

How European Do Young Slovenians Feel?

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Abstract

The last two decades of European integration have been challenging for European identity for various reasons. First, the 2004 and subsequent enlargement (in 2007 and 2013) of the EU to Central and Eastern Europe have further extended the diversity of the integration. Second, concerns with European identity have become even stronger as the EU has faced a permanent period of crisis. Third, the growing populism and authoritative politics in Europe are responsible for further differentiation and growing instability across the EU. Addressing the problem of European identity is thus inevitable. The goal of the EU is to build a collective European identity that helps reinforce integration via either the cultural dimension coordinated on the EU level, aimed at establishing a common European sense of belonging while complementing national, regional, and local identities, or the activities of various EU projects that support European ideas and values. In this article, we consider the presence and robustness of a European identity as a civic and cultural component among the citizens most directly involved in European projects that seek to add to it: elementary school students. The analysis is based on a survey conducted among Slovenian elementary school students who had participated in EU-related project activities. Students' self-assessment of their European identity and associated variables were measured before and after those activities. Our assumption is that participation in the project activities bolstered the students' European identity. The results show that the students already expressed a high level of European identity prior to the project activities, leaving little room for a stronger identity, which nevertheless speaks in favour of making sure that EU-related topics have a permanent place in the educational process.

Keywords

EU projects; European identity; Slovenia; students

1. Introduction

European integration and the enlargement of the EU to include Southern Europe as well as Central and Eastern Europe have added to the EU's diversity. At the same time as the EU acknowledges its diversity, as among others seen in (a) EU's motto "United in diversity," (b) the recognition of all 24 official languages, and (c) the fact that European cultural policy is intended to create a common European sense of belonging while complementing national, regional, and local identities, the EU aims to build a collective European identity to further strengthen integration and European solidarity. European identity stretches from multiculturalism, where diversity is viewed as a reality given the many cultural identities in existence, to monoculturalism, where a shared set of values is the basis for European identity. As argued by Pinxten et al. (2007), some minimum rules, values, and agreements can provide the basis for a common European identity. This is important due to the democratic deficit in the EU, and the lack of a European demos and common European identity that would boost the political participation of European citizens on the EU level (Novak et al., 2020). The EU still lacks a sufficiently strong collective identity able to reinforce the cohesion of all member states in an effective manner and underpin the political authority and legitimacy of the nation states (Egner et al., 2024; Steffek et al., 2024). The development of a European identity is particularly relevant among young people since in this way they are more likely to overcome biases and acquire a supranational identity (Nic Craith & Taylor, 2024), and because they represent the EU's future (Flanagan, 2018).

With this reasoning, the European Commission started creating programmes that would establish European integration through student mobility in the second half of the 1980s (Mitchell, 2012). As early as 1996, the European Commission adopted the Children's Identity in Europe initiative, which highlighted the importance of developing a stronger sense of European identity among young people (Bezjak, 2012). The EU is supporting the building of a European identity by financially supporting different projects and programmes that promote the European idea and values. Among these, the most recognised is the Erasmus mobility programme.

What actually holds the EU together is an especially pressing issue in times of crisis and instability. And such times have recently not been in short supply: the financial crisis (2008–2011), migration crisis (2015–2016), health crisis (2020–2021), Ukraine crisis (2022), and the upheaval of the geopolitical stage (2025). The global financial crisis, migration, rising authoritarianism in certain member states, Brexit, along with the question of open borders and free movement as cornerstones of the EU during the Covid-19 pandemic have led to greater Euroscepticism (Christiansen, 2020). Amid economic and political turbulence, the question of the nature of European identity, citizens' attachment to the EU, and EU mechanisms have become ever more salient (Mitchell, 2012). With growing populism, notably of right-wing populist parties and authoritative politics in Europe, EU member states have approached these crises with a range of approaches, causing further differentiation in the EU. This means that citizens of various EU member states hold different attitudes to the EU, irrespective of the effects of the crises. Following the economic and financial crises, citizens of newer member states remained more neutral or even positive concerning their EU membership, whereas citizens from older member states held more negative views about the EU (Göncz, 2013). Research has also revealed notable differences in perceptions, attitudes, and expectations of the EU between students in newer and older democracies, with post-communist countries in Europe having among each other different attitudes to Europe (Trunk et al., 2022).

In this article, we are interested in how strong and present a European identity is among those directly involved in European projects intended to strengthen European identity. We follow the definition of

European identity as a civic and cultural component, where the former is understood as cooperation between a shared culture and values and the latter as an individual perception of being part of the political system and polity (Cabada, 2020). Our research question in this regard is: In which way(s) do EU-related project activities concerned with European identity and attitudes to Europe impact adolescents? We present an analysis of data gathered in a self-assessment of European identity and associated variables among Slovenian elementary school students who had participated in EU-related project activities. Our assumption is that participation in the project activities bolstered the students' European identity. Data were collected for Slovenia, a newer member state. In the article, we first review past research and evidence of the development of a European identity. Before outlining the survey results, we illustrate general attitudes to the EU in Slovenia and the presence of EU topics in Slovenian schools. In the conclusion, the results are contrasted with the findings of previous surveys and general public opinion in Slovenia on the EU.

2. Development of a European Identity

The development of a European identity and pro-EU attitudes has been considered in several research studies as multifaceted in nature. While scholars have separately researched the development of a European identity and the development of pro-EU attitudes, some even contend that having a European identity is a predictor for holding positive attitudes to the EU.

A few scholars define European identity as a social construction of Europe based on collective identities, namely, the shared dimensions of individual identities. This includes the cultural component of European identity, which refers to cooperation between the shared culture and values, along with cooperation between different people (Cabada, 2020). A shared European identity in this case is understood as a sense of belonging to a common social group, cultural proximity, or a common history and set of values (Damiani et al., 2024).

The European cultural identity does not include identification with the EU and EU institutions (Van Mol, 2013, 2018) or affinity to the EU (Egner et al., 2024). For instance, the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study defines European identity among students as a construct closely related to attitudes and judgements (Damiani et al., 2024). Identifying with the EU and its institutions is understood as pro-EU attitudes (Öz & Van Praag, 2023). This understanding is close to the definition of European identity as a civic component where one sees oneself as part of the EU's political system, rules, laws, and rights together with support for open borders and mobility (Cabada, 2020) and can be connected with understanding the EU as a polity, political structure, organisation, or community (Damiani et al., 2024). In this article, we consider the definition of European identity as both a cultural and a civic component.

European identity has been investigated through multiple dimensions, such as seeing yourself as European, thinking that you have many things in common with Europeans, considering yourself a European citizen, and considering your country's EU membership as a good thing and European unification as a good thing. The affective dimension of a European identity is also observed as trusting Europeans, feeling close to Europeans, feeling attached to Europe, and having pride in being European (Öz & Van Praag, 2023). In some cases, attitudes to the EU were simply measured with pairs of adjectives like competent/incompetent, efficient/inefficient, warm/cold, friendly/unfriendly, just/unjust, and fair/unfair (Prati et al., 2019).

Pro-European attitudes can even be operationalised in other ways like mental orientations to the EU, beliefs, opinions, emotions, feelings, evaluations, tendencies concerning the EU (Tenenbaum et al., 2019), as well as the perception of benefits of countries' membership in the EU and a sense of belonging to the EU (Méndez García et al., 2021). The distinction between a European identity and pro-EU attitudes is thus not always easily made, and it is hard to distinguish various concepts such as Europeanism, European citizenship, and European identity (Öz & Van Praag, 2023). The concepts are also intertwined; for European citizenship to mean something tangible among EU citizens, it needs to be based on European identity (Trunk et al., 2022).

General education is important for developing pro-European values. Simply put, less well-educated citizens are more Eurosceptic, and this relationship has only strengthened over time (Hakhverdian et al., 2013). The presence of EU topics in education has other effects as well. Integrating the European dimension into education is expected to help students strengthen their European identity, reinforce the values of European citizenship, and foster the principles of democracy, social justice, and human rights (Turk et al., 2015). Scholars who have taken a more utilitarian approach to researching citizens' attitudes to the EU argue that individuals are more likely to express pro-European views if they recognise the advantages of EU membership for themselves or their country. These advantages or opportunities are the removal of mobility limitations, greater opportunities for work, educational opportunities, common market opportunities, recognition of EU funding in the home country, etc. When citizens recognise such advantages, they may also become more supportive of the EU (Hobolt & de Vries, 2016).

While there is a lack of research on the impact of Jean Monnet actions (part of the Erasmus+ programme) on the development of a European identity among youth, more evidence can be found on how mobility programmes have led to changing attitudes towards the EU. Participation in Erasmus exchange programmes, which, among others, aim to enhance pro-European attitudes, stronger ties to the EU, and citizens' support for European integration (Wilson, 2011), leads to mixed results with respect to the strengthening of a European identity. It is believed that the more citizens participate in the mobility programmes, the more the EU would benefit from citizens strengthened European identity, shared European cultural values, and a feeling of both European citizenship and multiculturalism (Rodríguez González et al., 2011). Some empirical research shows that students who participated in a mobility programme developed a stronger interest in Europe and the EU and felt more European than their colleagues who remained at the home university (Jacobone & Moro, 2016; Mitchell, 2012; Oborune, 2015). Specifically, participation in a mobility scheme was related to the likelihood that students would identify as European, with shared historical, economic, and political visions of the EU, along with their intentions to vote at the next EU elections (Mazzoni et al., 2018).

However, some research demonstrated that participating in Erasmus exchange programmes does not necessarily lead to a stronger European identity (Méndez García et al., 2021; Van Mol, 2018), although students demonstrated general awareness of the common characteristics of Europe and a utilitarian outlook on the EU (Méndez García et al., 2021). This does not then mean that participation in the programme has a negative impact or none at all, but that the programme attracts students who already possess pro-European attitudes (Kuhn, 2012). This reflects the fact that students are more pro-European even before they take part in a mobility programme, and remain pro-European also during their time abroad (Wilson, 2011, p. 1135). The effect of an Erasmus exchange is stronger among low-educated citizens (Kuhn, 2012). Nevertheless, individuals with a lower education who could potentially develop positive European attitudes

by participating in Erasmus exchange programmes often do not have an opportunity to participate in such an exchange because they leave school before then (Kuhn, 2012).

In this article, we look at the impact of Erasmus Jean Monnet project activities on elementary schools, namely, at an early age and when students from varying socio-economic backgrounds can benefit from being included in such activities. Developing a European identity at an early age can bring several benefits, reduce intergroup bias, lead to more positive attitudes concerning immigrants and solidarity with other European member states, and help develop a sense of belonging that, in turn, adds to well-being, educational achievement, and civic skills, which are key to sustaining democracy (Nic Craith & Taylor, 2024). Adolescence is a critical age for the formation of a political identity (Jennings & Stoker, 2004) and the emergence of a European identity (Barrett, 1996).

Socio-economic backgrounds can importantly impact attitudes to the EU that students hold prior to being part of Erasmus Jean Monnet project activities and how it is understood. Research on knowledge and competencies shows that students with low socio-economic status report lower perceived self-efficacy in explaining global issues, less awareness of global issues, fewer intercultural communication skills, and weaker responsiveness to global issues. Such competencies are partly related to knowledge and could be systematically strengthened in the educational process (Šterman Ivančič & Štremfel, 2022). However, opportunities for acquiring global competencies in the educational process are not significantly related to self-assessed global competencies, thereby calling into question the educational process's role in obtaining these skills (Štremfel & Šterman Ivančič, 2024).

3. Attitudes to the EU in Slovenia

Slovenia is a special case among EU member states because Euroscepticism has stayed at a low level in the more than 20 years of its EU membership (Lajh & Novak, 2024), which might also hold implications for its citizens' development of European identity.

Slovenia joined the EU on 1 May 2004. Strong support for EU membership peaked in the country when Slovenia gained its independence in 1991 (Uhan & Hafner Fink, 2024) and once again around the referendum on accession to the EU organised in March 2003, at which 60.4% of the electorate participated, with almost 90% of voters supporting the accession. The image of the EU held by the public was very positive. Slovenian citizens held high, above-average trust in the EU (see Figure 1). At the time, Slovenian citizens also expressed the absolute highest share of knowledge about the EU compared to other EU citizens (Mamić & Strmšek Mamić, 2005). Slovenia's membership of the EU was seen as being in the national interest, the political elite agreed to support the EU membership, and the media was also mostly pro-European. For the whole period of Slovenian membership in the EU, there have been no significant differences in attitudes to the EU among Slovenians, regardless of whether they are politically oriented to the left or the right (Uhan & Hafner Fink, 2024).

Immediately after Slovenia joined the EU, strong support for Slovenian membership existed among Slovenians, and there were no noteworthy changes in attitudes to the EU (Uhan & Hafner Fink, 2024). This attitude to the EU characterised the first membership period until the country held the Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2008, and was also detected among the political parties which had agreed not to take advantage of inter-party

competition on EU matters (Lajh & Novak, 2024). A more Eurosceptic position is only found among Slovenian citizens with a lower socio-economic position, a lower education, and from economically disadvantaged areas (Uhan & Hafner Fink, 2024).

Slovenians demonstrate a fairly strong European identity (Uhan & Hafner Fink, 2024) whereby a local and global identity are not mutually exclusive (Hafner Fink, 2006). In addition, Slovenian identity is often understood as part of a European identity (Šimenc, 2011), and the majority of Slovenian citizens view their future as lying in the EU (Uhan & Hafner Fink, 2024). Throughout Slovenia’s membership of the EU, the country’s citizens have expressed close-to-EU-average attachment to the Union. Still, in some years (2013, 2014, 2017) in the first decade of membership, Slovenian citizens felt less attached to the EU than the EU average citizen. Since 2019, we can observe above-average attachment, and for the last 7 years, over one-half of Slovenians have continuously felt attached to the Union (see Figure 1).

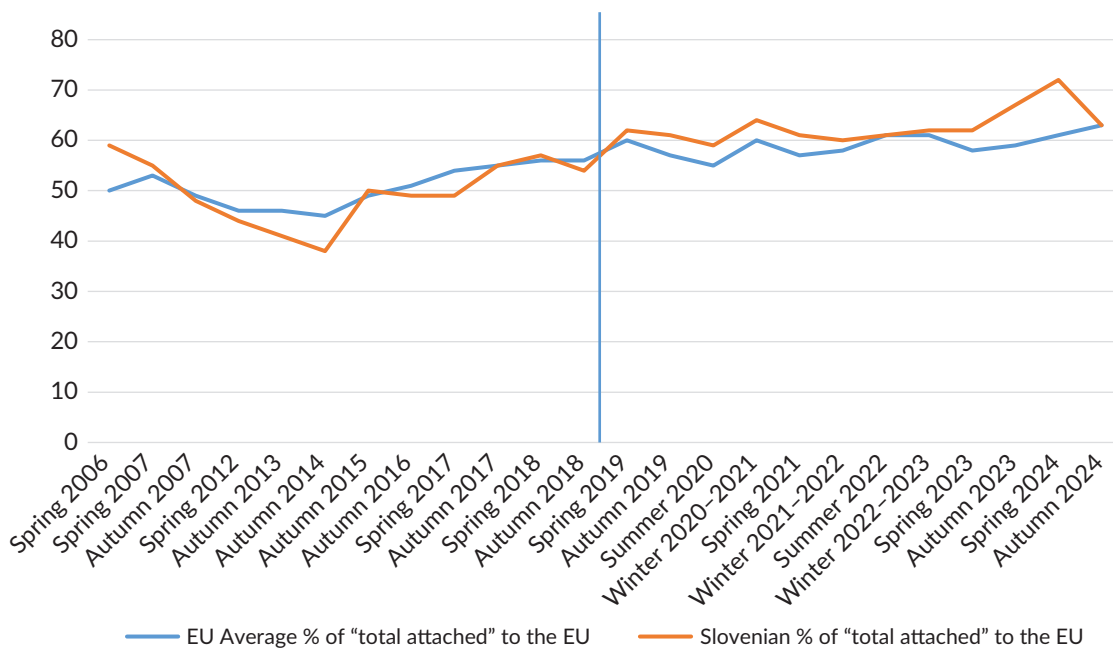


Figure 1. Feeling of attachment to the EU (y = answers with *total attached* in %). Note: The vertical line in the figure marks the starting point of our survey. Source: European Commission (2004–2024).

4. EU Topics in Slovenian Schools

The relatively positive attitudes held by Slovenians to the EU, the absence of strong Euroscepticism, and the presence of a European identity have generally set the baseline for high levels of pro-European attitudes also among adolescents. Data from the European module of the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study carried out in 2016, and 2022 among students aged 14 years show that Slovenian students express a stronger European identity than the average of students in other participating EU member states (17 countries in 2022). Although youth are generally more likely to express positive views about a European identity than the population at large (Damiani et al., 2024), teachers in Slovenian elementary and secondary schools, like Slovenian students, demonstrate a high share of a feeling of European identity (Novak et al., 2020). The national average scale indicating students’ sense of being a European citizen increased slightly in Slovenia from 2009 to 2016 and once again from 2016 to 2022. The above-average pro-European attitudes

among Slovenian students might also be an outcome of Slovenian students' exposure to EU-related topics at school. At more than 10 percentage points above the average of the 17 participating EU countries, Slovenian students reported having opportunities to learn about the political and economic systems of other European countries, the political and economic cooperation between European countries, the EU, the role and functions of EU institutions, and significantly above-average opportunities to learn about political and social issues in other European countries. At least average opportunities for students to learn about the EU were also reported by their teachers. At the same time, teachers participated above the average in training courses on civic-related topics and reported average competencies for teaching civic-related topics, including teaching about the EU (Damiani et al., 2024). Teachers who include European content in their lessons agree significantly more with statements about European identity than teachers who do not teach European content (Novak et al., 2020). This reveals that to develop a European identity it is necessary to possess some awareness about the EU and be exposed to EU-related topics.

Slovenian students are considerably exposed to EU-related topics in the framework of the school curricula and school activities. Already in 2009, the majority (92%) of Slovenian schools reported including EU-related topics in their teaching activities (Štremfel et al., 2013). A survey among Slovenian teachers conducted in 2018 also revealed that more than 70% of teachers included EU topics in the content of their courses (Novak et al., 2020). EU content is mainly taught in the last three years of elementary school (ages 12–15 years) in courses of history, geography, civics and ethics, foreign languages, but also in mathematics, biology, and physics. Teachers typically include topics concerning Slovenia's membership in the EU, information about life in the EU, the history of integration, and EU institutions. Half of the elementary schools had been involved in at least one EU programme or initiative (Štremfel et al., 2013). Between 2007 and 2016, 76% of all Slovenian elementary schools participated in at least one EU project (CMEPIUS, 2020, p. 2). Even though EU-financed programmes and projects do not always include topics on the EU, the source of funding for them makes students aware of the EU's everyday presence in their lives.

Pro-European sentiment, a European identity, and involvement in the EU can help motivate young people to participate in European elections (Becewe et al., 2019). Still, at 10 percentage points below the average of the 17 participating countries, Slovenian students do not indicate that they expect to participate in European elections very much. Namely, only 50% of students from Slovenia reported they would definitely or probably attend European elections. On a positive note, the share of those Slovenian students expecting to take part at European elections has increased in comparison to 2009 and 2016 according to the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study, while the share of those expecting to participate in national elections has fallen slightly since 2009 but remains significantly higher than expectations to take part in European elections (Damiani et al., 2024). These results may also reflect the fact that turnout at European elections in Slovenia is regularly one of the lowest across the EU (28.35% in 2004, 28.37% in 2009, 24.55% in 2014, 28.89% in 2019, and 41.80% in 2024; Državna volilna komisija, 2024).

5. Methodology

In the empirical part of the article, we are using data from the survey conducted in classrooms at eight elementary school partners of the Erasmus+ Jean Monnet project EU@Home – Bringing the EU and Youth Closer Together in the 2018/2019 school year. The project forms part of the Erasmus+ programme, originally introduced as the Jean Monnet action of the lifelong learning programme in 2011, which tried to

ensure the more focused and in-depth inclusion of EU topics in formal and informal educational practices in EU member states (Štremfel et al., 2013). EU@Home project activities included one interactive workshop with students where they learned about the EU through games and fun activities. The second activity was a guest lecture delivered by practitioners from Slovenia working in European institutions. Lecturers were able to present the work of EU institutions, the multicultural environment, and above all show the students that all member states have a say in the EU's functioning and anyone can contribute to the common policies. The participating schools came from different statistical regions in Slovenia (Gorenjska, Osrednjeslovenska, Primorsko-notranjska, Savinjska, Podravska, and Pomurska) and from both rural and urban areas. The whole classroom was included in the project irrespective of the students' prior interest in EU topics, socio-economic background, or ethnic background.

The aim of our survey was to analyse the attitudes of elementary school students who are already included or were included in the past in civic education courses as well as in different projects and programmes implemented with the goal of building and strengthening a European identity. We selected schools that have a tradition of participating in different EU projects, which means their students are exposed to EU topics and possess knowledge about the EU, its institutions, and its policies. In addition, we measured their attitudes to the EU before and after they participated in the EU@Home project activities. The aim of conducting the survey among students who were included in project activities is to measure their attitudes to the EU to determine whether these types of projects and programmes, coupled with learning about the EU, lead to more positive attitudes towards the EU and a stronger EU identity.

The survey included 418 pupils who participated at the first measurement time point and 423 pupils at the second time point at the end of the project. The majority of students participated at both time points. The students had similar demographic characteristics. A little over half (50.7%) were girls, and the remainder (49.3%) were boys. The majority of students were attending 8th grade, 14 years of age (52.8%), followed by 7th grade, 13 years (30.6%), 6th grade, 12 years (8.3%), 9th grade, 15 years (4.9%), and 5th grade, 11 years (3.4%). The civic education course that includes topics on the EU is taught in 7th and 8th grade, but in the framework of other courses students are exposed to EU topics in all grades and formally from 5th grade onwards (Novak et al., 2020).

The survey included 39 variables on 5 different dimensions of attitudes to the EU, namely: (a) European identity; (b) labour mobility within the EU—with which a European civic identity is connected (Cabada, 2020); (c) cooperation between European countries—with which European cultural identity is associated, while European identity is also linked with overcoming divisions among different countries (Cabada, 2020); (d) the future of Europe—as adolescents' attitudes provide insight into the EU's future (Flanagan, 2018); and (e) a self-evaluation of one's knowledge about the EU. In the latter, we were interested in whether students themselves felt the project activities had contributed to their knowledge. While students assessed their knowledge on a three-point scale, they expressed their agreement with other statements about the EU on a four-point scale. For all questions, students could also choose not to respond by selecting the answer "I do not understand the question."

While we do not compare demographic differences in the students' attitudes to the EU, we compare the difference in their attitudes at two points in time. Namely, we implemented the survey twice, before and after the project activities. While analysing changes in opinion between these two time points, we were especially

attentive to any increase in positive attitudes, improvement of knowledge, and decrease in answers “I do not understand the question.”

To protect the students’ personal data and sensitive information, we conducted the analysis completely anonymously and thus could not identify the students’ responses given at the first and second time points. The changes are thus identified only on an aggregated level. Students needed about 15 minutes to complete the survey using pencil on paper.

Students included in EU@Home project activities participated in two activities. One involved interactive workshops on the EU, where they learned about the EU’s basic characteristics and its influence on the everyday life of citizens. As part of the second activity, students participated in lectures given by practitioners from Slovenia employed in European institutions. In this way, students experienced how citizens from all EU member states (including Slovenia) contribute to building Europe, they learned that working for EU institutions could also be a career path for them, they understood which knowledge and competencies the staff of EU institutions possess, and they became more familiar with work in a multicultural and multilingual environment. All the lecturers had worked for EU institutions in either Brussels or Luxembourg. The lecturers all participated in the project voluntarily, had no political or party links, and thus were more acceptable for schools in Slovenia, where trust in political parties is extremely low (Uhan & Hafner Fink, 2024), but at the same time lecturers expressed high levels of pro-European attitudes.

6. Results and Discussion

Students who participated in the survey were first asked about their attitudes to the EU. Along with the frequency of the answers, we paid attention to the change of attitude from the first time point (before the project activities) to the second time point (after the project activities). Students included in the survey expressed a very high level of European identity, with more than 60% completely agreeing that they consider themselves to be European and a further 35% agreeing that they feel European (see Figure 2). Elementary and secondary education is vital for the development of adolescents’ identity (Greischel et al., 2018), which may also be said for identifying as European (Novak et al., 2020). When comparing the results from the two time points, we notice that the share of students who did not understand this question decreased by about 1 percentage point.

A smaller share, when compared to considering themselves as Europeans, feels proud to live in Europe. Around 49% completely agreed that they feel proud to live in Europe, and a further 46% agreed with the statement. Understanding of this question was high at both points in time, but around 4% of students did not agree with the statement. This share even grows with the statement “I feel like a part of Europe,” where 10% did not agree with the statement at the first time point and 13% at the second one. Here we also have a substantially bigger share of students who completely agreed with this statement before the project activities (38%) than after the project activities (30%). The project activities actually saw the share of students not agreeing with this statement rise from 50% to 55%. This result was not in line with our expectations, as we expected an increase in positive attitudes to Europe following the project activities.

Also surprising was the higher share of students who felt proud to live in Europe than being proud that Slovenia is a member of the EU (see Figure 2). Nonetheless, around 47% completely agreed that they feel proud of

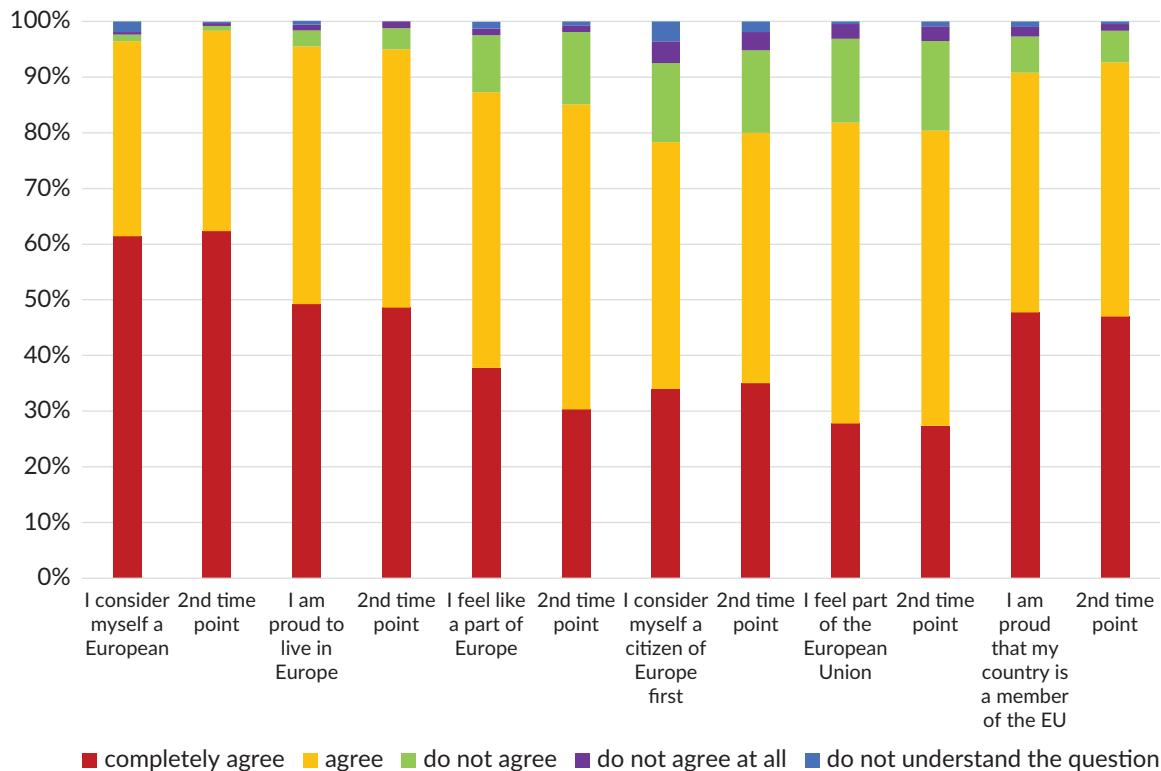


Figure 2. European identity (y = answers in %).

Slovenia’s membership in the EU at both time points. At the second time point, the share of students agreeing with this statement slightly increased from 43% to almost 46%, whereas the shares of “do not agree,” “do not agree at all,” and “do not understand the question” decreased between the two points in time. Around 35% of students completely agreed and a further 45% agreed that they consider themselves first to be citizens of Europe and then citizens of the world. Yet, after the project activities, the share of students who did not understand this statement also decreased. Students showed the least agreement with the statement “I feel part of the European Union,” where less than 30% completely agreed with the statement, and around 54% agreed with the statement at both time points.

In the second part of the survey, we asked students about their attitudes to labour mobility. The mobility of workers is one of the most recognisable advantages of the EU, and while young people may search for job opportunities in other EU member states, elementary school students may show fewer positive attitudes regarding such type of mobility especially if we focus on other EU citizens moving to their own country to find career opportunities. Still, the results show high levels of positive attitudes to labour mobility within the EU without discrimination and following equality principles. While before the project activities 49% of students completely agreed with the statement “Allowing citizens of European countries to work anywhere in Europe is good for the European economy,” after the project activities were concluded 6 percentage points more completely agreed with the statement. Simultaneously, we can observe a slight decrease in the share of those who only agreed with the statement and those who did not agree. More than 50%, with a slight increase at the second time point, also completely agreed that European citizens should be allowed to work anywhere in Europe. Around 44% also completely agreed with the statement that allowing EU citizens to work anywhere in Europe helps to reduce unemployment (see Figure 3).

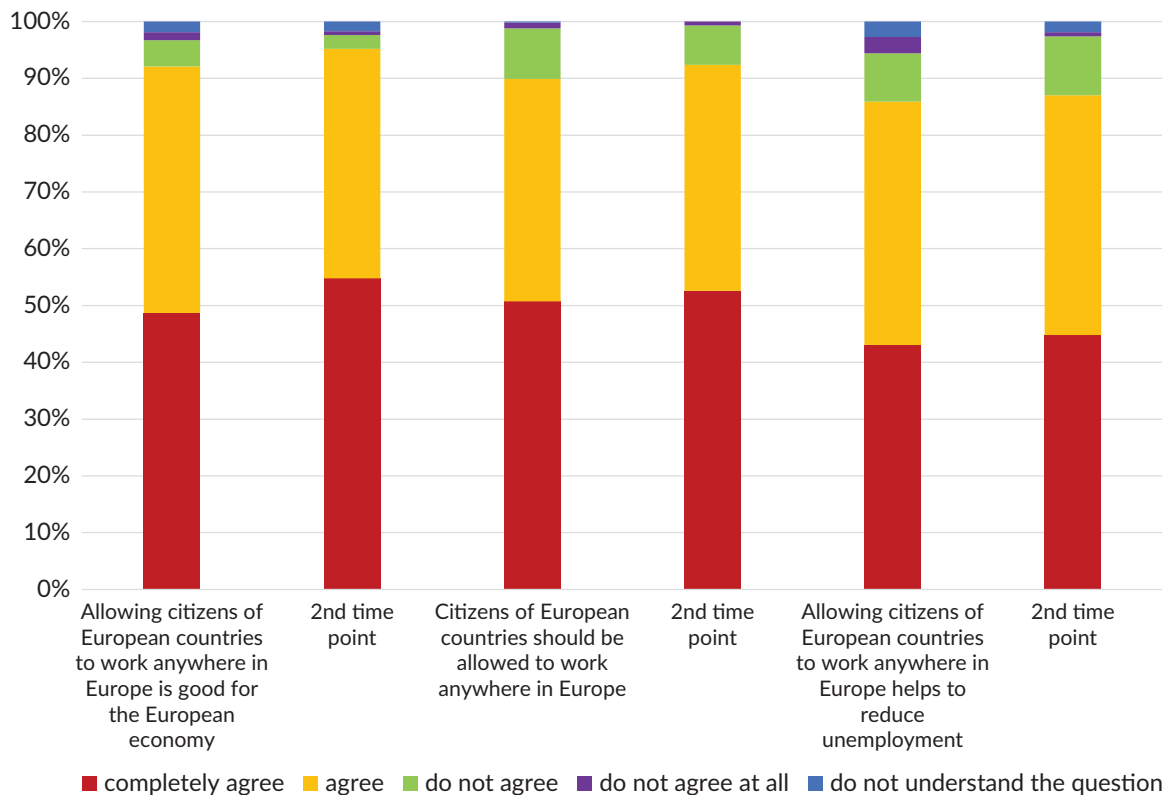


Figure 3. Labour mobility within the EU (y = answers in %).

At the same time, we also noticed low levels of agreement with statements that suggested limitations in labour mobility. Only 14% of students completely agreed with the statement that labour mobility should be only allowed where there is a need for certain skills. This share dropped by 2 percentage points at the second time point. The same change can also be observed when comparing the share of students who agreed with the statement. Still, at the same time, the share of students with difficulties understanding the question also doubled at the second time point. Even fewer students agreed with the statement that labour migrants should be offered exclusively the jobs that the citizens of the member states do not want, and that only a limited number of people should be allowed to move for employment reasons. Yet, the share of students who agreed with both of these two statements increased at the second time point, which was neither expected nor even desired from the perspective of the impact of the project activities. At the same time, the share of those who did not agree with the statement decreased (see Figure 4).

In terms of policy areas where students see a major role for the EU, we may especially mention protection of the environment, concerning which almost everyone completely agreed or at least agreed at both time points that EU member states should closely work together. The second-strongest support was seen in the area of the fight against terrorism. Students also recognise the role of the EU in the area of business and economic policies, where cooperation between countries is particularly noticeable. More than half the students completely agreed that EU member states should work better together to strengthen the economy and to ensure a high level of employment (see Figure 5).

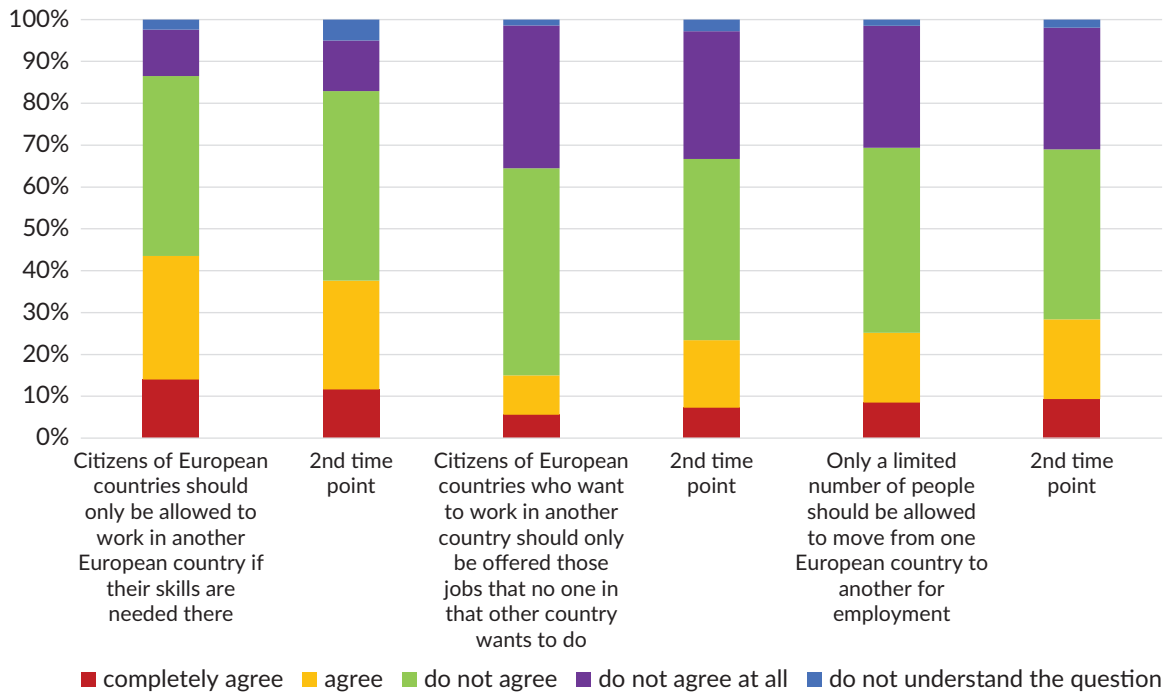


Figure 4. Limitations on labour mobility (y = answers in %).

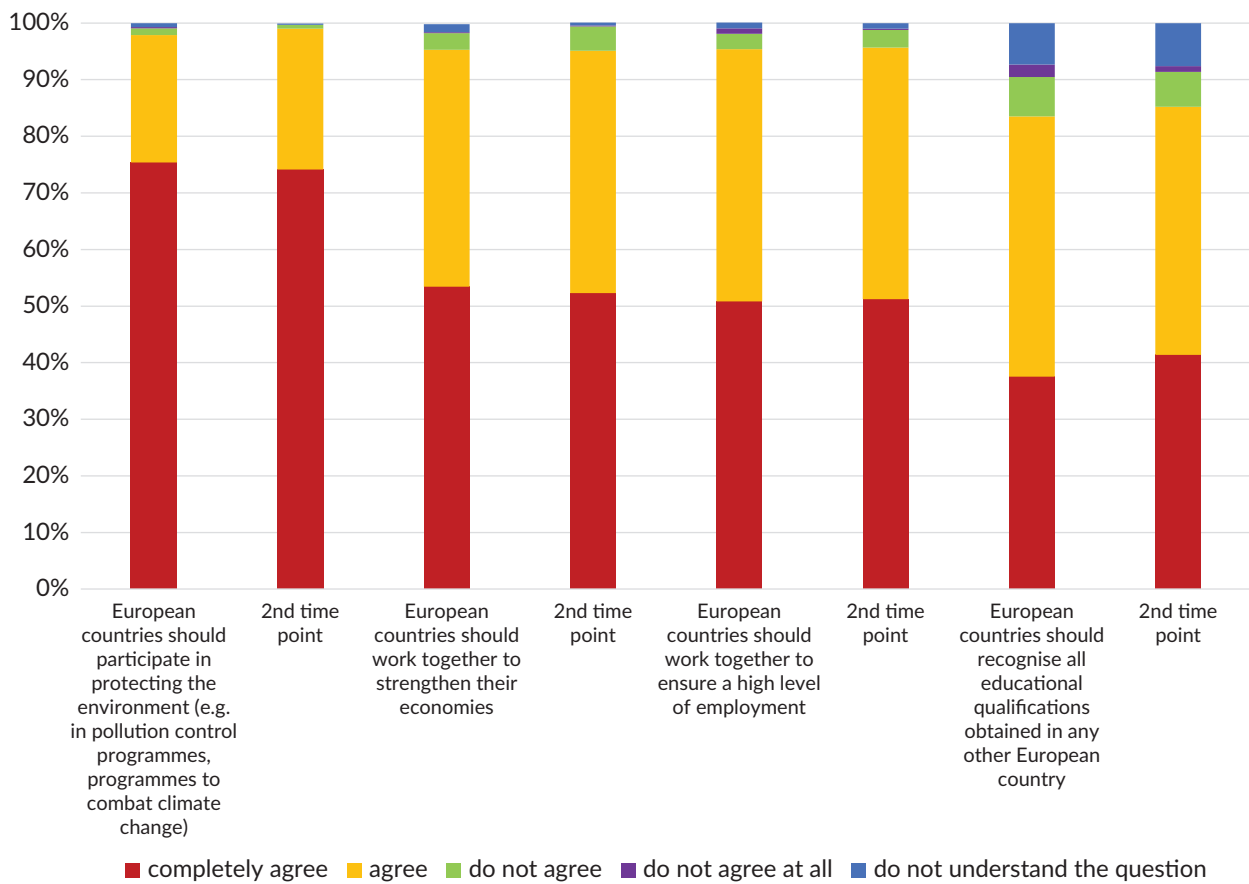


Figure 5. Cooperation of European countries: environment, economy, employment, and education (y = answers in %).

A similar level of agreement was detected for the statement that EU member states should work together in providing protection to asylum seekers (see Figure 6). For other statements regarding cooperation between member states, the students expressed a less strong need for cooperation among the member states. About one-third or more completely agreed with those statements. However, if we also consider agreement with the statements, we can also see with regard to these issues that the majority of students expressed support for cooperation between member states. Less need for cooperation was indicated for the policy areas where nation states are the ones that make decisions and create policies, such as on education. Around 40% completely agreed that EU member states should recognise educational qualifications, with this share even slightly increasing after the project activities (see Figure 5). Two other statements where only one-third of students expressed complete agreement were the establishment of a common European army (an issue under discussion in the EU at the time of the survey) and the fight against illegal immigration where we know that member states have different views on this issue and also Slovenian political actors disagree. For statements where students expressed less agreement, we also detected a bigger share of those who did not understand the question, and thus, this could also explain the weaker support to some extent (see Figure 6).

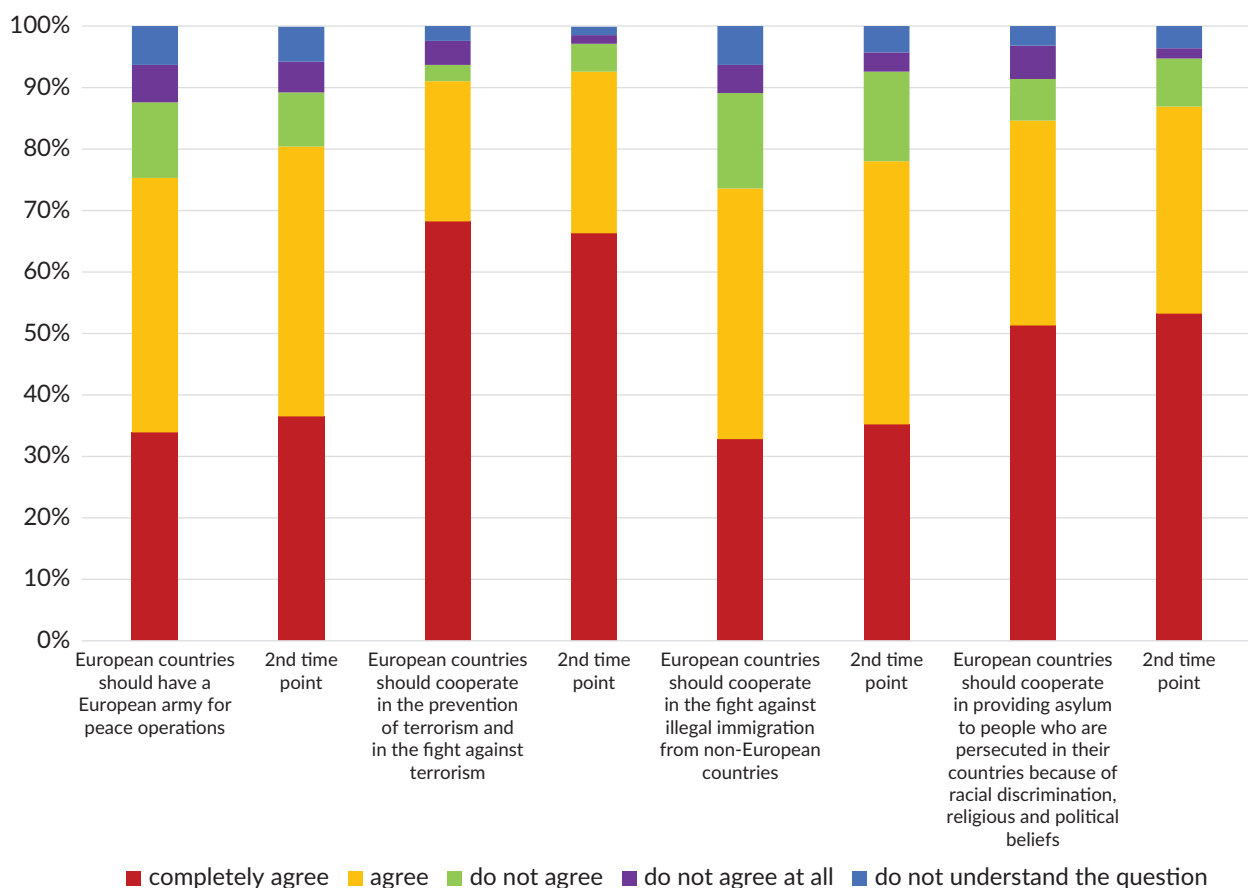


Figure 6. Cooperation of European countries: army, fight against terrorism, illegal migration, and asylum (y = answers in %).

In the third part of our survey, we asked students about their expectations for the future of the EU. In some aspects, like the economy, we can see that students have strong pro-European views and positive expectations about Europe. Thus, the majority of students believe that cooperation between European countries in the area

of the economy will be stronger, while the majority disagrees that the economy will be weaker in all European countries or that poverty and unemployment will rise in 10 years (see Figure 8).

A similar level of agreement is observable with respect to the statements that there will be more peace throughout Europe, but also that terrorism will become a greater threat and that Europe will be more influenced by non-European world power centres. These statements seem to be connected and address the issue of peace and threats to it (see Figure 7).

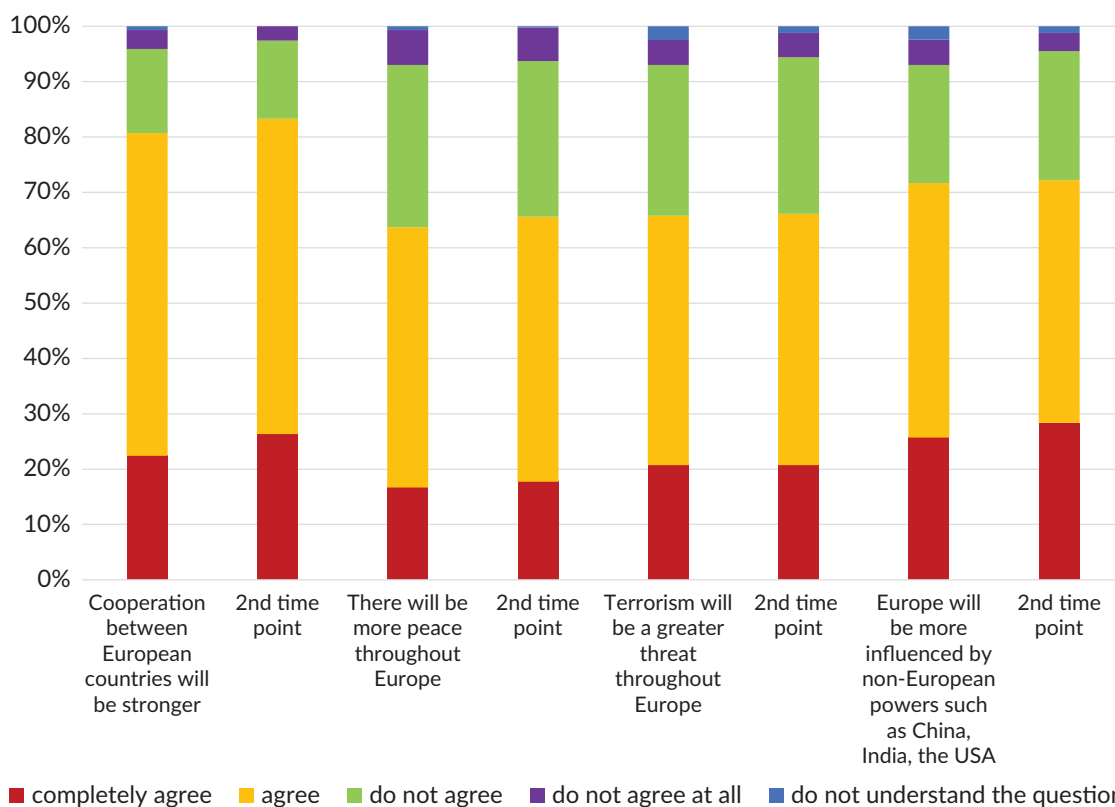


Figure 7. Future of Europe in 10 years: cooperation, peace, terrorism, and geopolitical balance (y = answers in %).

The majority of students agreed that democracy will become stronger in EU countries. Less agreement was shown for the improvement of the quality of air and water. Almost 55% of students disagreed with the statement that there will be less air and water pollution in 10 years at the first time point. However, at the second time point, only 50% disagreed, as if trust in EU environmental policies had slightly increased (see Figure 8).

As concerns attitudes to the EU, we asked the students where they see the advantages of the EU. We understand a stronger agreement with EU contributions in different policy areas as a stronger pro-European attitude. Almost 90% of the students completely agreed or agreed that it is good that the EU has common sets of rules and laws, as well as that the EU is beneficial for the economy of the member states (see Figure 9). While the added shares of those who completely agreed and agreed with these two statements grew slightly at the second time point, we could also detect a slight decrease in those who completely agreed with the statements.

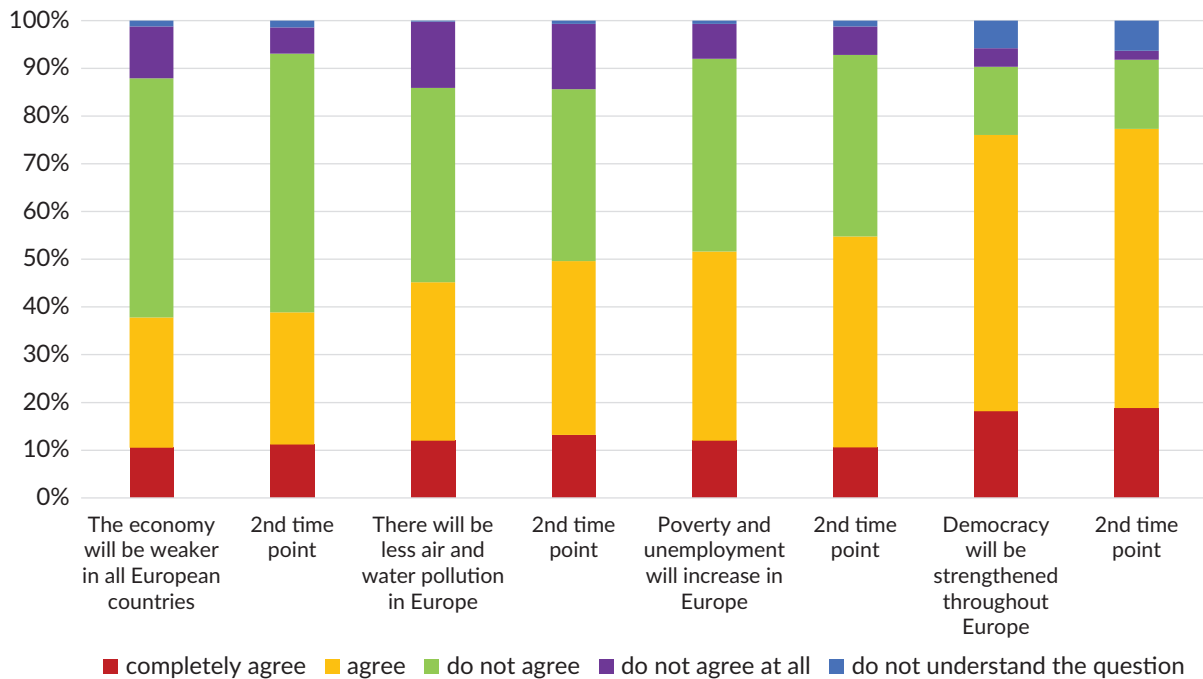


Figure 8. Future of Europe in 10 years: economy, pollution, unemployment, and democracy (y = answers in %).

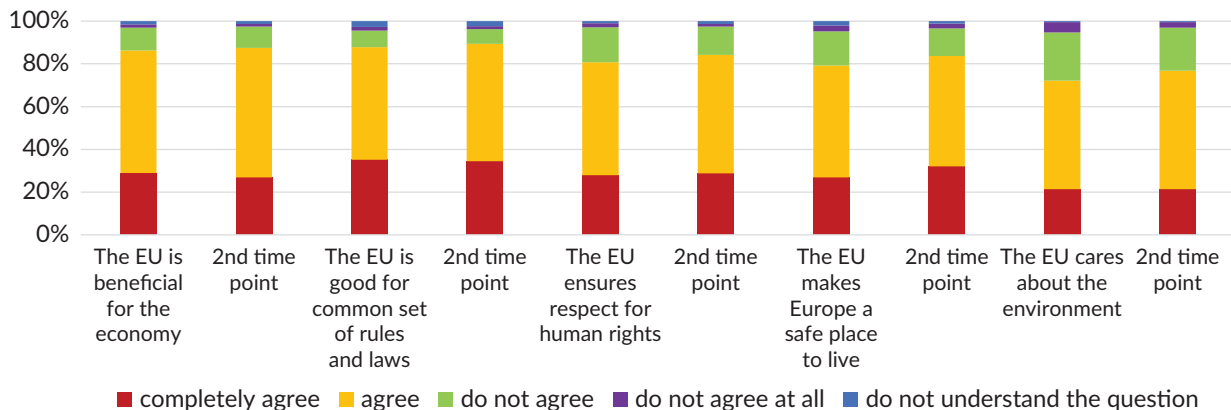


Figure 9. Advantages of the EU (y = answers in %).

Students also recognised other areas of the EU's contribution as advantages. Over 80% of the students completely agreed or agreed that the EU ensures respect for human rights and that the EU makes Europe a safe place to live. For both statements, the cumulative share of those who completely agreed and those who agreed, together with the share of those who completely agreed, increased at the second time point. Although only about 70% of the students recognised the contribution of the EU also in the area of care for the environment, the share of those who agreed with this statement rose at the second time point. When it comes to recognising the advantages of EU membership, we observe the impact of the EU project activities since the share of students who recognised these advantages increased at the second time point (see Figure 9).

Finally, we measured students' self-evaluation of their knowledge about the EU. We were interested in whether students would better assess their knowledge concerning different aspects of the EU after the

project activities. The focus here was on how students perceived the increase in their knowledge, not the *actual* increase in knowledge. They could evaluate their knowledge on a three-point scale: they agree they have knowledge about something, they partially agree they have knowledge, or they do not agree they have knowledge. We understand a decrease in students who say they do not have knowledge about a certain aspect of the EU as a positive impact of project activities. However, increased awareness of an issue may also lead to a self-evaluation that the topic is broader than first imagined and that their knowledge is not complete, in turn leading to an increase among those who claim they do not have knowledge or have partial knowledge.

The results show a clear decrease in the absence of knowledge and an increase in knowledge and partial knowledge for all aspects of the EU between the two time points. Students expressed the highest level of knowledge about the composition of the EU, whereby almost 90% knew something about the topic. A high share of knowledge was also expressed with regard to the history of the EU and even the characteristics of the integration of EU member states (see Figure 10).

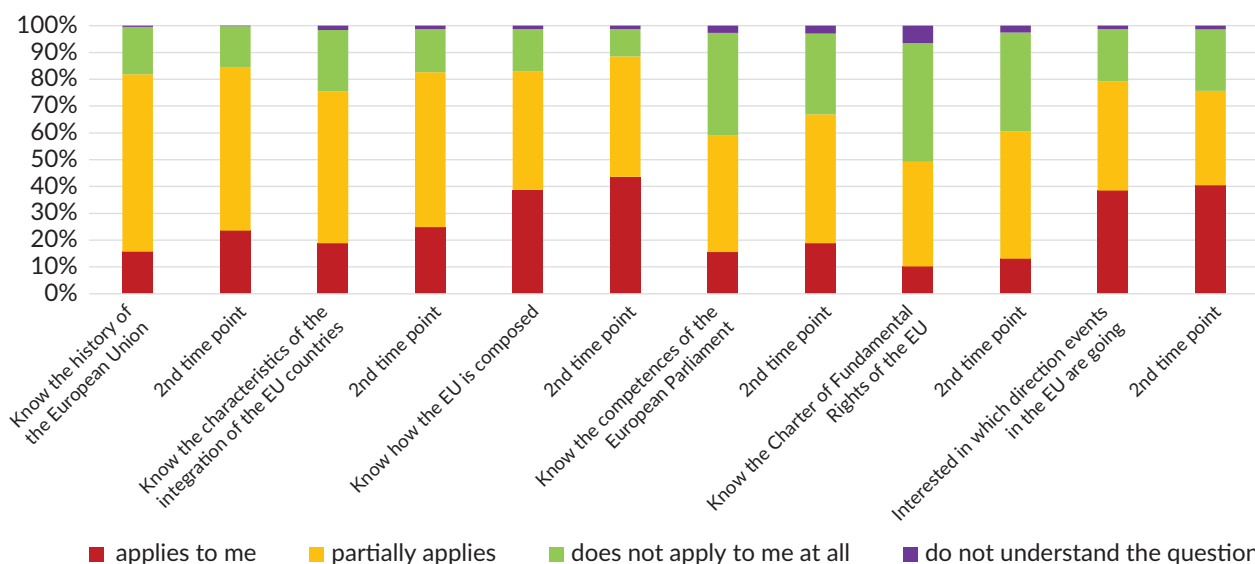


Figure 10. Knowledge of European topics (y = answers in %).

As expected, a smaller share of students expressed knowledge about more complex EU topics such as the competences of the European Parliament or even the Charter of the Fundamental Rights of the EU and international declarations (see Figure 10). Still, we were surprised that the project activities did not also lead to an increase in interest, not just knowledge. While the share of students who agreed they were interested in the future of the EU increased slightly from the first time point to the second one, the share of those who partially agreed with this statement decreased, and the share of those who said they were not interested also grew slightly (see Figure 10). It seems that after the project activities, some students who were partly interested became more interested and others less interested in the future of the EU.

7. Conclusion

Results of our survey show that students express a high level of European identity and positive attitudes to the EU. This share did not change much before and after the project activities. In some cases, such as with

the attitudes to feeling a part of Europe, the share of students who completely agreed with feeling part of Europe even decreased, or in the case of limitations on labour mobility, the agreement increased. Yet, when measuring the recognition of the advantages of EU membership, we observed an increase in second time point compared to the first time point in the share of students who agreed that the EU contributes to improvement in different areas like the protection of human rights, the economy, a safe place to live, and the protection of the environment. The clearest impact was evident with regard to self-evaluation about one's knowledge of EU issues, where the share of students who possessed knowledge about a certain aspect of the EU or had partial knowledge grew at the second time point. Nevertheless, we also note a slight increase among those who were not interested in the future of the EU at the second time point. We find several possible explanations for the survey results:

1. Students from partner schools involved in activities of the EU@Home project were generally more exposed to EU topics and thus already held high levels of pro-European attitudes. Namely, schools were involved in various EU projects and programmes, and the teaching staff were well trained to teach EU topics, even though during their studies most teaching staff did not have an opportunity to take courses on the EU (Novak et al., 2020). Still, schools with positive attitudes to EU projects are more likely to continuously participate in such activities.
2. The modest changes in results between the first and second time points show that our research findings are valid and robust. Although students participated in the survey twice, it is quite unlikely that students would remember the questions and answers from the first time point and repeat the answers in second time point. Further, for several variables we observed an increase of students answering the question and not choosing the option "I do not understand." The impact of project activities might not be one-dimensional. The students' increased knowledge may make them understand the issues better and, in some cases, even lead to a decrease in their pro-European attitudes (about the knowledge–attitudes relationship, see Šterman Ivančič & Štremfel, 2022; Štremfel & Šterman Ivančič, 2024).
3. Moreover, in the framework of the lectures, some topics were better explained to the students than others, and so with respect to particular issues the students' knowledge might not even improve. Here we should mention that the lecturers were different and had the freedom to select the topics they wished to talk about.
4. The project activities' clearest impact concerned the self-evaluation of knowledge about certain aspects of the EU. This shows that the impact of such project activities is stronger on knowledge than on identity or attitudes. To some extent, this was expected because knowledge is normally the most direct output of project activities and the easiest to gain and measure. The changes in identity and attitude represent outcomes or even goals of project activities that are more demanding and harder to achieve just with individual activities. To change identity and attitude, more permanent activities able to be included in civic education as opposed to one-year project activities are thus relevant.
5. Finally, we must not forget that when completing the survey, the students were not in a vacuum. Several political and social events took place, such as national elections in 2018 and European elections in 2019. Plus, students were exposed to different media, varying home environments, and even different school courses in which they might have received additional information that either strengthened or decreased their pro-European views. Accordingly, any changes that happened cannot be attributed to the project activities alone.

While research on elementary school students' attitudes to the EU is under-researched, different results reveal an interesting gap that warrants further investigation, particularly regarding young people's political participation in Europe. The presented results show that even though project activities may have the biggest impact on knowledge, the results are not so clear when it comes to the impact on identity, attitude, and interest. The implementers of future project activities should therefore consider incorporating some of the project activities introduced. The more permanent inclusion of EU-related topics and activities could produce a more noticeable impact on identity and attitudes as well. Our survey also has some limitations: the project activities were held only during a single school year, we had no control group in the survey, and no school included in the project activities was new to EU projects.

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Conflict of Interests

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