



The role of international exchanges in building the **European identity** of Polish students



The role of international exchanges in building the European identity of Polish students

Published by: Erasmus Student Network Poland

Authors: Dominika Guzik, Anna Kowalczyk, Aleksandra Lewandowska

Design and project: Dominika Guzik, Joanna Brylewska

Photos: Erasmus Student Network AISBL

Erasmus Student Network Poland

Al. Reymonta 12A

01-842 Warsaw

Phone: +48 508 351 421

www.esn.pl

Please refer to this report as: Guzik, D., Kowalczyk, A., Lewandowska, A., (2025). The role of international exchanges in building the European identity of Polish students. Erasmus Student Network Poland.

All content is protected by copyright law, and any unauthorised use, such as reproducing, copying, distributing on your website, or incorporating it into your own products, may result in civil or criminal liability. For permission to use the materials, please contact board@esn.pl.



Table of content

- 1. Introduction 4
- 2. Poland in the European Union 6
- 3. Polish Youth and the European Union 10
- 4. Citizenship Affiliation Before and After
Mobility 15
- 5. The Importance of EU Policies 21
- 6. Voting Intentions in the 2024 European
Parliament Elections 28
- 7. Conclusion 32
- 8. Bibliography 34



1 Introduction

The prospect of Poland's accession to the European Union served as a catalyst for profound social, political, and economic transformations in our country. The process of European integration brought Poland numerous benefits, such as access to the single market, freedom of movement, EU funds, inclusion in the Schengen Area, and participation in educational and mobility programmes like Erasmus+ [1]. The high level of public support for Poland's accession to the European Union, confirmed by the results of the accession referendum, reflected a widespread belief in the strategic importance of this step for Poland's development [2].

Today, twenty years after accession and at the start of Poland's second presidency of the Council of the European Union, it is worth reflecting on the impact of two decades of membership on Polish society - particularly on young people, who play a key role in shaping the country's future. At the same time, the 2024 European Parliament elections highlighted a low level of youth engagement in democratic processes [3], prompting an analysis of the potential causes and solutions to this issue.

The aim of this report, entitled *The role of international exchanges in building the European identity of Polish students*, is to demonstrate that participation in international academic mobility programmes - especially Erasmus+ - has a positive impact on increasing civic engagement and fostering greater interest in EU-related issues among Polish youth.

This report also sheds light on Poland's presidency of the Council of the European Union, which is just beginning, by providing valuable insights into the perspectives of young people - a group that largely does not remember the pre-EU accession era in Poland, and many of whom were not even alive to witness this key moment in the country's history. The analysis is based on data collected during the 15th edition of the *ESNsurvey*, which focuses on the experiences of students participating in international exchange programmes such as Erasmus+. Special attention was given to data obtained from Polish participants, which were compared with the Europe-wide results included in the ESN International report [ESNsurvey - 15th Edition: Making Quality Mobility a Reality for All](#) [4].

The *ESNsurvey* is a Europe-wide research project conducted by the Erasmus Student Network for the past 20 years, focusing on various aspects of international academic mobility. It is one of the largest research initiatives of its kind led by a student organisation. Since its first edition in 2005, the *ESNsurvey* has not only inspired ESN's efforts to improve the quality of student mobility but has also served as a valuable resource for EU policymakers.

The study covered three key groups: individuals participating in international exchanges, those completing full academic cycles abroad, and those who have never participated in academic mobility. The report, *The role of international exchanges in building the European identity of Polish students*, is the first publication in the history of the *ESNsurvey* project to focus exclusively on

the perspective of Polish students participating in international exchanges. These individuals accounted for 4% of the total respondents in the survey, representing 932 participants.

The research was conducted over a two-month period, from 29 May 2023 to 31 July 2023. The collected data pertains to students studying during the 2021/2022 and 2022/2023 academic years.

Additionally, the report draws on findings from social research, such as the CBOS report [20 Years of Poland's EU Membership](#) [5], published in April 2024, as well as data from the [Eurobarometer FL545 on Youth and Democracy](#) [6] and the [Eurobarometer EB046EP EU Post-Electoral Survey 2024](#) [3].

The conclusions presented in the report may serve as a starting point for discussions on the role of young people in shaping the future of Poland and the European Union, as well as identifying strategies to enhance their participation and sense of belonging to the European community.



2 Poland in the European Union

2.1 The beginnings of Poland in the European Union

On 16 April 2003, the Accession Treaty was signed in Athens, enabling the European Union to expand to include ten new member states, including Poland [7]. This was a key step in the process of European integration, marking a new chapter in Europe's history and, for Poland, the conclusion of a long process of negotiations and political, economic, and legal adjustments to meet EU standards.

One of the most significant milestones in the ratification of the treaty was the nationwide referendum, which served as a democratic expression of the public's will regarding EU membership. The referendum was held on 7-8 June 2003, with nearly 59% of eligible voters participating, reflecting strong public engagement in the decision-making process. The results were clear: over 77% of voters supported Poland's accession to the European Union [2]. This outcome underscored widespread public support for EU integration, seen as an opportunity for Poland to achieve dynamic economic growth, improve infrastructure, modernise public institutions, and fully participate in the political and economic processes unfolding across the continent.

The next step formalising the referendum's results was the ratification of the Accession Treaty on 23 July 2003. With this, Poland completed all necessary legal procedures, paving the way for official EU membership. From 1 May 2004, Poland became a full member of the European Union, actively shaping its policies and receiving numerous benefits from this membership.

2.2 Current attitudes of Polish citizens towards the European Union

Two decades have passed since the historic events surrounding Poland's accession to the European Union. In May 2024, nationwide celebrations marked the 20th anniversary of EU membership, providing an opportunity to reflect on the impact of European integration on the country's development and its citizens' lives. This was also a key moment to assess Poland's relationship with the EU and the significance of membership in the collective national consciousness.

To commemorate this anniversary, the Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS) conducted a public opinion survey, with results published in the report *20 years of Poland's membership in the EU* [5]. This study, carried out in April 2024, offers valuable insights into current attitudes of Polish citizens towards the EU, their evaluation of the past and present, as well as their expectations for the future of European integration.

The survey's results reveal the latest trends in how the EU is perceived by Polish society. The analysis sheds light on which membership benefits are most valued by the public, what concerns persist about the EU's functioning, and how Poles perceive their role in decision-making processes at the European level. These findings are crucial for understanding the dynamics of Poland-EU relations and the challenges both sides face in the years ahead, which Poland's EU Council Presidency has the opportunity to address.

Support for Poland's EU membership stood at 77% in 2024, indicating that a significant majority of respondents were in favour of remaining part of the EU. Notably, this level of support matches that of the 2003 accession referendum, which also recorded 77% in favour. Conversely, 17% of respondents opposed EU membership, while 6% were undecided. These results signal a notable decline in support for European integration, reaching its lowest level since 2013 [5], when support was at 72%.

It is worth noting that this decline may be attributed to several key factors, such as a shifting political landscape, increasing tensions between Poland and EU institutions, or the impact of global crises that may have fuelled Eurosceptic sentiments in society. Compared to previous years, when support for EU membership consistently exceeded 80%, these results suggest the need for an in-depth analysis of the causes behind this trend [5].

Nevertheless, the support level of 77% still reflects a strong embedding of European ideals within Polish society. However, the rise in the percentage of people opposing membership and those undecided may pose challenges for future initiatives related to civic education and promoting the benefits of EU membership.

2.3 The beginnings of educational mobility in Poland

Poland's path to full EU membership was a long and demanding process, requiring wide-ranging reforms that impacted not only the functioning of the state but also the daily lives of its citizens. A key aspect of this process was adapting Poland's education system to European standards and building social capital based on international cooperation. One of the most significant initiatives supporting these goals was the introduction of the Socrates programme in Poland, which began in the 1997/98 academic year [8]. Although this programme was available in Poland prior to its formal EU accession, it became a crucial tool for educational and cultural integration.

Poland's participation in the Socrates programme brought numerous benefits to both the education system and individual participants. At the systemic level, the programme contributed to preparing Polish higher education for implementing the Bologna Process, aimed at harmonising educational systems across Europe. It also facilitated the adaptation of curricula to international standards, which, in the long run, improved the quality of education and laid the foundation for future international university agreements.

For individual participants, the Socrates programme provided opportunities to develop linguistic and intercultural competencies, which were essential in an increasingly globalised world. Additionally, it opened doors to the West, enabling integration with universities and academic communities there. Students, academic staff, and university employees gained experience in international settings, learning to collaborate with representatives of various cultures and educational systems. Thanks to the Socrates programme, young Poles developed adaptive skills that became essential for functioning in the integrated EU labour market.

2.4 Conclusions

This chapter has focused on the historical context of Poland's accession to the European Union, as well as on an analysis of current perceptions of the EU among Polish citizens. Poland's integration with the EU was a lengthy process marked by numerous challenges, requiring significant reforms in the political and economic spheres. Despite the difficulties associated with aligning Poland's legal system, institutions, and social structures with European standards, joining the EU in 2004 proved to be a step towards political stabilisation and economic development.

Now, two decades later, Poland is a fully-fledged EU member state, and public perception of this decision appears largely positive. Based on public opinion research, there is a generally high level of satisfaction among citizens regarding Poland's EU membership. Most Poles recognise the benefits of integration, both in terms of economic improvement and enhanced living standards.

Despite these positive evaluations, critical voices remain, particularly regarding challenges related to further European integration and Poland's role within the EU. However, considering the prevailing social tendencies and the positive effects of membership, Poland remains a strong and committed member of the Union, with future cooperation within the EU seen as beneficial for the country.

Furthermore, it is worth highlighting that 25 years ago, there was already an awareness that the development of education represented a key investment in Europe's future. It was anticipated that the competencies gained through student mobility would significantly strengthen European integration and international cooperation. Student mobility programmes, such as Socrates, aimed not only to develop individual skills but also to foster a sense of European identity and solidarity.

In the next chapter, we will focus entirely on the perspective of young people in Poland. We will analyse the nature of their civic activity and their level of engagement in democratic processes, which form the foundation of modern society. We will also explore the significance of the European Union for young individuals who have never experienced the realities of pre-accession Poland, for whom EU membership is a natural part of daily life.



Undertaking this analysis is particularly important in the context of changing social and political conditions that affect younger generations. We aim to understand how young people define their place in Europe, how they perceive the benefits of European integration, and what challenges they identify in terms of EU cooperation. It will also be essential to examine how education, international exchange programmes such as Erasmus+, and contemporary social initiatives shape their approach to European values like solidarity, equality, and democracy.



3 Polish Youth and the European Union

3.1 Characteristics of the 15-30 age group

The 15-30 age group is a particularly interesting subject of analysis in the context of Poland's integration with the European Union, as it includes individuals who experienced the events surrounding accession as young children, as well as those born after Poland's entry into the EU. Consequently, members of this group either do not remember or have never experienced a reality in which Poland operated outside EU structures [9]. For many, EU membership is a natural and self-evident aspect of the socio-political landscape.

At the same time, this age group is recognised as one of the key voter demographics, requiring specific efforts to improve their engagement in democratic processes. Over the years, the European Union has implemented various initiatives aimed at stimulating young people's participation in public life. Examples include the Conference on the Future of Europe [10] and the European Year of Youth 2022 [11], both of which sought to amplify the voice of the younger generation and promote active citizenship at the European level.

The European Parliament elections, held in June 2024, presented another opportunity to undertake efforts focused on increasing youth engagement in democratic processes. EU institutions, non-governmental organisations, and national entities promoting civic activity among young people placed particular emphasis on education about democracy, political awareness, and the importance of their voices in shaping Europe's future.

Despite these efforts, the level of engagement among young voters in democratic processes remains a challenge. Voter turnout among those aged 15-30 remained relatively low in most EU member states, including Poland [3]. This phenomenon has long been a significant issue for both EU institutions and national governments, which strive to increase young people's civic involvement.

3.2 Civic engagement among youth in Poland

The *Eurobarometer FL545 on Youth and Democracy*, conducted in April 2024 [6], provided valuable insights into the latest trends in the civic engagement of young Poles aged 15-30. This broad age range captured both those still in education and those already active in the labour market. The European survey involved 26,189 respondents, with a sample of 1,008 participants from Poland. It yielded important data on young people's attitudes towards active citizenship and their willingness to engage in various forms of social and political participation.



Respondents were asked a multiple-choice question about their involvement in the activities of any organisations over the past 12 months. The findings revealed that the largest proportion of respondents (39%) selected the option 'None of the above' [6]. This result highlights the low level of involvement among young people in organised forms of social or civic activity.

Among those who reported participation in organisational activities, the highest percentages were recorded for volunteer organisations (17%), sports clubs (14%), and youth recreational clubs or organisations (14%) [6].

To better understand the reasons for the lack of engagement among young people, respondents were asked a multiple-choice question about why they had not participated in these activities. The most frequently cited reason was a lack of time, indicated by 46% of respondents. Other common reasons included 'I haven't thought about it yet' (34%) and 'I'm not interested' (25%) [6].

Other responses included: 'Nobody ever invited or asked me to take part' (19%), 'I can't afford it' (11%), and 'I don't know how to do it' (11%). Less frequently mentioned reasons were 'I don't understand these matters well enough' (8%), 'I didn't know I could do this' (7%), and 'These activities are too far away. It's hard for me to reach them from where I live, e.g., by public transport' (7%). Additionally, 2% of respondents cited other reasons, while 3% did not answer the question [6].

To identify the activities young people consider most effective for communicating their opinions to policymakers, respondents were asked a multiple-choice question about actions enabling young people to voice their concerns to decision-makers.

The most frequently chosen response was 'Voting in local, national, or European elections', selected by 54% of respondents. This indicates that young people view electoral processes as a fundamental democratic tool for influencing political decisions. Other popular responses included: expressing opinions on social media, using hashtags, or changing profile pictures (33%); and participating in public consultations on proposed policy initiatives, both online and offline, including the EU Youth Dialogue (28%) [6].

Other frequently chosen activities included involvement in student or youth organisations (27%) and volunteering for charitable organisations or campaigns (24%). Meanwhile, 20% of respondents viewed participation in political movements, parties, or trade unions as an effective way to express their views [6].

Activities with the lowest responses included boycotting or purchasing specific products for political, ethical, or environmental reasons (13%) and contacting a politician about a specific issue (10%). The option 'Other' was chosen by 2% of respondents, while 4% believed that none of the listed activities were effective. Additionally, 5% of respondents could not provide an answer to this question [6].



These findings reveal a diverse approach among young people to civic engagement. On the one hand, there is strong faith in traditional democratic mechanisms, such as elections, while on the other hand, there is growing importance placed on new forms of expression, particularly those linked to social media and digital consultations. The results also underscore the need to intensify efforts to facilitate access to social activities, improve communication, and better inform young people about engagement opportunities, which could significantly enhance their participation.

3.3 Polish youth's perspective on the European Union

This section examines the knowledge and engagement of Polish youth (aged 15-30) with the structures and initiatives of the European Union. Respondents were invited to share their expectations of the EU, both in terms of its strategic development and its direct impact on their lives. A key aspect of the study was also understanding young people's perception of the EU's influence on their daily experiences - from educational and career opportunities to social and cultural matters.

Respondents answered a multiple-choice question about their familiarity with ways to engage with the EU. The most commonly selected response was 'European elections', chosen by 47% of respondents. This suggests that young people perceive electoral processes as the most recognisable form of interaction with the EU. Other popular responses included 'EU social media and websites, such as the European Youth Portal' (28%) and 'Public consultations' (21%) [6].

Other forms of engagement received lower responses: 'European Citizens' Initiative' and 'European Youth Week or European Youth Event' (19% each), as well as 'Participation in EU-organised events in your country'. The least selected responses included 'Visits to EU institutions' (14%), 'Citizen dialogues, EU Youth Dialogue, or EU Youth Conferences' (12%), and 'Contacting an EU Commissioner or MEP' (11%). Notably, 16% of respondents selected 'None of the above', and 8% were unable to choose any response [6].

The survey also asked respondents about their perception of the EU's impact on daily life. The results showed that 81% of participants recognised the EU's influence on their lives. Meanwhile, 14% believed the EU had no impact, and 5% expressed no opinion on the matter [6].

When asked about their awareness of EU-funded initiatives enabling young people to spend time in another EU country, the most frequently mentioned initiative was 'Erasmus+ for students aged 18 and over' (53%). This was closely followed by 'Erasmus+ - youth exchanges' (47%) and 'Erasmus+ for pupils aged 11-18' (43%). Similar percentages were noted for 'Erasmus+ for trainees' (43%) and 'Erasmus for young entrepreneurs' (21%) [6].



Worryingly, initiatives such as 'DiscoverEU' and 'European Solidarity Corps' were far less well-known, with only 9% of respondents selecting each. Additionally, 12% of respondents were unable to identify any initiatives, and 4% admitted they could not answer the question [6].

These findings reveal a clear disparity in the recognition of EU programmes. Initiatives like Erasmus+ are well-known, indicating their established presence in the minds of young people as key mechanisms supporting educational and professional mobility. However, the low awareness of programmes like DiscoverEU and the European Solidarity Corps highlights the urgent need for greater promotion and awareness-building regarding the diverse opportunities offered by the EU.

3.4 Conclusions

This chapter sought to provide a detailed understanding of how civically active young Poles are. It examined the types of initiatives that young people are most inclined to engage with, as well as identifying the main barriers hindering their active participation in civic life. Particular attention was paid to actions young people consider effective in ensuring their voices reach policy-makers.

The chapter also analysed young people's perceptions of the European Union, focusing on their sense of belonging to the European community, their involvement in EU processes, and their views on how well their voices are heard within the Union. An important aspect was assessing young people's knowledge of the opportunities provided by the EU, including key mobility programmes for education, training, and employment.

The findings are concerning. A significant portion of young people in Poland exhibit low levels of civic engagement and limited knowledge about the European Union and the opportunities it offers. This lack of engagement and awareness poses a significant challenge for policymakers and non-governmental organisations, which should strive to further activate and inform Polish youth.

In subsequent chapters, the publication will focus on analysing the impact of participation in educational and professional mobility - particularly through the Erasmus+ programme - on shaping a sense of European identity among students. It will also explore which policies and European issues young Poles consider most important. Special attention will be devoted to examining young people's voting intentions in the context of the European Parliament elections held in June 2024. The aim is to understand how all the factors discussed earlier influence their civic activity and social engagement.



4 Citizenship Affiliation Before and After Mobility

In April 2024, the Centre for Public Opinion Research (CBOS) published a research report dedicated to the twentieth anniversary of Poland's membership in the European Union. The findings indicate that 54% of respondents identify with the European community, describing themselves as Europeans. The data analysis also reveals a clear upward trend in this regard, suggesting a gradual strengthening of the sense of belonging to the European Union among Polish citizens [5].

This trend may be attributed to several factors, such as increasing political, social, and economic integration with EU member states, as well as the perceived benefits of membership, including the free movement of people, access to education through programmes such as Erasmus+, and EU funds supporting regional development.

The aforementioned study also highlights that 29% of respondents reported that they currently participate or have previously participated in activities funded or co-funded by the European Union, such as educational, sports, or cultural programmes. Participation is particularly noticeable among young people—those aged 24 or younger, primarily pupils and students. In this group, as many as 67% of respondents had taken part in such programmes [5].

These figures indicate particularly high engagement among the younger generation in EU-supported initiatives, which may stem from the greater accessibility of such programmes for this age group and their tailoring to young people's needs. EU programmes, such as Erasmus+, the European Solidarity Corps, and various sports and cultural initiatives, offer opportunities to enhance skills, develop social competencies, and gain international experience.

It is also worth noting that young people's involvement in these initiatives may significantly influence their perception of the European Union and the formation of their civic identity. Interaction with EU projects fosters a sense of belonging to the European community and increases awareness of the benefits of Poland's membership in the EU. In the long term, participation in such programmes can contribute to greater civic engagement and increased interest in EU policies.

The data discussed below come from the *ESNsurvey XV*, conducted by the Erasmus Student Network. For this report, responses were analysed from Polish students who participated in international exchanges under the Erasmus+ programme. These findings provide a valuable source of information on the attitudes of academic youth towards key European issues and their civic engagement.



The first trend analysed was the change in students' perception of citizenship in the context of their participation in the Erasmus+ programme. The study focused on how the experience of international mobility influenced participants' sense of civic belonging and European identity.

Participants were asked to evaluate, on a five-point Likert scale (where 1 meant "Strongly agree" and 5 "Strongly disagree"), the extent to which they identified as citizens of their city, region, country, continent, world, Europe, and the European Union.

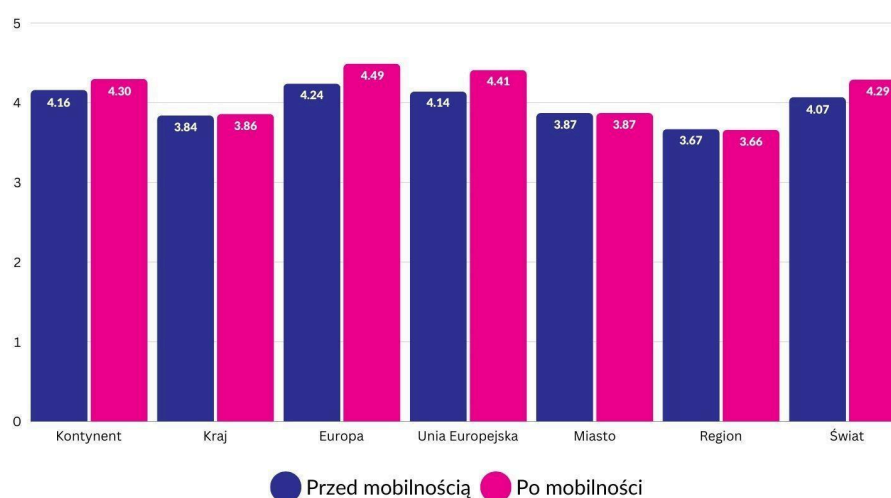


Chart 1: Comparison of Polish students' sense of civic belonging to various communities before and after mobility within the Erasmus+ programme (n = 590, n = 572).

Before mobility, students demonstrated the weakest sense of belonging as citizens of their region, with an average score of 3.67. A slightly stronger sense of belonging was observed concerning their country (3.84) and city (3.87). The strongest identification was with Europe, where the average score was 4.24, followed by a slightly weaker sense of belonging to the European Union, measured at 4.14.

The study results indicate that participation in Erasmus+ mobility deepened the differences in the perception of civic belonging. A slight decline was noted in the sense of citizenship of one's region (from 3.67 to 3.66) and city (from 3.87 to 3.83), suggesting that international mobility experiences did not significantly impact local identity. Conversely, the sense of belonging to one's country showed a minimal increase (from 3.84 to 3.86), potentially indicating a subtle change in the perception of national identity following the international experience.

A much more pronounced increase was observed in the sense of belonging to broader communities, such as the continent (from 4.16 to 4.30), the world (from 4.07 to 4.29), and Europe (from 4.24 to 4.49).

The most noticeable increase occurred in the sense of belonging to the European Union, where the average score rose from 4.14 to 4.41. This demonstrates that participants in the

programme, through their international experience, may better recognise the benefits of EU membership and feel more connected to its values and goals.

The analysis of the survey conducted in Poland and the European-level data presented in the *ESNsurvey - 15th Edition: Making Quality Mobility a Reality for All* [4] highlights significant differences in the perception of civic belonging before and after participation in international mobility.

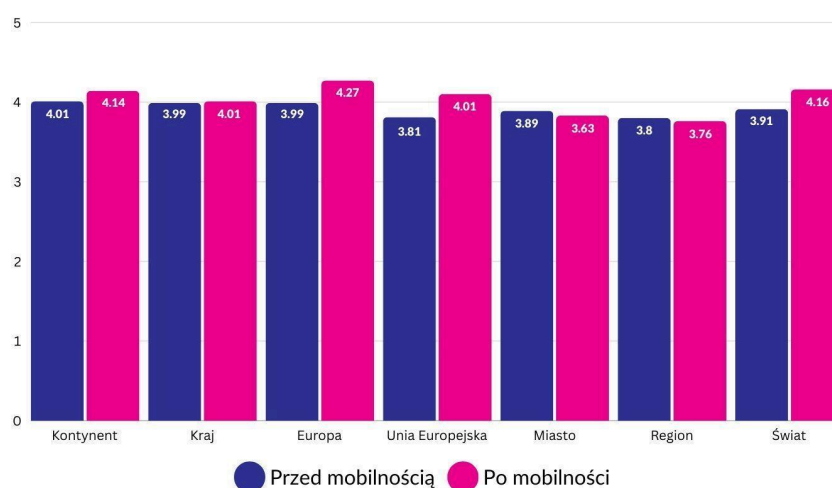


Chart 2: Comparison of students' sense of civic belonging to various communities before and after Erasmus+ mobility (n = 11,038-11,539, n = 10,908-11,285). Data source: *ESNsurvey - 15th Edition: Making Quality Mobility a Reality for All*.

In Poland, before international mobility, students declared the weakest sense of belonging to their region (3.67), consistent with European results, where this indicator was also the lowest (3.63) [4]. However, in Poland, the strongest sense of identification pertained to Europe (4.24) and the European Union (4.14), whereas at the European level, the highest values were for identification with the continent (4.01) and country (3.99) [4]. Notably, in Poland, the average sense of belonging to the European Union before mobility (4.14) was significantly higher than the overall EU level (3.81) [4].

In both cases, participation in the Erasmus+ programme strengthened the sense of belonging to broader international communities, such as the European Union and Europe.

In Poland, the sense of belonging to the EU increased from 4.14 to 4.41, a more substantial rise than the European average, where values grew from 3.81 to 4.01 [4]. In Poland, the greatest increase was observed in the sense of belonging to Europe (from 4.24 to 4.49) and the world (from 4.07 to 4.29), whereas in the EU, the most significant changes concerned the sense of citizenship of Europe (from 3.99 to 4.27) and the world (from 3.91 to 4.16) [4]. In Poland, the sense of belonging to the region and city did not change significantly, while national identity showed a slight increase (from 3.84 to 3.86). At the European level, similar phenomena were

observed: a slight decline in identification with one’s city (from 3.89 to 3.80) and a minimal increase in national identity (from 3.99 to 4.01) [4].

These findings suggest that trends observed in Poland regarding civic belonging align with broader trends characteristic of European countries. The results for Polish participants in academic mobility, such as the increase in identification with the European Union and Europe, are consistent with pan-European observations on the impact of mobility programmes like Erasmus+ on shaping European identity.

The alignment of Polish data with European trends suggests that international mobility operates universally, strengthening a sense of belonging to the European community regardless of national context. This highlights the effectiveness of mobility programmes in fostering European identity among young people across the EU, potentially contributing to greater social and cultural integration within the community.

Our results can also be linked to trends observed in other countries participating in Erasmus+ programmes, as described in the study [Participation in Learning Mobility as a Driving Force to Change the European Union](#) [12].

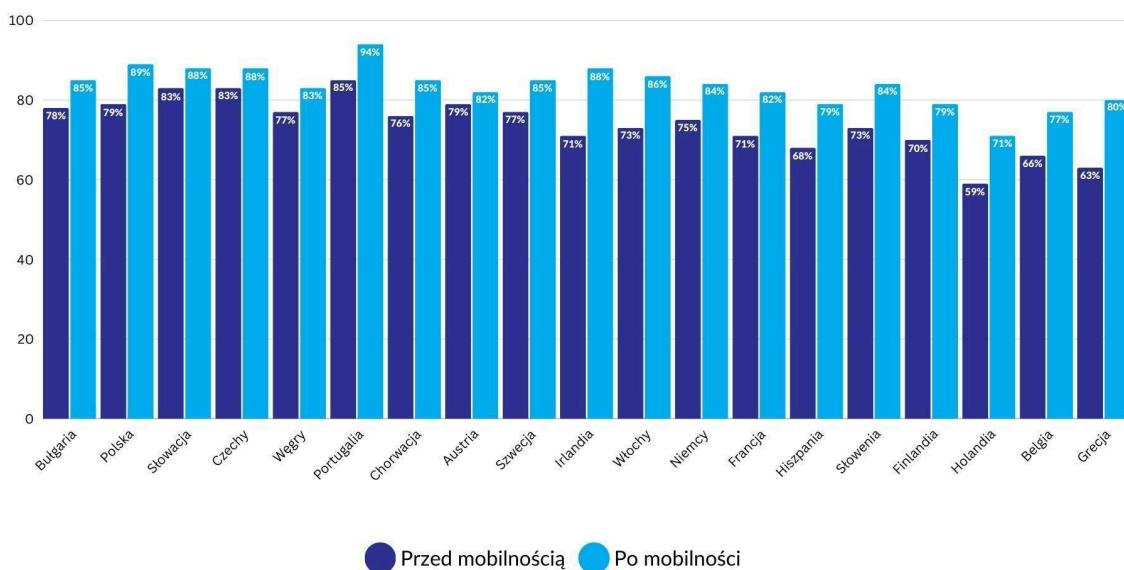


Chart 3: Comparison of students' sense of civic belonging to the European Union before and after mobility under the Erasmus+ programme. Data source: *Participation in Learning Mobility as a Driving Force to Change the European Union*.

It is worth emphasising that participation in academic mobility contributed to an increased sense of European Union citizenship in all analysed countries. These data underscore the significant impact of programmes like Erasmus+ on shaping European civic identity among participants. Poland’s case is particularly noteworthy, achieving the second-highest percentage increase in the sense of belonging to the EU, second only to Portugal. In Poland, the proportion



of individuals identifying as EU citizens rose from 79% before mobility to 89% afterwards, marking a notable 10 percentage point increase [12].

Finally, it is important to note a significant phenomenon observed in the *ESNsurvey XV*. The increase in the sense of belonging to Europe and the European Union is particularly evident after completing academic mobility under Erasmus+. At the same time, the level of identification with European and EU citizenship was already relatively high for many participants before their mobility. This observation suggests that the Erasmus+ programme primarily attracts individuals who already feel a strong sense of belonging to the European community.

This trend may be due to several factors. People who more strongly identify with European values and hold positive attitudes towards European integration may be more motivated to participate in programmes like Erasmus+. In this context, the programme acts as a mechanism that reinforces an already existing sense of belonging but may have limited impact on individuals who are sceptical of European integration or feel a stronger attachment to local or national identity.

For this reason, it seems crucial to develop strategies targeted at individuals less interested in the European Union or less identified with European citizenship. Such actions could include broader information campaigns highlighting the benefits of participating in mobility programmes, as well as initiatives promoting diversity, intercultural dialogue, and the practical advantages of experiences gained abroad.



5 The Importance of EU Policies

Another area of our study focused on the perceived importance of the rights, freedoms, and key policies of the European Union among Polish participants of the Erasmus+ programme. Analysing this aspect helps to understand the extent to which young people engaged in academic mobility appreciate the core values and political priorities that shape the European Union. Particular attention was paid to assessing how participation in the programme impacts their awareness of these issues.

The participants were asked to evaluate the importance of various aspects related to EU rights and policies. A five-point Likert scale was used, where a score of 1 indicated "Strongly Agree" and a score of 5 indicated "Strongly Disagree." The study examined the following aspects: the ability to live, work, and study in any other EU Member State; access to exchange opportunities such as Erasmus+; cohesion policies aimed at reducing regional disparities; programmes and policies supporting social inclusion; and environmental protection policies.

Assessing these aspects allowed us to identify areas that are particularly important to young people benefiting from mobility programmes, as well as those that may require further promotion or education.

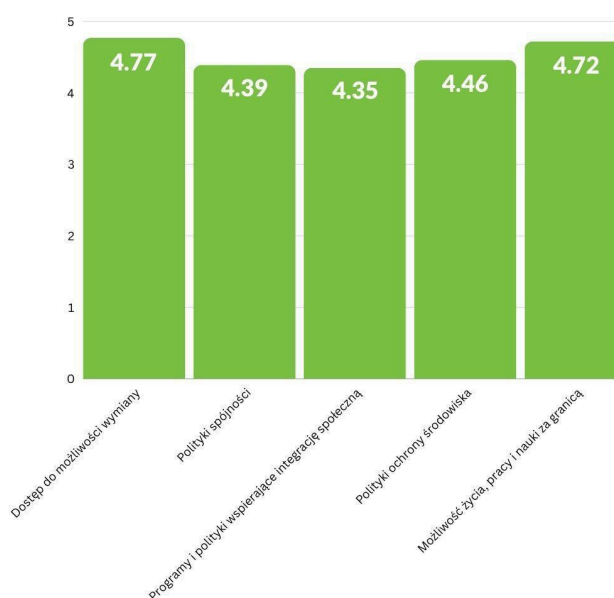


Chart 4: Importance of rights, freedoms, and policies for Polish students participating in Erasmus+ (n = 610).

As shown in Chart 4, the most interest among respondents was in opportunities for participation in exchanges such as Erasmus+, which received the highest average rating of 4.77. This result seems entirely justified, considering that the respondents had personal experiences with this programme, which undoubtedly influenced their positive evaluation of this initiative.

The second most highly rated aspect was the ability to live, work, and study in any other EU Member State, with an average score of 4.72. This high score highlights the importance of the free movement of people, one of the fundamental rights afforded to EU citizens.

Environmental protection policies (4.46) and cohesion policies (4.39) were rated lower. The lowest-rated aspect was policies and programmes promoting social inclusion, which received an average score of 4.35.

It is worth comparing the trends observed in Poland with data at the European level, presented in the report *ESNsurvey - 15th Edition: Making Quality Mobility a Reality for All* [4].

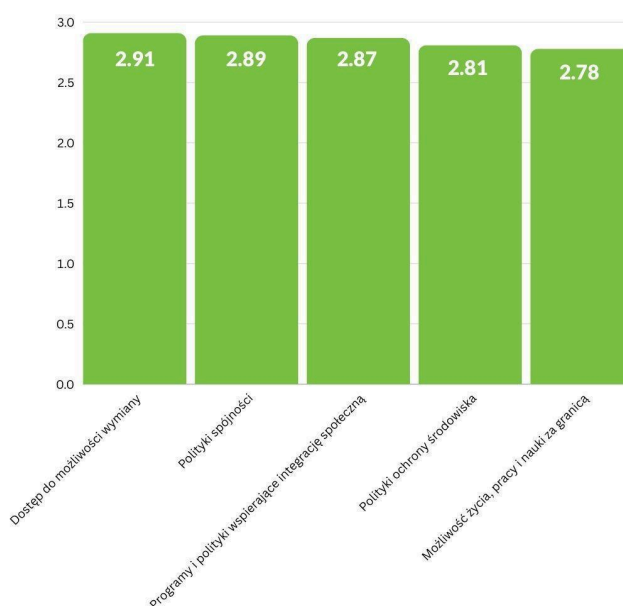


Chart 5: Importance of rights, freedoms, and policies for Erasmus+ participants across Europe (n = 488 to 1,276).
 Data Source: *ESNsurvey - 15th Edition: Making Quality Mobility a Reality for All*.

Among European students, the most interest was also in opportunities for participation in exchanges like Erasmus+, which received the highest average rating of 2.91 [4].

Second place was held by cohesion policies aimed at reducing regional disparities, with an average score of 2.89 [4]. This is noteworthy because, among Polish students, this option ranked second to last.

The lowest-rated aspect in the European study was the ability to live, work, and study in another EU Member State, with an average score of 2.78 [4]. This may indicate that students perceive this freedom as more of a given than something directly tied to their daily experiences. Furthermore, it may suggest that the younger generation in the EU considers mobility a standard that does not require particular emphasis in the context of EU policies.

The results suggest that academic mobility plays a key role in shaping pro-European attitudes and strengthening a sense of community within the EU as an organisation that promotes rights and freedoms. For many participants, the experience of living and studying in another Member State becomes an opportunity to engage directly with the practical dimensions of EU policies, such as the free movement of people or access to international educational programmes.

Another focus of our research was to determine which issues are considered particularly significant by Polish students studying within the Erasmus+ programme, especially in the context of the European Parliament elections held in June 2024.

The participants were asked to assess the importance of selected issues using a ten-point Likert scale. A score of 1 indicated "Strongly Agree," while a score of 10 indicated "Strongly Disagree." Respondents evaluated the significance of issues such as: civil and political rights, climate change and sustainable environmental development, digital transformation, education policies and programmes, Europe's role on the global stage, freedom of movement, fundamental rights, democracy and the rule of law, immigration policy, jobs and employment policies, social rights, and the economic situation.

The purpose of this analysis was to understand the priorities of young people participating in academic mobility within the Erasmus+ programme. The list of issues included key global challenges, such as climate change or digital transformation, as well as topics directly related to fundamental EU values, such as democracy, the rule of law, or civil liberties.

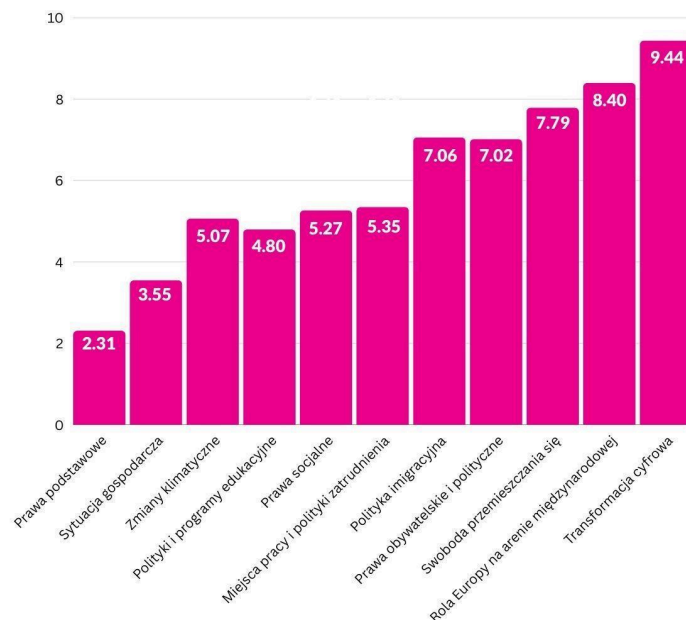


Chart 6: Priorities of Polish Erasmus+ participants in the context of the 2024 European Parliament Elections (n = 517).



The respondents identified digital transformation as the most important issue, with the highest average score of 9.44. The role of Europe on the global stage (8.40) and freedom of movement (7.79) also received high ratings. Next in the rankings were issues related to immigration (7.06) and civil and political rights (7.02).

Medium levels of interest were recorded for policies concerning jobs and employment (5.35), social rights (5.27), and climate change and sustainable environmental development (5.07). Education policies and programmes ranked slightly lower, with a score of 4.80.

The lowest-rated issues were the economic situation, with an average score of 3.55, and fundamental rights, democracy, and the rule of law, which received the lowest score of 2.31.

It is valuable to compare these results with the findings of the *Eurobarometer FL545 on Youth and Democracy* [6], conducted between 3-12 April 2024. This survey was carried out in the context of the European Parliament elections held from 6-9 June 2024, and as a continuation of initiatives from the European Year of Youth 2022.

In the next stage of the study, participants answered a multiple-choice question about their expectations for the European Union concerning their generation. Among Polish youth, the most frequently selected response was "Ensuring peace, strengthening international security, and promoting international cooperation," chosen by 42% of respondents [6]. This highlights the importance of values related to security and peace, which aligns with the slogan of Poland's presidency of the EU Council *Security, Europe!*, likely to resonate positively with young people.

Other significant expectations included employment and social equality. "Increasing job opportunities for young people" and "Combating poverty and socio-economic inequalities" were each selected by 35% of respondents. The third most common priority was "Promoting human rights, democracy, and shared European values," selected by 32% of participants [6].

Environmental and health-related issues ranked slightly lower: "Promoting environmentally friendly policies and tackling climate change" was chosen by 22%, while "Taking a strong role in addressing health challenges" was selected by 21% [6].

At the bottom of the priority list were responses such as "Promoting inclusive societies, including gender equality and anti-discrimination" (16%), "Bringing young people from different parts of the EU closer together" (15%), and "Promoting digitalisation of society" (11%) [6]. The low popularity of these topics may indicate that they are perceived as less urgent compared to challenges related to the economy, security, or the environment.

Additionally, 6% of respondents chose the answer "I don't know," and 3% selected "Other," suggesting that some participants either lacked defined expectations or prioritised issues not included in the options [6].



Comparing data from the *ESNsurvey XV* with the Eurobarometer findings leads to interesting and, at times, surprising conclusions.

Digital transformation, rated as the most important issue in the ESN survey (9.44), was among the lowest priorities in the Eurobarometer results (11%). This discrepancy may stem from differences in the characteristics of the surveyed groups. Erasmus+ participants, due to their experiences with academic mobility, may be more aware of and engaged with digital processes (as one of the programme's horizontal priorities), which may have influenced the higher rating for this aspect. Conversely, in the general youth population surveyed by Eurobarometer, digitalisation might be seen as less pressing compared to more immediate challenges such as employment or social inequalities.

Europe's role in the world, including actions to promote peace, ensure security, and strengthen international cooperation, received high ratings in both studies. These results suggest that young people recognise the EU's global responsibility and its potential as a leader in addressing international problems.

Issues such as youth employment opportunities, climate change and sustainable development, and building inclusive societies hold medium importance in both studies. While various groups of respondents may prioritise these aspects differently, their significance remains undeniable in the context of contemporary societal challenges.

By contrast, aspects such as the economic situation and fundamental rights, democracy, and the rule of law, which ranked lowest in the ESN study, were considered more significant in the Eurobarometer results. This may reflect the fact that Erasmus+ participants, as a group more privileged in terms of access to education and mobility, may not feel the direct impact of economic problems or threats to democracy as acutely as the broader youth population.

The observed differences between the study results may be attributed to the distinct characteristics of the respondent groups. In the Erasmus Student Network study, all participants had experience with mobility through the Erasmus+ programme - either participating in an exchange or during the study. In contrast, in the *Eurobarometer FL545 on Youth and Democracy* [6], only 14% of respondents reported having studied, trained, or undertaken internships in another EU country.

These data underscore the significant role of participation in the Erasmus+ programme in shaping young people's perspectives. Those involved in international mobility are better equipped to appreciate the benefits of initiatives such as freedom of movement, cross-border cooperation, and opportunities related to digitalisation and education. Moreover, such experiences may contribute to a more optimistic outlook on Europe's future and greater trust in its institutions and political programmes.



It is also appropriate to relate the trends observed among Polish students to the broader European context, as presented in the *ESNsurvey - 15th Edition: Making Quality Mobility a Reality for All* [4].

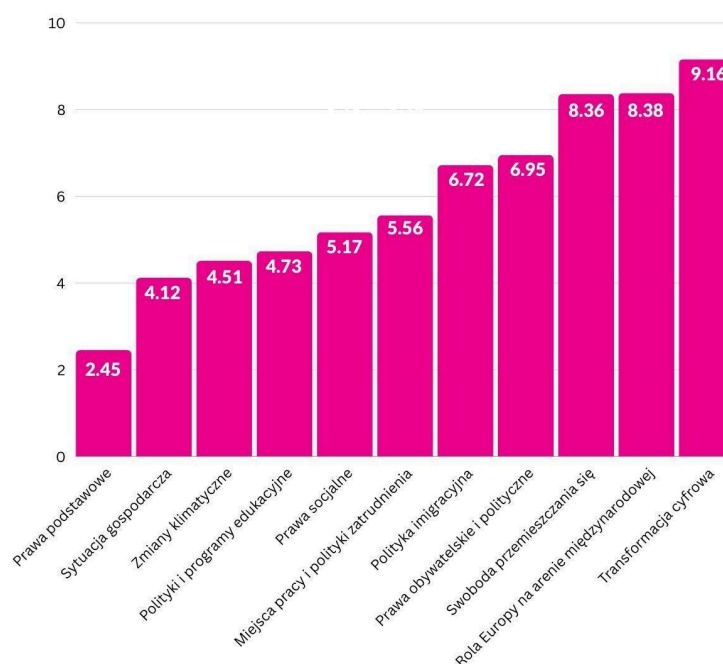


Chart 7: Priorities of students participating in the Erasmus+ programme in the context of the 2024 European Parliament Elections (n = 9,678). Data: *ESNsurvey - 15th Edition: Making Quality Mobility a Reality for All*.

The students surveyed identified digital transformation as the most important issue, receiving an average score of 9.16 on a ten-point Likert scale. High rankings were also given to issues related to freedom of movement (8.38) and Europe's role on the international stage (8.36) [4].

Mid-tier issues included civil and political rights (6.95), migration (6.72), employment and job policies (5.56), and social rights (5.17). Educational policies (4.73), climate change and sustainable environmental development (4.51), and the economic situation (4.12) were ranked lower [4].

The lowest-ranked issue was fundamental rights, democracy, and the rule of law, which scored only 2.45 [4]. This result may come as a surprise, particularly given the growing democratic challenges in Europe. It is possible that students do not perceive a direct connection between these topics and their own experiences of mobility within the Erasmus+ programme.

The data presented above reflect the perspective of Polish youth regarding the most pressing issues currently at the centre of public debate at the European Union level. The findings clearly indicate that participation in academic mobility, especially through the Erasmus+ programme, significantly enhances participants' socio-political awareness.

6 Voting Intentions in the 2024 European Parliament Elections

The final trend examined was an analysis of the voting intentions of participants in the *ESNsurvey XV* in the context of the European Parliament elections, which took place in June 2024. The aim of this part of the study was to understand the level of engagement of students in democratic processes at the European level.

Survey participants were able to select one of the following answers to express their likelihood of voting: 'I definitely intend to vote', 'I am likely to vote', 'I am undecided', 'I am unlikely to vote', 'I definitely do not intend to vote', and 'I do not have the right to vote'.

It is important to note that the data for the survey were collected between May and July 2023, meaning respondents were providing their answers almost a year before the elections. This may have influenced their declarations, which largely reflect intentions or beliefs rather than actual actions.

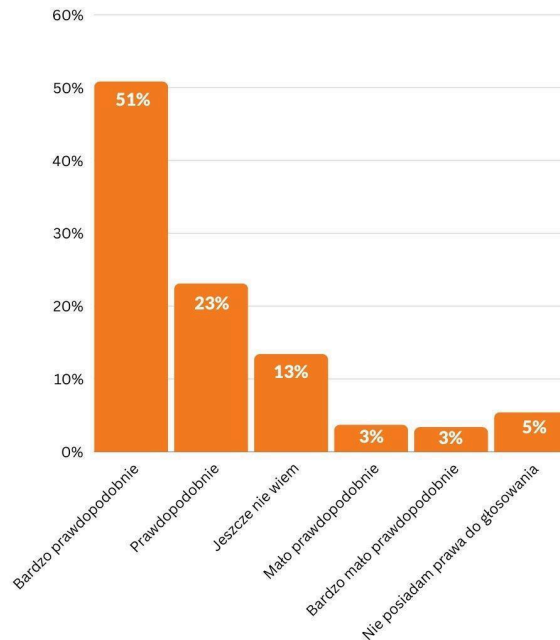


Chart 8: Voting intentions of Polish Erasmus+ students regarding the 2024 European Parliament Elections (n = 588)

As shown in the chart above, 74% of survey participants declared their intention to vote in the 2024 European Parliament elections. Meanwhile, 13% were undecided about their participation, and approximately 7% expressed no intention of voting. Additionally, 5% of



respondents indicated that they were not eligible to vote, most likely due to a lack of citizenship in an EU member state.

When comparing these results to the *Eurobarometer FL545 on Youth and Democracy* [6], certain differences in declared attitudes can be observed. In the Eurobarometer survey, participants responded to a multiple-choice question about their intention to vote in the upcoming European Parliament elections. The response options included: 'Yes, I am eligible to vote and intend to vote', 'No, although I am eligible, I do not intend to vote', 'I am not eligible to vote', 'I am unsure whether I am eligible or intend to vote', and 'I prefer not to answer'.

According to the Eurobarometer results, 69% of respondents declared their intention to vote. Meanwhile, 8% were undecided, around 9% did not plan to vote, and 10% were ineligible to vote. Additionally, 4% of participants refused to answer the question [6].

Respondents were also asked a multiple-choice question about the reasons why they did not plan to vote or were unsure about participating in the European elections. The most frequently cited reason was: "I am not interested in politics at all" (21%). The second most common response was: "I do not like any political party or candidate" (18%). Other frequently chosen responses included: "I was not aware of the elections" (17%) and "I generally do not vote in political elections" (15%) [6].

Less frequently cited reasons included: "I believe my vote will not change anything" (14%), "I do not trust the political system in general" (13%), and "I believe the European Union does not adequately address issues that affect people like me" (12%). The least commonly selected responses were: "I am opposed to the European Union" (8%), "I am not interested in the topics discussed during the election campaign" (7%), and "I do not understand the role of the European Union well" (6%). Additionally, 5% of respondents chose "Other," and 9% were unable to provide an answer [6].

These differences may stem from the characteristics of the research sample in the two projects. The *ESNsurvey XV* exclusively involved students participating in the Erasmus+ programme, who generally exhibit higher civic awareness and greater engagement in EU-related matters. In contrast, the Eurobarometer survey included a broad group of young people aged 15-30, representing diverse educational and social experiences. The significant increase in declared voting intentions among Erasmus+ students can be interpreted as a result of a stronger sense of belonging to the European community fostered by the programme.

It is worth comparing these trends in Poland to the European-level data presented in the report *ESNsurvey - 15th Edition: Making Quality Mobility a Reality for All* [4].



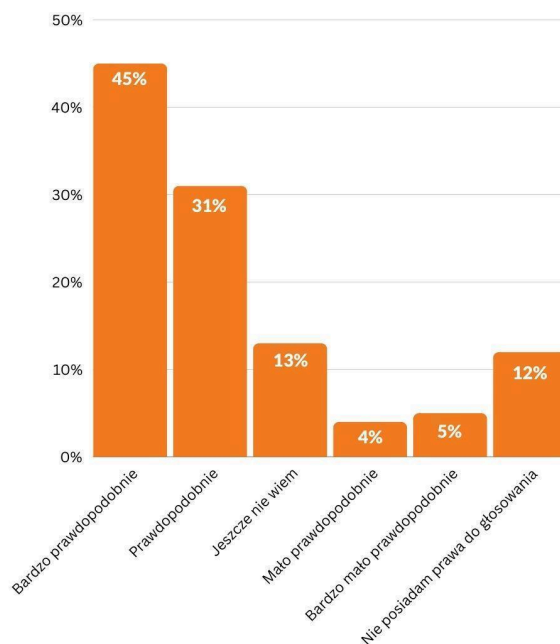


Chart 9: Voting intentions of Erasmus+ students regarding the 2024 European Parliament Elections (n = 11,252).
 Data: ESNsurvey - 15th Edition: Making Quality Mobility a Reality for All.

76% of surveyed participants declared their intention to vote in the 2024 European Parliament elections. Meanwhile, 13% were undecided about their participation, and approximately 9% expressed no intention of voting. Additionally, 12% of respondents stated that they were not eligible to vote, most often due to a lack of citizenship in an EU member state [4].

It is also worth noting that, in the context of planned participation in the European Parliament elections, Polish youth align with the broader European trend of increased interest in civic engagement. The study results confirm that participation in international educational exchange programmes can contribute to greater engagement in democratic processes among young people, which is particularly important for the future of the European Union.

These declarations should also be contrasted with the actual voter turnout, which in the 2024 European Parliament elections stood at 50.74% across the EU and only 40.65% in Poland. This marks a decline in turnout in Poland compared to 2019, when it was 45.68% [14]. Even more concerning are the figures for young voters in Poland (aged 18-29), whose turnout was only 26.5%. This represents a small yet significant drop compared to 2019, when turnout in this age group was 27% [15].

These figures clearly indicate that activating young voters remains a significant challenge both at the national and European levels. Low turnout in this age group may result from factors such as a lack of interest in politics, a feeling of powerlessness, or insufficient educational and informational efforts to promote democratic values.



However, it is worth noting that participants in the *ESNsurvey XV* demonstrated much higher declared voting intentions than the average for their age group. This may suggest that participation in mobility programmes like Erasmus+ helps foster a higher level of civic awareness and engagement in democratic processes. As such, promoting youth participation in mobility programmes could have a long-term impact on their civic attitudes and electoral activity.



7 Conclusion

The aim of the report *The role of international exchanges in building European identity among Polish students* was to illustrate how participation in EU programmes and initiatives influences Polish youth, particularly in terms of their perception of the European Community and their level of civic engagement. This type of analysis is especially significant in the context of Poland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union, marking an important moment both for Poland and the entire EU.

The Erasmus+ programme is one of the European Union's most successful initiatives, offering a broad range of development opportunities, including studying, internships, vocational placements, and volunteering abroad. By the time Poland began celebrating the 20th anniversary of its EU membership, over 266,000 Polish students had already participated in the Erasmus+ programme [16], highlighting the enormous impact of this initiative on youth in the country. In light of Poland's EU Council Presidency and the findings of the *ESNsurvey XV* presented in this report, it is worth emphasising the significant influence of Erasmus+ on the civic development of young Poles.

Several important conclusions can be drawn from the analysis based on the survey. Firstly, participation in mobility programmes such as Erasmus+ positively contributes to shaping a sense of belonging to the European Community and building civic identity among young people. Furthermore, taking part in international exchanges fosters greater interest in EU policies and a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with the functioning of the European Community. Finally, the findings indicate that individuals who participated in international exchanges and consequently felt more integrated with the EU were more likely to express their readiness to participate in the 2024 European Parliament elections. Moreover, their interest in the elections and democratic processes was evident long before the topic became widely discussed in the media.

However, the report's findings also highlight areas in need of improvement. EU institutions and policymakers should undertake consistent and long-term efforts to enhance the civic engagement of young Poles. It is equally crucial to further promote and develop the Erasmus+ programme to ensure it is accessible to all young people, regardless of their prior interests or level of knowledge about EU initiatives. The programme should serve not only those already engaged in European activities but also those who have not yet had the opportunity to explore the possibilities offered by the European Union.

Increasing young people's awareness of the European Union, its functioning, and the opportunities it provides is another critical aspect. Efforts should aim to ensure that youth have access to reliable information about how they can actively participate in EU initiatives, the benefits of European cooperation, and how their voices can influence the shaping of EU policies.



The Polish Presidency of the Council of the European Union presents a unique opportunity to address these challenges. It is an exceptional chance to bring the EU closer to young people, both in terms of providing information and by directly involving them in actions and political decision-making. The policies to be considered by the EU Council over the next six months could have far-reaching effects on the lives of young people in Poland, particularly in areas such as security, environmental protection, digitalisation, and educational development.

Poland's Presidency could also be an occasion to take further action to strengthen the Erasmus+ programme as the EU's flagship initiative for education, intercultural exchange, and mobility. Expanding this programme not only allows young people to acquire new skills and experiences but also reinforces their sense of European identity, contributing to the creation of an integrated and united European society.



8 Bibliography

- [1] Polish Robert Schuman Foundation. (2024). 20 years of benefits from Poland's membership in the European Union. Retrieved from: <https://schuman.pl/2024/04/25/20-lat-korzysci-z-czlonkostwa-polski-w-unii-europejskiej/>. Access date: 02.01.2025.
- [2] National Electoral Commission. (2003). Referendum on consent to ratify the Treaty concerning the accession of the Republic of Poland to the European Union. Retrieved from: <https://referendum2003.pkw.gov.pl/sww/kraj/indexA.html>. Access date: 29.12.2024.
- [3] European Parliament. (2024). Eurobarometer EB046EP EU Post-Electoral Survey 2024. Retrieved from: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3292>. Access date: 23.12.2024.
- [4] Dias, R. Buseyne, S. Haddad, Y. Topi, K. Dear, C. Mistretta, L. Rayón González, J. Gabriels, W. (2024). ESNsurvey - 15th Edition: Making Quality Mobility a Reality for All. Retrieved from: https://issuu.com/esnint/docs/xv_esnsurvey_final_single_pages. Access date: 22.12.2024.
- [5] Roguska, B. (2024). 20 years of Poland's membership in the EU. Research report. CBOS. Retrieved from: https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2024/K_043_24.PDF. Access date: 22.12.2024.
- [6] European Commission. (2024). Eurobarometer FL545 on Youth and Democracy. Retrieved from: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3181>. Access date: 23.12.2024.
- [7] (2003). Treaty between the Kingdom of Belgium, [...] and the European Union. Retrieved from: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/PL/TXT/?uri=CELEX:12003T/TXT>. Access date: 29.12.2024.
- [8] Foundation for the Development of the Education System. (2013). 20 years of the Foundation for the Development of the Education System.
- [9] Radkowski, M. (2024). Europe for the Active. The beautiful twenty-year-olds.
- [10] European Parliament. European Commission. European Council. (2021). Joint declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe. Retrieved from: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-6796-2021-INIT/pl/pdf>. Access date: 30.12.2024.
- [11] European Parliament. European Council. (2021). Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on a European Year of Youth. Retrieved from: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/PE-81-2021-REV-1/en/pdf>. Access date: 31.12.2024.
- [12] Buseyne, S. Dias, R. Gabriels, W. Kalinova, N. (2024). Participation in Learning Mobility as a driving force to change the European Union. Retrieved from: https://esn.org/sites/default/files/news/participation_in_learning_mobility_as_a_driving_force_to_change_the_eu.pdf. Access date: 22.12.2024.
- [13] Polish Presidency of the EU Council. (2024). Programme of the Polish Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Retrieved from:

<https://polish-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/media/zkcn0325/programme-of-the-polish-presidency-of-the-council-of-the-european-union.pdf>. Access date: 02.01.2025.

[14] European Parliament. (2024). Results of the 2024 European Elections. Retrieved from: <https://results.elections.europa.eu/pl/>. Access date: 27.12.2024.

[15] TVN24. (2024). Unrivalled among the youngest voters. Retrieved from: <https://tvn24.pl/wybory-do-europarlamentu-2024/wybory-do-parlamentu-europejskiego-2024-jak-glosowali-najmlodsi-jak-najstarsi-jaki-wynik-konfederacji-st7955037>. Access date: 28.12.2024.

[16] Ministry of Science and Higher Education. (2024). Summary of the Erasmus programme for the 20th anniversary of Poland's membership in the EU. Retrieved from: <https://www.gov.pl/web/nauka/podsumowanie-programu-erasmus-na-20-lecie-polski-w-ue>. Access date: 02.01.2025.



Contact Us

If you have any questions or would like to know more about "The role of international exchanges in building the European identity of Polish students", please contact president@esn.pl.

Otherwise, if you would like to know more about ESN Poland, please contact board@esn.pl.

www.esn.pl



Erasmus Student Network Poland, Warsaw 2025