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From **Euroscepticism** to **Euro-Curiosity**

Stories told by the most vulnerable about
the significance of the EU in their lives.



Ogólnopolska Federacja
na rzecz Rozwiązywania
Problemu Bezdomności



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significance of the EU in their lives.

Valo-Valmennusyhdistys ry
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Contents

Tables3
1. 'I wish that in the future, Finland would be free of the EU' vs. 'I am very happy to be a citizen of the EU'5
2. Our partnership6
2.1 Valo-Valmennusyhdistys ry6
2.2 Vamlas – Foundation for young people and children with disabilities7
2.3 OFRPB - Ogólnopolska Federacja na rzecz Rozwiązywania Problemu Bezdomności7
2.4 ŽISPБ - VšĮ Žmogiškųjų išteklių stebėsenos ir plėtros biuras7
3. Some EU-background to our study.9
3.1 Euroscepticism	10
3.2 Eurobarometer	11
3.3 Conclusions	12
4. Methodology	13
4.1 The process of participatory evaluation	13
4.2 Content analysis	14
4.3 Research data	14
4.4 Ethical questions	15

4.5 Critical reflections.	16
5. Results	16
5.1 Participatory evaluation	16
5.1.1 The first selection process of the participatory evaluation method	16
5.1.2 The most significance story	26
5.1.3 Reflections on the process of participatory evaluation	27
5.2 Content analysis	28
5.2.1 The nine categories.	29
5.2.2 Nine categories in the spotlight, what do the stories tell us?	41
6. Discussion	42
Literature	44

Tables

Table 1: Results of the European Parliament elections 2019

Table 2: Narrators by gender, age group and organisation

Table 3: Thoughts on the EU

Table 4: Thoughts on EU values

Table 5: Thoughts on the idea of being European

Table 6: Thoughts on EU decision - making

Table 7: Thoughts on the security associated with EU membership

Table 8: Thoughts on the free mobility within the EU

Table 9: Thoughts on project and investment funding received through the EU

Table 10: Thoughts on the single currency (euro)

Table 11: Life was better in the past



1. *'I wish that in the future, Finland would be free of the EU.'*¹ vs. *'I am very happy to be a citizen of the EU.'*²

This project responds to the concerns of four organisations in Finland, Poland, and Lithuania regarding the rise of Euroscepticism. The perceived distance from the EU specifically, experienced by its most vulnerable citizens, has created a breeding ground for anti-EUism and the rise of extremism. This project takes all subjective experiences and beliefs of the EU seriously. The themes that emerged in the study are being prepared for dialogue between the most vulnerable and EU decision makers as well for building a common understanding of the EU's role. The aim has been to make what is seen as the faceless EU entity more comprehensible to its citizens and to create new perspectives and positive curiosity towards the EU. We want to thank the Europe for Citizens Programme for their interest in our idea and for funding this study. Without this financial support, conducting the present study would have been much more challenging, if not impossible.

In practice, this project trained participants in the participatory evaluation method. Each organisation collected a total of 20 stories from their clients, in which the clients speak about what the EU has meant in their lives. Each organisation then selected the most meaningful story and justified their choice. Afterwards, the steering group went through the four selected stories in order to choose the most meaningful one and wrote down a justification for their choice. In the meantime, all the stories were sent to me. As a researcher, I classified the stories using content analysis methods. The nine resulting categories are based on what came to people's minds when asked about the meaning of the EU in their lives. After all, there are no right answers, only subjective stories.

The clients of the organisations are mainly users of the organisations' services, not volunteers. For them, coping with the challenges of their daily lives takes up most of their resources and attention, and they are unable to participate in other activities. In this project, they were offered the chance to tell their own story, to be heard, to engage in dialogue, and thus empower themselves. This project has given the participants, representing the most vulnerable in our society, a real opportunity to understand what the EU could mean in their daily lives. This process has lowered the threshold for influencing different elements that are important for these citizens. The stories collected for this project, descriptions of the selection processes and thematic analyses, are included in this report. The project has provided an opportunity to learn about the expectations of the most vulnerable people in society regarding the EU. The role of the EU is seen as something that brings security to people and as a shared space, but also as a threat to nation states.

While we were planning the first preparatory meeting, we had to accept that something had changed. In early March 2020, the alarming information about the spreading of the Covid-19 virus became a reality. Booked flights had to be cancelled and meetings changed to webinars. However, we decided that this was such an important project that we would not stop. In April 2020, we also received support from the Europe for Citizens program in Brussels. Despite the Covid-19 virus, we continued our work, transferring the project plan to the online environment. We had organised training for everyone in Poland, which we had all been waiting for, where participants would learn how to collect the stories and handle them. This had to be transferred to webinars and Moodle environments. The decision certainly paid off, as the project moved forward and we were able to discuss the importance of the EU with our clients.

We got to know each other through our computer screens. However, we hope that our next joint project will allow us to explore the real operating environments of the different organisations on site and to get to know each other outside of our computer screens as well. While we wait for this chance, it is a good moment to read this report.

I would like to thank the FESTE team for an inspiring and interesting shared learning process. The team includes Agne, Jakub, Karoliina and Kimmo, who were all fully committed to our joint project. It has been important for everyone to make our clients' voices heard and you have always been ready to carry the project forward. THANK YOU!

Helsinki, May 28th 2021

Eeva Sinisalo-Juha

Researcher

1 (Petri/Valo)

2 (Mindaugas/ ŽISP)

2. Our partnership

2.1 Valo-Valmennusyhdistys ry

Valo-Valmennusyhdistys is a national politically and religiously nonaligned non-profit organisation. It was founded in 2016 by four regional associations, all working towards building inclusion in society. Valo-Valmennusyhdistys is made up of 65 experts, including youth workers, social workers and teachers. We have already managed to develop a rich national and international co-operation network. We have used this network to conduct several development projects aimed at finding new solutions to the challenges that our clients face.

Our mission is to support, guide and train some of the most vulnerable members of our society in order for them to be able to obtain good, ordinary lives, where their goals in the areas of health and wellbeing, employment, housing, and family/friends can be achieved. We are also developing operating models to support our clients' access to inclusion and agency. Our goal is to empower our clients to become active citizens, with a clear understanding of how they can influence matters when needed. We improve their access to training, employment, wellbeing, and participation in society. Our main target group is young adults under the age of 29, although some of our activities have no age limit.

We constantly evaluate our working practices using research and applied sciences in order to improve the quality of support that we offer our clients and to develop our own processes. We develop informal and non-formal learning environments and validate skills/competences. For instance, in the KEIJO -project, we developed a new long-term rehabilitative education model for ex-offenders and people with drug addictions. The model is based on becoming an Expert by Experience and its aim is to improve participants' employment and education pathways.

Our organisation runs several active development projects related to the following areas: improving inclusion in society, validation of skills/competences in to the ECTS and in order for our clients to access vocational qualification modules and obtain full qualifications, improving the learning pathways and skills of ex-offenders and people in recovery, improving basic skills (reading, writing, mathematics, IT...) and competences in wellbeing.

Our operating models include:

Valo-valmennus training model

Valo-valmennus is aimed at people who want to improve their job readiness and complete vocational qualification modules through practical work. Learning takes place in real-life working environments, completing real tasks while supported by a coach. The model has been used in over 100 organisations across Finland.

Youth Guarantee House

The Youth Guarantee House concept brings together different youth services. We use the methods and ethos of youth work. Our aim is to offer holistic support at the right time to young people who are at risk of exclusion from society. Young people who are not in education or receiving statutory services are offered one-to-one support. In the long term, our aim is to offer opportunities and solutions in transition to education or employment. There are several Youth Guarantee Houses in different cities across Finland.

Towards an Ordinary Life

The Towards an Ordinary Life- model offers rehabilitation and training to ex-offenders in different stages of their release process. The aim is to support ex-offenders in moving towards education and employment. This model provides a genuine opportunity for ex-offenders to change their lifestyle in the direction of an 'ordinary life'.

Valo-Valmennusyhdistys is the coordinator in this project and is also responsible for administrative and economic issues. Valo-Valmennusyhdistys also takes care of training the research method used in the project and reporting the research results.

2.2 Vamlas – Foundation for young people and children with disabilities

Vamlas is a support foundation for young people and children with disabilities that was founded in 1889. The aim of the foundation is to promote the education and employment of young people and children with disabilities. Currently, Vamlas provides expert services, training and projects (employment, services, participation) and housing services for students in Helsinki. The foundation's activities are based on three strategic themes; increasing accessibility of services, participation, rehabilitation and schooling for families and young children, promoting inclusion, independent living opportunities and accessibility of education for young people, and aiding young adults in their transition into paid work. We run employment projects that focus on employers, business networks and job creation, and family projects that focus on preventive action and the inclusion of families with disabled children. We also lobby and influence legislation and services, and create networks with other NGOs and families working for common goals. Vamlas supports research, training of professionals (i.e., in job carving), arranges events for families, professionals and young people and organises summer camps for children.

In the present project, Vamlas mainly focused on young people with disabilities (all kinds of disabilities). The aim was to make the EU more comprehensible for young people with disabilities and to open up new perspectives and positive curiosity towards the EU. Traditionally young people with disabilities have been more excluded from society and more passive (politically and generally) than other people of the same age. There is a rising interest in the social activities carried out by young people with disabilities in the research field and in the third sector generally. Participation in this project gave us an opportunity to gather more information from young people themselves in order to promote their inclusion in society, also on a political and EU-level. In Vamlas, a total of 20 stories were collected from young people with disabilities describing what the EU has meant in their lives. We selected three stories that were presented to the steering group. We also engaged in dialogue with these young people with disabilities on the results of the executive team's work. The aim was to jointly develop a new understanding of the role and importance of the EU in people's daily lives. The project was an effective learning process for all participants and their networks regarding the EU.

2.3 OFRPB - Ogólnopolska Federacja na rzecz Rozwiązywania Problemu Bezdomności

Polish National Federation for Solving the Problem of Homelessness is a national umbrella organisation for homelessness founded in 2013 as a result of a partnership between six major Polish homeless charities. OFRPB works with entities devoted to combating homelessness (as defined by the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion ETHOS, developed and published by [FEANTSA](#)) supporting the participation of homeless people in social life. Members of OFRPB are bound by a common vision that **ending homelessness is possible**.

The aim of OFRPB is to prevent and mitigate the effects of poverty and social exclusion on people at risk of homelessness or that are already experiencing homelessness by stimulating and supporting cooperation between entities involved in helping the homeless in Poland and by thriving to influence social policies regarding the problem of homelessness.

Currently OFRPB has **29 members** and it has been a member of **FEANTSA** since 2018.

2.4 ŽISPБ - VšĮ Žmogiškųjų išteklių stebėsenos ir plėtros biuras

VšĮ Žmogiškųjų išteklių stebėsenos ir plėtros biuras (ŽISPБ) is a non-governmental non-profit organisation with 18 permanent employees and a large number of volunteers who help to organise the activities implemented by the organisation.

The objectives of ŽISPБ are:

- to observe, analyse and assess social phenomena and processes them in the field of social and educational policies;
- to create, adapt and implement innovative social and educational initiatives and projects related to for-

mal and non-formal education aimed at professionals and different target groups.

ŽISPB develops and implements various projects, initiatives and interventions at both a national-local and transnational level in collaboration with both formal and non-formal adult education providers, training centres, schools, public bodies, research centres, NGOs, social cooperatives, SMEs, business associations, etc.

ŽISPB provides services to different target groups, including the elderly, victims of violence, (ex) offenders, families at risk of social exclusion, young people, volunteers, social workers, social partners, disabled people, people at risk of poverty, etc. The organisation provides services for more than 200 people in disadvantaged target groups. Their services include:

- psychosocial support, individual and group counselling, job integration activities, career counselling, etc.;
- development and implementation of local and international projects mostly for socially excluded target groups;
- development and accreditation of different programs for perpetrators of violence, post-graduate social workers, assistants of social workers, nurses, managers, employers, volunteers, etc.
- organisation, execution and implementation of various social initiatives and activities, conferences, roundtable meetings etc., mainly for victims and perpetrators of violence, HR management, and promotion of the inclusion of the socially disadvantaged, vulnerable groups (e.g., victims, elderly, unemployed, disabled, etc.);
- provision of research, information, counselling (advice), external evaluation services;
- translation, interpretation services;
- provision of training.

ŽISPB seeks to create and adapt new psychological services and training for different groups of professionals working with socially disadvantaged groups to provide them with information, counselling and educational activities. The organisation also initiates, participates and implements both local and international projects in the field of social work, formal and non-formal education, improves the skills, competences and knowledge of professionals and volunteers and provides them with methodical support.

ŽISPB is an expert in assessing and developing soft skills, developing and implementing new learning methods, working out new strategies, methodical materials and programmes regarding effective vocational insertion. We are also skilled in pilot trainings, e-learning, accreditation of programmes, quality assurance, dissemination and valorisation, project management, research, conferences and venues, etc.

During the implementation of the FESTEĆ project, 50 service receivers were informed about the project activities and 25 of clients were selected for the story collecting procedure. In the end, 20 stories were collected and added to the project's content. The idea is for all of these clients to participate in the final webinars organised locally as part of the project.

3. Some EU-background to our study

Finland joined the European Union in 1995. Lithuania and Poland joined in 2004. Finland joined the euro area at the beginning of 1999 and from the beginning of March 2002, the euro became Finland's only currency. Lithuania adopted the euro at the beginning of 2015. Upon accession to EU membership, Poland has agreed to join the euro area, as long as its national economy meets the conditions for joining. The process is therefore still ongoing in Poland.

Up until 31 January 2020, the European Parliament had a total of 751 members. In the May 2019 elections, 13 MEPs were elected from Finland, 11 from Lithuania and 51 from Poland. In the 2019 EU elections, the turnout in the entire EU region was 50.66%. The turnout in Finland was 40.88%, in Lithuania 53.48% and in Poland 45.68%. The seats in Finland, Lithuania and Poland were distributed as follows:

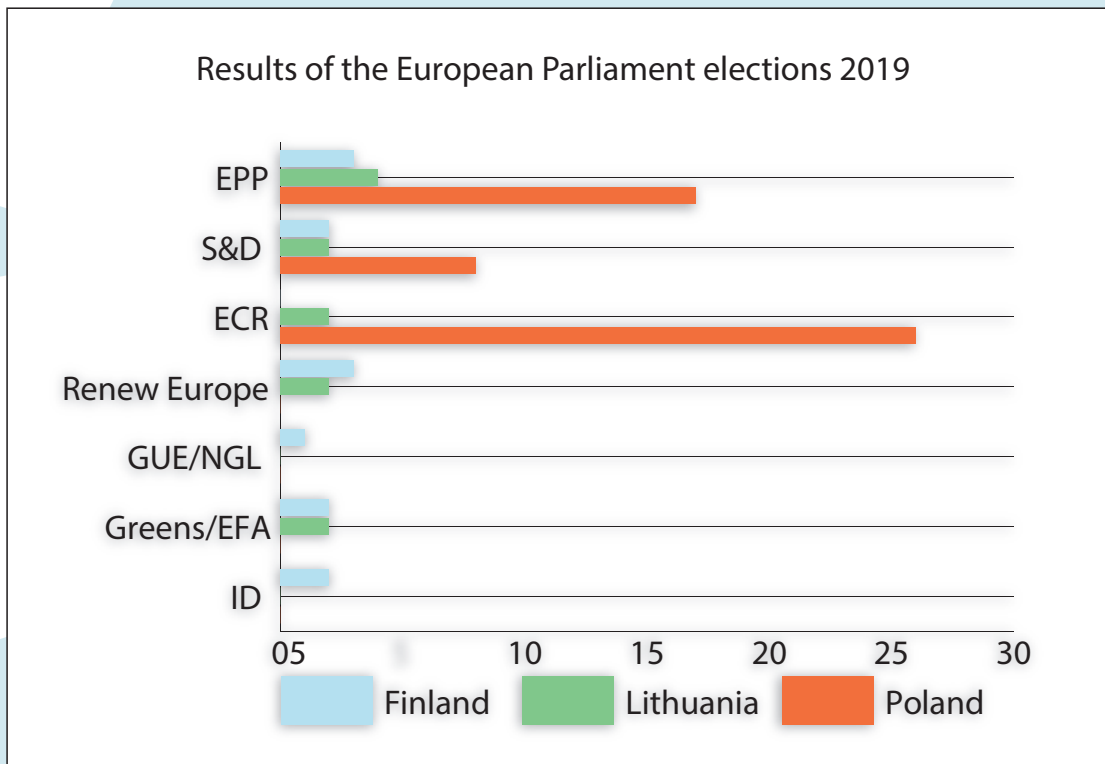


Table 1: Results of the European Parliament Elections 2019

Abbreviations:

EPP - Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats)

S&D - Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament

ECR - European Conservatives and Reformists Group

Renew Europe - Renew Europe group

GUE/NGL - Confederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left

Greens/EFA - Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance

ID - Identity and Democracy

Following the separation of the United Kingdom from the EU, the number of members of the European Parliament decreased to 705. As a result, Finland got one more Green Representative. Poland also added one more representative to the ECR Group. In addition, one representative of the Polish S&D Group joined the Greens/EFA Group as a non-attached member. (European Parliament 2019.)

3.1 Euroscepticism

The earliest roots of Euroscepticism can be traced back to the problems with the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty already in 1992. Since then, Euroscepticism has also been fuelled by referendums on different treaties, which have made space for various protests. In addition, the enlargement of the European Union has increased various integration projects and introduced new ways of dealing with European issues. Euroscepticism refers to either outright or conditional opposition to European integration. So-called hard-line Euroscepticism opposes a country's EU membership or plans to join the EU. Soft Euroscepticism, on the other hand, opposes the process of European integration. (Szczerbiak & Taggart 2008.)

Founded on The Guardian's initiative and peer-reviewed by 80 European researchers, The PopuList includes far-left, far-right and Eurosceptic parties from 31 European countries. The popularity of Eurosceptic parties in the European elections has grown from around 15% in 1992 to almost 35% in 2019, meaning that about one in three voters is critical of the EU. One element that increased Euroscepticism was Poland's accession to the EU in 2004. The Polish Eurosceptic Law and Justice Party defends Christian values, which they believe are under threat in the EU. However, Eurosceptic parties are more strongly positioned against immigration than the European Union itself. According to The PopuList, 54 of all European parties represent Eurosceptic, populist and far-right ideas. In comparison, far-left politics, populism and Euroscepticism are represented by 17 parties. There are 35 Eurosceptic and far-left parties and 17 Eurosceptic and far-right parties. In total, around 33% of voters voted for Eurosceptic parties in the 2019 European elections. Of these, far-right Eurosceptics received the most votes (16%), followed by Eurosceptic parties representing neither extreme (10%), and finally far-left Eurosceptic parties (7%). Regarding the countries that are the object of this study, more than half of the Polish population and about 14% of Finns voted for Eurosceptic far-right parties. There was no Lithuanian party that directly represented Euroscepticism. (Rooduijn et al. 2019.)

In the autumn of 2020, a book on Euroscepticism and the future of Europe, funded by the Europe for Citizens Program, was published (Kaeding et al 2020). The aim of the book was to describe Euroscepticism in the EU Member States. The book includes articles from all 27 EU Member States as well as from 13 neighbouring countries, such as the United Kingdom, Iceland, Norway, Turkey and Ukraine, all providing answers to the same questions centred on Euroscepticism.

Euroscepticism has existed in Austria, Belgium and Sweden since the early 1980s. In 1992, only 51.05% of the French population voted in favour of the Treaty on the European Union, the so-called Maastricht Treaty. Brexit, Britain's withdrawal from the EU, represents materialised Euroscepticism. Of the countries participating in the From Euroscepticism to EuroCuriosity research project, Poland is the most pro-European country, with only 5% of its citizens expressing the desire that Poland withdraw from the EU. This is surprising when, at the same time, the Eurosceptic Law and Justice Party (PiS) was voted into power in Poland. On the other hand, Lithuania, just across the border from Poland, is the second least Eurosceptic country in Europe after Ireland in terms of its political parties. Lithuania's Euroscepticism is not on the party agenda, but rather contained in the activities of strong political movements. (Kaeding et al, 2020.)

Kaeding (2020) points out that Euroscepticism is here to stay and despite its status as a marginal phenomenon, it is able to influence the political arena. Therefore, it is worth analysing the roots of Euroscepticism. Unemployment, socio-economic vulnerability, climate change and anti-immigration sentiments or xenophobia are key factors contributing to Euroscepticism. The EU has, of course, already been working on these issues. For the future, a strong vision is needed to help EU citizens understand the importance of cooperation and trust between neighbours.

Program Director Juha Jokela from the Finnish Foreign Policy Institute wrote the article about Finland. Traditionally, Finnish parties have pursued a constructive EU policy. The election victory of the True Finns in 2011 broke this tendency. True Finns is a right-wing populist and openly Eurosceptic party. Its aim is to fight immigration and the 'climate change hysteria'. Disagreements within the party led to its disintegration and the more radically right-wing section came out stronger in the following elections, becoming Finland's second largest party. True Finns also won two MEP seats in the 2019 European elections. They represent the Identity & Democracy Group, founded in 2019. In the

2019 elections, the remaining 11 Finnish seats went to pro-European MEPs. (Jokela 2020.)

Ramūnas Vilpišauskas is a professor at Vilnius University and the director of the Lithuanian Institute of International Relations and Political Science. He contributed to the reflections on the attitudes of Lithuanians towards the EU. Prior to her election as President, Dalia Grybauskaitė, who served as President of Lithuania from 2009 to 2019, was Lithuania's first EU Commissioner, during which time she was responsible for the EU budget. During her presidency, she influenced Lithuania's foreign relations and European policy. In 2019, three elections were held in Lithuania, the first of which were municipal elections and the second the first round of the presidential elections. The second round of the presidential elections were held at the same time as the European elections. There were no clearly Eurosceptic candidates amongst the presidential candidates. One of the candidates represented the Europe for Nations Group as an independent candidate, but, with only 4.69% of votes, they did not reach the second round. In the parliamentary elections, where the turnout rose to a high 53.48%, criticism of the EU was expressed by political parties, as well as by political movements known as public elections committees. The criticism mainly focused on the sovereignty of EU states and remained somewhat vague. None of the parties that gained seats in the European Parliament can be called Eurosceptic. According to the 2019 Eurobarometer results, Lithuanians are among the most pro-European in the entire European Union: 72% trust the EU, 76% are optimistic about the future of the EU and 94% are in favour of free movement in the EU. Indeed, free movement has been an important factor since the beginning of Lithuania's EU membership, as it has enabled migration to the UK, Ireland and Spain. Vilpišauskas also mentions EU geopolitics and especially the occupation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 as significant factors contributing to the positive attitude of Lithuanians towards the EU. However, nationalist and populist political movements are on the rise in Lithuania and can be expected to contribute to a more negative attitude towards the EU in the future. Lithuania therefore needs genuine debate on the implications of possible deeper EU integration. (Vilpišauskas 2020.)

Professor of European Studies *Zdzisław Mach* and Assistant Professor of Political Science, *Natasza Styczyńska*, both from the Institute of European Studies of Jagiellonian University in Kraków, wrote the Polish section for the Euroscepticism and the Future of Europe publication. Poland is one of the most pro-European countries in the EU. In the 2019 COBOS opinion poll, for example, 91% of Polish respondents were in favour of Poland's EU membership and only 5% thought that Poland should not belong to the EU. At the same time, there is strong support in Poland for right-wing policies based on ethnic nationalism. According to the ethnic nationalist view, nations refer to like-minded ethnic communities where newcomers of different religions or races, for example, are not welcome. Indeed, the Catholic Church represents this idea of the Polish identity and has expressed concerns about the impact of European values on the country. The Catholic Church has been particularly critical of European currents, such as what it refers to as the 'civilization of death' and 'LGBT ideology'. Over the course of history, the self-identification of Poland and Polishness has developed by means of external rulers. These historical currents also explain the Poles' sense of victimhood and the idea of the outside threat. Thus, many Poles think that financial support from the EU represents a compensation for the suffering experienced by Poles instead of shared EU values. This idea is also supported by the right-wing parties that are now in power, according to which 'Poland, the heart of Europe' is connected to Europe only in terms of its economy, not because of a shared European identity or values. Indeed, during the 2015 refugee crisis, Europe was portrayed as being on the verge of suicide, letting people into its territory whose aim supposedly was to destroy Europe. These far-right ideas appear as especially attractive to young Polish men. Young women seem to support more liberal values. (Mach & Styczyńska 2020.)

3.2 Eurobarometer

The Standard Eurobarometer has been used to conduct surveys on Europeans since 1974, with the aim of interviewing around 1,000 people from each country. Nowadays, these surveys are commissioned by the European Parliament on a regular basis. The so-called Standard Eurobarometer as well as other targeted surveys, such as the Future of Europe, are conducted on an annual basis. (European Union.)

The Eurobarometer survey conducted in February-March 2020 asked, among other things, whether respondents were familiar with the concept of 'citizen of the European Union'. 65% of respondents

said they understood what it meant, while 26% recognised the concept but did not really know what it meant. When respondents were asked to assess three assertions related to EU citizenship, for example: 'Citizens of EU Member States must apply for EU citizenship' (WRONG), a total of 83% of the respondents answered correctly, including 85% of Poles, 81% of Finns and 68% of Lithuanians. When asked about the rights of EU citizens, 81% of all respondents answered correctly, including 89% of Finns, 87% of Poles and 76% of Lithuanians. 48% of respondents fully agreed that free movement would benefit their national economy and 36% more or less agreed. In comparison, in 2015, 32% of respondents fully agreed and 39% more or less agreed. Last year, 90% of Poles, 88% of Lithuanians and 84% of Finns agreed. When respondents were asked what might inspire them to vote more actively in the European elections, the most important element for Finnish respondents was receiving more information about how the EU affects their daily lives. Lithuanians mentioned having more young candidates as the most important factor. Poles, on the other hand, hoped to receive more information about the candidates' programmes and targets, as well as about parties in the European Parliament. (European Commission 2020.)

In the autumn of 2020, the Future of Europe survey, conducted jointly by the European Commission and the European Parliament, asked respondents, among other things, how European citizens can be consulted regarding EU decision-making, the EU's main interests and challenges, and EU values. The survey was conducted as face-to-face or remote interviews and the total number of respondents was just over 27,000. Among other things, the study asked about the best ways in which citizens could make an impact. One of the available answers was 'voting in the European elections'. This answer was selected by 84% of Finns, 43% of Lithuanians and 37% of Poles. When respondents were asked about their attitude regarding the idea of the EU, 35% of Finns were satisfied with the EU as it is today and 39% were generally satisfied with the EU, but not so much with its activities so far. The corresponding figures for Poles were 41% and 36% and 40% and 34% for Lithuanians. 16% of Finnish respondents said they felt rather sceptical about the EU and were more or less against it, while 10% were completely opposed to the EU, the highest figure among all surveyed Member States. The corresponding figures for Poles were 18% and 3% and for Lithuanians, 22% and 4%. When asked to choose the two most important factors for Europe's future, 56% of Lithuanians and 46% of Poles chose standard of living as the most important factor. With Finns, on the other hand, solidarity between EU countries was the most popular answer, 43%. When asked about the EU's interests, Lithuanian respondents chose the EU's respect for democracy, human rights and the rule of law as the most important, 42%, while the same option was picked by 44% of Finnish respondents and 26% of Poles. Finns chose the EU's strength in the economic, industrial and commercial spheres as the most important advantage, 45%. The Poles, on the other hand, chose the standard of living of EU citizens as the most important advantage, 33%. Of the challenges faced by the EU, Lithuanian respondents rated climate change and environmental issues as the biggest, 47%. 44% of Finnish respondents chose it as the most important challenge, the same amount as those who picked terrorism, 44%. Polish respondents considered health issues to be the biggest challenge, 50%. (European Parliament & European Commission 2021.)

A Eurobarometer survey conducted in February-March 2021 asked whether respondents trusted the EU or not. The answers also included the option 'I can't say'. 49% of all respondents said they trusted the EU. In comparison, 70% of Lithuanians said they trusted the EU while 30% did not. 50% of Finnish and Polish respondents said they trusted the EU. 38% of Poles said they did not trust the EU while the corresponding figure for Finns was 50%. The same survey asked about respondents' attitudes towards the European Economic and Monetary Union and the shared currency. The answers revealed that 84% of Lithuanian respondents, 76% of Finns and 34% of Poles supported the EMU. The same survey revealed that 79% of respondents were in favour of the euro. This is the highest figure since 2004. (European Commission 2021.)

3.3 Conclusions

The countries involved in this research project are generally very pro-European. It is interesting how so many Poles voted for a Eurosceptic party while, at the same time, many are strongly in favour of belonging to the EU. For Poles, the most difficult element of the EU seems to be its liberal values, both regarding gender minorities and abortion. These are contrary to the position of the Polish Catholic Church. There is no Eurosceptic party in Lithuania yet, but a shift is taking place in that direction. Lithuanians are also strongly pro-European. Lithuania's geopolitical location and Russia's

occupation of Crimea have also contributed to their positive attitude towards the EU. In these two countries, the positive attitude is likely to be related to expectations of improved living standards. Finnish opinion is divided. Most Finns support the EU, while about a third are more or less Eurosceptic. In the Finnish Eurosceptic debate, there are concerns that Finland will end up paying for other countries and that its own national decision-making will be subordinated to 'Federal Europe'. At the same time, 43% of Finns value the solidarity with other countries that is enabled by the EU.

In light of this study, it is good to consider the root causes of Euroscepticism, including socio-economic disadvantage and unemployment. Seeing immigrants as a threat also affects negative attitudes towards the EU. According to a study by Hakhverdian et al. (2013), a person's level of education also influences their level of Euroscepticism. Lower levels of education seem to reinforce Euroscepticism. On the other hand, populist movements can be seen as promoting equality as they mobilise more citizens to vote and express their opinions.

4. Methodology

The participatory assessment method used in this research project was developed by Susan Cooper, lecturer at the Plymouth MARJON University (2018; Siurala et al. 2019), as a tool for evaluating youth work. Her idea was to encourage young people to talk personally about how youth work had affected their lives. Her aim was also to analyse the accounts of young people in order to look at the work carried out by youth workers and the management of youth organisations and to determine whether the goals of the organisation were being met. The method is strongly participatory in addition to empowering.

The participatory assessment method has previously been used, for example, in the development of the Youth Guarantee House operating model of the training company Valo-Valmennusyhdistys (Sinisalo-Juha 2019). The feedback received from young people on the method has been encouraging. It served them as a reflection for the changes taking place in their own lives. In addition, the employees valued the feedback received from young people, as it acted as an indication of the elements that were working well, but also shed light on potential improvements. As the management of Valo-Valmennusyhdistys participated in the processing of the material, they were able to see what was going on in the organisation and whether their expectations were being met. Because the method produced such good and encouraging experiences, it seemed natural to extend its use to other operational contexts as well.

4.1 The process of participatory evaluation

This project was conducted based on the participatory evaluation method described above. The idea was to collect 20 stories from each partner organisation. The stories were narrated by the ordinary clients of these organisations, the most vulnerable members of society. The clients were asked the following question: 'What role has the EU played in your life?'. The organisations' employees, already known to their clients, were responsible for collecting the stories. This avoided the situation, where an outsider first has to get to know a person's life situation before asking them for a story, only to then turn around and take the story with them. As the story collectors already knew the clients, there was no need for the clients to introduce themselves as, for example, someone with a substance abuse problem or a homeless person, but they were seen as interesting subjects in themselves. The narrations also function as community stories through which a plurality of voices can be heard.

Each organisation allocated four to five story collectors. The aim of the project was to bring all the story collectors together for a joint training in Poland, but because of the corona pandemic, this idea had to be abandoned. Thus, training was organised procedurally through Teams meetings and more practical tasks were carried out on Moodle. The method was exemplified by each story collector narrating a personal story based on the following question: 'What has Covid-19 meant to you?'. The stories were thus used to practice the process of participatory assessment in each organisation through the story collectors' personal experiences. A selection of these corona stories is available on

the project website. (FESTEC 2020.)

The actual study frame, based on the question 'What role has the EU played in your life?' was carried out on Moodle. Each organisation collected 20 stories. The narrators used a nickname that was attached to their story. Their gender and age were also added to the story. Each story included a short description of the narrator the aim of which was not to identify them, but rather to help increase understanding of the different components of the story for outsiders. Special care was taken to ensure that no one could be identified as a result of this information, with the exception of the story collectors. All of the stories were also translated into English.

The story collectors from each organisation then read through all the stories from their organisation and jointly determined two to four themes for each story based on what they thought the stories were about. They also had to pick the three most relevant stories. The choice of stories had to be justified. The three most significant stories selected by each organisation with their justifications can be read in the result chapter.

Each organisation also created a steering group, which, in addition to a few story collectors, included representatives from the organisation's management, other NGOs and local influencers, and some officials. The steering groups were tasked with selecting the most significant story and justifying their choice. The Lithuanian partner organization ŽISPB has created animations of these stories.

In March 2021, all steering groups met in a Teams meeting. At the meeting, each organisation presented their most relevant story together with a justification. The meanings of these stories were discussed at the meeting, where also the most meaningful of the four stories was selected. Each story had to be backed up with a justification. Comments were also prepared in relation to each of the four stories regarding the relationship between the narrator and the EU. The actual research part ended here.

However, project activities continued. During the spring of 2021, events were held in each partner organisation, where the animations and selected stories with their justifications were presented to the clients. The aim was to encourage a deeper client-driven debate on the role of the EU. Everyone involved in the project as well as any interested clients, story collectors, steering groups and also MEPs will be invited to the project's closing webinar. The aim of the event is to encourage discussion on the themes raised by the clients of the partner organisations in their stories and in local feedback events regarding the importance of the EU. The aim is also to ensure that clients' messages will be taken seriously and forwarded to Brussels.

4.2 Content analysis

In content analysis, the researcher goes over the collected material in order to start gradually outlining various themes from which categories of meaning can be drawn (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009). In this study, the themes were derived from the clients' stories. The following sentence illustrates how this is done: 'The EU monitors Member States' compliance with the law.' Outside this sentence, the narrator already displayed a positive attitude towards the EU. Thus, one could interpret that the monitoring role assigned to the EU by the narrator is seen as positive. Two themes can thus be highlighted: a positive attitude towards the EU and that the EU increases security. The theme table compiled in relation to the stories included a total of 325 themes. These were gradually divided into nine categories of meaning. The researcher then allocated titles to the different categories, such as 'Life was better in the past'. These categories helped open up new perspectives on the material and different meanings attached to it. All categories were later collated with the rest of the material, the different organisations, and the age and gender of the narrators.

4.3 Research data

The research project included 20 client stories from each organisation regarding the meaning of the EU in the clients' lives. The stories were collected during the spring and summer of 2020. The narrators were between 17 and 67 years of age, including 34 women, 43 men and 3 non-binary, a total of 80 narrators. Table 1 presents a summary of all narrators. All of the 80 stories have been translated from their original languages into English. Some of the stories are just a few sentences long while

others are longer than an A4 sheet. The totality of the stories takes up 48 pages.

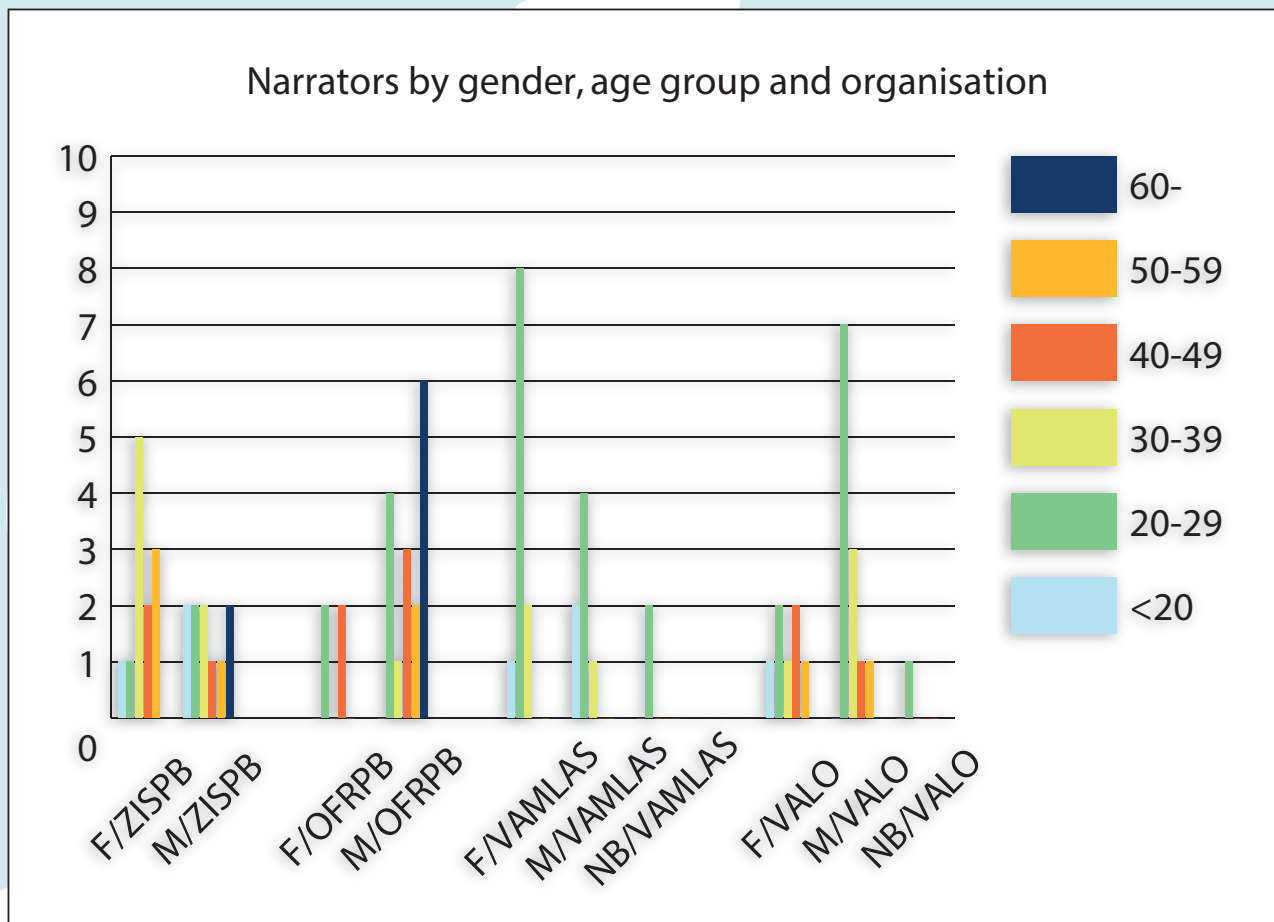


Table 2: Narrators by gender, age group and organisation

4.4 Ethical questions

The Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (Tenk 2012) has published guidelines on how to promote good scientific practice and research ethics and on the prevention of scientific fraud. These guidelines have been followed in this research project. The research ethics guidelines pay special attention to minors, i.e., in Finland people under 18 years of age, as subjects of research. According to the guidelines, 15 years is the age limit for having to ask parents for permission for their children to participate in a study. None of the research subjects in the present study were under the age of 15 and there was only one 17-year-old amongst the project informants i.e., narrators. Thus, only the narrators themselves had to be informed of their participation in the research project and only their personal permission was needed.

The study includes the age, gender, and nicknames of narrators, as well as information regarding their organisation and the country in which each story was collected. It could be possible to identify individual narrators within their organisation, but for outsiders this would be a demanding task. Nor is it of interest in this study, as the focus lies on the stories themselves. One should also remember that all narrators have given their permission for publishing their stories.

4.5 Critical reflections

It is important to look at how the different narrators were selected and how they were asked to tell their stories. The former relates to whether the narrators represent a realistic sample of people who think positively or negatively about the EU. This inevitably affects the results as the stories were used to study the different meanings given to the EU. The question also arises as to whether each narrator was asked to provide a story in the same way. It is highly likely that, as there was a total of 17 story-collectors and the clients were asked to write their stories in different types of situations, the tone of each story is also very different. Also, the relationship between individual story collectors and narrators most likely varied, as did the cultural context in which the stories were written. This was taken into account as much as possible by reading all of the stories in their entirety as well as the themes that had been highlighted in them. The goal was to bring out each narrator's voice. All of the narrators are living in vulnerable situations and they are not normally asked to provide their story nor are they given importance, as has been done in this study, where the aim has been to make the narrators' voices heard.

Language represents one of the key concerns related to this research project. Despite good intentions, some elements may have been lost or altered as the stories were translated from their original language into English. Cultural differences between countries and organisations may also have influenced the stories. It is very hard for external researchers to have access to all possible meanings. At the same time, of course, this can be seen to reflect the present context of Europeanness, where cultural differences are always present and not always detected.

Understanding the process of story selection is critical in terms of participatory evaluation. For example, whether every story generated an equal amount of interest, or if anything went unnoticed or changed in the translation process. However, one has to believe in the goodwill of the people involved, that no intentional manipulation occurred, and that any possible alterations are unintentional in nature.

5. Results

5.1 Participatory evaluation

5.1.1 The first selection process of the participatory evaluation method

First, the story collectors from each organisation read through all of the 20 stories collected from their clients together. After this, a general discussion was held regarding the stories and the themes that emerged in them, in other words what the stories were about. The story collectors then jointly selected the three most significant stories and placed them in order of importance. All three choices had to be justified.

In what follows you can find the choices of each organisation and their justifications.

OFRP (Poland)

The most significance choice

Herbie

He is a 60-year-old homeless man from Poland. Since 2017 (with breaks) he stays in a homeless hostel, where, apart from the shelter, he receives services in the field of social work and social and professional activation. Herbie's severe alcoholism caused loss of employment, then a divorce and an eviction from his apartment. Despite the addiction therapy, he occasionally returns to dangerous

alcohol consumption, which makes his reintegration attempts difficult.

"I associate the European Union with the progress of our country. It can be compared to human relations - the weaker ones are supported by the stronger ones. This is what integration should be about. We, as a country, would not be where we are today (in such a good economic situation) if it were not for the Union.

The EU allocates funds from a common pool according to the needs of the countries - the weaker get more, the stronger get less, or even add to the pool more than they receive. And this is a good solution, although I know that Poland is slowly moving from the group of the weaker to the stronger and the amount of the EU's aid will probably decrease in time. This way of acting helps everyone, Poland has benefited a lot from it.

The lack of borders means the freedom to choose where to live and work. If there is too much unemployment, you can easily look for a job in another country.

Common trade policy, freedom of trade - this is another very important thing. There is the ease of trade between EU countries, which makes it possible for me to buy products from Spain or Greece in Poland.

The downside of integration is the weakening of national ties, the ideas of homeland and patriotism are subject to decay. But this is probably a sign of the times and the global village we all live in, only strengthened by the actions of the Union."

Justification of the choice

Herbie's story is probably most balanced, structured and comprehensive of all gathered. He underlines the most positive aspects of Poland's adhesion to EU, like international cooperation and solidarity, supporting development of poorer regions, freedom of movement or common trade. He also points out concerns of globalisation and losing national identity. Herbie shows a very good understanding of the subject, yet he approaches it as an observer only – he does not speak about his own experiences at all.

The second significance choice

Andrew

He is a 65-year-old man. For half of his life, Andrew was homeless and addicted to alcohol. Currently he has been staying in a peer-support commune for 7 years and considers it a home, his destination. He has been an abstinent for 5 years.

"I associate the EU with the development of our country, but also with my personal development. Thanks to the EU, our country is developing more – it is quite obvious to see. New roads, highways, new buildings, renovated monuments, certain standards in various areas of life that are "imposed" on us cause progress. Our commune also benefited from this – for example, we have new buildings which were built with 50% from the EU funds. The other 50% was obtained from a private foundation and thanks to this we have better conditions to live and work. Without the EU we wouldn't have had it, because what Polish NGO would have so much money?

It's nice that there are EU projects e.g., for integration with other people, like the ones we organise here. But it would be even better if these were, for example, longer integration trips, so that there would be money to have a decent dinner in a good restaurant, instead of these bonfires and barbecues that we constantly have. And what a great thing it is that we can have vocational courses and internships with the EU money! It would be unthinkable in the past.

The fact that you can travel in the EU without passports and customs is also a very good thing. If you are looking for a better life for yourself, you have such an opportunity now. You just have to go well prepared, because there is a large group of people who leave Poland with neither a job nor a place to live at their destination. They just go spontaneously or sometimes even run away from Poland, from their addiction or from prison. But there are also those who are lucky enough and they have pulled their whole families to where they live. I personally benefited from this opening of borders. Now, as a peer-worker, I can work abroad and help other Polish migrants who did not succeed there. I had the opportunity to visit so many countries – me, a homeless person and an alcoholic! I have been to Italy, Belgium, England, Netherlands and Germany. It was the open borders that made it possible and the EU funds too. Without this, my life would have been probably monotonous."

Justification of the choice

Andrew's story is very euro-positive and mostly built on his own experiences. He points out some general benefits for Polish infrastructure, but mostly he underlines his own experiences – better conditions in the commune he lives in, taking part in reintegration activities and his peer-work with Polish homeless migrants in European cities, which is possible thanks to the freedom of movement.

The third significance choice

Alex

She is 64-year-old woman and a single mother who has experienced domestic violence and has lived in support centres for violence victims. She is a homeless person, currently she lives in transition housing. She shares her apartment there with two other families.

"I have no experience with the EU at all. As such it has given me nothing. Nothing has improved since Poland joined the EU. It has only improved for those who were already quite well situated. And opening borders was the worst idea. The Ukrainians came to us, pandemics, pestilence. There will be no work for us soon. The Ukrainians will work for next to nothing, and we will not do it for next to nothing. I won't allow anyone to humiliate me, they will treat me like a decent person and I won't work for free.

I would expect the EU to become more involved in the fight against homelessness. So that countries would have to build housing, because we are forced to wait too long for an apartment. Social housing should be given to the homeless for free, not rented. How are we supposed to be able to afford it if we only receive the lowest social benefit?

I have never even been abroad, neither to work nor on vacation, because how could I afford it? But I'm not interested in going there anyway. What's there for me? We have everything here. Besides, I would be afraid. One hears so much about scams – you arrive there and learn that your job offer was a lie. And the scammers even take the money you've earned away from you. I would never leave on my own. Maybe with some company that has been checked and would organise everything. No, even with that I wouldn't. I want to work in Poland and I want to die in Poland. I am Polish. And I want to earn here the kind of money they earn in the West. I have friends who tell me that it is enough for them to have one person working for example in Germany and the whole family stays home in Poland, they do nothing and everything is fine, everyone makes a living out of it. And I don't even want to speak what social support is like in Germany. It is not worth working at all there. It is better to go with their social benefits.

And the only positive experience I have with the EU is probably the waste segregation that the Union has imposed on us. Thanks to this there is no more mess, you can't just throw your old sofa out on the street, etc. There are fixed days when such kind of garbage is collected, there are containers for waste segregation. This is on the plus side. In the past even neighbours used to throw their waste into each other's garden and now, thanks to these regulations, it's all about order and I'm satisfied with it."

Justification of the choice

Alex's story is very eurosceptic and filled with frustration. Of all eurosceptic stories gathered, this one is the most comprehensive (though the subject of the conflict between Poland and EU over the rule of law is not present in this one). It shows Alex's anger with her own situation directed not only at the government and EU (she points out that EU should be much more involved in fighting homelessness), but also at migrants. The latter makes Alex complain on the freedom of movement, and point out it is useless for her as she is devoted to staying in Poland for the rest of her life. This kind of borderline patriotic and nationalistic approach is present in almost all eurosceptic stories. She recognises very little advantages of Poland's adhesion to the EU (e.g. garbage segregation) and she points out that at the end of the day, only "those who were already well situated" benefited from it.

Valo-Valmennusyhdistys (Finland)

The most significance choice

René

A 36-year-old man. An invalidity pension was under consideration for health reasons after he suffered a heart attack. He wanted to try to go back to work and got into rehabilitative work through Työpiste. His physical condition has improved and he feels that he has regained a daily routine and many other good things.

“European Union is just a communistic and forced federation, nothing else. I don’t like at all, we are told from somewhere else what to do. We don’t have right to do our decisions anymore. Original idea of EU as a economical system is changing to federation in every level. It is purely a debt-Union that is strictly against constitution.

Only good thing in Eu is freedom of travelling, but that could be arranged without Union, we don’t need anything but economical treaties to make this possible. European Union doesn’t bring any safety, but they take our funds with joy. Our prime minister is just a shop clerk, she made deal worth 50 million euros and that costs to us 100 million. By the words of our former president, Urho Kaleva Kekkonen, I would say “Damn idiots”.

Prices in Finland has been just rising after joining Euro. Now we are one of the most expensive countries in Europe. They are playing with alcohol- and cigarette taxing even consumption of these products has been decreasing year by year. Everything is dictated from Brussel. Bureaucrats are deciding everything. Internet laws are just one example. These idiots just didn’t know what they were voting for. All they care are interests of big money and multinational corporations. Decisions are made in Germany and France and others just have to obey. We are never going to get our loans from Italy or Greece, it was just wasted money.

It would be just great to have our own currency. Agriculture has been driven down, all they do in that field nowadays is begging money from EU and writing different kind of application forms. I can remember the day one could have a lunch for ten marks. Now that same dish costs you ten euros, prices have literally multiplied, these banks in Middle Europe are just screwing us around.

If I would be heard in European parliament I would repeat my previous words of Urho Kekkonen. I’m totally against EU. When I was kid, I could see flourishing fields from car window. My grandmother used to have cattle, horses and things like that. Now everything has gone.”

Justification of the choice

René’s story showed an honest viewpoint regarding the EU. It is very clear what his own opinion is and he is very open with expressing it. René shows strong scepticism towards the EU and believes the EU is unnecessary. Even the one positive aspect he mentioned, free mobility, could, in his opinion, be arranged without the EU. His concerns regarding the changes in agriculture and higher prices after the euro were shared with some other storytellers as well. He remembers the life before Finland had joined the EU and compares it to the current day Finland, which according to him, has changed for the worse.

The second significance choice

JH

He is a 38-year-old man, who battles different health difficulties, but is focused to rehabilitate himself to one day be able to work at a library. This story is obviously based on the writers very limited knowledge of how things actually are. The writer is neither politically active nor very knowledgeable of the actual significance of large political bodies. At least from the news coverage the writer observed, while the situation naturally varied greatly between the nations within the EU, mostly we managed better than most of the world, partly because while we are a union, we still had the tools to section of borders and travel as needed, as the countries within are much smaller than the super-powers.

“European Union hasn’t played a visible role in my life in a long time, yet it has always been in the back-

round as a kind of solemn, unchanging constant. (To preface this a bit, the writer is neither politically active nor very knowledgeable of the actual significance of large political bodies.)

While I don't see the effect European Union has in my life on a regular basis, I know enough to be aware that is a large part of my life, even if I don't actively perceive it as such. Being raised in a relatively liberal home and having a mostly 'live and let live' mindset myself, I do consider European Union to be more or less best the world currently has to offer as far as larger political bodies are concerned. The concept 'In Diversity, Strength' holds true to my mindset, and the EU embodies this better than other similar collectives as far as I can tell. To sum it up, in the writer's perspective, smaller nations seem to have much more flexibility in their governance, thus allowing for quicker reactions and more efficient and swift responses to crisis such as the COVID-19

A large consortium which allows its members to remain culturally mostly as themselves, yet brings unity for the sake of political and economical considerations is ideal, in my mind, to how the world should unite, yet allowing each individual nation to retain their specific identities, be they religious, cultural or whatever else.

Of more contemporary note, it is nice to not have EU be a constantly visible part of the negative news storm that seems to rampage its way through the rest of the world, the situation in the US, Russia, China and some other parts of the eastern world keep showing as constant reminders on how much worse many others have it as far as their governing bodies are concerned.

The recent outbreak of COVID-19 displayed rather well to me at least how a more diverse, yet united grouping like the European one seemed to suffer comparatively less from the outbreak. Having smaller countries who have separate local governments and their own borders seemed to be a more effective way to seclude the viral outbreaks, compared to what happened in the larger "super-powers" akin to China, US and India for example.

Thus the value of a governing body similar to the European Union seems best we can (currently anyway) manage. Together as one (politically and economically in any case), yet socially distanced."

Justification of the choice

JH's story showed deep reflection on what the EU has meant to him. His story was written by him in English, which leaves the story completely untouched without the effects of translation. He describes the EU on different levels and mirrors them to his life. Even though he might not understand the politics behind the EU, he is still aware of its effects. He gives attention to the values he sees in the EU and describes how he has witnessed the EU put them into practice. He also covers the topic of the EU in comparison to the superpowers of the world, a theme which was found in several other stories as well.

The third significance choice

Toni

He is a 22-year-old man. He first came to the Youth Guarantee House sometime in the end of 2018 to meet a job coach. At the time, he was finishing his vocational IT degree and doing his last internship.

After the graduation he said he was ready to become more independent. He was not able to find a job in his field but got an opportunity to start working at a fast food restaurant. Toni was working very irregular hours and most of his free time would go towards gaming all night. Most of the time, he was very exhausted.

In the Youth Guarantee House, Toni has mostly been having one-on-one meetings with the youth counselors. Since last year he has quit his fast food restaurant job, moved to his own apartment and started a one-year course to develop his IT skills. However, with the corona outbreak and living alone for the first time, keeping up with his studies and other responsibilities has been challenging. This summer he started a rehabilitative coaching at the Youth Guarantee House to support him towards a more independent future.

"EU hasn't really meant anything in particular to me. It is discussed in media a lot, for sure. I guess it makes traveling and other things easier. And of course if there's a common currency between different countries, it makes life easier. It can be easier when, for example, you order something online. At least it's

cheaper because there's no need to exchange the currency. I would rather order something from Germany than from the USA.

I hope that in the future EU could mean something like "unity". So that countries could co-operate. I hope it could make life easier. I haven't done much research on politics, so it's a bit difficult to say."

Justification of the choice

Toni is a prime example of those storytellers who have lived their whole lives in EU-Finland. Toni's story expresses the themes shared by many stories from the people of the same age group. The EU doesn't really mean anything to Toni. He understands that the EU has made life easier for him, but other than that, it is difficult for him to form an opinion when there is not much to compare to or when the knowledge is limited. Toni also has his wishes for the EU and hopes it to create more unity.

Vamlas (Finland)

The most significance choice

A

26-year-old woman She is a member of Vamlas's Nuoret vaikuttajat (Young influencers) group.

"I do not have any particular relationship with EU. It is just in way something that "is". I was so young when Finland joined the European Union that I do not really have any memories from the time before it.

In everyday life it may be seen in a positive manner for example in the fact that when ordering products from other EU countries, one does not need to pay customs or that thanks to the financial EU aids, food is quite inexpensive.

EU also shows its usefulness and practicality when one wants to travel to other EU countries. Common currency and free movement make that quite a lot easier.

Beside EU's positive sides I also see negative ones; certain kinds of political decisions are difficult to make very fast if they keep being negotiated in several different countries. Furthermore, Finland has to pay for other EU countries' mismanaged economics, and therefore our interior devaluation and increasing Finland's competitiveness is not possible.

In a certain sense, EU created security and stability, and makes it easier for individuals to make their own choices regarding consumption and movement but at the same time it seems a rather inefficient and generalising and I do not think that the European Union brings a sense of community between the citizens of the member countries."

Justification of the choice

We determined 5 main themes that manifested in most of the stories and this story covered all of them in a concise yet very descriptive way. Many of the young writers initially state that the EU feels personally irrelevant or foreign to them, Yet the themes of freedom of movement and consumption choices come up in most of the stories, and they are considered positive and useful facts. We wanted to choose writers of different genders. This writer is a female.

The second significance choice

Please, no World War Three in Europe!

He is a 22-year-old man. He has no direct personal connection with Vamlas at the moment, but he is a vocal disability activist and a musician and he is considering joining Vamlas's Nuoret vaikuttajat (Young influencers) group.

"The European Union is a free trade and cooperative union between many European countries. It was first formed between a couple of countries during the late 1900s and later more member countries joined it. For example, if I can recall, Finland joined the union in the late 1990s.

Approximately at the same time Finland decided to switch the currency from the mark to the euro which was used in several EU countries. The EU has a blue flag that has yellow stars forming a circle. The stars represent the member countries, if I can recall. The elections to the European Parliament are arranged every fifth year. In these elections each country elects MEPs from their citizens, i.e. Members of the European Parliament. The EU has a court of law.

In normal circumstances the EU countries allow free movement between them. The EU citizens have the right to work and move into any EU country. Free trade is done within the EU, which means for example that there is no customs duty to be paid when shipping products from one country to another.

Not all of the European countries are part of the EU, and the member countries are required to have democratic values. The EU has its own central bank. The UK left the EU in 2020.

I am not particularly interested in the EU. The union feels like a very distant and bureaucratic thing, which happens far away somewhere in Brussels. I know that the political decisions done by the EU are very important regarding the Finnish citizens but it feels like such macro-level politics that I do not have the energy to follow it that closely. I would rather focus on political questions on the more local level, which affect my own life more directly.

In normal circumstances I am able to move, travel and work within the EU countries. However, I am not really of the travelling type, or very skilled at languages so this does not affect my life very much.

Peace with the EU and in Finland is a good thing. There has not been too many wars within the EU between the member countries in recent times, so I think that the EU has at least succeeded in terms of the peace project. In the countries that are at war, the fates of people with disabilities often do not end up well.

The heightened right-wing populism within the EU countries is a bit scary and it also influence the Finnish majority's attitudes towards people with disabilities, for example. In addition, the popularity of populism brings about a lot of unpredictability in my outlooks. I do not think that xenophobia is part of the western or the EU values, although you can think critically about immigration and its effects in an appropriate manner.

I will not comment on the economical questions about the EU because I do not know enough about the national economy. It is clear, however, that different kinds of stimulus packages and massive transactions have an effect on the Finnish economy as well. But that is also rather a macro-level matter.

I would you like get more transparency information in the EU's decision-making processes and better reporting on the decisions made.

The EU is not completely foreign to me. I know the basics. But I think that for example the EU-level economical questions are so big that I do not understand them that easily without having a degree in economics. Also, you do not really come across the decisions made on the EU level for example on my social media feeds.

I am completely neutral about the EU. There are pros and cons about the union. There is lots of nuance. If the right-wing populism continues rising in popularity, more EU member countries are probably going to leave the union and the whole EU might fall apart. I think this is a threatening scenario because it will create insecurity in Europe.

I cannot make arguments about the federation development and the EU military, I do not know if they would be good or bad things. The US have become more distant from Europe during the Trump era so NATO cooperation or Nordic military cooperation are in my opinion options worth looking into in Finland, quite quickly as well.

Some of my friends know a lot more and some know less about EU. I think the level of my EU knowledge is average."

Justification of the choice

This story also covered a diverse set of views on the EU. The main themes in this story are the perception of the EU as a distant and bureaucratic system that feels complicated to normal people, but the significance of the EU as a global operator is understood. These ideas manifested in most of the stories we collected. Also the significance of human rights advocacy was considered specifically from the disabled point of view; if basic human rights become threatened as far-right ideas spread

and gain ground, what does it mean for the most vulnerable? We know this from the history books.

The third significance choice

H

27-year-old non-binary person. This person has no direct personal connection with Vamlas. They are a personal friend of one of our story collectors and they meet the criteria of our target group so they were recruited for the task. They just started studying design and they pursue to have a positive effect on the everyday lives of different kinds of people with their work later. They are interested in helping people regardless of their background, abilities, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and worldview.

"I know about the EU that which we were taught in school. I know about the euro, I know about the directives and what the administration consists of. The general restrictions and the freedoms. I can't remember the name of the chair right now but I do generally keep up with what's going on inside the union.

I'm interested in the internal affairs of the EU but you hear and see unfortunately few news what's going on with the smaller countries. Most of those that you see focus of wars and misery and I would hope that the union would speak out more strongly about blatant human rights violations. For example Hungary and Belarus. Russia cannot be such a big threat that human rights are not actualised. Shockingly obsequious behaviour. Now Brexit is talked about for weeks on end but everything else is forgotten about. I would like to see the EU to grow a spine about this.

I would like for the directives to have more flexibility, especially in the agricultural affairs. That goddamn curved cucumber has to go in the trash but at the same time child labour production gets a blind eye. The EU seems to be weak in front of the US, the Middle East, China and Russia. I hate that. Capitalism, regulations. I'm quite an anarchist anyway.

From the point of view of a disabled person living with chronic pain, the EU doesn't seem to affect my life in one way or another. I do own the European health insurance card and it would be a handy system if only I travelled. However, due to my chronic pain and financial situation I remain mainly within my home country borders (Finland).

My friends discuss politics actively but Europe is often forgotten, especially in terms of the union. The US, China and Russia haunt in our conversations the most. Worries about World War Three, and the climate change that the EU won't get involved in with its directives. Only delivers guidelines, which many countries won't be able to respond to with their GDPs and national resources.

The Union is more than the Eurovision. There's a lot going on behind the scenes, there are lots of closed doors, and the songs are often cries for help. Are those presenting criticism ever heard of again, or do they disappear? What happens after the song contest ends? What can Europe do? I would like to get some answers. I demand them. But I don't know how I could get my voice heard as an individual. That's why we need many voices. Not just one representative, but all of Europe. Together we can do more.

My parents don't speak of the EU in other ways than as journalists so rather impartially. They take into account many viewpoints and that has on the other hand taught me to employ source criticism and to always be paying attention."

Justification of the choice

This story expresses many concerns about the EU. The writer digs into the internal conflicts within the EU and how powerless the union seems in front of them (Belarus, Ukraine). They also ponder upon the personal sense of smallness; the feeling of having no voice in the global matters, and also being physically restricted from participating due to disability that causes chronic pain.

ŽISP (Lithuania)

The most significant choice

MENDOZA

18-year-old woman and a student. Her parents are divorced, she lives with her mother and stepfather in a large family. Mendoza has health problems.

“Since Lithuania joined the EU in 2004, I was only two. I cannot tell the difference between living in or outside of the EU, because I have lived in such conditions since childhood. Perhaps it has affected my values, or maybe it happened unknowingly.

My values to which the EU has contributed: liberalism, family values. For example, it formed my view of any human as a free individual, I support gay and lesbian marriages. But I can neither prove nor verify these views because I have nothing to compare them with.

Another thing that came to my mind first (and it goes without saying) is that it is much easier to travel. At least within the EU countries. You can get onto a train and go. This is so important for young people. I may not have had a lot of opportunities to travel yet because I still live with my parents and don't earn anything, however, knowing that I have a freedom to travel makes me happy. There are countries, such as the United States, whose residents have not been abroad. Not even left their state because they have a very strong work ethic. You get the feeling that people here are treated like individuals. We have maternity leave, which is not the case in the US, and in general US citizens get less annual leave. This is possibly because the US promotes a different work ethic, therefore not many people take annual leave.

I really don't know if we would be better off outside the EU, but I see that most post-Soviet countries are not very strong. I believe that the EU has contributed to the strengthening of Lithuania. Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia are the economic leaders of the former USSR countries.

I don't yet know whether I will study abroad but studying in another country is a lot easier when we are a part of the EU, and having that option makes me happy. Most of the young people have learned English by themselves, which is possibly an influence of the EU. We learn because we focus on the Western culture. The smaller the country, the more motivation to learn other languages.

Perhaps Lithuanian language is somewhat negatively affected by the fact that a large number of young people use English on a daily basis. On the other hand, patriotism doesn't suffer much from that. You are patriotic when you want to improve something, when you spread a good word or do something good, regardless if you stay or leave. Now, little by little, our culture is getting stronger. Especially young people's interest in culture and language is growing. In the past, Lithuanians did not create good music or films however, now creative young people are steadily emerging. The situation is slowly improving. The ability to get funding from the EU enables the desire to root ourselves in this completely global world by contributing to the promotion of culture and the arts.

All kinds of projects and exchange programmes enable people to study abroad. New experiences, new people, broadening horizons, exploring how others live. There are many details that are interesting to learn. For example, you find the same sayings and expressions are used in different countries. Let's say in England and Lithuania. And then you think about how people came up with the same saying being so far apart.

I also think the situation for homosexuals will keep improving. It is better now than it was before. The pride parades used to get violent, almost like in Poland now. Maybe, if the world does not change too drastically, in 10 years time LGBT couples here will be able to get married and be able to adopt. “

Justification of the choice

The story covered many topics from different fields – education, equal rights, culture, economics and environment. She is the youngest and she grew up in EU. Her positive but adequate attitudes

towards EU shows that youngsters in Lithuania are open-minded, have their own opinion, critical thinking. Mendoza takes for granted many things that she got as a EU citizen so she can see what problems are really relevant today without comparing with the past. Also, she was the only one who talked more about homosexuality as an advantage of EU, despite the fact that Lithuania is one of the most homophobic countries in Europe.

The second significance choice

VIKTORIJA

She is a 39 years old unemployed beautician. She is married and a mother of one child.

“There has been a lot of positives for our country joining the EU. First of all, to be able to join, we had to match the criteria, so it wasn't like the government has decided and the country just went for it. Lots had to change for the better.

After joining, a lot of the EU funds have reached our country and it was used wisely and appropriately. I am also aware that with all the benefits we receive from the EU, such as creation of jobs, modernising of the buildings, roads, comes a great responsibility. We have to comply with the EU law, financially contribute, the policies have to be followed.

The EU is also a „safety net“ for the members. Let's take the situation with the COVID-19. Lithuania was able to secure funds from the EU to help the business and people who had come into hardship during the pandemic. Lithuania, a small country wasn't left to deal with the crisis on its own. Those in need received the support, so the country doesn't collapse employment wise, and business managed to survive. If we were on our own, the consequences of facing a global crisis like this could have ended very negatively on the whole state and its people.

Another great benefit of the EU is the open borders, people can travel freely. This has affected my family in a very positive way. My husband was able to travel to work abroad when he was unable to find a job in Lithuania. This resulted in us having a better quality of life, we can afford to go on holidays, we bought a house, and no longer have to rent. Of course, this comes with a sacrifice of him being away a lot, but he was able to go away and support his family.

With the conversion from Litas to Euro, the prices have gone up and the wages increase is not catching up as fast. I guess this is something Lithuanians will have to deal with for the time being. I guess for things to get better, things have to go worse first.

All in all, I am happy that we have joined the EU, there are lots of opportunities, people should stop moaning and get off their sofas, and start taking advantage of everything that is on offer today. “

Justification of the choice

The story covers how the life has improved since Lithuania has joined the EU. This woman has started her own business and feels she has a lot of protection being a citizen of the EU, she feels supported and sees a lot of opportunities available for everyone, as long as people are prepared to work hard. The story is covering two levels of information: general (related to the changes in society) and personal (related to the changes in family) and covers many topics as well – economy, healthcare, labor market, social welfare, environment protection and others.

The third significance choice

ARTŪRAS

He is a 65-year-old man with a disabilities and unemployed.

“I have conflicting views when it comes to thinking about Europe. I remember how hard it was to imagine our country with open borders, and that feeling of crossing the open Polish border for the first time. We no longer had to stop at the border and wait at the bus at night until we passed the checks. Today, it would be difficult to imagine a different life - without borders and without restrictions.

For me, a person who likes to travel, it is very important to move freely. I can choose what I want to do and

how I want to live, create, travel. Another good thing for me is that there is no need to exchange Litas into Euros.

Now that Lithuania is in the European Union, I feel safe. There is no need to be afraid that you will be imprisoned for your opinion or faith like in North Korea. I see my country changing for the better. Buildings and parks becoming more and more beautiful, private businesses developing, scientific innovation taking place, which is why the European Union is to be thanked for its support and the opportunity to modernize our country.

However, the arrival of so many freedoms and opportunities, the number of departures from Lithuania has also increased. My children have emigrated to Ireland, we call and see each other via Skype, but we meet very rarely. No calls will replace live communication. The consumerism, a culture of rush, high demands at work, the desire to earn well has quickly overshadowed close relationships. So it is very good that we have so many opportunities for activities, but on the other hand it is getting harder to maintain your values. "

Justification of the choice

If you ask anyone about advantages in EU they would say it is a free travelling, economy relations in between the EU countries. Artūras talks expresses the combination of the opinions of other our participants belonging to the same age group. Next topics are emigration, safety, environment care and they are the next ones that usually come to people's mind while thinking about EU and comparing with Soviet times or period before integration to EU. The participant belongs to the group of people who remembers the difference of Soviet-post-Soviet-Independent-Europe Lithuania phases, being positive towards EU, shows that even the most disadvantaged groups are being appreciated, supported, they feel safe and confident. Open borders and emigration are shown as a disadvantage of belonging to the Union.

5.1.2 The most significance story

On Wednesday, March 3, a Teams meeting was held with the goal of selecting the most meaningful story out of the 80 stories in this project. The most meaningful story would be the one that best describes the thoughts of a client regarding the role of the EU in their lives.

At the beginning of the day, each NGO presented their personal choice for the most meaningful of their clients' stories, as well as a justification for their choice. Comments regarding the four stories were gathered onto a common Padlet base. The goal was to bring out different perspectives on each story. Based on the presented stories and the Padlet notes, participants worked in small groups where they reflected together on the stories and their meanings. Each group then presented their reflections as well as the story that they thought was the most meaningful. Two of the groups chose the story of H as the most meaningful, another two groups chose the story of Alex and one group chose the story of Mendoza. During the debate, the stories of Mendoza and Alex, representing very different perspectives on the role of the EU, came to the fore:

Mendoza

Mendoza has been an EU citizen as long as he remembers. He sees the EU as representing different opportunities, an opportunity for free movement or for studying in other EU countries. He himself has not yet been able to take advantage of these opportunities, but the mere awareness of their existence makes him happy. He also appreciates the values of the EU, in particular the equal treatment of sexual minorities. He also appreciates the EU's various development programs. Mendoza also emphasizes the EU's ecological activities in Lithuania.

Alex

Alex says she has no experience of the EU. Nor has Poland's accession to the EU affected her in any way, only those who were already better off. Her only hope is that the EU will solve homelessness in such a way that people can obtain housing even with the smallest social support. Alex is not interested in travelling or working in other EU countries. She sees mobility mainly as a threat. She is scared of the idea of leaving Poland. She also emphasises the fact that she is Polish, lives in Poland, works in Poland, and that she will also die there. She has found that in one respect the EU has made a positive

contribution; the amount of litter has decreased and waste management has improved.

In the discussion on these two stories, it was generally observed that they represent generational stories. Alex is ignorant about the EU, nor does she care about it. In general, she is very sceptical about the EU. It has not brought any value to her life. Mendoza has lived most of his life in the EU and it offers him a promise of different opportunities. He could be called Eurocurious. Together these two stories create a clear interpretation and narrative regarding the theme of this research project, From Euroscepticism to Eurocuriosity.

In the debate, Alex's story was chosen as the most significant and it will also be presented to the members of the European Parliament. The choice was justified in the following way:

JUSTIFICATION OF SELECTION: ALEX

The four stories selected and justified by the project's steering groups in Finland, Lithuania, and Poland cover a whole range of views from Euroscepticism to Eurocuriosity. Alex's story from Poland is a good representation of Euroscepticism. On the other hand, Mendoza's story from Lithuania provides us with an example of optimistic curiosity towards the possibilities of the European Union. The other two stories from Finland, told by H and JH, represent more of a balanced mix between the two opposing views.

The steering group chose the two Finnish stories (especially the one written by H) because they represent a balanced view, as the most extreme cases do not always represent the majority of a target group. The team also acknowledged the Eurocuriosity represented by Mendoza's story. In the end, the team decided to choose Alex's story from Poland as the most meaningful. All of the 80 stories gathered within the FESTECC project have meaning and significance. Alex's story, however, reflects the context of the project very well. Her story has a clear perspective and produces a strong impact.

Alex's voice is far from the European Parliament and the political decision-making and benefits of the European Union. Her voice is that of a group of socially excluded people who do not often get the chance to be heard, financial means or benefits from the European Union, or good social support services.

In her story, Alex challenges decision-makers, presenting them with real problems that need to be solved, and criticises the European Union's lack of actions for solving homelessness.

Her story draws out the conclusion that Euroscepticism is partly the result of frustration deriving from unfulfilled human needs. For many, it is impossible to perceive the abstract influence and existence of the European Union if their basic needs, including shelter or housing, safety, health, a sufficient amount of food, are not satisfied. Alex's powerful story exemplifies this very well. She says: 'I have no experience with the EU at all. As such it has given me nothing'. Her story illuminates the fact that it is necessary to address immediate, concrete problems before we can start building Eurocuriosity.

5.1.3 Reflections on the process of participatory evaluation

The main objective of this research project was to bring to light the reflections of the most vulnerable people in society about the importance of the EU in their lives. Participatory storytelling was chosen as the research method. 80 clients from four different organisations told their stories. A total of 17 employees listened to them. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, plans had to be changed on the wing, but all partners were prepared to adjust to the new situation. All joint meetings and trainings were moved to online platforms. This was, of course, a great disappointment, but putting the focus on the voice of the clients and letting them be heard by decision-makers was seen an important task, so each NGO made sure it was able to deliver its contribution and worked together with the others in an exemplary manner.

One of the special features of the participatory evaluation method is that each participant has to take a stand regarding the research question. The story collectors first considered the meaning of the research question, what it aimed to explore, amongst themselves. They also had to practice their own role so as to make the client's authentic voice heard while extracting an answer for the research question. While a client's answer may seem distorted from the story collector's point of view, it still represents the client's own subjective 'correct' answer to the research question. A good example of this was a situation reported by one story collector, where a client's story expressed that they had not benefited from the EU, but immediately afterwards, the same client had received an EU-funded food aid bag. Once the stories had been collected, the story collectors from each NGO read them together and discussed their meanings. This, of course, also deepened each participant's own ideas about the EU and its importance. When discussing the stories, focus was placed on the message that would best describe each client's perspectives. After this, each organisation's steering group went through the three selected stories, reflecting on their messages and meaning. Here, the steering groups were also receiving information that would be useful in their own work, both from their clients' perspective and regarding the choices made by the employees themselves and their justifications. The process as a whole was based on shared reflections and learning. This opportunity was provided to the organisations as if by accident, as a by-product of the actual research project.

However, the most important part of the participatory evaluation method was to make the clients' voices heard. Of course, the three stories that each organisation chose as the most meaningful also tell us something about those who selected them. Seven of the selected stories were pro-European and only two were clearly Eurosceptic. Three of the stories can be considered neutral. According to the research literature on Euroscepticism, the clients of this research project should be strongly Eurosceptic. One explanation may be that Lithuania and Poland are the most pro-European Member States of the EU. In terms of infrastructure, improvements that are apparent to the eye, such as road repairs, waste management, the condition of buildings or the management of parks, represent concrete indications of the importance of the EU. On the other hand, free movement has brought a huge change into the lives of those who remember how things were before the EU. It allows people to travel, but also to work in other EU countries, which may significantly improve their own and their families' living standards. Several of the selected stories also referred to the EU's solidarity regarding its Member States and the security that it brings. For younger people, free movement represented a significant freedom, even if they felt they had to wait to take advantage of it.

The selected stories also raise concerns about the rise of the far right. There is a fear that it will affect people's attitudes and their acceptance of difference. The most vulnerable in particular fear for their human rights. Also, the difficulty in comprehending and the slowness of EU decision-making distance people from the EU. Although the EU is seen as positive thing, it is also removed from the daily lives of these people, whose possibilities to exert their influence are marginal.

5.2 Content analysis

In the second part of the study, the stories were classified using content analysis. The researcher read through all the stories several times. Gradually, a number of themes began to emerge from the stories. Through the themes and their meanings, nine categories were eventually created. These categories provide an insight into what the EU means for the most vulnerable in society. The charts show how often a category appears in different stories and whether the narrator of the story agrees or disagrees with the title of the category. It is important to remember that the stories are an expression of the daily lives of their narrators, of what the EU means to them. The thoughts of the different narrators go in different directions and the stories describe very different things, a bench at the railway station or life in the Soviet Union. There are, of course, overlaps in the categories, but the perspectives in them are different.

The categories include:

Thoughts on the EU

Thoughts on EU values

Thoughts on the idea of being European

Thoughts on EU decision-making

Thoughts on the security associated with EU membership

Thoughts on the free mobility within the EU

Thoughts on project and investment funding received through the EU

Thoughts on the single currency (euro)

Life was better in the past

In the following section the categories are presented as bar graphs, displaying differences in narrators' gender, age, and organisation. Below each chart, there are some quotes on the different themes.

The following abbreviations are used to refer to the different organisations:

Ogólnopolska Federacja na rzecz Rozwiązywania Problemu Bezdomności => **OFRPB**

Valo-Valmennusyhdistys ry => **Valo**

Vammaisten lasten ja nuorten säätiö => **Vamlas**

VšĮ Žmogiškųjų išteklių stebėsenos ir plėtros biuras => **ŽISPB**

5.2.1 The nine categories

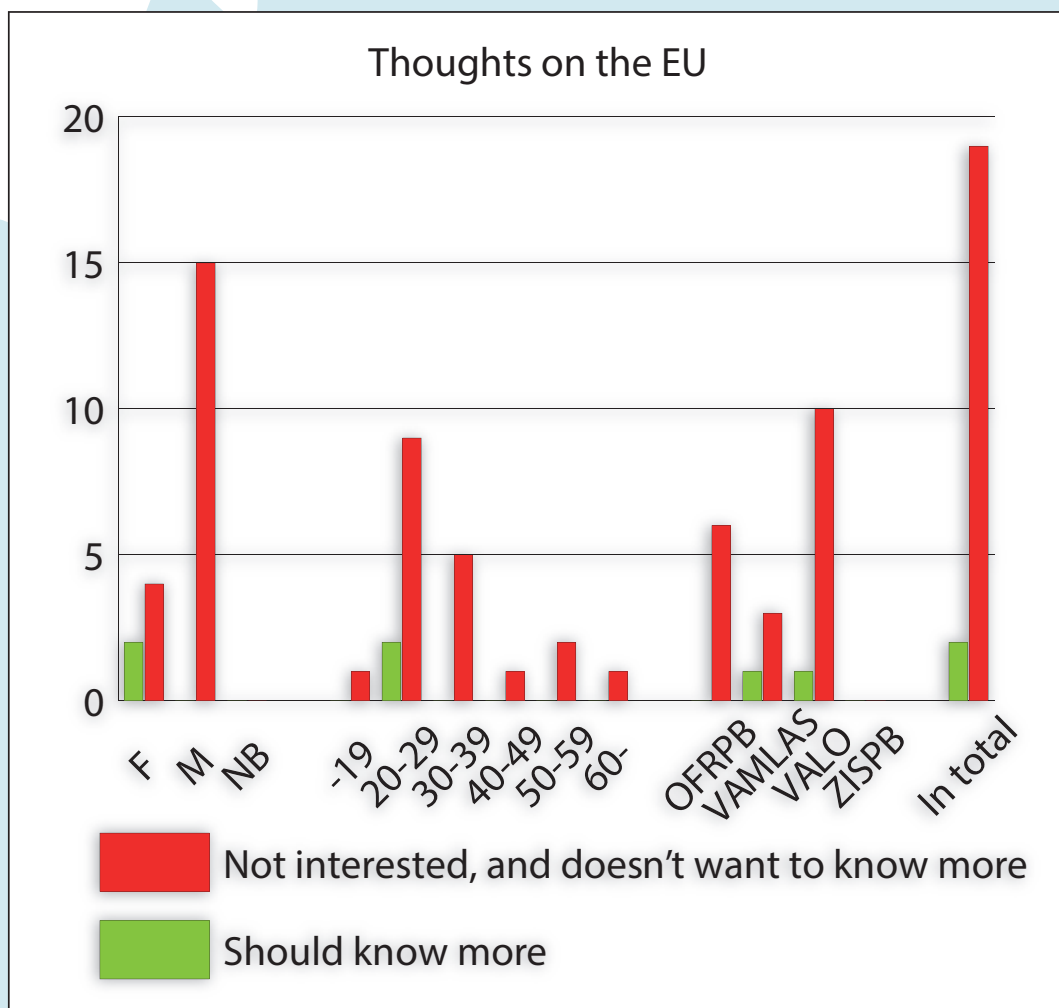


Table 3: Thoughts on the EU

"EU hasn't really meant anything in particular to me." (Toni/Valo)

"I don't like it, I'm not interested in it. It is irrelevant to me whether the EU exists or not. I do not recognise any influence of the EU on your life. I do not feel that I am anyhow connected to the EU." (Dariusz J./OFRPB)

"And what should I think about the EU? I don't think anything, they do nothing, they help nothing." (Ryszard/OFRPB)

"I don't really hear adults talking about the EU. Do even they know anything about it? I mean, what are you supposed to know about it?" (S/VAMLAS)

"EU has not meant much to me, since my life has not changed radically because of it. I haven't even noticed the small effects." (Janne/Valo)

"I do not feel that the EU has influenced my life in any way." (Łukasz/ORFPB)

"I have no experience with the EU at all. As such it has given me nothing. Nothing has improved since Poland joined the EU." (Alex/OFRPB)

"I just want to ask why EU has been invented. I should google it. I do want to know." (J.L./Valo)

"If I had to sum up my opinion, I guess it's this: I don't know how well or badly EU actually works, but I see it as sign of European nations wanting to work together." (J/Valo)

"Sometimes it feels that you would know more about the EU if you knew more about politics in general. It feels that the EU is something that has always existed as silent knowledge over everything in my own life, but something that I've never actually paid that much attention to. I am a little embarrassed and amused about the level of my knowledge on this matter." (JuliannaAurelija/VAMLAS)

Reflections

19 of the narrators, in other words about a quarter, say that they are not interested in the EU and do not really know about it, but also that they are not interested in learning more. This group included 15 men and only four women. Half of the narrators from Valo-Valmennusyhdistys belong to this group. No ŽISPB narrators mention any similar ideas regarding the EU.

These 19 narrators that lack interest in the EU may represent the perfect breeding ground for Euroscepticism. They do not feel that the EU is relevant in their lives. Only two from this group of narrators consider it important to improve their understanding of the EU. If the EU is to be seen as relevant to the lives of the most vulnerable, it is important to be able to visibilise the work the EU is doing for them in a concrete way in order to open people's eyes to the positive changes that have been possible with or through the EU. These achievements must be made visible in people's daily lives.

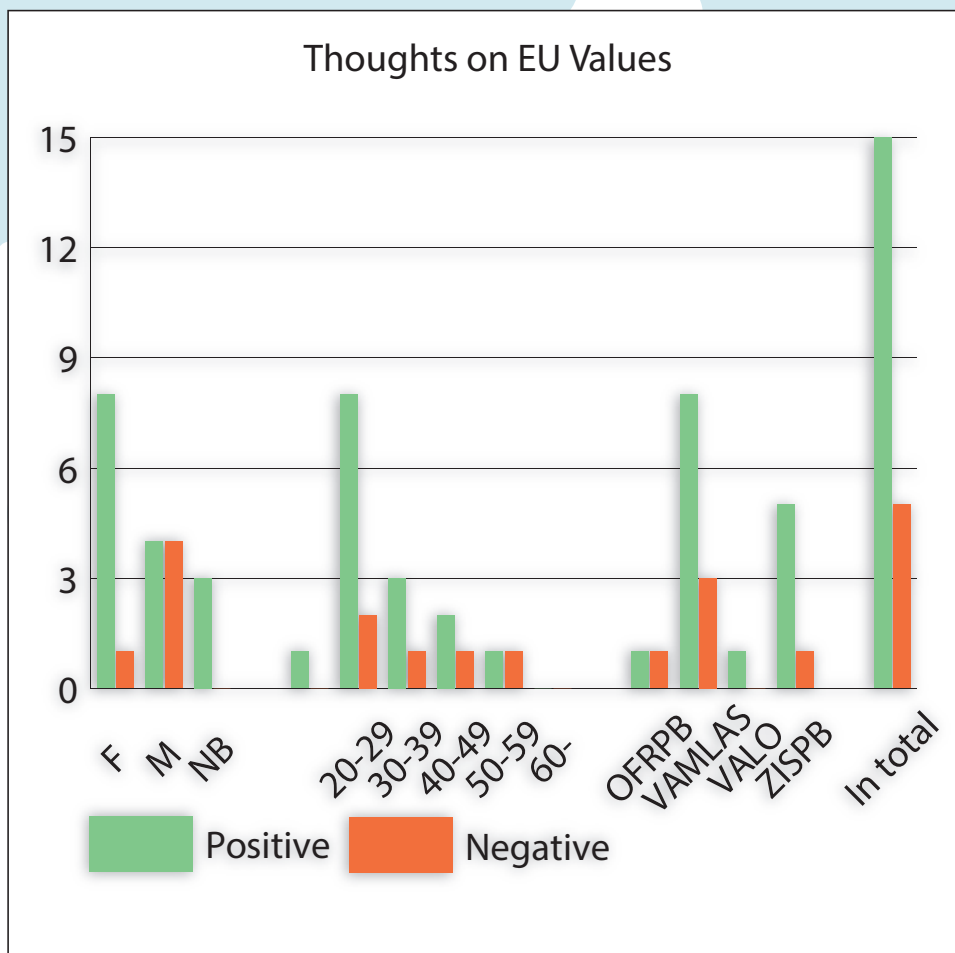


Table 4: Thoughts on EU values

"I like that the EU has replaced plastic straws with paper ones. I am not against such decisions coming to Lithuania from the EU, because the Lithuanian government might not even approve of them." (Mendoza/ ŽISPB)

"Strict EU standards also brought a certain sense of confidence in life from a consumer's point of view. Its influential program of manufacturing products made under ethical conditions with respect for human rights and adequate wages." (Kame/Valo)

"The EU fights social discrimination. The EU equally values different kinds of people. I hope that the EU will keep supporting para-athletes and the Special Olympics operation around Europe and around the world. Let us be equal." (Saksu/VAMPLAS)

"Nevertheless, the EU may be thanked for many everyday matters, starting from securing the human rights." (Iina/VAMPLAS)

"The non-discrimination principles of the EU make me feel secure: every member country is obligated under the threat of punitive consequences to pay attention to the actualisation of human rights." (E/VAMPLAS)

"I like the fact that the EU is based on democracy, teaches tolerance, respect for human dignity. Freedom and equality between men and women prevails." (Fausta/ ŽISPB)

"If I was listened in Brussels, I would ask more humanity in decisions, not that everything is measured by money." (Terhi/Valo)

"I would hope that the union would speak out more strongly about blatant human rights violations. For example Hungary and Belarus. Russia cannot be such a big threat that human rights are not actualised." (H/VAMPLAS)

"Human rights are widely discussed but the EU cannot secure them even for its own member countries. For example, the rights of trans people continue to be trodden on, also in Finland. The EU has given Finland several notices that call for the reform of the trans law but they haven't lead to any changes, even

though Finland is a constitutional state and follows the EU constitution and guidelines on other affairs. I think that the EU should have a stricter policy and a possibility to use financial sanctions to ensure that the guidelines are being followed. The protection of human rights is especially important now when Poland and Belarus are stamping on them.” (Toivo/VAMLAS)

“One thing I would like an improvement on is that basic normal people have a little even more say in decisions in the EU and that the EU is more democratic.” (V.S./Valo)

“These legalizations of homosexual marriages is a filth. I do not agree to homosexuals being able to adopt children as the EU wants it.” (Krystof/OFRPB)

Reflections

Some narrators display a positive attitude towards EU values. In the stories of 15 people, the EU is seen to combine equality, ethics and ecology. Especially young people representing Vamlas see human rights as a key EU value, and many express concerns about the rise of right-wing populism and how it will affect their rights. They consider it important that the EU promotes its values and the EU is also seen to bring security to the most vulnerable. Critics of EU values focus mainly on the rights of gender minorities.

This attitude of some of the narrators towards EU values can be considered surprising. In particular, the position of the Polish Catholic Church and its attitude towards EU values is hardly reflected in these stories. The EU’s values seem to bring security to the lives of the most vulnerable people and increase their confidence in the materialisation of their human rights. Of course, only about one in four of the narrators mentions EU values in their story.

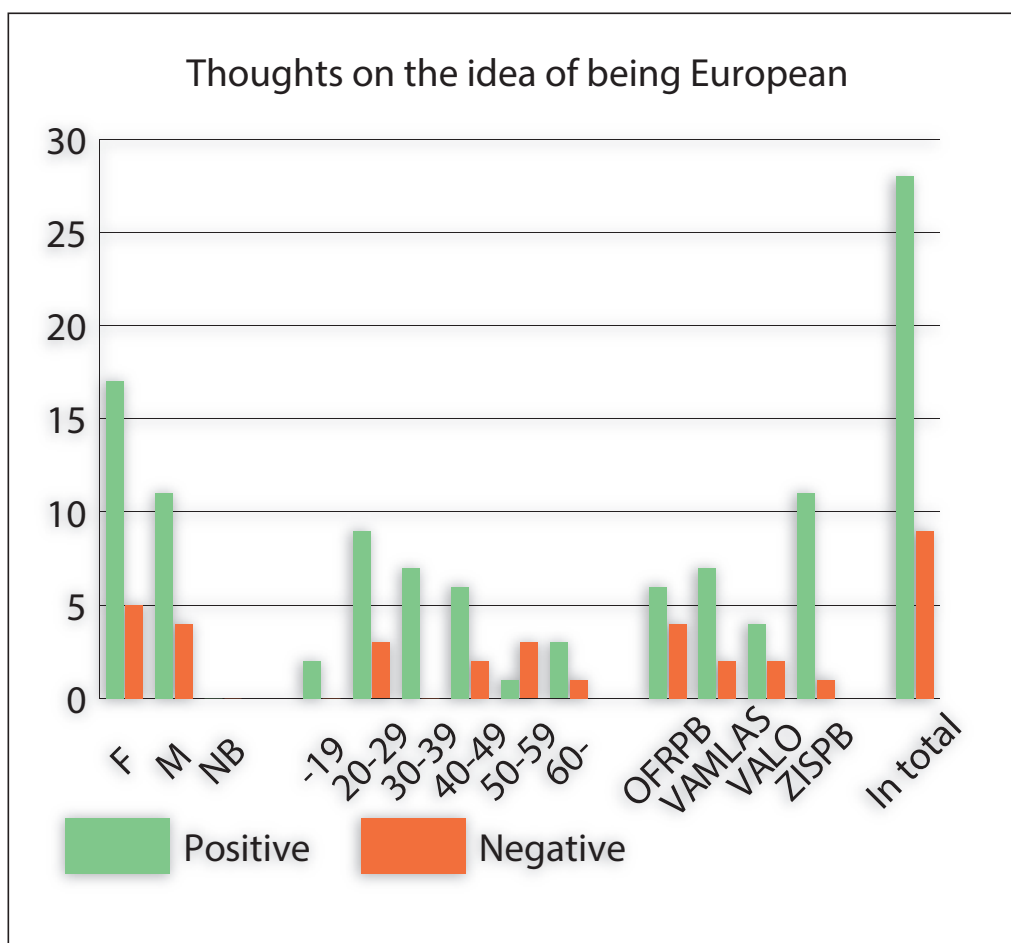


Table 5: Thoughts on the idea of being European

“With Lithuania being a part of the EU, I was able to go to university in Ireland, and the fees were same for all the EU citizens. This showed me the great benefits of the EU and me, being a Lithuanian, meant I was equal to all the other EU citizens.” (Kamile/ ŽISPБ)

“Thinking about my future, I believe that it inevitably is linked to the possibilities that the EU are offering. I think it will take me abroad and not necessarily permanently - maybe work or maybe travel. That freedom to travel is, in my view, a simple and fundamental right of being an EU citizen” (Itachi/ ŽISPБ)

“European Union has brogth countries together. I think Euro is good thing, but I don ´t believe European countries should be separated by borders anymore.” (David/Valo)

“We should be bolder and try to reach our personal potential as Europeans. The EU has provided the greatest opportunity to move forward.” (Karoliina/ ŽISPБ)

“I want to work in Poland and I want to die in Poland. I am Polish.” (Alex/ORFPB)

“In general I am a nationalist and have a negative attitude towards the EU.” (Wiktus/ORFPB)

Reflections

A total of 28 stories sees Europeanness as a strength. A few narrators even mention that they consider themselves European citizens. More than half of the stories from ŽISPБ mention Europeanness as a positive thing. Women express a positive attitude more often than men. Many also wonder about the importance of borders, whether they are even needed anymore. Europe is seen as a shared space where one can make their dreams come true. At the same time, however, nine narrators also see Europeanness as a threat to their own national identity. More than half of the narrators take no stand regarding nationality in their stories.

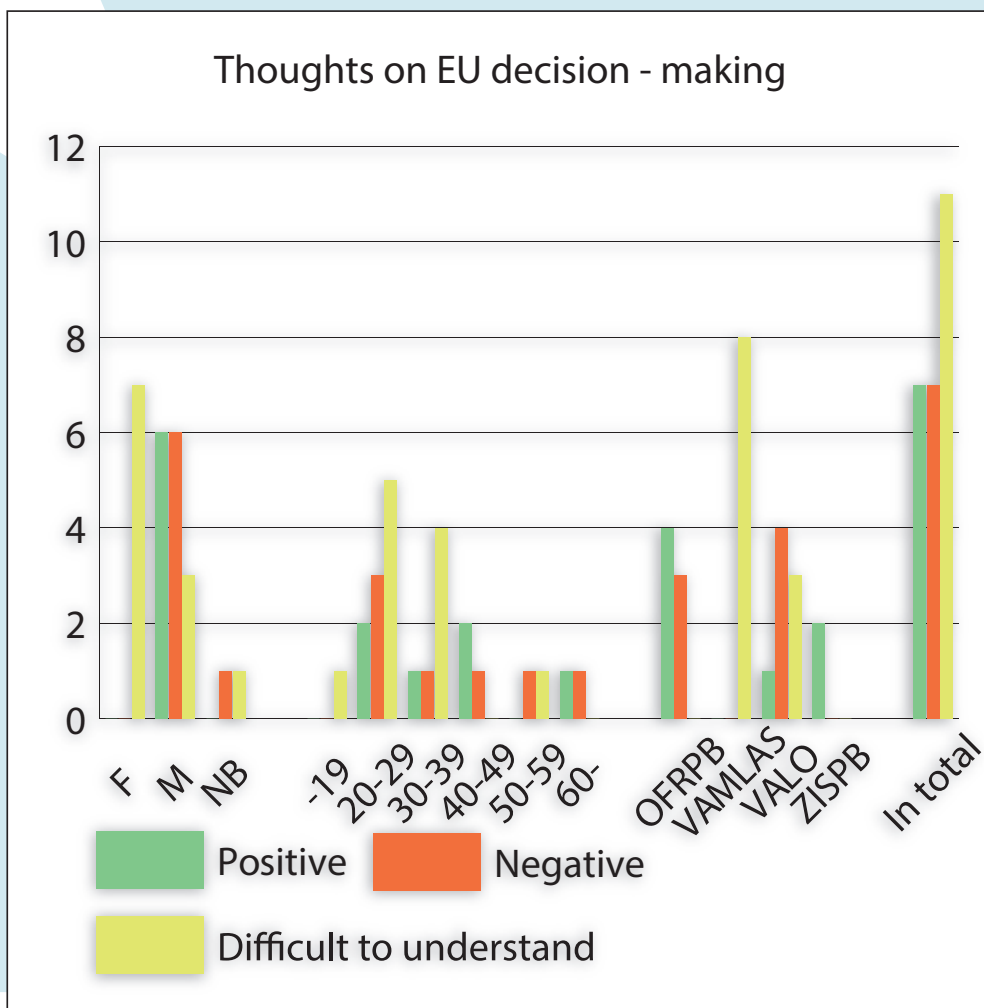


Table 6: Thoughts on EU decision-making

"A certain amount of the criticism I hear towards the EU focuses on the restrictions on trade and business. By this I mainly mean the criticism towards the EU directives, given by agricultural entrepreneurs.... I can admit that the EU politics, its governmental operations and bureaucracy feel quite complicated and I have not had the energy to particularly delve into them." (Iina/VAMLAS)

"The Union is more than the Eurovision. There's a lot going on behind the scenes, there are lots of closed doors, and the songs are often cries for help. Are those presenting criticism even heard of again, or do they disappear? What happens after the song contest ends? What can Europe do? I would like to get some answers. I demand them." (H/VAMLAS)

"I am quite interested in the EU and generally interested in politics. What has maybe prevented me from getting more invested in EU politics is that the structure of the EU legislative and political system is intensely confusing to me." (L/VAMLAS)

"I would like that the information about the EU would be more plenty in the vernacular language." (Mer-vi/VAMLAS)

"One thing I would like an improvement on is that basic normal people have a little even more say in decisions in the EU and that the EU is more democratic." (V.S./Valo)

"Everything is dictated from Brussel. Bureaucrats are deciding everything. Internet laws are just one example. These idiots just didn't know what they were voting for. All they care are interests of big money and multinational corporations. Decisions are made in Germany and France and others just have to obey." (René/Valo)

"I appreciate that the EU controls what happens in the member states and pays attention to the rule of law." (Dariusz/OFRPB)

"I feel that it would be better even, if the EU kind of „micro managed“ us a bit more." (Mindaugas/ ŽISPB)

"Moreover, I am glad that we have some control over the weird things our government is doing." (Tomasz/OFRPB)

"It would be great if the EU could pass a law which would prohibit the same member of the Lithuanian Parliament (Seimas) to sit in for longer than 4 years. All the new people coming in power would be able to contribute their share, which might bring more benefits, create better choices. Such a proposal could come from the EU, because at the local level the Seimas itself would not do such thing." (Anonymous/ ŽISPB)

"The EU is a creature and has no right to express itself on the internal affairs of a given country. I want Poland to stay in the EU, but I also want the EU to be composed of nation states that decide for themselves whether something is compatible with their national, internal law." (Wiktus/ORFPB)

Reflections

Eleven narrators mention that they have difficulty understanding how decision-making takes place in the EU. Seven perceive decision-making as positive, while seven perceive it as negative. In general, decision-making is perceived as distant and bureaucratic. A few express the desire to understand more and for information to be published in plain language and in their mother tongue. In relation to EU decision-making, some narrators also express concerns about the EU's interference in the internal affairs of independent states. At the same time, other narrators specifically expect the EU to monitor the implementation of human rights, for example, across national borders. A few even wish that the EU would monitor the legitimacy of national parliaments

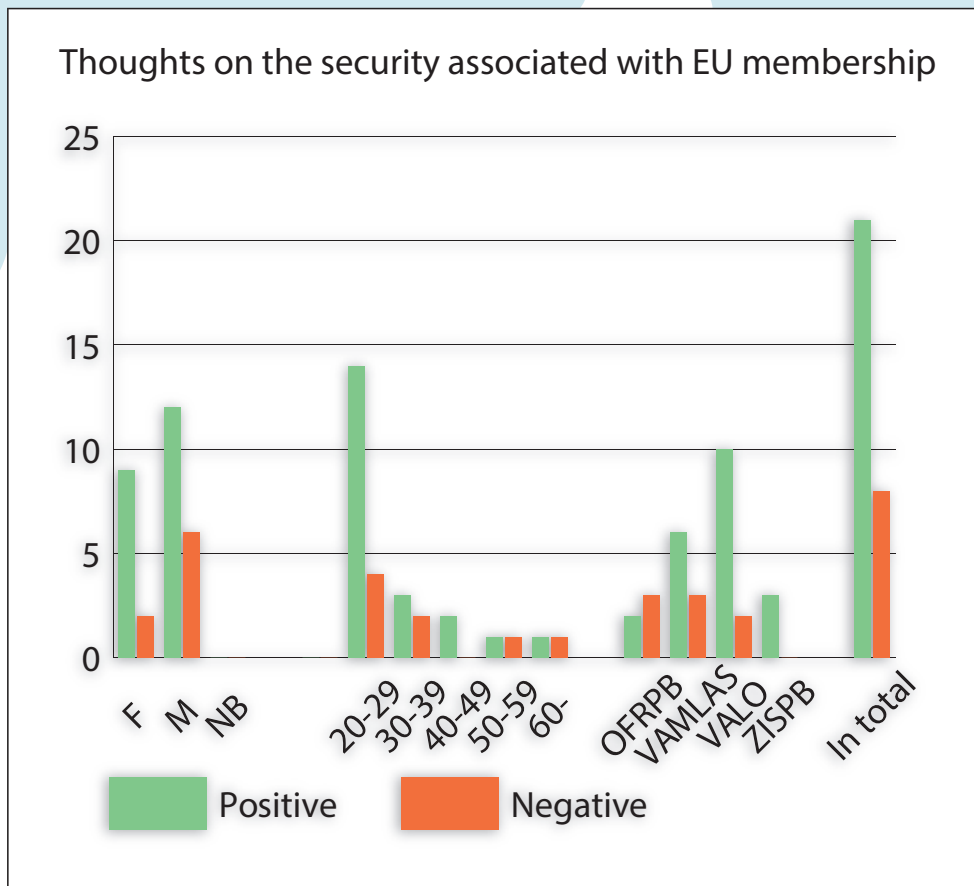


Table 7: Thoughts on the security associated with EU membership

"For me, the EU represents stability and security compared to, say, America." (Jenni/Valo)

"One thing I have to mention it's a good thing that EU brings some balance when negotiating with superpowers such as China or USA." (Marcus/Valo)

"I like the fact that the European Union exists and controls what happens in different countries. But I think it doesn't put enough effort into normalizing the situation in Ukraine." (Przemysław/OFRPB)

"For sure EU prevents European wars. I do believe that as a members of European Union we can respond global problems much more efficient than as single countries." (David/Valo)

"All in all I feel I am more safe being a citizen of the European Union." (Fausta/ ŽISPB)

"I feel safe. I have a job and a roof over my head. Security. I'm not afraid. I feel like I can ask for help." (A./ OFRPB)

"Now that Lithuania is in the European Union, I feel safe. There is no need to be afraid that you will be imprisoned for your opinion or faith like in North Korea." (Artūras/ ŽISPB)

"Two decades ago I was pretty sure there will be 3rd World War. Now it seems much brighter. Because we are not part of NATO, being part of EU is essential. Membership itself brings stability and safety. We have limited resources and small defense forces, that's why we need allies and back up from others." (Terhi/ Valo)

"I am scared of the EU falling apart because I'm afraid that it would lead to large disagreements and wars also within the EU." (Toivo/VAMLAS)

"The heightened right-wing populism within the EU countries is a bit scary and it also influence the Finnish majority's attitudes towards people with disabilities." (PleaseNoWW3/ VAMLAS)

Reflections

A total of 29 narrators mention aspects related to their sense of security. 21 of them say that the EU has increased security in their lives. Eight narrators mention issues that have weakened their sense of security and that they believe the EU is not able to influence. For example, many young people in Vamlas draw attention to the rise of right-wing populism and how this might affect the human rights and security of people with disabilities. Some of them feel that the EU will not be able to stop this development, while others explicitly see the EU as a safe haven that protects people from human rights violations. In a few responses, the EU is seen to offer protection against imperialism. In particular, the stories of OFRPB and ŽISPB mention the occupation of Ukraine. They see the possibility of the EU offering protection against similar series of events that may threaten their own country.

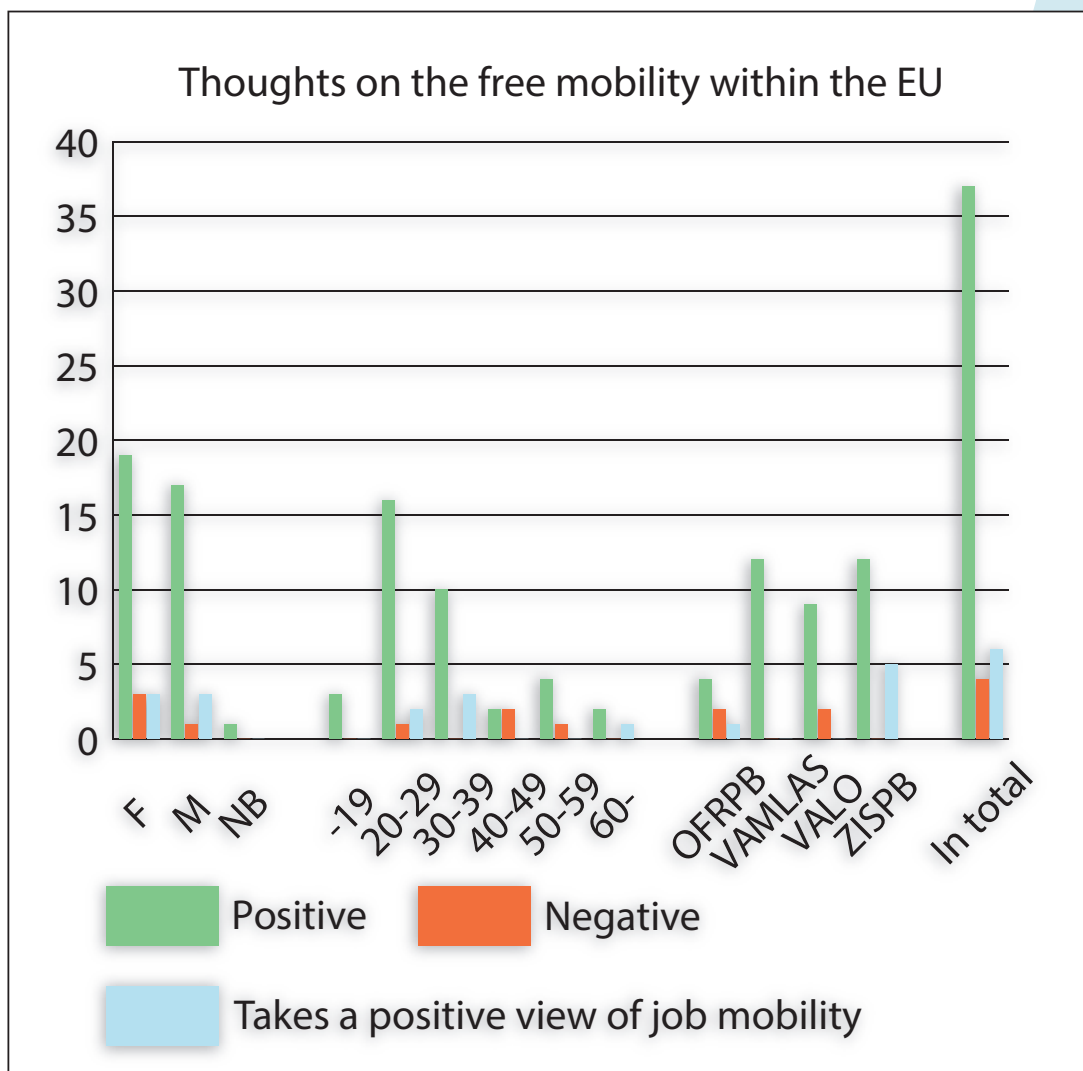


Table 8: Thoughts on the free mobility within the EU

"Now, as a peer-worker, I can work abroad and help other Polish migrants who did not succeed there. I had the opportunity to visit so many countries – me, a homeless person and an alcoholic! I have been to Italy, Belgium, England, Netherlands and Germany. It was the open borders that made it possible and the EU funds too." (Andrew/OFRPB)

"The lack of borders means the freedom to choose where to live and work. If there is too much unemployment, you can easily look for a job in another country." (Herbie/ORFPB)

"Because I need 24/7 assistance, my PAs have also travelled abroad with me, and as an individual assistant cannot legally work for several weeks on end, I have switched assistants "on the go", so to say. I believe that the European Union has made these kinds of arrangements significantly easier. I have never had to worry about visas or other bureaucracy issues for my assistants." (E/VAMLAS)

"Maybe the only thing that has changed is that we are free abroad without having to stand in customs for half a day, now everything is faster and smoother. It used to take 5 hours to get into Latvia. There were queues, checks, and now, you get in a car, and you're there in two hours." (Siga/ŽISPB)

"The borders being open to us because we joined the EU, are probably the only plus of all this. You don't have to mess around with passports when going on vacation or to work. And the other way round, when they come to us, it's ok too. There's money for the Polish economy in it. For me personally, it is also okay that these borders are open in the EU, because I can escape a conviction in case of any problems." (Lukas/ORFPB)

"Another great benefit of the EU is the open borders, people can travel freely. This has affected my family in a very positive way. My husband was able to travel to work abroad when he was unable to find a job in Lithuania. This resulted in us having a better quality of life, we can afford to go on holidays, we bought a house, and no longer have to rent." (Viktorija/ ŽISPB)

"I have never even been abroad, neither to work nor on vacation, because how could I afford it? But I'm not interested in going there anyway. What's there for me? We have everything here. Besides, I would be afraid." (Alex/ORFPB)

"When I'm thinking travelling in time before Union, I don't see any reasons why I wouldn't cope in there. Freedom of travelling, open borders and the Internet are not vital things in life." (Toomas/Valo)

Reflections

In relation to the importance of the EU, narrators generally speak about free movement the most. Almost half of all of the stories include positive references to the possibility of travelling within the EU without border regulations. Even though some of the narrators have themselves not been able to take advantage of the free movement, its existence nevertheless gives them a sense of freedom. A few of the stories recall the long queues at borders in the past, where nowadays one can simply drive through. Only four narrators mention free movement as a bad or useless thing. Six narrators specifically mention that they are happy to have the opportunity to work in other EU countries, having either done it already or because they hope to do so.

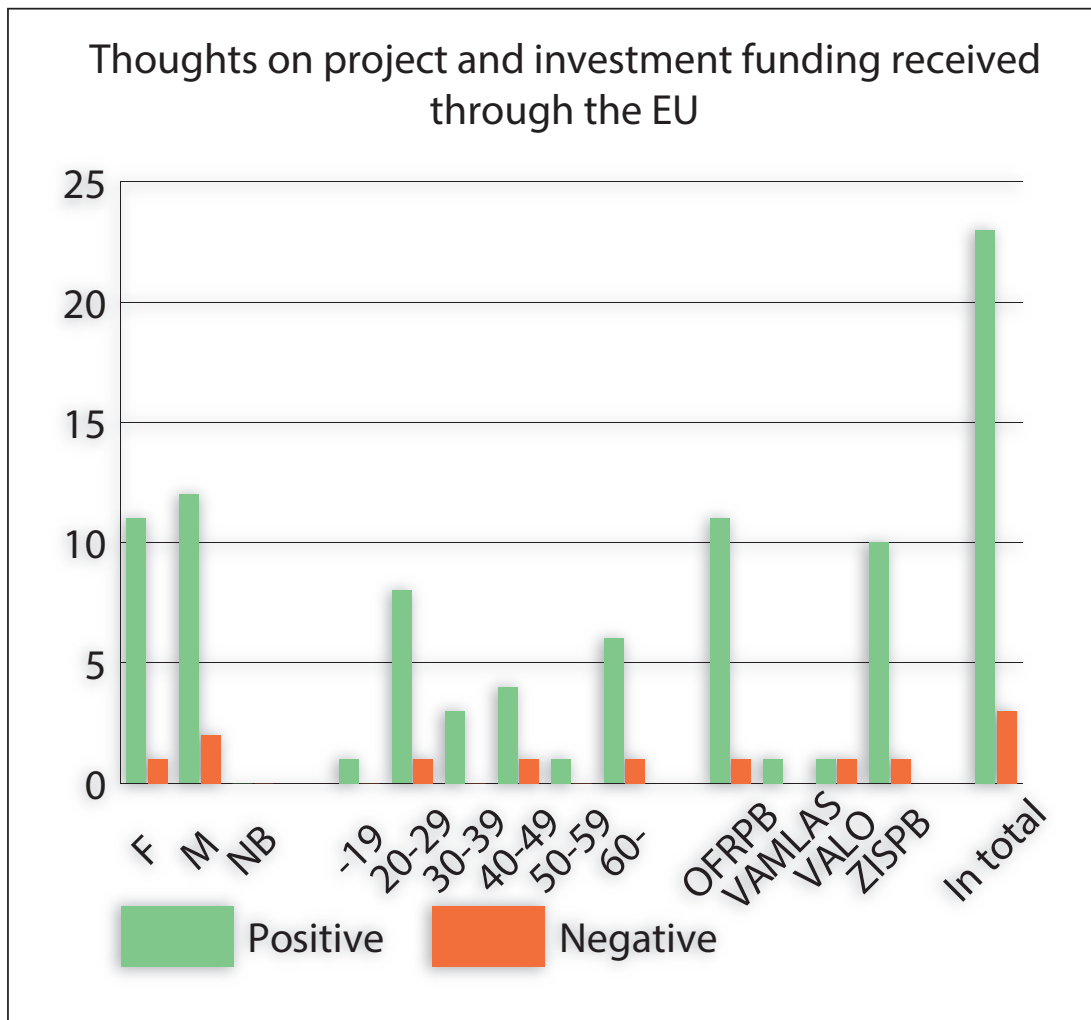


Table 9: Thoughts on project and investment funding received through the EU

"Nevertheless, I believe that the EU has a great influence on the life of Poles as a community. Many people can benefit from different funds, different organizations can operate thanks to the money from the EU." (Łukasz /OFRPB)

"...when I used to sleep at the railway station, the benches were made thanks to this EU." Ryszard/OFRPB

"EU has affected my life in a good way, I live in a shelter, I benefit from EU aid (meals, food packages)." (C/OFRPB)

"Thanks to the European Union many countries have benefited. Among others, in the area of agriculture, which has received funding. I also like the fact that many different organizations work thanks to EU projects." (Dariusz/OFRPB)

"But I think that it [EU] will offer lots of help in crisis situations and for the disadvantaged if they [EU] give donations from there." (Janne/Valo)

"EU-funded projects have been particularly successful - even in my work - the premises have been done up using the EU money, and roads and streets are getting improved." (Teacher/ ŻISPB)

"EU funded programmes aimed at increasing professional qualifications implemented by the labour service are also very important. Thanks to them, taking up employment in Poland or another EU country is much easier than before Poland joined the EU." (Anonim/ORFPB)

"The European Union helps Poland a lot. They give money. They had a good influence on my life, we get meals, food parcels. The shelter works better than it used to." (D/OFRPB)

"I agree with the European Union. But only to fair politics, so the common man is not forgotten and can be heard. I feel that all the funds coming from the EU go into the pockets of those in power." (Vytautas/ ŽISPБ)

Reflections

In more than half of the stories collected by the OFRPB and half of the ŽISPБ stories, narrators mention the importance of EU investments and funding for their country's development. They mention a wide range of infrastructure-related items such as roads, buildings and parks. These are seen as visible indications of the importance of the EU. Information technology and the internet are also mentioned in several of the stories. A few also mention EU food packages. Only four narrators perceive EU funding as something negative.

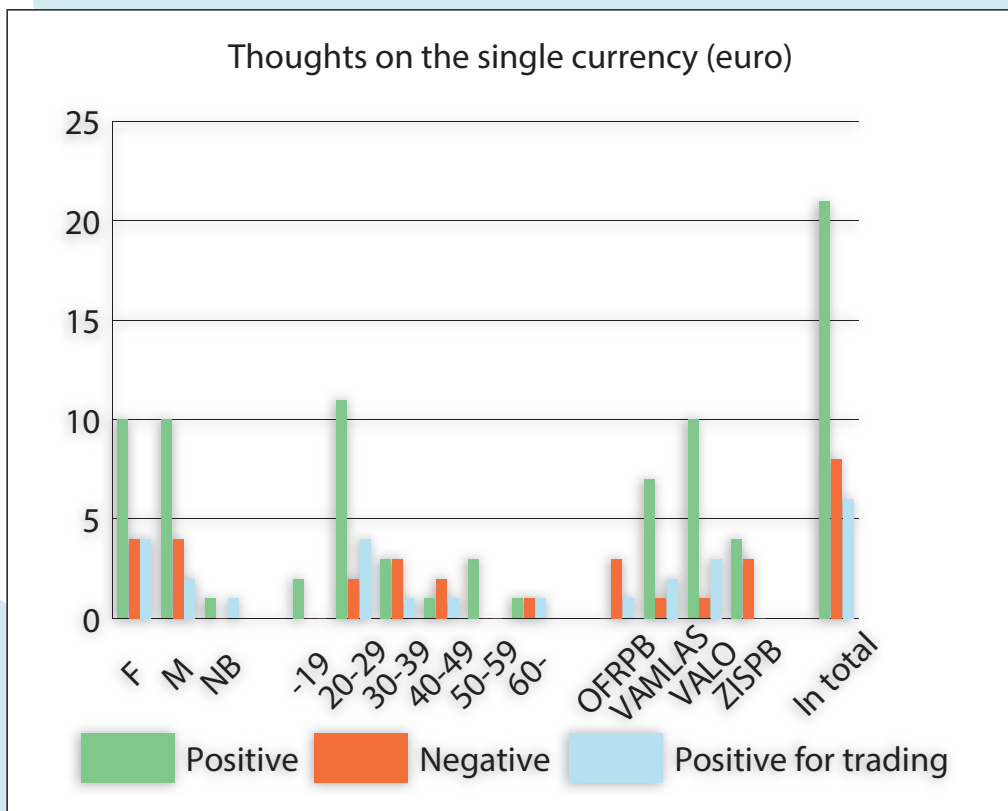


Table 10: Thoughts on the single currency (euro)

"There are definitely benefits having one currency across the EU – there is no longer a need to exchange currencies when going to Latvia." (Colleague/ ŽISPБ)

"Well, there's the common currency, so that one doesn't have to exchange money when going to Germany for example, or to some other country" (Karkki/Valo)

"What interests me about the EU is whether it would have been at all possible to keep the old currency. Now that we have the common currency, it seems that we are obligated to help countries whose economical situation is bad." (Karo/VAMLAS)

"With the conversion from Litas to Euro, the prices have gone up and the wages increase is not catching up as fast." (Viktorija/ ŽISPБ)

"There should be no compulsion to adopt the Euro currency. Many countries have faced a crisis after the adoption of Euro and the lives of their citizens have deteriorated. I therefore think that this pressure to

adopt Euro is bad.” (Łukasz /OFRPB)

“I am not satisfied with our currency going to Euro. Everything is more expensive now, it was better when we had Litas. We didn’t have to count every cent, there wasn’t as many shops. I feel that Euro is absolutely valueless” (Regina/ ŽISPБ)

“Common trade policy, freedom of trade - this is another very important thing. There is the ease of trade between EU countries, which makes it possible for me to buy products from Spain or Greece in Poland.” (Herbie/OFRPB)

“As an individual I know that shipping cargo within the EU zone is probably cheaper and that it is easier not having to pay customs duty on everything.” (S.K./VAMLAS)

“And of course, if there’s a common currency between different countries, it makes life easier. It can be easier when, for example, you order something online. At least it’s cheaper because there’s no need to exchange the currency. I would rather order something from Germany than from the USA.” (Toni/Valo)

Reflections

The EU’s common currency, the euro, is mentioned in 21 stories as a positive thing. Half of the stories from Valo and a third of the stories from Vamlas mention the euro as a positive thing. The euro is specifically mentioned in relation to free movement and how it is no longer necessary to exchange currency at the border. A few of the stories point out that prices have risen since the introduction of the euro. A few miss their former national currency, the litas or marks. In terms of trade and especially e-commerce, the euro is viewed in a positive light in six of the stories.

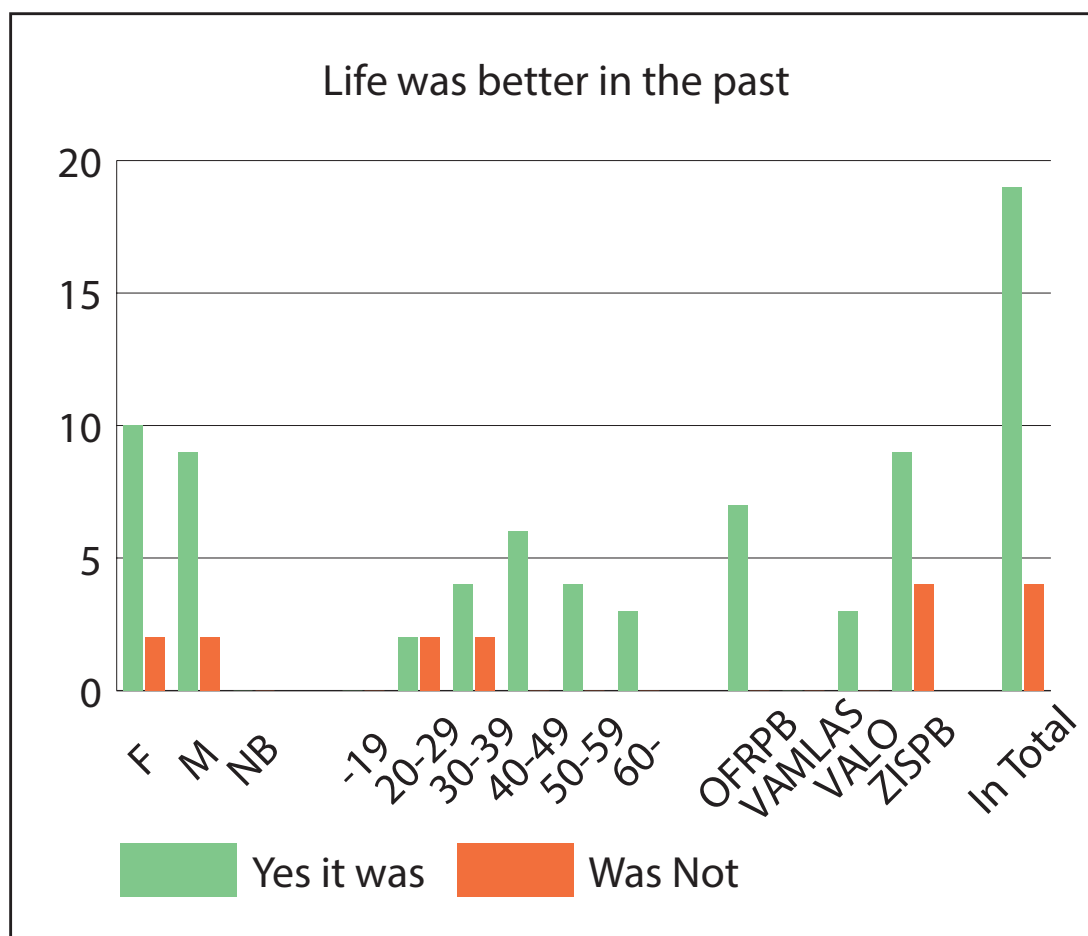


Table 11: Life was better in the past

"It is becoming harder and harder to find a job in our city. I can't see any visible changes in this area. Employers expect people to work hard for little pay, I feel that human values are disappearing." (Siga/ ŽISP)

"When it comes to my life since Lithuania joined the EU, I feel that it has become a lot harder for me to gain employment. The cost of living has become very high." (Vytautas/ ŽISP)

"Going back to the Soviet times, I always worked, and it was easy to gain any employment, the employers were a lot nicer, the wages were always paid on time." (Natalija/ ŽISP)

"I feel back in the day it was a lot easier to survive. The law policies were the same for everyone. People used to live simpler lives: they worked, earned, paid their taxes, and had enough left for food and other necessities." (Lina/ ŽISP)

"However, I feel that some things were better back in Soviet days - there was only one bread, one milk, one lemonade. There was only one choice, everyone had jobs, worked in collective farms, there was no unemployed person. The only downside was that people were punished too harshly for wrongdoings." (Colleague/ ŽISP)

"Nothing has improved since Poland joined the EU. It has only improved for those who were already quite well situated. And opening borders was the worst idea. The Ukrainians came to us, pandemics, pestilence. There will be no work for us soon. The Ukrainians will work for next to nothing, and we will not do it for next to nothing." (Alex/ORFP)

"I wish that in the future Finland would be free of EU." (Petri/Valo)

"Prices in Finland has been just rising after joining Euro. Now we are one of the most expensive countries in Europe. They are playing with alcohol- and cigarette taxing even consumption of these products has been decreasing year by year." (René/Valo)

"I don't think that joining the EU has changed my life for the positive. People have to try harder to survive, there is a lot of stress and worries." (Regina/ ŽISP)

"All in all, I am happy that we have joined the EU, there are lots of opportunities, people should stop moaning and get off their sofas, and start taking advantage of everything that is on offer today." (Viktorija/ ŽISP)

"Older people are sometimes sceptical about the EU because of personal nostalgia. They think about how well they were in their youth, in the Soviet regime. They idealize their youth, not the system, thus confusing themselves." (Teacher/ ŽISP)

"Lithuania has a history of being occupied, because of its geographical position and also because it is only small. We are now safe and a part of a great Union. We are nothing without the EU." (Mindaugas/ ŽISP)

Reflections

In almost half of the stories from ŽISP and a third of the stories from ORFP, life before the EU is considered better. In a few of the stories, narrators refer back to the Soviet era, which is preferred over the EU. The stories that express life being better in the past mention how, for example, employment, livelihood, housing and food, were assigned to everyone as basic items. Nowadays, in the EU, they are no longer available to everyone. Four of the stories mention that some people long for the past. Such people receive no understanding in these four stories.

5.2.2 Nine categories in the spotlight, what do the stories tell us?

Using stories for content analysis opens up new perspectives on them. When different ideas or themes are extracted from a story, the research material also expands. The same story may express that the EU has no effect on the narrator's life, but also that it has made their surroundings more pleasant, reducing the amount of litter and improving waste management. The stories contain many levels and meanings. There are certainly some that have not yet been reached. My goal has been to make as many voices and perspectives as possible heard.

A surprising number of people from all the NGOs cite EU values as meaningful and as something that increase security. Many also express expectations regarding human rights and the monitoring of their implementation, as well as equality in general. For example, young people from Vamplas perceive the EU's defence of human rights as something that brings them a feeling of security. At the same time, the rise of the far right worries them precisely because they see it as trampling on human rights. Indeed, for young people with disabilities, this issue, in its most extreme form, relates to their right to live. Such a deep concern must be taken seriously. Many of the narrators from OFRPB and ŽISPB also mention environmental care and the EU's commitment to waste management. The more ecological and comfortable environment, in their view, is one of the most visible and noticeable changes brought about by EU membership.

Many of the stories mention how difficult it is to understand how the EU works, despite there being an interest to find out. Attempts to understand how the EU works are frustrated and, in the end, it becomes easier not to show any interest in the EU. Indeed, the stories mention the need for information to be published in a plainer language and in the narrators' own mother tongue in order for it to be accessible to everyone. After all, the EU also requires other actors to communicate in an accessible way. This matter should be taken seriously.

Free movement is one of the best identified elements of the EU. It is mentioned almost exclusively as a positive thing. Free movement translates into the elimination of border regulations and easy transition between EU countries. It is related to the experience of the freedom to move from one country to another when necessary. At the same time, it is seen to increase opportunities to improve one's standard of living by working in other EU countries. The stories also mention the opportunity to study in other EU countries.

The euro is also generally seen as a positive thing. It is often mentioned in relation to easier travel, as there is no need to change currency at the border. It is also linked to easier trade, as it facilitates commerce and understanding prices. In particular, the euro is linked to easy e-commerce. However, currency is also seen to be linked to national identity. A few of the stories express a yearning for the Lithuanian litas or the Finnish mark, or worry about the imminent loss of the Polish zloty in the future.

The Lithuanian and Polish stories mention increased investments in society's infrastructure and the EU's funding for projects as resulting from EU membership. These aspects are not mentioned in the Finnish stories. This could be due to Lithuania's and Poland's more recent membership, meaning that the resulting changes, such as improved roads, bridges, buildings or parks are still fresh in people's memories. Also, Finnish EU projects may represent more intangible development work making it harder to detect concrete changes. In any case, there are significant variations between the different countries. The conclusion could be that Finnish EU projects should remember to inform people about the origins of funding and the role of the EU. An EU flag alone is not always enough to explain the origins of funding to clients.

It is also interesting to consider that 17 of the 40 narrators from OFRPB and ŽISPB mention that things were better before their country joined the EU. Many of them mention how work and livelihood were better secured. There may not have been a broad selection of foods, but there was enough food, as well as housing, for everyone. Basic needs were covered. Also, the stories highlight the experience that everyone got the same treatment, there was no need to choose, and everybody's needs were catered for. The experience of equality was strong. Interestingly, equality is one of the EU's values, but it does not come across in these stories.

6. Discussion

Only about a quarter of the narrators express an open attitude towards the EU. The result can be considered surprising when thinking about the target group of the study. There are many elements that may have influenced the outcome, for example, those who are fanatically opposed to the EU may be reluctant to take part in EU-funded research, or, conversely, narrators thought that they were expected to write a constructive or positive story about the EU. In research projects, informants may unconsciously assume that they are expected to express a certain type of story and they therefore want to do their best to give the 'right' kind of answer. It may also be the case that narrators actually see the EU as a good thing for them, as something that creates security, continuity and brings economic benefits. The ultimate truth may never come to light. In any case, every story is told by a

person struggling in a vulnerable life situation and as such it represents a subjective truth about that person's life. It is also important to note that each narrator personally brought up certain specific issues in their stories. When more than one person independently raises the same issue, the relevance of that issue increases. Achieving a 100% generalisable truth is never possible in qualitative research. In this study, the material is made up of 80 authentic stories and I have trusted these stories in my analysis, which must be enough.

All in all, only eight of the stories can be classified as Eurosceptic. Four of them come from Valo-Valmennusyhdistys and they were written by three men and one woman, two come from two men in OFRPB, and two from two women in ŽISPБ, representing a total of 10% of all the stories. In total, about half of the narrators from Valo-Valmennusyhdistys seem sceptical about the importance of the EU. This may be due to the fact that Finland already has been a member of the EU for longer and thus the changes brought by the EU are no longer clearly perceived. Finnish narrators from Vamlas, on the other hand, mention the EU's actions in defence of human rights as particularly significant. These are mentioned by some of the young people with disabilities, but the same idea is displayed in the stories from ŽISPБ and OFRPB. The stories from Valo-Valmennusyhdistys express no similar fear of losing one's human rights or integrity. Of the ŽISPБ narrators, only two women express EU-critical attitudes. The generally rather positive attitude towards the EU could be linked to, for example, shorter membership and, among other things, the improved living standards made possible by free movement and the security brought by the EU. Similarly, OFRPB narrators mention having observed several positive changes in their own living environment. The opening of borders and the resulting free movement are also important issues for the narrators of ŽISPБ and OFRPB, something that has a different meaning for Finns. The experience of the most vulnerable people in the EU seems to vary and depend on their life-context. At the same time, reference is made to the military security brought by the EU. The EU is perceived to prevent violent acts, such as the occupation of Crimea. This is probably all the more relevant when, in Lithuania's and Poland's neighbouring country Belarus, democracy, freedom of expression and human rights are only a distant dream in the chaotic situation following the presidential elections.

Narrators that display an indifferent attitude towards the EU include four men, aged 20-29, and three women from Valo-Valmennusyhdistys, one man from Vamlas and one man from OFRPB, a total of nine people. One could reflect upon the view that the situation of the narrators from Valo-Valmennusyhdistys is probably more predictable regarding their standard of living than that of their Lithuanian and Polish counterparts, and safer in terms of the protection of human rights than that of Vamlas's young people with disabilities. It is possible that the narrators from Valo-Valmennusyhdistys feel more independent and thus also freer to criticise the EU.

In addition to the above differences, Europeanness is seen to unite people. Many narrators mention being European, or a European citizen. This appears to contain a positive promise.

The particular issues that could be raised regarding the 80 different stories include:

- The idea that confidence in the materialisation of one's human rights and in the legitimacy of one's own life is a fundamental right that must be guaranteed for everyone.
- The EU creates a sense of security in the daily lives of the most vulnerable. In addition to human rights, this refers to the safeguarding of democratic values and military integrity. It contributes to reducing daily concerns.
- Information on EU activities and decision-making must be made available in plain language and in all European languages.
- Free movement is one of the recognised benefits of the EU and it must be nurtured.

Finally, I will return to Alex's story, which was selected as the most meaningful. What does it mean for the EU if it is unable to guarantee basic rights, such as the right to housing? The answer is, nothing. In Alex's words:

'I would expect the EU to become more involved in the fight against homelessness. So that countries would have to build housing, because we are forced to wait too long for an apartment. Social housing should be given to the homeless for free, not rented. How are we supposed to be able to afford it if we only receive the lowest social benefit?'

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