



CODES

Comprehending and Debating Euroscepticism



One Union, Two Universes? Critical Perception of the EU in Six EU Member States.

Discussion Paper

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Abstract: Future of European integration is increasingly more discussed in current Europe. In the project “Comprehending and Debating Euroscepticism” we studied Euroscepticism among ordinary citizens and how this can be addressed on local level. This discussion paper summarizes the citizens’ discussions. Overall, in its first phase the project conducted debates with almost 400 citizens in six member states of the EU: Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, Germany, Latvia, Slovakia. According to citizens, the main benefits of the EU are the four basic freedoms, most of all freedom to travel and work in other parts of the Union. Most criticized were the European funds as the source of corruption, migration crisis as an example of the Union’s failure to protect itself, and the feeling of second-class citizenship in the post-communist societies. In the discussion section we relate our findings to the debate on the future of the European integration, particularly the idea of differentiated integration.

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



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

¹ This study was made possible by contribution of the following researchers: Adebahr, Cornelius and Marti, Jennifer (DGAP, Germany), Kazoka, Iveta (Providus, Latvia), Vassilev, Lubomir (Capital Foundation, Bulgaria) Weidel, Christiana (World of NGOs, Austria), Zgut, Edit (Political Capital, Hungary).

1. Introduction

The CODES project conducted the debates with citizens in six member states of the EU: Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, Germany, Latvia, Slovakia. Even if the project countries are not the most Eurosceptic ones in the EU (e.g. Great Britain, the Netherlands or Denmark), there has been recent increase of the Eurosceptic tendencies across all disputed countries. Germany can be seen as the only exception; however, looking at eastern part of the country, the tendency is present.

In the academic literature there is no clear consensus on the single precise measurement of Euroscepticism. Several indicators, such as trust towards the EU, membership benefits perception or the image of the EU is used. Below we present three selected indicators of the Eurosceptic attitudes in the countries involved in the project. Based on the share of population that holds negative image of the EU, mistrusts the Union and is pessimistic about the Union's future, we can observe overall increase of Euroscepticism across all countries. However, the increase of Euroscepticism is not uniform in all countries and generally the Eurosceptic attitudes are still not dominant.

When looking at the individual indicators one can see that there is a difference in the extent citizens of six countries in question, and the EU on average, mistrust the EU, and perceive its image and its future. While the level of mistrust is at around 50% (except of Latvia and Bulgaria), there are only around 40% of populations seeing the EU's future pessimistically, and only 20% of populations holding negative image of the EU (except Austria, around 30%).

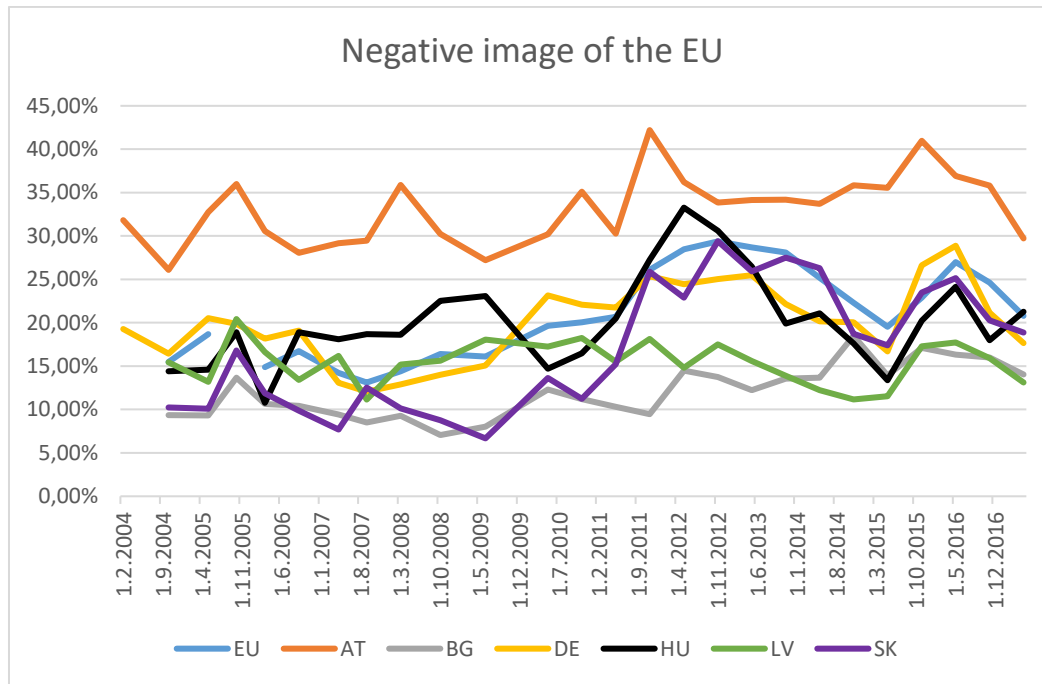
Noteworthy is the wave of negative attitudes that emerged in years 2011–2014 and then another one around 2015–2016. To a more or less extent, this is observable in all

countries employing all three indicators. We argue that the first wave related to the monetary/debt crisis related dominantly to Greek debt which resulted into establishment of the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) and the European Stability Mechanism (ESM). The second wave of increased Eurosceptic attitudes is related to the migration crisis. These two crises are an example of an issue that affected basically every member state and, as a matter of fact, found the EU ill-prepared for coping with them.

Our project aimed to provide the opportunity for regular citizens to speak up their opinions on the EU in small groups at local level. The discussions were opened to any attitudes to the EU spontaneously arising from the debate and we were especially interested in perceptions of the EU from the everyday life perspective. In sixty-six debates over 400 people took the chance to express their concerns but also positive perceptions on the project of European integration.

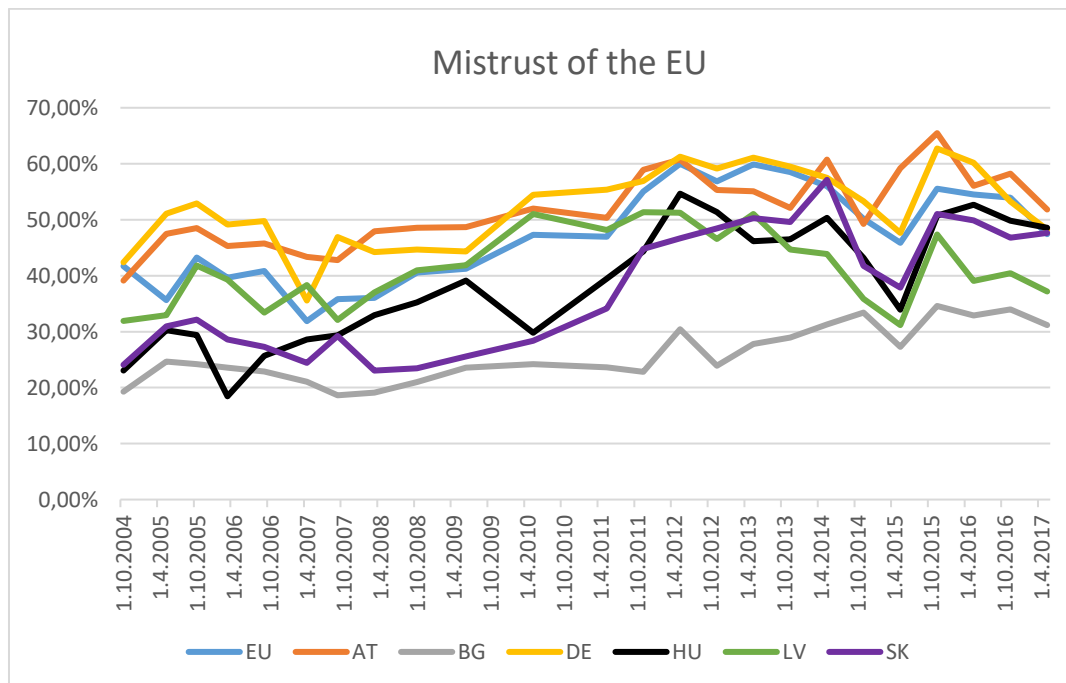
Based on experience from CODES project it is clear that there are Eurosceptic tendencies both in Western as well as in Eastern Europe. We observed variation in what were the dominant associations with the EU spontaneously highlighted by citizens. On the one hand, in Germany and Latvia the dominant discourse was positive and the negative stances only appeared after moderator's intervention. On the other hand, in Austria, Slovakia, Hungary and Bulgaria the dominant discourse was negative. Thus, we observe no clear West-East division line.

Figure 1: Negative image of the EU



Source: Eurobarometer, European Commission 2017²

Figure 2: Mistrust of the EU



Source: Eurobarometer, European Commission 2017

² <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Chart/index>

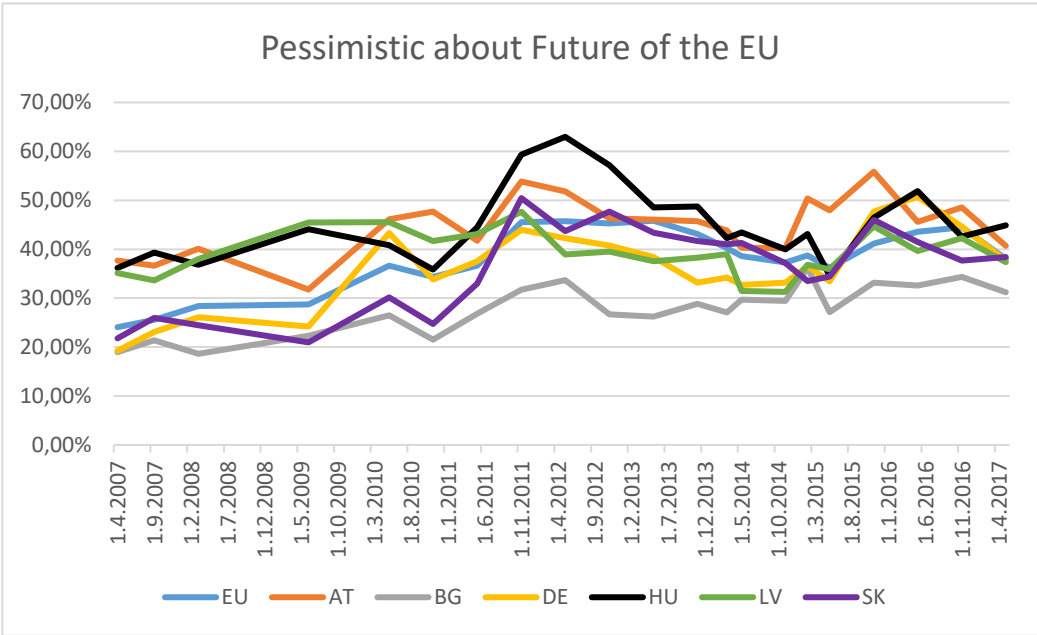
One of the reasons why the public is either openly critical or more reluctant in criticism of the EU might be the political influence of leading political parties at national level. German chancellor Merkel but also the leader of the second largest party Schultz, are ones of the most pro-European leaders in the EU and they were consistent with this approach also during the recent election campaign. Recent Austrian election campaign was slightly different with regard to the communication of European issues. The incumbent ÖVP as traditionally pro-European political force adopted discourse that was more critical. When former foreign minister Sebastian Kurz closed the main illegal migration route, known also as the Balkan route, he also promoted this step as a symbol of the new course of his party. Later the ÖVP election campaign was marked by strong right-populist arguments with more critical viewpoint on the EU issues. Similarly Fidesz, the governing party in Hungary, and SMER-SD, the leading governing party in Slovakia are well known for their critical viewpoint on migration policy of the EU. Recently, both Hungarian

and Slovak political representation communicated the feeling of second-class EU members.

Additionally, rather critical approach of the newly formed Bulgarian government with the Eurosceptic political party on board is further underlined with strategic media anti-EU propaganda, massively supported by Russia-backed websites. On the other hand, in Latvia we experienced less critical tone of the debates. That might reflect the fact that dominant political parties and media attitudes towards the EU issues range from disinterested and apathetic to moderately involved, but of generally low priority.

The importance of national political leaders in communicating the EU project is thus still very important and should not be omitted from any attempt to improve the European communication strategy. The rest of this report presents a comparative analysis of our participants' opinions on various issues connected to the EU. Analytical interpretations reflect the viewpoints of the authors of this report. Recommendations stated by our participants are presented separately.

Figure 3: Share of Citizens Pessimistic about Future of the EU



Source: Eurobarometer, European Commission 2017

2. Benefits Perception

Four freedoms of the EU were spontaneously mentioned in all debates across all participating countries as the main benefits of the European integration, although in rather abstract terms. Further discussion of the four freedoms, however revealed the differences between Western members on the one hand, and Central Eastern European countries on the other hand. In Germany and Austria the freedom of movement was positively valued not only from the perspective of personal benefits, but also as a general principle worth of upholding. On the other hand, participants from CEE countries viewed the four basic freedoms more through the optic of personal benefits related either to them directly, or friends and family members. Additionally, in CEE countries the freedom to move to other country was also viewed partly negatively as it contributes to brain drain and massive departure of young people from these countries.

Many people quoted direct experience with their relatives or friends moving to another member state in search of improvement of their own economic situation. These family members have, to a considerable extent, found what they were looking for. Nevertheless, this positive experience did not automatically lead to a better evaluation of the EU in general. The reason might be that the free movement within the EU was perceived not only as an opportunity but also as a cause for emptying out of economically neglected regions and causing family ruptures.

Regarding the free movement of people, there was the EU initiative that was perceived very positive regardless country or region. The Erasmus Programme was frequently named as one of the flagship projects of the EU that offers the possibility to experience the European community first-hand and the chance to build a

European identity among young people in the long run.

Comparing debates on benefits of the EU, the other striking difference between cases within our project was predominance of material benefits valued by citizens from new member states. Not only free movement was perceived as a benefit mainly through the lens of improving economic situation of individual or family. Due to massive support from the EU cohesion funds, people were more likely to name development of infrastructure (more than anything else) as a benefit of the EU membership. Benefits as security or empowerment of the states on international level (as a part of the EU) were rarely mentioned (except for Latvia) in these countries but they were part of the debate in Austria and Germany.

„The most visible benefits EU bring to country? The opportunities for free travel, education and work abroad.“

The security reasons mentioned by Latvian citizens are specific to the Baltic region and hardly transferable to other parts of CEE. Participants in Latvia mainly associated the EU with the perception of security from potential invasion from Russia. The Baltic States are in a particular position as Latvia and Estonia have direct land border with Russia. Simultaneously, only three Baltic States were part of the Soviet Union in the past and therefore the perception of threat from Russia is stronger than in other countries.

It is also noteworthy that historically well-defined benefits of the European integration (as the long-lasting peace on the continent) were rarely spontaneously mentioned as perceived gains. Only some older participants from Germany mentioned the importance of the EU as a guarantor for

peace and security. They pointed at these achievements as ones that could not be stressed enough.

Lessons learned from our debates point on two aspects of the EU project that should not be taken lightly in order to maintain the overall support for the integration. First, it is necessary to preserve the four freedoms as the single most valued achievement of the EU in the form as we know it today. Restrictions on Schengen regime or possible protection of domestic labor markets could harm the EU project irretrievably. Possibility of differentiated integration as a future avenue for the EU should be treated very cautiously. Second, despite the fact, that the EU cohesion policy has improved the situation in CEE region significantly, new member states are still economically lacking behind. Debate on the new perspective of the EU cohesion policy should take it into account. The exit strategy (from the EU funds) should be adopted while transition period of reducing the EU support would be still in place (even after 2020).

3. Justifications of Euroscepticism

Despite various attempts to bring the EU closer to its citizens, the project of European integration is still perceived as exclusivist one. The perception of the EU as the project that only somebody else is profiting from was regularly popping up in all debates. In Germany, it was pointed out that the middle and upper classes reap most of the benefits of the European Union while the working class is left alone. In one of the Austrian debates, they pushed it even further and named big business interests as ones who used the EU at the expense of its citizens.

Similar perceptions, but debating in more personal manner were also presented in the CEE countries. In Slovakia, Bulgaria or Hungary, only few people identified themselves as the beneficiaries of certain EU programmes and they were not able to

use personal examples while speaking about benefits of the EU. Several European schemes, including structural funds, were perceived as the ones devoted to a small number of selected, privileged beneficiaries.

It is difficult to assess whether the image of the EU, previously perceived as elitist project, has been shifted away from elitism closer to citizens due to various institutional steps taken by the EU itself (like emphasis on transparency, more pro-citizens initiatives, etc.). However, the existing narratives indicate that the efforts to get the Union closer to the citizens should continue. There is still need to win the “hearts and minds” of the EU citizens (as J.C. Juncker put it). The more effort should be done in communicating the various EC initiatives (e.g. anti-carrousel measures) from the perspective of “benefits for ordinary people”. The message should be spread that these efforts are not taken only in order to help other businesses (to provide fair trade environment) but they would influence also ordinary people through, for instance, more money in national social systems.

3.1. EU funds as a driver of corruption

The EU structural funds as a main tool for economic support of the New Member States and one of the most appreciated advantages communicated in the pre-accession phase have lost their aura. Debates in CEE countries where the EU funds are still used revealed that they became a justification of the EU criticism as they are frequently connected with the corruption scandals. People debating the corruption, although with critical EU attitude, admit that a number of problems with the application and absorption of European funds and rules are actually rooted within the national authorities. However, they still pointed on the EU as the

one that should take better care about its money, and if the EU wanted the EU could have monitor the whole process better.

Another negative image of the EU funds that is still present in the CEE countries participating in our project is based on center/countryside dichotomy. The argument is that further away from the capital cities people live, the further away are the economic opportunities and the

„Distribution of European subsidies? Corruption schemes among a small number of selected beneficiaries!“

benefits of the EU. This emphasis was especially strong as we were organizing the debates mainly in the countryside/ small towns. The reason is that many citizens do not understand the way structural funds work and they consider general economic development to be the consequence of the EU financial support. However, naturally the economic development is faster in and around capital (and large) cities than in distant regions.

Discussions on the EU funds revealed two important implications for the EU policies and their further communication. First, without the effective oversight of the EU funding by supranational, EU-level authorities the appreciation of financial support from the EU will deteriorate: it is not going to strengthen the image of “strong, helping supporter” but that of a “weak lavish”. Second, the accent of benefits for “ordinary people” should be strengthened in the communication of the benefits of the EU funds. Ideally, people need to understand its availability and profit to each of them/us, even to people like you or your neighbor.

3.2. Migration crisis

There are several indices that the migration crisis caused a large wave of Euroscepticism across the whole Union. Naturally, the issue was present in almost all the debates with citizens. Usually when the migration and refugees crises popped up, the discussions tended to get heated. Many participants expressed fear and only country where this perception in debates was missing was Germany.

The reasons citizens reject to accept refugees in their country were threefold: cultural threat to local way of life, security concerns, and economic issues in sense that the state should not give migrants too much money while nationals are poorly taken care of. In many debates in CEE countries the refugees were closely related to Muslim religion. Citizens expressed they fear of how the Muslim men would treat the females in a host country. Another often mentioned obstacle to accepting migration was the fear that due to the otherness (religion, color of skin and culture) the migrants would not be able to integrate.

“I think about it [the EU] as a large family. We are not trying to make it good for the family members but for migrants.”

The debates of our participants clearly reflexed the discourse led by main political forces in the country for almost two years prior to our research. . It focused on potential rather than actual threats but the fear of migration is such a strong frame that counter-arguments did not have any effect, and neither did family members' experiences with migration.

If the participants used somehow more personal justifications of their attitudes, they pointed on their own (not well) economic situation or their experiences with Roma minority as an example of those who are inadapted based on cultural differences.

Many participants voiced out their perception of migrants as economic migrants who come to Europe in search of better jobs and welfare. Therefore they argued that this type of migration is not acceptable and the EU should be able to control it. Noteworthy is the incongruence in the perception of own nationals being so-called economic migrants in Western Europe on the one hand, and migrants coming to Central Eastern Europe from non-European countries on the other hand. While the former is all right because it benefits “us”, the latter is not seen as the other side of the same coin. A participant from Hungary put it bluntly: “my daughter is in Switzerland and that’s fantastic. But that they want ... to force migrants on us, [it] is horrible.”

3.3. Second-class citizenship

Inequality of living standards between EU member states; different pay for the same activity depending on the nationality of the worker; different levels of subsidies for CEE and western farmers but also differing standards of customer protection regarding food, they are the factors that fuel the feeling of being treated as not equal among citizens of the CEE countries.

Second-class citizenship

The idea of CEE citizens being treated as second-class European was voiced out in every country under investigation. In various groups different particular reasons were used, mostly of economic/material nature.

Double living standards were present in many discussions. This is hardly surprising as this is part of the long-term comparison between West and East. Economic development, increase in salaries and life quality was often also the single most accented reason in the pre-accession

They look down on us and exploit us” versus „There are member states that do not follow the rules or disregard the decisions of the European Court of Justice“.

campaigns in many countries. Central Eastern Europeans, however, still perceive large differences between their life standards and the life standards in Germany or Austria (mostly measured by salary levels).

Another heated debate was observed on the topic of double food quality standards. This has become a political issue on the highest level in early 2017 and the citizens’ discussions already reflected that. Western food companies were accused of selling lower quality food for higher prices in comparison to Germany or Austria. In many countries the food quality issue was, in citizens’ views, related to the decline of agriculture.

As mentioned previously, in many CEE countries agriculture was discussed rather heatedly. Several citizens expressed their opinion that the EU membership caused a decline in the agricultural sector, and thus use the decline in agriculture as a justification for the EU criticism.

Partly the problem is that foreign direct investment is usually concentrated around the capital and/or large cities. For many people of distant regions the big industries are therefore not real option to get employment and so they are more interested to think about more “down to earth” option for solving the problem with unemployment. For many years, agriculture

was the dominant sector for rural areas of many post-communist states and thus, mobilized by populist politicians, revival of state-owned agricultural farms might represent an attractive option (but usually as solution for the village/region/others, “not me personally”).

Agriculture is an object of criticism and a form of Eurosceptic justification in regard to subsidy system of the EU. Citizens perceive different level of subsidies between Western and Eastern Europe, latter being significantly lower. People thus blame the EU for destroying the CEE agriculture also via large subsidy gap. This narrative was present in all investigated countries in CEE.

On the other hand, the feeling of injustice was shared also among participants from the Old Member States. They pointed at „some Eastern European (member) states“ as the ones for whom the same principles do not count. The problem was repeatedly mentioned as the disrespect for European rules and values on the part of these countries. A case in point was what in Germany is considered missing solidarity among member states during the refugee crisis. And also reaction of some member states that they would not follow the rules or the decision of the European Court of Justice regarding the relevance of refugee quota system.

“We expected a lot (when we joined), but the situation did not get that much better.”

The same discourse was observed in Austria. Mostly, related to either currency issues or refugee crisis, participants in Austria contemplated the common values and blamed CEE countries that they do not behave in a true European manner. As one participant in Austria put it: “These countries only want to have benefits without giving anything back.”

4. Discussion: Unfulfilled expectations and differentiated integration of Europe

As part of the project “Comprehending and Debating Euroscepticism,” the project team conducted tens of group discussions with over 400 participants in six countries. Our aim was to map the arguments citizens use in order to justify their Eurosceptic attitudes. These group discussions present only one of the project activities, and this paper presents and discusses the findings based on the activity.

First, in terms of the degree of positivity vs. negativity that people spontaneously express, we observed no clear difference between Western and Eastern Europe. While in Latvia and Germany the main discourse was positive, in Austria, Slovakia, Hungary and Bulgaria the main discourse was negative. We argue this is to a large extent caused by the way political elites communicate the European issues. In case the European issues became the main mobilizing issue in the political competition the public is rather negative. This is the case of Austria, Slovakia, Hungary and Bulgaria. Therefore, in order to address the Euroscepticism it is desirable that the national political elites communicate the EU issues with more caution.

Second, when it comes to the justifications people use, we found that the West-East division is rather strong. Both the Western and Eastern European citizens’ Eurosceptic attitudes are heavily justified by the unfulfilled expectations. However, what differs is the type of expectations people had.

First set of expectations was typical for newcomers to the EU. It reflects the economic promises made by politicians during the pre-accession phase. As stated by our participants, they had expected that the level of economic welfare would

increase, more precisely, the differences in wages or pensions between Western countries and Eastern countries would diminish. Regardless the economic foolishness of such promises and expectations or the fact that due to the membership, the macroeconomic development stimulated mainly by Foreign Direct Investment in the CEE countries has significantly improved (Clausing, Dorobantu 2005)³, such expectations should not be taken lightly. They help to understand the positions of people from these countries to many other EU initiatives or policies. Significant gap in economic well-being (Figure 4) not only feed the feeling of injustice among citizens of New Member States but also reduces their sense/support for solidarity with others. Illustration of such consequences might be tracked back to the position of Visegrad group towards the refugee quotas, political stance that was backed by high level of popular support.

“The Visegrad states and the countries of the South should have their own EU and their own Euro.”

The other group of unfulfilled expectations is connected with citizens from the Old Member States. The biggest enlargement in the EU history was not uncomplicated and overwhelmingly welcomed among the citizens of EU 15. Major concerns were attached to free movements of workers and its implications for labor force market and social policy (Kvist 2004)⁴. Thus, the anti-immigration sentiments and economic

considerations played the role in referendums on the EU 2004 enlargement. (de Vreese, Boomgaarden 2005)⁵. Despite the obvious economic hardship that the enlargement would have caused, the decision was supported by the old member states (and their citizens in some cases). In our recent debates, participants brought back the topic of the EU becoming too large. The enlargement was perceived as the cause of weakening the EU capabilities and financial capital as well as executive powers. In Austria, some Eastern European members were seen as the ones that want to have benefits without giving anything back. In Germany, a number of participants expressed their disappointment that the EU could no longer agree on a cooperative solutions and the EU's reputation as a “community of values” suffers deeply. Drawing such conclusions, they referred to experiences from the refugee crisis of the last two years.

For the European Union institutions and representatives, it might be useful to address the concerns and expectations stated above. A properly set communication campaign could remind the populations of the CEE countries the sacrifices the Old Member States brought in order to unite Europe and also to elaborate more on the EU as value-based project. On the other hand, communicating the poor economic situation in many CEE households (with bread-winner earning about 600 Euro per month) might help Western European citizens to understand better the specific economic concerns of Eastern Europeans.

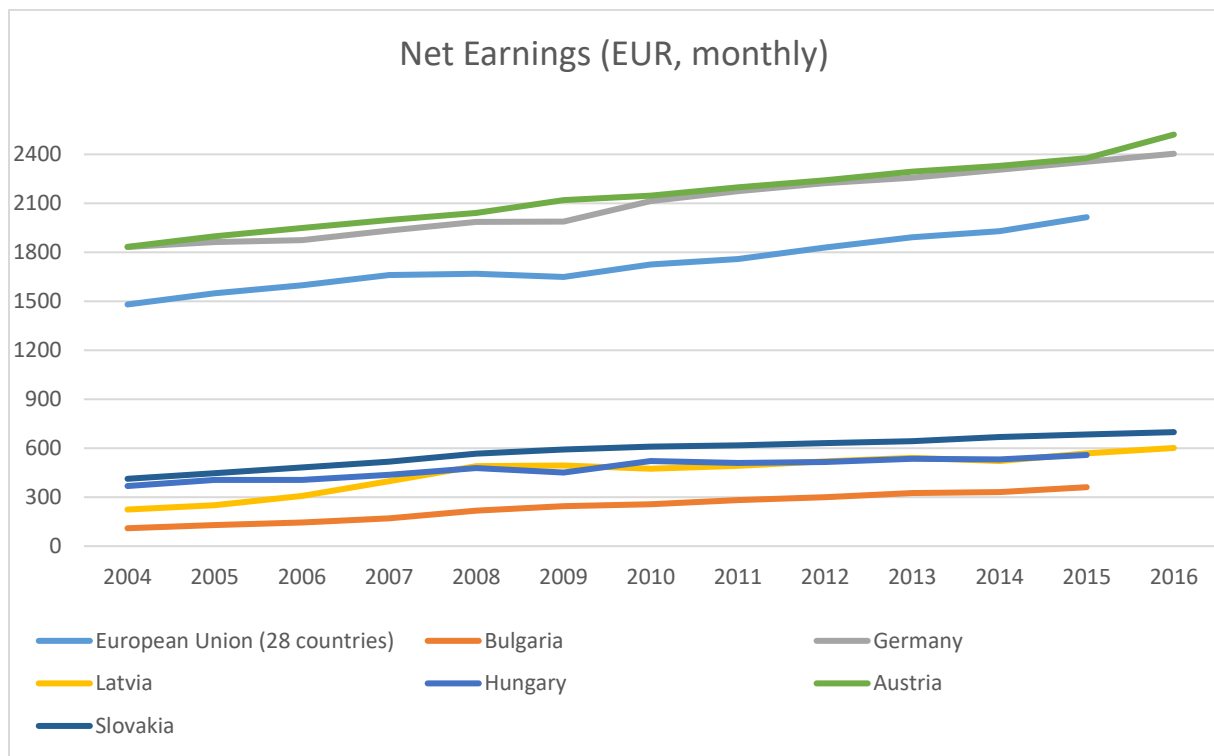
³ Clausing, K. A. and Dorobantu, C. L. (2005), Re-entering Europe: Does European Union candidacy boost foreign direct investment?. *Economics of Transition*, 13: 77–103. doi:10.1111/j.1468-0351.2005.00208.x

⁴ Kvist, Jon: Does EU Enlargement Start a Race to the Bottom? Strategic Interaction among EU Member States in Social Policy. In: *Journal of European Social Policy*, Volume: 14 issue: 3,

page(s): 301-318,
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928704044625>

⁵ Projecting EU Referendums, Fear of Immigration and Support for European Integration. In: *European Union Politics*, Volume: 6 issue: 1, page(s): 59-82.

Figure 4: Net Monthly Earnings, Average Worker



Source: Eurostat 2017

The unfulfilled expectations as a source of Eurosceptic attitudes present a challenge to future integration of Europe.

On the one hand we see Westerners who expected Easterners to behave according to the true European values (such as solidarity, or zero corruption tolerance). On the other hand we have Eastern Europeans who expected to become as economically developed as Westerners, with the same life standard, food quality, etc. However, what these two viewpoints have in common is that people in both parts of Europe expected the European Union to gradually develop into one entity with unified norms and wealth level in all of its parts.

More than a decade has passed and there are still striking differences between the

Old and New Member States. These differences are not only in the economic status of the member states, but they are also projected into the attitudes towards major political issues the EU faces nowadays. Many suggest that the differentiated integration would be a solution to the lack of consensus in how to address the multiple crises in Europe. However, we argue that the differentiated integration would not help to overcome the differences. Based on our research we argue that, since the lack of unity is driving Eurosceptic attitudes to a large extent, the differentiated integration would rather increase the probability of breakdown of the integration project as it would further contribute to the second-class feeling of many citizens.