



## EU Elections – Where Are the Voters?

Study about the low turnout in new EU Member States

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### Key Points

- There are a number of different reasons underlying the low turnout in new EU Member States.
- A low turnout does not necessarily reflect dissatisfaction with the EU.
- The low turnout can be attributed to a lack of interest on the part of politicians, a lack of knowledge about the EU, and people's fear of losing their recovered national identity.
- Besides the need to strengthen political education in the Member States and to raise the programmatic profile of the national political parties, communication of the decisions taken in Brussels also needs enhancing.
- In addition, efforts should be made to explain that the creation of a European identity does not necessarily entail the loss of national identity.

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## 1. Introduction

From 22 to 25 May 2014, EU citizens went to the polls to cast their votes for a new EU Parliament. Almost 60 per cent of eligible voters stayed away. Turnout throughout Europe was therefore lower than ever before in European Union history. An analysis of the figures for the 28 EU Member States shows that turnout was particularly low in countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which did not join the EU until 2004 and 2013 in the course of the eastern EU enlargement.

The purpose of this case study is to investigate the underlying reasons for this low turnout in five of the new Member States. Some recommendations for action on how turnout could be increased in new Member States will then be derived from the findings. The following countries were selected for the study to serve as examples: Croatia, Slovakia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic and Hungary.<sup>1</sup> Besides country-specific reasons, common phenomena are identified as well. In addition to pursuing conventional explanatory models, the following questions also need to be answered: Why is turnout in the above-mentioned countries so low? Does the low turnout reflect a lack in support for the European Project? Or do many voters stay away from the polls because they are satisfied with the status quo? How can politicians, national political parties, the EU and civil societies counter the trend of declining turnout? What recommendations for action can be derived from the answers to these questions?

Experts from the countries under investigation were questioned to identify reasons for the low turnout besides the usual explanatory approaches (normalisation thesis, representation thesis, individualisation thesis, post-democracy thesis). These interviews provided detailed insights into the respective countries, in turn providing indications of common causes, which then provided a basis for recommendations for action.

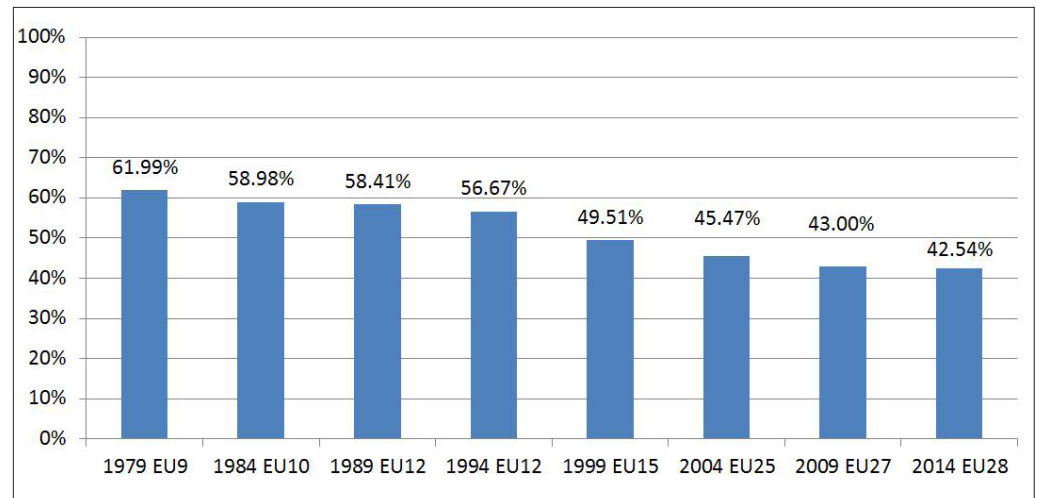
## 2. Declining turnout in European elections

Turnout has been declining in almost all European countries both in parliamentary elections and in elections to the European Parliament. Figures from the 2014 European elections show that EU-wide turnout was as low as 42.54 per cent. The proportion of people making use of their right to vote is therefore lower than ever before in European Union history (Fig. 1). Overall, EU-wide turnout is showing a downward trend. While it had been as high as 61.99 per cent back in 1979, figures for the 2014 elections showed a decline of almost 20 percentage points. One point to bear in mind when analysing turnout is that many countries have acceded to the EU in recent years where there is no compulsory voting and where turnout rates are generally lower than in Western European states.

While low turnout does not in itself pose a danger to democracy, as people's decision to stay away from the polls could be explained by their satisfaction with the status quo, it can lead to a legitimisation problem. If close to 60 per cent of EU citizens eligible to vote do not participate in elections to the European Parliament, this calls into question the legitimacy of the work of the European Parliament. Legitimacy is also significant for the European Union's stability. The greater the number of eligible voters who support the European Union by participating in the elections, the stronger the legitimisation of the political activities as they have the backing of the majority of eligible voters.<sup>2</sup>

EU-wide turnout declined by almost 20 percentage points between 1979 and 2014.

Low turnout calls the legitimacy of the work of the European Parliament into question.

**Fig. 1: Voter turnout in European elections from 1979 to 2014**Author's own chart<sup>3</sup>

Political science research has been examining the issue of voter turnout and the low figures in European elections for decades. Turnout is determined by a variety of factors, including socioeconomic influences, the institutional framework and the extent of people's identification with political parties. Another aspect worth mentioning is the perception of European elections as "second-order elections"<sup>4</sup>. It appears that European elections are ranked less important compared to national parliamentary elections, which affects not only turnout but voter behaviour as well. This explains the success enjoyed by smaller parties, which frequently have no chance in parliamentary elections.

In the new Member States, accession to the EU was of great interest to many citizens at the time, as was confirmed by the high turnout in the referendums in the course of the eastern EU enlargement of 2004. But far fewer citizens then participated in the subsequent elections to the European Parliament.

### 3. Case Study

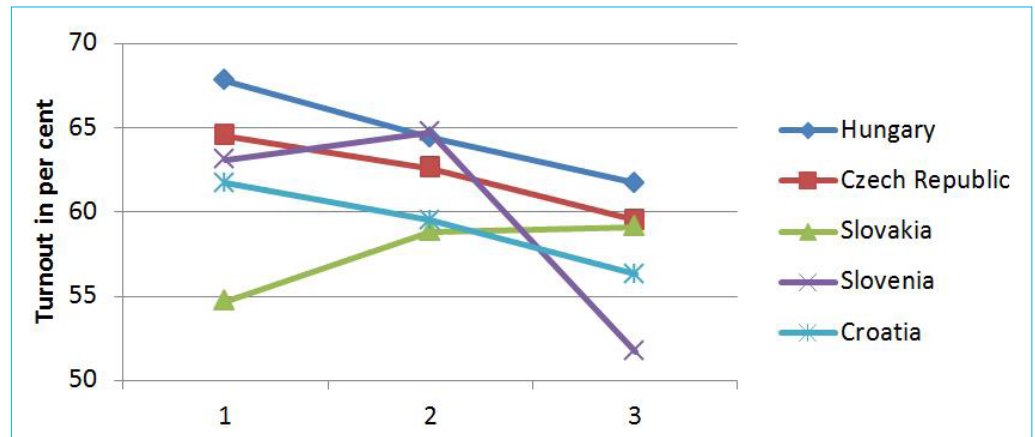
The country-specific causes underlying the low turnout are to be investigated on the basis of five example cases.

#### 3.1 Case Selection

For the purposes of this case study, the author analysed data relating to voter turnout in the national parliamentary elections and the elections to the European Parliament for the 28 EU Member States. The work concentrated on the figures for the three last parliamentary and European elections in each country. Countries with compulsory voting were excluded from the analysis from the start because of their consistently high turnout, which would have precluded any conclusions about further explanatory models.

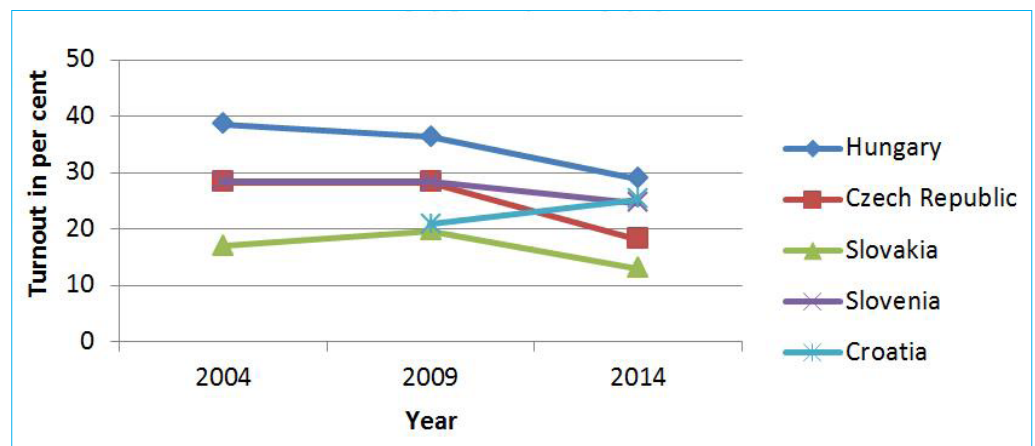
**Fig. 2: National Parliaments – Voter turnout**

Author's own chart<sup>5</sup>



**Fig. 3: European Parliament – Voter turnout**

Author's own chart<sup>6</sup>



In many Western European Member States, turnout in parliamentary and European elections is consistent or experiences proportionately equivalent changes.

Turnout figures for the European elections in Croatia, Slovakia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic and Hungary are particularly unusual.

Turnout is generally higher in parliamentary elections than in European elections in all EU Member States. Lithuania represents the only exception in this respect. When making a direct comparison between turnout in the elections to the national parliament of 2004 (40.21 per cent), 2008 (32.37 per cent) and 2012 (35.91 per cent) with turnout in the European elections of 2004 (48.38 per cent), 2009 (20.98 per cent) and 2014 (47.35 per cent), it becomes clear that even in 2014, turnout was clearly higher than in the parliamentary elections.<sup>7</sup>

In many other countries, such as the *Netherlands*, *Sweden* and *Austria*, there are also clear differences in turnout between parliamentary and European elections. But apart from this general difference, turnout figures do not show any other peculiarities. Turnout in parliamentary and European elections tend to be consistent and fluctuates constantly around comparable values or experiences proportionately equivalent changes.

The situation is different in Central and Eastern European EU Member States. When examining turnout figures for these countries, which only joined the EU eleven years ago or in 2013 in the course of the eastern EU enlargement, and comparing them to those for Western European Member States, there are clear differences in turnout apparent, for both parliamentary and European elections.

We selected the following countries in Central and Eastern Europe and analysed their figures in detail: Croatia, which did not accede to the EU until 2013, but has a low turnout, Slovakia, due to its lowest turnout of all EU countries in the 2014 elections to the European Parliament despite an increase in turnout during national elections, and Slovenia, the Czech Republic and Hungary because of their striking discrepancies with respect to voter turnout in parliamentary elections and elections to the European Parliament (Figures 2 and 3).

The following overview summarises the underlying reasons for the respective countries in table form (Table 1).

**Table 1:**  
**Underlying reasons for the low voter turnout in the new EU Member States**

Croatia	Slovakia	Slovenia	Czech Republic	Hungary
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Protracted accession negotiations</li> <li>▪ Insufficient persuasiveness of Croatian politicians in promoting the EU</li> <li>▪ Unfulfilled expectations due to the economic and financial crisis</li> <li>▪ „Post-accession“ shock</li> <li>▪ Fear of losing national identity</li> <li>▪ Fear of the country suffering a loss in sovereignty</li> <li>▪ Dissatisfaction with the EU</li> <li>▪ The nation state being considered more significant for political matters than the EU</li> <li>▪ The feeling of playing merely a marginal role in the EU</li> <li>▪ The weak mobilisation potential of the political parties</li> <li>▪ Lack of identification with political parties</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Weak relationships between national politicians and MEPs</li> <li>▪ Slovakian MEPs are not well-known and sit on insignificant committees</li> <li>▪ Hardly any election campaigns for the European elections</li> <li>▪ No state funding for European election campaigns</li> <li>▪ Slovakian election system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ People focused on the parliamentary elections in July 2014</li> <li>▪ EU not a primary interest of the Slovenian government</li> <li>▪ The media and politicians taking a negative stance towards the EU</li> <li>▪ Fear of losing economic sovereignty</li> <li>▪ Lack of knowledge about the EU among the population</li> <li>▪ Low level of interest in the EU in population</li> <li>▪ Population feeling little connection to the EU</li> <li>▪ Dissatisfaction with the EU</li> <li>▪ Disenchantment with politics</li> <li>▪ Low level of identification with political parties</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The European elections could not to be used to deliver a “protest vote”</li> <li>▪ Czech politicians avoid European issues</li> <li>▪ Low level of engagement with the EU on the part of the politicians</li> <li>▪ Distrust of and disappointment in political parties</li> <li>▪ Low level of media interest</li> <li>▪ Election campaigns not based on issues</li> <li>▪ Low election campaign budget</li> <li>▪ Fear of a loss of national identity</li> <li>▪ Fear of a loss of independence</li> <li>▪ Low level of identification with political parties</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ No motivation due to preceding parliamentary elections</li> <li>▪ Low level of interest in the EU among both politicians and the population</li> <li>▪ No hope of economic growth</li> <li>▪ Parties doing little to mobilise voters</li> <li>▪ Ineffective election campaigns as there was little differentiating the parties</li> <li>▪ People did not feel that European issues affected them</li> <li>▪ Absence of a follow-up project subsequent to the EU accession</li> <li>▪ EU issues too theoretical and too abstract</li> <li>▪ Lower importance of post-materialist issues in Hungarian society, such as conflicts of value that people connect with the EU</li> </ul>

### 3.2 Croatia<sup>8</sup>

In Croatia, there have been two elections to the European Parliament to date (in 2013 and 2014).<sup>9</sup> In the referendum on the EU accession in January 2012, during which turnout was 43.6, some 67 per cent of Croatians voted in favour of Croatia joining the EU.<sup>10</sup>

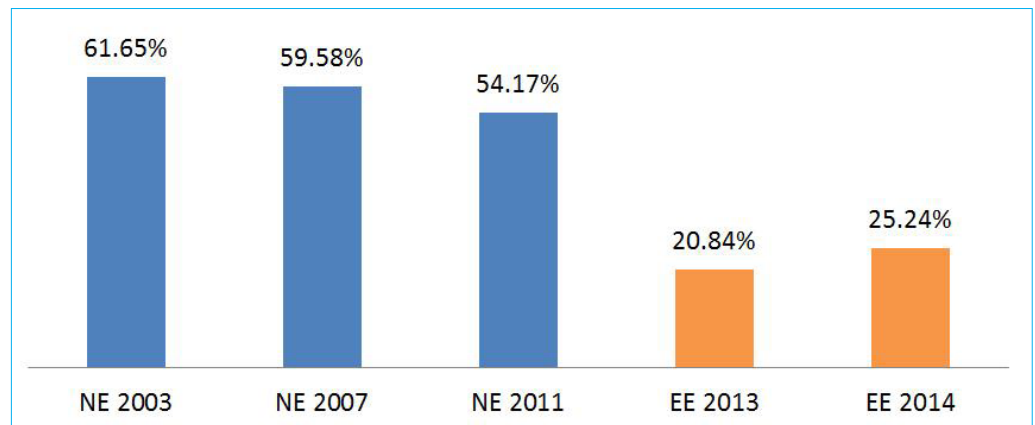
#### *Decline in parliamentary elections and only marginal increase in European elections*

After the first elections to the European Parliament in 2013, turnout in the 2014 European elections rose slightly by 4.4 percentage points (2013 – 20.84 per cent; 2014 – 25.24 per cent). While turnout in parliamentary elections has declined in Croatia, 35 per cent more eligible voters vote in parliamentary elections on average than in elections to the European Parliament (2003 – 61.65 per cent; 2007 – 59.58 per cent; 2011 – 54.17 per cent). Average turnout in the three last Croatian parliamentary elections was 58 per cent. Croatia has 11 seats in the European Parliament.

On average, 35 per cent more voters participate in parliamentary elections than in European elections.

**Fig. 4: Voter turnout in Croatia**

Author's own chart<sup>11</sup>



There are a number of different reasons for the low turnout in European elections. Besides the common explanation that European elections are also of little significance in Croatia and that they are considered “second-order” elections, there are various other reasons which the interview with the expert uncovered.

#### *Lengthy accession negotiations and post-accession shock dampen euphoria*

Firstly, Croatia’s accession to the EU involved a very protracted process, partly due to resistance from Slovenia. Before Croatia could become the 28<sup>th</sup> member of the EU, disagreements about the Slovenian-Croatian border needed to be settled. These related above all to the territorial waters in the Adriatic. Slovenia blocked the accession negotiations until the two countries agreed to have an international court decide the border dispute.<sup>12</sup> The protracted accession negotiations had already dampened the Croatian population’s enthusiasm for the planned EU accession prior to the 2012 referendum. Many Croatians could no longer comprehend why Croatia should, in fact, join the EU. In addition, there was no significant joint project subsequently, which was supported by both Croatia and the EU.

After the protracted accession negotiations, there was no joint project with the EU that could have inspired the Croatians.

Hoped-for economic effects did not materialise in Croatia.

Secondly, the economic and financial crisis also meant that the expectations of the Croatians were not fulfilled. Their stance towards the EU Project became increasingly critical. The accession negotiations and the accession in 2013 in the shadow of the economic and financial crisis produced a sustained “post-accession” shock in Croatia. The accession had hardly any positive economic effects for the country. The labour market suffered from a significant decline in new jobs, and rising unemployment and a decline in real earnings dampened consumer spending. In spite of the EU membership, experts expected the economic stagnation to continue and GDP to drop by one per cent in 2014. By the time of the election, the hoped-for economic benefits of the EU accession had not materialised, rather the opposite. Changes to taxation meant that billions of kunas of taxable income were transferred out of the country.

#### *Fear of “integration” into the EU*

In Croatia, the debate about the loss of national identity is coloured by the country’s communist past.

Croatians also increasingly feared a loss of national identity by the country’s accession to the EU. Foreign affairs politicians spoke of the country being “integrated” into the EU. The term “integration” reminded voters of the times in the former Yugoslavia. They were afraid of once more becoming part of a supranational structure and suffering a loss of sovereignty.

In Croatia, a link is made between the low turnout and dissatisfaction with the EU, focusing on two aspects. Firstly, there is the communist past. Many Croatians are highly sensitive on issues of national identity for that reason and fear a loss of identity in the European Union. The feeling of alienation with respect to European institutions is particularly strong in countries that are in the process of building a democracy after having been bound together under a communist, dictatorial, supranational system for many years.

The feeling of only playing a marginal role in Europe is lowering turnout in Croatia.

Secondly, Croatian voters realise that despite the increasing authority of the EU Parliament and its role of providing an outline framework, it is the nation state in which political matters are implemented within the provisions of the framework. The EU Parliament deals more in political concepts than in political implementation. As the actual implementation is of greater importance to the voters, they use parliamentary elections to express their wishes. Another aspect that plays a role in this context is the fact that Croatia only plays a marginal role in the EU, which engenders a feeling that the country will not be able to make its own special contribution to the European Project.

#### *Poor voter mobilisation and dampened euphoria*

The low level of voter identification with political parties contributes to the low turnout.

The poor mobilisation potential of the political parties is a further reason why eligible voters from post-communist countries do not turn out to vote. Political parties are not only less active in their efforts to mobilise voters, but also in recruiting new political elites. Unlike the situation in other countries, the parties have hardly any links to society. Party members are mired in corruption scandals and not capable of bringing the citizens’ interests into the political sphere. For this reason, only a small number of eligible voters are able to identify with a party. Most of them are not interested in participating in the political process. In public, Croatian parties convey the idea that half of all Croatian legislative projects are decided on by the EU, without spelling out which bills these are and what stance the Croatian politicians take with respect to the European requirements.

Working for and promoting Europe continue to be important after the EU accession.

*Resentment and disappointed hopes*

The low turnout in Croatia is due above all to resentment and disappointed hopes. Not only does Croatia fear losing its own national identity, there is also little effort being made to promote the EU Project now that the protracted negotiations are over. In the case of Croatia, the low turnout can also be seen as an expression of dissatisfaction.

In Croatia, the European elections are seen as second-order elections. This is partly due to the poor communication efforts by the national parties, which are not capable of mobilising voters and which do not promote the EU Project as much as the parties in Western European and older EU Member States do.

Both the population and the government of Croatia had clearly supported the accession to the European Union. But politicians, parties and civil society failed to realise that working for and promoting Europe would be necessary after the accession as well.

**3.3 Slovakia<sup>13</sup>**

Slovakia acceded to the EU in 2004 in the course of the eastern EU enlargement. In the referendum, 93.71 per cent of voters supported the accession with a turnout of 52.15 per cent.<sup>14</sup> Slovakia has 13 MEPs.

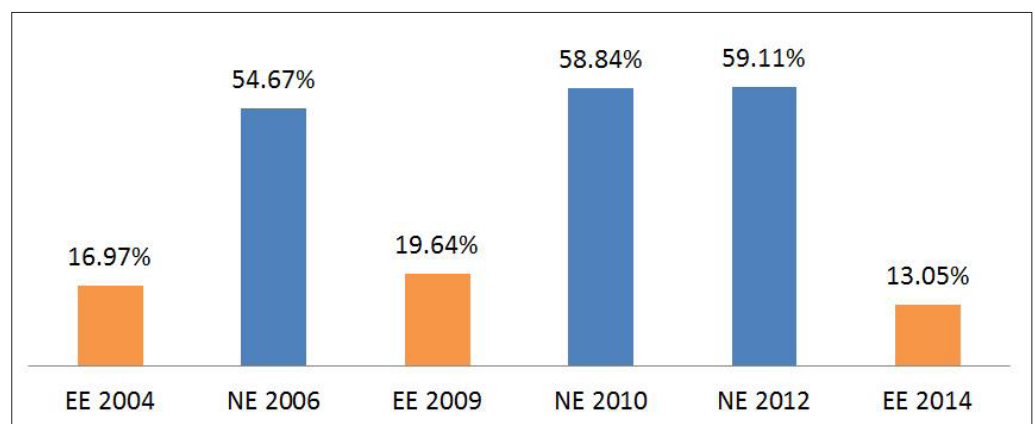
*Slovakia had the poorest turnout in the elections to the European Parliament*

After the European elections, Slovakia drew media attention due to its low turnout. At 13 per cent, it was lower than in any other EU Member State. Additionally, the difference in turnout in the European elections and in the parliamentary elections was much greater in Slovakia than in any other country. In the parliamentary elections of recent years, turnout ranged from 54 to 59 per cent (2006 – 54.67 per cent; 2010 – 58.84 per cent; 2012 – 59.11 per cent), while it was some 40 percentage points lower in the elections to the European Parliament (2004 – 16.97 per cent; 2009 – 19.64 per cent; 2014 – 13.05 per cent).

At 13 per cent, turnout in the 2014 European elections in Slovakia was the absolute lowest.

**Fig. 5: Voter turnout in Slovakia**

Author's own chart<sup>15</sup>





*Satisfied with the EU, but:*

Although turnout in the 2014 European elections was the lowest ever, this is not necessarily attributable to dissatisfaction with the EU, contrary to the situation in Croatia. The political parties and their campaigns are thought to be the root cause of the low turnout.

To the representatives of the political parties in Slovakia, the European Project is not as important as national interests. Consequently, not much effort is invested in maintaining contact with Brussels. The country's MEPs are politicians who are not well known and who sit on insignificant committees, the work of which hardly affects Slovakian interests. If Slovakian MEPs were involved in making decisions on economic and monetary regulations in Brussels, this would substantially increase the attention paid to the EU by the country's citizens. The political parties neither motivate the voters nor realise themselves how important the EU is for the country's advancement.

Slovakia's MEPs are politicians who are not well known.

As there was hardly any election campaigning, there was nothing to mobilise voters to participate in the European elections.

Furthermore, the parties did not make sufficient efforts to promote the elections to the European Parliament. As there was hardly any election campaigning, the voters were consequently not very motivated. This was due not only to a lack of interest on the part of politicians but also a lack of financial resources to fund elections campaigns. The parties receive no funding for European election campaigns. This is in stark contrast to the campaign before the 2003 referendum, which promoted the EU accession. The country's communist past in particular had been an important strategic argument used by the proponents at the time; the aim was to have the country join the EU as fast as possible. Afterwards, neither the politicians nor the parties maintained their interest in the EU.

The Slovakian electoral system does not satisfy the voters.

A further significant aspect is Slovakia's electoral system. This forces voters to first vote for a party and then select two candidates from that party. People cannot vote for a party and then select one or two candidates from a different party. There is also only a single constituency. The individuals standing for election are frequently unknown and have no local connection. Voters ask themselves why they should vote for a candidate they do not know, who has failed in national politics and is now hoping for a post in Brussels.

*Nevertheless: integration in a supranational system as an opportunity*

The lack of knowledge about the EU and the importance of maintaining the national identity, which were described as the causes for people's decision not to vote by the Croatian expert, are less relevant in the case of the low turnout in Slovakia. Integration in a supranational system was important to Slovakian citizens in the 1990s and still is today. In no way does this low turnout reflect dissatisfaction. But the politicians were not successful in communicating the importance of the European Project and mobilising the country's population to vote. It is incumbent on the politicians and the political parties to step up their engagement for the EU.

**3.4 Slovenia<sup>16</sup>**

In Slovenia too, there is a clear discrepancy apparent between the turnout in parliamentary elections and that in European elections. While turnout in parliamentary elections is 63 per cent on average, it is around 27 per cent in the elections to the European Parliament. When voting in the referendum back in 2003, as many as 89.64 per cent of eligible voters supported the EU accession (with a turnout of 60.44 per cent).<sup>17</sup> Slovenia has eight MEPs.

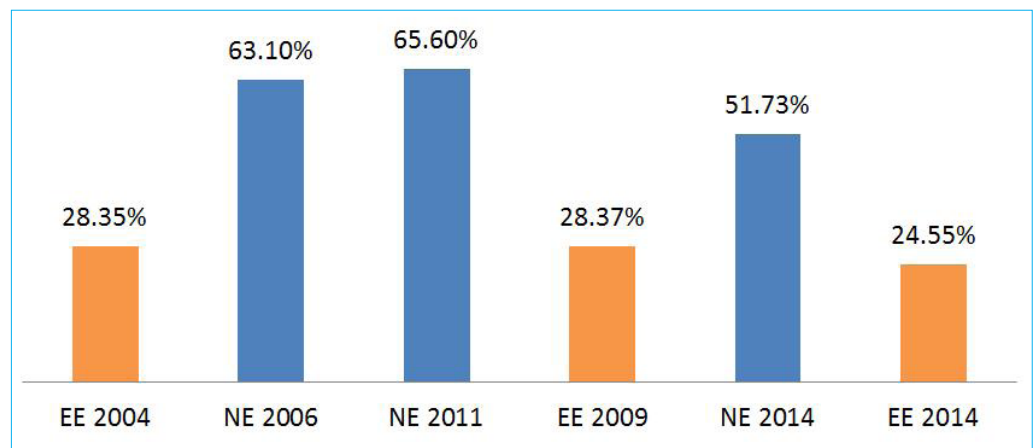
The discrepancy between parliamentary and European election turnout figures averages 33 percentage points.

*Roller coaster in parliamentary elections, low-level downward trajectory in European elections*

While turnout in the elections to the national parliament was 63.10 per cent in 2006, it rose to 65.60 per cent in 2011 and then fell again to 51.73 per cent in 2014. Turnout also declined in the European elections; it was 28.35 in 2004, rose only by 0.02 percentage points to 28.37 in 2009 and dropped to 24.55 in 2014.

**Fig. 6: Voter turnout in Slovenia**

Author's own chart<sup>18</sup>



*Super election year 2014*

The European elections took place in the shadow of the parliamentary elections.

The election results of the 2014 European elections were closely linked to the preceding political turbulences affecting Slovenia. The government under Alenka Bratušek had announced its resignation in April 2014, and new elections had taken place in July. During the Slovenian super election year, turnout in the elections to the European Parliament had not been expected to be high. Everybody was focused on the impending parliamentary elections, not the European elections.

*Lack of interest, lack of knowledge, low level of enthusiasm for politics*

The Slovenian population shows little interest in decisions taken in Brussels.

There are, however, other aspects besides the parliamentary elections that contributed to the low turnout in Slovenia. The most important underlying reasons include a lack of interest, a lack of knowledge, and disenchantment with politics. These originate in Slovenian criticism of the ECB, the IMF and the EU Commission, which were blamed for the Slovenian economic plight during the economic and financial crisis. The media picked up on this critical stance and riled against the MEPs' high salaries, thereby lending support to Bratušek's Eurosceptic course. The government in particular considered the unpopular measures a diktat from Brussels. Furthermore, the European Project does not represent a key interest of the Slovenian government and institutions; consequently, they made no great effort to encourage their citizens to vote. The Slovenian population feels little connection to the EU, which means that decisions taken at EU level did not catch the voters' attention. Dissatisfaction with the EU also played a part, although there was little discussion of specific criticisms in society. Although the population had been enthusiastic in its support for the referendum, interest has obviously waned since then. This ties in with the explanation that EU accession was the primary objective.

The main concern in connection with the EU accession was not fear of the loss of national identity but fear of the loss of economic sovereignty.

In the Czech Republic, turnout is declining in both parliamentary and European elections.

The 2014 European elections could not be used to lodge a "protest vote".

Instead of arousing interest in the European Union, the Slovenian institutions and the government convey the impression that decisions from Brussels have to be accepted without question. It is therefore above all the government and the political parties that are incapable of mobilising their voters. This is also linked to the low level of identification with political parties.

Similar to the situation in Slovakia, national identity does not play a significant role. Instead, EU critics and parts of the population fear the loss of economic sovereignty.

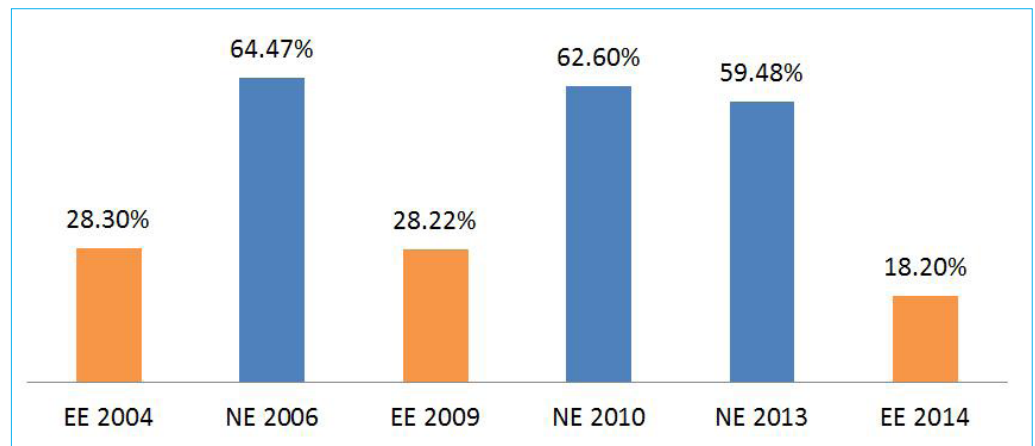
### 3.5 Czech Republic<sup>19</sup>

The Czech Republic acceded to the EU in 2004. In the preceding 2003 referendum, 77.33 per cent of voters supported the accession, with a turnout of 55.21 per cent.<sup>20</sup> In the 2004 elections to the European Parliament, turnout in the Czech Republic was 28.30 per cent, dropping very slightly to 28.22 per cent in 2009. In the most recent European elections in 2014 (18.20 per cent), turnout dropped drastically by ten percentage points. The Czech Republic has 21 MEPs.

In the last three parliamentary elections (2006, 2010 and 2013), turnout was an average 62 per cent, declining over time. In 2006, it was around 64 per cent, dropping to 62 per cent in 2010 and then further to 59 per cent in 2013. The discrepancy in turnout in parliamentary and European elections is around 36 percentage points on average.

**Fig. 7: Voter turnout in the Czech Republic**

Author's own chart<sup>21</sup>



#### *National debate stays clear of European issues*

There are a number of different underlying reasons for the low turnout in the Czech Republic. Parliamentary elections took place in the country in 2013. At the time of the European elections, the government had only just begun its work. This meant that people were not able to use the European elections to lodge a "protest vote". Nor could the opposition voice any concrete criticisms in the new government which could have been used in the European election campaign. Although each party had an election program in which they attempted to home in on European issues, the ideas and the priorities were so different that no single issue could make a significant impression in the election campaign. Voters could therefore not see any mean-

ingful causes to vote for in the European elections. The general approach of the Czech political parties is also inadequate. Politicians avoid European issues as those are less helpful to them in their national careers and in national political work.

*Underlying reasons include low election campaign budgets, a low level of identification with political parties as well as disappointment*

Politicians evoke a great deal of distrust and disappointment among voters and consequently fail to mobilise them.

It is also the case in the Czech Republic that the election campaign budgets are much lower than for the preceding parliamentary elections, by a factor of three to five. There is therefore much less publicity for the European elections. Added to this is the fact that media interest is low, a phenomenon that is also apparent in other Central and Eastern European countries.

Voters' identification with political parties is on the low side in the Czech Republic. The political parties evoke not only a great deal of distrust but also disappointment among the voters. This did not, however, play into the hands of the Eurosceptic parties. On the contrary: the Eurosceptics lost support in the Czech Republic. While surveys show that the Czechs are rather sceptical towards the EU, this stance is not strong enough for them to actually vote for Eurosceptic parties. Low turnout does not necessarily indicate dissatisfaction.

The lack of influence of the Czech Republic in the EU is a further reason for the low turnout in the European elections. In a survey by the European Values Think-Tank, 35 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that the effects of the Czech Republic's EU membership are negative, while 26 per cent professed to be indifferent and only 37 per cent thought the effects were positive. Unfulfilled expectations, for instance with respect to economic growth, could therefore also have been reflected in the election turnout. Even though the economic and financial crisis did not really impact the Czech Republic, the negative associations continued to resonate in public opinion.

*"About us without us"*

Fear of the loss of independence and of national identity plays a significant role in the Czech Republic.

Prior to the EU accession, EU opponents fuelled the fear that the accession would endanger national identity, stating that joining the EU would result in the Czech identity being subsumed in the EU identity. While the fear was not that significant, it did play a decisive role in the question of a potential loss of independence. This has to do with Czech history, namely the fact that decisions were made in the past about the country without Czech interests being taken into account ("about us without us"). In this context, Brussels was regarded as the new city making decisions without the Czechs having a say. This had previously applied to Moscow, to Berlin before that and to Vienna in the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. Many politicians used this narrative, which resonated with voters.

Czech politicians are frequently incapable of discussing European issues.

Voters' distrust of politicians is particularly significant where the EU is concerned. Only the top three candidates of a party are capable of talking about European issues and making a contribution to the European debate. The situation is similar to that in Slovakia, where only few politicians have adequate knowledge about the European agenda. Added to this is the fact that the Czech political parties refused to adapt to EU institutions and that the functions of the EU are not well-known either. At the same time, politicians are showing little interest in engagement with European matters.

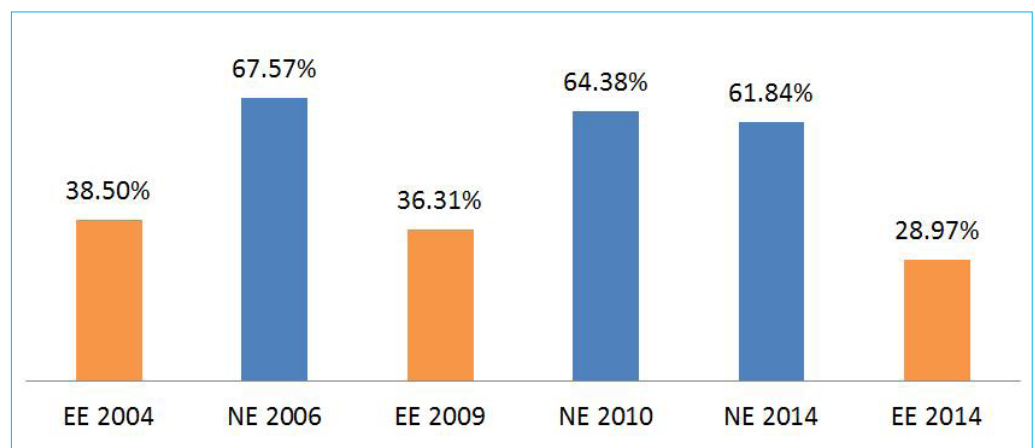
### 3.6 Hungary<sup>22</sup>

Turnout in the 2014 European elections in Hungary was 28.97 per cent. There were also parliamentary elections taking place in Hungary in 2014. Turnout in these was 61.73 per cent, i.e. almost 33 percentage points higher than in the European elections of the same year. When looking at the historic figures, it becomes apparent that turnout declined in both the parliamentary and the European elections. In the parliamentary elections, this involved a decline from 67.57 per cent (2006) to 61.84 per cent (2014) and therefore a drop of just under 6 percentage points. The decline in the elections to the European Parliament was more pronounced. Turnout during the 2004 European elections, the first ones Hungary participated in, was 38.50 per cent. Five years later, the figure had dropped slightly by two percentage points to 36.31 per cent (2009), and it then dropped by a further 8 percentage points to 28.97 per cent (2014). Overall, turnout in the European elections therefore declined more significantly than in the parliamentary elections. This discrepancy is interesting insofar as there had been clear support for the EU accession referendum in 2003, when 83.67 per cent of votes were cast in favour with a turnout of 45.62 per cent.<sup>23</sup>

The decline in turnout has been more pronounced in the European elections than in the parliamentary ones.

**Fig. 8: Voter turnout in Hungary**

Author's own chart<sup>24</sup>



#### *European election could not be used to lodge a "protest vote"*

The low turnout in the European elections of May 2014 is being put down to the preceding parliamentary elections in April 2014. These had already produced a clear result, which is why voters were not interested in further elections. There was no strong motivation for going to the polls yet again. The general view is that the Hungarian population had always used previous European elections to flag up their desire for national political change. As parliamentary elections had only taken place one month previously, the European elections could not fulfil this function.

Motivation in participating in a second election within two months was low in Hungary.

At the time of the first European elections in 2004, the social-liberal party in government was not particularly popular, which meant that the opposition of the time and current governing party Fidesz was better able to mobilise voters through their election campaign. Two months after the 2004 European elections, the Prime Minister had to go, as his party had lost the elections. The socialists were also very unpopular in 2009; consequently, the Fidesz party already made its mark for the coming national elections during the European election campaign.

Voters' lack of interest and a lacklustre election campaign made voter mobilisation more difficult.

### *Hungarian criticism in Brussels undermines support for the EU*

Furthermore, interest in European matters is not as strong in Hungary as in other countries. According to a study carried out by the Nézőpont Institute, only five per cent of respondents were able to name the top candidate of the EPP in the 2014 European elections. Added to this is the fact that the political parties did not make any great efforts to mobilise voters for the European elections. Instead, the government has risen in popularity in recent years particularly by voicing criticism of Brussels, as the EU has initiated various proceedings against it.

Another aspect contributing to the low turnout was the way in which the election campaign was conducted. While the parties clearly fall into right-leaning and left-leaning camps at the national level, a grand coalition is usual practice at EU level. Consequently, there were hardly any significant differences apparent between the different factions. The election campaign was neither confrontational nor did it arouse voters' interest.

### *National issues overshadow European issues*

The absence of a feeling of relevance contributed to voters staying away from the polls.

The EU and the 21 Hungarian MEPs play hardly any role in Hungarian public life. The Hungarian population does not feel directly affected by the issues under discussion in Brussels and these are also too theoretical and too abstract to attract the attention of voters in Hungary. Voter mobilisation was more effective for the 2014 parliamentary elections. This had to do with the desire to reduce energy costs, a subject that had exercised people's minds for years. It was the main topic of the election campaign and was considered important by eligible voters because it affected them personally. While the EU tried to generate interest through a personalised election campaign and by reducing roaming charges, the remaining issues discussed at EU level were of no interest to Hungarian voters. Even the personalisation of the election campaign involving Jean-Claude Juncker made no impact.

Issues that are of importance in other countries at a European level as well have no or little significance in Hungary. Immigration plays a large role in many other countries. But Hungary hardly has any immigrants and their number is decreasing<sup>25</sup>, which is why the perception of being affected and interest are minimal. Furthermore, foreign affairs are not seen as very important, contrary to the situation in Poland, for instance, where there is greater interest in the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Hungarians are mainly occupied with Hungarian issues and less open to European matters.

### *The EU as a post-materialist community of values*

In Hungary, materialistic issues are still of great significance.

Society itself also plays an important role in voter turnout. Hungarian society is still rather materialistic in its outlook. Materialistic issues are more important than post-materialist ones, such as conflicts of values. By comparison, the EU is less involved in material matters. After all, it is the national governments that distribute the money. The national government is therefore considered to be of greater significance than the EU.

Even if interest in the EU is rather low in Hungary, one should not interpret the low turnout as reflecting dissatisfaction with the EU. This is confirmed in particular by the strong support for the EU accession in the 2003 referendum, when 83.76 per cent of those voting supported the accession.<sup>26</sup> Both government and opposition parties supported the EU accession. Joining the EU allowed the country to take advantage of financial support from Brussels. The primary aim had been achieved.

### *There is no joint follow-up project*

Hungary lacks a dream which only the European Union can fulfil.

The accession was not complemented by a follow-up project, which the political actors and the population could get behind. This was partly the reason for the declining turnout. During the period following the accession, economic growth in Hungary either almost stagnated or declined in spite of the EU accession. The hope to achieve the same standard of living as Austria remained unfulfilled. Instead, scepticism towards the European Union increased. What Hungary lacks is a desire, a dream that can only be fulfilled by the European Union and not by the national government. If there was such a project, this would boost interest in Europe and increase voter turnout. But there is currently no such project in sight. And even joining the Eurozone does not have majority support among the population.

## 4. Comparison with Western European Member States

It will be helpful to conduct a comparison with Western European Member States to be able to formulate some purposeful recommendations for action for Central and Eastern European countries.

A study by the European Parliament and the European Commission conducted subsequent to the 2009 European elections came to the same conclusions regarding voter turnout. By contrast with other studies, this one investigated the reasons why turnout was still higher in the Western European countries.

People are more likely not to vote in countries where there is a general lack of trust in politics.

The proportion of those who regularly fail to vote is markedly higher in countries that only joined the EU in 2004 and 2007 than in the "old" EU Member States. In addition, the proportion of non-voters is higher in countries where there is a general lack of trust in politics. This lack of trust is more pronounced in the Central and Eastern European countries than in the Western European Member States. Turnout in European elections is also higher in countries where people identify more strongly with political parties.<sup>27</sup> This was also confirmed in the interviews with the experts, who stressed that identification with political parties is very weak in the Central and Eastern European countries, which made it more difficult to mobilise voters for the European elections.

People in the new Member States have a stronger connection with the nation state than those in the "old" EU Member States.

When focusing more strongly on those who did vote, the following becomes apparent: support for Europe is stronger among those who cast their vote. Another correlation becomes clear when making a direct comparison between the 15 Member States existing before 2004 and the subsequent new members. People in the "old" Member States feel less connection with the nation state than those in the new Member States. EU membership is still viewed more positively in Western European countries than in Central and Eastern European countries, which acceded to the EU in 2004 and later.

Furthermore, those who live in the "old" Member States are more inclined to consider themselves EU citizens than those in the new Member States. However, there is a new trend becoming apparent. Although this self-image is stronger in the old EU Member States, it is on the decline there. In the Central and Eastern European countries, on the other hand, the trend is upwards.<sup>28</sup>

One thing remains unresolved. Even if citizens of the youngest Member States increasingly see themselves as EU citizens, this is not reflected in voter turnout. Instead, turnout is still declining in the Central and Eastern European countries.

## 5. Conclusions

The present study points to certain underlying reasons for the low voter turnout in five selected Central and Eastern European countries. These include some common aspects as well as some country-specific ones.

A lack of interest, a lack of knowledge about EU institutions and the absence of a fundamental positive stance of politicians towards the EU are causes for low voter turnout in all countries.

Low voter turnout does not necessarily reflect dissatisfaction with the EU. Instead, other problem areas can be identified as key factors for low turnout figures: a lack of interest, a lack of knowledge about EU institutions, and political parties, politicians and civil society actors who do not display a stronger fundamental (positive) stance towards the EU. The main point to be made in this context is that politicians hardly made any efforts to promote the EU and the European elections because of their focus on national key areas of interests. In connection with the accession to the EU, one must bear in mind people's fear of losing their own national identity due to the supremacy of a supranational idea. This is closely linked to the communist past (Croatia and Czech Republic). That said, this does not apply to all countries. In Slovakia, for instance, national identity is not significant with respect to the accession to the EU, which was welcomed because of the communist past.

The underlying reasons are further considered to include a lack of identification with political parties, dissatisfaction with and distrust of the national politicians who are sent to Brussels to represent the country.

Other significant aspects affecting voter turnout include the extent of identification with political parties, satisfaction with politics and trust in national politicians. This is confirmed by a comparison with Western European Member States. If these three components are virtually absent, this has a detrimental effect on voter turnout according to the experts as it discourages people from going to the polls. The lack of trust in national politics and national politicians is further of particular significance. It goes hand in hand with the perception that the new Member States will hardly be able to exert any influence in the EU Parliament with their few seats. The countries' representatives in Brussels tend to be politicians who failed to succeed in national politics. In some countries, there were also indications of disappointment about the fact that the EU accession did not produce the expected economic improvement (Hungary and Croatia).

The media further played an influential role. Particularly in Slovenia, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, the population hardly noticed the media reporting about the European election campaign and the European elections. The perception of the EU and of the European elections was also affected by the low budgets for the election campaigns (Slovakia, Czech Republic).

Problems such as protracted accession negotiations, the absence of joint projects with the EU and the materialistic nature of society are not conducive to high voter turnout.

Besides these common underlying reasons, there are also some country-specific ones to mention. In Croatia, the protracted negotiations produced symptoms of fatigue, and approval for the EU declined over time. There is also no significant joint project that has the support of both Croatia and of the EU. Parliamentary elections took place in Slovenia and Hungary in 2014 and in the Czech Republic in 2013. This meant that voters were not highly motivated to go to the polls once again. In Hungary and the Czech Republic, where the parliamentary elections preceded the European ones, the latter could not be used to lodge a "protest vote" against the national government. In Slovakia, the institutional framework made voter mobilisation difficult. As the EU is considered a post-materialist community of values, Hungarians do not view its significance for them particularly high.



## 6. Recommendations for action

Higher voter turnout should be in the interest of the EU Parliament and national governments. Five measures could well play a key role for all countries and for actors on the ground.

### **Strengthen political education in Member States**

One recommendation for the new Member States is to focus more strongly on political education and to integrate it into the education system. Knowledge about the EU and the associated institutions must be enhanced and interest in the EU must be (re-) stimulated. This is particularly important in rural areas. One cannot assume that support for the EU will continue after the accession and the initial euphoria. Instead, there is a need for a more intensive engagement, for instance in the form of campaigns, events, papers, consulting and information measures. That is the only way to ensure that the population will gain a better understanding of the European Union and will continue to support it. After the accession to the EU, politicians, political parties and other actors are called upon to step up their efforts to provide the population with information about the EU and with details of the latest developments. Particularly in countries where the media reporting focuses little on European politics, political education is of great significance. This is also extremely important for potential future accession countries.

Greater engagement in the form of political education is required in order to counter the decline in voter turnout.

### **Improve communication**

Secondly, communication will have to be much improved to explain more clearly what consequences decisions taken in Brussels have for EU citizens and to what extent people will be personally affected by the decisions. If EU citizens do not have this knowledge, voter turnout will not improve and the EU will not be able to gain greater support in future. In the case of further accession candidates, it is also advisable to make the accession process visible and to illustrate the consequences of accession to the EU more clearly. In addition, decisions must be made transparent. They must not remain at an abstract level, but must be expressed in a clear, simple and precise manner. This is where national politicians and the media in particular are called upon to step up their engagement and increase pressure on the politicians in the European Parliament to up their game. The MEPs play a special role as they represent essential communication links between Brussels and the population. If they do not speak about the decisions and the associated consequences, neither national politicians let alone the population will deem them to be of importance.

Decisions taken in Brussels must be transparent, clear and comprehensible.

### **Send top politicians to Brussels to represent the country**

Thirdly, the politicians acting as national representatives play a key role. Besides communication and support for the EU, it is also important to put forward candidates for the Brussels positions who are taken seriously and who are considered successful by the population. Politicians who have already failed in their ambitions in their home country and now hope to gain a position in Brussels after all will not enjoy support from the population. This means that efforts should be made to send top politicians to Brussels as MEPs who are prepared to demonstrate commitment to the EU. Seeing top politicians from Central and Eastern European countries motivated to go to Brussels can have a positive impact on the population. Successful politicians can gain the trust of the people and their support for the EU. Poland and

There is a need to send top politicians to Brussels to win the trust and support of the population.

Latvia have shown that it can be done by sending Donald Tusk and Valdis Dombrovskis, former prime ministers, to Brussels, where they hold important offices.

### Strengthen programmatic profiles

The political parties must strengthen their programmatic profiles to counter the low level of identification with the parties.

Another recommendation relates to the need for parties to strengthen their programmatic profiles. As a comparison with Western European countries shows, identification with political parties contributes significantly to voter mobilisation. Strengthening the programmatic profiles can help to counter a further loss of identification with political parties.

### A European identity does not preclude national identity

Political parties and other actors must attend to the fears and concerns of the population before accession negotiations even begin.

Identity plays the fifth key role. The new Member States are not only new members of the EU, they are also young nation states. Their development of a national identity therefore came up against a European identity, which comprises the nation states as a supranational concept, whilst still in its infancy. The risk of the country losing its national identity or of not being able to develop it further was thus to do with chronological coincidence. In this situation, it must be made clear to people that the creation of a European identity does not necessarily mean the loss of the national identity. Instead, it is possible to be part of a national identity and of a European identity. As Eurosceptic parties try to fuel such fears of a loss of identity in the course of an EU accession process, it will be necessary to attend to the concerns and fears of the population ahead of the accession taking place.

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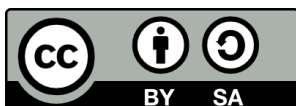
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