

Rating Europe's Most and Least Happy Cities

Start packing your bags for Oslo.

FEARGUS O'SULLIVAN | [@FeargusOSull](#) | Feb 9, 2016 | [7 Comments](#)

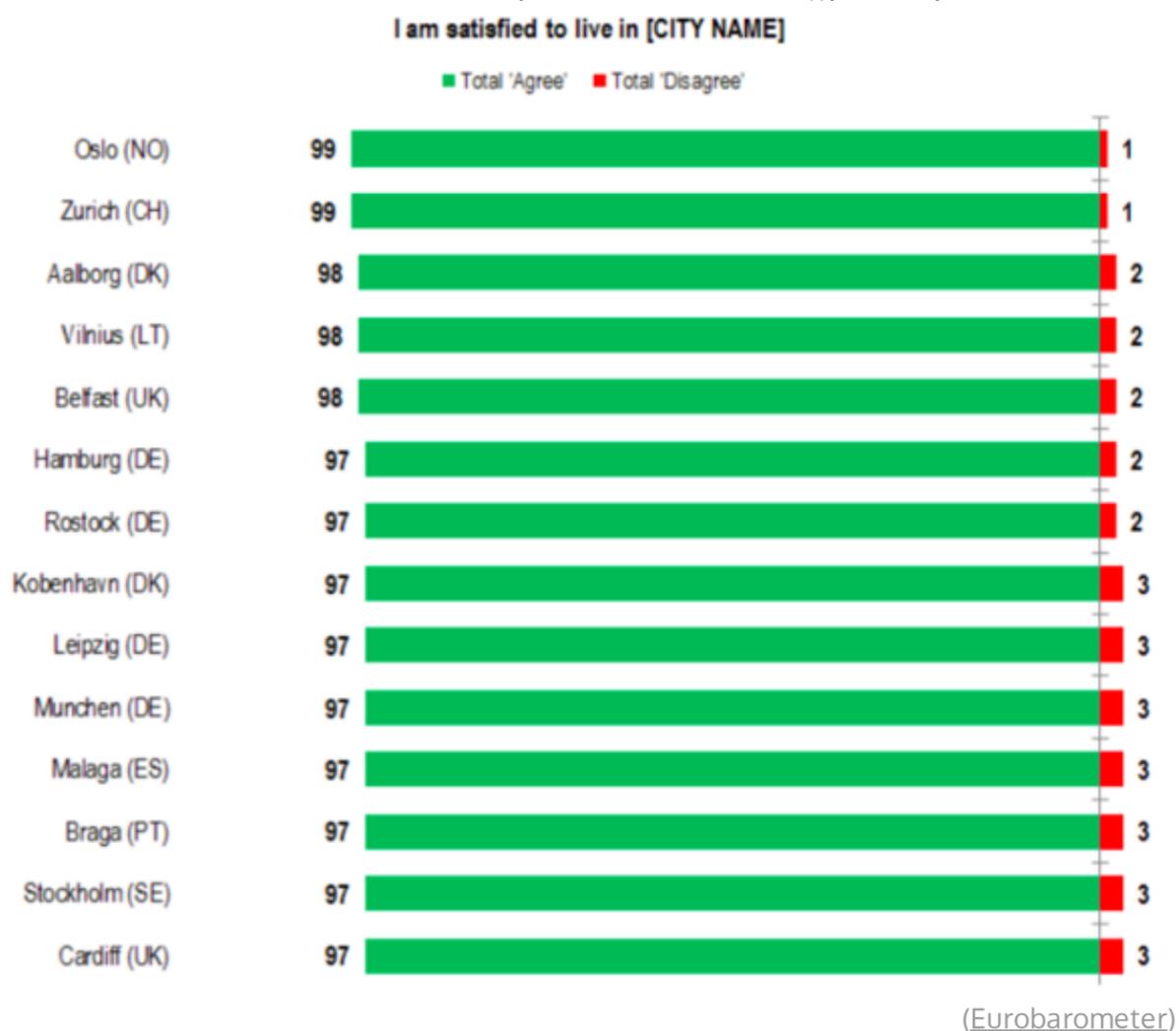


Residents in Vilnius are among the most satisfied in Europe. ([Flick/Mantas Volungevicius](#))

Among European city dwellers, residents in Prague are most confident about finding a job, while people in Zurich feel safest. Romans distrust their administration more than anyone on the Continent, while no one thinks it's harder to find an affordable apartment than Parisians. Everyone except residents of Valetta, Malta, thinks that their cultural scene is great, while most Europeans still feel that foreigners bring more benefits than problems.

These are some of the conclusions of a mammoth [survey](#) of the attitudes of Europe's city-dwellers released this month. Compiled by the E.U.'s [Eurobarometer](#), it shows some sharp divides, major changes since the organization's last survey in 2012, and some unexpected rising stars. Here are a few of its key findings.

The Happy North



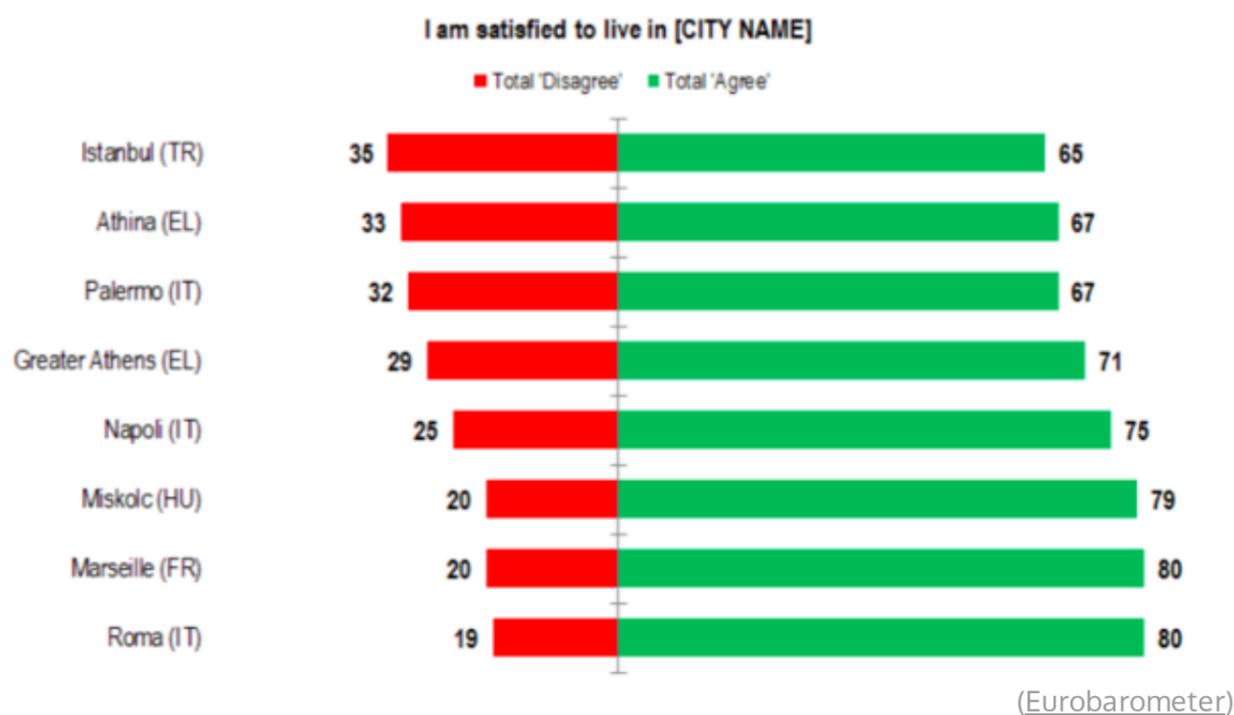
Europe's happiest cities are overwhelmingly on the northern side of the Continent, but results suggest it's not wealth alone that is a driver for happiness. While the top three may be among the usual suspects—Oslo, Zurich, and Denmark's third city of Aalborg—the next two in the ranking are less obvious: Belfast and Vilnius.

Northern Ireland's Belfast may have charm, but it remains partly divided along sectarian lines that have caused decades of violence in the past. Vilnius, meanwhile, is an unquestionably beautiful place whose inhabitants are nonetheless generally poorer than cities in Europe's northwest—cities that it has largely outperformed.

In these places, optimism may outweigh wealth as a driver of happiness. With Lithuania's economy almost doubling in size [since 2000](#), Vilnius has the upbeat feel of a boomtown. Belfast, meanwhile, has enjoyed decades of relative calm that have allowed citizens to put its troubled past behind them and enjoy themselves.

Size may also be a factor. The populations of these cities are between 206,000 (Aalborg) and 648,000 (Oslo). The happiness scores suggest the charms of a medium-sized city: big enough to be lively but small enough to be easily navigable and capable of fostering tight community links.

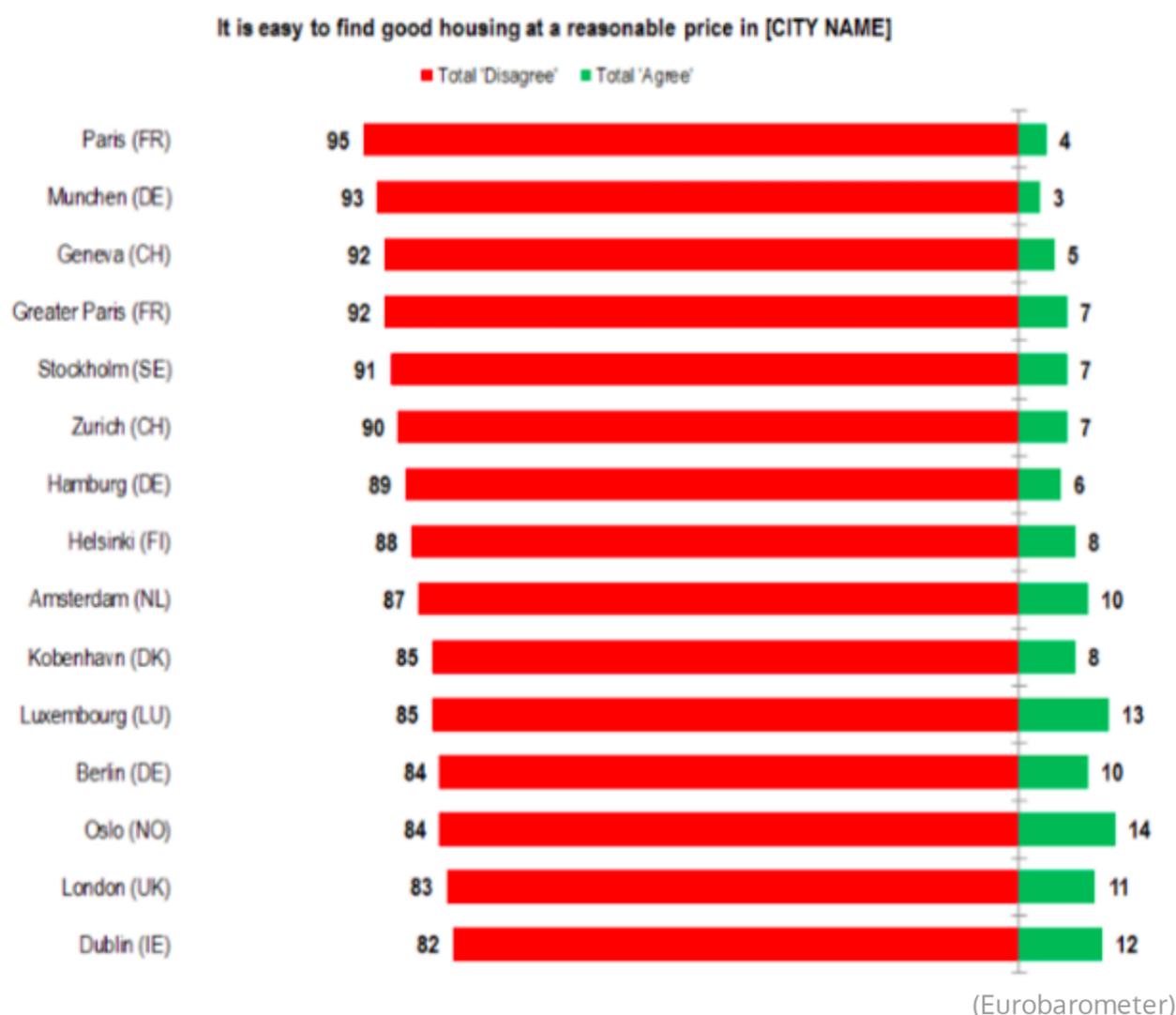
The Not Quite So Happy South



Even Europe's least happy areas don't perform too badly, with the proportion of residents declaring themselves happy never dipping below 65 percent in any city. The cities with lower scores nonetheless tend to cluster around the Mediterranean. Least happy of all is Istanbul, where a total of 35 percent of residents pronounce themselves unsatisfied.

The possible reasons could be legion, given the city's ongoing upheaval. Istanbul has grown hugely in recent years and the infrastructure necessary to make the city livable is still struggling to catch up. The city has been riven with unrest and is the largest city in a country that has absorbed refugees in such numbers recently ([1.9 million](#) by the end of 2015) that it makes Northern European [complaints](#) about the issue seem shrill.

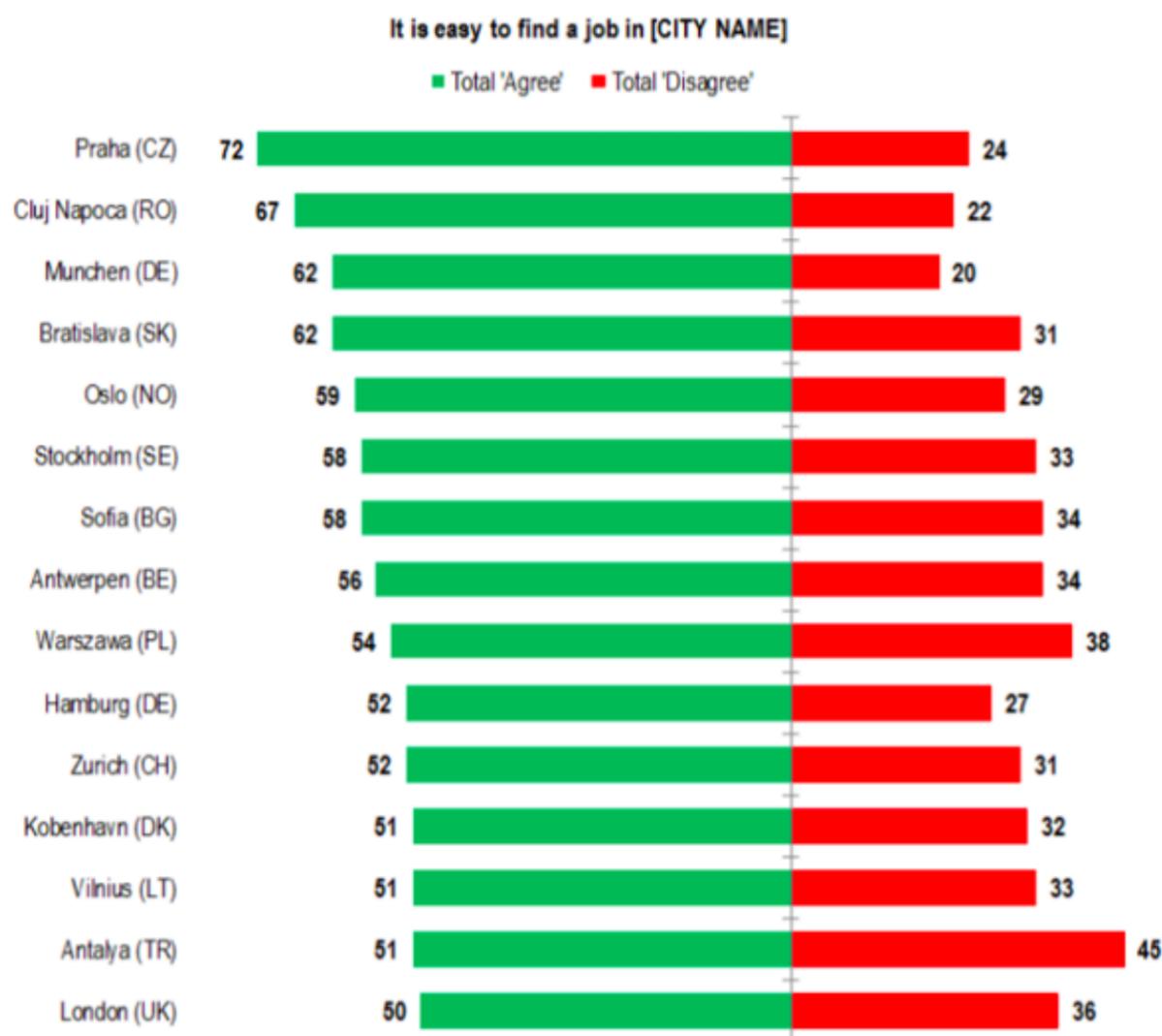
Richer Cities in Housing Crisis



The European cities where people felt that good, reasonably priced housing was easy to come by tended to be either smaller cities or larger ones in crisis. According to the survey, anyone looking for well-priced housing compared to wages should head for Oulu, Finland; Braga, Portugal; Oviedo or Malaga, in Spain; or Athens.

The list of cities where people thought good housing was least easy to come by, meanwhile, reads like a litany of success: Paris, Munich, Geneva, and Stockholm topped the ranking. This is essentially a survey of perception rather than reality, however. Residents in low-rent Berlin felt that good housing was harder to come by than Londoners did, even though housing costs in London are far higher even when you take wage differences into account.

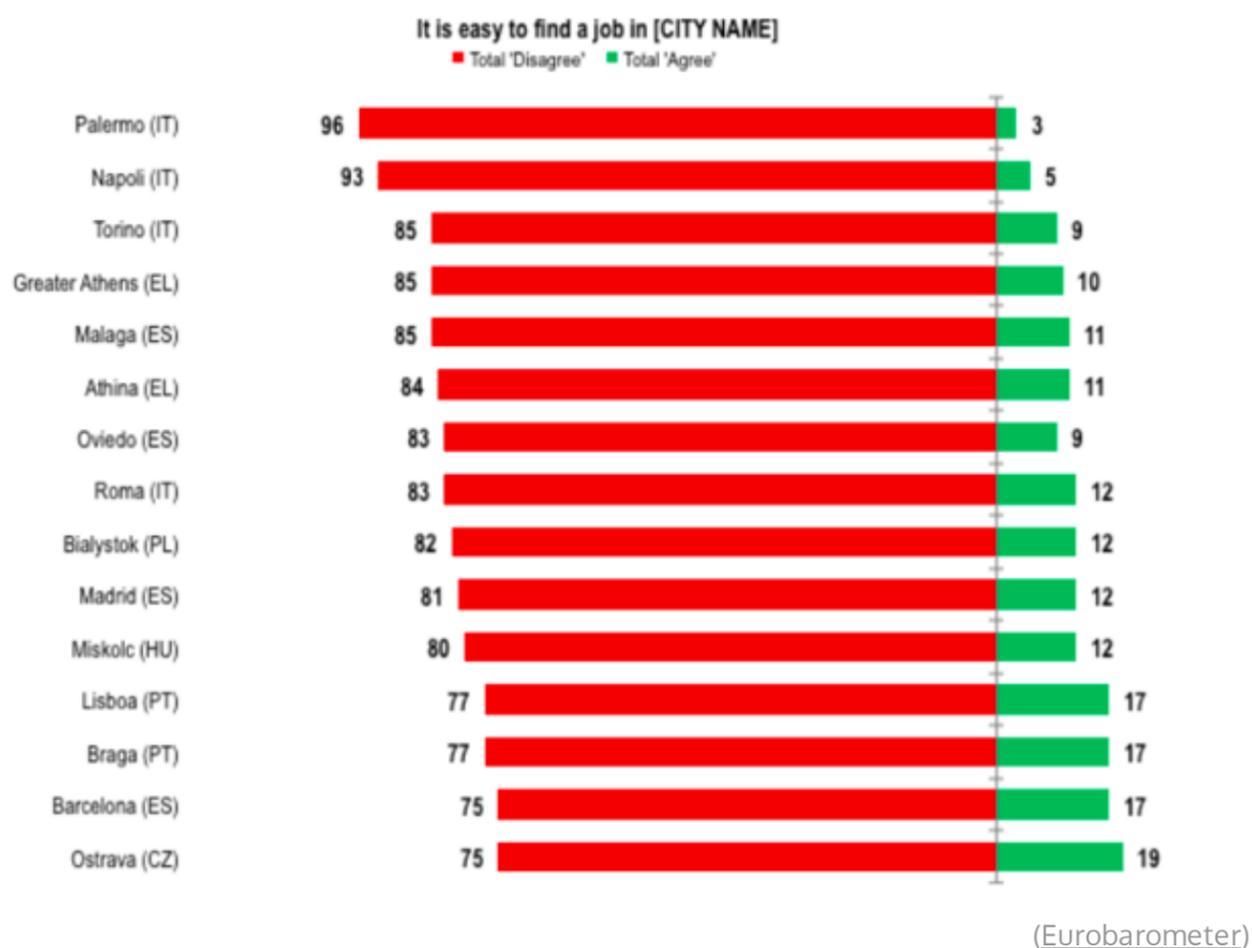
Job Optimism in the East, Pessimism in the Mediterranean



(Eurobarometer)

When it comes to opportunities for finding employment, the most optimistic city-dwellers tend to be in central and Eastern Europe. Prague, Romania's Cluj-Napoca, Munich, Bratislava, and Oslo topped the chart, with both Sofia and Warsaw making the top 10.

Prague, where 72 percent agreed it was easy to find a job, deserves its optimism. Currently the Czech Republic ties with Germany to boast the [lowest unemployment rate](#) in the E.U. By contrast, job optimism in Palermo is at a nadir, with 96 percent strongly disagreeing that jobs were easy to find. Sadly, this is a reflection of reality, not pessimism per se. Across Southern Italy, it's estimated that 75 percent of young people are now unemployed.



Surprising Rises and Falls

Some local attitudes have changed radically and unexpectedly since the survey's last installment in 2012. Residents in Reykjavik, for example, are far less happy about the condition of their streets and buildings, with the number of satisfied people slumping 29 points, to 52 percent overall. This is one of the sharpest drops recorded anywhere in the survey.

Scandinavian countries are hardly known for their shabby roads and houses, but aspects of Icelandic life have still not recovered from the country's dramatic [financial crisis](#). The economy has rallied by Reykjavik city budgets have fallen year on year since 2009. The result: a pervasive sense of quiet shabbiness.

Meanwhile, to find the citizens whose economic confidence has grown most, you have to visit somewhere many people haven't heard of: the elegant Transylvanian city of Cluj-Napoca. In 2012, only 42 percent of people in Romania's second city agreed it was easy to find a job. Now that number is 67 percent, a jump of 25 points. Citizens are right to feel so positive. Many international tech firms have set up offices here recently, a creating a modest Romanian counterpart to Silicon valley thanks to firms attracted by decent infrastructure and a beautiful mountain backdrop.

Italian Cities Struggle

They may be famous for their beauty, but Italian cities performed shockingly badly in the Eurobarometer survey, especially when you consider that overall Italy has not been the worst hit by the Mediterranean region's economic crisis. Citizens of Palermo, Naples, and Rome were least happy with their public transit and the state of their streets and buildings. These three cities were also the least likely trust their administrations or agree that they were efficient. The survey reinforces the impression gained from recent [scandals](#) and [environmental crises](#)—that Italy's cities are doing very badly, indeed.



Things are looking up in Athens. ([pineider](#) / Flickr)

Athens Bounces Back

Greece's capital, meanwhile, still isn't exactly doing great. Athens has suffered more than most from the ongoing economic crisis sweeping southern Europe. But while that suffering doesn't seem to be over, the good news is that Athenians' levels of satisfaction have shot up across the board since the last survey in 2012.

The proportion of Athens residents who say they are satisfied living in the city has risen by 15 points to 65 percent. A healthy 65 percent of Athenians say they're happy with cultural facilities (a rise of 15 percent), while satisfaction with life in general has also gone up 15 points, to 60 percent. Satisfaction with jobs, the condition of streets and squares, and the belief in the city administration's efficiency have all shot up—though for these three indicators no figure rises higher than 45 percent.

Clearly, there's still much room for improvement, but at least in terms of growing positivity and optimism, Athens seems to be on the road to recovery.

About the Author



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