

# Attitudes toward the European Union 15 Years after Accession: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland

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**Abstract:** Within the EU program “Europe for Citizens”, the project “The 15th Anniversary of the EU Enlargement”, implemented by four NGO from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, the research on the attitudes of the population to the European Union and the issues related to the EU development. Among the concepts used in the research, the constructs of place attachment and social identity were chosen. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected, including 88 in-depth interviews and 467 questionnaires. Conclusions were drawn showing that national and place identity is stronger than construct of “European identity” among the respondents.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Within the EU program “Europe for Citizens”, the project “The 15th Anniversary of the EU Enlargement” was created by four civic society organizations from four European countries - Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, and Poland. Year 2019 was a year of remembrance, marking the 15th Anniversary of the enlargement of the EU. All participating countries joined European Union in 2004. What has changed and what are people's views on 15 years in the European Union?

The aims of the project included:

1. To raise awareness of the citizens about an important historical, economic and political event in 2004 - the enlargement of the EU, which was the largest expansion of the EU in terms of territory, number of states and population
2. To involve into the project social organizations, town municipalities, museums, libraries, universities and schools for cross-sectorial cooperation to achieve more success in the project.
3. To create the stable network of the Eastern European countries with the aim to disseminate the values of the EU among European and neighbouring countries, to strengthen the EU on its eastern border, to work together for the benefits of the EU.

To implement the aims of the project, one of the tasks was to carry out research on the attitudes of the population to the European Union and the issues related to the EU development. It was decided to divide the research in two parts and to organize both qualitative and quantitative survey. The qualitative structured interviews aimed to collect in-depth insights of the respondents on the topics being researched. Parallely, the questionnaire including mostly the same questions was developed and allocated in the internet platform [visidati.lv](http://visidati.lv) aiming to collect information that could be quantified.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

The general population were the residents of four countries involved in the project - Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, and the sample proposed was kind of stratified sampling: the respondents were drawn at random from the following groups: age, occupation, place of residence (urban and rural areas), level of incomes, education. Developing the questions, the methodology of one of the most popular surveys - EUROBAROMETER - was taken as the basis. The questions were arranged in several groups: (1) questions about the identity included self-

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evaluation of the respondents of their attachment to the EU in comparison with their country or local settlement, as well evaluation of the achievements of the EU; (2) questions on awareness of the EU citizenship advantages, place of their country in the EU; (3) questions on the challenges of the EU and national level and their possible impact on the lives of the respondents in the future; (4) expectations and concerns of the respondents of the EU future and image of the EU; (5) group of questions aimed at identifying active involvement of the respondents in the EU projects, participation in the activities of non-governmental organizations, their motivation to take an active position in the life as active citizen of society.

### 3 BACKGROUND

Among the concepts used in the research, the most interesting to analyse attitudes were concepts of place attachment and place identity.

In psychology, it is widely studied concept that people are strongly motivated to belong to social groups. Social Identity Theory (SIT) is a social psychological theory most concerned with how group membership affects the cognitions of individuals within group. Maricchiolo, Mosca, Paolini, Fornara reminds that Tajfel and Turner, developers of SIT, have postulated that individuals may associate themselves with others depending on the idea of belongingness to a certain group or depending on the idea of their uniqueness comparing to other group (Maricchiolo et.al., 2021). That makes base of local social identity.

Curley has tried to build a theory of European Union (EU) expansion using Social Identity Theory. He points out that both psychologists and International Relations (IR) theorists have begun to discuss the importance of using psychological research to inform our understanding of international issues (Curely, 2009).

The concept of identity within EU countries is an extensively studied. There are three main factors that contribute to identity formation within countries: (a) adaptations of the political order must “resonate” with pre-existing identities; (b) decision-makers pick ideas in an instrumental fashion according to their interests; and (c) once nation-state identities have become consensual among the political majority, they are internalized and institutionalized (Curley, 2009). Therefore the national identities are stronger than the construct of “EU identity” or “EU attachment”.

Fenton, Mann show how the boundary concept has significance for people’s views of English and British identity and for how they view relations between England, Britain, Europe, and the European Union. Identities are connected to historical and political institutions and the national ideas. The connections between nations, states, and citizenship have formal and legal foundations. When people talk about “their country”, they explicitly or tacitly recognise that the nation-state is the most important social container in which they are implicated (Fenton, Mann, 2019). That is how we wanted to compare significance of “social containers” of local, national, and European scale among our respondents, who relatively recently has joined the EU.

Community attachment is a construct proposed by Hummon and explains how a person subjectively interprets or affectively reacts to the place where they reside (Hummon, 1992). Hummon suggests there are five ways people can relate to the place they reside. The terms used by Hummon are rootedness (everyday and ideological) and sentiments (alienation, relativity, placelessness). The first can be described in positive terms, the second – in negative (Maricchiolo et.al., 2021).

The construct of place attachment has been developed in the environmental psychology domain. Three decades ago, Feitelson published an article in *Global Environmental Change* proposing the importance of place attachments, at local and global scales, for understanding human responses to climate change. Devine-Wright focuses on interdisciplinary approach to place attachment and the related concept of place identity, connecting human geography, environmental and social psychology (Devine-Wright, 2013). The conclusions made by Devine-Wright, particularly, recommendations to capture place attachments and identities at global as well as local scales; to integrate qualitative and quantitative methods that capture constructions of place as well as intensity of attachments and identifications (Devine-Wright, 2013) allows to see the possibilities how this construct could be successfully applied to other areas, especially regarding active citizenship and citizen involvement which also were the themes covered by the project “The 15th Anniversary of the EU Enlargement” and the current research. Awareness of people about their identity, which is based on the place attachment, can define their active citizen position.

Interesting research has been carried out by Favell, who interviewed 60 residents of three of the major hubs of European mobility – Amsterdam, London and Brussels, who has moved from their

countries because restrictive circumstances, analysing the opinions of these individuals about Europe. Favell observes low consistency of their attitudes towards the EU, which contrasts with their intense usage of the new possibilities that the EU offers its citizens. They actively exercise their EU citizenship but do not develop actively their so-called “European identity” (Favell, 2010).

## 4 RESEARCH FINDINGS

In the result, 88 in-depth interviews (20 in Poland, 22 in Lithuania, 24 in Estonia, and 22 in Latvia) were carried out, and 467 respondents (115 from Estonia, 137 from Poland, 108 from Latvia, and 107 from Lithuania) participated in the online survey. The research took place from the pre-pandemic time February 2020 till May 2021.

The surveyed sample includes 55% respondents residing in large cities, 27% in small towns, and 17% in rural areas. Generations represented: 28% born after 1995 (so called Gen Z), 33% - born 1981-1994 (Gen Y), 20% - born 1965-1980 (Gen X), 16% - born 1946-1964 (Baby Boom), and 3% of respondents born before 1946. The education and schooling criteria included the age the respondent has completed the formal education (taken from Eurobarometer methodology): age 15 or earlier (3%), age 16-19 (19%), age 20+ (48%), and “still studying” (31%). One more parameter that was used to compare the respondents answers was level of incomes, which in the surveyed sample was represented by the indication by the respondents if they have difficulties paying bills (Eurobarometer): most of the time (6%), from time to time (26%), almost never (33%), never (35%).

### 4.1 Attachment to the EU

According to Eurobarometer survey close to nine in ten Europeans (89%, same as in summer 2020) say they feel attached to their ‘city/town/village’, including over half (52%) who are “very attached” to it. Over nine in ten Europeans (92%) feel attached to their ‘country’, with 56% who feel “very attached” to it. Close to seven in ten Europeans (69%) say they are attached to ‘Europe’, with 21% “very attached” to it. Six in ten respondents (60%) answer they feel attached to the ‘European Union’, including 17% who feel “very attached” to it.

Our survey shows that half of the respondents feel attached to their city/ town/ village, and one third (32%) feel very attached to it. Almost 8 in ten

respondents (77%, which is almost 15% less than in EB survey) feel attached to their country, including 36% very attached to it (56% in EB survey). 72% of the respondents feel themselves belonging to the Europe and 65% – as a part of the world.

The respondents name common values, history, and shared experiences as base for this attachment. Those expressing negative feelings, indicate disagreement with the national policy, lack of satisfaction with external factors impacting their lives.

“This feeling of belonging to the European Union is kind of important and some kind of feeling of safety - I don’t know how much this is real and how much this is just imagination but there is this feeling of safety while belonging to a bigger union of countries that, just in case something is happening, there will be this union that will help you.” (Ola, Poland)

Looking at the differences by countries, the data shows that six to seven in ten respondents feel attached to the EU. A little higher number shows Poland (70%), which could be explained by a larger share of respondents from large cities (76%), and lesser number by Estonia, where more respondents come from rural areas (25%). The survey shows significant correlation between city and countryside residents and their answers - 56% in this population feeling not very much or not at all attached to the EU. (Fig. 1).

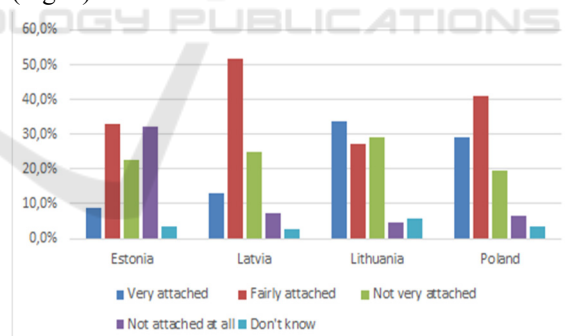


Figure 1: How attached do you feel to the EU? (N=467)

Regarding generations, there are almost no differences among people born after 1980, slightly less attached feel Gen X respondents. This could be explained by the fact that X and Y were those who took active part in changes in their countries before the accession to the EU, but Z have feeling of belonging to the EU granted

This is a new concept focusing on the emotional dimension of local/ national/ European identity. It is concept of collective identity, which impacts individual attitudes and behaviour.

Common, collective identity could be described as a glue that holds together people, communities, social and political systems, including the EU.

## 4.2 The EU Citizenship

The concept of European citizenship is based on the notion if Europeans see themselves as European citizens. There are several elements that create the sense of European citizenship, including if Europeans know their rights as European citizens. In our research, we wanted to collect opinions on self-identification of our respondents.

Our survey shows that more than 7 in ten respondents (74.9%) feel themselves as the European Union citizens, which is even slightly more than feeling attached to Europe. (Fig. 2)

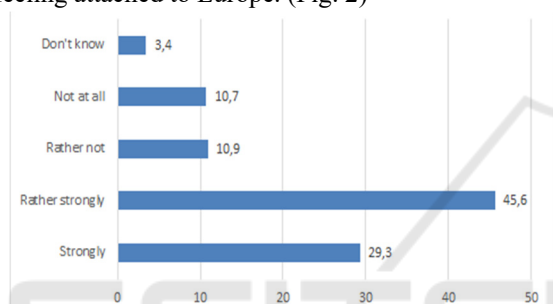


Figure 2: Do you feel yourself as the EU citizen? (N=467)

Most often in the interviews, the respondents name freedom of movement as the most obvious factor letting them feel as the EU citizens, as well using the infrastructure improved due to the EU funding, using euro. Many of them have travelled outside the EU, and emphasize that feeling of the EU citizenship raises when contacting other countries, cultures. The privileges of being the EU citizen is more seen in contrast with others.

It should be noted that in all generations is rather strong feeling of being the EU citizen: 78% of the youngest generation (Gen Z), slightly more (84%) those born between 1980-1994 (Gen Y), and so-called Gen X (1965-1980) (76%) identify themselves as the EU citizens "strongly" or "rather strongly".

Among countries, nine in ten respondents from Poland has the identity of the EU citizens, in average eight in ten - in Latvia and Lithuania, and only half of Estonian respondents. It could be explained by the more representative sample in Estonian case, where different generations are more represented in the sample, keeping in mind that, for example, Baby Boomers are more reluctant to identify themselves as the EU citizens (55%).

There is a possibility for range of the NGO projects explaining EU citizenship to people expanding their focus from freedom of movement to other freedoms and rights of the EU citizens. Considering the issue of ageing population in Europe, there is a large share of population that could use more education and training on the EU awareness.

## 4.3 The EU Awareness

Both in the interviews and online survey, the respondents were asked to name what are the EU achievements they are proud of. In the interviews, this was preceded by the question "What would you think of a person saying "I am proud to be a part of the EU?" There certainly is part of people who are focused on the problems and challenges of the current situation, which causes negative answers like "Do not understand - what to be so proud of?" (Martin, EE). Some respondents understand that it goes without saying - it is just geographical fact of belonging to certain part of the world. Nevertheless, it is nice to hear the views like "That it is a person who is educated and understands the benefits of the European Union" (Nomedas, LT) or "It's a happy person and it's Europe-friendly person" (Rysiek, PL).

In many interviews, the respondents emphasize the feeling of safety and peace in the region as very important achievement of the EU to be proud of, and remember the history of the establishment of the EU and one of its aims - restoring the peace during the after-war period.

The survey affirms that free movement of people, goods and services, peace among the member states, and the student exchange (which, in fact is again the freedom of movement) are three of the most popular achievements (the respondents were asked to mark several options from the list). The least marked options were the common agricultural policy (1,9%), the political influence of the EU... (4,2%), level of social welfare (4,6%), economics (4,6%). (Fig. 3).

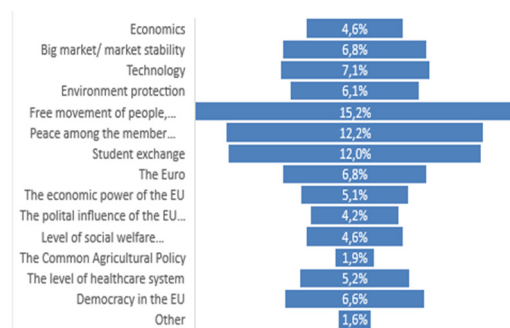


Figure 3: What are the EU achievements you are proud of? (N=467)

In general, the respondents consider that the EU conjure up to very positive (18,6%) or fairly positive (40,7%) image, which is good in relation with evaluation of its image as fairly negative (10,3%) or very negative (5,1%). Still, 1/4 of the respondents are neutral in their position evaluating the overall image of the EU.

The authors of the research believe that the image of the EU is related with its achievements the people can be proud of. The respondents name basic freedoms of the EU, especially freedom of the movement of people (students exchange), as well as peace among member states as the main reasons to be proud of being part of the EU. In the result, more than half of the respondents consider the EU image as positive (very/ fairly), while 1/4 of the respondents stay in neutral position.

#### 4.4 Shared European Values

The question “What are 3 words that come into your mind when someone says „Europe”?” was included in the interviews to find out what are values that possibly are shared by people. In the respondents' answers, of course, their personal values are reflected as well. Intentionally, the authors of the research mentioned "Europe" in this question instead of the "European Union", so the attitude towards the organization, institutions would not prevail over the factors that unite people living in Europe as part of the world.

The EU values includes human dignity, human rights, equality, democracy, freedom, rule of law. All EU member states shall obey these values otherwise their belonging to the Union could be under the question. Defence of these values, promoting citizens' wellbeing and peace are main goals of the EU. European Parliament is the institution following and ensuring that these values are reflected in the EU legislation.

Only by implementing the values declared by the EU, it is possible that the values named by our respondents could flourish. One of the most popular associations named by the respondents is culture - including deep cultural roots, as ancient Greek or Roman cultures, and diversity of national cultures, which are maintained within the union, not being "unified". Of course, there are respondents that are concerned about disappearing of cultural differences under pressure of global/ continental European cultures. Still, most of the respondents name unity as a positive association.

The European history is shared by all the peoples - the history of Christianity is mentioned, as well as history of wars.

It should be noted that all associations mentioned by the respondents are of positive connotations: cooperation, unity, opportunities, democracy, stability, freedom.

One of the most touching is the comparison of the respondent expressing the following vision of Europe - "I can see literally a picture of people holding hands together and I can see circle. So that would be probably friendship, community". (Renata, LT)

In Eurobarometer survey, the question is asked "Which are the subjects that most create a feeling of community among EU citizens" and list of subjects provided. Over one in five respondents cite 'values' (23%) and 'history' (22%); at least a quarter of Europeans mention the 'economy' (26%), which is the most common answer in this survey, and 'culture' (25%). (Standard Eurobarometer, Winter 2020-2021) The authors of the project research consider that the answers of the interviewed respondents reflect the Eurobarometer survey results and illustrate them.

#### 4.5 Country's Position in the EU

The respondents were asked to evaluate what, in their opinion, is the position of their country in the EU. Here, the answers of the respondents are not so optimistic. This question to some extent relates to the question, if a citizen can make their impact to the world, to what is happening in the world or just be a passive token in the big game.

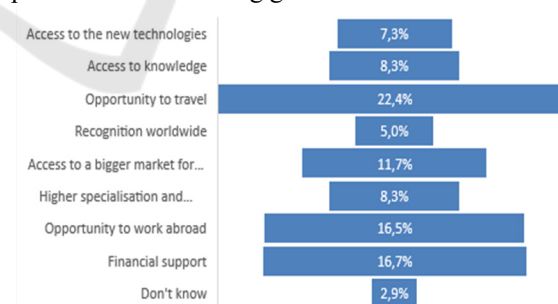


Figure 5: What are the benefits of your country being a member state of the EU?

The interviewees believe that 15 years after accession have not be enough to prove stable position of their countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland) in the European Union – “We are still only establishing this position” (Andrzej, PL), “I feel Estonia has little effect in the EU” (Terhi, EE), “I doubt they are hardly proud of us as a Member State”

(Edgars, LV) - mentioning reasons as low GDP, mentality, national politics, etc.

At the same time, it is positive that the respondents see the advantageous aspects for the EU of having their countries in the union – “I think that Poland is enriching the EU”. (Renata, PL)

There are two in ten respondents considering their country's positions as very strong or quite strong in the EU (2,1% and 16,9% respectively). Almost four in ten are pessimistic (or realistic?) on this position identifying it as rather weak or very weak (26,6% and 11,8% respectively). 42,6% choose the middle opinion, which is "neither strong, or weak". (Fig. 4)

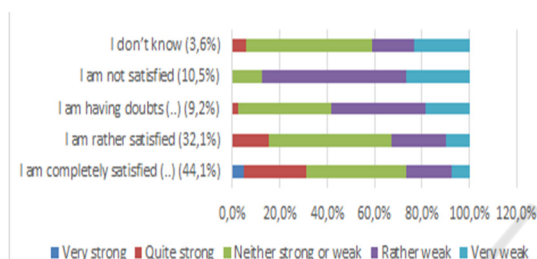


Figure 4: “What is your attitude now about joining the EU by your country in 2004” vs “In your opinion, what is the position of your country in the EU?”

It is interesting to correlate answers to this question with the replies to the question about the respondents' attitude of accessing the EU by their country. As the graph shows, those respondents, who are satisfied that their country has joined the EU, have more positive opinion and less negative opinion about their country's current position in the EU.

The respondents have quite negative opinion about their country's position in the EU. There is opinion that national politics influence this position quite strongly. At the same time there is opinion that each country enriches the Union. Among those respondents who positively evaluates their country's accession to the EU 15 years ago, there are more of those who evaluate their country's current position more positively and see the development perspectives.

The European Parliament Eurobarometer survey "A glimpse of certainty in uncertain times" (2020) includes a regular question to its respondents: "Taking everything into account, would you say that (OUR COUNTRY) has on balance benefited or not from being a member of the EU?" The Parlemeter 2020 survey finds that in all 27 EU member states more than 50% of respondents believe that their country has benefited from being a member of the EU. Particularly, 90% of Lithuanian, 89% of

Estonian, 88% of Polish, and 77% of Latvian respondents. (A Glimpse of Certainty, 2020)

Similar as in the Parlemeter survey, among the benefits of being part of the EU are mentioned economic growth, improved cooperation, strengthening security, new work and travelling opportunities, democracy, availability of the funds for various projects – from infrastructure and environment protection till education and human rights. (Fig. 5)

To quantify the data, our survey confirms that three top positions in the list of benefits of the country being a member state of the EU take opportunity to travel (22,4%), opportunity to work abroad (16,5%) and financial support of the EU (16,7%), followed by access to a bigger market for businesses (11,75%).

Asked individually, more than half of the respondents (excluding 15,4% who are too young to compare) evaluate the changes in their lives for good - 20,8% reply that their life has definitely changed for good and 37% - their life in some aspects has changed for good. Of course, the changes could be affected by various, including, personal factors, but to large extent it is also of being within the EU.

#### 4.6 Challenges of the EU

The Special EB-500 “Future of Europe” (FoE) was conducted in October and November 2020 in the 27 EU Member States. Respondents express opinion that the main global challenge that will affect the future is climate change (45%). The second challenge as assessed by Europeans is terrorism (38%), the third – health-related issues (37%). The fourth most cited challenge, mentioned by just over a quarter of Europeans, is forced migration and displacement (27%). Other challenges mentioned by just under one in five Europeans include the further rise of populism (17%). (Future of Europe, 2020)

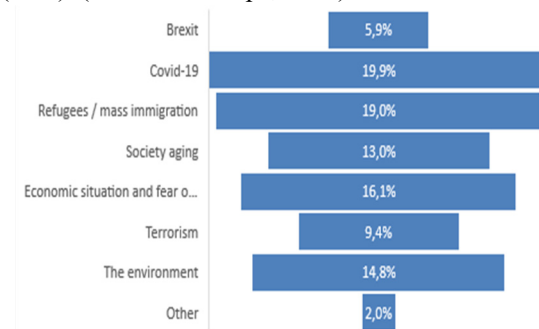


Figure 6: What are three the most important challenges the EU is facing at the moment?

In our interviews, the respondents in addition to the mentioned problems, indicate economic challenges (mostly due to the pandemics) and about Brexit as a concern about stability and continuity of the EU.

To quantify the data, top three challenges as ranged by the respondents are health related issues, i.e., Covid-19 (20%), refugees and mass migration issues (19%), economic situation and fear of economic crisis (16%), closely followed by the environment issues (15%) and society ageing (13%). In the interviews, as well in the open-ended question, the rise of populism and human rights issues are mentioned as a concern by the respondents. (Fig. 6)

Eight in ten respondents (82,4%) are concerned that these challenges would impact their lives (marks 6 and above in scale of 10) in answer to the question "To what extent these EU level challenges could impact your personal life in the future).

#### 4.7 Future Prospects

Eurobarometer survey "Future of Europe" (October-November, 2020) shows that comparable living standards and stronger solidarity among Member States (35% and 30% respectively) are regarded as the two most helpful developments for the future of Europe. The respondents also believe that development of common health policy and comparable education standards (25% and 22% respectively) should be prioritised. Lower ranked priorities, mentioned by less than two in ten, include energy independence (19%), deeper economic integration (17%), a stronger industrial capacity (16%), and a common army (10%). Finally, less than one in ten respondents mention the introduction of the euro in all EU countries (7%).

Despite concerns and challenges that the EU is currently facing, 7 in 10 respondents feel optimistic about the future of the EU (including 59,1% fairly optimistic and 11,8% very optimistic). Though, there is opinion that "Always all unions, empires collapse" (Anna, LV) and Brexit and covid-19 have affected trust in the future of the EU, most of the interviewees consider themselves as optimists. (Fig. 7)

In order to last, the EU shall tackle all its challenges - "I believe that EU won't last. At least, it can't go on like this any longer. There have to be a lot of changes - in politics, people have to change, more equality must occur and only then this union may last." (Luule, EE)

Analyzing by the age group, it is obvious that there are more optimistic respondents in Gen Z (84,7%) and Gen Y (76,8%) age groups, less in Gen X (65,6%), only half of Baby Boomers generation

(50%) feel themselves optimistic, and even less the elder population respondents.

Active involvement and active life position also determine the positive attitude to the future.

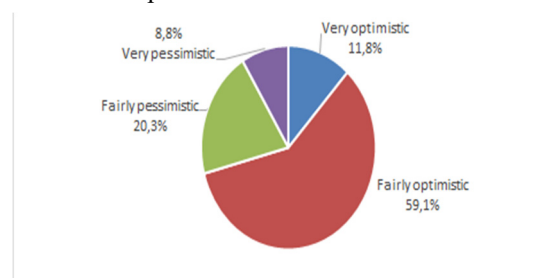


Figure 7: would you say that you are very optimistic, fairly optimistic, fairly pessimistic or very pessimistic about the future of the eu?

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

Attachment is a new concept focusing on the emotional dimension of local/ national/ European identity. Common, collective identity could be described as a glue that holds together people, communities, social and political systems, including the EU. Studying impact of collective identity on attitudes and behaviour of individuals could provide interesting results in understanding the attachment to the idea of Europe and what this attachment includes.

There is a possibility for range of the NGO projects explaining EU citizenship to people expanding their focus from freedom of movement to other freedoms and rights of the EU citizens. Considering the issue of ageing population in Europe, there is a large share of population that could use more education and training on the EU awareness.

Most of the respondents mention positive associations with Europe: cooperation, unity, opportunities, democracy, stability, freedom. These are possible only because of implementing the European values defined by the EU. Commonly Europe is associated with its history, values, religion. In comparison, the Eurobarometer survey ranges the 'culture' as the second subject shared by Europeans, following 'economics', and being followed by 'values' and 'history'.

The image of the EU is related with its achievements the people can be proud of. The respondents name basic freedoms of the EU, especially freedom of the movement of people (students exchange), as well as peace among member states as the main reasons to be proud of being part of the EU. In the result, more than half of the

respondents consider the EU image as positive (very/fairly), while 1/4 of the respondents stay in neutral position.

The respondents have quite negative opinion about their country's position in the EU. There is opinion that national politics influence this position quite strongly. At the same time there is opinion that each country enriches the Union. Among those respondents who positively evaluates their country's accession to the EU 15 years ago, there are more of those who evaluate their country's current position more positively and see the development perspectives.

Among the benefits of being part of the EU the respondents mention opportunity to travel and work, economic growth, improved cooperation, security, democracy, availability of the funds for various projects - from infrastructure and environment protection till education and human rights. More than half of the respondents indicate that their lives have definitely or in some aspects changed for good after the accession the EU 15 years ago.

Health related issues (Covid-19), refugees and mass migration issues, economic situation and fear of economic crisis, environment issues, society ageing, rise of populism, and protection of human rights issues are mentioned as main challenges of the EU level in the future. The respondents are definitely concerned that these EU level challenges could impact their lives in the future.

Despite concerns and challenges that the EU is currently facing, 7 in 10 respondents feel optimistic about the future of the EU (including 59,1% fairly optimistic and 11,8% very optimistic). Active involvement and active life position determine the positive attitude to the future. Analysing by the age group, there are more optimistic respondents in Gen Z (84,7%) and Gen Y (76,8%) age groups, less in Gen X (65,6%), only half of Baby Boomers generation (50%) feel themselves optimistic, and even less the elder population respondents.

Mõtetega (Estonia), Unique Projects (Lithuania), and KOBIEȚY.LODZ.PL (Poland).

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