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Euroscepticism and Education in the Visegrad Group Countries

Valeria Belova, Małgorzata Grząba and Jakub Szabó

Executive summary

In the position paper, the authors demonstrated that there is an overwhelming consensus on causal link between lower levels of educational attainments and the levels of Euroscepticism in the Visegrad Group Countries. Higher educated people are less Eurosceptic because they have acquired necessary cognitive skills, have been exposed to cosmopolitan values at school, hold an open and cosmopolitan outlook on society, and face less competition and insecurity in the global labour market. The authors also emphasized that, allocation of the EU expenditure on education seems to be correlated with Eurosceptic attitudes as well in the V4 Countries. Investing into formal and informal education might moderate certain manifestations of Euroscepticism in the V4 Countries, increase cooperation between these countries also strengthen their position within the international community. In fact, targeted expenditure aiming to increase intra-EU mobility and pro-EU values seem to be one of the most feasible precursors for decreasing Euroscepticism, even more than the expenditures on education in general. This conclusion is supported by the fact that the Czech Republic still achieves relatively high levels of Euroscepticism in spite of the rise of total government expenditure on education in the recent years. Therefore, the authors proposed four specific policy recommendations with regards to education and its possible impact on decreasing Eurosceptic tendencies, focusing on the V4 countries with potential overlaps to the EU level:

- (1) increasing and expanding the Erasmus+ programme,
- (2) institutionalizing learning about the EU into schools' curriculums and EU long-term strategies,
- (3) supporting informal platforms generating new pro-EU leaders and reaching the general public and lastly,
- (4) counterbalancing disinformation by promoting the EU on social media and TV broadcasts.

Introduction: Description of the problem

When the Council of Europe picked the passage from Beethoven's 9th symphony – Ode to Joy – as a European anthem in 1972, vision of unified Europe appeared to be in its heyday. The European unification, in all intents and purposes, turned into the “purified, favoured endeavour, European position of euphoria, encircled by divine shines, a celestial spot, where through the spell of Divine beings men live in harmony and solidarity” (Schiller, 1785). Contemporary Europe, however, seems to be far from this vision. Cynicism, Euroscepticism, and resistance against universal European values started gaining momentum in the last couple of years, peaking with Brexit, where the questioning of the benefits of European integration struck the whole Europe. It is not surprising though, since first Eurosceptic tendencies can be traced back to British conservatives in the 1970s and 1980s, then spreading to the rest of Europe, finding their way also to the contemporary Visegrad Group countries. Gradually, as Euroscepticism progressed, the European population kept losing the enthusiasm for further integration (Bijsmans et al., 2018; Dutceac et al., 2019). Nonetheless, even after all these years, we cannot but agree with Lerith et al. (2018) that the meaning of Euroscepticism remains ambiguous, often being narrowed down to just a negative opinion on the European Union (EU). Whenever Euroscepticism is characterized solely as a backlash against integrated Europe, according to our opinion, it becomes a rather vague concept. Euroscepticism is much more complex and cannot be restricted to neither party politics, nor to national politics. It is neither entirely static, nor completely rigid, it is a changing process, which grows further along the development of the EU. Euroscepticism represents an antidote to European integration, in Leconte's (2010) views, it is “a direct and blatant rejection of the EU's *raison d'être*”.

But let us get back to the issue of Brexit, since it constituted a turning point in our opinion. On June 23, 2016, a slight majority of 51.9% chose to leave the EU in a historic referendum on the UK's future as an EU member. The outcome of the Brexit referendum was highly polarized along educational lines – people with a lower level of education voted to leave the EU, while those with the higher educational credentials voted overwhelmingly to remain (Hobolt, 2016). This division with regards to Euroscepticism is not limited to just the United Kingdom, it also occurs in the Visegrad Group Countries, where generally speaking, people with lower educational attainment can be found to be more Eurosceptic than those with higher education across the whole EU (Hakhverdian et al., 2013; Hooghe and Marks, 2005; Lubbers and Scheepers, 2010). Furthermore, this discrepancy has widened dramatically over time. Several theories have been proposed in the literature that (causally) relate education with support for European integration



(Hakhverdian et al., 2013; Lubbers and Jaspers, 2011). According to the literature on Euroscepticism, higher educated people are less Eurosceptic because they have acquired necessary cognitive skills, have been exposed to cosmopolitan values at school, hold an open and cosmopolitan outlook on society, and face less competition and insecurity in the global labour market. This argument is supported by political scientists studying transnational political cleavages as well (e.g. Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Kriesi and Schulte-Cloos, 2020; Piketty 2020). If one takes a look at sociological structure of electorate of Eurosceptic parties, or parties with slightly Eurosceptic tendencies in the Visegrad Countries for that matter, the evidence overwhelmingly supports the hypothesis about the trade-off between education and Eurosceptic attitudes. Electorates of Eurosceptic parties like Tomia Okamura's Svoboda a přímá demokracie in the Czech Republic, Slovak far-right party Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko, or regional poster boys of illiberalism – Kaczyński's Prawo i Sprawiedliwość and Orbán's Fidesz, are comprised on average of less educated, and *ipso facto* less economically mobile "losers" of economic globalization (Lindner et al., 2020).

To summarize, the empirics suggested that there exists a correlation between the level of educational attainment and negative attitudes towards the EU. Referring to the presented argument, the purpose of the policy paper is to define the relation between education and Euroscepticism in the Visegrad Group Countries. Additionally, the policy paper presents concrete recommendations and suggestions of how to reduce the level of Euroscepticism in the V4 Countries with regards to the education.

Analysis of the Current Situation

Substantial scholarly effort has previously been given to explaining Euroscepticism in its numerous varieties (e.g. Hobolt and de Vries, 2016). As we have already indicated, Euroscepticism is stratified along educational lines. It belongs to one of the most consistent findings in this field (Hakhverdian et al., 2013). Lower educated people are consistently proven to be more Eurosceptic than higher educated people. By using the Eurobarometer trend file (2004-2020) and appending it with the most recent waves of the Eurobarometer, Figures 1 and 2 depict the attitudes towards the EU in the V4 Countries between 2004 and 2020.¹

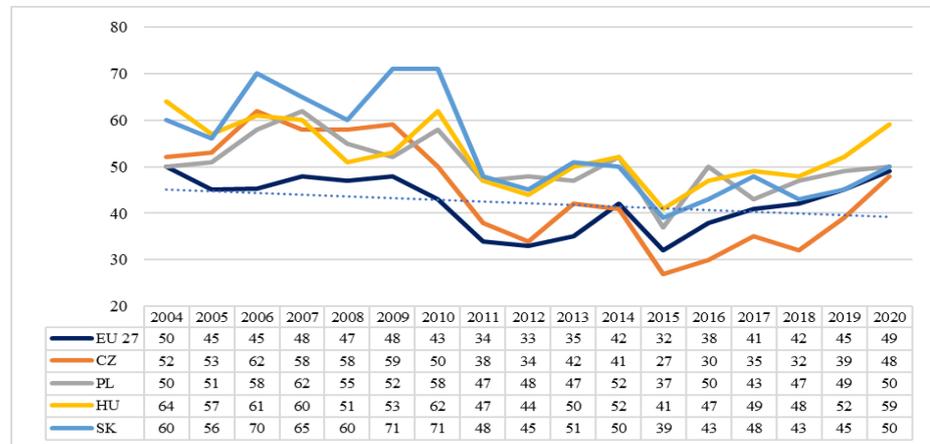


From joining the EU in 2004 until the financial crisis in 2008, citizens' trust in the V4 Countries was above the EU average every year. At that time, this measure was characterized by an upward trend in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia. From the beginning of the financial crisis to 2015, the measure decreased in all the analysed Countries. Then, from 2015 to 2020, citizens' trust in the EU grew again in all V4 Coun-

¹ In terms of methodology, Euroscepticism is measured by asking respondents whether they trust, don't trust, or don't have an opinion on the EU. Lubbers and Scheepers (2005) label this as instrumental Euroscepticism.

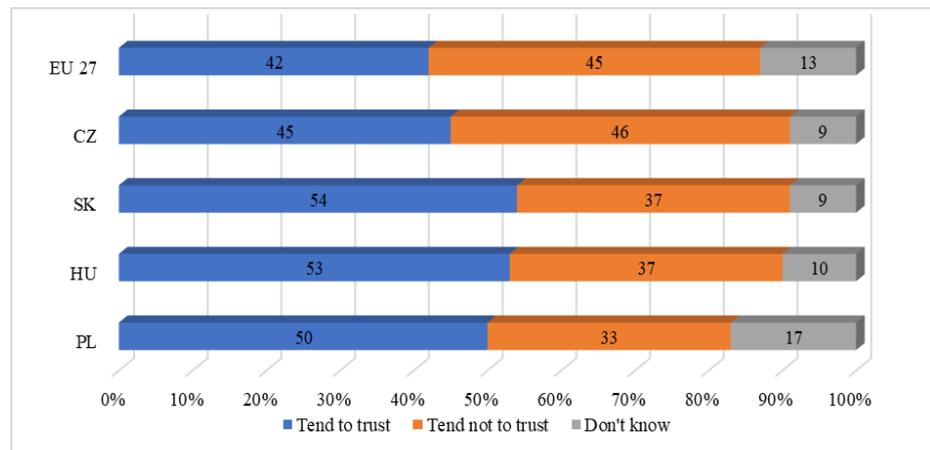
tries. Between the years 2004 and 2020 in Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary, this measure was above the EU average, with values below the mean only in the case of the Czech Republic.

Figure 1. Trust of V4 citizens in EU in 2004-2020 (in %)



Source: Own elaboration based on Eurobarometer data.

Figure 2. Average level of V4 citizens' trust in the EU in 2004-2020 (in %)

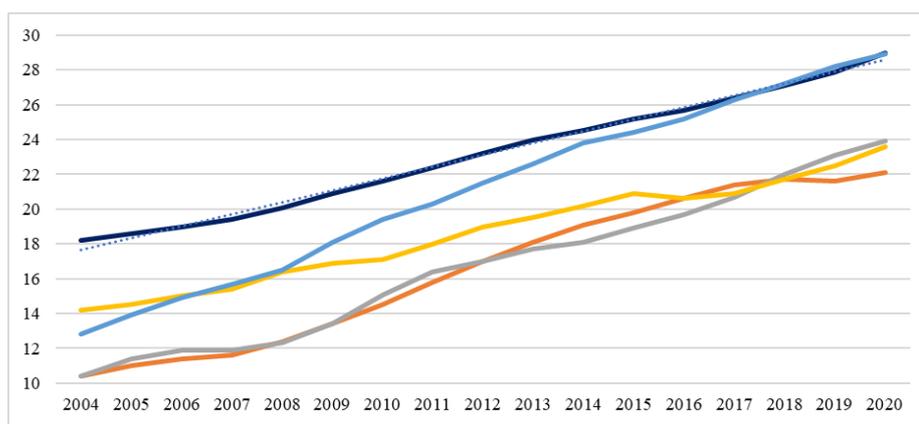


Source: Own elaboration based on Eurobarometer data.

Between the years 2004 and 2020, the highest average level of citizens' trust in the EU was in Slovakia (54%), followed by Hungary (53%), Poland (50%), and lastly the Czech Republic (45%). Still, the citizens' distrust was below the EU average. In Poland it was 33%, in Hungary and Slovakia 37%. Only in the Czech Republic, during the analysed period, the average measure was higher by 1pp than the EU average and amounted to 46%.



Figure 3. V4 citizens with higher educational level (in %)



	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Average 2004-2020
EU 27	18.2	18.6	19.0	19.4	20.1	20.9	21.6	22.4	23.2	24.0	24.5	25.2	25.7	26.4	27.1	27.9	29.0	23.1
CZ	10.4	11.0	11.4	11.6	12.4	13.4	14.5	15.8	17.0	18.1	19.1	19.8	20.6	21.4	21.7	21.6	22.1	16.6
SK	10.4	11.4	11.9	11.9	12.3	13.4	15.1	16.4	17.0	17.7	18.1	18.9	19.7	20.7	22.0	23.1	23.9	16.7
HU	14.2	14.5	15.0	15.4	16.4	16.9	17.1	18.0	19.0	19.5	20.2	20.9	20.6	20.9	21.7	22.5	23.6	18.6
PL	12.8	13.9	14.9	15.7	16.5	18.1	19.4	20.3	21.5	22.6	23.8	24.4	25.2	26.3	27.2	28.2	28.9	21.2

Source: Own elaboration based on Eurostat data.

As depicted in Figures 1-3, since the beginning of 2004, V4 Countries with on average lower educated citizens are consistently more Eurosceptic (Czech Republic) than the V4 Countries with higher educated citizens (Poland). On the other hand, we would be careful with regards to the interpretation of this results, since the % of higher education attainment does not automatically manifest better education, especially when comparing the Czech Republic and Slovakia.² Subsequently, as the trend lines show, the current gaps in Euroscepticism between the lower and higher educated not only did not diminish over time, but it also seems that they have gotten even worse in all V4 Countries. This gap seems to be a part of a larger, education-based cleavage in Western Europe (Bovens and Wille, 2017; Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Piketty, 2020). This trend is also present in France (National Rally), Germany (AfD) or Italy (Lega).

Figure 4. depicts the EU expenditure on education³, whereas the figure 5. delineates total national expenditure on education as % of GDP. From 2004 to the financial crisis in 2008, the EU expenditure on education in the V4 Countries was above the EU average. However, since then, this measure has been characterized by a downward trend in all V4 Countries. Then, from 2015 to 2020, the EU expenditure on education

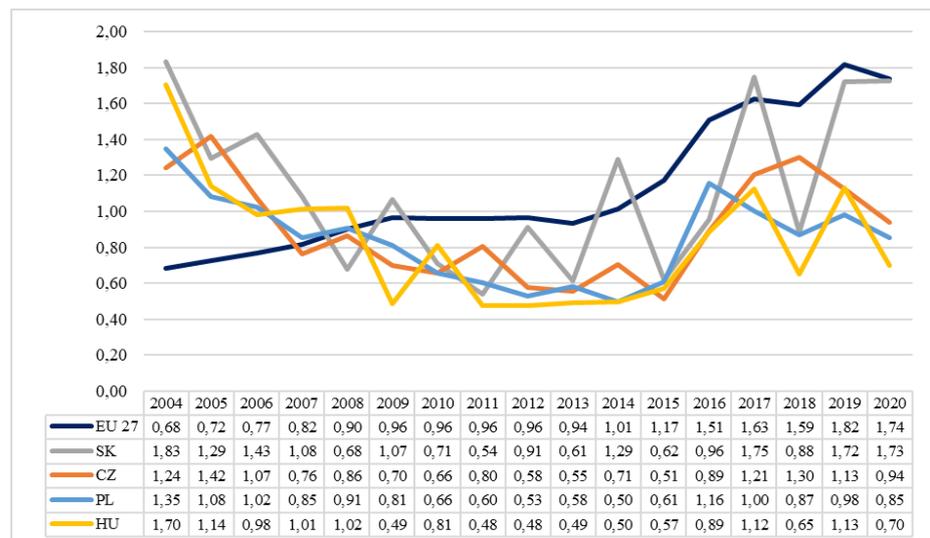


² The OECD PISA results show us that students in the Czech Republic achieve significantly better results in all three areas – Reading, Mathematics and Science (OECD, 2018). The same can be said about quality of Czech universities as compared to universities in Slovakia. According to the Shanghai Ranking, 7 Czech universities place in among the 1000 best in the world, while in Slovakia it is only one (Shanghai Ranking, 2021). All of this indicates greater quality of education.

³ The Union programme for education, training and sport comprises of expenditure on the support of learning mobility (Erasmus+), non-formal and informal learning mobility and the learning mobility of sport staff.

in the V4 Countries grew gradually, but the value of the measure was still generally below the EU average every year. Since the introduction of the Erasmus+ program in 2014, there has been a noticeable increase in citizens' trust in the EU and the EU education expenditure growth in the following year (2015). Taking a look at the total expenditure on education as % of GDP, we can clearly see a downward slope in the case of Poland, and to a lesser extent Hungary as well, especially since 2014. The expenditures on education have been relatively levelled in Slovakia in the recent years, namely since 2012. The Czech Republic, on the other hand, registered a significant increase, surpassing Slovakia, Hungary and the EU-27 average simultaneously, reaching almost 5% of GDP in terms of the total expenditures on education. This indicates that the total national expenditure on education does not seem to have an impact on the levels of Euroscepticism, on the contrary, especially when the education is not interrelated with promoting universal European values.

Figure 4. EU expenditure on education as % of total EU expenditure in the Visegrad Group Countries

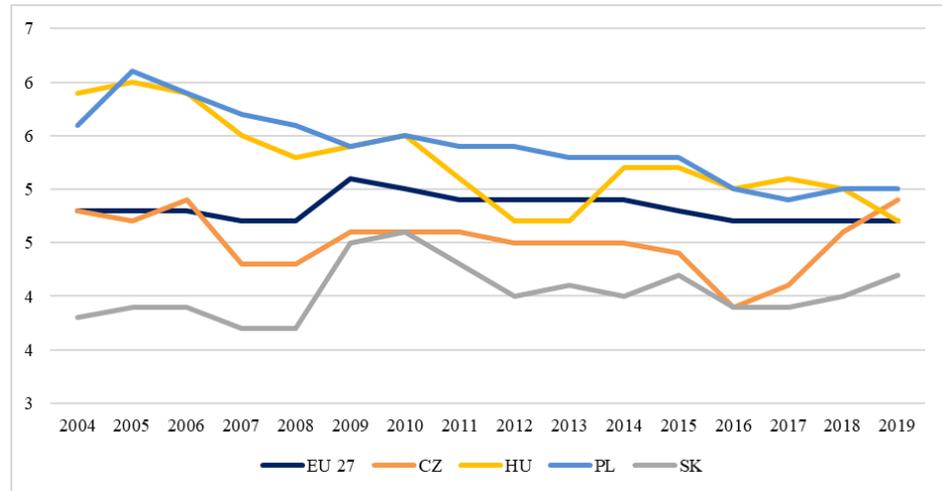


Source: Own elaboration based on Eurostat data.

Although the data seems to support the statement that people with different educational attainments have quite different perspectives on the EU, can we say that this relationship also implies causality? Is education, in other words, a causal element in changing people's attitudes toward European integration? Remaining cautious, we expect this to be the case based on the current state of the literature and our Euroscepticism research. Improved cognitive capabilities, getting familiar with cosmopolitan ideas taught in school, and implementation of cost-benefit calculations when evaluating pros and cons of certain alternatives are commonly listed as three ways by which greater education changes attitudes toward the EU in research on the roots of Euroscepticism (Hakhverdian et al., 2013; Hooghe and Marks, 2005; Lubbers and Jaspers, 2011). The



Figure 5. Government expenditure on education as % of GDP (2004-2019)



Source: Own elaboration based on Eurostat (COFOG) data.

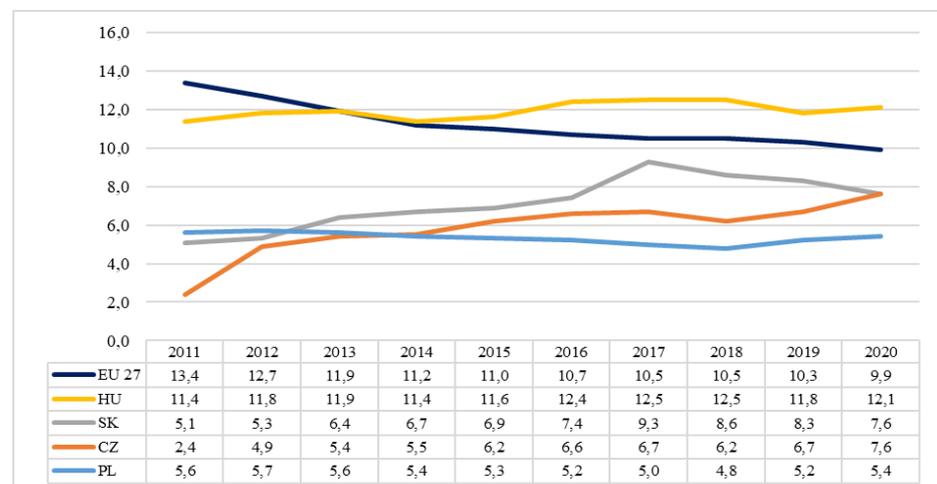
first two mechanisms are based on the premise that education widens intellectual and cultural horizons, which leads to increased support for European integration. Previous research has shown that cultural intolerance and a strong sense of national identity are major predictors of Euroscepticism (De Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2005; Hooghe and Marks, 2005; Luedtke, 2005; McLaren, 2002). Additional education is associated with more internationalized views and beliefs, and a greater empathy. A person with more years of schooling is on average more open and welcoming to people from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds and has a less exclusive national identity. In this way they had the opportunity to receive full-time or short-term education abroad, as well as to travel and acquaint themselves with new countries and cultures. According to the cognitive skills thesis, education has a significant ‘liberalizing’ influence on students by strengthening their cognitive capacities and broadening their perspectives (Bobo and Licari, 1989; Hyman and Wright, 1979; Jackman, 1978). These enhanced cognitive abilities have been connected to more cosmopolitan political perspectives, lowering nationalist feelings and cultural intolerance. Education is said to not just ‘enlighten’ pupils, but also to socialize them into a set of political beliefs, according to this theory (Van de Werfhorst and De Graaf, 2004). As a result, education causes a movement in internal cultural values toward cosmopolitan ideals. Students are taught concepts like pluralism, democracy, and individual liberty at school, which help them develop a more open and tolerant outlook on the world. Furthermore, there has been a growing emphasis on spreading European values and, more recently, European citizenship, since the 1970s (Busemeyer and Tram, 2011; Keating, 2009). Education provides students with a stronger position in the labour market in addition to improving cognitive capabilities and socializing them into a specific set of values. The utilitarian cost-benefit analysis argument points to



Euroscepticism to be a result of self-interest, or more specifically, whether people profit (economically) from European integration or not (Anderson and Reichert, 1995; Gabel, 1998; Gabel and Palmer, 1995). Higher educated people are more supportive of European integration since they benefit from more European collaboration due to their skills and mobility. In conclusion, if cognitive skills are successfully increased, cosmopolitan ideas are transferred, or the labour market position is strengthened, we should expect extra years of education to reduce Euroscepticism. As a result, rather than being a source of Euroscepticism, education may prove to be a proxy for other factors such as cognitive capacity, political socialization at home, and the socio-economic condition of the family.

However, another problem is the need to increase interest in learning. According to Eurostat statistics, as of 2020, 9.9% of 18-24 years old in the EU had completed at most a lower secondary education and were not in further education or training. These graduates represent “early leavers”. In the V4 Countries, this figure ranges from 5.4% to 12.1%. Of course, this figure has decreased significantly in recent years in Europe as a whole, but in the V4 Countries the need to improve in this direction clearly remains and there is a great room for improvement.

Figure 6. Early leavers from education and training in 2011-2020 (in %)



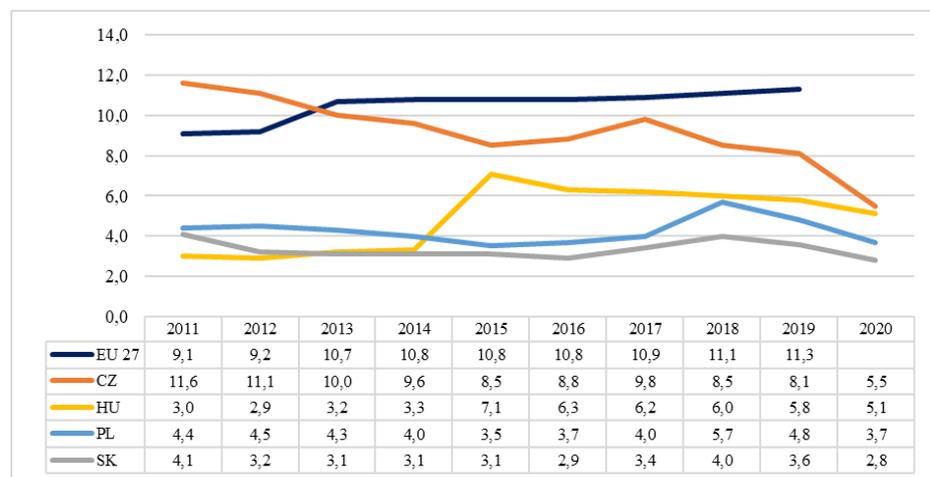
Source: Own elaboration based on Eurostat data.



In addition, we should pay attention to the general state of education and training in the V4 countries. The chart below (fig. 7) shows the share of people aged 25-64 who stated that they received formal or non-formal education and training in the four weeks preceding the survey. Interestingly, since 2011 the share increased by 1.4 p.p at the EU level. Within the V4 countries, the highest growth was reported in Hungary by 2.1 p.p. On the other hand, a decline was monitored in two countries, in Poland by 0.7 p.p. and in Slovakia by 1.3 p.p. As Alvin Toffler (an

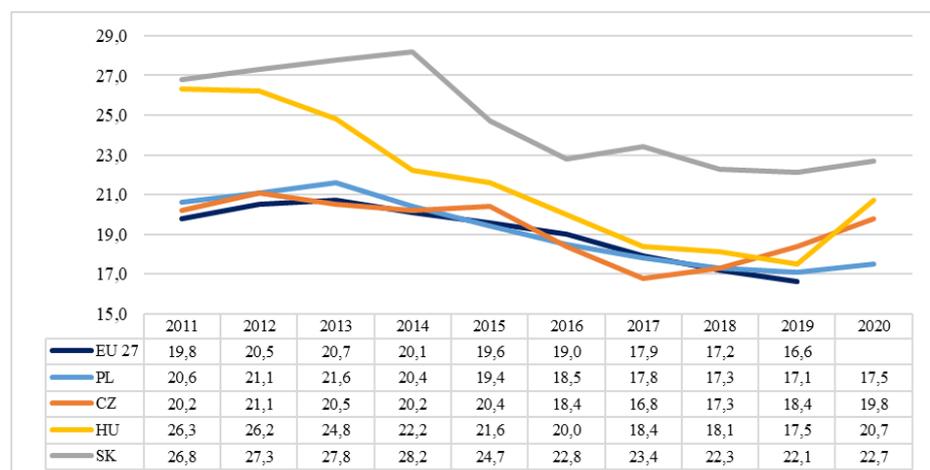
American writer, futurist, and businessman) noted in "The illiterate in the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn" (Toffler, 1981). Due to the ever-increasing life expectancy, the professional life and period of active work activity also increases. A career that is 50-60 years long can hardly be built on the same starting educational baggage and be in the same professional rut. The forks, the possible changes in the professional scenario, of course, are tied to different stages of career and age maturity, to personal circumstances. But the twists and turns at these forks are impossible without a new education. In this regard, speaking of education, it is extremely important to pay attention not only to the education of the younger generation, but also to the education of adults who make up the working majority.

Figure 7. Adult participation in learning in 2011-2020 (in %)



Source: Own elaboration based on Eurostat data.

Figure 8. Young people not in employment, education or training at the age from 25 to 34 years in 2011-2020 (in %)



Source: Own elaboration based on Eurostat data.



Another interesting point is the non-participation of young people in either educational programs or work activities. The graph below (fig. 8) shows the share of the population aged 25-34 who are not employed and not involved in education or training in the four weeks preceding the survey. Their share has been dropping steadily since 2011, but as of 2020 their share in V4 Countries ranges from 17.5 % to 22.7 % due to COVID-19 pandemic. Which is clearly a high percentage.

According to these statistics, we see how many people are disconnected from educational activities. We can see in this regard, that the education is not unidimensional, and it has multiple layers. Therefore, working in this direction, including with these groups, might have a potential to qualitatively reduce Euroscepticism in the V4 Countries.

Policy recommendations

In the previous part, we have demonstrated that there is an overwhelming consensus on causal link between lower levels of educational attainments and the levels of Euroscepticism. At the same time, allocation of the EU expenditure on education (Figure 4.) seems to be correlated with Eurosceptic attitudes as well (Figure 1). Therefore, targeted expenditure aiming to increase intra-EU mobility and pro-EU values seem to be one of the most feasible precursors for decreasing Euroscepticism, even more than the expenditures on education in general. This conclusion is supported by the fact that the Czech Republic still achieves relatively high levels of Euroscepticism in spite of the rise of total government expenditure on education in the recent years.

In this section, we propose four specific policy recommendations with regards to education and its possible impact on decreasing Eurosceptic tendencies, focusing on the V4 countries with potential overlaps to the EU level. We suggest to (1) increase and expand the Erasmus+ programme, (2) institutionalize learning about the EU into schools' curriculums and EU long-term strategies, (3) support informal platforms generating new pro-EU leaders and reaching the general public and lastly (4) counterbalance disinformation by promoting the EU on social media and TV broadcasts.

⇒ **Increasing Erasmus+ budget**

Since we have showed that EU expenditure on education, a proxy for Erasmus+ programme, seem to be positively correlated with pro-EU attitudes, we recommend substantial increase of the Erasmus + budget, especially when it managed to become one of the most effective ways of fostering a sense of EU belonging by ensuring learning mobility. Still, the amount of disposable resources is not high enough for students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, and calls for an upgraded version, taking into account different social and economic conditions of its



applicants. The additional resources can be progressively distributed reflecting socioeconomic position of the students. Economic unaffordability of the Erasmus+ mobility cannot be an issue anymore. As a motivational aspect, we can promote excellence in research and study results by awarding additional scholarships, so students are motivated to keep achieving exceptional results even when being on international mobility. Currently, the educational results whilst on Erasmus+ mobility do not play any role whatsoever. Additionally, it would be plausible to start reflecting a possibility of establishing an EU mobility program for high school students, Erasmus++ of sort. Teachers and educators should be also encouraged and supported in pursuing international mobility and foreign language learning within the EU. Although this is already part of the Erasmus+ Teaching mobility, this part of the EU mobility agenda tends to be less utilized than the part for university students. The Erasmus+ Teaching mobility should include possibilities of intra-EU mobility for primary and secondary school teachers, but at the same time, schools and universities should start promoting these possibilities, instead of creating barriers and various constraints. On EU level institutions and policies, we recommend that the future increased Erasmus+ budget (2021-2027) foster a sense of EU belonging by ensuring learning mobility for all, particularly people from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, and calls for all future projects to emphasize learning about the EU, building an EU identity, and supporting intergenerational learning about the EU, as well as language learning for all age groups.

Lastly, albeit it may not produce tangible results, we are of the opinion that symbolism is an important part of education, and it can provide possibility for spreading positive information about the EU. Starting point for common education activities about the EU throughout all Member States in schools and communities can be embodied in a European Education Day, when all the EU Member States will try to emphasize the importance of education with regards to the EU at one specific day on annual basis. This initiative will not bring additional financial costs, but will unite all EU countries.

⇒ Learning about the EU

Education about the EU, EU citizenships and EU democratic values should constitute a cornerstone of the general education in all EU Member States. The “EU literacy” should be regarded as generally required skill and competence, aiming to establish minimum knowledge about the European Union. The general curriculum at our schools should be established interdisciplinary, stretching over multiple disciplines, such as history, geography, economics and civics. Possibly, all EU national education systems can adopt a generalized European civic education, teaching about the history of European integration and current institutional settings, the same way the young are taught about their national history and constitutional order. Ultimately, it would be useful for such EU identity-building to be seriously considered to be legally binding and be incorpo-



rated into the EU long-term strategies (e.g. EU2030 Strategy; the ET2030 Strategic Framework) and in the European Semester process building, where the European Commission makes tailored-massed country-specific recommendations, provided that accurate systematic data are available. We propose establishing an EU level policy strategy, while respecting national competence in the field of education, to propose recommendations on cooperation (for example, via the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) or through a high-level group) among EU countries to encourage initiatives in education systems and action at the national and local level on education about the EU as well as EU identity. This should be reinforced by current research that map the situation in terms of education about the EU. Additionally, we would like to emphasize the importance of implementing the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) to ensure that all Europeans have access to high-quality, inclusive education, training, and lifelong learning.

⇒ Supporting Informal Platforms

Education about the EU cannot be focusing exclusively on formal education such as primary and secondary schools or universities, it is necessary that it will be extended through informal platforms such as youth movements, associations and civil society organisations, encouraging active citizen participation. Common V4 annual student summits or quarterly pro-EU V4 clubs could be established, drawing finances, for instance, from the International Visegrad Fund, whose budget should be substantially augmented by all the V4 governments. These informal platforms, promoting EU values and deepening education about the EU in the V4 Countries could resemble Slovak Globsec, an internationally recognised annual conference, attracting policy-makers and other pundits, from all around the world. Our goals are, naturally, more modest, with the aim to gather young pro-EU people from the V4 Countries, and organize an annual, regionally established conference discussing the future of the European Union and perspective of the Visegrad cooperation within. Ultimately, such informal platforms can constitute a seed for creation of new class of pro-EU politicians, policy-makers and academics.

Moreover, if we want to overcome the rejection, but mostly just an mundane indifference towards the EU in the V4 countries, the EU, but especially the political, economic and cultural elites from the V4 countries simply must not forget about the rural and socioeconomically laggard areas. We cannot just focus on informal platforms for the young urban elite. It is crucial that people in these areas, with on average lower levels of education, get exposed to the advantages of EU integration. It does not suffice to campaign before the election to the European parliament, trying to win their votes. Euroscepticism in these areas prevails mainly due to low levels of exposure about the EU successes. Informal events can be organized, recruiting famous people such as actors, singers and athletes, who will spread the information about the EU.



⇒ Counterbalance Disinformation about the EU on Social Media

The spread of misinformation and disinformation about the EU represents a hallmark of recent development on social media, undermining the trust in the European integration project and its institutions. We are of the opinion that these largely false information should be tackled by the necessary tools. In the long-run, this is the domain of proper education, we have already highlighted above. In the short-run, however, these disinformation have to be balanced out by accurate and data-based information about the EU. We do not propose censorship, the EU is and must remain to be based on the values of free speech and freedom of expression. The EU and the V4 governments, respectively, must get themselves involved in spreading the advantages of EU membership. In our opinion, we can use public service media and pro-EU broadcasters such as Euronews, to have a role in delivering accurate information about the EU, both its advantages and disadvantages. The Euronews is a splendid platform, however, one has to realise that the targeted population, with lower education on average, does not have access to English or French information about the EU. Thereby, we propose to establish a V4 Euronews lookalike, presenting data-based information about the EU in Czech, Slovak, Polish and Hungarian languages. The Euractiv platform is a good start, however, we have to follow up with visual media as well and make them competitive with the “alternative” media. Similar strategy will have to followed up on social platforms, mainly Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and even TikTok.

Governments take major responsibility for educational and cultural policies. However, the EU has played an important complementary role over the years, and it is in all countries' interests to fully realize the potential of education and culture as drivers of job creation, economic growth, and social equity, as well as means of experiencing European identity in all its diversity. While the many EU programs have so far focused only on universities, we believe that the EU budget should be increased, and programs broadened to all education sectors and extended to all age groups to enhance education about the EU and strengthen democratic citizenship.

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