



FACTS project – results of two focus groups meetings

WiseEuropa is one of the partners of the project FACTS¹, co-financed by the European Union within the framework of the Europe for Citizens programme. Its aim is to analyze current narratives, fake news and citizens' perception of the European Union. Two focus groups took place on 20th and 22nd of July during which the participants shared their thoughts on the above mentioned topics.

The majority of associations with the European Union are positive. Most of the participants associate the European Union itself with the opening of development perspectives for the member country. The prevailing conviction is that without this community, Poland would not be at the same stage of economic and social development today.

In this context, participants of the focus groups mentioned mainly financial help in various economic and social areas and development in general. Various investments in Poland's infrastructure, especially roads, freeways, bicycle paths, sports facilities for children, or building renovations, were often given as examples. They feel that such facilities are being built very quickly and effectively. In addition, the EU funds are subject to strict control, which ensures that the money is spent as intended.

Apart from that, the participants paid attention to funding in the academic and scientific life. Thanks to grants from the EU, students can take part in international exchanges (e.g. Erasmus). This is a great opportunity to acquire knowledge at renowned universities, gain new life experiences and learn about other cultures. In addition, European funds finance a variety of additional activities and scholarships for students and trainings for adults, helping them, for example, to acquire skills and certificates necessary for a particular profession.

¹ This project has received funding from the European Union's Europe for Citizens programme under grant decision No. 615563 and acronym FACTS. This publication reflects only the author's view and therefore the European Union and its Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency are not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

This development also has an economic dimension. Participants mentioned e.g. farmers in this respect – they also noticed that farmers with large farms benefit most, while those with smaller farms do not receive as much support from the EU. Financial aid from the EU is also associated with an opportunity for young people, because thanks to the EU smaller entrepreneurs who often need financial support to start up their business also receive aid.

The European Union is first of all a community - opening to other nationalities, a common strong currency which is the Euro, etc. In addition, accession to the EU is seen as a kind of ennoblement, distinction, because not everyone can be in this community. It was also emphasized that the EU puts ecology on an important place and sets standards in this area. For participants, the European Union is also a freedom, with its many dimensions - freedom of trade and economic circulation (many people associated the beginning of the very concept of the European Union with a community in trade), freedom of movement without the need for a passport, membership in the Schengen area, etc. Participants greatly appreciated the simplified procedures in taking up employment outside Poland. It was also pointed out that since joining the European Union it has been easier for Polish citizens to take up specialized, better paid jobs. It is also easier to receive opportunity for internships in foreign companies. The above mentioned positive associations with the European Union are seen as its strengths. It influences broadly understood development and increase of living standards in Poland. Security is also a strong point of the Union. Participants noted that although the Union does not have its own army, they believe that being a part of a certain collective provides security. Mutual assistance of member states in crises and natural disasters is also important. The recent natural disasters in the Czech Republic and Germany were set as examples, where other European countries provided support to those countries affected by natural disasters. The European Union also cares about important values - it stands watch the human rights and observes democratic values. Since Poland became the member state of the European Union, its importance in the international arena has increased and Poles are perceived differently and better by inhabitants of other member states. This concerns not only citizens but also Polish export products. Positive, personal experiences with the European Union largely coincide with the spontaneous associations and strengths of the EU that were presented earlier. These experiences are based primarily on the freedom of movement (both for tourism and business purposes) and the daily use of modernized infrastructure, among other things. The European Union has also influenced the development and establishment of e.g. more photovoltaic farms and the increase in the use of renewable energy sources.

Although participants had mostly positive associations with the EU, there were also some negative ones. These include, above all, bureaucracy and all kinds of rigid norms concerning, for example, agriculture. Excessive formalities, exceptional scrupulosity and rigid evaluations of e.g. projects are discouraging. The most frequently mentioned weakness of the



European Union by most participants (both mobilized and non-mobilized) is its bureaucracy. Respondents noticed it mainly in the process of submitting grant applications on their own and during their participation in various projects financed or co-financed from European funds. The number of documents necessary to be filled in and rigid time frames for their submission often discouraged participants from taking advantage of the programmes offered by the EU. Some regulations are also too complicated, unclearly formulated and may lead to errors. The downside of joining the community is for some participants (especially the non-mobilized) a partial loss of sovereignty. They believe that in such situation Poland is politically dependent on an organization that is above the state. Some participants also believe that the European Union is poorly handling the influx of immigrants into member states, the lack of a coherent policy on accepting refugees was highlighted. Many non-mobilized participants pointed out that decisions made by the EU are not always adapted to local circumstances. Unification was shown as a value and an advantage of the EU, but on the other hand participants feel that before introducing different kinds of laws or regulations there should be a detailed analysis to show whether this is possible in each country. Focus groups participants also have a feeling that they are not quite on an equal footing with the citizens of other EU countries. The main differences here are finances and wages. The possibility of working abroad is also associated with the outflow of specialists from various industries to foreign countries.

The participants agreed with the statement that the European Union is a guarantor of peace - a possible external aggressor may be afraid of assistance provided to each other by the community countries. It was also stressed out that being aware that we belong to some kind of community gives a sense of security and a certain psychological comfort. However, the participants are aware that the security provided by this community does not have a military dimension and concerns primarily the internal relations of the member states. The responsibility for external and military support is primarily attributed to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

As for the guarantee of prosperity, the vast majority of workshop participants believe that the EU is able to provide it. Since Poland joined the European community, they noticed the improved living conditions, easier and wider access to products, and cooperation between nations (e.g. in the context of pandemics). What should be also mentioned is a huge development and leveling of opportunities. A higher standard of living can be seen in many Polish towns and villages - it is not only about the improvement of roads, modernization of infrastructure or financial support for business, but also about the development of society, broadening of minds.

The mobilized participants emphasize that unity and solidarity are the basic principles of the European Union. However, unity does not mean uniformity, which allows the member



states to retain a certain amount of individuality. On the main and most important issues, the Union has similar opinions and acts together. On the other hand, the non-mobilized participants were somewhat more critical of EU unity and solidarity. They believe that it is impossible to talk about these values when each country is primarily concerned with its own interests and fights for money. Unity and solidarity are rather seen as slogans that are not trusted and do not have a bearing on practice. In their opinion, this is influenced not only by struggles for influence and finances, but also by cultural differences between nations and the past. Nevertheless, both groups (mobilized and non-mobilized) gave similar examples of unity (e.g., position on the situation in Ukraine, fight against COVID-19) and lack of it in the European Union (e.g., refugee relocation issue, Nord Stream 2).

One of the main sources of information about the European Union (both for mobilized and non-mobilized citizens) is the Internet - they mainly use various types of information services and web portals, social media, check through the Internet search engine, enter the websites of institutions, check out the formal sources. The following sites were also mentioned: www.reddit.com, www.discord.com, www.pap.pl, www.europa.eu. Other media, which play a large role in obtaining information, are mainly television (domestic and foreign) and the press. Other sources of information in this field are also schools, universities, workplaces - this refers mainly to obtaining information and using various types of European programmes (e.g. Erasmus), trainings, educational materials about the EU. Valuable sources of knowledge are also travelling and exchanging experiences.

Most participants, regardless of their level of social engagement, believe that misinformation campaigns exist and we can see them in everyday life. A great deal of false narratives, especially in the opinion of the non-mobilized citizens, can be found in social media, especially on Facebook. Some participants, both mobilized and non-mobilized, were of the opinion that the main source of false information about the European Union, especially on the Internet, is Russia. According to the participants, the authors of Eurosceptic and anti-EU narratives are often representatives of political parties in the parliament and the ruling coalition, and more recently, public television. They promote a Eurosceptic narrative according to which the EU strikes at Polish traditions, faith and sovereignty. Especially the elderly are susceptible to such narratives, they distance themselves from the European Union and are more likely to speak critically about it. Recently, the most fake news concern the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccines (specifically their health effects) and the allegations that the whole situation is some kind of medical experiment or exaggerated problem used by the authorities to use direct coercive measures and maintain a sense of insecurity among the public. It was also stressed that sometimes false information is not given intentionally, but due to lack of knowledge or fear. The main sources of disinformation campaigns are countries that could care about weakening the position of the European Union and expanding their

influence. Participants also pointed to the existence of a certain phenomenon, namely troll farms, where a specific influence with a specific overtone is dictated and published.

It is easy to believe fake news because it is simple and easily available. It takes much less time to accept a piece of information found without analyzing it than it does to verify each and every piece, especially in the current abundance (and sometimes chaos) of information and draw conclusions from it. Proper education in critical thinking and inference is also very often lacking. Fake news also often capitalizes on the public's fears and concerns, and if it confirms someone's beliefs then the willingness to verify them is less common. The main way to recognize and protect yourself from fake news is to use several sources of information - even if the original source seems extremely reliable, it is worth comparing it with others. Reaching out to official institutional websites allows you to verify information summarized in various articles on news portals. Comparing information can also be done by using foreign media, as translations can sometimes distort the original message or even deliberately misinterpret the message. You can also check different narratives and the presentation of similar facts by media associated with extremely different political or worldview backgrounds. We should also be careful with the information we find through social media - it is extremely easy to spread fake news there. A very important filter in catching fake news is our own knowledge and experience - we can see when the information we come across is too far from reality to be true. It is also important to remember about fact-checking organizations, whose aim is to demystify different kinds of fake news.

If given the opportunity, the focus groups participants would like to convey to the representatives of the EU authorities the need to reduce bureaucracy, simplify procedures and introduce more flexible approach to individual projects. They would also like to convey the need for a more thorough analysis of the feasibility of certain projects so that they respond to the real needs of local communities. Great emphasis was also placed on leveling the playing field, also in financial terms. Important issues they would like to raise with the EU authorities include climate change (more courageous implementation of changes in this respect), environmental protection and moving away from coal-based energy generation, although in this last matter greater flexibility of the EU would be expected (especially in the case of Poland, whose energy is based mostly on coal).

Opinions were divided on the importance of Polish politicians in the European arena. There were some opinions that the European Union imposes its decisions on individual member states and Polish politicians do not have much say in the European Parliament. However, this is not due to lack of opportunities, but to excessive internal conflicts and lack of one common narrative abroad. Others emphasized that there are situations in which the European law has primacy over the Polish law and this should be respected, but in general it is Polish politicians who have an influence on the decisions made in the European Union.

The consensus was that Euroscepticism exists and is a phenomenon present in Polish society. It is also perceived by non-mobilized people who are not interested in political life. One of the reasons for Euroscepticism is old habits, fear of the new and lack of personal benefits. The prevailing belief is that the European Union is first and foremost an opportunity for the young or people who can find their way in the complicated rules of EU programs. Euroscepticism also stems from a desire for reform and for the EU itself to work properly. Eurosceptics fear a loss of sovereignty and react negatively to attempts to impose certain regulations or courses of action on them. Interestingly, it has been recognized that the presence of Eurosceptic voices is needed in public discourse. This allows many improvements and reforms to be made and discussions to take place.