Attitudes Toward the European Union Among Bulgarian Tertiary Students

Thesis

Monika Delieva
S5445788

Supervised by Drs. Thijs de Zee

6 June 2025

Abstract

The future of the European Union (EU) increasingly relies on the attitudes and perceptions of its citizens. This is why this thesis examines the construction of attitudes toward EU integration among Bulgarian tertiary students. Previous research suggests that both utilitarian cost–benefit considerations and identity attachments shape EU attitudes, but fall short to qualitatively explore them in the context of Bulgarian youth. Using co-occurrence analysis and qualitative thematic analysis based on semi-structured interviews with five tertiary-level students, this study investigates how Bulgarian youth navigate diffuse and specific support for the EU, focusing on their expressions of national and European identity. The findings reveal a dynamic interplay between internalized democratic values, territorial identity attachments, and pragmatic considerations in shaping EU attitudes. Participants consistently express diffuse support for the EU, grounded in democratic principles, while specific support is more conditional and often hinges on the perceived alignment or tension between national and European identities. Moreover, generational divides surface as a key factor, with youth viewing older national frameworks as limiting and calling for national-level policy changes that better reflect their evolving identity needs.

Table of contents

Introduction

The future of the European Union relies heavily on citizen support for European integration. The era of elite-driven integration without public input has ended, now marked by increased referendums, the rise of Eurosceptic parties, and the politicization of EU issues (Hobolt and de Vries, 2016). Public perceptions of the EU are increasingly important, as mass political behavior - especially voting- shapes both EU integration and policy making (Gabel, 1998). Furthermore, the EU institutions have already recognized the importance of citizens of member states also seeing themselves as citizens of the Union. In fact, the 2001 white paper on European Governance (European Commission, 2001), which stressed the reinforcement of "European Identity" and the importance of shared values within the Union (Carey, 2002, p. 388). Laffan (1996) similarly states that most research suggests that the prospect of further integration lies in the EU's ability to create an European identity (Laffan, 1996). Does that still hold true today? While some individuals may feel a sense of belonging to a shared European identity, support for the European Union is not solely driven by such identification. As Hobolt and de Vries (2016) contend, public attitudes toward the EU are also shaped by utilitarian, benchmarking, and cue-taking approaches, each reflecting different conceptions of what the EU is and what it should offer. If the EU aims to deepen integration and increase democratic legitimacy, understanding the sources behind youth support or aversion is critical (Ilonski, 2009; Favero, 2021). Therefore, I argue that these approaches deserve closer scholarly attention, particularly when explored in the context of Bulgarian youth. Bulgaria's accession to the EU in 2007 marked a major milestone in the country's post-socialist transformation, providing a path toward democratic governance, liberal values, and economic modernization. For Bulgarian youth, the EU is not a theoretical project, but a tangible part of their lived reality, given they have lived most of their life being part of it (Filipova, 2003). Although the country's constitution enshrines liberal democratic principles (e.g., Articles 4, 6, and 17), promotes a free-market economy (Articles 19 and 20), and formally embraces the EU since 2007, yet youth political participation in the democratic process remains strikingly low. Post - electoral Eurobarometer results of the 2024 European elections reveal that the average youth voter turnout in Bulgaria was only 22% of those aged 15 - 24 voted, compared to 36% in the EU (average) (Eurobarometer, 2024). This suggests a significant lack of motivation among young Bulgarians to participate in the EU electoral process. Although turnout improves slightly in the 25 - 39 age group (33%), it still remains a lot lower than the EU average (46%) (Eurobarometer, 2023). And not only the formal electoral process shows poor political engagement of the youth: as of 2023,

a Gallup International survey shows the level of youth participation in any political protests is below 10%, and only 4% interact with political organizations (Kandilarov, 2023, p. 3). This issue raises several important concerns. First one of which is that it undermines the legitimacy of democratic institutions. Normatively, elections give voters an opportunity to hold their government accountable and choose fitting representatives, thus conferring legitimacy, which consequently delivers satisfaction with democracy for both "losers" and "winners" (Esaiasson, 2011; Plescia, 2020). Empirical evidence from Kostelka and Blais (2018) further confirms that voter turnout affects citizens' satisfaction and not the other way around. In other words, elections increase satisfaction with democracy among those who vote, and especially those who win the election (Kostelka and Blais, 2018; Plescia, 2020, p. 3). Secondly, low turnout exacerbates inequalities in representation. For example, the National Parliament of Bulgaria has historically had a relatively low proportion of young MPs — in the 49th National Assembly which was elected in 2023, about 5% of the members were under the age of 30, compared to Germany's 8.8% and Slovenia's 5.6% (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). This discrepancy ties further with the notion that "if you do not vote, you do not count," indicating that low youth participation in politics means that they have relatively little to expect from the government, as there is little incentive for politicians to focus on policies that benefit youth (Martin, 2012, p. 107). In addition, various studies point to the empirical fact that the outcomes of the political process are in favour of those who participate the most (see Macedo et al., 2005; Martin, 2012; Deželan, 2022). Thirdy, and most important for this study is the fact that low turnout is connected to lower support for the EU (Stockemer, 2011).

Given the need to analyse underlying attitudes of Bulgarian youth toward the EU, current identity concepts as national and supranational which are applied and currently dominate this research field (see Popivanov et.al., 2024; Nakova and Milenkova, 2023), which points to barriers to Europeanization. However, I argue that the conceptualization of identity in these frameworks is rigidly binary and territorially fixed, which limits a more nuanced understanding of youth orientations. This study instead adopts an alternative approach, analysing EU attitudes through the lens of territorial (attachment to national identity and/or European identity) and non-territorial attachments (democratic identity), which I believe offer better multidimensional understanding of the topic given the nuanced nature of both EU support and of identity attachments.

Having this in mind, with this study I aim to contribute to the empirical research on Bulgarian youth's perception of the EU by analyzing their attitudes toward the European Union. The central question guiding this study is: How are multilevel identities of youth in tertiary

education framed and elicited in reasons for support or opposition of Bulgaria's membership in the European Union? In other words, what are the underlying factors driving youth attitudes toward EU membership, with a specific focus on examining how identity-based considerations shape those reasons. In order to answer the research question the article is structured as follows. First, I will review previous research on attitudes toward the European Union. This will be followed by a theoretical framework that situates youth perspectives within broader patterns of political engagement and their identity attachments. Based on this framework and previous research, I will formulate a set of hypotheses regarding how and why Bulgarian youth may support or averse the EU. Secondly, I will describe the method of data collection, the tools and procedures used to collect and interpret the data. Afterward, I will present the results of the data analysis, key themes, which have emerged and are closely related to complement the analysis on youth attitudes toward the EU. This will be the basis of discussion following the findings. Finally, I will conclude the main insights and outline the study's limitations, which I will address as potential directions for future research.

Previous research on analyzing EU attitudes and theoretical framework

An important source of data to start with is the review of Bulgarian youth' attitudes toward the EU which was executed by the 2024 Youth Survey[1]. It illustrates varying levels of support for the European Union among Bulgarians between 16 and 30 years old compared to the EU average for that age group (see Table 1). 33% of Bulgarians express full support for the EU and its current functioning, which is slightly above the EU average of 31%. A notably higher proportion (40% in Bulgaria compared to 32% in the EU27) favor the EU but are dissatisfied with how it operates. Support for EU membership remains strong (amounting to 73%), but there is criticism to be addressed toward its current policies or effectiveness. Additionally, 20% of Bulgarians are skeptical of the EU but still open to changing their opinion if substantial reforms occur, which resembles the opinion of the average EU of 21%. Aversion to the EU is relatively low in Bulgaria, with only 4% expressing outright rejection, compared to 6% across the EU27. Furthermore, Bulgarian respondents demonstrate lower levels of uncertainty - only 2% indicated

---

[1] Interviews with EU citizens, aged 16 to 30: EU27 – 25 863 | BG – 1 030 Fieldwork: 25.9 – 3.10.2024 Methodology: online interviews (Eurobarometer Fact Sheet Bulgaria, 2024)

that they did not know their stance, and 1% preferred not to answer, compared to 8% and 2% in the EU27, respectively.

Statement	EU27	Bulgaria
I approve of the EU and the way it currently works	*31*	*33*
I tend to approve of the EU, but not the way it currently works	*32*	*40*
I am rather skeptical about the EU, but I could change my mind if the way it works really changed	*21*	*20*
I am opposed to the idea of the EU altogether	*6*	*4*
Don't know	*8*	*2*
Prefer not to answer	*2*	*1*

Table 1. Support for the EU, Bulgaria; Q4. Which of the following statements about the European Union is closest to your opinion? (%) (data reported directly form EP Youth Survey, 2024)

Furthermore Mitev and Kovacheva (2017) explore in their research[2] that Bulgarian youth, at the time of the research, generally maintained a pro-European stance, with limited support for Euroscepticism, although discontent with the transition and economic challenges often led to the belief that "nothing has changed," and reflecting criticism toward national governance[3]. The

---

[2] The target group consisted of young people aged 14–27 years, with a final sample of 1,018 valid interviews that closely mirrored Bulgaria's demographic structure (Mitev & Kovacheva 2017, p.18).

[3] Their critical attitudes interfere and lead to a general political scepticism (Mitev and Kovacheva, 2017, p. 144); Furthermore they point out that "Almost one third of respondents do not feel that anything has

most pro-European youth are those with tertiary education and students, who form a European identity that enhances, rather than replaces, their national identity (Mitev and Kovacheva, 2017). Additionally, they share that attitudes toward European values are becoming more democratic, moving away from previous distortions, such as overemphasis on economic values (Mitev & Kovacheva 2017, p. 164). This pro - European stance of the youth, however, has been shifting with time, with research by Filipova (2023)[4] showing that an overwhelming proportion of 70% of the 18-24 age group and 72% of the 25-34 age group think that the EU "dictates to us what to do without Bulgaria having the influence to change that". She notes this is an unexpected skepticism, given that they have spent their adult lives fully integrated within the European Union and have had ample opportunities for travel, work, and study across member states. Additionally, Filipova (2023) notes that lukewarm support for democracy is observed, with over half of the respondents from the 18-24 age group being most likely to agree, compared to all other age groups, that having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections is good for Bulgaria (Filipova, 2023). This can be translated into potential weakness in democratic values attachments among Bulgarian youth, which could be tied in relation to democratic deficits and nativist attitudes. Yeung (2021) argues that persistence of Euroscepticism may reflect weaker democratic attachments - manifested in anti-immigration sentiments and democratic deficits -rather than direct responses to demographic change. Thus, he attributed findings to public misperceptions to be caused by limited intergroup contact, both of which hinder the development of democratic norms such as tolerance, inclusion, and respect for diversity (Yeung, 2021). Evidence further points out that citizens with exclusive national identities tend to be the most eurosceptic, whereas those with inclusive, multiple identities that incorporate supranational elements are generally more supportive of European integration (Abts, Heerwegh, & Swyngedouw, 2009). Furthermore, European identity strongly reduces euroscepticism at both individual and country levels, some people who identify with the EU may still hold sceptical attitudes, pooling toward categorization of different types of eurosceptics: critical Europeans who seek EU reforms and adamant eurosceptics who reject European integration altogether (Weßels, 2007).

---

changed. The EU has become part of the general disappointment with the transition for quite a few young people in Bulgaria, too (Mitev and Kovacheva, 2017, p. 157).

[4] The paper analyzed sociological trends in Bulgaria, based on public opinion polling conducted by GLOBSEC in March 2023. The survey, which utilized computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI), was carried out on a representative sample of 1,000 Bulgarian respondents. The sampling method employed was stratified multistage random sampling, ensuring that the respondent profiles accurately reflected Bulgaria's demographic characteristics, including gender, age, education, place of residence, and settlement size (Filipova, 2023).

Education is also marked as a cornerstone of EU support. Youth with higher education levels may be more inclined to support EU membership, thereby highlighting the need to address educational background as a key component of youth attitudes toward the EU (Hakhverdian et al., 2013). This happens through means of equipment of citizens to compete better in integrated markets (Gabel and Palmer, 1995). Education further enhances mobility and transnational skills, which consequently promotes EU support (Baumann, 1998) and advances cosmopolitan worldviews, which decreases nationalism and ethnic exclusionism (Coenders and Scheepers, 2003; Hjerm, 2010; Hakhverdian et al., 2013). To extend this line of reasoning Tanasoiu and Colonescu (2008)'s research shows that support for EU membership is mainly driven by perceived individual benefits. The average Bulgarian appears to prioritize non-economic reasons for wanting to join the EU, with some of these reasons - such as the perceived benefits for future generations - being at least as important as those related to the nation's economy, rather than focusing solely on immediate returns (Tanasoiu & Colonescu, 2008). Similarly, Gabel and Palmer (1995) underscores the importance of economic factors like income, human capital, and proximity to the EU in shaping public support for integration. Their study indicated that support is ultimately a result of policy appraisal, reflecting how citizens perceive the EU's impact on their own and their country's broader interests (Gabel and Palmer, 1995). Building on this, more recent research highlights that these perceptions extend beyond economic factors to include broader evaluations of national circumstances. Specifically in Western Balkan candidate states, citizens' support for the EU is significantly influenced by their overall perceptions of national economic and political conditions. More positive perceptions of these circumstances generally translate into higher support for the EU, while negative evaluations correspond with lower support. This indicates that both individual-level economic factors and broader national assessments interact to shape public attitudes toward European integration (Lubbers, Haverland and Zhelyazkova, 2025).

Collectively, these studies show that attitudes toward the EU are shaped by the interaction of democratic values, educational background, utilitarian considerations, and identity-based attachments. However, existing academic research lacks a detailed examination of the reasons for the nuanced results of support for the European Union specifically on Bulgarian youth. Furthermore, a concerning remark is lack of in-depth qualitative research specifically examining how identity-based considerations shape Bulgarian youth voters' perceptions of the European Union. It identifies a research gap, which I address through an investigation of the roots of attitudes toward the EU and the mechanisms through which these

attitudes are evaluated, particularly by drawing on both utilitarian and identity-based approaches.

To tackle this gap effectively, one needs to first clarify the meaning of the concept of support. Although it may appear straightforward, definitional disputes have plagued the field (See Boomgaarden, Schuck, de Vreese and Elenbaas, 2016), due to the EU's multilevel and multidimensional functioning. Thus, before an analysis, I argue there is a need for further clarification on the nature (or quality) of support that shapes attitudes toward the EU and the approach one takes to analyse them.

Support is inherently nuanced and rarely absolute or uniformly distributed, which is also further proven by the previous approaches to analyzing this strand of research. Historically, attitudes toward the European Union have been characterized by varying forms of support, typically distinguished as either specific (object-based) support for particular policies or diffuse (structural) support for the EU as an institution (see Gabel,1998; Easton, 1975). Easton (1975) conceived diffuse support as a basic 'reservoir of favorable attitudes or good will that helps members to accept or tolerate outputs to which they are opposed or the effects of which they see as damaging to their wants' (Easton 1965, p. 273; Ares et.al., 2016). However, specific support is more niche and lies in its relationship to the satisfactions that members of a system feel they obtain from the perceived outputs and performance of the political authorities. It centers on individuals' assessments of decisions, policies, actions, or the overall conduct of current authorities, based on their perceived causal relationship between these actions and their own demands, needs, and wants - and the resulting alignment or misalignment between authority behavior and public expectations. Furthermore, individuals may express their support for the EU through either affective attachment or utilitarian evaluation (Lindberg and Scheingold, 1970; Boomgaarden et al., 2011).

While previous research has largely conceptualized public attitudes toward the EU through utilitarian frameworks by focusing on perceived individual and national economic costs and benefits (see Gabel, 1998; McLaren, 2002; Tanasoiu & Colonescu, 2008), this study adopts a specific theoretical lens through the theory of social identity. It reinforces that individuals define themselves through group memberships, categorizing themselves and others into social groups. Even minimal and arbitrary group distinctions can trigger in-group favoritism, as shown in Tajfel (1974)'s minimal group paradigm, where positive distinctiveness (maintaining a favorable image of one's group in comparison to others) drives both preferential treatment of the in-group and negative evaluations of out-groups, independently of material interests (Tajfel, 1974). Identity, defined as such, is blurred with collective identity, national identity (Gellner,

2009), democratic identity, European identity, etc., all of which emerge from the same underlying self-categorization dynamics and imagined boundary construction (Anderson, 2006; Vit, 2020). Accordingly, I assume an national identity definition that emphasizes unity through sovereignty, community, and religious plurality within a temporally extended narrative (Bell, 2003; Vit, 2020). Bulgaria, however, is both a European nation and a presidential democracy, adding both democratic identity, defined as identification with a stable democratic polity, its rights, procedures, and mutual recognition among citizens (Wiensner, 2024). This means that European identity also emerges as a socially constructed supranational community shaped by individual attachments and macro-level patterns of meaning (Wiesner, 2024); however, it remains anchored to a geographic conception of territory, defined through the collective boundaries of the member states.

At a first glance one can assume a simple expectation: that respondents use feelings of national identity to form their attitudes towards the EU, which are closely related to the direct benefits they gain from the EU membership. An example for a direct benefit will be citizens deriving varying economic benefits and losses from EU membership depending on their ability to exploit the economic opportunities created by market liberalization (Gabel, 1998). Such approach is famously known as the utilitarian approach, discussed also by Hobolt and de Vries (2016), where they mention public support for European integration was dominated by utilitarian explanations of support based on an individual cost-benefit analysis (Hobolt and de Vries, 2016). They further mention that in poorer member states, to which classification Bulgaria falls under, economic considerations dominate and are more likely to support a deeper European integration. Coming from this, a simple assumption is that there will be overall EU support expressed by the participants (H1). Contrary to this approach, however, Hobolt and de Vries (2016) state that European integration nowadays is not even closely connected to the single market and its economic benefits, but also about loss of national sovereignty, that potentially erodes national self-determination and blurs boundaries between distinct national communities (Carey, 2002; Hobolt and de Vries, 2016)[5]. Existing work thus documents both utilitarian and emerging identity‑based drivers of EU attitudes but stops short of examining how different dimensions of identity approaches jointly shape EU attitudes among Bulgarian youth. To fill in

---

[5] There is a vast amount of literature that discusses the relationship of national identity and conceivement of European identity, mentioned in their work. Some notable research is the Hooghe and Marks (2004, 2005), which demonstrates that individuals who conceive their national identity as exclusive are more likely to be Eurosceptic, than those who have multiple nested identities(Hobolt and de Vries, 2016). In the paper it is also discussed Mc Laren (2002, 2006)'s studies, which point out the Euroscepticism is closely related to a general hostility toward other cultures, such as negative attitudes toward minority groups and immigrants (Hobolt and de Vries, 2016))

this gap, I hypothesize that young people with overlapping identities bonded through a strong non-teritorial attachment, though more nuanced, have higher overall (diffuse) support for the EU compared to those whose identities are territorially attached (H2). This aligns with Tanasoiu and Colonescu's (2008) argument that the positive association with 'democratic values' suggests individuals who endorse democratic principles are more supportive of EU integration (Tanasoiu and Colonescu, 2008), even if this support is not explicitly linked to a sense of territorial belonging. Lastly, I hypothesize that complementarity between Bulgarian and European identities will be associated with stronger support for specific support (H3), in comparison to identity inconsistency. This is justified by the notion that specific support for the EU is often contingent on whether individuals perceive EU membership as aligned with, rather than opposed to, national interests (McLaren, 2002; Gabel, 1998). In other words, individuals who experience identity complementarity will be more inclined to view the EU as a practical extension of their national identity and interests.

Methodological approach

As past research suggest there are multiple aspects of EU support, therefore in order to investigate the hypothesized relationships discussed above and the research question, the dependent and independent variables are defined as such: The dependent variable is Bulgarian youth's support or aversion toward the EU, operationalized through measures of both specific policy support/ aversion and diffuse support/aversion. The independent variable is Bulgarian youth's identity attachment, categorized as territorial (national and European) or non-territorial (democratic). This is based on participants' descriptions of their sense of belonging and identity in relation to the EU.

To assess further this frame of reference, we first need to define the understanding of "youth" because there is still a lack of an official, unambiguous definition of young people. The UN uses 15 - 24 and the EU 15 - 29 (Perovic, n.d.; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2008). No single definition captures both electoral eligibility and available data filters for Bulgaria. Since voting rights begin at age 18 in Bulgaria (Bulgaria – How to Vote, n.d.) and most statistical data align with the EU's upper bound, I adopt an 18 - 29 age range.

In this study, I adopted a qualitative research approach, with interviews serving as the main method of data collection. This method was chosen because it enables the participants to

bring up perspectives and concerns that may not have been anticipated by the researcher but are nonetheless vital to exploring the research topic in depth (Kuada, 2012, p. 94). In other words, insights are allowed in the analysis which will otherwise be unintendedly omitted. This is also the main reason the structure of the interviews will be semi-structured. For the purpose of in- depth analysis of the sample size is 5 respondents within tertiary education, which provides enough and yet in-depth data responses to answer the research question. The sampling technique used was a convenience sampling, where the volunteers were only filtered through age and whether they are currently following a tertiary education. This approach is efficient, and ensures that the participants are voluntarily sharing data (Gills, 2020). The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 24, and their academic backgrounds were diverse, including Scandinavian language and culture, philosophy, mathematics, technology and information, as well as international relations. They were asked a set of structured questions which directly tackle this frame of reference that was written a priori. It included the following questions: "What is the EU for you"; "What are your thoughts on the EU?" Why do you support Bulgaria's membership in the EU, why not?"; "Some people feel negatively because Bulgaria has lost part of its sovereignty since joining the EU. What is your take on this argument?"; "Political collectivity refers to groups or communities that share common political ideas, goals, or interests. This collectivity can be based on two types of identity: Territorial identity (connected to belonging to a certain country or region) and more personal identity (based on individual factors - e.g., social). Having this in mind, how would you describe yourself in relation to your sense of belonging to the European Union?; "Based on what you've shared, how would you describe your identity when analyzing or participating in political processes?" and if applicable the participants were asked a follow-up question "Would you say these identities are mutually exclusive, or do they complement each other?". Lastly, unless discussed the following question was asked "Does your identity matter more in evaluating the applications of the EU in Bulgaria, or economic considerations you think are more important?" in order to clearly indicate one approach in explaining the EU (see Appendix 1).

I grounded my analysis of Bulgarian youth's EU attitudes in a qualitative approach that incorporated both inductive and deductive strategies. I placed particular emphasis on exploring how expressions of identity attachments and policy attitudes emerged from participant narratives. Afterward I translated and transcribed the interview data and carried out the initial coding process manually, through which I was guided by two key considerations.

First, I adopted a deductive approach, drawing on predefined thematic categories aligned with the study's hypotheses: expressions of non-territorial and territorial identity

attachments; complementarity or tension between national and European identities; and manifestations of specific and diffuse support or aversion toward the EU. These categories allowed me to examine the themes in both systematic and comparative manner. To materialize this I conducted a co-occurrence analysis that examined the frequency and context in which different codes appeared together within the same segments of participant narratives. The hypothesis testing translates to the extent to which identity attachments and utilitarian considerations were interlinked in participants' line of evaluation.

Secondly, I employed an inductive thematic analysis to systematically identify and interpret recurring patterns in participants' perspectives on European integration. Thematic analysis is particularly well-suited for exploring subjective experiences and constructing meaning from qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). I chose this approach because it allows for a flexible yet rigorous examination of textual data, which enables to include in the findings and analysis themes that are grounded in participants' own words rather than being imposed by pre-existing theoretical frameworks (Boyatzis, 1998; Holloway and Todres, 2003; Nowell, Norris, White and Moules, 2017). This kept the findings grounded in the participants' own perspectives and made the overall analysis more relevant and precise.

Findings

H1 and H2: Overall (diffuse) EU support

Table 2 presents the co-occurrence of identity types with full and partial diffuse support, and aversion to support for the EU. Participants expressing non-territorial identity attachments, especially those rooted in internalized alignment of democratic norms showed a greater tendency to express full diffuse support for the EU (3 co-occurrences for overall non-territorial identity attachments; coefficient = 0.20[6]). Looking at the narratives of the sample size, the analysis operates at the level of individual self-positioning within broader discourses of identity construction. It conceptualizes democratic identity as a source of self-categorization that transcends territorial and national boundaries, even though "democracy" and "identity" signify different dimensions of belonging. To illustrate that one participant shared " I would rather share

---

[6] co-occurrence coefficient measures the strength of association between two codes based on how frequently they overlap within the same context (like a paragraph or a quotation). A coefficient of **0** indicates no co-occurrence between the codes.A coefficient of **1** signifies that the codes always co-occur when either is applied (Leydesdorff and Vaughan, 2006).

my values with someone from West Africa than with a tyrant in Eastern Europe". Their articulation discloses non-territorial identity attachment through affinity to internalized democratic principles rather than in partisanship toward shared geography. Another participant delivered an answer that paralleled the same line of reasoning " To believe in what you believe in, to have the freedom to choose your own religion and values, and to be able to determine your own life path, without interfering with the life paths of other people in society, but having the right to make decisions and take responsibility. This is what I understand about the values of Europe. I strongly hope that Europe will fight for this too". This evokes further salience of democratic identity, which is constructed around principles of individual agency, tolerance, and mutual respect. Democratic values are not perceived as simply imposed by political institutions but are deeply embedded in their aspirations for personal autonomy and social coexistence.

In contrast, territorial identity types, namely national identity and European identity were more frequently associated with both partial diffuse support (1 co-occurrence; coefficient = 0.33), and full diffuse support (1 co-occurrence, coefficient =0.11). One respondent stated this conditional support stating: " There are things that I think should be kept as they are, but there are also many things that should not be… because in my opinion, we should at least keep something of our own". Such insistence remains susceptible to perceptions of strong national attachment by reference to "own".

Notably, aversion to diffuse support did not co-occur with any identity type in this study, which infers that explicit rejection of diffuse EU legitimacy was uncommon within the sample size. Although the pattern is not conclusive, in this study it points to a tendency where individuals who express non-territorial identity attachments are more likely to support the EU at a foundational level based on shared internalised democratic values. In addition to this, individuals who hold primarily territorial attachments tend to express more conditional support, depending on whether it is conflicted or aligned with perceived national and European interests (both tied to a specific geographical region).

Identity Type	Full Support	Diffuse	Partial Support	Diffuse	Diffuse Aversion
Democratic Identity - non territorial	2 (0.18)		0		0
European identity - territorial	1 (0.11)		0		0
National identity- territorial	0		1 (0.33)		0
Overall non-territorial identity attachments	3 (0.20)		0		0
Overall territorial identity attachments	1 (0.08)		1 (0.25)		0

Table 2. Co-occurrence of Identity types with forms of diffuse support and aversion toward the EU (n = total number of quotations coded for each identity type; values in parentheses indicate co-occurrence coefficients)

H3: Specific support

Tentative support is found for the hypothesis that territorial identity complementarity is linked to greater specific support for the EU (see Table 3). The data points to an implicit correlation between complementary identity framings and expressions of instrumental support,

and weak co-occurrence between the two (see parentheses). Specifically, participants who perceive their Bulgarian and European identities as compatible expressed support for the EU in

terms of tangible benefits, such as mobility and market integration. One respondent, who expressed ambiguity between complementarity of the two identities, shared "The Schengen area and open borders bring a lot of freedom in terms of not having to queue when you want to go on holiday to Greece". This is a particularly pragmatic recognition of the importance of European cooperation through instrumental evaluation of EU membership, wherein specific support is conditioned on the ability of the EU to deliver concrete tangible benefits. Furthermore, another participant noted "Of course, one of the most basic criticisms we can all have is that the EU should digitise a little more." which I interpret to stem from attentive means toward improving the EU administrative functioning.

Tension between different identities appeared more frequently in relation to specific policy aversion. Interestingly, when European and Bulgarian identities are seen as misaligned or in conflict, specific support tends to be less pronounced. One participant, who expressed that the two are exclusionary identities, further indicated "The European Union is perhaps not as reliable as it once was. (...) It's difficult to make certain decisions, since, as we agreed, it's an alliance of many different countries with different policies". This situates the EU not as a cohesive supranational community but rather as a contemporary fragmented alliance, which in turn shows views that European identity is not a stable source of belonging. However, the co-occurrence coefficients ranging from 0.06 to 0.14 reveal a relatively weak to moderate association between identity framing and specific support, so these relationships should be interpreted with caution. Therefore, I consider it essential to conduct an additional thematic interpretative analysis.

EU and Bulgarian identities	Support for Specific Support	Aversion of Specific Support
are complementary (n=10)	3 co-occurrences (0.14)	0
remain in ambiguous in relation to one another (n=2)	1 (0.06)	0
trigger tension between one another (n=7)	1 (0.06)	2 co-occurrences (0.12)

Table 3. *Co-occurrence of identity framings with specific support and aversion to the EU (n = total number of quotations coded for each identity; values in parentheses indicate co-occurrence coefficients)*

Inductive thematic findings

Diverging Views on preservation of culture, the Eurozone, and Erasmus+

Across the interviews contrasting views on the preservation of Bulgarian culture within the EU elicited through opposite means. One respondent emphasized on a perceived neglect of Europe's cultural diversity specifically in policymaking stating that "the general disregard for the cultural element does not contribute to the implementation of ideal policies." Conversely, another participant framed EU membership as a protective mechanism for national identity, asserting that "Bulgaria is better able to preserve its traditions and identity within the European Union than outside of it," with further identifying internal political conflicts to be the primary threat to cultural heritage, rather than a targeted EU omission of such.

Unsurprisingly, given the recent internal political developments on the topic of accepting the EU currency (see Vassileva, 2025), attitudes toward the Eurozone that were expressed were further polarizing. Some participants expressed strong support, citing institutional trust in the European Central Bank and potential many economic benefits such as increased foreign

investment and ease of market access: "I am strongly in favor" and "I believe that the European Central Bank is one of the best-functioning major banks in the world". Another participant indicated that the issue lies rather in political tensions in accepting the EU currency - "the eurozone is not an economic issue in Bulgaria, but a political one…", and added that "Europe really needs to prove [itself]… as well as being united in legislative projects, it must also be united economically, and we must start to behave as one economy". Statements which expres full aversion on the level of specific support were also present "I don't support Bulgaria's participation in the eurozone, as I believe that we have not yet reached the stage of our development", where youth specific support can be withdrawn when further European integration is perceived as misaligned with national developmental trajectories and that Bulgaria is perceived as not yet mature to enter European ones.

In stark contrast to the polarized opinions on the Eurozone and cultural preservation, the Erasmus+ programme received unequivocal support across all participants. Respondents praised the initiative's role in its unmatched ability to improve their mobility and their personal development. This was reflected in comments like "You have to take advantage of all the opportunities that the European Union can offer you through its biggest programme, Erasmus+". Furthermore, one participant articulated "I have developed part of my philosophy thanks to the fact that I have been able to connect with people". This particular negotiation of identity is grounded in intergroup contact, not just in utilitarian considerations, and points to a discussion that attitudes toward the EU are more than just cost-benefit calculations.

Generational conflicts

Furthermore, the theme of generational conflict emerged as an undercurrent in participants' narratives, namely the relation to perceptions of national identity, political power, and the European Union's policy reach. Three respondents specifically articulated a sense of disconnect and tension between younger and older generations in Bulgaria, both in divergence in societal values and in general access to political influence. One participant critiqued the lack of targeted youth-oriented policymaking through stating "There are no youth policies, only general policies. The most powerful youth policy is to have a strong economy [for us][7]." Another respondent attributed the limitations of national identity discourse to older generations - "Unfortunately, people in Bulgaria are not only divided by gender, but also by national identity,

---

[7] To give more context the answer continues as such: "There, young people can develop peacefully and not be exploited by a range of factors, so that we can be freer. In other words, if you want jobs for young people. Be the system, make it better, and it will be easier to "take"".

which is actually limited to older people". A perceived generational divide seems to emerge between them and older age groups in how identity is constructed and exercised particularly in the political arena, with older generations seen by participants through the lens of gatekeepers of more traditional values, and they are consequently seen to be the one who shape legislation and public narratives. Interestingly, the description of the Schengen membership of Bulgaria was also framed as a generational value, where European integration become a site of contestation between younger and older people - "Schengen is one of the young people's values that, when taken away, we will feel as a personal attack, while other age groups simply do not know whether it is a priority".

Discussion

Across the sample, the findings support H1. There was a consistent expression of diffuse EU support, with no instances of aversion to diffuse support found among the coded quotations (see Table 2). Participants articulated full foundational agreement with the EU project, and even further they put emphasis on respect for democratic values, their personal freedoms, and shared norms, with notable rejection of economic reasoning in their line of argumentation on overall support. Notably, even participants who expressed critique of certain EU policies or inefficiencies in the institutional design did not extend this critique further to the EU's legitimacy as a political union. These patterns affirm the continued pro-European orientation of Bulgarian youth observed in the prior research of Mitev & Kovacheva (2017) and the EU Youth Survey (2024), and show that being part of the EU is just an accepted part of Bulgarian young people's political outlooks.

Furthermore, the findings tentatively support H3. As seen in Table 3, participants who framed their Bulgarian and European identities as complementary expressed greater specific support for the EU, particularly with regard to tangible benefits such as Shengen mobility, better economic opportunities, and better opportunities for socialization thanks to Erasmus+.

In contrast, identity tension (i.e., perceiving the two identities as conflicting) was associated with higher aversion to specific support. This is in alignment with Hobolt and de Vries' utilitarian approach, where support is closely tied to well-perceived policy performance, and with theories of identity complementarity, which posit that dual identification enhances perceived congruence between national and EU-level goals (see Carey, 2002; Abts, Heerwegh, & Swyngedouw, 2009). It can therefore be cautiously hypothesized that participants' practical

assessments of the EU were shaped by how well they could reconcile their national and European identities. Further inference can be made that the debate is not centered on whether Bulgaria should be part of the EU, but rather on how EU membership can be used in a way that better benefits young people themselves - "... As I mentioned earlier, this lack of flexibility and ability to make quick decisions is not particularly useful for us" or "In other words, if you want jobs for young people. Be the system, make it better, and it will be easier to 'take' [from it]." These statements are further in line with Hakhverdian et al. (2013) and Coenders and Scheepers (2003) arguments that young people in tertiary education are more likely to see the EU as an opportunity for mobility and personal development and in return support it. I analyse these statements to reflect conditional specific support, which is tied in a utilitarian logic of EU support, and confirm that, as theorized by Hobolt and de Vries (2016) and Tanascou and Colonescu (2008), perceived benefits - particularly economic and developmental - are a primary source of public support for the EU in newer member states. There could be a number of possible explanations for why participants expressed more critical views when discussing specific EU policies compared to their overall support for the EU, one of which I argue is due to the fact that specific policies are more easily evaluated through a pragmatic lens that aligns with utilitarian considerations.

I further argue that my thematic analysis made evident a dynamic in which participants' support for the EU is contingent on the degree to which EU policies and narratives align with their existing identity attachments. This emerged especially in discussions about Eurozone integration, where participants' evaluations of potential membership often began with identity considerations rather than purely utilitarian cost-benefit analyses. For example, some participants expressed strong support for joining the Eurozone by referring to trust in the European Central Bank and economic benefits for Bulgaria, but others perceived Eurozone membership as an inappropriate or premature policy given Bulgaria's perceived "unreadiness." Notably, these evaluations were often framed through usage of collective pronouns such as "we are not ready", "we must start...", "we will be..." indicating that participants viewed Eurozone accession as a matter that directly implicates their ingroup (Bulgaria) rather than as an individual or purely economic decision. This identity framing was also evident in generational references, where participants expressed concerns or hopes using similar collective language "we will feel..." and "for us" also referring to generational in-grouping of young people. I interpret these findings to suggest that motivations for supporting or opposing EU policies like Eurozone membership are rooted in collective identity attachments rather than stemming solely from a utilitarian calculus of economic benefits and costs. This aligns with identity-based theories of

European integration, such as those proposed by Citrin and Sides (2004), which argue that identity attachment can shape attitudes toward supranational institutions by influencing whether and how citizens perceive the EU as serving their group's interests. Coming from this, the presence of ingroup-outgroup language ("we are not ready" vs. an implied "they are ready") I analyze through a sense of bounded solidarity, where evaluations of EU policies are filtered through perceived group belonging which positions European identity to be not fully inclusive for everyone; rather, it competes with a strong national identity that conditions and even averse support for specific EU projects. To extend this argument, earlier studies suggest that public support is greatly shaped by economic benefits, human capital, and proximity to the EU (Gabel and Palmer, 1995), as well as by experiences of mobility and transnational competencies (Baumann, 1998), the findings of this study reveal that Bulgarian youth frame their support for specific EU projects (for instance Erasmus+) as extensions of national opportunities rather than threats to sovereignty. This supports the notion of a utilitarian logic proposed by Gabel (1998) and Baumann (1998), as participants did not explicitly employ identity-based language in their reasoning. But more interesting is that Erasmus+ was generally not perceived to challenge any national concerns, which reinforces the interpretation that a utilitarian rationale which is focused on practical and tangible benefits rather than identity concerns, makes sense in this context. Coming from this I infer that specific support for EU projects is most robust, and thus evaluated through utilitarian logic when perceived as complementing rather than challenging national identity narratives.

In contrast to Filipova (2023), this study did not reveal strong anti-EU sentiments or portrayals of the EU as an authoritarian entity, although expressed support of participants did not preclude the existence of a national identity, which the study of Hobolt and de Vries (2016) implicitly points a correlation to. Although it is important to note that some participants' critical remarks regarding certain EU policies - combined with their desire for more flexible and responsive institutions, can be introduced as soft Eurosceptics who seek reform and improvement of the EU rather than outright rejection (Weßels, 2007). Rather surprisingly, most participants expressed deeply internalized commitments to democratic values (see Table 2). Since participants did not adopt consistently strictly utilitarian or identity-based logic of support for EU membership, they intricately negotiated both economic and identity-based considerations and embodied what I term a "strategic" approach to the opportunities and resources available by the EU. This is evidenced by participant statements such as: "To preserve Bulgaria as a state, we must work in the interests of the state and the nation within the European Union," and "I believe that they are the most important thing that defines us and our future, and I think that the

more categorically we defend good values, the better we will be economically". This also marks less of a binary relation between utilitarian benefit and identity attachments since participants did not fit into a single logic of support but negotiated between both when evaluating different aspects of EU membership, as pointed out with internalized collective identity language. I will challenge this by stating that this line of reasoning can also be situated within a utilitarian framework with a thinner definition if one considers that the participants' strategic evaluation, still ultimately reflects a pragmatic assessment of benefits, even if framed through identity considerations, however internalized identity language seem to put of the startpoint of evaluation on how it can benefit "us" within a frame of collectivity rather than pure individual perception of benefit, even within participants which expressed complementarity between national and European identity, but especially when the EU policy directly hinders national sovereignty.

Lastly, in addition to findings of Favero (2020) on generational differences in EU support among Polish youth, and those of Cichocki (2011) that Europeanisation does introduce new opportunities but does not always eliminate pre-existing national frameworks, my findings add modestly to literature on understanding generational tensions within Bulgarian youth attitudes toward the EU. Answers confirmed that despite the emergence of new institutional and ideological pathways opened by Europeanisation, traditional boundaries shaped by older generations continue to influence national identity narratives. The results align with the idea that enduring national frameworks remain a significant factor, even as Europeanisation progresses. More importantly, however, participants framed these frameworks as contradictory, rather than complementary, to one another with examples being: "...not only divided by gender, but also by national identity, which is actually limited to older people", " …while other age groups simply do not know whether it is a priority" . These divisions are indicative of the youth in this study to seek national-level policy interventions that acknowledge and integrate newer frameworks, enabling them to navigate their identities and values within an evolving European context. It is important to note that these findings should be interpreted prudently due to the limited sample size and the qualitative nature of this study. However, given the consistency of these observations with prior literature (Favero, 2020; Cichocki, 2011), it remains a valuable contribution to understanding this generational relationship.

Conclusion

To conclude, my literature review showed that despite progress in analyzing youth attitudes toward the European Union, the question of how identity constructions influence both diffuse and specific support remains underexplored in the Bulgarian context. More specifically, the relationship between multilevel identity attachments and perceptions of EU legitimacy on the one hand and specific EU support on the other remains unclear. To better understand and explain Bulgarian youth attitudes toward the EU, I conducted a co-occurrence analysis and qualitative interview-based analysis of youth in tertiary education. In summary, it set out to answer the following research question: How are multilevel identities of youth in tertiary education framed and elicited in reasons for support or opposition of Bulgaria's membership in the European Union? My findings suggest that identity constructions fundamentally mediate youth support for the EU. More precisely, youth with complementary national and European identities tend to exhibit stronger specific support, particularly in relation to perceived economic and developmental benefits such as Schengen mobility and Erasmus+ opportunities. In contrast, tensions between national and European identities often correlate with conditional or skeptical support for EU policies. Unsurprisingly, this indicates that identity complementarity enhances perceived congruence between national and EU-level goals and identity tension undermines it. Participants consistently expressed diffuse support and exhibited foundational trust in democratic values associated with EU membership, even when specific policy criticisms emerged. This finding resonates with Mitev and Kovacheva (2017) and the EU Youth Survey (2024), which highlight the acceptance of EU membership among Bulgarian youth. It is interesting that even participants who expressed concerns about national cultural preservation and EU inefficiencies still exhibited fundamental pro-EU orientations rooted in democratic identity. While the study reveals the presence of soft Euroscepticism, it does not support the notion of widespread rejection of the EU as an authoritarian entity (Filipova, 2023). Rather, the findings suggest that Bulgarian youth act as "strategic users" of EU opportunities through their assessment of tangible benefits while at the same time indicating strong adherence to both democratic values and national identity considerations. This ties to the direct answer to the research question: that youth attitudes toward Bulgaria's membership in the European Union are mediated through a dynamic utilization of multilevel identity constructions and pragmatic assessments of costs and benefits. Importantly, the study shows that specific support is more conditional and shaped by how national and European identities align or conflict and especially

when EU initiatives are seen as challenging national sovereignty or not. And even when participants expressed complementarity between national and European identities, their reasoning often began from a collective standpoint, asking how EU policies benefit "us" as a group rather than solely focusing on individual gains. Coming from this, among this youth in tertiary education, identity does not operate as a static category but rather as a relational and context-sensitive framework through which EU membership is evaluated.

Despite this work, the study has limitations that should be acknowledged. The most notable one is particularly the ongoing integration process continually reshapes the very concept of 'integration' itself (Janssen, 1991). As the study points out, formation of attitudes presents an ever evolving evaluation between different and overlapping identity and utilitarian markers. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to develop strictly equivalent measuring instruments across time and contexts in order to explore the topic in a competitive manner. Moreover, the study's relatively small sample size and the omission of other approaches that explain EU support limits the generalizability of the findings. The quetaking and benchmarking approaches were not analyzed, although they are approaches which fall under significant academic scrutiny for their relevance in this field of research (Hobolt and de Vries, 2016). Further research is necessary to test and extend my conclusions. I believe a particularly interesting case will be to extend the scope through a deeper investigation into how identity constructions intersect with specific policy areas of EU integration, particularly on the topic of immigration which is a salient topic perceived as highly polarized, both at the national and European levels (European Commission, 2024). In addition, more necessary is future research to expand the research sample size to include and operationalize multiple youth cohorts from different regions and socio-economic backgrounds to enable a more robust assessment of whether the identity-related dynamics identified in this study hold across different and wider youth contexts, which I believe would also allow researchers to explore potential generational shifts in identity constructions and their implications for attitudes toward the EU.

Appendix 1: Interview plan

Introductory questions

- What are you studying? How old are you? Where are you from?
- What is your level of political engagement? Do you follow political news?
- Do you vote? In what kinds of elections do you participate? EU elections?

General Reasons for support

- How would you define the European Union? What is the EU to you?
- Do you feel familiar with the scope and functions of the EU?
- What are your thoughts on the EU?
- Why do you support Bulgaria's membership in the EU?
  OR
- Why do you oppose Bulgaria's membership in the EU? *(Only if the participant's reaction indicates such an opinion - I'd prefer not to ask this directly unless indicated in the previous question)*
- How does the EU affect your life in Bulgaria?
  - Follow-up question: Some people feel negatively because Bulgaria has lost part of its sovereignty since joining the EU. What is your take on this argument?

- So far, we've talked about the EU in general, but which parts of the EU do you support and which do you not? For example: European integration, the Eurozone, the Schengen Area, specific EU-funded projects, or the overall EU philosophy.

Focus on Identity

- *Political collectivity* refers to groups or communities that share common political ideas, goals, or interests. This collectivity can be based on two types of identity:
  - Territorial identity (connected to belonging to a certain country or region),
  - Personal identity (based on individual factors - e.g., social or European identity).

How would you describe yourself in relation to your sense of belonging to the European Union?

- How would you define the term national identity? If applicable: Do you feel attached to your national identity ?
- Does your identity play a role in your political decisions?
- Do you think Bulgaria's EU membership has caused conflicts between maintaining cultural identity and adopting broader European values? Why?
- Would you say these identities are mutually exclusive, or do they complement each other?
    - If they complement: How?
    - If they are exclusive: Why?

- Based on what you've shared, how would you describe your identity when analyzing or participating in political processes?
    - If necessary: For example, when someone asks me who I am, I might say "I am a European" or "I am a Bulgarian" or "I am a student." In that context, do you identify in a similar way, or do you approach this differently when thinking about EU–Bulgaria relations?
    - If applicable: Is your identity constant or does it change depending on the issue discussed?

- Follow-up question (if not yet answered): Does / How you identify matter a lot?
- How would you rank your different identities? Why?

Engagement with the EU (input support)

- Do you perceive the EU as a system that allows young citizens like yourself to influence important decisions?
- Do you support such initiatives, and why?

Conclusion

Thank you for the information you've shared - it was very helpful.

- Do you have any questions or anything you'd like to add?
- What do you think about the interview itself?
- Is there anything on the topic we didn't cover but you'd like to share?

Bibliography

Abts, K., Heerwegh, D., & Swyngedouw, M. (2009). Sources of euroscepticism: utilitarian interest, social distrust, national identity and institutional distrust. *World Political Science*, *5*(1). https://doi.org/10.2202/1935-6226.1057

Anderson, B.O.R. (2006). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso Books.

Ares, M., Ceka, B., & Kriesi, H. (2016). Diffuse support for the European Union: spillover effects of the politicization of the European integration process at the domestic level. *Journal of European Public Policy,* *24*(8), 1091–1115. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2016.1191525

Bauman, Z. (1998). *Globalization: The human consequences*. Columbia University Press.

Bell, D. A. (2003). *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680–1800* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Boomgaarden, H. G., Schuck, A. R. T., Elenbaas, M., & De Vreese, C. H. (2011). Mapping EU attitudes: Conceptual and empirical dimensions of Euroscepticism and EU support. *European Union Politics, 12*(2), 241–266. https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116510395411

Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development. sage.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic Analysis : A Practical guide*. Braun, Virginia - Clarke, Victoria - SAGE Publications Ltd - Torrossa. https://www.torrossa.com/it/resources/an/5282292

Bulgaria - How to vote. (n.d.). *European Elections 2024: All You Need to Know*. https://elections.europa.eu/en/how-to-vote/bg/

Carey, S. (2002). Undivided loyalties. *European Union Politics*, *3*(4), 387–413. https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116502003004001

Cichocki, P. (2012). Polish attitudes towards the European Union. *Przegląd Zachodni*, *340*(00), 265-277.

Coenders, M., & Scheepers, P. (2003). The Effect of education on nationalism and Ethnic exclusionism: an international comparison. *Political Psychology*, *24*(2), 313–343. https://doi.org/10.1111/0162-895x.00330

Deželan, T. (2022). Young people's participation in European democratic processes - How to improve and facilitate youth involvement | Think Tank | European Parliament. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/IPOL_STU(2023)745820

Easton, D. (1965). *A Framework for Political Analysis*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Easton, D. (1975). A Re-assessment of the Concept of Political Support. *British Journal of Political Science, 5*(4), 435–457.

Esaiasson, P. (2011). Electoral losers revisited–how citizens react to defeat at the ballot box. *Electoral Studies, 30*(1), 102–113.

Eurobarometer. (2024). *EU Post-electoral survey 2024: Factsheet Bulgaria*. https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3292

Eurobarometer Survey. (2024). *Youth survey 2024: Bulgaria*. https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3392

European Commission. (2024). *Eurobarometer 3372: Bulgaria Factsheet*. Retrieved from https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3372

European Commission. (2001). *European governance: A white paper* (COM(2001) 428 final). Retrieved from https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A52001DC0428

Favero, A. (2020). The influence of gender on attitudes towards the EU among the Polish 'winners of European integration'. *European Political Science Review, 12*(1), 19–34. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773919000304

Favero, A. (2021). Political attitudes among the urban Polish youth: assessing the role of cities on support for the European Union. *East European Politics, 38*(1), 144–164. https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2021.1955675

Filipova, R. (2023). Teetering on the Brink of Regional Convergence: Bulgarians' Stances on Russia's War against Ukraine, Strategic Orientation, Democracy, Media and Values vis-à-vis Central and Eastern Europe. *Briefing Paper, No 3, September 2023*, 2. https://globalanalytics-bg.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Public-opinion-trends-ENG.pdf

Gabel, M. J. (1998). Economic Integration and Mass Politics: Market Liberalization and Public Attitudes in the European Union. *American Journal of Political Science, 42*(3), 936–953. https://doi.org/10.2307/2991736

Gabel, M., & Palmer, H. D. (1995). Understanding variation in public support for European integration. *European Journal of Political Research*, *27*(1), 3–19. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.1995.tb00627.x

Gellner, E. (2009). *Nations and Nationalism*. United States: Cornell University Press.

Gill, S. L. (2020). Qualitative Sampling Methods. *Journal of Human Lactation, 36*(4), 579–581. https://doi.org/10.1177/0890334420949218

Hakhverdian, A., Van Elsas, E., Van Der Brug, W., & Kuhn, T. (2013). Euroscepticism and education: A longitudinal study of 12 EU member states, 1973–2010. *European Union Politics*, *14*(4), 522–541. https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116513489779

Hjerm, M. (2010). Education, xenophobia and nationalism: A comparative analysis. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *27*(1), 37–60. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830124482

Hobolt, S. B., & De Vries, C. E. (2016). Public support for European integration. *Annual Review of Political Science, 19*(1), 413–432. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-042214-044157

Holloway, I., & Todres, L. (2003). The status of method: flexibility, consistency and coherence. *Qualitative Research*, *3*(3), 345–357. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794103033004

Ilonszki, G. (2009). National Discontent and EU-Support in Central and Eastern Europe. *Europe-Asia Studies, 61*(6), 1041–1057.

Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2023). Youth participation in national parliaments: 2023. https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2023-10/youth-participation-in-national-parliaments-2023

Janssen, J. I. H. (1991). Postmaterialism, cognitive mobilization and public support for European integration. *British Journal of Political Science, 21*(4), 443–468. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0007123400006256

Kandilarov, E. (2023). Bulgaria social briefing: The Problems and Challenges of Young People in Bulgaria and the State Policy for Youth. *Bulgaria Social Briefing, Vol. 61*(Issue No. 3), 1–3. https://china-cee.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/2023s04_Bulgaria.pdf

Kostelka, F., & Blais, A. (2018). The chicken and egg question: Satisfaction with democracy and voter turnout. *PS: Political Science & Politics, 51*(2), 370–376.

Kuada, J. (2012). *Research methodology: a project guide for university students* (1st ed.). Samfundslitteratur. http://site.ebrary.com/id/10636329

Laffan, B. (1996). The Politics of Identity and Political Order in Europe. *Journal of Common Market Studies, 34*(1), 82–102.

Leydesdorff, L., & Vaughan, L. (2006). Co-occurrence matrices and their applications in information science: Extending ACA to the Web environment. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, *57*(12), 1616–1628. https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.20335

Lindberg, L., & Scheingold, S. (1970). *Europe's Would-Be Polity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Lubbers, T., Haverland, M., & Zhelyazkova, A. (2025). National satisfaction vs. European support? Explaining attitudes towards the EU in candidate member states. *Journal of European Integration*, 1–29. https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2025.2489160

Martin, A. J. (2012). *Young people and politics: Comparing Anglo-American democracies*. Routledge, Abingdon, New York.

Macedo, S. (2005). Democracy at risk : how political choices undermine citizen participation and what we can do about it. Brookings Institution Press. http://site.ebrary.com/id/10120594

McLaren, L. (2002). Public support for the European Union: cost/benefit analysis or perceived cultural threat?. *Journal of Politics, 64*, 2551–2566.

Mitev, P.-E., Kovacheva, S., & Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES). (2017). *Young People in European Bulgaria: A Sociological Portrait 2014*. GESIS Data Archive, Cologne. https://doi.org/10.4232/1.12759

Nakova, A., & Milenkova, V. (2023). The future of national identity in Bulgaria: The role of communication with "others" for the formation of supranational identity. *History in Flux*, *5*(5), 165–178. https://doi.org/10.32728/flux.2023.5.8ResearchGate+4

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *16*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847

Perovic, B. (n.d.). *Defining Youth in Contemporary National Legal and Policy Frameworks Across Europe*. https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261653/Analytical+paper+Youth+Age+Bojana+Perovic+4.4.16.pdf/eb59c5e2-45d8-4e70-b672-f8de0a5ca08c

Plescia, C., Daoust, J. F., & Blais, A. (2021). Do European elections enhance satisfaction with European Union democracy?. *European Union Politics, 22*(1), 94–113.

Popivanov, B., Simeonov, P., Georgiev, S., Elenkova, L., Petkova, Y., & Galyova, Y. (2024). *Youth Study Southeast Europe 2024 – Bulgaria: Optimism for the self, pessimism for*

society: Bulgaria's youth facing times of insecurity. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Bulgaria. https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sofia/21522.pdf

Stockemer, D. (2011). Citizens' support for the European Union and participation in European Parliament elections. *European Union Politics*, *13*(1), 26–46. https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116511419870

Tajfel, H. (1974). Social identity and intergroup behaviour. *Social Science Information, 13*(2), 65–93. https://doi.org/10.1177/053901847401300204

Tanasoiu, C., & Colonescu, C. (2008). Determinants of support for European Integration. *European Union Politics, 9*(3), 363–377. https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116508093489

Toneva-Metodieva, L. (2017). Гражданско участие и медиен дебат в условията на членство в ЕС: (не)очаквани траектории на европеизацията. *Questa Soft*. https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=541745

Vassileva, D. (2025, May 20). Bulgaria's Eurozone games. *New Eastern Europe*. https://neweasterneurope.eu/2025/05/20/bulgarias-eurozone-games/

Vit, M. (2020). *The EU's Impact on Identity Formation in East-Central Europe Between 2004 and 2013: Perceptions of the Nation and Europe in Political Parties of the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia*. Ibidem Verlag. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/rug/detail.action?docID=6109284

Weßels, B. (2007). Discontent and European Identity: Three types of Euroscepticism. *Acta Politica*, *42*(2–3), 287–306. https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.ap.5500188

Wiesner, C. (2024). Democratisation of the EU, European Identity, and National EU Discourses. In *Politicisation, Democratisation and EU Identity*. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003408703-2

Yeung, E. S. (2021). Does immigration boost public Euroscepticism in European Union member states? *European Union Politics*, 22(4), 631–654. https://doi.org/10.1177/14651165211030428