



**FOCUS**  
FOOD CONSUMER SCIENCE IN THE BALKANS



## FOCUS-BALKANS project 4<sup>th</sup> Newsletter

# *Characteristics of food consumers in Western Balkans countries, Results of a Quantitative Survey in six WBCs*

## Why conducting a Quantitative Survey as part of the FOCUS-BALKANS project?

Objective of Focus Balkans project is to promote knowledge and to improve understanding of behavior of consumers towards food in Western Balkan countries. The project includes the development of the knowledge and the skills in the science of food consumption, as well as the development of networks of institutions and initiatives for the improvement of the understanding of food consumption in the Western Balkans.

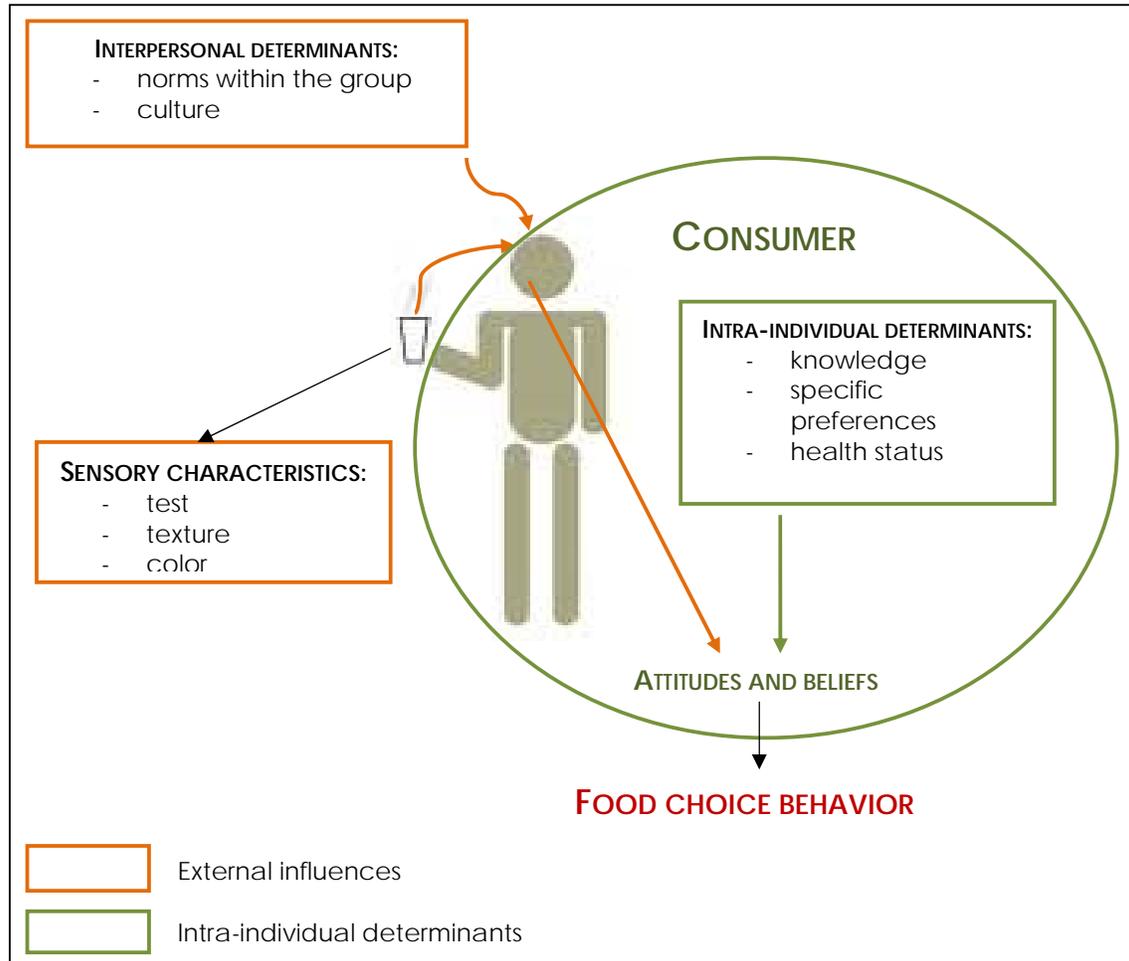
Planning and realization of the quantitative research are the results of the first two years of the project.

The main objective of quantitative research in Focus-Balkans project is the analysis of drivers and determinants of food choices related in the Western Balkans in the target of four types of products:

- Fruits and fruit products,
- Products with health claims,
- Organic products,
- Traditional food.

# 1. Methodology and Sampling

Consumers' dietary patterns are not only determined by the sensory characteristics of the food itself (also labeled as food-internal stimuli), but also by a broad set of individual and social factors, such as food-external stimuli or non-food effects.



**Figure 1 : Relations between external influences and actual food choices**

The non-food effects can further be categorized as intra-individual determinants (knowledge, specific preferences, health status) and interpersonal determinants (e.g. norms within the group and culture).

It is assumed that the relation between external influences and actual food choice behavior is mediated by food related attitudes and beliefs. All that was mentioned has been topic for analysis in the quantitative survey.

Table 1: Table summarizing data collection's method for the quantitative survey

Areas	6 countries of the WB
Total sample size	3 085 respondents
Sample in each country	Around 500 respondents - Sample representative of the country
Data collection's method	Face-to-face
Questionnaire	Structured questionnaire 30 minutes 6 sectors + sociodemographic data of the respondent

## Methods

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The survey examined various factors and determinants that influence the attitudes, perceptions, knowledge and consumption of food in the Western Balkans. Besides exploring motives for food consumption in general, the research focused on the attitude, perception, knowledge and consumption of four product categories within the project: fruit, products with health claims, organic products and traditional food. Different theoretical frameworks were used to shape the project design and the questionnaire. Those models of behavior predictions were:

- Models focused on prediction of rational consumer behavior preceded by cognitive processes with high personal involvement,
- Models strong in predicting automatic and spontaneous behavior of consumers with low personal involvement.

Taking into account the 4 categories of products, we concluded that the most appropriate models for understanding the consumption of the examined product categories in Focus Balkans project are those that view food choice as rational processes. We took as basis for this choice that unlike the consumption of other types of products (like meat, chocolate, snacks), which is largely determined by impulsive processes, **consumption of the examined product categories needs to be preceded by adoption of knowledge about their effects and importance, and that choosing that particular food type usually involves deliberate decisions making.**

Findings of this research can be used to target and tailor specific media-policies regarding nutrition.

## 2. Context of the Western Balkans countries

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Previous researches suggested that Western Balkans populations have unbalanced diet, which places them **high in risk of different diseases** (especially coronary). Furthermore, we wanted to examine if the region can be viewed as fairly homogenous regarding dietary habits. **Rare data on this issue indicate that according to use of fat and sweeteners, as well as**

proportion between animal and vegetable calorie intake, there are more similarities than differences between Western Balkan states. However, the data have shown that knowledge is not high for organic food and food with health claims. This means that there is a need in the entire region to continuously inform more the public about the meaning of the labeling put on food. Both health care institutions and other institutions of public importance, and manufacturers as well, should take this obligation. It is in the best interest of all subjects participating in the process of production, research and consumption of food to lift the quality of nutrition in the region to a higher level. Deterioration of the living standard definitely had a negative impact on consumers' daily diet, and we can assume that it explains the importance of the price factors in the food motives for a certain group of consumers. However, price is just one of potentially important and possible factors which influence the choice of food. As stated before, the factors can be classified into three groups of factors: factors connected with characteristics of products, factors which are connected with characteristics of individuals and external factors. In quantitative research within Focus Balkans project, we decided to analyze different motives of food consumption. Therefore, we analyzed socio-demographic characteristics of population, then knowledge about products, but also attitudes towards products and lifestyles.

## Research results

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Data of the quantitative survey showed that motives for food consumption did not differ significantly among Western Balkan countries. The most important motives were found to be: taste, price, health and natural content of the food (cf. Table 1).

Table 2 : Comparison of means of motives for food choices

Motives for food choices	Mean
Sensory Appeal	4.29
Price	4.17
Health	4.15
Natural Content	4.14
Convenience	3.96
Mood	3.86
Familiarity	3.81
Weight Control	3.66
Ethical Concern	3.13

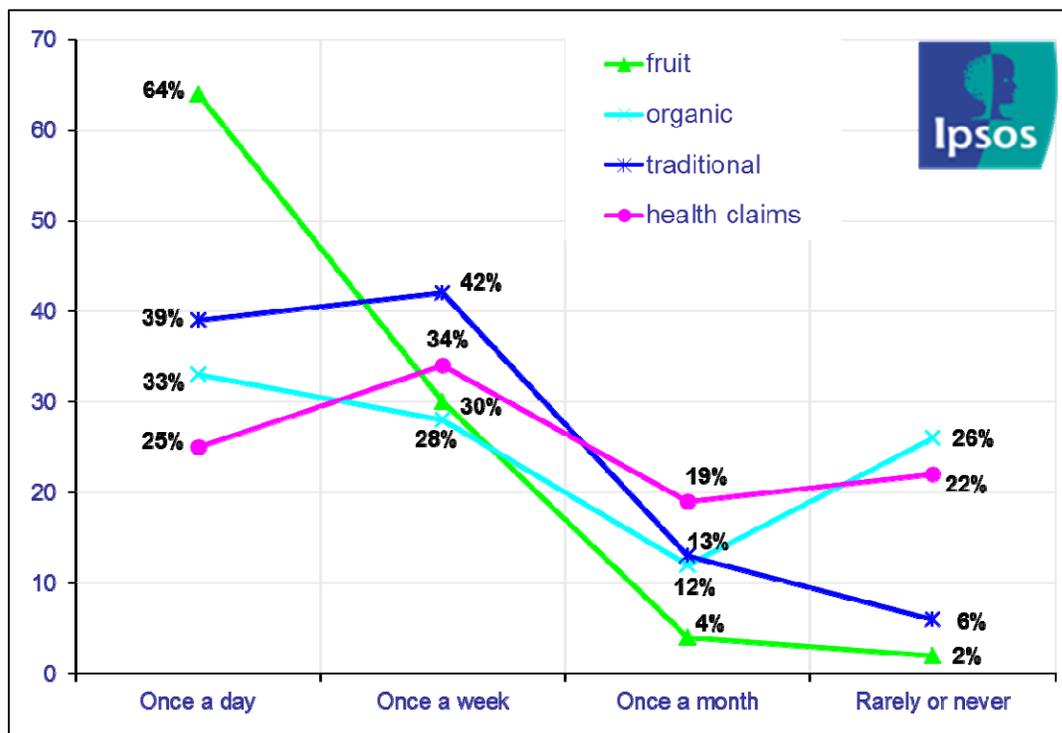
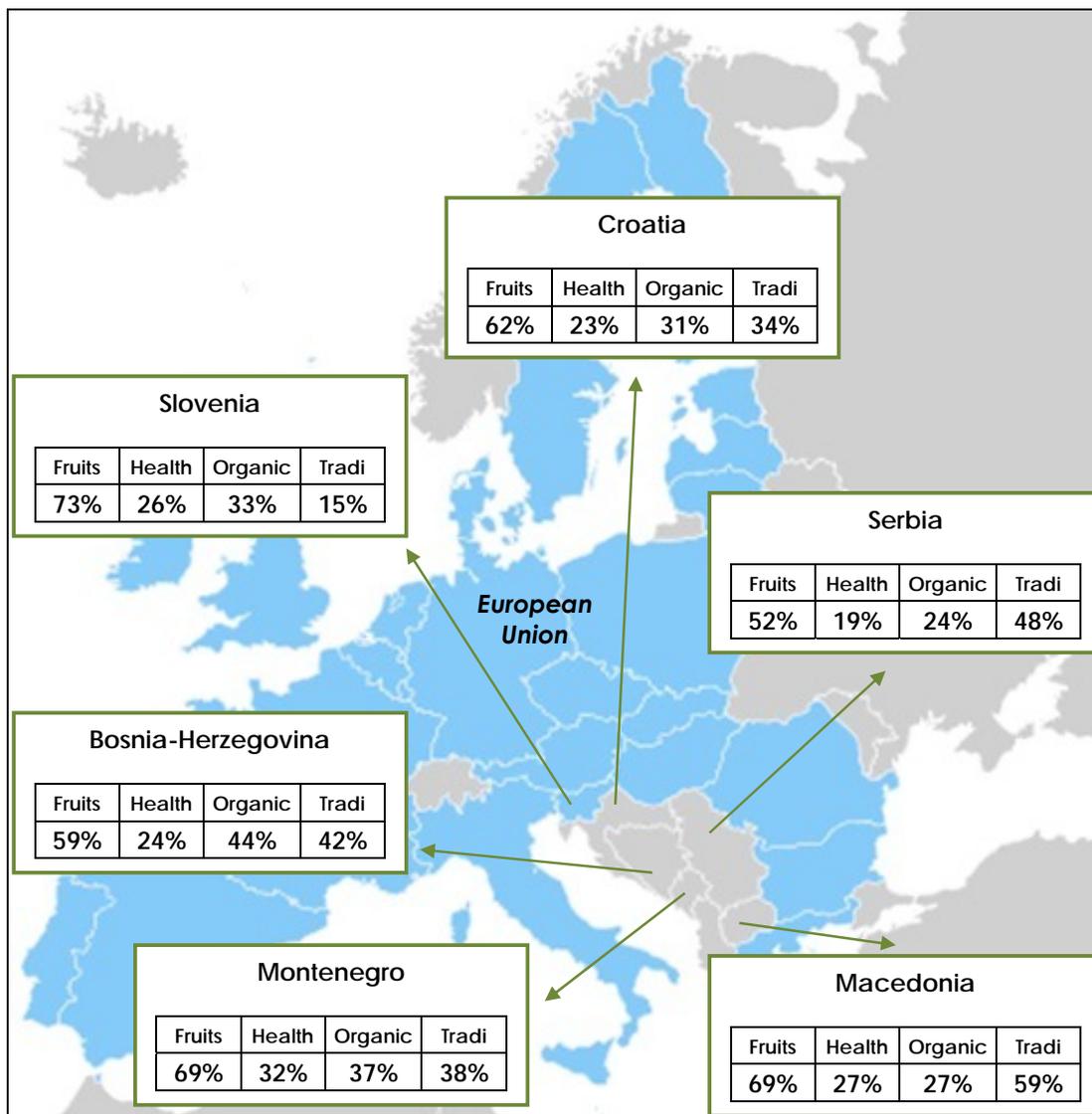


Figure 2: Frequencies of intake of the 4 products studied in the Western Balkans countries. *IPSOS Strategic Marketing*

Comparison of consumption in all four categories indicates that consumption of fruit is the most extensive; it is followed by consumption of traditional dishes, while products with health claims are consumed least. 64% of the surveyed population claims to eat fruit at least once a day, 39% consume traditional products at least once a day, 33% consume organic food at least once a day and 25% of the tested population (18+, residents of the countries where the research was carried out) consume products with health claims at least once a day (cf. figure 1).



**Figure 3 : Mapping of the percentage of the population of each country who consume at least one time per day fruits/traditional dishes/organic food/product with health claim.**

Answer to the question: "How often do you consume fruits/traditional dishes/organic food/product with health claim?"

**Fruit** is consumed most on daily basis in Slovenia, and the least in Serbia. Women, the elderly and highly educated persons consume fruit more frequently.

**Traditional dishes** are consumed most in Macedonia and Serbia and less in Slovenia. Traditional dishes are primarily prepared in households. Consumption of traditional dishes is more frequent among the elderly with low education, engaged in agriculture. Traditional dishes are perceived as tasty and healthy, prepared at home, with one's family, using inherited recipes.

Consumption of **products with health claims** is the most extensive in Montenegro and the less extensive in Serbia. These products are primarily consumed by women, younger persons and highly educated, not engaged in agriculture, but living in urban areas.

**Organic food** is perceived as food without pesticides, fertilizers or any other chemicals, as food grown on family farms with using traditional production techniques. Consumers who frequently use organic food and products with health claims have similar motives for that. Their motive is primarily a wish to be healthy and to be in a good mood. The ones who consume traditional dishes stated popularity and sensory experience to be their main motives for choice of food. Heavy fruit eaters marked price and convenience as the most important motives.

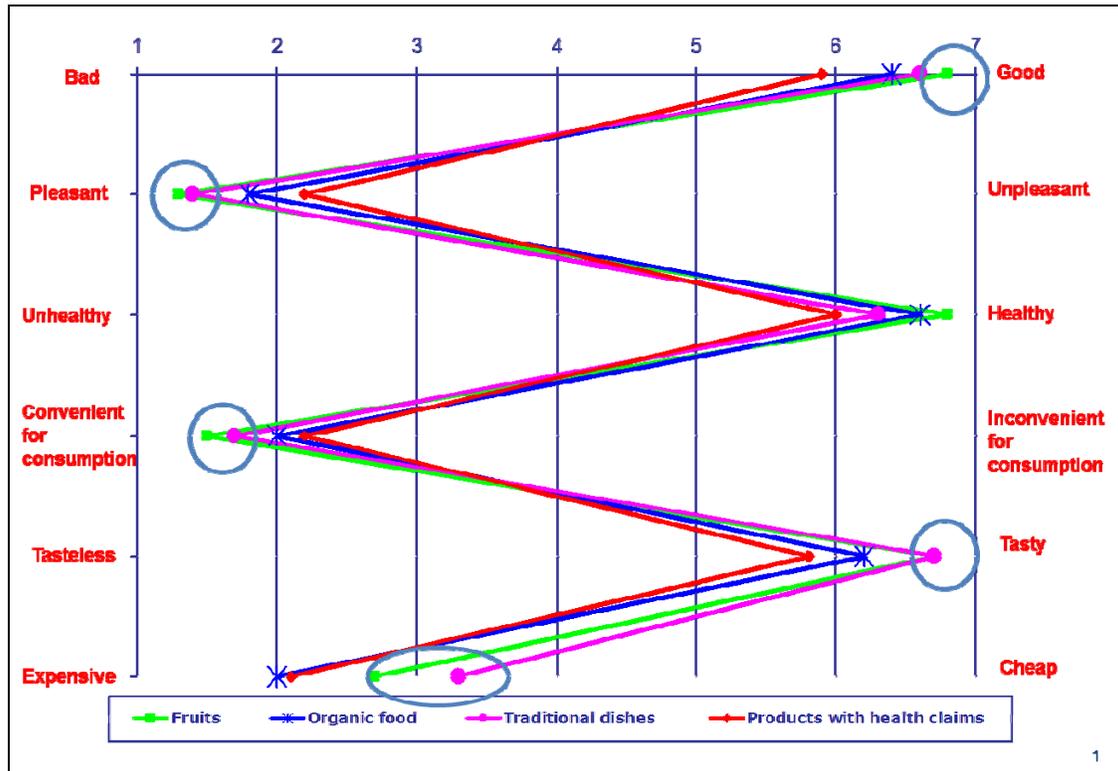


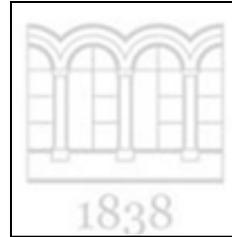
Figure 4 : Graph of opinion for the 4 products studied. *IPSOS Strategic Marketing*

The tested population expressed the most positive attitude towards fruit and traditional dishes. **These products were primarily perceived as good, pleasant, healthy, tasty, and suitable to eat.** Attitudes towards organic food and products with health claims, although still positive, were somewhat less extreme, probably because these two groups of products are still not very familiar to respondents. It seems that they do not have a clear concept about what these terms stand for, and that it causes more moderate responses.

## Partners' impression of the FOCUS-BALKANS project

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***Iris Zezelj, Faculty of philosophy, University of Belgrade, Serbia***



Personally, I find undertaking a collaborative research project of this scope to be immensely useful for my research skills, my communication skills and cultural sensitivity. Firstly, I have learnt a lot about research design, about working with large, diverse samples and about the way to elaborate the most appropriate theoretical background for a concrete purpose - all of this achieved through interactive work. The very process of sharing and improving ideas was extremely exciting for me. Secondly, I found myself a member of a large and heterogeneous consortium and I had to pay attention not only on content of communication, but also on the form. I learnt it was essential to present one's ideas in clear and simple manner, to keep one's mind open to counterarguments and to be prepared to revise your initial opinion. Finally, getting to know researchers and scientists from different western European countries and from the WBC region made me aware of different academic and cultural traditions. It was also very valuable in terms of setting quality standards for my own research. At the end, I think there is still a lot of work to be done as we now have a gem in our hands: a huge database with comprehensive data on Western Balkan food consumers that can be utilized to test a whole range of hypothesis: from clustering the food consumers based on their food choice motives and socio-demographic data to analyzing the predictive power of different variables for consumer behavior or testing the relation between knowledge, behavior and attitudes in different product categories.

**Jasna Milošević, IPSOS Strategic Marketing**



Being a part of large consortium of FOCUS-BALKANS project with different partners involved, was great and exciting experience for me, in many aspects: scientific, analytical, networking and cultural aspects.

My understanding of food consumption and food choice in general has been improved, not to mention the specific knowledge about targeting products. I became more familiar with some advanced statistical and analytical procedures and techniques. I improved my presentation skills, language skills and skills of sharing and shaping scientific opinion and ideas in cooperation with other professionals. Sharing experience with other colleagues from Europe was grateful, as well as sharing experience and thoughts with other professional orientations.

FOCUS-BALKANS project is also interesting in terms of involving different and various stakeholders. Therefore I learned more about the broader perspective of influence of the science to the society in general. Focus of some parts of the project is on emphasis the importance of science in shaping country strategy about such important issues as food consumption in WBC.

The results and findings from all work packages are very valuable. The final database from large quantitative research contains a lot of data and important results from different aspects of food consumer science and targeted products, so the consortium could use those results for publishing large number of papers in scientific journals, but also for bringing these important subjects of food consumption and food choice more close to general public in WBC.

My deep belief is that the professional cooperation among some partners of the consortium would be long lasting, and the value of FOCUS-BALKANS could therefore be also seen as a driver for other projects and cooperation in the future.

