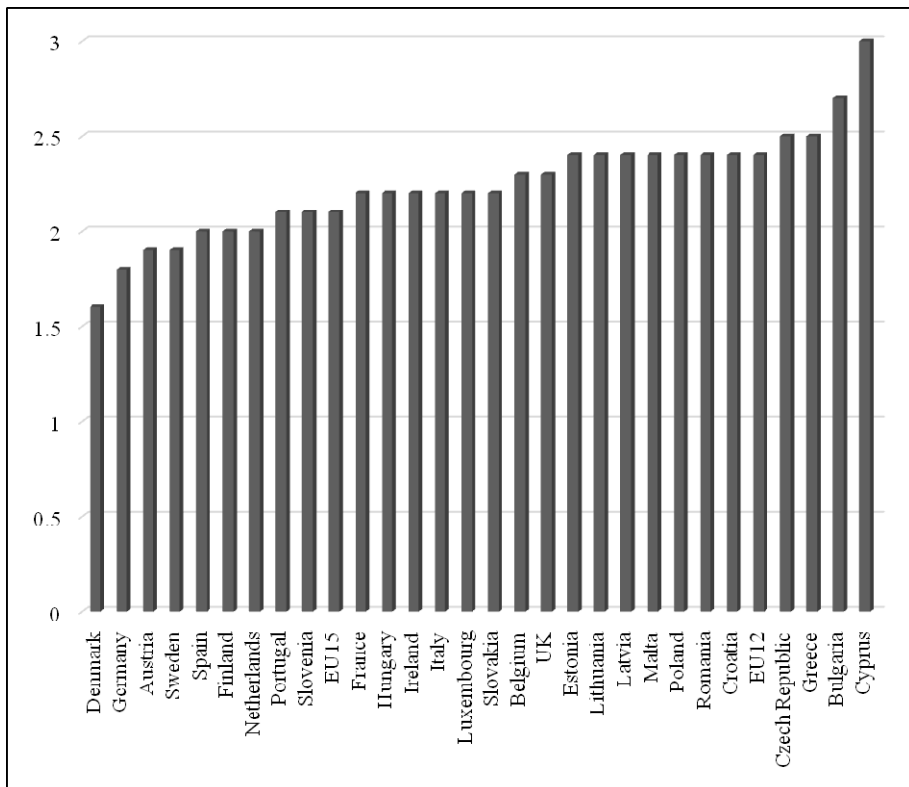
The happiness indicator has a similar distribution to that of satisfaction with life in the EU countries in the three waves of research. Overall, the average for happiness is slightly higher than for life satisfaction. The highest levels of happiness we encounter in all countries of northern Europe. The level of happiness decreases in the countries of central and eastern Europe, but also in southern Europe.

In most European countries, between 2003 and 2007, the level of happiness slightly increased, then between 2007 and 2011 we would see a slight decrease. In five countries, Cyprus, Hungary, Germany, Romania and especially Greece, the happiness indicator recorded a decrease between 2003 and 2011/2012.

Perceived social exclusion

Perceived social exclusion is measured based on agreement or disagreement with five items capturing the extent to which the individual feels excluded from society (Böhnke, 2005): feeling left out of society, feeling that life has become so complicated that one cannot find one's way, feeling that the value of what one does is not recognized, feeling that others look down on one and the feeling to be close to the people in the area where one lives (last item was introduced in 2011/2012). The items are scored from 1 (strong disagreement) to 5 (strong agreement) and the scale is the average score across the five items.

Figure 6. Social exclusion index in European countries in 2011/2012 (mean)



Source: EQLS 2011/2012 (own calculation).

Social exclusion index is computed by 5 indicators: Q29. Please tell me whether you strongly agree, agree, neither agree or disagree, disagree or strongly disagree with each statement. e. I feel left out of society; f. Life has become so complicated today that I almost can't find my way; g. I feel that the value of what I do is not recognized by others; h. Some people look down on me because of my job situation or income; i. I feel close to people in the area where I live It takes values between 0 and 5.

Perceived social exclusion is a component of subjective well-being referring to negative affects and it is also strong correlated with life satisfaction.

Figure 6 presents the distribution of perceived social exclusion in the European countries. Countries with high level of life satisfaction tend to have low level on perceived social exclusion. In the Nordic and Western countries, the social exclusion index takes the lowest values, but also in Spain and Portugal. The high-test values on social exclusion are recorded for Greece, Bulgaria and Cyprus in 2011/2012.

Because items referring to perceived social exclusion included in the survey in 2003, 2007, 2011/2012 suffered changes, comparison isn't possible.

Conclusions

The main measures of subjective well-being (life satisfaction and happiness) remained fairly constant in 2003, 2007, 2011/2012 interval. Some countries with a low level of life satisfaction in 2003 were recovered, and in some countries with high level of life satisfaction in 2007, this level was diminished (Eurofound, 2014).

The life satisfaction has remained relatively constant in the richer countries and has been increased in the poorer countries.

The indicator related to happiness slightly decreased in most European countries. For example, Greece is the country that has a relevant fallen in terms of life satisfaction and happiness.

During 2003-2011/2012 the proportion of households with financial difficulties has been increased, the most vulnerable groups being long term unemployed people, people with low incomes, a single parent in household and people over 65 years.

Family life is an important determinant of subjective well-being. Satisfaction to family life has remained relatively constant during the period 2003-2011/2012 (Eurofound, 2014).

The relative stability of subjective well-being during the economic crisis highlights that this is not determined only by economic component.

The most vulnerable groups defined by subjective well-being, but also by objective conditions of life, requires special measures regarding social policy, both at national and at European level.

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Web pages

- Eurofound: <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/>
- Eurostat: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>
- UK Data Service: <http://ukdataservice.ac.uk/>
- OECD: <http://www.oecd.org/>

Annex

Table 1. Domain satisfactions in the European Union member states (mean).

	How satisfied are you?							
	Q40a Your education	Q40b Your present job	Q40c Your present standard of living	Q40d Your accommo- dation	Q40e Your family life	Q40f Your health	Q40g Your social life	Q40h Eco- nomic situation in [country]
Austria	8,0	8,0	8,0	8,3	8,4	7,9	8,1	5,7
Belgium	7,5	7,7	7,4	7,6	7,8	7,4	7,5	4,8
Bulgaria	6,7	6,8	4,7	6,9	6,7	6,8	5,9	3,0
Cyprus	7,5	7,8	7,5	8,6	8,9	8,4	8,1	3,4
Czech Republic	7,3	7,5	6,3	7,5	7,2	7,1	6,8	3,8
Germany	7,5	7,6	7,2	7,7	7,7	7,2	7,5	5,7
Denmark	8,1	8,4	8,3	8,4	8,4	8,0	8,3	5,6
Estonia	7,0	7,3	6,2	7,2	7,3	6,6	6,9	3,9
Greece	6,4	6,6	5,9	7,1	7,7	7,8	7,1	2,2
Spain	7,5	7,3	6,9	7,9	8,2	7,5	7,6	3,4
Finland	7,6	8,1	7,6	8,3	8,4	7,7	7,8	6,2
France	7,0	7,3	6,9	7,6	7,8	7,4	7,4	3,9
Hungary	7,0	7,1	5,8	7,0	7,5	6,7	6,8	2,8
Ireland	7,1	7,6	7,3	8,2	8,4	8,0	7,1	3,1
Italy	6,8	7,2	6,8	7,6	7,6	7,5	7,3	3,7
Lithuania	7,2	7,4	6,1	7,0	7,5	6,9	6,7	3,2
Luxembourg	7,3	7,7	7,8	8,2	8,2	7,7	7,8	6,7
Latvia	7,1	7,2	5,9	6,6	7,3	6,5	6,5	2,9
Malta	6,9	7,6	7,0	8,1	8,4	7,9	7,4	4,7
Netherlands	7,0	7,9	7,7	7,9	7,8	7,4	7,5	5,6
Poland	6,4	7,0	6,2	6,9	7,5	6,8	6,6	3,8
Portugal	7,6	7,3	6,5	7,4	7,9	7,1	7,2	2,8
Romania	8,2	7,9	6,4	7,8	8,3	7,2	7,4	2,9
Sweden	7,4	7,7	7,9	8,2	8,1	7,7	7,7	6,1
Slovenia	6,8	7,3	6,3	7,7	7,8	7,3	7,2	3,2
Slovakia	7,0	7,3	6,3	7,7	7,6	7,3	6,8	3,7
UK	7,2	7,5	7,3	7,9	8,2	7,3	7,0	3,8
Croatia	7,0	7,2	5,9	7,8	7,9	7,3	6,9	2,8
EU12	7,0	7,3	6,1	7,3	7,6	6,9	6,8	3,4
EU15	7,2	7,5	7,1	7,8	7,9	7,4	7,4	4,3
EU28	7,2	7,4	6,9	7,7	7,8	7,3	7,3	4,1

Source: EQLS 2011/2012 (own calculation).

Q40. Could you please tell me on a scale of 1 to 10 how satisfied you are with each of the following items, where 1 means you are very dissatisfied and 10 means you are very satisfied?