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# TACKLING ILLIBERAL/EUROSCEPTIC NARRATIVES FROM BELOW: A CROSS-NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE



Co-funded by the  
Europe for Citizens Programme  
of the European Union



Kolegium  
Europy Wschodniej  
im. Jana Nowaka - Jeziorańskiego  
we Wrocławiu



SCUOLA  
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University of Ljubljana  
Faculty of Social Sciences

CIP - Каталогизација во публикација

Национална и универзитетска библиотека "Св. Климент Охридски", Скопје

**341.171(4-672ЕУ):316.654(497.7)(047.31)**

**341.171(4-672ЕУ):329(497.7)(047.31)**

**341.171(4-672ЕУ):316.654(4)(047.31)**

**341.171(4-672ЕУ):329(4)(047.31)**

TACKLING illiberal / Eurosceptic Narratives from Below : a cross-national perspective / [authors: **Dimitar Nikolovski, Mariglen Demiri, Manuela Caiani ...** и др.]. - Skopje : EUROTHINK - Center for European Strategies =Скопје : „ЕВРОТИНК – Центар за европски стратегии“, 2022

Начин на пристапување (URL):

<http://eurothink.mk/2022/10/30/tackling-illiberal-eurosceptic-narratives-from-below-collection-policy-brief/>.

- Текст во PDF формат, содржи 84 стр., илустр. - Наслов преземен од екранот. - Опис на изворот на ден 11.11.2022. - Фусноти кон текстот. - Authors: **Dimitar Nikolovski, Mariglen Demiri, Manuela Caiani, Benedetta Carlotti, Marko Lovec, Faris Kočan, Aljaž Roškar, Adam Balcer, Maria Winclawska.** - Библиографија кон одделни поглавја

ISBN 978-608-4923-56-5

1. **Nikolovski, Dimitar** [автор] 2. **Demiri, Mariglen** [автор] 3. **Caiani, Manuela** [автор]

а) Евроскептицизам -- Евроинтеграција -- Македонија -- Истражувања б)

Евроскептицизам -- Евроинтеграција -- Земји-членки -- Истражувања

COBISS.MK-ID 58600709

**Publisher:**  
EUROTHINK - Center for European Strategies - Skopje

**About the publisher (editor):**  
Dimitar Nikolovski, Executive Director

**Authors:**  
Dimitar Nikolovski, Mariglen Demiri, Manuela Caiani, Benedetta Carlotti,  
Marko Lovec, Faris Kočan, Aljaž Rožkar, Adam Balcer, and Maria Winclawska

**Graphic design:**  
Sashka Deskoska

**Proofreading by:**  
Marija Jones

2022

*The publication was produced within the project "**Tackling Illiberal/Eurosceptic Narratives from Below**", implemented by EUROTHINK - Center for European Strategies, in cooperation with Scuola Normale Superiore – Florence/Pisa, Italy, University of Ljubljana – Ljubljana, Slovenia, and The Jan Nowak-Jeziorański College of Eastern Europe – Wojnowice, Poland and co-funded by the Europe for Citizens programme of the European Union .*

*The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.*

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# INTRODUCTION

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Euroscepticism is a phenomenon that acts as a counterpoint to contemporary European societies that strive to realize the values of individual freedom, democracy, and the rule of law as general features of the liberal-democratic system. Individuals from members or aspiring members of the European Union that oppose those values and aspirations are viewed by the public as espousing Eurosceptic reflections and tendencies.

The theory of ‘Euroscepticism’ is defined as ‘contingent or qualified opposition as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration’ (Taggart 1998). Those who support European integration both in theory and in practice are ‘Euroenthusiasts’, while those who disapprove of both the European idea and its reality are ‘Eurorejects’. Those who lie somewhere in-between are the political actors who favor European integration per se but reject its current form. They are labeled, again, as ‘Eurosceptics’.

Another important component in this analysis are liberal democracies which adopt illiberal tendencies, discursively introducing concepts and ideas that in some way endanger the political-institutional framework in which the system operates. Unlike liberal democracies where the system of free elections not only exists but in which a circulation of critical attitude towards the state apparatus is well-accepted, in illiberal democracies such critiques are reduced or rejected (Kauth and King, 2021). It may undermine the rule of law and basic rights in terms of equality before the law, independent institutions, protection from arbitrariness and persecution of corruption.

In recent years populism as a concept, a means of winning power, and exercising power has been used extensively by political actors and researchers worldwide.

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The idea of populism that can be defined “in the minimal terms as the unique set of ideas that understand politics as a Manichean struggle between a reified will of the people and a conspiring elite” (Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2019: 3) has many strains or varieties and is adopted by political parties and political leaders in a way that suits best the conditions of a given country or region. The concept of a Eurosceptic populism can be singled out as “a particular kind of populism that relates to a political phenomenon that mingles anti-EU sentiments with populist interpretations of the world. We use this perception in the study as the theoretical background. We understand Eurosceptic populism as a set of ideas that "equate the EU with 'the corrupt elite' that stands in sharp contrast to 'the pure people', usually, but not exclusively, the nationals of a given member state" (Csehi & Zgut 2020: 3; Canovan 1999). Additionally, in this set of ideas, we also find the belief that the European Union is an anti-democratic organization because it does not represent the “will of the people” (Reungoat, 2010) and in its actions and decisions are unjust and even discriminatory to some of its members.

The sovereignty, legitimacy, cultural, and socioeconomic frameworks of Euroscepticism proposed by Andrea Pirro and Stijn van Kessel (2018) were adopted to analyze the discourse of Eurosceptic respondents. The aim here is to understand and analytically divide the narratives noted during focus groups. This publication is part of a project on tackling Euroscepticism and illiberalism from below. The aim of the project was to explore the trend by looking at individual sociodemographic groups (demand side) exposed to narratives in politics and media (supply side). The research aimed to enable a more effective response to social discontent and anxiety while, at the same time, scrutinizing skeptical points-of-view and the alternative policies that they push for.

This publication contains four public policy documents relating to four countries: Italy, Slovenia, Poland and North Macedonia. The policy documents are based on research conducted in said countries through desk research of public opinion surveys and political programs and manifestos, focus groups and interviews that analyzed the mood of citizens in these countries regarding Eurosceptic viewpoints. In these countries, particular political dynamics have developed in recent years that have served to either stimulate or challenge Eurosceptic trends within society.

The findings presented here are demonstrative of a necessity in terms of the direction of research and analysis of Euroscepticism as a narrative approach, as well as a strategy for political organization and action. The example of North Macedonia as a candidate for EU membership is especially noteworthy, especially considering that it signed two agreements with its neighbors (Bulgaria and Greece) in order to begin the EU accession process that included elements that touched on national identity: History and name of the country itself.

NATO membership has been realized, but due to several vetoes by Bulgaria, the process of beginning EU membership negotiations was delayed. This configuration of the political field in the country stimulates various types of far-right propaganda where the main archetypes are Eurosceptic and anti-democratic rhetoric, pro-Russian propaganda and distrust of state and European institutions. The other three cases espouse the development of Eurosceptic narratives in three EU member states, as reactions to shortcomings in the EU policies of migration, representation, and national sovereignty. Each policy brief contains recommendations for national governments, EU institutions, educational system, the media, and civil society.

This publication finishes with a short comparative study of the three cases, implying further areas of research and intervention.

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# TACKLING EUROSCEPTIC ILLIBERAL NARRATIVES FROM BELOW: THE CASE OF ITALY

Policy paper

Manuela Caiani\*, Benedetta Carlotti\*\*

*This policy report focuses on the case of Italy, and presents the evolution and dissemination the Eurosceptic feelings among the broader public in Italy. Indeed, the Italian scenario is a perfect rendition of a case in which a country shifts from a strong Euro-enthusiast toward a widespread Eurosceptic position. In addition to its overall depiction of the phenomenon, the empirical sections of the report offer an overview of the reasons and justifications that the Italian citizens have given for their stance against Europe. Closing normative reflections and recommendations conclude this policy report.*

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## **INTRODUCTION: ITALY AS A TRADITIONAL EURO-ENTHUSIAST COUNTRY**

Italy and Italians have generally been considered as mostly Euro-enthusiast. Prior researches in the field often expected high levels of support for the European integration processes accompanied by an overall high degree of confidence in the European Union's institutions (EU).

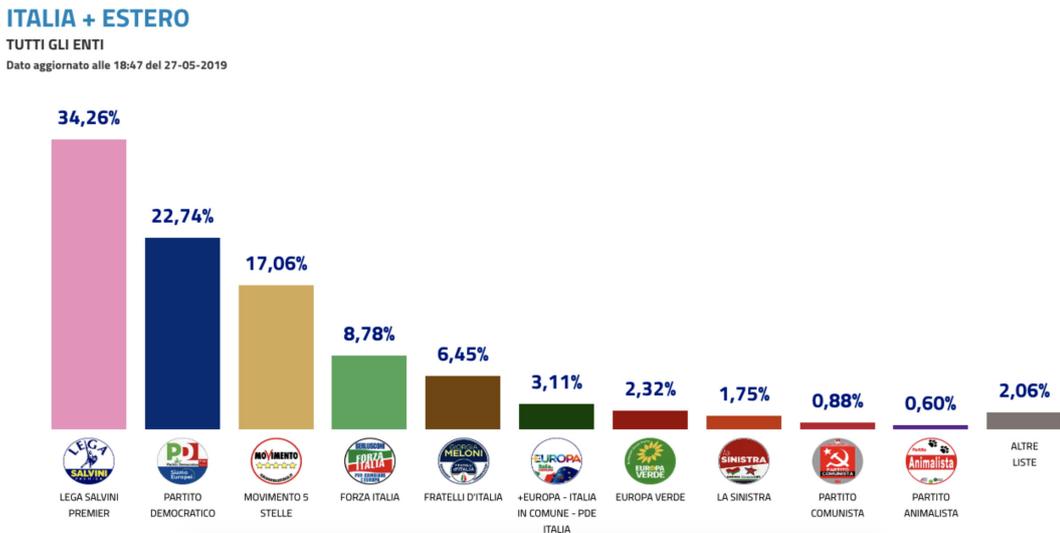
Some general hypotheses have been cited to explain the high level of support for the EU in Italy, including: the geopolitical interests and net gains for Italy from its participation in the EU; Italians' low confidence in the national institutions; their self-identification as Europeans not being jeopardized by a strong and exclusive national identification (Marks and McAdam 1999) and the positive correlation between the support for the EU and the length of the member state's participation in the EU institutions (Niedermayer 1995, Eichenberg and Dalton 1993; Carey 2002).

Indeed, as one of the founding members of the EU, Italy and, consequently the Italians, have had more time to align with and normalize the various stages of the European integration process. Furthermore, and not unlike the other Southern European member nations, Italians do not have much confidence in their national governing elite, which has been compensated for by a higher degree of confidence in the functioning of the European institutions (Sanchez and Cuenca 2000). As a matter of fact, the widespread perception that Italy is plagued by corruption and inefficient public administration only pushed the support for the European integration upwards and the EU was broadly perceived as an opportunity to "normalize" many of the Italian pathologies (Giuliani 2001; Ferrera 2003). Of additional importance is the fact that Italy is among the net receivers of generous allocations of cohesion funds in relation to the less universalistic welfare state (which is typical of Southern European member states) (Brinegar and Jolly 2005). Furthermore, as we have already mentioned, unlike in some other member states, such as Germany or Spain, the European identity in Italy goes hand in hand with a less intense perception of its national identity. This is to say that the Italian national identity is somehow "more compatible with the European identity, resulting in a sort of completion and integration" (Grilli di Cortona 2004).

In addition to the importance given to the general perception of the EU and the European identity, it is of fundamental importance to observe that the Italian elite has been commonly perceived as “bi-partisan” but always pro-EU, at least in the past. It would suffice to mention the centrist Christian Democratic Party (DC) established after the Second World War or the shift in the position of the Italian Communist Party in the 70s. This latter moved from a VERY critical attitude against the EU, on account of its anti-Atlantic position, to enthusiastic support for the EU (Verzichelli and Cotta 2000).

If this picture was true in the past, at present we can observe a rise in the number of populist Eurosceptic parties in Italy (especially on the right side of the ideological spectrum), whereby Euroscepticism has become mainstream (Vasilopoulou 2013) and more there is now widespread distrust in the EU and EU institutions among the broader public. If we look at the Eurobarometer data for the period between 2003 and 2018, we can see that there was an increase in the percentage of Italians who tend not to have confidence in the EU, it rose from 25% of the interviewees in 2003 to approximately 54% in 2018. We have to clarify, though, that the degree of confidence in the EU institutions has risen of late, owing to the management of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The European Parliament is by far the most respected of the institutions (54% of the interviewees having positive opinions about the EP) an increase that was probably measured after the unexpected death of the former President of the EP David Sassoli. However, the overall level of confidence in the EU in general is decreasing.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 1:** The electoral results of the last EP elections, Italy (2019)



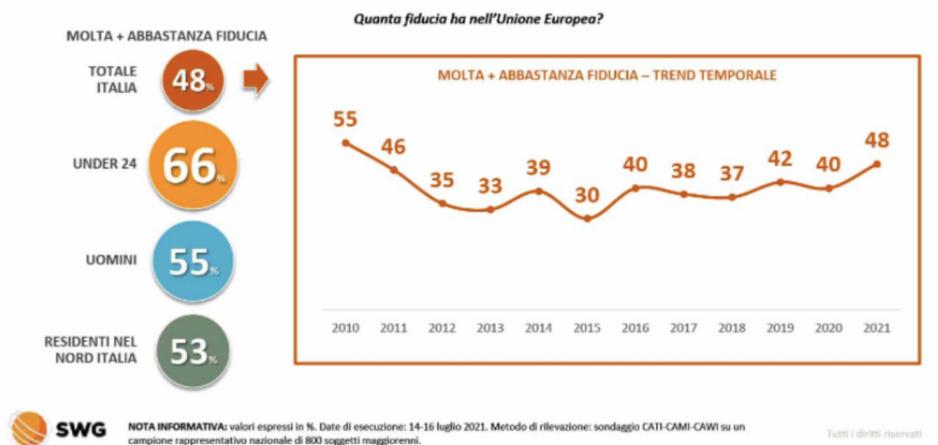
<sup>5</sup> For a complete overview of the latest release of the Eurobarometer Standard 96 Winter 2021 – 2022 (Italian report) see: [Standard\\_Eurobarometer\\_96\\_Winter\\_2021-2022\\_National\\_Report\\_IT.pdf](#)

However, Italy at present offers a different picture concerning the rise of Euroscepticism. As presented in Figure 1 below, we can observe the electoral success of the parties critical of the European Union in different ways (Figure 1 below). Indeed, the right-wing League won 34.26 % of the votes and ended up being the most successful party in the country. The third, fourth and fifth positions were occupied by the Five Stars Movement (its electoral success weaker than before, but still scoring 17.06% of the votes), Go Italy (scoring 8,78% of the votes) and Brothers of Italy (with 6,45% of the votes).

Despite this general increase in the percentage of votes won by the Eurosceptic parties in the Italian national context, the pandemic situation and the handling of the COVID-19 crisis by the EU resulted with Italians regaining their confidence in the EU. Indeed, figure 2 below represents a situation in which the confidence in the EU expressed by the Italian citizens reached a new peak owing to the way in which the EU and its institutions handled the COVID-19 crisis. Consequently, the Italians position vis a vis the EU is a phenomenon that deserves further investigation.

**Figure 2:** Survey of the European attitudes during the COVID-19 emergency (2021)

**La reazione di Bruxelles all'emergenza sanitaria fa aumentare la fiducia degli italiani nell'Unione Europea, che raggiunge un nuovo picco**



Note: Conducted by SWG, values are expressed in percentages. Date of execution: 14-16 July 2021.  
 Method: CATI-CAMI-CAWI, a national representative sample of 800 interviewees.

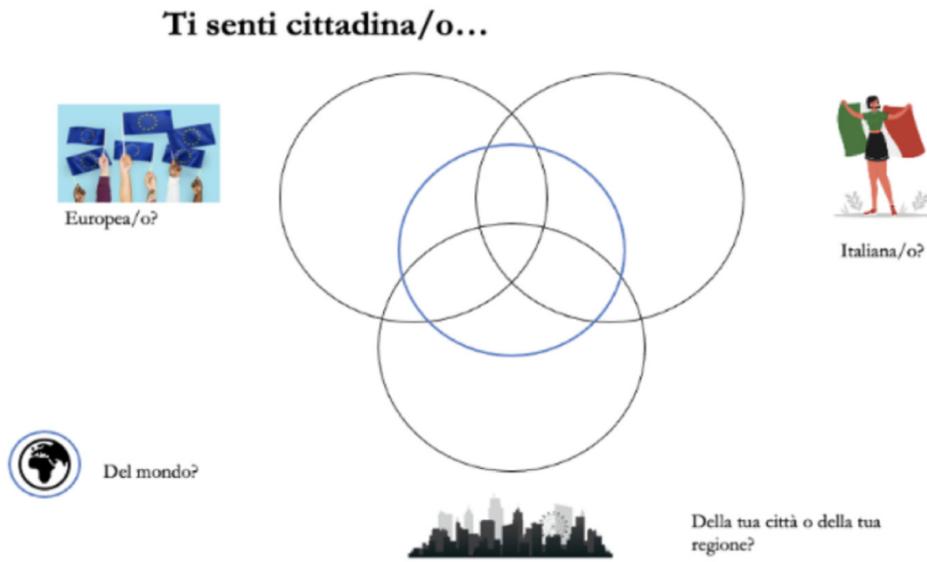
## DATA COLLECTION AND METHOD

This policy report is based on data derived from around 30 in-depth interviews with representatives of associations and political parties in Italy that represent the main foci of Euroscepticism and 5 focus groups. They were conducted in the period between July-September 2021, in three Italian regions: the first in the center (Tuscany, typically left wing leaning), the second in Rome (which has a tradition of radical right-wing political parties and a general right-wing milieu; and the third in the Northeast part of Italy (the headquarters of the right-wing populist League). Collective actors and ordinary people made up the composition of each focus group.

The questionnaire used in the interviews focused on three main areas of investigation. The aim of this first set of questions was to search for and understand the origins of the opinions concerning the main grievances and values of the represented sectors of the society. The second area of investigation focused on the views on the EU. Interviewees were asked to talk about the pros and cons of the EU from several points of view (its political dimension). In other words, the interviewees were questioned both about their organization's stance toward the EU and about their organization's position with respect to the EU as a political system. The last area of investigation concerned the organization's activities with reference to the EU on a national, supranational and international level. More specifically, the interviewees were asked to provide some examples about their national, supranational and international activities that might also anticipate the activities of other similar organizations (the contextual dimension). Following more or less the same structure and content, the focus groups also used audio-visual materials to stimulate the discussion among the participants.

The last area of investigation concerned the participants' sense of citizenship. The participants were shown the image below and asked whether they identify as citizens of their city, their region, their nation, Europe or of the world (see figure 3).

**Figure 3:** Graph presented to the FGs' participants to express their sense of political identification



Note: Question, “Do you feel like citizens of ...”, please locate graphically yourself in the picture. Possible choices: 1) citizens of Europe; 2) Italian citizens; 3) citizens of their town or region; 4) citizens of the world.

## THE FINDINGS

Having observed changes in the Italian society with regards to its ever increasing of Euroscepticism in recent years, this study delved deeper to better understand the Italian positions vis-à-vis the EU expressed below. The core objective of this study was to provide a more profound analysis of the attitudes expressed by the associations on the ground, their attitudes were then compared to the attitudes of the so-called “ordinary citizens” - people that did not belong to any specific association/organization or political party, and participated in the study as part of the civil society. Our main findings point at a multifaced Euroscepticism in Italy. Europe means different things to different people and political actors (from the Right to the Left) and it is criticized accordingly, on the basis of a plurality of reasons: economic, cultural and political.

### Europe as a ‘Community of values’

We could identify several dimensions of the contestation against Europe in Italy, the main being the cultural. Europe is no longer perceived as a community of common values.

For instance, we could record the use of **reformist arguments**: European institutions were supported, but with *“Eurocritical positions”* (Saputo, *Movimento Federalista Europeo*). According to this movement, the EU should go back to its founding values, in order to recover a shared sense of solidarity and to avoid *“a utilitarian drift, that is to say, the Union itself has become the place one goes to with expectations, but those values that used to be inherent to the foundations of the Union are not really on the table anymore”* (Saputo MFE). Similarly, a representative of the Greenpeace movement was convinced that the EU was *“a great opportunity that was often missed and went unnoticed.”* (Gianni Greenpeace. He then went on to stress that *“the sore point of this European Union is the contrast that actually exists between the “dynastic powers” of the elite that I think holds the reins in th entire game, and the respect for people's rights”*.

Another organization that used reformist arguments was the Comitato No Tunnel TAV that pointed at the *“disconnection between the values underlying the European Union and the practical realization that sows divisions between the capitals, which, in consequence, engender many other differences and rifts among the member states. I am obviously referring to the strong differences that exist between the member*

*states in the South and in the North of the Union. The states in the North are obviously more powerful economically and play their part and achieve their goals at the expense of the states in the South of the Union” (Cardosi – Comitato No Tunnel TAV).*

## The deficiencies of political Europe

In addition to this, when researching the organizations’ attitude toward the EU institutions, it was interesting to observe that all of them lamented the substantial deficiency of democratic transparency and pointed at the need to increase the power of the European Parliament, at the same time eliminating the Council’s power of veto and reducing the powers of the non-elected European Commission (**reformist arguments**). A right leaning representative of the League lay emphasis on the demand that the EP should *“become a real democratic agora with greater powers than the powers that the various representatives of national governments have, in this sense I am obviously referring to the Council”* (Santini – League). The only organization that expressed a rejective attitude (what we can call as **‘rejectionist arguments’**) was Forza Nuova, whose representative openly rejected the European Union institutions in their existing shape, while proposing a transformation of the EU into a *“superstructure that facilitates the trade between the states. This structure should perform the sole function of facilitating the circulation of goods and people”* (Castellini – FN). According to FN, each member state should regain control over some of its former competencies, over “printing money” and regulating immigration in particular.

Concerning the relationship between the organizations included in the interviews and the European Union, we might observe that all of them tend to have ties with their counterparts on both European and international levels. All the interviewees referred to the problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the slowing down of all kinds of initiative on a national, supranational and international level.

These findings were corroborated by the focus groups. With references both the cultural and political integration, table 1 below summarizes the main results. Here we can see more radical positions (rejecting the EU as an overall project) and more moderate positions (accepting the process of EU integration, but contesting some of the policies and politics in it). Interestingly, both the extreme right (represented by the Azione Studentesca) and the extreme left (represented by EuroStop) participants shared strong rejectionist arguments (even an exit position in the case of EuroStop) against the European Union, and they even declined in its capacity of a political union.

Table reporting the principal types of criticisms against the EU in Italy (source: focus groups)

		Reformist	Rejectionist
Type of criticism against the EU	Cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Criticism of the political integration leading to cultural assimilation: <i>“The first image (a Muslim woman with the European flag), for example, gives me the idea of a girl who arrived here on a scholarship, with a language certificate, she came here and we are grateful to heaven that she came here. The second (riots in the Banlieue) is a model of assimilation that exposes the colonial history of the European Union. We are stained with blood, all of us”</i> (FG – Padua: Ordinary citizen)</li> <li>• Lack of cultural homogeneity and responsibility in each of the member states: <i>“I find it hard to think about what the Union can do for that second picture (riot in the Banlieue), I can’t understand how that is the history of a single country, such as France, and that each state has its own history. Cultural integration was complicated 80 years ago, even with a much more homogeneous populations. The same difficulties that you find within a nation, can be identified in Europe as well, obviously ,with a different level of severity.”</i> (FG – Rome: League)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rejection of the cultural integration on the basis of ethnic reasons: <i>“the single individual, together with the national community, recognizes something superior and that is the nation, and together with the other peoples of Europe, they recognize the community of states (...)Here we have an attempt at cultural integration as a guarantee that more peoples and more ethnic groups will be able to live together, but the results are these, they are chaos”</i> (FG – Padua: Azione Studentesca)</li> <li>• Rejection of the European immigration policy by creating ethnic substitutions and causing internal instability: <i>“with regards to illegal immigration, well, our idea is to create a naval blockade off the coast of Libya or North Africa. With illegal immigration, people come here when they look for work and are offered work in the agriculture where they are paid two euros per hour, a much lower salary, of course, but in this way Italians lose their jobs too, isn’t it so?”</i> (FG – Padua: Azione Studentesca)</li> </ul>
	Political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The rise of abstentionism in the European Elections related to the feeling of detachment from the EU: <i>“abstentionism makes us understand how detached Italians feel from the EU. There is a great distance that comes from the lack of identification with the idea of European Union and the effectiveness of this vote, as well as from how much it is worth and can shift the political balance.”</i> (FG – Rome: Ordinary citizen)</li> <li>• The lack of participation as a typical malaise of the political integration: <i>“in my opinion there is one thing missing in our society that is killing our political culture even on a European level, and that is participation”</i> (FG – Florence: 6000 Sardine)</li> <li>• A general positive view of the EP election: <i>“On the issue of voting, I believe that it is absolutely necessary. You can express your position and have it represented on a European level”</i> (FG – Florence: Ordinary citizen)</li> <li>• The insufficient power of the EP: <i>“What I would change is to give the EP legislative capacity. Now the EP votes some resolutions but it cannot do anything. It has no real representative role. This could be the first major change in the EU that would bring people closer.”</i> (FG – Rome: League)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rejection of the political integration and creation of a new Union of Mediterranean states: <i>“I am much more pro-exit than him (Azione Studentesca). The less I see the Germans, the better off I am (...) we are in favour of establishment of a Euro-Mediterranean union. I am in favor of an economic system in which exchanges need not be done in money but in a currency that measures the hours of work. That is to say, an hour of my work is worth as much as an hour of a Greek’s work. Obviously, there is a problem, we have moved on, you have to understand how to do it but you have to do it in a different manner here.”</i> (FG – Padua: EuroStop)</li> </ul>

These criticisms against the EU were complemented with a political identification which generally goes beyond the local and national level in the case of our interviewed citizens. In sum, almost all of our interviewed partners simultaneously identified as citizens of their own city and country and as citizens of Europe (and of the world even). Furthermore, most of the participants, regardless of their ideological affiliations, stressed that the concept of citizenship is relational, varying in accordance with the reference context: *“it is difficult to answer this question. I need something else to understand what I am a citizen of. I would probably feel like a Roman citizen in Milan, I would feel like an Italian citizen in Sweden, I would feel like a European citizen in Iran, maybe during an alien invasion, I would feel like a citizen of the world. Surely, if I had to answer with a single option I would feel like an Italian citizen.”* (FG – Padua: League).

## Economic critiques against the EU

Finally, we observed some strong economic critiques against the EU in Italy. They were voiced by both the Right and Left. While the Left criticized the shortages in the social protection, especially in times of crisis, the Right offered a mixture of economic liberalism (e.g. the Lega, we want to be free from the European dictatorship), and some nostalgia for a past in which the nation states could control the socio-economic processes of their country. For example, in the criticism by the extreme right the EU was defined as a *“Union of banks and private institutions”* where the financial governance worked as an *“eternal noose around the necks of the countries”* (Castellini, Forza Nuova). While, as it has been cited earlier, the criticism from the left emphasized the absence of homogeneity, when determining the salaries, for instance. Indeed, the economic union was defined as a *“joke, because, how come that the wages are different in different nations? A factory worker in Italy earns 1200 euros, while in Germany the same worker earns more than 2000 euros. We have taken States with totally different economic conditions and put them together ... so I think that it is not true that there is economic integration”* (Aldo, EuroStop Padua). In general, we can reiterate that there is a widespread perception that the economic union is an *“attempt at equality among unequals. If it continues like this, it will never succeed. We used to have an asset whose name was the European Community, nowadays we do not have it anymore. So, either we get back to the Community or we will never succeed”* (Five Stars Movement Florence).

## DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As highlighted in the introduction to this report, Italy has departed from its substantially pro-European or Euro-enthusiast position. This was corroborated by the findings of this study. In other words, at present, there is a broad variety of positions towards the EU in Italy, along with criticisms of the various levels of integration.

This report established that the opposition to the EU, generally defined as Euroscepticism, is a multidimensional concept. While almost all the participants in the survey accepted the general ideas of the EU and its integration processes, some constructive criticism was also meted out.

What strongly emerged from the analysis of the data derived from both the interviews and the focus groups was the intersection between the two core dimensions of the EU integration: its contextual dimension (culture, economy and politics) and its political dimension (policy, politics and polity).

The visions of the EU that they formed depended on their origin: the right leaning and left leaning participants envisaged things differently. While the right endorsed only a lesser degree of integration (or even rejection in the case of FN) and was in favor of a confederative or more intergovernmental transformation of the EU, the left proposed alternatives to the current situation in the EU and opted for a pragmatic type of opposition. These participants were keener to see a more supranational organization (with the Movimento Federalista Europeo asking for a federalist European Structure) but one that would pay more attention to the social aspects of the EU and go back to its founding values. More specifically, the left-leaning participants proposed a higher degree of solidarity among the member states together with closing the democratic gap. Concerning this last aspect, it is interesting that all the participants, with the exception of FN, a party that totally reject the EU institutions, emphasized the importance of the EP elections, although they are all aware of the fact that the EP at the moment has very little independence and power despite being the only truly democratic institution of the EU.

Lastly, it was interesting to observe that the ordinary people involved in the FG discussion were aware of the general aspects of the EU although they did not possess any deeper knowledge about its technicalities. As a matter of fact, there is a general sense of detachment between the EU institutions and the people.

This general feeling of detachment is coupled with a feeling that the EU is not moving in the right direction. In other words, the ordinary citizens involved in the discussion portrayed the social situation in the EU from below as not reflected in its current institutional set-up. This expectation to address the needs of ordinary people on a European level clashes with the general perception of the EU as a union of the banks and great economic powers.

On the basis of the general findings emerging from this study three broad recommendations can be formulated, the first to the academic field, while the other two to the world of politics.

Firstly, Euroscepticism as a concept is complex, multidimensional although broadly defined as negative even in the academic environment. However, as it has emerged in this study, not all criticism coming from below should be perceived as negative and considered a malaise of the European society. Academics should scrutinize Euroscepticism in its different dimensions whenever they operationalize this concept independently, unrelated to the object of observation (e.g.: political parties, organizations or ordinary citizens). Furthermore, some of the researched aspects, concerning both the contextual and the political dimensions of the EU, overlapped, thus a deeper and more nuanced observation of such overlaps should serve as matter for further research in the field with a broader focus including ordinary citizens.

Secondly, this study shows that the EU is perceived as distant and detached and not democratic enough by the citizens in general. While it is not true that ordinary people and organizations are praying for Italy to leave the European Union, this general sense of detachment and lack of representation should be at least mitigated, or it will most likely progress toward complete rejection. In other words: “the political scepticism is likely to cumulate, and that specific discontent (à la Easton) could translate into more generalized discontent and could spill over from the authorities to the regime” or to the political community itself” (Weßels 2007, Carlotti 2020). All in all, as a general recommendation, the objectives of the politicians on a national and supranational level should definitely consider ways to improve the inclusion of the citizens in the EU decision-making process and better and extensive education concerning the EU integration processes.

Lastly, there is a special recommendation to the ruling elite both on the national and European levels, and in particular to those politicians belonging to the so-called “Brussels bubble”, generally recognized by the participants in this study as “technocrats” or “eurocrats”. And indeed, to avoid the transformation of the reformist criticism into rejectionist criticism, the only viable option is to move in the direction of collecting, analyzing and including all the constructive criticisms into a potential reform of the EU and its institutional structure.

The only way to construct a truly democratic process on an EU level is to let the critical voices and stances become part of effective debates and to follow a new trajectory of change inside the EU in order to mitigate those rejectionist voices, which, if left unheard, could lead to a disruption of the EU integration project.

Consequently, a study that researches these Eurosceptic stances expressed from below should fundamentally accept that Euroscepticism has to be understood as a multidimensional concept concerning perceptions (Anderson 2020). In other words, Euroscepticism implies the existence of many different perceptions of the EU and the European Integration project, revealing that people take Europe as a topic per se. This last assertion is of crucial importance for a better understand Euro-scepticism in contemporary Europe and it is of great help when devising measures how to fight it, which would include economic, cultural and political aspects.

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# TACKLING EUROSCEPTICISM AND ILLIBERALISM FROM BELOW: THE CASE OF SLOVENIA

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*In this policy paper, we analyse the appeal of the Eurosceptic and Illiberal narratives pushed by the domestic political elites for individual socio-demographic groups. Focusing on Slovenia, the policy paper builds on two sets of data – the first set was obtained through desk research, with a focus on the Illiberalism and Euroscepticism in the Slovenian political arena on the basis of party programmes and opinion polls, while the second set recorded the voices of individuals via focus groups and interviews about Eurosceptic and Illiberal narratives taking into account both the public opinion and advocacy experts. The analysis of the desk research has shown that Slovenian citizens have until recently been generally supportive of the EU, including the political elites that have not built their political programmes upon relativisation of the EU.*

*However, several of its internal crises have contributed to the perception of the Slovenian citizens that their voice within the EU is weak.*

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# INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, the EU has had to face growing Euroscepticism and illiberalism (Lovec et al. 2019). The trend was explained with respect to the global crises acting as triggers for the crises specific to the integration, such as the Eurozone and the migration crisis, thus revealing the dysfunctionality of the EU. These crises also fed the growing illiberalism in the Eastern EU and caused Brexit. Some argued that the rise of Euroscepticism and illiberalism had deeper root causes, such as the changes in the international system, that is to say, the more assertive role of Russia and emergence of China, which have destabilised the (Western) international order, resulting in its inherent crisis as demonstrated by the victory of Donald Trump at the US elections in 2016. Others pointed at the growing disparities created by the international (neo)liberal governance in the area of economics.

This policy paper is part of a project dedicated to tackling Euroscepticism and illiberalism from below.<sup>9</sup> The aim of the project was to explore the trend by specifically looking at individual sociodemographic groups (demand side) attracted by the narratives in politics and media (supply side). The research also aimed to facilitate the response to the social discontent and anxiety while at the same time, based on the best available knowledge, to scrutinise the sceptical voices and the alternative solutions they provide.

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<sup>9</sup> The research project involved four different countries, three EU member states, one old (Italy), and two new members (Slovenia and Poland), and one EU candidate country (North Macedonia). All surveyed countries shared undeniable Eurosceptic and illiberal trends, not only among certain sociodemographic groups and opposition parties, but also inside their government coalitions and their supporting majorities, which gave a new dimension to the trend, regarding the role of Eurosceptic and illiberal government policy. Moreover, strong links were identified among the Eurosceptic and illiberal actors in all those countries, which in turn created a regional dynamic that countered the international pressures.

The focus of this paper is on Slovenia as a new member state where before the crises period, both the public and the elites shared strong pro-EU and liberal attitudes (Lovec et al. 2019). The EU crises transformed into the crisis of the political elites that relied on the EU for their own political legitimacy. The crisis of the centrist politics created space for more radical voices, and radicalised some of the existing parties and party elites.

In this paper we present the results of the desk research on Euroscepticism and illiberalism in Slovenia with reference to the opinion surveys and party manifestos. This is followed by presentation of the results of the two focus groups with adherents to the Eurosceptic and illiberal views (one from the far right and one from the radical left) and interviews with experts in public opinion, media and advocacy. The interviews were used to grasp the narratives from bottom-up and top-down. In its conclusion the paper discusses the findings and proposes recommendations.

# DESK RESEARCH

## Euroscepticism

Euroscepticism is typically defined as a qualified (soft Euroscepticism) or an outright (hard Euroscepticism) rejection of the European integration. Until recently, it has not been particularly strong in Slovenia, which is equally true for both the electorate and the political parties. Currently, three political parties support Slo-exit, while other two would like to see more fundamental reforms of the EU. Only one of the parties supporting Slo-exit and one of the two parties supporting more fundamental reforms are parliamentary parties. One of them was a member of the government coalition for only a brief period of time and the other, although not a member of the government coalition, supports the current government coalition in the parliament. For many years, Slovenia used to be one of the countries with the highest support for the EU according to the polls such as Eurobarometer. Euroscepticism is not prevalent in any of the important sociodemographic categories, but it is rather related to some specific negative impacts of the EU and to the more general discontent.

## Party manifestos

In the last parliamentary elections of 2018, the Slovenian National Party (Slovenska nacionalna stranka – SNS), United Slovenia (Zedinjena Slovenija) and the Socialist Party of Slovenia (Socialistična partija Slovenije – SPS), the three political parties in Slovenia that were in favour of a Slo-exit (the essential feature of the hard Euroscepticism), won less than 5% of votes in total. Most of the votes went to SNS, which managed to become a parliamentary party, having failed to reach the 4% threshold in the previous elections. The Homeland League (Domovinska liga), the party calling for fundamental reforms in the EU did not participate in the parliamentary elections in 2018. The Left (Levica),<sup>10</sup> yet another party in favour of more fundamental EU reforms, emerged in 2014 in the context of the global financial crisis and the Eurozone crisis. It won a bit more than 9% of total votes.

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<sup>10</sup> Initially, the party was called United Left (Združena levica) as it consisted of three separate parties. Later on it was renamed into The Left.

However, the share of Eurosceptic voters on the Left is questionable as the EU did not feature prominently in their debates, unlike the NATO membership, where the Left was questioning both its purpose and Slovenia's role in it. In these elections the turnout of voters was the highest in the oldest group of voters (37% in the group of 60+) (DVK 2018). Although older voters are typically the most Eurosceptic, Eurosceptic parties achieved only marginal results despite the overrepresentation of their demographic pool of their voters.

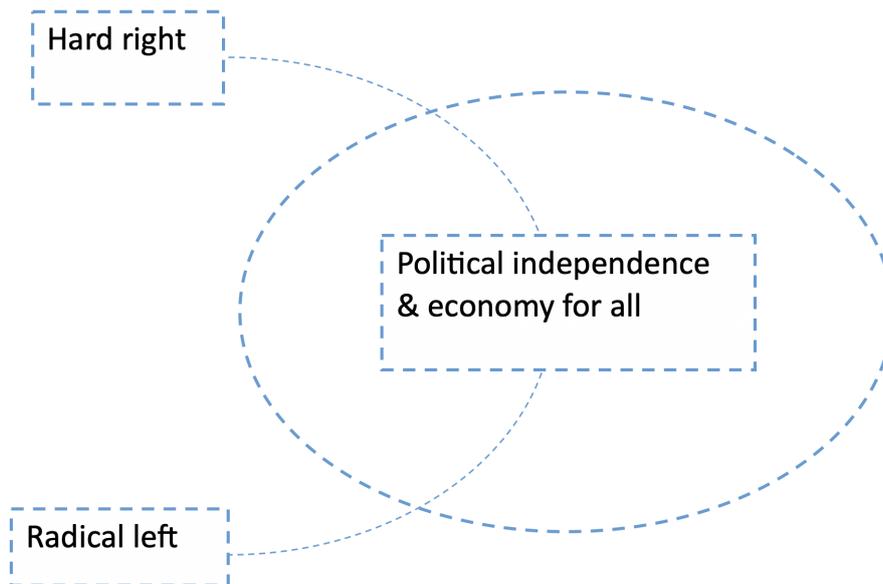
In the European parliament elections in 2019, only the Homeland League and the Left participated, and neither was able to reach the threshold, which was about 7-8% (the Left was close) though one of the candidates of The Left was also one of the Spitzenkandidates of a European Party group. The softer positions of the parties when they participated in the EU elections might be explained with the specifics of the elections, such as the higher threshold and lower turnout, as well as the role of the European party groups and the manner in which discussions were marked out. More recently, Euroscepticism has also appeared in the rhetoric of some other parties, including the chief right-wing party, the Slovenian Democratic Party (Slovenska demokratska stranka – SDS), e.g. concerning migration policies, the rule of law and various identity issues, some of which we discuss below under illiberalism.

**Table: Eurosceptic parties in Slovenia**

Party	EU (soft/hard Euroscepticism)	Politics (NATO, third countries)	Economy (trade, investment)	Identity (migration)
<b>United Slovenia</b>	According to the party, EU thwarts national sovereignty. The party is against a European federation and emphasizes the absence of directly elected institutions. European politicians are described as “criminals and thieves”.			The EU migration policy is considered a “genocide against Europeans”.
<b>Slovenian National Party</b>	The party is in favour of Slo-exit in order to prevent the negative impact of the trade agreements and to enable Slovenia to engage in stronger trade relations with the Russian federation.	Slovenia should make decisions independent of the of foreign actors; all relevant decisions relevant should be made in Slovenia and not in the EU or USA.	The party is against the intensification of the trade between EU and USA (i.e. TTIP) to prevent the foreign investors from interfering with the right to regulate and prevent the negative impact on agriculture, economy and environment.	
<b>The Homeland League</b>	The EU is important for Slovenia and its economy but it should be reformed.	The party is against centralisation and Brussels based governance, and federalisation.		The party is against the progressive principles concerning the migrants
<b>The Left</b>	The party is against the existing regulation that restricts the establishment of a more social union and enables companies to avoid taxation.	The party is against joining PESCO. The EU should demilitarise and cut ties with NATO.	It is in favour of sovereignty so that the states can determine their economic/trade policies.	
<b>The Socialist Party of Slovenia</b>	The party supports Slo-exit, the EU is described as a “fascist organisation” headed by Germany. The member states are losing their sovereignty and follow the dictate of the German elites.		The party supports the return of Slovenia's own currency, stronger cooperation with BRICs and Russia.	

Source: SNS (2021); Zedinjena slovenija (2021); SPS (2021); Domovinska liga (2021); Levica (2021)

## Scheme 1: Stylised presentation of party manifestos



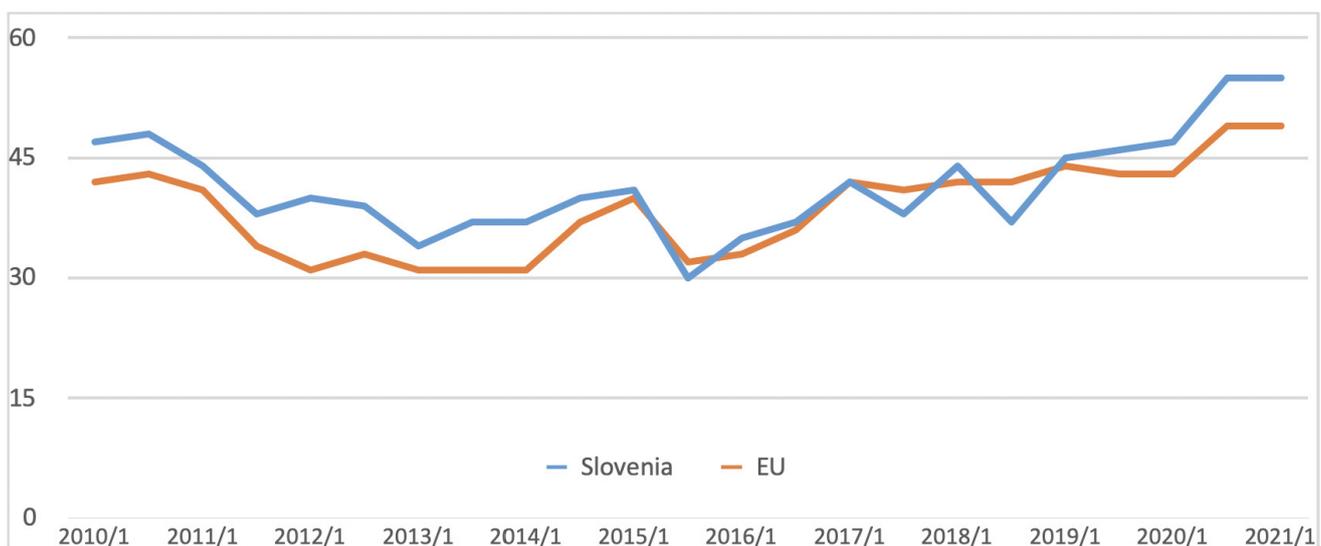
Two of the parties that support Slo-exit and one of the parties that support fundamental reforms belong to the far right, while one of the parties that support Slo-exit and one of the parties for fundamental reforms belong to the radical left. Their shared feature is the call for independence. In the case of the more traditional parties, this is articulated as more general independence for the state and less influence by foreign factors (SNS), including some states (USA-SNS, Germany-SPS). The term sovereignty is used by several parties across the political spectrum (United Slovenia, SPS, The Left). When it comes to the EU, the parties supporting Slo-exit emphasize the need for independent decision-making (SNS), the democratic deficit (United Slovenia) and the foreign dictate (SPS), while the parties in favour of more fundamental reforms articulate their positions as against all imposed progressivism (Homeland League) and pro-capital regulatory constraints (the Left). The right-wing parties specifically oppose the centralism of Brussels institutions (the Homeland League) and the federation (United Slovenia, the Homeland League). Economy is more important than security issues, followed by identity. Two parties (one far right and two radical left) oppose trading (SNS), one opposes neoliberal rule (the Left) and one the euro (SPS). Two traditional parties would like to see more trade with the Russian federation (SNS) and BRICS (SPS) while the Homeland League sees benefits in more economic cooperation within the EU. United Slovenia and the Left oppose the membership in NATO. All right-wing parties give emphasis to migration (one uses a nativist argumentation – United Slovenia) while the Homeland League also draws attention to other identity issues such as the LGBTQ+ ideology. The old parties (SNS, SPS, United Slovenia) are hard Eurosceptic and accentuate the pressures by other states and the need to cooperate more with third countries, while the new parties (the Left, the Homeland League) are more moderate and focus more on specific EU policies and identity issues.

## Public opinion

According to the Eurobarometer, Slovenians have been on average positive about the EU, their EU membership and various EU policies, but they believe that their voice does not count for much. The attitude veered towards negative during the crises, but it has returned to the positive end of the scale afterwards. Slovenians prioritise the overall economic situation in the country, and it has featured more prominently than in the rest of the EU. Slovenians are aware of the importance of the EU policies regarding cooperation, such as the four freedoms and peace, as well as of the significance of the common currency and have scored higher in this respect than the other EU citizens on average. Other issues, such as migration, have climbed up on the list of priorities more recently, e.g. during the migration crisis. Slovenians have more confidence in the EU institutions than in their national government, except for the policy areas of security and migration where they have displayed (occasionally) more confidence in their national government. Slovenians have traditionally identified strongly with Europe/EU and more than \ the citizens of the other EU member states on average.<sup>11</sup>

### Scheme 2: Share of respondents that have confidence in EU

(Source: Standard Eurobarometer no. 73-95)



<sup>11</sup> The case of migration is particularly interesting. Slovenians constantly featured among those in the EU that expressed the most support for free movement. At the same time, in some of the polls, migration was seen (especially following the 2015-2016 migration crisis) as one of the key challenges. Although their support for asylum policies was the lowest of that for all other policy initiatives listed, two thirds of the Slovenians were still in favour of further reforms. Compared with EU average, Slovenians associated this EU-related free movement with more criminal activities and less control at the EU borders.

In the 2020 Parlemeter poll over half of the respondents were positive about the EU and only 8% were negative. The trend was positive; Slovenia was among top five EU members regarding the growth of public support (+24%). The same was valid for other questions regarding the EU membership too, such as the benefits of Slovenia's membership (especially the economic cooperation, but the freedom of movement also). The EU has enjoyed more positive reception, as opposed to the domestic government. Rule of law was seen as the biggest obstacle between EU institutions and Slovenia. This was a result of the tensions between the SDS and the EU that we discuss below. Interestingly, most of the people believed that things in the EU were going in the right direction, while a slightly smaller majority believed that they are not going in the right direction in Slovenia. This can be explained with the declining support for the SDS led government. Slovenia ranked high (second) on the list of those who believed that bright future was awaiting the EU after the pandemic.

The Parlemeter did not include details on the demography. According to standard Eurobarometer 74 (2020), more men found the level of democracy in the EU satisfactory compared to women, self-employed, high-middle and high class and those with right-wing political orientation. According to the literature, the negative attitude was more common among the older population, and the population with lower education and lower incomes, but these factors were not of crucial importance when explaining this attitude, as the negative attitude was not prevalent in any of these groups and people with a negative attitude were distributed relatively evenly across the different socio-demographic categories. The party preferences correlated with the attitudes towards the EU, forming a U-shaped curve in which Eurosceptic positions were more common among the supporters of the parties on the extremes of the left-right political spectrum. Still, the correlation was more important when more specific issues were brought up in the context of the domestic debates.

### **Key findings of the desk research concerning Euroscepticism:**

- The support for the EU has until recently been very high both among the ordinary Slovenian citizens and the elites;
- The 'functional' policy areas where the role of the EU competences was strong, such as the economy, have played a central role for the Slovenian citizens and political parties;
- Slovenians tend to have more confidence in the EU than in the national elites regarding most of the issues, except for the migration issue;
- Slovenians believe that their voice within the EU is weak, and this features prominent in the programmes of the Eurosceptic parties as part of the reason for their calls for independent decision-making.

## Illiberalism

The notion of illiberalism is less clear than that of Euroscepticism. Following Kauth and King (2021) (based on previous work by Zakaria and Schenkkan) illiberal democracy is characterised by system where free elections still exist and there is no explicit violent oppression of citizens. Nonetheless, the state apparatus rejects the criticism voiced by the citizens and hinders their participation in the political process. It may undermine the rule of law and the basic rights and equality before the law, and hinder independent institutions, protection from arbitrariness and persecution of corruption.

## Party politics

Compared to Euroscepticism, the research of illiberalism based on party programmes is more difficult as no party would directly admit that its aims are to undermine the rule of law or individual rights. It is also difficult to assess the actions of the parties that are yet to reach the 4% threshold. More recently, the turn towards illiberalism has been attributed to the SDS, and to its long-term leader Janez Janša in particular, since his support for the illiberal regimes in Hungary and Poland. From the EU perspective, this was seen as problematic, as these countries could block the decision-making processes about the rule of law in the EU by vetoing proposals. The rule of law issue divided the Slovenian electorate. SDS lost some support, but continued to poll first because the centre-left opposition was fragmented. The SDS-led minority government was supported by SNS.

Slovenia's scores on freedom are quite high (95/100) according to Freedom House (2021). And yet, some issues have been identified as problematic, such as the pressures on the media and civil society. SDS representatives have verbally attacked journalists, government has cut the financing of the national press agency and has supported the development of partisan media, thus obstructing media pluralism. Government has also harassed public protesters, using the pandemic measures as an excuse. Some commentators have argued that the SDS behaviour has worked as counterbalance for that of the leftists, a challenge to the 'deep state structures' (Turk 2020).

**Table: Illiberalism in Slovenia**

	<b>Slovenian Democratic Party</b>	<b>Slovenian National Party</b>
<b>Liberal international order</b>	Janša supported Orban’s blockade of the rule of law conditionality in his letter. He congratulated Donald Trump on his victory in the US elections even before the count was over thus demonstrating disrespect for electoral rules.	No specific illiberalism; populism, anti-EU, anti-NATO and anti-USA orientation
<b>Illiberal regime</b>	Cooperation with Orban and the Fidesz regime, Hungarian investments in Nova24 partisan media.	No explicit intentions to install illiberal democracy. Although one of the central goals is to strengthen the ties with the Russian federation, one of the chief contemporary illiberal democracies.
<b>Pluralism, human rights</b>	Radicalisation in more recent times, of the rhetoric against the LGBTQ+, migrants, left progressive groups.	Criticism of the previous governments, described as an extended arm of lobbies.

## Public opinion

According to the Eurobarometer polls, the rule of law in terms of legality, certainty, equality before the law, separation of powers, prohibition of arbitrariness, penalties for corruption and effective judicial protection by independent courts have been perceived as very important in Slovenia (Specialised Eurobarometer 2019). The same goes for the independent and critical media and civil society. At the same time, the perceived need to improve the situation in Slovenia in these areas has been significantly higher than the EU average. This can be explained with the widespread perception that the independence of judiciary is minor, corruption rife, and the interference of politics and political parties is perceived as the main reason (Flash Eurobarometer 489; Special Eurobarometer 502, 2019). In a recent poll, most of the Slovenians believed they were exposed to divisive contents online and a third believed that they were exposed to intimidation by politicians through threats or hateful messages (in both cases the share one third above the EU average) (Special Eurobarometer 2021).

As it was explained above illiberalism has been associated with SDS only more recently. At the start of their mandate in 2020, SDS had 23% support (Ninamedia 2020a) and the support for the government (measured in April) was 64%. In September 2020, the support for SDS was down 1.4 percentage points.

In October, the support for the government stood at 39%. A year later, the support for SDS was 18%, while the support for the government was only 28%. Although this decline in the support is not a result only of the government's illiberalism, it does show that the public has rejected their treatment of the media and civil society.

On a more general note, we can say that the public support for liberalism varies from one of its characteristics to the next, and that it is heavily context dependent. For example, the support for certain traits, such as the personal freedom and independence is very strong, followed by the support for democracy, the media, human rights and the more specific rights, such as the right to asylum. Some polls demonstrate higher confidence in the existing institutions among the younger and better educated citizens (e.g. Flash Eurobarometer 489 on trust in judiciary).

### **Key findings of the desk research concerning illiberalism:**

- Illiberalism is a vague notion that is hard to define; the attitudes that the public assumes can depend heavily on particular contexts and issues;
- The support of the Slovenian public for independent judiciary, media and civil society is very strong, the support levels being just slightly below the EU average on individual issues;
- SDS, has lost support because of its ties with the Orban regime, and this can be partly attributed to the public's rejection of illiberalism.

# RESEARCH OF TARGET GROUPS AND STAKEHOLDERS

## Focus groups

Two focus groups were established, one in a community in Eastern Slovenia, consisting of voters of the SNS and Homeland league, and another in the capital Ljubljana consisting of voters of the Left. The questionnaire consisted of five groups of questions whose goal to capture the underlying rationale, the basic understanding of the EU, the pros and cons of the EU membership, the specific vision of the EU and some overall political attitudes. The questions were designed to move from the input to the output side of the political process, that is to say, from basic motivations towards particular actors and divisions (see Appendix I).

## Overall attitudes and perceptions

FG A discloses a general disappointment with the EU membership, repeated several times by all respondents. According to A1 (2021) “We expected more. There are no jobs and those that exist are poorly paid. In short, what they promised us did not happen.” According to A2 (2021) “In the beginning, it looked like we were going to be more independent/.../ but now everything is dictated from Brussels.” It also disclosed specific types of perception that can be linked to the respondents background, such as the loss of political independence and social rights (A1 – older employed), the limitations imposed on business (A2 – middle aged entrepreneurs), the scarcity of jobs (A3 – young employed) and the absence of social cooperation (A4 – student).

While FG A respondents felt Slovenian as opposed to European, these two could co-exist: “if it were as they promised it would be, it could be” (A1, 2021). The issue of who promised what turned out to be ambiguous for the younger generation that pointed out that they were not present during these debates and were unaware of the concrete opportunities that were promised.

Contrary to the FG A, FG B disclosed that the EU was understood primarily as a "liberal economic project" and "ideological tool". Two out of four participants argued that "the EU was using its (economic) power to subjugate non-Western areas" (B1, 2021) and that "the EU was becoming a liberal project that does not care about the social dimension" (B2, 2021). These perceptions were then put into the perspective when assessing the 'developmental' potential of the EU. All members of focus groups were united in their assessment that the EU was "not heading in any direction" (B3, 2021), and that "if it is, it is definitely pursuing the interest of the capital, not the people" (B1, 2021). Here, it is also worth mentioning the idea put forward by one of the members of the focus groups (B4, 2021). She argued that the vision for the EU was "unambitious", and that "Brussels was becoming an institution where we only applied for co-financing of projects".

When discussing the question of identity and the potential complementarity/exclusivity of the Slovenian and EU citizenship, we could not observe any pattern. If, for example, member B1 (2021) said that he was "more Slovene than European" because "he never used the Erasmus programme and is paying taxes in Slovenia", then member B2 (2021) argued that "she is neither Slovenian nor European, but a citizen of the world". Here, we could also mention the argument proffered by member B3 (2021), who said that "she cannot imagine what Slovenian and European might mean, but she had both 'labels' in her passport".

## Pros and cons

For most of the FG A participants the negative impacts of the EU membership prevailed. The greatest problems were located in the interference and dictate by the EU (members) (A1, A2), in its bureaucracy (A1, A4) and democratic deficit (A4). They thought that solution would be for Slovenia to reclaim its powers (A1, A3) in line with the Slovenian constitution (A2). According to A1, "the EU plays a far too important role, a bunch of bureaucrats dictates what we should eat and drink. We should put our foot down and be more independent instead of obeying every dictate". A younger participant (A4, 2021) pointed at some more specific issues: "/the EU/ is mostly about well-paid jobs in the Commission /.../ they are not accountable to anyone /.../ the European parliament has no powers to initiate legislation, only the Commission can."

Two older representatives expressed more positive views, but also some contradictions vis-à-vis the domestic political divisions (the Communists in Slovenia – A1)<sup>12</sup> and the policies on migration for instance (an exclusivist view on the freedom of movement – A2)<sup>13</sup>. The younger generation was more disappointed in general (“we are just a number” A3) (“so many negative things happen every day and it is hard to predict the future, sometimes even the present”, A4). They elaborated their scepticism and alternative vision in more specific manner (and depending on the issue, sometimes in even more radical terms, such as the case with the negative opinion of A4 about the euro) which involved types of integration, decision-making, economy, and identity issues:

*Each Member state should have its own policy and only shared problems should be dealt with collectively, in Brussels. In the Homeland League we are strongly behind subsidiarity. That is to say that only those things that cannot be solved on a state level should be advanced to a supranational level. This was the original idea; free trade, lower barriers and while the EU was just a tariff union everything worked well. But when the multi-culti globalists arrived with their idea to abandon national democracies and states, our problems emerged. The EU should take care of the security and economic operations and leave the rest to the sovereign nation states. The EU is a hybrid entity in a process of transforming into a federation, but the sovereign nation states are in its basis. What Weber and Macron want is a classical federation, the united states of Europe. (A3, 2021)*

In contrast with the FG A, the FG B participants (who were on average younger and better educated) see more positive effects of the EU than negative, although they are – to a certain extent – contradictory. For example, member B2 (2021) argued that “education and training” are fields where the EU did the most, but the “Bologna higher education reform is where the effect of the EU was the most negative”. The arguments of member B3 (2021) were similar. He said that the “Bologna higher education reform” is “a horrible reform that is aimed at competences, that is to say, it treats people as human resources”. Only member B1 (2021) did not focus on education, but rather on the freedom of movement as one of the fundamental freedoms of the EU. Here, the participant argued that “on an individual level, it is very stimulating for a Bulgarian citizen to study and work in Belgium, but it is a disaster for the Bulgarian socio-economic environment”, he pointed out again that the EU works as a “non-social Union”, and as a mechanism in favour of “the richer, Western members”.

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<sup>12</sup> “It is good that we got rid of Yugoslavia but we did not get rid of socialism. That judiciary has some sort of control in the EU and our /left elites/ cannot do the things they used to do in Yugoslavia /.../ but socialism is still there.”

<sup>13</sup> “Communists used to shoot economic migrants while now they receive them with open arms /.../ I am not a nationalist, but we cannot take them all. If we accept everybody, we will be poor ourselves. Currently, 75 percent of the social transfers go for these migrants when they come here. That needs to stop. I support our Minister here, Mr Hojs, because this needs to stop at the border. Right from the start, when they come into those boats because half of them ... people are poor, half of them drown. It has to be stopped at the source.” (A1, 2021)

However, FG B participants were united in the belief that the most responsible people for these developments are the "political elites" (B3, 2021; B4, 2021). Here, they did not talk about some political elite in general, but were quite specific. For example, participant B1 (2021) said that "we are talking about the Western bourgeoisie and their local assistants", and participant B2 (2021) said that it would be "unthinkable for Slovenia to produce politicians such as Guy Verhofstadt". This indicated that they held the "political elite of liberals" most responsible for the current situation.

## Political attitudes

FG A participants expressed their mistrust in the institutions, representation, and they were not clear about their sources of information, but also defended the basic principles of pluralism and accountability. There were elements of populism, authoritarian personality and fake news, but they did not prevail in most cases.<sup>14</sup> Several references were made to the need for the new generation to replace the people who have been in power for too long (A2, A3, 2021). Not unlike in the case of FG A, the participants of the FG B group exhibited deficient confidence in the institutions, blaming the "Western liberals" for the lack of social cohesion (B2, 2021; B3, 2021), inactivity in the face of the climate crisis (B4, 2021) and for the erosion of human rights in general (B1, 2021). We could trace elements of populism (the idea that the political elites do not serve the people, but the capital), but no elements of fake news, as they mostly follow the public Radio-Television Slovenia (RTV Slovenia) and other credible sources (e.g. Guardian, New York Times) (B1, 2021; B3, 2021).

### Key findings of the focus groups:

- Economy plays essential role in framing of EU attitudes; while supporters of hard right parties have been disillusioned due to lack of quality jobs, supporters of radical left point that the EU was all along an empty shell and an instrument of neoliberal hegemony;
- Supporters of hard right parties see as an obstacle Brussels centralism and progressive ideologies and want to take back control. Supporters of radical left blame neoliberalism in general and (Western) liberal politicians in particular;
- While elements such as overall disappointment and anxiety, questionable source of information and authoritarian personality can be noticed, the attitudes can be explained in quite pragmatic terms.

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<sup>14</sup> For example A1 said "all parties are the same" "changing over cloths" which is "part of multiparty system" but also essentially blamed socialists ("communist in disguise") for most of the problems and said that Europe could see it. He did not buy papers because they were manipulated by their owners. In contrast, A2 simply said that the existing elites "did not perform". He trusted the media, "it is good to listen to them all and build one's own opinion". In his view "the power should be given back to the people. If they do not deliver they should be replaced". According to A3 "their views /of the established politicians, institutions, media/ are different than ours. They want to lead the country according to their own ideas."

## Interviews

A total of five semi-structured interviews were conducted (Appendix II). The questions were adjusted to each of the interviewees. The basic questions referred to the importance of the European vs national identity, the role of the EU in the public and political debates, the attitudes towards various aspects of the EU, the main winning and losing groups, the visions about the EU and their supporters, the role of political actors and division, the politicization of the EU, the role of fake news, as well as to the independent institutions, pluralism and basic rights.

### European identity

A "non-conflicting" view of Slovenian and European identity can be observed in all interviews. According to Interviewee 1 (2021) "the European identity was never controversial, or well-articulated or attractive for any of the groups or a source of political programme or division"; it was rather "perceived mostly positively and as non-upsetting (as opposed to NATO)." Moreover, European values are seen as "underpinning Slovenian identity" (Interview 2, 2021) and European identity is most commonly seen as something that "complements Slovenian identity" (Interview 4, 2021). It was also pointed out, however, that "the European identity in the Slovenian case only 'makes sense' if it is one step above the nation's liberty" (Interviewee 5, 2021). With this the interviewee referred to the idea that Slovenian identity was built upon resistance against totalitarianisms, especially Italian fascism and German Nazism (Interview 4, 2021).

At the same time, the EU – largely associated with Europe – was an empty signifier in the 1990s and in the context of independence, the national identity prevailed and the issue of Europeanness was experienced more as an affront in the accession period (Interview 1, 2021). According to the interviewee 3 (2021) "people had much clearer idea about what European identity meant in the period before Slovenia's membership in the EU", and "today, when in this current socio-political environment, Slovenia is more divided, the perception on the European identity depends more on each individual".

Unlike the rest of the region, Slovenia does not have some great historical narrative and its nationalism has not been toxic or exclusivist in most parts, it was even seen as something grotesque (references to Karantaniija or the political programme of SNS) (Interview 1, 2021). The sense of belonging to Europe increased in 2020, but still only 10% of the respondents placed their being European first (in 1991 only 1%). The Slovenian national identity was in the first place for 37% (quite low compared to other countries), the regional for 19%, their belonging to a town for 25%, and to the world for 8%. (Interview 1, 2021).

## EU attitudes and narratives across different groups

The interviewees claimed that the perception of the EU among the general public is "positive" (Interview 1, 2021) but they also stressed that the EU "is not an important topic in Slovenia" (Interview 2, 2021; Interview 3, 2021).

According to Interviewee 1 (2021), the support for the EU in the early years of monitoring was rather high (75%) because it was influenced by euphoria, while in the more recent years it has been around 45% and stable. Support for the European integration has is somewhere around 6 on the scale 1-10, with positive upward fluctuating in instances of specific articulation of the questions (Interview 1, 2021). While people see sense in the integration regardless of the specific issues, their attitude towards specific institutions, in the context of the crises, for instance, can result with criticism issued by the individual groups that were affected by those crises (or it can became a general perception). like in the context of the COVID-10 pandemic. The most specific in this regard was Interviewee 5 (2021), who argued that "Slovenians are pro-European until they have to face some more problematic issues, such as the migrant crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, then they tend to react in accordance with their assessment of how much of a threat this is to them".

Interviewee 4 (2021) stressed the role of the political actors who milk certain (perceived) weaknesses. He argued that (with regards to the perceived weak voice of Slovenia within the EU) "people were prone to follow the politicians that successfully paved the way to the perception that they had more power than the EU had, and this could give rise to all kinds of scepticisms concerning the EU". According to Interviewee 1 (2021), the divisions such as the young-old, urban-rural divisions etc., certainly exist but they play more particular role, while rationale behind the attitudes is typically quite pragmatic.

### Political actors

The interviewees stressed the importance of the political changes on the level of the European political groups where "all the political agendas for the future of the EU come together" (Interview 2, 2021; Interview 4, 2021). At the same time, the interviewees argued that the general public does not know much about the European political groups, their visions or the positions of the Slovenian political actors on the EU level (Interview 3, 2021).

The narratives that place globalism against sovereignty are, as the EU itself, “far too sophisticated for ordinary people” (Interview 1, 2021). According to the interviewee 5 (2021) “the general public does not know the ‘weight’ of particular political groups and institutions on the EU level”, that is to say that the general public is relatively unaware of how important/unimportant are the statements of the Slovenian politicians working on the EU level. Still, the more specific problems, such as the migration or LGBTQ+ in the context of domestic perceptions, can cause divisions that are associated with the EU. Here the party support variation plays a stronger role. Religion is another factor, but not as strong as the party divisions (Interview 1, 2021). In the context in which “the public does not know the context of the claims by Slovenian politicians on the EU level”, the EU level debates are often blurred in the domestication of the process (interview 4, 2021).

One of the interviewees explained that the centre-right parties were currently undergoing crisis since the ideal of Western Europe they had relied upon no longer existed, and for that reason they turned to the old debates, such as the threats to the domestic identity (e.g. by Muslims) as well as to authoritarianism. The centre-left parties who were sort of right in their scepticism and critic of the neoliberal turn, but failed to do much about it, now found themselves in a position in which they tactically defended liberal values like the human rights. Furthermore, these political ideologies contributed to Slovenia’s sense of being self-isolated and detached and strengthened the overall anxiety:

*According to Krastev, the fall of the iron curtain was perceived as the beginning of normality and the West was its synonym. For the right-wing parties, the Christian democracy (Kohl and others) was seen as the golden standard. The left-wing parties were more articulated and critical (e.g. against the neoliberalism of the 1990s) but it felt like it would not pay to go against it. Today, certain values that are universal and not exclusively related to Europe, but the strongest here are problematized. This is part of a broader global change. The EU is regrouping but is often pragmatic and not doing enough for its defence. Slovenia was self-isolated by its current elites. The entre-left parties now defend those values for tactical reasons, but they face difficulties because in the economic area they generate injustice, and neoliberalism is still present. They and the Greens are currently exploring new paradigms. The right wing is upset because of the interferences with the identity, because of Islam ... these are in fact old rifts and division that were reinvented in a new context, in which the right-wing realised that Europe represented by the likes of Kohl and Mitterrand no longer exists. (Interview 1, 2021)*

### **Key findings of interviews:**

- The national identity is not seen as contradictory to the European identity, but rather the opposite. Still, the European identity, largely associated with the EU, also works as an empty signifier;
- Slovenians feel positively about the EU, and while the overall attitude is not influenced by specific crises, the negative consequences for individual groups result in negative attitudes towards some more specific aspects, those believed to be responsible;
- The EU crises and the global crises in general contributed to the crisis of political ideologies that resulted in specific trajectories in the transition countries, which in turn that made them more vulnerable to illiberalism and authoritarian trends.

## DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research has corroborated that the Slovenian political elites and citizens in most part have positive feelings about the European integration. At the same time, the 'EU' or 'Europe' are not attached to any of the grand narratives that are of great significance and importance for the Slovenians and are consequently not much more than an *empty signifier*. The perception of the EU in terms of the social-liberal welfare model associated with Western Europe resulted in a disillusion soon after the accession. This was problematic for the 'technocratic' elites that relied on the EU for their legitimacy. It was problematic for the centre-right parties that built their policies on the economic liberalism but also for the centre-left parties that did not go against it.

The global economic crisis and the eurozone crises that exposed the asymmetric dependence of Slovenia and had concrete negative consequences for various socioeconomic groups, acted as a trigger for a much broader disenchantment, and led to a crisis in the centrist politics of the domestic elites that were still the first to be blamed for the situation. As the crisis progressed and the centrist voters remained demotivated, the traditional Eurosceptic parties occupied the centre-stage shifting from the margins and some new Eurosceptic parties such as The Left emerged.

The migrant and refugee crises were different from the Eurozone crisis in the fact that the EU ultimately failed in responding to them, which then resulted in perception among the population of individual countries that they were left on their own. And for the centre-right parties in particular this was an opportunity to build on the grounds of securitization-nationalism and on the traditional fears of migrants and different cultures in an attempt to display their potency and restore the imagined old order. As a way of gaining international support and curbing political competition at home, the centre-right parties such as SDS sought alliance with illiberal regimes, pressurized the civil society and media. The centre-left parties, on the other hand, had difficulties because they were trapped between the stigma of communism and the economic and institutional challenges of implementing the new more inclusive development paradigms pushed by the EU.

Based on the above, the recommendations for tackling Illiberalism and Euroscepticism in Slovenia, are the following:

- The European integration narrative should centre around a more inclusive economic narrative (green deal, sustainable and inclusive growth), on which its self-narrative should be based and related to concrete policy initiatives based on a dialogue with different sociodemographic groups;
- Red lines should be set concerning the interferences with independent institutions, arbitrariness and corruption, and this should be justified in terms of their negative implications for the economy and the society;
- The issue of weak voice should be approached in more objective terms by comparing the position within the EU to the one out of the EU and by highlighting the need to better exploit the opportunities offered by the integration, such as working together with similar minded countries on specific issues and specialisations.

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# IF YOU SCRATCH THE SURFACE: EUROSCEPTICISM IN POLAND

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*This policy report deals with Euroscepticism present in Poland as a member state of the European Union and the impact of Euroscepticism on political and social life. The paper adopts the concept of sovereignty as main theoretical and argumentative backbone of Polish Eurosceptics, and through the public opinion polls and focus groups design the overview the Eurosceptic discourse. According to the findings, even though Poland is member state of EU, there are many Eurosceptic narratives in the public sphere and among the “ordinary” citizens. These narratives are mostly present within far-right and right wing political parties and initiatives.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Euroscepticism in Poland is a complex topic because the attitude of Polish society towards the EU is characterized by a high level of ambivalence. According to the opinion polls a great majority of Poles supports the membership of their country in the EU and this level of support is one of the highest among the EU member states. The Polish attitude to the EU, however, becomes substantially more complex and less unequivocally positive if we take into consideration some concrete and fundamental issues. And indeed, many Poles subscribe to very particular opinions that could be recognized as Eurosceptic. Moreover, in the recent elections, a substantial majority voted for parties that are soft Eurosceptics (United Right dominated by the Law and Justice (PiS) almost 45% in 2019) and hard Eurosceptics (Confederacy 7% in 2019).<sup>15</sup> This ambivalence will be defined in this research of Euroscepticism in Poland within four frameworks: the socioeconomic, that concerning sovereignty (including the rule of law), that concerning legitimacy (including security) and the cultural framework. We adopted these frameworks inspired by an article by Andrea Pirro and Stijn van Kessel (2018), who used them when analysing the populist Eurosceptic trajectories of some Italian and Dutch political parties. This research will be based on an analysis of opinion polls in the context of the current political situation, discourse of politicians and opinion makers and the results of focus groups organized within the frameworks of the project.

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<sup>15</sup> The soft Euroscepticism can be described as an acceptance of the membership of a given country in the EU but complemented with a support for national sovereignty, and consequently for a considerable reversal of the internal European integration. Meanwhile, the hard Euroscepticism might be defined as a rejection of the membership in the EU as such. The pandemic caused a decrease of support for PiS in 2021 but the war in Ukraine stopped this trend and brought about, though a modest one, a rise of its popularity (rally' round the flag effect). Today both parties enjoy support of approx. 45% decided voters (almost 40% PiS, almost around 5% Confederacy).

## POLISH PUBLIC OPINION AND THE EU

In the 2003 referendum on the accession to the EU, 77% of Poles voted for and 23% against. In all opinion polls conducted in the aftermath a solid majority of Poles always expressed their support for the membership of Poland in the EU. In some opinion polls, the electorates of all major political parties (including to a lesser degree even the voters of the hard Eurosceptic political forces) expressed their support for the EU.<sup>16</sup> This high approval rating in favour of the membership in the EU was correlated to a various degree to:

- age (middle)
- higher level of education
- higher income
- residence (large and middle size cities, the western and central part of the country)
- sex (a more positive attitude toward the EU among women)

The Poles' faith in the EU is slightly higher than the EU's average.<sup>17</sup> The image of the EU is very positive in Poland, one of the most positive among member states. According to the opinion poll conducted at the end of 2020, more than 65% of Poles declared that the advantages of the membership in the EU prevailed over the disadvantages, more than 15% subscribed to the opposite opinion, while 20% believed that the advantages and disadvantages were the same.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See, for instance. *Widmo Polexitu? Społeczne postawy wobec członkostwa Polski w UE*. Instytut Spraw Publicznych (2021).

<sup>16</sup> According to the Standard Eurobarometer (Winter 2021-2022), almost 55% of Poles had confidence in the EU and more than 30% of them did not. *Standard Eurobarometer 96 Public opinion in the European Union Winter 2021-2022*, p. 38.

<sup>17</sup> Sondaż: Unia Europejska dla Polaków pełna zalet, Rzeczpospolita, 01.12.2020, <https://www.rp.pl/spoleczenstwo/art395741-sondaz-unia-europejska-dla-polakow-pelna-zalet>

## Socioeconomic frame

The EU is perceived positively by most Poles mainly owing to the enormous social and economic benefits that the membership brought to the Polish society.<sup>18</sup> About 80% of Poles selected the free movement of people as one of the greatest advantages, while more than 55% recognized the EU funds as such. Democracy and human rights were a secondary importance in the Polish associations with regards to the EU. The issues of climate and energy policies (“Fit for 55”) emerged as a potential key source of tensions between Poland and the EU within the socioeconomic framework that may have had a negative effect on the attitude of many Poles towards the Union. The EU promotes a fast pace of decarbonisation of the economies of its member states, while Poland is the foremost among the EU countries that in adopting a very reluctant position on this matter owing to its “dirtiest” energy balance within the EU. Most Poles support decarbonisation in general, but a considerable minority rejects it, and moreover, a large group accepts it only conditionally, that is to say, only if it is introduced slowly and with no additional costs.<sup>19</sup> There is a considerable correlation between the support for decarbonization and the voters’ political sympathies (centre and left).

## Sovereignty

PiS defines the Polish national sovereignty as the chief element of its political ideology. Therefore, it advocates a thorough reform of the EU, mainly by relegating the key competences in the decision-making process from the EU to the member states (“Europe of nations”, unanimity - sort of Polish tradition of liberum veto).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Poland has received (in absolute numbers) more than 140 billion euro as net financial transfers from the EU budget since the accession. These numbers make Poland by far the biggest beneficiary of the EU funds. Moreover, according to estimates of some Polish economists, whether directly or indirectly, Poland has gained up to 900 billion euro after the accession to the EU (the Single Market, interest rates, FDI portfolio investment, faster GDP growth, etc.) <https://www.pb.pl/solidarna-polska-pomylila-sie-o-setki-miliardow-zlotych-1128305>

<sup>19</sup> According to the CBOS survey undertaken in June 2021, less than half of the Poles endorsed the achievement of climate neutrality by 2050. Transformacja energetyczna – oczekiwania i postulaty, CBOS, [https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2021/K\\_070\\_21.PDF](https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2021/K_070_21.PDF)

In a survey published at the beginning of 2022 and conducted by DGP and RMF FM almost 60% of Poles did not support the rise of energy prices in favour of the implementation of this energy transformation. Grzegorz Osiecki, Tomasz Żółciak, Polacy nie chcą płacić wyższych rachunków "dla klimatu". SONDAŻ DGP i RMF, 13.01.2022, Dziennik Gazeta Prawna. <https://gospodarka.dziennik.pl/news/artykuly/8332168,wyzsze-rachunki-kryzys-klimatyczny-sondaz.html>

<sup>20</sup> As Jarosław Kaczyński put it in 2021: “It can be assumed that what is at stake here is a certain intensification of processes that do not lead to development of the EU, but to a deep crisis that is already ongoing, and to phenomena that have nothing in common with the postulates of the founders of the EU and the practice from its initial years – to creation of a superstate, centralisation, and a cultural revolution that is to destroy the existing social structures” (Jarosław Kaczyński cited from the article Le Pen, Kaczyński, Orban, Salvini. Partie prawicowe z Europy podpisały wspólną deklarację, Forsal.pl, 2.07.2021, <https://forsal.pl/swiat/unia-europejska/artykuly/8202445,le-pen-kaczynski-orban-salvini-partie-prawicowe-z-europy-podpisaly-wspolna-deklaracje.html>).

The Polish society is definitely less supportive of the reversal of the EU integration than the current ruling elite, but it exhibits only a rather lukewarm approval for a more considerable deepening of the EU's economic and political integration in future, as well as for Poland's participation in it.<sup>21</sup> Another example of reluctance of the Polish society is the following. All national opinion polls conducted in the last 15 years in Poland have shown that the majority has had a negative attitude towards the accession to the Eurozone (against were about 55% and against were about 25%).<sup>22</sup>

Today, the attitude toward sovereignty and the EU overlap with the issues concerning the rule of law. PiS has ruled the country since 2015 implementing illiberal and nationalistic policies that have resulted in a democratic backsliding<sup>23</sup> and dismantling of the rule of law, as confirmed by an exceptional number of negative verdicts of the European courts concerning Poland. This situation provoked a dramatic and unprecedented deterioration of the relations between Poland and the EU institutions and its key member states. The European Commission preconditions the EU budget and other funds with the rule of law conditionality regulation. The Polish society has been expressing contradictory positions on this issue. They depend very strongly on the political sympathies (the pro-government and far right vs. the centre and left opposition).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> In the Special Eurobarometer „The Future of Europe” conducted in autumn 2020, Europeans were asked if they would prefer a situation where more, fewer or the same number of decisions, respectively, were to be made by the EU in ten years' time. 45% of Poles were in favour of approximately the same number of decisions taken by the EU as today, almost 30% of Poles declared that they would like to see more decisions made by the EU, and about 25% wanted less decisions. In comparison, almost 35% of the EU endorsed the status quo, more than 40% of citizens of the EU were in favour of EU making more decisions, while 20% wanted a reversal of the integration. The Special Eurobarometer 500 The Future of Europe, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2021/future-of-europe-2021/en-foe-special-eb-report.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, the most recent Flash Eurobarometers suggest that the majority of Poles endorse the adoption of the euro by Poland.

<sup>23</sup> According to the Freedom House, an US foundation that has been monitoring political system in the world since the beginning of the 1970's, after 7 years of PiS on its helm, Poland finds itself on the verge of being relegated from the category of free to the category of partly free country.

<sup>24</sup> The opinions depend to a large degree on the questions posed by pollsters.

In May 2022 almost 70% of respondents favoured the opinion that the Polish government should implement the EC prerequisites.

Dominika Sitnicka, 69 proc. Polek i Polaków chce, żeby PiS podporządkował się zaleceniom UE [SONDAŻ IPSOS], *Oko.press*, 14.05.22, <https://oko.press/sondaz-kpo-ue-praworzadnosc/>

However, in June 2022 more than 60% were of the opinion that the European Commission should transfer the funds even if Poland did not fulfil the requirements.

Justyna Lasota-Krawczyk, Pieniądze z KPO powinny trafić do Polski nawet bez reformy sądownictwa?

[SONDAŻ], *RMF FM*, 21.06.2022, [https://www.rmfm24.pl/polityka/news-pieniadze-z-kpo-powinny-trafic-do-polski-nawet-bez-reformy-s, nId,6104844#crp\\_state=1In](https://www.rmfm24.pl/polityka/news-pieniadze-z-kpo-powinny-trafic-do-polski-nawet-bez-reformy-s, nId,6104844#crp_state=1In)

April 2022, in another survey, almost 35% of Poles believed that Poland should stop contributing to the EU budget if it did not receive its EU funds and only slightly more than 35% rejected this proposal which would have been a nuclear option regarding Poland's membership in the EU.

Sondaż: Solidarna Polska proponuje zawieszenie składki do UE. Polacy podzieleni, *Rzeczpospolita*, 30.04.2022

<https://www.rp.pl/polityka/art36211951-sondaz-solidarna-polska-proponuje-zawieszenie-skladki-do-ue-polacy-podzieleni>.

## Legitimacy

The current Polish government vehemently contests the German-French leadership of the EU, and by default, the internal legitimacy of the EU.<sup>25</sup> The role of Germany in the EU meets with a particularly strong opposition by the United Right. This position has resonated among a substantial part of Polish society. In the poll cited above, when asked about the disadvantages of the membership in the EU, a significant percentage of Poles (40%) defined the lack of equality among the member states as a principal disadvantage, as well as the situation in which the more powerful member states impose their own interests on the others. Other issues get much less traction. In consequence, it should not come as a surprise, that a sizeable minority of Poles (a higher proportion than the EU's average) believes that Poland should better face its future challenges outside the EU.<sup>26</sup> The legitimacy of the EU in Poland is in an especially weak position in the security field. Since 1989, Poland has always treated the EU as a definitely second-rate security provider in comparison to NATO and the US. The war in Ukraine made security a top priority in Poland's domestic and foreign policies. The French, and especially German, reactions to the war in Ukraine - sometimes too lenient - triggered a very negative response throughout the entire Polish society, and even more so in the Polish government. The United Right used this as a pretext to step up its criticism of the leading role of the French-German tandem in the EU.

## Cultural framework

In the Polish public discourse the EU is generally identified with Europe and the membership in the EU is perceived and presented as a key proof of the Europeanness (in a cultural sense) of Poland, of its affiliation to the West. In addition to this, because of the huge importance of religion as an element of Polish national identity, and because of the greater numbers participation in the religious practices in comparison to the rest of the EU, many Poles, and their political and intellectual elites (excluding the left) identify Europe with Christianity, and with Roman Catholicism in particular.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> As PiS MEP, Jacek Saryusz-Wolski said in an interview "It is not about a federal Europe, but about - to use an old language - an empire with a hegemon, or - in the new language - oligarchic centralism, in which elected political forces are to dominate others against their democratically expressed will" (Co oznacza umowa koalicyjna w Niemczech? Saryusz-Wolski ostrzega: To zapowiedź przemocy, skrajnie groźne zapisy, WPolityce 27.11.2021, <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/575796-saryusz-wolski-niemcy-chca-narzucic-swoj-ustroj-calej-ue>).

<sup>26</sup> According to the Eurobarometer (Winter 2021-2022), more than 35% of Poles supported this idea and around 55% of them rejected it. The Standard Eurobarometer 96 Public opinion in the European Union Winter 2021-2022, p. 49.

<sup>27</sup> Polish conservatives and nationalists often use the term "Latin civilization" as a synonym for the West or Europe.

PiS and the intellectuals sympathetic to the party entertain a vision of the EU in which the union has “betrayed” its Christian identity (traditionalism and conservatism) and therefore, it cannot be identified with the “genuine” Europe.

Despite the ongoing rapid secularization, the Polish society remains more conservative in comparison to most societies within the EU (with more negative attitudes towards abortion, LGBT etc.). In consequence, as opinion polls have exhibited, many Poles perceive themselves as different in a cultural sense from the West.<sup>28</sup> This social disposition has only been strengthened by PiS and the far right, who often use anti-LGBT and anti-abortion discourses in order to mobilize their own electorates.<sup>29</sup>

The negative attitude of Poles towards Muslims constitutes another cultural factor which may influence their approach to the EU indirectly.<sup>30</sup> In the opinion poll conducted in the summer of 2017 more than half of Poles said that, if the EU insisted on relocation of Muslim refugees (a very small number in actual fact) to Poland, the country should leave the Union.<sup>31</sup> This negative opinion of most Poles about the Muslims is interlinked with their rejection of multiculturalism and the civic national identity and with their preference for ethnic nationalism. Meanwhile, many of them often perceive the EU as a promotor of the above-mentioned ideas they reject.

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<sup>28</sup> In the comprehensive opinion poll „Religious Beliefs and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe” conducted a few years ago by the Pew Research Centre, more than half of the Poles said they believed that there was a conflict between their country’s traditional values and those of the West, while less than 35% rejected this idea (only 5% completely). Religious Beliefs and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe, Pew Research Center, 10.05.2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>

<sup>29</sup> Robert Winnicki, an MP from Confederacy, stated in the interview that “The EU is a tool for the liberals, leftists, nihilists and globalists. It destroys the human being, the family, and the nation on all levels. It attacks people's gender identity, national identity, and religious identity” (UE jest narzędziem liberałów, lewicowców, nihilistów i globalistów. Niszczy człowieka, rodzinę i naród na wszystkich poziomach. Niszczy człowieka, rodzinę i naród na wszystkich poziomach. Radio Maryja 17.04.2019, <https://www.radiomaryja.pl/informacje/tylko-u-nas-r-winnicki-ue-jest-narzedziem-liberalow-lewicowcow-nihilistow-i-globalistow-niszczy-czlowieka-rodzine-i-narod-na-wszystkich-poziomach/>).

<sup>30</sup> The Polish society suffers from a high level of Islamophobia (including, though to a much lesser degree, many liberals and leftists), considerably higher than in most EU countries. According to the opinion poll conducted by the Pew Research Centre in 2019, two-thirds of the Poles expressed an unfavourable opinion about the Polish Muslims, and only around one quarter had a positive opinion. Richard Wike, Jacob Poushter, Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, Janell Fetterolf, Alexandra Castillo, Christine Huang, European Public Opinion Three Decades After the Fall of Communism, Pew Research Center, 15.10.2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/10/15/european-public-opinion-three-decades-after-the-fall-of-communism/>

<sup>31</sup> This was a survey conducted by IBRIS for the weekly „Polityka.”

Jakub Bierzyński, Uchodźcy: najskuteczniejszy straszak władzy, 04.07.2017, <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kraj/1710746,1,uchodzcy-najskuteczniejszy-straszak-wladzy.read>

# THE EUROSCEPTIC DISCOURSE AND ITS SOCIAL RECEPTION

Euroscepticism in Poland, both among its political actors and among its “ordinary” citizens, is mainly of right-wing origin: conservative, ultraconservative, and nationalistic. In Polish public debates, politicians, journalists, and activists from the far-right circles, such as Confederation, as well as from the governing party of the United Right (PiS and its alliances), regularly express opinions that are sceptical or even hostile towards the EU. For instance, they question the legitimacy of the EU institutions to make decisions, especially the legitimacy of the Court of Justice of the European Union (PM Mateusz Morawiecki<sup>32</sup>), they also accuse the EU of limiting the Polish sovereignty (MP Krzysztof Bosak<sup>33</sup>; MP Marek Suski<sup>34</sup>, 2022), they also attack the core European values, as supposedly inconsistent with the traditional Polish identities (Przemysław Żurawski vel Grajewski<sup>35</sup>) or criticize the strategic directions in which the European policies are developing as conflicting with the Polish national interests (MEP Zdzisław Krasnodębski<sup>36</sup>). This kind of discourse has always greatly affected the public opinion, as Robert Csehi and Edit Zgut argue in their article on Eurosceptic populism in Hungary and Poland. (Csehi and Zgut 2020). The question that has remained open, though, is the one concerning the relationship between the supply and demand, that is to say, the question whether and to what a degree the public figures themselves introduce, or even impose, this discourse on the public or whether they just respond to the demands of their constituencies.

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<sup>32</sup> When the CJEU dismissed the Hungarian and Polish appeal against the rule of conditionality, the PM commented that the process of extending the competences [of the CJEU] was very worrying, very dangerous. “This is one of the many judgments that adds another chapter to the book of inflated verdicts”. In: „Premier o wyroku TSUE: Proces poszerzania kompetencji unijnych względem traktatów jest groźny”, Polska Agencja Prasowa (PAP), 16.02.2022, <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C1081316%2Cpremier-o-wyroku-tsue-proces-poszerzania-kompetencji-instytucji-unijnych>.

<sup>33</sup> „The EU is one of the organisations that deplete our Polish independence”, in: Krzysztof Bosak o spaleniu flagi UE. “Sposób na wyrażenie opinii”, Wirtualna Polska 13.11.2018, <https://wideo.wp.pl/krzysztof-bosak-o-spaleniu-flagi-ue-sposob-na-wyrazenie-opinii-6316448020326017v>.

<sup>34</sup> “In the past, Stalin wrote our a constitution. We were a subordinate state. Today, Brussels is trying to regulate (...) they are behaving like Stalin (...) Brussels imposes solutions, sets conditions”. in: Marek Suski w Sednie Sprawy, Radio Plus 9.06.2022, <https://radioplus.com.pl/a/udycje-radiowe/63895-marek-suski-pis-w-sednie-sprawy>.

<sup>35</sup> “Between Poland and the EU elites there is a clash on the ideological level. The liberal-progressive ideology stands for all sorts of moral extravagances, which, for no reason whatsoever, have been recognised as European values”. Przemysław Żurawski vel Grajewski interviewed by Jakub Popławski, Rok pod znakiem nacisków Unii na Polskę. Prof. Żurawski vel Grajewski: im chodzi po prostu o rząd PiS Polskie Radio 24, 23.12.2020, <https://polskieradio24.pl/321/9021/Artykul/2642391,Rok-pod-znakiem-naciskow-UE-na-Polske-Prof-Zurawski-vel-Grajewski-im-chodzi-po-prostu-o-rzad-PIS>.

<sup>36</sup> „I have in mind various issues, such as the immigration policy, climate policy or industrial policy, the infringement of the national competences, the centralisation of the EU and its ideologisation. This must be opposed, as it would lead to negative consequences for Europe and for its individual states”. Krasnodębski Zdzisław, interviewed by Lidia Lemaniak (2021), Prof. Zdzisław Krasnodębski: Donald Tusk powtarza bezustannie frazesy o rzekomym polexicie. To typowa dla niego prowokacja, Polska Times, 27.09.2021, <https://polskatimes.pl/prof-zdzislaw-krasnodebski-donald-tusk-powtarza-bezustannie-frazesy-o-rzekomym-polexicie-to-typowa-dla-niego-prowokacja/ar/c15-15822089>.

To understand the manner of thinking and reasoning adopted by the Eurosceptics, we must identify, explore, and analyse their narratives about the EU. To do so, we organized focus group interviews, and in them we examined the Eurosceptic (soft and hard) respondents' perceptions of the European Union.<sup>37</sup> Below, we analyse the Eurosceptic narratives of the respondents within four frameworks: those of sovereignty, legitimacy, cultural, and socioeconomic framework, on the basis of the arguments and narratives introduced and discussed by the respondents within each of them. Then we present some counternarratives and methods for their implementation, as proposed by the students from the Social Science Department of the University of Wrocław who took part in the workshop entitled „Counter-narratives to the Eurosceptic narratives”.

### ***In defence of dignity and sovereignty.*<sup>38</sup> Sovereignty frame**

The basic assumption behind this framework concerning sovereignty is that European integration limits or even abolishes the sovereignty of its member states. It does so by imposing laws and obligations on Poland, by interfering with matters that should, according to the respondents, be in the remit of the states, and by pushing for further integration. One of the respondents said: “The beginning [of Polish membership in the EU] was gratifying, but now it is getting worse and worse. We have less and less to say. Laws are being imposed on us, regarding the judiciary or climate, for example”. The other added that when we joined the EU, the Community imposed “many orders and bans on us. The Union interfered with our worldview; I cannot not say I like it very much. We have been forced to do things that go against us”. And another one argued that “Poland is not a sovereign state because it surrendered its legislation to Brussels.”

Moreover, according to the respondents, the current direction in which the EU is developing and the process of further integration threatens to only further limit the sovereignty of the states. This is so because the EU elites (and institutions) want to broaden their prerogatives and competencies unlawfully, against the EU treaties, with the verdicts issued by the EU tribunals for instance. To avoid this risk, the European Union should halt all further integration, and even reverse some of the political developments. It should return “to its roots, to the community designed by the founding fathers”; it should return to being an economic organisation in the form of a “community of homelands”.

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<sup>37</sup> We selected a purposive sample of 22 respondents, whom we identified, based on the survey, as holding Eurosceptic convictions, to participate in the interviews. The research groups were then organized in three cities: Toruń, Rzeszów and Wrocław, which differ in size and location. Toruń is a medium-size city (200 000 people) in northern Poland, Rzeszów is of a similar size, located in south-eastern Poland, and Wrocław is a big city (over 600 000 people) in south-western Poland.

<sup>38</sup> The titles of the subchapters are quotations from the tickers of “Wiadomości” the main evening news program of the Polish national television. They are cited after the article W „Faktach” kolejna kompilacja z „Wiadomości” i TVP Info. „Można Unię zożyć codziennie”, 21.09.2021 <https://www.wirtualnemedial.pl/artykul/w-faktach-kolejna-kompilacja-z-wiadomosci-i-tvp-info-mozna-unie-zozyc-codziennie>.

### ***German attack under the EU flag. Legitimacy framework***<sup>39</sup>

The framework concerning legitimacy is built around two arguments. The first argument concerns the lack of EU authority to make decisions with regards to certain issues and impose these decisions, resolutions, or even world views, on its member states and their citizens. The second one concerns the accusations levelled at the EU elites of being detached from the people and the countries that constitute the Community.

The frequent use of the word “impose” by the respondents implies, firstly, a perception of the European Union as an extraneous organisation to its member states, sometimes compared to “the Soviet Union even” (as described by one of the respondents). And secondly, the nonexistence of EU authority to do so. One of the interviewees said: “There is an attempt to impose a worldview. The European Commission, or a group of blind people, are trying to inflict it on all countries; but every country is different.” A belief in the imbalance between the member states comes together with that conviction. According to the respondents, the EU is dominated by the “old” member states, particularly by Germany, and to a lesser degree France. Both countries “within a framework of supposed cooperation, pursue their chauvinistic interests” and while the rest of the states are in a demonstrably lower position, the position of the “new” member states is the lowest by far.

The EU elites, which, according to the respondents, are not accountable to anyone and “certainly not to the citizens of the European Union”, unravel the second thread within this legitimacy framework. The interviewees claimed that “with these elites, the EU will fall apart” (...), “and especially because they are corrupt and have ambiguous interests”. Within this framework, we identified a model populist discourse. The respondents felt deceived by the EU and its dishonest, untrustworthy, and mercenary elites. They also pointed to the unfairness brought about by the inequality among the states. Instead of providing equal cooperation, the EU forces, according to them, the weaker countries to detract from their interests. As a result, the development of these countries is curbed.

### ***Let Poland be Poland. Cultural frame***

“Our culture is being taken away from us. Our values have become superficial. As a Catholic country, we should attend to them; “The EU is taking away our national identity, which is being subjugated to some pan-European identity. If we lose our identity, we will die as a nation.”

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<sup>39</sup> The focus groups did not include the war in Ukraine because they were organized before the war.

These quotations from the focus groups interviews aptly illustrate the narrative of the respondents that we analysed within the cultural framework. The arguments expressed by them can be divided into two categories, which can be, in fact, seen as the two sides of the same coin. The EU is seen as an organization that is responsible for some spontaneous processes of westernization and diffusion of cultures throughout Europe and is also to blame for actively promoting this unification. So, on the one hand, the EU is perceived as a threat to the traditional Polish culture, customs, norms, and values, because Polish national identity, morals and manners are thus dissolved in the broader Western culture. On the other, the EU enforces liberal values and norms on all of its member states and punishes them if they want to keep their own values and preserve them. According to the respondents, these procedures are a lethal danger for the Polish identity, especially with regards to migration and rights of women and LGBT people.

### ***The Eurobalance sheet of profits and losses. Socioeconomic frame***

One of our chief underlying concepts in all interviews was that the European Union would be a much better organization if the cooperation between the nation-states was limited only to its economic dimension. No wonder then that the socioeconomic dimension of the EU membership was the most appreciated by the respondents. They could easily list many personal benefits that the membership brought them, and also some advantages for Poland. Nevertheless, the latter was not so readily admitted. The interviewees considered mainly the EU programs they participated in as beneficial, including the infrastructure developments co-financed by the EU, and some provisions included in the EU policies. Among the most frequently named were: the Erasmus program, the vocational training programs, the construction of roads and other infrastructures, the possibility to work abroad, the international contacts, and open borders. However, as some noted, the EU should not be credited with all these benefits. Because "it is enough to sign international agreements to attain the same goals", and as an example, they referred to the Schengen zone, consisting of only some of the EU countries, and at the same time, of countries that are not members of the EU.

This socioeconomic framework also revealed a cynical attitude towards the European Union, whose tasks were mainly described as providing the states with financial support. The researched Eurosceptics did not see the EU as a community of shared values and common rights. They perceived it as a source of donations. The views that Poland "should remain in the EU as long as it benefits from the financial opportunities" and that it should "stay in the EU but only if it is not a "net contributor" were common among the respondents. Some of them, mainly those holding positions more firmly against the EU, went further to question the benefits in general: "Poland could manage without the membership in the EU,, and it is not at all certain that the membership will be work in our favour in the long run".

## „Counter-narrations to Eurosceptic narratives”: Student’s workshop results

### Directions of actions that could be taken by the EU and member states:

- Promotion of programs such as: Erasmus Plus, vocational training, language courses, etc.;
- Further investments in infrastructure;
- Stressing the size of the Single Market;
- The Single Market also offering great potentials for science and culture;
- Promoting the four freedoms of the EU;
- Emphasis on the EU geopolitical strength as a partner to the USA or China and other countries and regions of the world. The EU can be an equal partner in all these partnerships, its member states on their own cannot;
- Promoting the traditional Polish values as interlinked with European values, such as the shared values of openness and hospitality versus xenophobia and hostility towards others, including foreigners;
- Building the European identity as a part of the Polish identity.

### Methods of achieving the goals:

- Launching a national campaign and debate about the benefits and costs of the Polish membership in the European Union. This should be preceded by an extensive research in the different fields affected by the Polish membership. Both the Euroenthusiasts and Eurosceptics should be allowed to discuss their arguments openly, and then experts could comment them and highlight the benefits, but at the same time, address the fears without ignoring the costs. This campaign could be aimed not only at the “ordinary” people, but also at the NGOs and other organisations in order to provide them with solid and genuine arguments for their campaigns, which could also be financed by the EU;
- Reducing the financial penalties imposed on the states that instigate antagonisms between the states and the Union;
- Educational programs in the schools, implemented by NGOs;
- Launching promotional campaigns: on TV, social media, in schools (workshops), etc., with the involvement of NGOs. Some campaigns should be targeted (e.g. at smaller towns, villages, the eastern part of Poland, young people, and young men). The topics of these campaigns could be: promoting multicultural values by presenting the minorities living in Poland as an integral part of Polish society, building their positive image while helping them to maintain their cultural distinctiveness:
  - promoting the Poles that live abroad (in the EU) and their stories;
  - a “Chinese portrait” as an advertising campaign: asking school children to draw the EU as a vehicle and then exhibit these drawings on billboards and in TV ads (with the children’s explanations of their drawings) a positive image of the EU.

- Cooperation between the EU countries, bilateral and multilateral, promoting the diversity of their cultures, but also highlighting the shared values. Events, campaigns, tourism, etc. The aim of these would be to show that the EU states keep their diversity and identity, while sharing, at the same time, common European values;
- “Europe’s days” – an initiative celebrating the diversity and cultures of the European (EU) Nations and other open-air events. These should be organised not only in big cities, but also in smaller towns and should address the local communities;
- A Eurovision concert – the artists could perform in their native languages; the songs could be subtitled. This would show the diversity and richness of the cultures but on a common stage;
- A film, or even a TV series, on one of the popular platforms (Netflix or HBO or any other) that, based on the ERASMUS program for students, would depict the life of its participants in different European countries;
- Opening a chain of cafes/bars under the EU logo, which could also serve as a meeting and information point about the EU. An excellent example of such practice is the “Newcone bar” in Warsaw, opened by the editorial team of Newcone.

## CONCLUSIONS

Under the surface of the significant support for the Polish membership in the EU, more and more Euro-sceptical narratives can be observed in the public sphere and among the “ordinary” citizens. For the time being, we can conclude that the Eurosceptics hold mostly far-right and right-wing beliefs. In addition, according to our research, in the relationship between the supply and demand, the supply plays a more important role. The Polish Eurosceptics are highly influenced by the Eurosceptic narratives produced by the ruling elite and the far right, and pro-government media, as well as some public figures (intellectuals and journalists). If they manage to stay in power after the next elections, we can expect that their discourse might gradually gain popularity and affect other parts of society. In the near future, if the conflicts concerning the rule of law between Poland and the EU continue, they might strengthen the negative opinions of some Poles towards the Union to a greater extent. The support for the EU in Poland is strongly correlated with the economic benefits. Therefore, the transformation of Poland into a net contributor may considerably decrease the attractiveness of the EU membership in the Polish society. At the same time, a relatively new phenomenon – “new Euroscepticism” may emerge in the coming years (Kublik 2020). It will be based on some people’s disappointment by the fact that the EU turns a blind eye to the deficits in the rule of law and is not effective enough in preventing the undemocratic changes in Poland. A large section of the Polish society may turn out to be especially exposed to these Eurosceptic manipulations and propaganda because the Poles stand out in the EU as a nation that has the most faith in online social networks and internet media outlets.<sup>40</sup>

To sum up, even at present, the views critical of the EU, its institutions and key member states, are not at all marginal in Poland. If efficiently reinforced by certain powerful sectors of the political elite and media, they may, in the long run, function as the pebble that will start the avalanche leading to the worst-case scenario, towards the Doomsday, that is, Poland’s exit from the EU.

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<sup>40</sup> In the last Standard Eurobarometer more than half of Poles declared their trust in internet and more than 40% in online social networks. By comparison, the EU’s average was 35% and 20% respectively. Standard Eurobarometer 96 Public opinion in the European Union Winter 2021-2022, p. 27-28.

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# ON THE BUMPY ROAD TO THE EU: ILLIBERAL AND EUROSCEPTIC NARRATIVES IN NORTH MACEDONIA

Mariglen Demiri, Dimitar Nikolovski

*The policy paper outlines the main attitudes and initiatives of the Eurosceptics in North Macedonia, in context of implementing the “Prespa Agreement” and “Treaty of friendship, good-neighbourliness and cooperation” with Bulgaria, and Bulgarian veto on North Macedonia’s EU accession talks. The analysis reaches Eurosceptic discursive conclusions through the methods of interviews with the main proponents of Euroscepticism and EU optimism and focus groups in five cities in the country. Furthermore, public opinion analysis is included in the research. This paper show that the main argument of Macedonian Eurosceptics is derived by the idea of sovereignty and national dignity, which according to the protagonists are endangered.*



## INTRODUCTION

Recent times have been quite challenging both for Europe and for the idea of Europe in states that claim they want to become member states of the European Union. One such state is North Macedonia in the Western Balkans, which since 2005 has been a candidate for membership in the European Union. Over the years, the ambitions and mood of the establishment, but also the citizens of North Macedonia, have moved in Euro-enthusiast directions. The European Union has been seen as a very significant asset to the survival of the state, the economy, and the identity of the dominant Macedonian ethnic population, but also minorities (primarily Albanian).

Over the years, as Euro-enthusiastic discourse developed, Eurosceptic discourse has also been nurtured by some political parties and through other social instances. One significant component that carried on and preserved Eurosceptic sentiments in Macedonian society was the illiberal approach to politics practiced by the VMRO - DPMNE (2006 - 2017).<sup>41</sup> Following the 2018 NATO summit in Bucharest and the Greek veto on North Macedonia, retrograde processes were set in motion regarding the practice of democracy and governance that resulted in illiberal practices in a democratic state (or simply illiberal democracy). That approach introduced Eurosceptic sentiments into the political debate, pleading for alternative models not only for the political system but also for the state's prospects regarding the EU.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the sources and dynamics of Eurosceptic trends in North Macedonia in the last five years. Within this period, illiberal tendencies were not promoted by the government, as was the case during the rule of the VMRO-DPMNE but by fragmented initiatives outside the party. The illiberal way of governing and the introduction of polarizing elements into society, which was encouraged by the government at the time and created a basis for reducing a sense of social responsibility and introducing elements related to national and identity perspectives into public discourse.

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<sup>41</sup> In 2010, the Minister of European Integration, Vasko Naumovski, emphasized that there is no such thing as Euroscepticism but rather EUenthusiasm. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/2100030.html>

We can highlight three positions that have been developed through proponents of various discourses throughout the years. The first is the pro-EU position, where the main advocates of this position are generally the political parties in power but also the parliamentary parties, the majority of civil society, and the non-governmental sector. For them, the EU represents the potential for liberal and minority-inclusive perspectives, security in a close relationship with NATO, and liberal democracy as a systemic setting.

The second position, and the most significant for this paper, are instances of Eurosceptic discourse. Proponents of this discourse include political parties created in the previously defined period as well as initiatives and associations from so-called (un)civil society. One of the main components of some of these instances ('Edinstvena Makedonija' [United Macedonia]) is the rejection of the EU as a political, economic, ethical, and civilizational option and redirection towards the Eurasian Union. This political party also claims to have close relations with the political party in power in the Russian Federation, United Russia. Another political party, 'Rodina' (Fatherland), believes that: "Artificial war-mongering creations such as the EU and NATO are falling apart as we speak, and our programmatic goal is to prepare Macedonia for the upcoming geostrategic reality and the only natural option for the next 100 years minimum: Eurasia, from Lisbon to Vladivostok, as a community of free and sovereign peoples." (Jovanchev 2019).<sup>42</sup>Also, a dozen organizations, associations, and initiatives that promote Eurosceptic views have appeared in protest over the years, mainly due to the bilateral agreements with Bulgaria and Greece, and they continue to promote the same content through different forms. Online podcasts are among the most significant platforms for disseminating political views containing illiberal political capacity and Eurosceptic discourse. Their ideological and political profile is extreme (radical or extreme) right-wing, with concepts of identity, sovereignty, history, pride, honor, and treason. During the pandemic, podcasts had a significant impact on the public, especially on young people, regarding their views on the European Union.<sup>43</sup>However, they also show that the main direction of the citizens in North Macedonia is still the European Union.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> <https://rodina.org.mk/%d0%b8%d0%bd%d1%82%d0%b5%d1%80%d0%b2%d1%98%d1%83-%d0%b7%d0%be%d1%80%d0%b0%d0%bd-%d1%98%d0%be%d0%b2%d0%b0%d0%bd%d1%87%d0%b5%d0%b2-%d0%b7%d0%b0-%d1%80%d1%83%d1%81%d0%ba%d0%b8%d0%be%d1%82-%d0%bf%d0%be/>

<sup>43</sup> Ivan Damjanovski, Analysis of public opinion on the Macedonian process of accession to the European Union (2014-2020), Conrad Adenauer Foundation in the Republic of North Macedonia Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis": Skopje, 2021) 10, available:[https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/A5\\_Analysis-of-public-opinion-on-North-Macedonias-accession-to-the-European-Union-2014-2020MKD.pdf](https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/A5_Analysis-of-public-opinion-on-North-Macedonias-accession-to-the-European-Union-2014-2020MKD.pdf)

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

According to the IRI survey, in November 2021, 84% of citizens support North Macedonia to become a member of the EU. "Public Opinion Poll: Residents of North Macedonia November 27 – December 23, 2021", IRI, March 7, 2022.

The third discursive instance is ambivalent about the strategic integration options of North Macedonia and is held by the political party 'Levica' (The Left). Their ambivalence consists in the fact that they reject the NATO alliance of which North Macedonia is already a member. Still, Levica publicly points out that it is not opposed to membership in the European Union.<sup>45</sup> The public approach of this party is populist. In recent years, from left-inclusive populism, it has taken a turn towards right mono-ethnic, national, and anti-establishment positions.

In the following, the findings of a survey report, five focus groups held in the cities of Shtip, Veles, Struga, Skopje, and Tetovo in North Macedonia, as well as six conducted interviews with both Euroscep-

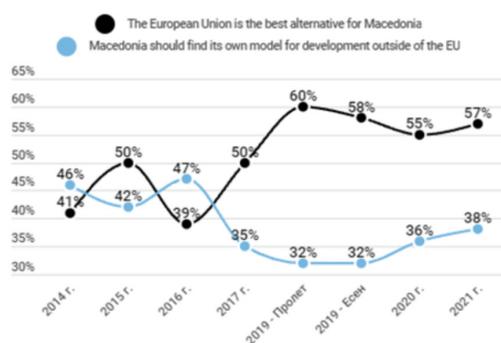
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<sup>45</sup> Addressing the protests on the French proposal in July 2022, the president of 'Levica' emphasized that there is an alternative for the EU, while not directly emphasizing that he is in favor of union with Russia, rather pointing to the conditionality for membership in the EU that refers to the identity of the nation .<https://nezavisen.mk/apasiev-veli-ima-alternativi-za-eu-sdsm-i-dui-vednash-go-osudija/>

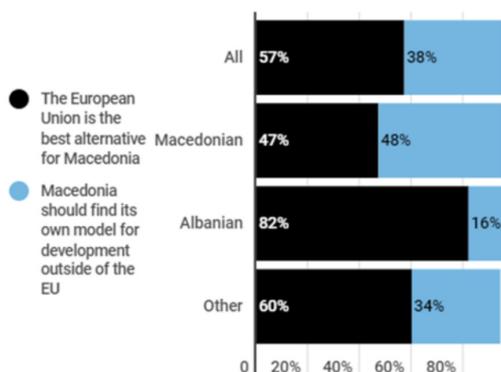
# PUBLIC OPINION ON THE EU

As an instigating agent of Euroscepticism in recent years, polls show that it is not only the internal instances in the country but also the ways in which the European Union manages the process of integration of the Western Balkans into the EU. The agreements concluded with Bulgaria and Greece leave the impression, among some citizens, that the prolongation and Bulgarian veto on the start of negotiations with North Macedonia, is actually indirectly alluding to the lack of mood for expansion and inclusion.

Eurothink – Center for European Strategies has been measuring the public mood via representative telephone surveys regarding EU and other contemporary political issues since 2014. For the purposes of this study, a time comparison of several questions can be included. The Eurometer research in the period from 2014 to 2021 shows the rising line of the idea that joining the European Union would be a "good thing". Therefore, compared to 2014 where the attitude that membership would be a good thing is supported by 59%, while in 2021 that percentage is much higher with 70% support, and at the same time the highest of the years according to the scope in which the research was conducted.



The view that the EU is the best alternative for Macedonia remains at a stable level - almost 57% of the respondents share it in 2021. On the other hand, since the spring of 2019 onwards, the support for the view that "Macedonia should find its own model for development outside the EU" has also been growing, and it has increased from 32% to 38%, which is a consequence of the disappointments.



Ethnic Macedonians are divided on this issue into two equally large categories: 47% of them share the opinion that the EU is the best alternative, while 48% percent believe that the country should find its own model. On the other hand, 8 out of 10 ethnic Albanians were of an opinion that the EU was the best alternative.

When asked if they believed that the European Union was the best option for North Macedonia, the answer varies over the years. Thus, in 2014, the support for this position was 41%, and in 2021, that support has increased to 57%. Over the years, there have been small zig-zag jumps like in 2014 = 41%, 2015 = 50%, 2016 = 39% and 2017 = 50% up to 57% support in 2021.

At the same time, the position that 'Macedonia should find its own model for development outside of the EU', a position that represents one of the main maxims of Eurosceptics in the country, intersects with the previously elaborated position. Thus, in 2014, the support for this position was 46%, slightly higher than the previously elaborated position, and in 2015 it was 42%, which is lower than the position that the best option for the state is EU membership. The next year again, in 2016, this option gains momentum and is somewhat more dominant than the other option and counts 47%. Over the next five years, the support slowly falls: in 2017 the support is 35%, in 2019 in the spring and in autumn the support is 32%, in 2020 the support is 36% and finally in 2021 the support is 38%.

However, some significant differences can be observed regarding the main ethnic groups in the country. Ethnic Macedonians support the view that the EU is the best option for the country with 47%, while the view that a model for development outside the EU should be found is supported by 48%. Unlike the Macedonians, 82% of the ethnic Albanians think that the EU is the best option, while 16% think that the state should find a new model for development outside the EU. According to the category Others (ethnic communities), the support for the EU is 60%, while for the new model it is 34%. The total ratio is 57% for the first option, that is, that the European Union is the best option for the state, and 38% believe that the state should find a new model for construction outside the EU, indicating a potential for further development of Eurosceptic narratives.

According to the same survey, to the question 'If a referendum is held this Sunday with the question "Are you in favor of the integration of N. Macedonia in the EU", how would you vote?', from 2015 to 2021 the line of answers with Yes is quite high with a variation of 66% to 71% (2015=66%, 2016=69%, 2017= 67%, 2018=70%, 2019 Spring=72%, 2019 Fall= 65%, 2020=65 % and 2021=70%), indicating a persistently Euroenthusiast attitude among the whole of the population. The 'No' responses range from 21% to 12% (2015=18%, 2016=21%, 2017=18%, 2018=19%, 2019 Spring=14%, 2019 Fall=16%, 2020=16% and 2021=12%). The other options like 'I don't know yet' and 'I would not vote' have very little support, below 7%.

## Focus Groups

In the interest of examining citizens' views of Euroscepticism or Euro-enthusiasm, in May and June, 2021, Eurothink conducted five focus groups in five cities (Veles, Skopje, Struga, Tetovo, and Shtip) in North Macedonia. Thirty-five participants from all demographic categories participated in the focus groups. The questions that were asked have the character of guiding questions and are as follows:

What does Europe/the EU mean to you?

What are the advantages/disadvantages of EU membership?

What would you change about Europe/the EU?

Four categorical groups were created that express the mood of the participants, but also emphasize their discursive referentiality in the direction of the basic intention of the research, namely, examining the Eurosceptic attitudes and moods in Northern Macedonia.

**The first category** is Euro-enthusiastic, which explores the basic value and civilization intentions associated with the concepts of a free market economy, civilization, something to strive for, culture, diversity - United Europe, end of nationalisms, carbon-neutrality, green Europe, freedom of choice. In that direction, on the question of what the EU means for the participants in the focus groups, the social dimension is well represented and prioritized highly.

*"A better life, primarily financially, and better health. Because I work in the hospital I have been abroad and have seen what kind of health they have. Better education - 100% that we will get, life without corruption, mobbing, and discrimination. More respect for workers' rights."* (FG Skopje)

*"Equal access and a large number of opportunities for all equally and freedom of choice."* (FG Skopje)

The right to choose is seen as one of the most important rights, consequent to the right of functioning the laws and rules in the country. In North Macedonia, the view that the state apparatus and the institutions of the state are not functioning has a kind of influence on the relationship with democracy and the democratic mood. The notion of freedom is also applicable in the Euro-enthusiastic hierarchy of values. Freedom of movement, choice, and life in the general sense of the word.

*"Respecting the rules of the game was my second point, which doesn't mean we should go with that cliché respecting the rule of law principle or, I do not know what else, but the rules of the gameplay. If there are rules to the game, we should all respect them. At the moment, those rules don't apply to ten people"*(FG Skopje)

*"As far as I think, now, in Europe, to be a European means to be free, without borders ... Wherever you go, you move freely, it is now the culture, if you go honestly and honestly, and the law applies to everyone, not to be oppressed or ... "*(FG Tetovo)

*"The positive thing that Europe offers ... Freedom of movement, we have it now, but right, you are limited to say. Consequently, freedom of movement is also one of the motives and synonyms for the EU."* (FG Struga)

For some of the participants in the focus group, national identity is not in conflict with a European identity. However, the participants had the impression that the European administration and EU member states are not satisfied with the performance of the citizens of Northern Macedonia on the values of the European Union.

*"No real conflict between being Macedonian and being European"* (FG Veles)

*"European politicians in general and citizens show a high level of moral responsibility to themselves and to the society in which they are active as actors, whether they are from one side or the other of politics. "* (FG Skopje)

**The second category** refers to the positive attitudes of the participants in the Focus Groups on the EU, which still end up with a cynical and hypocritical conclusion.

In this regard, the views related to the hypocrisy of the EU and the so-called double standards of the EU, enlargement policies, and EU requirements for Northern Macedonia as a country that will never fulfill them, not because of the inability to fulfill them, but because of the inability to fulfill those duties and the role of the EU as constantly dissatisfied with the fulfilled. *"Stuck in the waiting room"* (FG Tetovo)

*"They propagate European values, but then deny our right to self-determination and tolerate Bulgaria's absurd demands"* –(FG Shtip)

*“We are too obedient to others. We need to start thinking for ourselves” (FG Shtip)*

*“We’re technically European, but still not quite...” (FG Skopje)*

**The third category** deals with the negative aspects of the EU. It mainly houses the different types of stereotypes and logical inconsistencies with the attitudes and values that are preferred but also noticed in the official structures of the EU.

In that direction, the EU is a negative benchmark of value, cultural, and even national-political direction. The rejection of the differences and the destruction of traditional values emerged as one of the main remarks of the EU influence in Northern Macedonia.

*“Youth is already Europeanized here, i.e., they follow all the negative trends from the EU” (FG Shtip)*

*“So I think maybe that's how I see it, but the EU has some laws that I could not accept at all. There are those male-to-male weddings, and female-to-female. Man could not survive at all. Why choose like that? They will be only male and only female, and neither Adam nor Eve would exist, accordingly. That's one thing I would never vote for, but there are many other laws I would accept, such as regulations on cycling.” (FG Tetovo)*

*“In the last 5-6 years, I have not been in Europe. I have been more here in the Balkans. According to my colleague, about those marriages between a man and a man, a woman with a woman, and I am not for that.”(FG Tetovo)*

*“So even now, Europe does not look down on us. I look down on the EU because they have no moral values or family values. Here is what happened to Notre Dame when it caught fire. What are those pedophile things out there, and immediately the whole world went to help with it all, right?” (FG Skopje)*

*“With European working hours, we cannot maintain our traditional values ...” (FG Struga)*

*“We are Europeans, but we are not members of the EU, and in my opinion, I would not like to be part of the EU” (FG Struga)*

The inclusiveness of minority groups in any sense, in the eyes of some of the participants, is a problem they cannot avoid.

*“Yes, the EU has some values, respect for minorities, respect for human rights, etc.” (FG Struga)*

*“The EU gives too many rights to bicycle riders; we, the car drivers, are discriminated against” (FG Tetovo)*

**The fourth category** refers to alternatives and solutions in relation to experiences with blockades or views regarding the European Union as problematic. Attempts can be made in some focus groups to create the impression that EU membership has an alternative. That alternative is often seen in the United States, Russia, China, Brazil, and the Eurasian transversal.

*“The EU for us is the closest... natural, geographical, etc. However, the problem is if they do not want to integrate us... There are countries, as we mentioned, Norway and Switzerland that are not members but are in close cooperation. Close relations, so if they do not want you, you have to look for an alternative, whether it will be America, whether some relations with China, with Russia with the great powers, you have to have an alternative.” (FG Tetovo)*

*“We have no other alternative. I think we cannot go to the bloc again with Russia or China I think ...” (FG Skopje)*

*“For everything in life, there is always an alternative... so there is always an alternative, whether that alternative will be China, Russia, I do not know how these people imagine, what it means now, we will - if we change, if we are not with the EU we will be with China, what?” (FG Skopje)*

*“I am pro-EU, and I will fight to the end for Macedonia to be part of the EU, but when we talk realistically, there must always be an alternative.” (FG Skopje)*

The changes are seen as a necessity not only in the EU but also in regard to the dispute between Northern Macedonia and Bulgaria.

*“In general, the dispute must be resolved first, and then we must go on the European path because at the moment it is our reality. Otherwise, we can only have a dream.” (FG Skopje)*

*“Full membership is an illusion, but we should at least get into the common market” FG Skopje*

Regarding the remarks about the EU, some of the participants believe that the EU should be more up-to-date in terms of decision-making, especially in relation to non-EU countries.

*"To be more efficient in decision-making ... On accepting new members like Macedonia ..."* (FG Tetovo)

The focus groups conducted in the five towns express a kind of Euro-enthusiastic view, especially from the perspective of the freedoms promoted by the EU member states, such as freedom of choice in the political or cultural sphere, freedom of movement, freedom of the labor market, and economic freedom. Often these elements are logically related to the social environment and the need for a more authoritative state role towards the institutions and greater order in the implementation of state affairs.

Attitudes can be seen that have a positive note for the EU. Still, there is a discrepancy in how they are experienced and promoted, indicating a certain amount of cynicism and hypocrisy. Namely, EU membership is nice, but there are values, practices, laws, and rules that the focus group participants do not like. Here are always the duties of accepting others and the freedom of others, although personal freedom has been highlighted as one of the most important components of Euro-enthusiasm.

Finally, in terms of alternatives and adjustments within the European Union, all possible countries in the world that have the capacity for transcontinental influence and cooperation are seen as alternative and partner countries. The elements of sovereignty and the possibility of national humiliation through negotiation and indulgence of other states and neighbors are especially included as arguments for seeking alternatives. Despite the presence of illiberal international actors, the preferred alternatives to the EU are still those that are part of the Western world: either to have some kind of associational status with the EU, to be something resembling Switzerland or Norway, or closer cooperation with the US.

## Interviews

A total of six semi-structured interviews were conducted. Six persons were interviewed, from which one is EU-optimist op-ed writer, and four of them are right-wing founders of political parties or initiatives for founding a political party. The respondents have been anonymized. The questions were adapted to each of the interviewees. Basic questions referred to the role of European vs. national identity, attitudes towards various aspects of the EU, pluralism, and basic rights.

## RELATIONS BETWEEN EUROPE, THE EU AND NORTH MACEDONIA

In all the interviews conducted, the interviewees made parallels between Europe and the European Union. Very often, the questions related to European identity inherently dissolve the question of the identity of the European Union and its position relative to “us”. In that direction, in three out of five interviews, the discrepancy between the Macedonian and the so-called European identity was clearly highlighted, and the position of the EU relative to “us” is hierarchically higher. Hence the need for a “we,” who are lower relative to the EU, to fulfill tasks and for the EU to oblige us for it. In that direction, “everything has changed with an “us”, everything that the Union required has been adopted, we have changed the name and identity and history, tradition and culture of the Macedonian people, and we still kept a bare promise, that one day we will become a member of the Union” (Interview with JB). The EU, as an instance that obliges “us”, also has the function of disfiguring us. The EU “is a union with false values, a union that, according to its agenda, decided to create a new demos, Europeans, at the expense of all European peoples.” (Interview with LJP) This relationship of the EU towards “us” is also considered as the relationship of an instance that has no idea what to do with itself “the EU should define its concept of how it will look like in the future.” (Interview with SG) Hence, the EU represents an instance of superiority, which constantly pushes for a change in the identity of North Macedonia, but in essence, the EU has an identity crisis.

From this, it can be concluded that there are three groups of respondents: those who are not in favor of negotiations and entry into the EU by any cost, those who are in favor of entry into the EU but resent the EU because of the high price that the state has to pay with an identity stake, and those who only see in the EU a way out of the menace of non-inclusive policies by the rising right.

## EU-OPTIMISM VS EU-SCEPTICISM

EU scepticism is one of the dominant attitudes among right-wing nationalist circles and parties. In encouraging EU-scepticism, there are the so-called conditionalities of the EU and the impression that "we" have suffered the consequences of the arbitrariness of the EU. Thus, "we are not pro-EU, we are Eurosceptics, but Eurosceptics precisely because of the ideological foundations of this kind of Europe and its consequences, which the Macedonian people felt directly." (Interview with LJP) In this regard, one of the interviewees sees EU-scepticism as a consequence of the non-expansionist motives of the EU and the arbitrary demands on North Macedonia, especially in terms of identity, but also in direction to the level of politics ".however, I am a skeptic, and even Macedonia fulfills all that is required, the question is whether they will accept us (in the EU)" (Interview with JB).

One of the interviewees sees scepticism as a consequence of insufficient reforms both in the state and in the EU with the potential for undemocratic tendencies. In that direction, "we are not against the EU, but we are sceptical. If we don't make changes in the political system, we will continue to sink into populism." Hence, the appearance of various populist and EU-sceptic- manifestations in the country is seen as a consequence of a lack of enthusiasm for reforms in the EU and North Macedonia.

One of the EU-optimistic positions sees EU accession as membership in an alliance that logically follows up from NATO membership and the alliance with the USA. "Because we as 'Democrats' are for Europe, we are pro-European ... we know who our strategic partners are now, that is Europe, America, NATO" (Interview with JO). Another EU-optimistic attitude remains on the importance of the inclusive model of the EU and the possibility of enlargement to counter the danger of the emergence of strong nationalist and right-wing options. Thus, "the idea of Europe and our country, of our state, is to get involved and go towards a certain path, towards a certain route because, otherwise, we have chances to fail in our local racism." (Interview with NJ).

## SOVEREIGNTY AND EU ALTERNATIVE

Sovereignty is one of the most represented concepts in three out of five interviews. The loss of sovereignty and decision-making autonomy is seen not only as part of nation-states but also as part of the EU. One of the interviews indicates that "Europe should stop being an American or Anglo-Saxon vassal. Europe should start from De Gaulle." (Interview with LJP) Hence the conclusion about the collapse of "our" sovereignty and the USA as the greatest enemy.

The solution to the problem of sovereignty is highlighted as a starting point in the direction of whether to look for an alternative or not. One interview points out that "to define how far the sovereignty of states goes and to what extent states pledge their sovereignty in the EU." (Interview with SG)

EU skepticism imposes a need for an alternative, just as EU-optimism imposes a need for an argument about against alternatives. The construction of the attitudes of some of the interviewees has a consistent logical framework. It follows the original hypothesis of national sovereignty and the relationship of the EU as an instance of power over an "us."

As an alternative, the interview with the Eurosceptic sees Europe as a continental and geographical entity. "With equal membership of Russia in the EU, as a union of sovereign nations, European industry, knowledge, technology and a huge concentration of people in a small territory and Russian resources will make Europe literally the strongest economic and political power, and I can say that here and China invests in that project, on the continent and a strong, Euro-Asian continental policy will be born again" (Interview with LJP)

The alternative includes not only include geographical but also values-based and cultural elements according to another interview "that is our determination - peoples who will respect traditionalism, national identity, religious identity, family, name, identity, sovereignty" (Interview with JB) The same interview emphasizes the anti-NATO element as a pillar of building an alternative alliance "we are the only party that is against NATO in Macedonia and we are a party that advocates in Macedonia to establish close relations with Russia and the Euro-Asian Union" (Interview with JB). In that direction, the

argument for this alternative can be seen in the non-undermining of sovereignty "In the past 30 years, Russia has in no way questioned our name and identity, history, tradition, culture; it respects sovereignty." (interview with JB)

On the other hand, in two of the interviews, arguments about EU membership as a geographic identity, but also value-incorporating core, together with "us," are highlighted. In that direction, the main political-legal components of why the EU has no alternative for us as part of the Western Balkans are stressed. Namely, "The Western world offers the rule of law, it offers a legal state, it offers cooperation with civil society organizations, it offers individualism, the Western world even has sympathy for dissidents." (Interview with NJ).

According to the priorities and necessities outlined in this way, in the same interview, it is highlighted that "Europe's alternative is Euroscepticism, Europe's alternative is a new nationalism, Europe's alternative is even greater corruption, and finally, Europe's alternative, i.e., non-Europe, is a new war." (Interview NJ)

The geographic, as well as the political need for the state to move towards the EU, is emphasized in an interview, in which the economic connection of the citizens of North Macedonia with the EU is emphasized as one of the key components.

"Europe is powerful. It unites both economically and in terms of area and people... when we go abroad to work, we want to go to Germany... we don't go to Vietnam. First, geographically, we belong to Europe." (Interview with JO)

### **Key findings of interviews:**

- European identity is seen as confronting National identity.
- European identity associated with the EU;
- Most Macedonians doesn't feel positively about the EU and the overall attitude is influenced by identity erasure and deprivation of sovereignty
- Alliance with Russia is seen as guarantor of national sovereignty and as one of the biggest alternatives
- National Sovereignty is one of the key concepts espoused in opposition to the EU.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Eurosceptic narratives in North Macedonia are mainly determined by the fatigue with the long and uncertain process and the concessions the country needed to make as part of it (the Agreements with Greece and Bulgaria). Thus, the ‘threat’ to national identity is seen as the most important argument in the Eurosceptic narratives in North Macedonia. Despite the proliferation of Eurosceptic and pro-Russian parties and movements in recent years, the attractiveness of such viable alternatives as the Eurasian Union has not had a significant rise, as seen from the public opinion surveys and focus groups. Nevertheless, the interviews conducted with party and movement leaders suggest that the length and uncertainty of the Euro-integrative processes create fertile political opportunity structures for the rise of these options to more prominence. In this regard, the research team can propose several policy recommendations:

- 1. Continuous education on EU and European values needed. As much as has been already invested by international donors and civil society, a reinvigorated educational approach on the Eu is necessary.*
- 2. Need for a breakdown of the benefits of EU membership beyond the usual mantras, because they seem to be lost and/or forgotten. The focus groups suggest that a lot of the attractiveness of the EU (except for the economic aspects) are met with cynicism and spite.*
- 3. From EU representatives, there is a need for less rhetorical support, and more tangible aid which can be successfully presented to the Macedonian public.*
- 4. The common regional market in the Western Balkans needs fast implementation, so that the benefits of a common market can be directly felt.*

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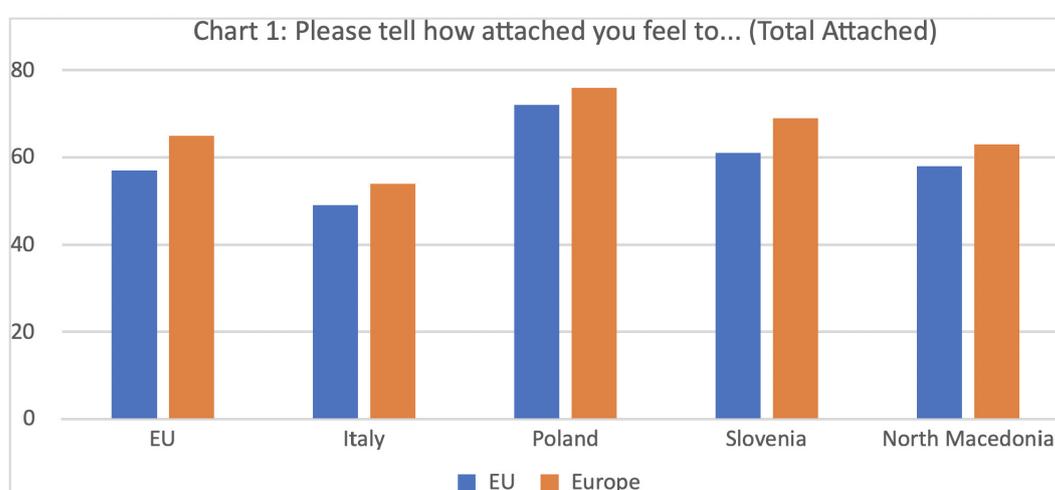
# ILLIBERAL AND EUROSCEPTIC NARRATIVES: COMPARISON AND CONCLUSIONS

## PROJECT RESEARCH TEAM

*The four policy briefs contain the local specificities of Italy, Slovenia, Poland, and North Macedonia regarding the main Eurosceptic narratives and reflections as seen through public opinion, focus groups, and select interviews with political party and movement activists. In order to draw some conclusions, we compare the four cases along findings of public opinion surveys and the fieldwork conducted within the project.*

## DESK RESEARCH – COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

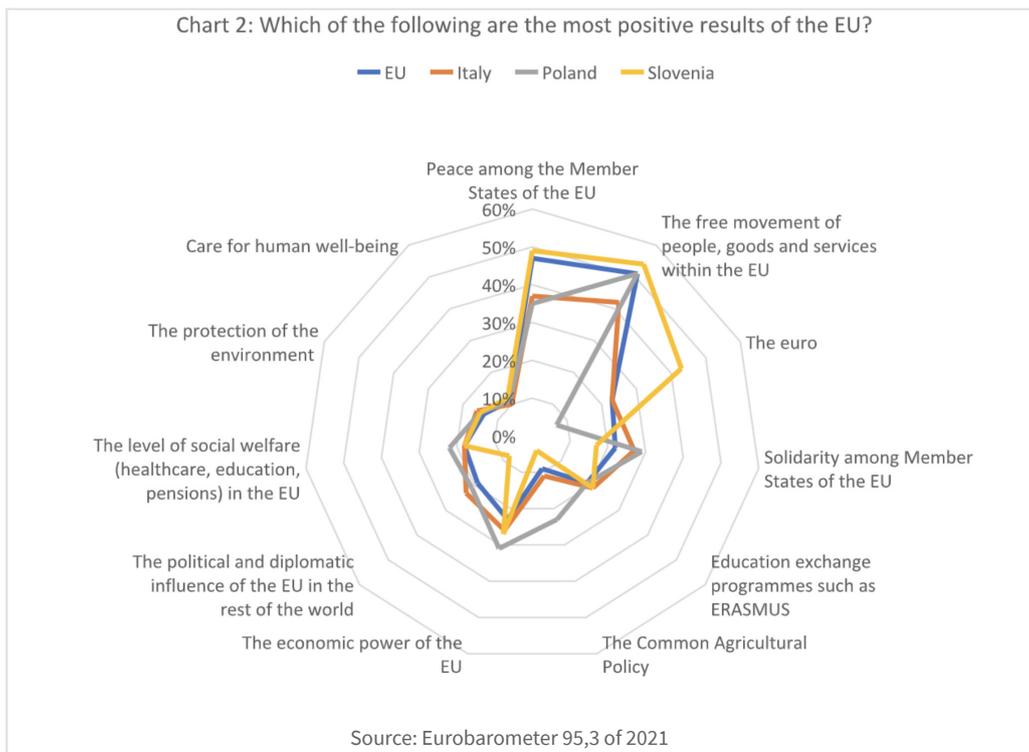
In this part we focus on the existing data on illiberalism and Euroscepticism in the four countries included in the research. Owing to the differences in the selected methods, sources and in the quality of the data provided in the desk research sections of the national case studies, we chose to rely on Eurobarometer opinion polls. These provided us with basic background information that was of help to us in the comparison of the national contexts of the four country cases.



Source: Eurobarometer 87,3 and 95,3 of 2021

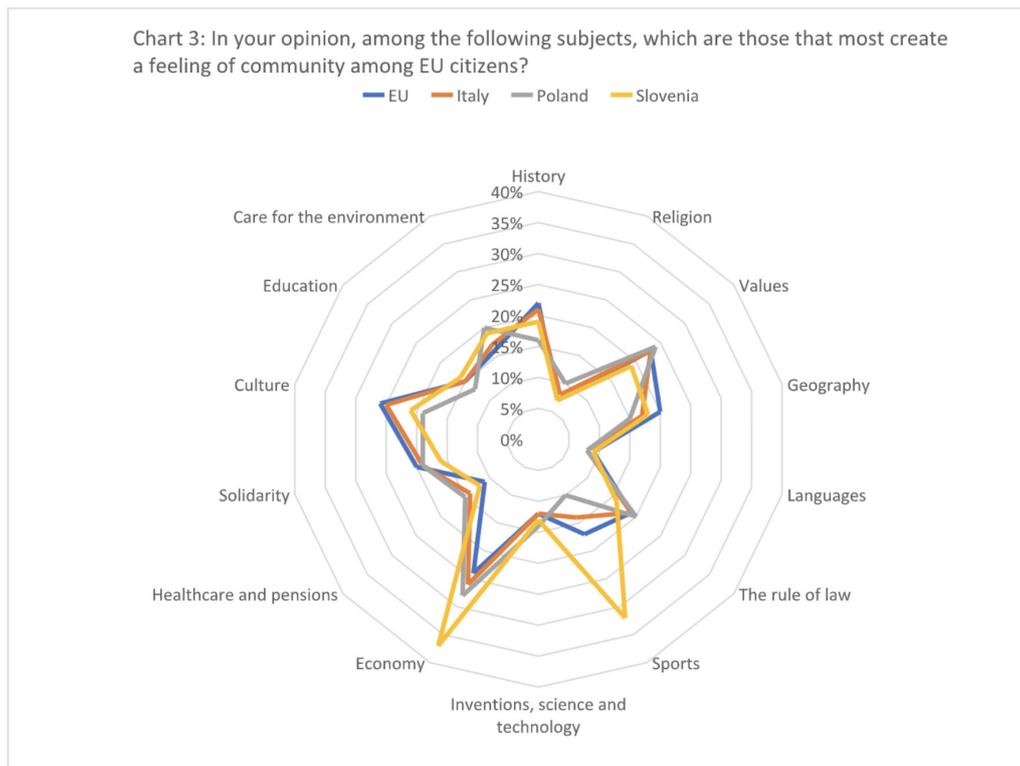
As presented in Chart 1, in every country except for Italy, the majority of the respondents felt attached to the EU/Europe. The level of attachment to the EU/Europe was under the EU average in Italy and above the EU average in Poland, Slovenia and Macedonia. The difference in the level of attachment to the EU and the level of attachment to Europe in general was smaller than the EU average in all four countries except for Slovenia.

The relatively lower levels of attachment to the EU/Europe in Italy could be explained with the fact that Italy is an old member state, while Poland and Slovenia are new member states and Macedonia is a potential candidate country. While the relatively lower difference between the attachment to the EU and the attachment to Europe (compared to the EU average) in most of the countries except for Slovenia indicates a strong interrelation between the two, that is to say, there existed only a limited differentiation between Europe as a geographic and cultural phenomenon and the EU as an economic block and political organization.



According to the data presented in Chart 2, the achievements such as the peace among the member states and the free movement of people, goods and services were seen as the most important positive results of the EU. In all 4 countries, the respondents were more positive, compared to the EU average, about the economic power of the EU. Italians were relatively less positive about peace and free movement of people, goods and services, but more positive about the political and diplomatic influence of the EU in the rest of the world and about solidarity. Poles were relatively less positive about the Euro, but more positive about CAP, social welfare and solidarity, as well as about the political and diplomatic influence of the EU in the world. Slovenians were relatively positive about the peace, free movement and the euro.

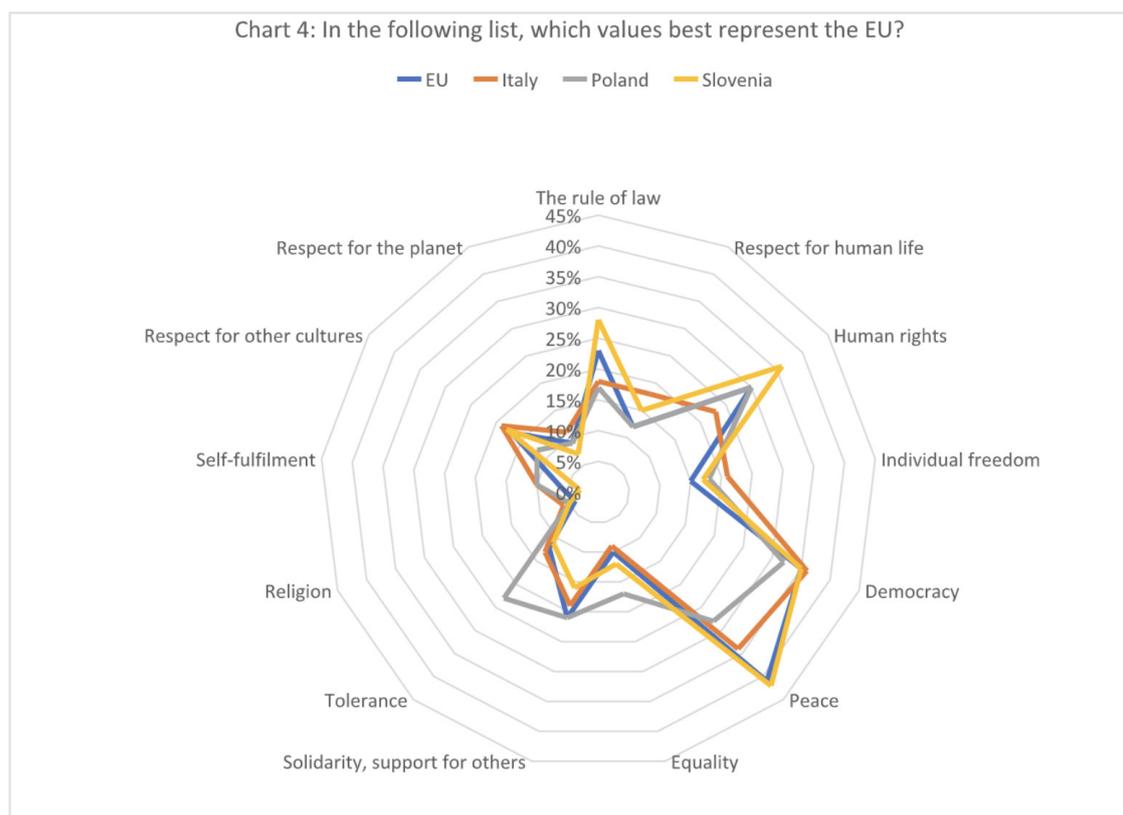
The relatively positive views on the economic power of the EU could be explained with the lower levels of economic development of the countries concerned. The relatively less positive opinions of the Italians about peace and free movement as key results of the EU are consistent with their lower attachment levels to the EU (Chart 1). While the relatively positive opinions of the Slovenians about peace, free movement and the Euro are consistent with their relatively strong attachment to the EU. Poles as citizens of a net beneficiary country are relatively positive about the distributive elements of the EU, which appear to be the reason behind their strong attachment to the EU. To a lesser extent this is also true for Italy. The relatively less positive views of the Italians and Poles on peace and the euro, and their more positive views on the political and diplomatic influence of the EU in the rest of the world (as opposed to Slovenia as a small member state where the opposite is the case) could be explained by the size of the respective countries.



Source: Eurobarometer 95,3 of 2021

Chart 3 demonstrates that culture and economy were perceived as the most important factors that created the feeling of community among the citizens of the EU. Compared to the EU average, the economy, environment, healthcare and pensions were relatively more important than the geography and culture. In Italy, sports were relatively less important. In Poland, religion, values and the rule of law were slightly more important, while sports, history and education were relatively less important. In Slovenia, sports were relatively more important, while history, the rule of law, solidarity and values were less important.

The findings of Chart 2 were consistent with the strength of the economy in the observed countries. The strength of the economy, healthcare and environment could be the reason that explains the positive view on the contribution of the EU to those fields in the countries concerned in more recent times. On the other hand, the weaker role of geography and culture in creating the feeling of community was consistent with the lower level of differentiation between the EU and Europe as a whole as seen in Chart 1. In the Polish case, the stronger role of the normative issues might be explained with the politicization of those issues.



Source: Eurobarometer 95,3 of 2021

As presented in Chart 4, , peace, democracy, human rights and the rule of law were seen as values that best represented the EU. The respondents in all 4 countries were more positive about individual freedoms, compared to the EU average. Italians had relatively strong feelings about respect for human life, religion, democracy and respect for other cultures, but their feelings about human rights, the rule of law and peace were not that strong. Poles felt relatively strongly about tolerance and equality, but not as strongly about peace, the rule of law, democracy and respect for other cultures. Slovenians felt relatively strongly about the rule of law, respect for human rights, but not as strongly about respecting the planet and solidarity.

These relatively strong views on individual freedoms are consistent with the perception of the EU as a liberal project prevalent in these countries. The fact that the Italians and Poles did not have very strong views on peace, and that the Slovenians did is consistent with the findings presented and explained below the earlier graphs. The fact that Poles did not hold strong views on the rule of law and democracy can be explained with the politicization of that particular issue in Poland.

## FIELDWORK COMPARISON

Regardless of the differences between the countries, not only in their size, in the duration of their EU membership, or even in their status as members or just a candidate country, we could distinguish some common traits in the Eurosceptic discourse of the focus groups and interviews. Naturally, some differences could be observed too. The similarities and differences in the opinions ran in line with the similarities and differences between the countries, as well as in line with their ideological positions. We must emphasize that, in North Macedonia and Poland, the European Union was heavily criticized by the right-wing. In Italy and Slovenia, it was criticized by the radicals on both extreme ends of the political spectrum.

In the summary of the focus groups research, we should call attention to certain predominant narratives.

Firstly, the EU was accused of lacking legitimacy (democratic deficit) by the Eurosceptic respondents from its member states. The respondents perceived the common EU institutions as distant from the “ordinary people” (Italy) or even as external to its member countries (Poland). They perceived the elites as not accountable to anyone (Italy – left-leaning respondents, Poland, Slovenia), they regarded the citizens as insufficiently involved in the European decision making process (Italy), and the Community as dominated by bureaucracy.

Secondly, the concept of sovereignty was raised. The respondents, especially those with right-wing leanings, saw the possibility of further integration of the EU as a significant threat to the nation-states and to the EU itself (Italy, Poland, Slovenia). The rules and regulations imposed by the EU, such as the Rule of Law of Conditionality Regulation, were perceived as curtailing the sovereignty and interfering with the nation-states and their interests (Poland, Slovenia). The researched Poles and Slovenians also stressed the inequality among the member states within the Community. According to them, the old states’ subjugated the new ones, especially in the economy and with regards to values.

Thirdly, the EU values were questioned. These values were seen as constituting the core of the federalization project' as promoted by the EU elites. This project, in the views of the right-wing leaning respondents, entailed a unification of cultures and a promotion, or even imposition, of the Western (leftist) values that were seen contradictory to many traditional, conservative, religious, and national values (Italy, North Macedonia, Poland, Slovenia). The extreme openness of the EU to new cultures and to the cultural integration of migrants from outside the EU (Italy) would lead the EU and its member states into a 'nihilist abyss' (Poland).

The socio-economic dimension was the fourth and the last issue the focus groups discussed and it was the most appreciated by many of the respondents. They did accept that the EU offered a better quality of life (North Macedonia) and enabled the development of the infrastructure (Poland), education and vocational training in its member states (Poland, Slovenia). They appreciated the four EU freedoms (North Macedonia, Poland). Nevertheless, in Slovenia, the economic dimension of the EU was strongly criticized by both sides of the Eurosceptic political spectrum. Those supporting the radical right blamed the EU for the loss of jobs. In contrast, the radical left supporters denounced the EU for its neoliberal economic policies, as did the left-wing Italians.

Another, fifth issue that came up was the disappointment in the European Union, which was a phenomenon that united the 'new EU countries' such as Slovenia, Poland, and the only candidate country included in the research – North Macedonia. The interviewees from Poland and Slovenia entertained high hopes for the EU when their countries joined the Community in 2004. However, they were later disappointed. The respondents from North Macedonia were disappointed with the indecisiveness of the Union with regards to its enlargement, and accused the EU of proliferating obstacles to the country's integration.

Yet another, sixth, issue, pushed forward by the most radical Eurosceptic respondents was the belief that the membership in the EU had alternatives. The interviewees proposed a closer cooperation with China or Russia (the research was conducted before the Russian aggression on Ukraine) (North Macedonia and Poland), the USA (North Macedonia) or with other European countries from the Mediterranean area (Euro Mediterranean Union – Italy). Although very few focus group respondents in North Macedonia showed preference for alternatives such as Eurasian Union, Russia and China, the interviewees from right-wing political parties strongly included the East as desired orientation.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations contained in the policy briefs are the product of the country specific studies, and are directed at both local and European actors. To finalize, three common threads and shared recommendations can be brought:

**1. Representation and democratic deficit:** The “Brussels bubble” is seen as detached from citizens of the EU and those from the one candidate country researched. This perception needs to be mitigated through better communication strategies built by both pro-EU forces within the countries, as well as in the EU institutions.

**2. Integration narratives:** The economic narratives need to be more strongly present in talks on European integration, either as an argument for the Green deal, sustainable and inclusive growth, or on the benefits of the open market for aspiring EU members.

**3. Education:** More innovative formal and informal programs on the EU need to be introduced at all educational levels. The functioning of the EU and benefits of EU membership seem to be forgotten by large parts of the young populations, in both member and non-member countries. In particular, popular culture needs to be included for these efforts, as suggested by Polish students.

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Co-funded by the  
Europe for Citizens Programme  
of the European Union



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