

# Eu Social Cit

European Social Citizenship

## How citizens understand European social citizenship: deepening quantitative survey results with focus group analysis

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# Summary

Deepening quantitative survey questions through focus group discussions can shine a light on the deeper understandings of individuals about social citizenship, and also demonstrate how ambivalent and multidimensional attitudes are about social citizenship in Europe.

This paper presents the methodology, the research process and preliminary findings from a series of focus group discussions on the future of European social citizenship that were conducted over the course of 2022 in four European countries: Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, and Spain, involving a total of 134 participants. Importantly, as part of the focus groups, we also collected quantitative survey evidence via a short questionnaire handed out to participants before the discussion, allowing us to compare our qualitative data with quantitative evidence.

The focus groups covered three topical areas: 1) support for government redistribution broadly understood (and different meanings thereof), 2) the relationship between the national and EU levels in financing and providing social policy, and 3) inequalities in access to social rights and how to address them. To summarize the core findings of our preliminary analysis: Focus group participants were generally supportive of strengthening the social dimension of the EU (as quantitative surveys have also shown), but the qualitative data also revealed a significant degree of skepticism regarding the ability of the EU in harmonising social rights and dealing with the current series of large-scale crises. Furthermore, participants differentiated between a range of social policies and how fair and effective it would be to harmonise these on the EU level. Participants also discussed what conditions should be in place for granting social rights, particularly in the case of compensatory social policies and migrants/refugees. Finally, participants noted persistent inequalities in accessing social rights, which appear to be related to socio-economic status. Specifically, lower socio-economic status groups appear to have less access to much needed social rights. A main driving force of these inequalities is likely to be a prevailing information deficit, in particular regarding the initiatives of the EU in the social domain.



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# 1. Introduction

The contribution of our Working Package 6 to the EUSOCIALCIT project is to ‘listen to the citizens’, i.e. to generate insights into how European citizens (as well as non-citizens living in European countries) perceive the current state of Social Europe as well as its future. In previous deliverables, we have explored and analyzed existing quantitative data on these issues. Eick et al. (2021) provides a broad overview of the development of social policy output, outcomes, and related resources over the last three decades. Eick et al. (2022) complement this overview with a broad survey of existing public opinion data on Social Europe.

A core finding of Eick et al. (2021) is that there has been a general trend towards convergence in social policy across European welfare states, which might cautiously be interpreted as the emergence of a European social model, although this convergence trend has been partly disrupted by the economic and financial crises of the years 2008. We also observed a noticeable trend towards the expansion of social investment policies (such as education, labour market integration, childcare), even though this policy trend has become weaker in countries more affected by the economic crisis. Regarding public opinion, our analysis (Eick et al. 2022) finds evidence of patterns that partly comport with the major trends in policy output. More specifically, Europeans are generally very supportive of a generous welfare state as well as of the European Union (EU) playing an increasingly important role in social policy-making. Also, social investment policies have become more popular over time, and as we show in related research (Eick et al. 2023), European citizens tend to associate these policies with EU level decision-making whereas the more traditional social policy programs are preferred to be handled by national welfare states.

Against this background, this deliverable adds an important perspective by enriching the existing quantitative data from public opinion surveys with qualitative data from focus groups. As we explain in greater detail below, focus groups have the advantage of combining elements from both quantitative and qualitative methodology. While focus groups can never be truly representative, the composition of focus groups varies according to pre-defined criteria (in our case: age and socio-economic background) in order to get a sense of the variation of attitudes within and between groups. Compared to traditional individual interviews, focus groups generate more data (in our case: 6-9 participants with 4-6 groups per country) and also allow us to study the interaction between participants in the group. To anchor and compare our findings with results from quantitative studies, we asked participants to fill in a short questionnaire before the start of the focus groups, which will also be briefly analyzed in this deliverable.

The important added value of focus group data relative to existing quantitative studies is that it adds more depth and critical reflection on individual-level attitudes and preferences, and thereby also yields insights regarding the validity of quantitative measures. The significant limitation of existing quantitative work is that there is very limited comparative survey data available on this issue (for an overview, see Eick et al. 2022). For one, the Eurobarometer includes in irregular intervals questions about the social dimension of Europe, but the wording of these questions is – from a research perspective – often not ideally suited and it changes across years so that the creation of time series

data is challenging (but see Beaudonnet 2013; Burgoon 2009). The 2020 Special Eurobarometer 509 on the European Pillar of Social Rights provides valuable data to study Social Europe, but again there are some challenges regarding the question wording (see Eick et al. 2023). Furthermore, a notable exception to the general lack of data is Round 8 in the European Social Survey (ESS), which includes a concrete question on support for a proposal of an EU-wide minimum income scheme. Studies using these data have suggested that there is indeed widespread support for an EU social dimension (Roosma & van Oorschot 2021: 175; Baute & Meuleman 2020: 410). However, with only one policy proposal being included in the survey and also significant parts of the public opposing the proposal, one should be cautious to overgeneralize these results (see theory/analysis on “welfare Euroscepticism” related to this policy proposal in Eick 2023).

In response to the lack of readily available comparative survey data, researchers have collected their own data. This partly compensates for the lack of suitable questions in the existing large cross-country surveys. For instance, studies have explored support for an EU-wide unemployment scheme and to what extent levels of support depend on the concrete policy design (Nicoli et al. 2020). Gerhards et al. (2016), looking at this from a broader perspective, also find significant levels of support (and relatively little political conflict about this) for EU-wide social policy. Finally, related studies about the extent of solidarity within the European Union confirm that European citizens are in fact quite solidaristic with their European neighbours, although it depends somewhat on the concrete issue and policy area (Ferrera & Pellegata 2018; Genschel & Hemerijck 2018; Heermann et al. 2022).

While these studies have jointly generated many useful insights regarding the state of Social Europe from the perspective of public opinion, quantitative approaches have some inherent limitations that more qualitative approaches such as focus groups can help to ameliorate. For one, the questions on Social Europe asked in quantitative surveys often remain on a rather abstract level. Furthermore, when more detailed questions are asked as in the Special Eurobarometer 509 or in the ESS Round 8, it remains unclear whether respondents understand the questions in the same way, given the limited knowledge of citizens about social policy at the EU level. For instance, in the mentioned Eurobarometer, only 25 per cent of the respondents indicated that they had heard of the European Pillar of Social Rights before the interview and only 8 percent say they know what it is (shares that are likely inflated given the upward social-desirability bias in this question) (European Commission 2020: 4). Thus, it is essential, both from a methodological as well as substantial perspective, to dig deeper and better understand the dynamics of attitudes of citizens towards Social Europe in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of the state of affairs regarding the future of EU social policy.

This deliverable is a first step towards this goal, and will be further complemented by analyses in future outcomes of this Working Package 6. The main purpose of this paper is to document and explain the collection of focus group data, which took place over the course of 2022. It also includes a more descriptive analytical section, which provides first insights into our findings, in particular with regard to the comparison of quantitative data collected in the short survey and the actual focus group data.

## 2. Methodological issues and documentation of fieldwork

As briefly mentioned above, the collection of focus group data (also referred to as citizen meetings in some contexts) took place across four countries over the course of the year 2022: Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, and Poland. For recruitment purposes, participants in these focus groups were mostly recruited from the capital cities in these countries (i.e. Berlin, Amsterdam, Madrid, and Warsaw). The coordination and implementation of these focus groups was a collaborative process that included EUSOCIALCIT partner universities in each of these countries.

Primarily coordination of this project was led by the team at the University of Konstanz (*UKON*), including Marius Busemeyer, Gianna Maria Eick (now University of Amsterdam) and Kattalina Berriochoa. Coordination efforts were also organized by the University of Amsterdam (*UVA*) team, including Brian Burgoon and David van der Duin. The other research teams were located at the Warsaw School of Economics (*Szkoła Główna Handlowa w Warszawie, SGH*), including Izabela Grabowska and Karolina Bolesta, and the Charles III University of Madrid (*Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, UC3M*), including Ana Belen Muñoz Ruiz, Francisco Javier Gómez Abelleira, and Jesús Rafael Mercader Uguina.

During the months of April and May 2022, a series of focus groups were conducted in Berlin (Germany), Amsterdam (the Netherlands), Madrid (Spain), and Warsaw (Poland) to collect qualitative data about the opinions and perceptions of citizens in regards to social rights within the context of the European Union. In total, 134 citizens across Europe broadly reflected on their understanding of common survey questions including redistributive preferences, inequality, and governmental responsibility, opinions about social rights at the national versus European Union level, and access to social policy resources and the role of the EU in improving access to social policy resources. Before each focus group discussion, participants filled out a short questionnaire that included items on basic demographics as well as ideological positions. The former (socio-economic) information is needed in order to get a comprehensive picture regarding the composition (in terms of age and socio-economic background) of each focus group, the latter (more substantive information) is required in order to be able to compare the focus groups with existing quantitative evidence. In all countries, discussion data was collected with nearly identical design (primarily determined by the UKON and UVA research teams) and in cooperation to ensure the safe handling of data based on the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

In the following, we provide further details and justification on: 1) focus group objectives, 2) data privacy process, 3) coordination process, 4) format of focus groups, 5) recruitment process and location, and 6) data processing and coding.

### 2.1 Focus group objectives

Focus groups serve as an opportunity to collect qualitative data that brings context to the opinions, perceptions, and attitudes of a particular target audience. Generally, these groups consist of 6-12 participants with a moderator and a co-moderator (Smithson 2007). Focus groups typically consist of a moderator asking questions about a certain topic, but can also be characterized as an in-depth group interview (Hughes & DuMont 1993) or a designed discussion (Kreuger 1998). In the context of the EUSOCIALCIT project, focus groups are key for better understanding what citizens think of the EU when it comes to social policies, such as child care or unemployment support, and how they think about the role of the EU in providing these services.

The composition of participants typically consists of a relatively homogenous group of individuals (Krueger 1994). While a diverse group can provide for interesting discussions, a homogenous sampling of participants improves the chances of ascertaining data from all individuals in the focus group. The moderator of the focus group plays an important role in determining the flow and discussion. Remaining relatively neutral, the moderator is expected to generate interest in a particular topic in an open environment (Vaughn et al. 1996; Sim 2002). The role of the moderator is mainly to listen to the discussion and direct the conversation. This requires asking simple and clear questions, not losing control of the discussion, and ensuring that all participants speak during the discussion. The role of the co-moderator is to assist the moderator and most importantly, to take notes during the discussion.

Qualitative focus groups generate added value because they give researchers the opportunity to examine the underlying reasoning, narratives, justifications, and preferences of citizens. This form of research complements survey-based research because it allows for a better understanding of the context, framing, and meanings that individuals use to determine their political perceptions and preferences (Krueger & Casey 2015). This method of data collection is also particularly useful for examining cross-cultural differences, insights into rhetorical and argumentative processes, and contemporary discourse on a wide range of issues (Myers 1998). The typical process of focus groups includes collecting discussion data with audio and video recordings. This data is then transcribed for subsequent analysis.

## 2.2 Data privacy

The privacy of data is paramount for this project's focus group component. To ensure that each partner university met the standards of data privacy, there was a collaborative effort to create a joint data controller agreement (*JDCA*) which was signed by the representative parties at each university.

The joint data controller agreement stipulated the processing, purposes, and categories of personal data. In particular, this agreement outlines the processing and flow of data. Within the protocols set forth by the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), this data agreement delineates the storage of collected data, sharing of data across partner universities, security protocols for equipment used during the research process, and transcription, pseudonymization, and translation of data. This agreement also includes consent forms that were used in the collection of initial contact data and focus group data across each country case. The consent form provided to participants at the beginning of the focus groups is included in Appendix A. To ensure the data standards of each participating university were met in this agreement, the data protection officers (DPO) at each institution reviewed, revised, and confirmed the final measures. After the completion of this iterative

and collaborative process, this document was signed by the respective parties at each partner university in July 2022.

Specific to data handling, the research teams decided that all collected data would be transcribed into the language of each country, pseudonymized, and translated into English. Pseudonymization requires a de-identification procedure of the data by which any personally identifiable information is replaced by an artificial identifier, or pseudonym. Participants in the focus groups were identifiable only by a numerical code (for example, “speaker 24”). The crosswalk to match these numerical codes to personally identifiable information (in this case, first and last names) was saved in separate folders on the UKON GDPR-compliant cloud. The original non-pseudonymized (‘raw’) data will also be stored in encrypted and separate folders on the UKON cloud and kept until a specific date, with highly limited access for the research teams.

## 2.3 Coordination process

The coordination of focus groups was organized primarily by the UKON research team in cooperation with the UVA research team. Preparations for the organization of focus groups began in December 2021 with a coordination call between all partner universities. Shortly thereafter, it was determined that the focus groups would be held in each country during the end of April and throughout the month of May. It was also determined that, to ensure the proper transcription of the discussion, the focus groups would be video and audio recorded.

Throughout the months of January and February 2022, the research teams at the University of Konstanz and the University of Amsterdam collectively determined the objectives and data collection goals of the focus groups. Coordination between these research teams determined that focus groups would concentrate on: 1) understanding public opinion (the reasoning and rationale of individuals in their responses to survey questions underlining responses about inequality and preferences for redistribution), 2) social citizenship perceptions and preferences (comparing social right provisions at the national versus EU level), and 3) accessing resources (how individuals have accessed resources in the past and if the EU could improve access). It was determined that the focus groups would begin with an on-site questionnaire to collect their opinion data followed by a discussion about their responses to these survey items.

The on-site questionnaire follows the three main goals outlined above: 1) how respondents think about and interpret survey questions, 2) how respondents think about EU versus national social insurance/social-rights provision, and 3) how respondents think about resources relevant to accessing such provisions. The first part of the questionnaire collects basic demographic data such as gender, birth year, education, income, migration background, and political leanings. This is followed by a second part that focused on “classic” survey questions, taken from the European Social Survey (ESS waves 2008/2016) regarding preferences for redistribution, government support for the unemployed, and government support for childcare. The third section focuses on differences between national and EU provisions of services (focusing on unemployment and childcare) and the fourth section deals with personal experiences with government assistance, how individuals go about accessing resources, and opinions about if and how the EU could improve access to social rights (e.g. unemployment or family benefits, education, health care). The focus group questionnaire is included in Appendix B.

To assist in the recruitment of participants in each country, the research teams created a webpage (translated into all participant country languages) and participant sign-up forms through the EUSOCIALCIT website (<https://www.eusocialcit.eu/focus-groups-en/>). The registration of participants was stored centrally through the University of Konstanz cloud server, but individual contact of participants was managed by the partner universities. It was also decided that participants in the focus groups would receive a 30-euro voucher for the Amazon e-commerce website for their participation. Vouchers for Amazon were selected because of their availability across the participant countries (Germany: amazon.de, Netherlands: amazon.nl, Poland: amazon.pl, and Spain: amazon.es). The UKON research team took the lead in purchasing and preparing the Amazon vouchers for the focus groups in each country. Per the requirements of the University of Konstanz, respondents were required to provide a signature and date to receive their voucher.

## 2.4 Format of the focus groups

In March 2022, the research team at the University of Konstanz oversaw the logistical and organizational details for the focus groups. This included the formatting of the data consent forms (determined by the joint data controller agreement), finalizing the questionnaire of survey questions, and preparing signature forms for the Amazon vouchers. This also included finalizing the interview guide for focus group moderators. The interview guide was created to provide a standard format for the direction of the focus group discussion across different country contexts. This guide included introductory language outlining the objectives of the EUSOCIALCIT focus groups, ground rules for discussions (for example, reassuring participants that there are no wrong or right answers), and information on data privacy measures (in simplified information from the joint data controller agreement). The interview guide also offered moderators probing questions for each section of the discussion (following the items in the on-site questionnaire, excluding demographics) to encourage discussions throughout the focus groups. The interview guide is included in Appendix C.

Focus group pre-tests were scheduled for March 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> at the University of Konstanz. University students from UKON were recruited to participate in the pre-test discussions. This resulted in 10 students for each pre-test focus group (20 in total). After the focus group pre-tests, the UKON research team discussed the pre-test focus groups and adapted all documentation and the organization of the focus groups to improve the flow and discussion by participants. Adapted information and findings from the pre-tests were communicated with the other research teams after completion.

The focus groups were scheduled between April and June 2022 (see more details below). To translate all the necessary documents into the respective language of each country, the interview guide, consent forms, on-site questionnaire, and other documents were shared with each research team after the completion of the Berlin focus groups (last week of April). The format of the focus groups was designed for similar implementation in each location. Groups were seated around a block table or desks were moved into a circular formation (for example, when held at a university meeting room) with the moderator and co-moderator at one end. Audio recording equipment, including microphones, were placed in the center of the configuration. The video equipment was placed in one corner of the room. Each participant had either a nametag or a name tent so that they could be identified during the discussion. The on-site questionnaire, in contrast, did not ask for their name but

rather included their numerical code to identify each participant. At the beginning of each session, the moderators and co-moderators filled out a list of each participant matching first and last names to their numerical code for later identification.

Each focus group began with the moderator introducing the main theme – the future of European social citizenship, providing information about the EuSocialCit project, and outlining the structure of the session. The duration of focus groups was set for approximately 90 minutes, with the first 30 minutes devoted to data privacy consent forms and the initial questionnaire, and the following 60 minutes for the discussion. Each session included a short introductory round with moderators and participants sharing their name, age, occupation, family situation, and in some cases, hobbies.

Participants also filled out the initial questionnaire and, after these were collected, the discussion would begin. The first block would begin with a discussion about income inequality and governmental responsibility to reduce this inequality. This was followed by a discussion of the provision of social rights by the European Union, including reducing inequalities across countries and the extension of rights to migrants. Subsequently, the discussion would focus on the national level versus the EU level in providing social rights. This section included three examples of the role of the European Union in minimum income provision, education policy, and unemployment policy. In Germany and Poland, these examples were distributed in printouts to participants. The following section included questions about information and how to exercise social rights. Respondents were asked, “if you needed government support, where would you turn to for access to programs and why?” The next session focused on the role of the EU in times of crisis and was included as an addition due to the current political climate in Europe (for example, the war in Ukraine). A final set of optional questions asked respondents to raise their hands if, 1) they think that the EU welfare state should be further expanded and 2) if their opinion had changed after the discussion. In Germany, Poland, and Spain, the majority of respondents agreed with the first question, but there were mixed responses to the second question.

At the conclusion of the discussions, respondents were asked to share any other thoughts, thanked for their participation, and again, informed about the EUSOCIALCIT project (including the project website). At this point, the co-moderators would hand out individual sheets requiring signatures and dates so that the participants could receive their 30-euro Amazon voucher. Amazon vouchers were printed out with the code to use on their local Amazon website as well as detailed information about the vouchers in their native languages.

At each focus group session, all documents, video, and audio recordings were transferred back to the University of Konstanz and safely stored on the UKON cloud server. The lists of participants, surveys, consent forms, and voucher forms were scanned and saved based on the protocol of the joint data agreement. After completion of the focus groups, each team received password-protected access to the focus group data collected in their home country. In June 2022, the pseudonymized survey data was put into an electronic format and each team would begin the process of transcription and translation of the discussion data (video and audio).

### **Recruitment of Participants and Location of Focus Groups**

The recruitment of participants was managed by each partner university. The initial concept of recruitment was to use “grassroots” methods or self-recruitment efforts, through social media and contacting organizations with access to target populations. Due to practical limitations and varying experiences, the ultimate recruitment methods varied across country cases and are outlined below. At the end of the day, the initial goal of having 4 to 5 focus groups in each country was reached.

#### 2.4.1 Germany

Beginning in March 2022, recruitment in Germany was initially a grassroots effort. This was primarily through social media posts and contact with non-profit and community organizations in the Berlin area. The team initially used the official University of Konstanz website to post a webpage that outlined the objectives of the focus groups and a link to the sign-up form. The recruitment advertisement was also posted on seven Berlin-based Facebook groups that included information and a link to the focus group webpage on the EuSocialCit website.

Combined these seven groups encompassed over 300,000 members on Facebook. The UKON research team also sent emails to nineteen (19) social policy and European Union organizations in the Berlin area requesting that they communicate information or contact individuals to participate in the focus groups. Examples of these groups included Pulse of Europe-Berlin, Europa-Union Berlin, and Sozialverband VdK Deutschland, among others.

In Germany, however, less than 20 people signed up for the focus groups in spite of the significant recruitment efforts. Due to the low number of recruited participants during these grassroots efforts, the UKON research team decided to contract the recruitment of focus group participants to a private company, Quovadis-Studio for qualitative market research Berlin GmbH. This organization handled the recruitment of participants for five (5) of the focus groups. The sixth focus group was composed of individuals recruited through the grassroots recruitment effort. The groups were recruited by Quovadis on the basis of the criteria provided by the UKON team. Participants were selected based on education level, family status (with number and age of children), and age. The participants in the focus groups organized by Quovadis did not receive an Amazon voucher, but rather a voucher provided by Quovadis. The target populations for each focus group are outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1. Overview of Berlin Focus Group Target Populations**

Group	Date/time	Characteristics	Description
1	25.04.22 / 14.00	Mixed	Diverse group (Recruited by UKON)
2	25.04.22 / 17.00	Higher education	Completed university education
3	25.04.22 / 19.30	No higher education	No completed university education
4	26.04.22 / 14.00	Pensioners (Older People)	Age 60 to 75, or official retirement age in country
5	26.04.22 / 17.00	People with care responsibilities	All have at least 1 child under 10 years
6	25.04.22 / 19.30	Young adults	Age 18 to 35

In total, fifty (50) individuals in Berlin participated in the focus groups. The focus groups were held in Berlin on April 25<sup>th</sup> and April 26<sup>th</sup> at the Quovadis Qualitative Research Studio (in rooms specifically designed for group discussions, with equipment and a one-way mirror, etc.). Refreshments and food were provided on-site for participants.

Across all focus groups in Berlin, the median age of respondents was 38 years. Female participants comprised 50% of the total sample. The largest share of participants (44%) are highly educated, with a degree from a college or university (e.g. Bachelor, Master, Magister, Diploma). 60% of respondents are employed with a full-time job (e.g. dependent employee, self-employed, assisting family member; working time 30 hours per week or more). The largest share of respondents (34%) have a monthly income between 1.501-2.500 Euros. Approximately 60% of respondents have never been unemployed for more than 3 months and the majority (66%) have no children.

#### 2.4.2 Netherlands

The process of recruitment began in April 2022 and, as in the German research group experience, was a combination of self-recruitment efforts and outsourced recruitment. The former was primarily done via direct contact with students and staff in the university setting. The UVA team also created a poster to be distributed around the campus with information about participating in the focus groups. In the end, the UVA research team contracted a private company, Norstat, to supplement the self-recruitment efforts. Norstat is a data and service provider in the Netherlands with a respondent panel of approximately 80,000 individuals.

This organization handled the recruitment of participants for three (3) of the focus groups. The fourth focus group was composed of individuals recruited through the grassroots, self-recruitment effort.

The groups were recruited by Norstat on the basis of the criteria provided by the UVA team (education and age). The participants in the focus groups organized by Norstat did not receive an Amazon voucher, but rather a voucher provided by Norstat. The target populations for each focus group are outlined in Table 2. In total, twenty-four (24) individuals participated in the Amsterdam focus groups. These focus groups were held in Amsterdam on May 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> in meeting rooms across the University of Amsterdam campus. Refreshments and food were provided on-site for participants.

**Table 2. Overview of Amsterdam Focus Group Target Populations**

Group	Date/time	Characteristics	Description
1	04.05.22 / 10.00	Pensioners (Older People)	Age 60 to 75, or official retirement age in country
2	04.05.22 / 14.00	Higher education	Completed university education (Recruited by UVA)
3	06.05.22 / 10.00	No higher education	No completed university education
4	06.05.22 / 14.00	Mixed	Diverse group

Across all focus groups in Amsterdam, the median age of respondents was 55.5 years. Female participants comprised 46% of the total sample. The largest share of participants (50%) are highly educated, with a degree from a college or university (e.g. Bachelor, Master, Magister, Diploma). 25% of respondents are employed with a full-time job (e.g. dependent employee, self-employed, assisting family member; working time 30 hours per week or more). Among income groups, 25% have a monthly income between 1.501-2.500 Euros. Approximately 58% of respondents have never been unemployed for more than 3 months and the majority (88%) have no children.

### 2.4.3 Poland

The process of recruitment began in May 2022 for the Warsaw focus groups. Recruitment was primarily a grassroots, self-recruitment effort. The recruitment consisted of direct emails sent to graduates with a request to share it on their social media networks. Research assistants monitored this process by sending follow-up emails and follow-up phone calls to students that shared the information. The SGH team also made direct contacts with organizations supporting older people (such as “universities of third age” and senior clubs). Additionally, direct contact was made (via phone calls and email) with representatives of these organizations to share information with their networks. The SGH team also posted invitations to participate in groups/forums for individuals with disabilities.

In total, thirty-three (33) individuals participated in the Warsaw focus groups. The target populations for each focus group are outlined in Table 3. The focus groups were held in Warsaw on May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, and 25<sup>th</sup> at a university student housing center (with specially designed meeting rooms). For

individuals that were unable to attend the focus groups, two virtual focus groups took place on another date. Refreshments and food were provided on-site for participants.

**Table 3. Overview of Warsaw Focus Group Target Populations**

Group	Date/time	Characteristics	Description
1	23.05.22 / 14.00	Young adults	Age 18 to 35
2	23.05.22 / 17.00	Pensioners (Older People)	Age 60 to 75, or official retirement age in country
3	24.05.22 / 14.00	People with care responsibilities	All have at least 1 child under 10 years
4	24.05.22 / 17.00	Higher education	Completed university education
5	15.05.22 / 13.00	Mixed	Diverse Group (Middle-aged)

Across all focus groups in Warsaw, the median age of respondents was 28 years. Female participants comprised 60% of the total sample. The largest share of participants (88%) are highly educated, with a degree from a college or university (e.g. Bachelor, Master, Magister, Diploma). 67% of respondents are employed with a full-time job (e.g. dependent employee, self-employed, assisting family member; working time 30 hours per week or more). Among income groups, 45% have a monthly income between 500-1.000 Euros. Approximately 90% of respondents have never been unemployed for more than 3 months and the majority (82%) have no children.

#### 2.4.4 Spain

The process of recruitment also began in May 2022 for the Madrid focus groups. The research team at UC3M led the recruitment process through grassroots, self-recruitment efforts. This was primarily through posts on social media and direct contact with community organizations. To recruit retired individuals, the UC3M team reached out to the *Escuela de Mayores de la UC3M* (UC3M Senior School). To recruit students, the UC3M research team spoke with local teaching groups on the university campus. They also sent focus group information to the Servicio de Investigación de la UC3M (UC3M Research Service). This organization distributed this information through email and social media. The UC3M research team also prepared texts that were posted to social media sites, including LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook.

In total, twenty-seven (27) individuals participated in the Madrid focus groups. The target populations for each focus group are outlined in Table 4. These focus groups were held in Madrid on May 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> and June 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>. The focus groups were held in a meeting room at the UC3M campus at Puerta de Toledo. Refreshments were provided on-site for participants.

**Table 4. Overview of Madrid Focus Group Target Populations**

Group	Date/time	Characteristics	Description
1	30.05.22 / 12.00	Pensioners (Older People)	Age 60 to 75, or official retirement age in country
2	31.05.22 / 10.30	No higher education	No completed university education
3	01.06.22 / 17.30	People with care responsibilities	All have at least 1 child under 10 years
4	02.06.22 / 12.00	Young adults	Age 18 to 35
5	02.06.22 / 17.00	Higher education	Completed university education

Across all focus groups in Madrid, the median age of respondents was 41 years. Female participants comprised 56% of the total sample. The largest share of participants (59%) are highly educated, with a degree from a college or university (e.g. Bachelor, Master, Magister, Diploma). 41% of respondents are employed with a full-time job (e.g. dependent employee, self-employed, assisting family member; working time 30 hours per week or more). Among income groups, 30% have a monthly income between 1.501-2.500 Euros. Approximately 70% of respondents have never been unemployed for more than 3 months and the majority (74%) have no children.

#### Data processing and coding

The processing of the focus group data was managed by each research team. Using the audio and video recording, the discussion data was transcribed into the language of each country, pseudonymized, and then translated into English for the final coding and analysis. Once all data was processed, the process of analysis was coordinated by the UKON research team. Because the data was collected through a structured interview, the discussion was coded using categories outlined in the interview guide.

The process of coding began with the UKON research team outlining the main themes from the focus group discussion. This was based on the structure of the interview guide. The main codes (categories and sub-categories) followed the interview guide and were determined from the main sections of the discussion as outlined in the guide. This included: 1) how respondents thought about and interpreted survey questions, 2) how respondents thought about EU versus national social insurance/social-rights provision, and 3) how respondents thought about resources relevant to accessing such provisions. The next step of analysis included familiarization with the data through a concentrated, focused reading of the focus group transcriptions to identify keywords, phrases, or quotes that exemplified the discussion in each country. Building off the main themes of the interview guide, the research team sorted the data into main categories based on the following criteria: if 1) a participant answered a

question and how, 2) if a response belongs to a different question, 3) how the comment communicated something of importance on the topic, and 4) if something similar has been said or how this varies to the conversation (Krueger & Casey 2000).

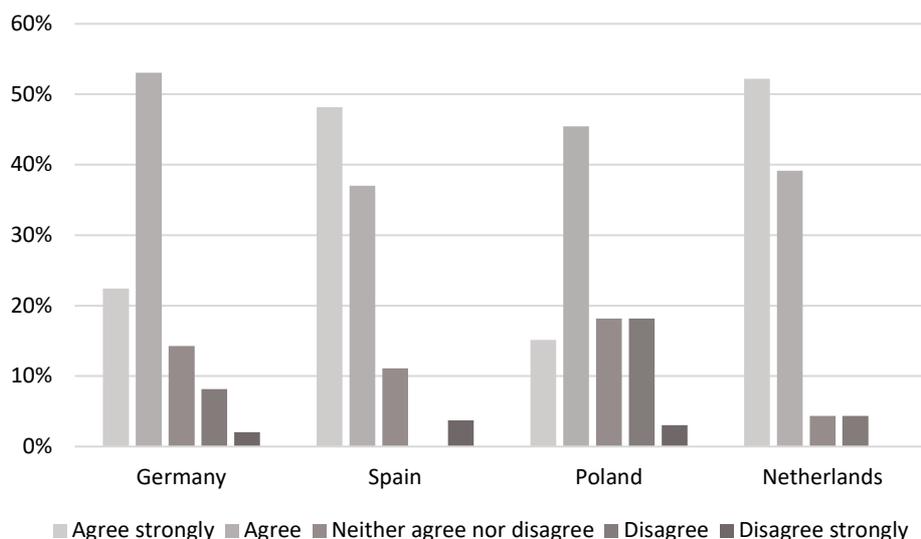
The next step included indexing coded language, i.e., sorting into categories based on the interview guide. Coded language was collected in a database under their main categories. Using this approach, the research team identified the main concepts, reasoning, and contemporary discourse for participants in each country. This data was compared and contrasted to show similarities and differences in the discussion across countries. Data was used to highlight representative quotes, concepts, and language across country cases. The final step of analysis included using the quotes from the focus group context to highlight the primary thematic content of the discussion.

### 3. Focus group discussions on income inequality

In the following sections, we provide a first, largely descriptive overview of the main findings from the focus groups. This descriptive part is grouped according to the three main themes described above. In each sub-section, we contrast the quantitative data collected in the short survey among focus groups participants with insights from the analysis of the qualitative data. The quantitative data should not and cannot be interpreted as representative for the particular countries, but merely serves the purposes of anchoring the qualitative data. As mentioned above, all participants have been assigned an individual ID, and all analyses rely on these pseudonymized IDs. However, in order to facilitate readability, we use (invented) names when quoting participants.

#### 3.1 Survey results on government intervention and income inequality

To start, we look at how participants replied to the survey question, "The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels" (strongly agree = 1, strongly disagree = 5). Figure 1 shows that the majority of participants agree or agree strongly with this notion. There are some differences across the different national samples, which the discussions around this survey question and topic, in general, reflect also. For example, in the Dutch and Spanish samples, around half of the participants agree strongly with the government reducing income inequality, while in Germany and Poland, around half of the participants agree only. The Polish participants seem to be the most critical towards the government reducing income inequality, and in the next section, it will become more apparent why. It is worth noting that these patterns, drawn from our small and not-fully-representative samples, broadly comport with the patterns of high support for government redistribution in recent, more representative surveys (e.g. European Social Survey).



**Figure 1. Survey results on the question "The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels ", strongly agree = 1, strongly disagree = 5, total N = 132.**

## 3.2 Understanding of income inequality

Independent of how individual participants define income inequality, they see it as problematic across the board. This is in line with the survey results that show high levels of support for reducing income inequality. Participants also agree that the income gap is widening and, therefore, social inequality is increasing. However, participants have different understandings of what the wording income inequality means, and they discuss from whom income should be redistributed and to whom. Unsurprisingly, participants discuss in length the gap between rich and poor. Alfonso (Spain) describes it like this: "We are all born equal, but we are not all the same. We each have our responsibilities, and these are marked by the skills we can teach, deliver and sell."

Participants discuss income differences between different sectors. Here, care workers and other professions in the social sector are addressed. Felix (Germany) says, "Especially nursery school teachers and geriatric nurses. They can't go to work and still do not know how to pay their rent." Fernanda from Spain says small business owners are "crushed". On the contrary, participants mention that managers and directors are receiving too much income compared to "normal" employees. Nora (Germany) describes it like this: "Just because you grew up in a privileged position, studied for ten years, and then became a company boss somewhere, doesn't mean that you work more than someone who has completed an education and does social work." Nora further connects the discussion about income and social mobility: "The problem is also that it is passed on, that people are born into families, and then they are not entitled to equal opportunities in our system as it is. Simply because you are trapped in it and [...] you don't have the possibilities to reach your potential."

Mainly (lower educated) women mention that they first thought about the gender pay gap when thinking about inequality. The common definition mentioned in the group is "women earn less than men in the same job and in the same position" (Karina, Germany). The women who discuss this issue think that women in the same positions as men or with the same competencies should get the same

income as their male counterparts. Another topic during the discussion about income inequality is income in different life cycles. Participants are particularly concerned about how people with families and those on pension benefits can manage their livelihood since the costs are rising. This is because the salaries or pensions are not increasing in line with rising costs.

### 3.3 Understanding of government intervention

Interestingly, while the focus group discussions revealed a consensus on tackling income inequality, there is more debate on whether the government should intervene and if yes, how. But first, it is important to keep in mind that participants have different views on who "the government" is. To some extent, the participants in the focus groups distinguish local authorities and the EU from "the government", who they associate with their national governments. Whether they are referring to their current national government in place or national governments, in general, is not always differentiated. For instance, Marlene (Netherlands), interpreted the question about the role of the 'government' as the role of the sitting cabinet, and said "yes, we the people should play that role [reduce income differences]", but the current cabinet [led by the Liberal party leader Rutte] "can't do much, I suspect. So that's why I said no."

Participants have different reasons for supporting government intervention regarding income inequality. One of the reasons is the increasing gap between rich and poor. Others refer to individuals who live in poverty, individuals who cannot work for certain reasons, families with children or social cohesion, and the government's responsibility for the well-being of its citizens in general. One particular concern throughout the discussions is nicely summarized by Eva (Germany): "I think the government could intervene where people with a full-time job can't live on their salary without further support, so where the wages are so low that they have to get supplementary benefits." So here, participants think more about to whom income should be redistributed.

The more concrete government interventions that participants discuss reflect these patterns. The legal regulation and rise of a minimum income is a current topic across the focus groups in Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, and Spain. Other popular proposals by the participants concern taxes, in particular wealth and inheritance taxes. Maximilian (Germany) gives an example: "I was thinking of wealth tax, that is, above all, fair taxation. If you think about the Federal Republic of Germany, then at some point, the percentage tax rate stops. That's where you start that people who earn a lot of money pay the same percentage of tax as people who earn less money." Participants also mention increasing the taxation of large companies, and stopping tax havens and tax loopholes.

Other possible government interventions participants mention having more protective elements, such as unemployment insurance, universal basic income, or affordable living. Ute (Germany) explains, "[individuals] are then protected and can concentrate fully on their work and contribute something." Others focus more on investment elements, such as education, to achieve equal opportunities. Pawel (Poland) describes: "I would still say that this equalization of income should rather be based mainly on creating opportunities for everyone to be able to simply earn for themselves." And others think of government interventions are not always considered part of social policy, such as ensuring the labour laws and practices are fair. As Jan (Netherlands) put it, the role of the government need not "to

enforce equality, but to achieve it through a fairer personnel policy” such as “tackling discrimination in job vacancies”.

Some participants also say that levelling out incomes is not the responsibility of the government or are against government interference in social inequality issues more in general. Here the participants discuss two main reasons. First, some participants prefer a liberal market policy approach where the economy largely determines income inequality. Participants from Poland and Spain explain that they do not trust their governments with too much intervention power because there are concerns that their governments are corrupt and waste taxes. In general, some participants do not want the government to intervene in the private sector and would prefer the government to be a more neutral observer that only interferes in individual cases.

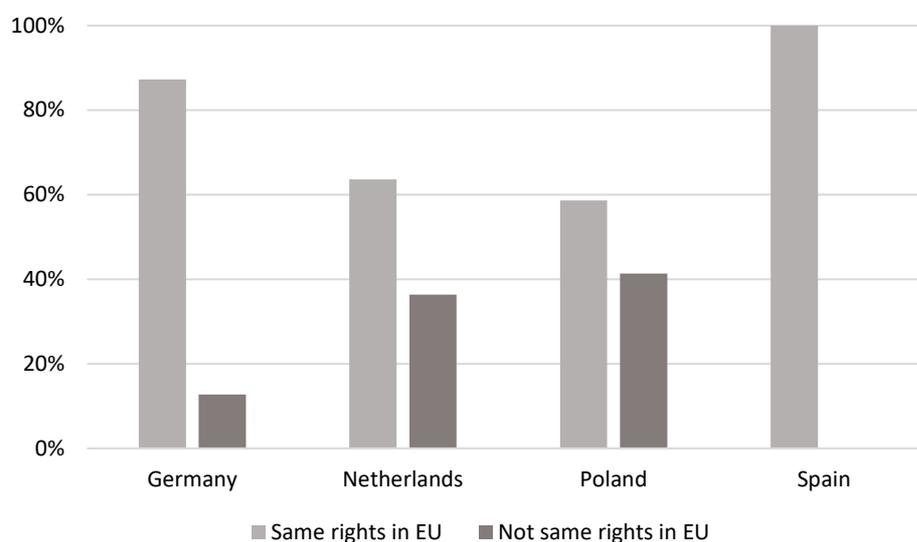
This leads to the second reason for opposing government intervention regarding income inequality, which is the fear of free riders. Alicja (Poland) says: "at the same time, in the form of taxes or some other tribute to the country will be collected precisely to equalize the standard of living of those people who do not put any, do not give anything from themselves and do not bring anything to social life." Participation in the social community is also discussed by other participants as a requirement for getting support by that (tax paying) community. Tanja (Germany) mentions: "Those who do not want to participate, they just have to see how they can get around the round." Once again, participation relates to having a job and paying taxes.

Finally, participants also discussed who else should be responsible for reducing income inequality. Here, they discuss primarily companies, trade unions, local authorities, and last but not least, the EU. The following section will further elaborate on income inequality and social rights in the EU.

## 4. Focus groups discussions on social rights in the EU

### 4.1 Survey results on EU intervention

Figure 2 reveals that the majority of participants of the focus groups in Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, and Spain respond in the survey that it would be good to give all EU citizens the same social rights. However, the extent to which they agree varies significantly across countries. The participants in Spain (100%) are followed by Germany (87%), the Netherlands (64%), and Poland (59%). In spite of this variance, the overall high level of support for some version of social citizenship rights at the EU level chimes well with the existing quantitative evidence as mentioned in the introduction. However, this question is very general. Therefore, what 'the same social rights' means across countries is likely to differ, as the more detailed analysis of the focus group data shows.



**Figure 2. Survey results on question 1 = It would be good to give all EU citizens the same social rights, so that it does not matter in which EU country they live, 2 = It is better to maintain the differences between national welfare states, even if this means that some EU citizens have fewer social rights than others, total N = 125.**

### 4.2 Understanding of social rights

To discuss social rights in the EU, first, an understanding of social rights needs to be established. Overall, participants seem to differentiate between what they refer to as "basic social rights" and "financial social rights". Basic social rights are described as policies in the realm of education, housing, or health, though some participants also see human rights as social rights. According to some participants, these should be granted unconditionally, without exception. Nicole (Germany) says: "I think in the first place, we are all human beings. And I think every person must somehow be able to go to the doctor or have enough food so that they can survive and not live on the street or anything

else." Tanja (Germany) adds: "I think I would distinguish between so-called basic social rights, so a right to education or to equal treatment. These would be basic rights that should apply everywhere. But there should be basic social rights in any case so that people have enough to eat."

When discussing financial social rights, the discussion moves to refugees. Here, participants distinguish between war refugees and economic refugees. As Patrick (Germany) puts it: "Getting equal rights depends on basic conditions, e.g. a war refugee should not have to work before getting equal rights." On the other hand, the participants from Germany seem to agree that economic refugees, or migrants in general, who come to Germany for a higher salary or a better lifestyle should be treated differently. Sami (Germany) says: "I think it's very individual, especially with war refugees and so on. But if someone comes here from another country without having to flee from war or anything else, then I personally would actually find it okay if they work for a year and pay taxes so that they can ultimately receive social benefits." Hence, here the attitudes about financial social rights are more conditional on the effort to work (similar to the discussions mentioned in the previous section).

More specifically, participants tend to link financial social benefits to specific obligations or contributions: Employment, paying taxes, and speaking the language of the host country. Jürgen (Germany) describes a reciprocal principle: "If you get social benefits, you also have to be prepared to give something. Not only do you have to be willing, but the government is also responsible for ensuring that everyone gives something in return." To be able to contribute, some participants argue that labour market integration is key and that the government should more actively integrate newcomers into the labour market by granting them work permits (earlier).

The discussions also reflect a concern about generous financial social rights incentivizing not only migrants but also natives without the obligation to work. Antje (Germany) describes: "But if you give people so much that they can live on it, that means they have no incentive at all to keep going to work. And I'm talking about, we have to be fair here, not only of migrants, and here, we have enough in Germany, own people who sit with their butts on the sofa, and that for 10, 20 years." This seems to be a particular issue for the participants in Germany. Michelle argues: "From my point of view, the government has to take care of its own citizens first, and then the circle goes on and on, on and on." One consequence (as mentioned already in the previous section) for participants is to grant financial social rights not automatically to everyone in a certain country but for the government to access individual cases.

Different proposals were discussed to further understand what priorities the participants have concerning EU-level social rights. The proposals focused on minimum income, education and unemployment policy. Overall, the three proposals on the integration of the EU in the individual policy areas are regarded as suitable by focus group participants. Participants also argue, "if you create added value for the people again, especially in terms of rights, basic rights or minimum income, education policy, unemployment policy, then there could be a change in people's minds, a change that they say, hey, the EU is important, and we have to protect and preserve it" (Melanie, Germany).

More specifically, in the case of minimum income and unemployment, it is questioned whether a fixed amount should be set for all countries or whether the EU should instead create a framework in which the countries then set a concrete rate. Annika says: "I think the EU should set the framework, how

much is paid in the end in minimum wage or in unemployment benefits etc., that's a national matter." Particularly for the unemployment benefits, participants question whether it could be implemented. For example, Clara has a concern regarding mobile EU citizens: "I also think it's fundamentally good. What is also a big problem is when you have worked in one EU country and then go to another. The unemployment benefit is completely different and it is not considered, so to speak, because you have already worked, but when you come to Germany, for example, it is not seen that way, and you may get nothing. So, depending on who you are and in which country you are, you have to find a cross-border regulation so that things are evaluated in the same way." Other participants argue (once again) that the priority should not be giving individuals money but guaranteeing employment for everyone. Nikola (Poland) claims: "Combating unemployment is a priority here, and the first thing we need to do is to give these people work if we are at all talking about equalizing incomes, and only then should we consider whether they are higher or lower."

Most participants see education as the most important and implementable proposal, mentioning the existing EU program Erasmus as an example. Participants evaluate education as the easiest policy to implement on the EU level also, in comparison to the other two policies. Some argue that the EU should start with integration in the policy area of education because other policies build on it, as with education policy, equal opportunities, equal life chances and integration are created within the EU. However, there are also a few voices that are critical of the focus on education. Annika (Germany) says: "I think education policy is a difficult topic. Maybe it also has something to do with Germany. That it's a matter for the countries anyway, and the countries insist on their own characteristics and their own school systems. And the attempts to Europeanize that, and what that always means is that you have to agree on some common denominator. I think that will be very difficult, because the education systems are also very, very different. So I don't see the EU in the steering role."

Other policy areas for the EU that came up during the discussions are, amongst others: action on the low-wage sector, insurance system, startup support, health care, access to childcare places, gender equality or any discrimination on the ground of race, gender, religion or sexual orientation, pensions, and hate on the internet.

Still, participants also mention not giving the EU the full power over social rights: "So to regulate everything in the European Union, that's a bit for me. I don't think we should completely give away our sovereign rights, but as a country, we should be able to make certain decisions ourselves. But these core issues, such as those mentioned here, for example, education and health care, for example, could be regulated at the European level, including the minimum income and so on and so forth" (Antje, Germany).

### 4.3 Why should the EU intervene?

Similar to the survey results, the focus group discussions indicate that a majority favors harmonizing social rights on the EU level. One reason for EU intervention is to set the same standards or a common framework across the EU. But participants also mention a right to intervene where such standards or frameworks are violated. Perez (Spain) says: "I think we should make an effort to decide if we want a European Union; if governments wish to join, they must fulfill a series of requirements. If I sign a contract with a telephone company, they tell me if I want a telephone, you have to meet these

requirements. It's the same thing, but at the European level. It is crucial not only to ask for these requirements but also to contribute to helping these countries to meet them. It is essential that being EU citizens makes us equal, that there are no first and second-class citizens." For Gabriel (Poland), a particular issue in this regard is unequal incomes across EU member states: "If we consider our salary in relation to the salary of people in the same positions working in Western Europe, we see a very large discrepancy. At least some time ago, I checked, and the difference was three times. This is a big problem."

The participants often mention a European (social) community independent of borders and citizenship in this context. Alexander (Germany) says: "if I ask myself personally, then I would definitely say at the point where that's already the case, but of course, we have to guarantee certain things, and that has to be independent of citizenship or of the presence in which country one is at the moment. We are a European community, so if we manage to trade without borders, we must also be able to have social justice and social standards without borders. What kind of standards can we agree on then?" Some participants mention that the EU (in comparison to national governments) should take the lead in raising social justice within Europe. Raul (Spain) says: "Individual member states have to row together with the rest of the member states. Equality is a social construct, and if there is no relationship with the rest of the member states, it is not understood. We member states have to row, all of us, we all have to row to move the boat forward."

Another reason for EU intervention is related to issues of enforcement and compliance. The discussions show that participants disagree on the degree of enforcement and compliance. Some prefer loose orientations, and others want specific sanctions to avoid corruption. For example, Sami (Germany) argues: "first try to regulate this at the national level. If that doesn't work, then there must be limits, guidelines, and directives from the EU that ensure that every country is at the same standard as far as possible." Doreen (Germany) has a similar opinion: "Well, maybe create a certain framework and a rough orientation. But the countries should then be able to decide for themselves whether they want to support other countries for certain purposes." Junis (Germany) has a different opinion: "I would also be more in favor of a legal requirement. The reason is if I look at the corruption rates in the EU countries, in which countries how high the corruption rates are, then I would definitely regulate it by law. There are people who go into politics poor in certain EU countries and come out as billionaires. After a few years." There is also frustration about countries blocking legislation, and some participants feel that this is an issue that needs to be addressed for creating a more social Europe.

Finally, participants favor EU intervention in social rights in times of crisis. Participants argue that crises such as climate crisis, and war, cannot be solved nationally. This calls for EU intervention, unity, and cooperation between EU countries. Some participants think about more practical matters, such as Alexander (Germany): "I think the EU is particularly in demand in times of crisis because it is the only institution that has the means or the tools." Others think about cross-national solidarity, like Elke (Germany): "I also think that when I look at these natural disasters, which do not affect the whole of Europe, but individual countries, then I think it is also important that there is a unified Europe, that there is a strong Europe, that the countries receive support, but that research continues to be done in climate research not only in individual countries but in the whole of Europe. I think that is very important. And if the support is also there for these crisis areas. I think that not only helps the individual country but also helps to strengthen Europe." And then again, others think about the

legitimacy of the EU, like Maximilian (Germany): "Yes, I think everything you read out, all the crises, where you can see that these are things that cannot be solved nationally because they are all problems that do not stop at our borders. And that's why I think it was easy to see that we need to work together and that this strengthened the value of the EU. And yes, in my opinion, we should act more together, i.e. through the EU, on this basis."

And the participants also mention that the EU should do more in times of crisis, in particular in the case of a transnational crisis that goes beyond borders. Juan (Spain) mentions the 2008 financial crisis: "The idea that there is strength in unity, in the end, depends on the crisis because, in this case, it was seen very well, but the 2008 crisis, precisely, not being able to devalue the currency ended up affecting the entire southern part of Europe, in other words, it depends a lot on the crisis." Magdalena (Poland) mentions the refugee crisis: "Too free, and I would also say for sure in the case of aid for refugees from the European Union, it was very confusing with help for the countries that support refugees, and it is also known that it is not even, but there were terrible problems with it, with enforcement any form of such assistance."

#### 4.4 What are the challenges regarding Social Europe?

As already mentioned above, the majority of the participants support a more Social Europe, though there are important concerns that could hinder extending social rights on the EU level. Many participants think it is not possible at all. One concern is related to the implementation in terms of practical, legal, and financial matters. In particular, participants in Germany are concerned about the financing of cross-border financial social rights, like unemployment benefits. Doreen (Germany) says: "I always think about the fact that Germany is one of the richest EU countries and would then always have to give something to others when there is talk of poorer countries being helped. Where should it come from then?"

Other concerns are historical differences, cultural differences, and language barriers. Michelle (Germany) mentions traditions and religions: "I agree with you that Europe is united above all by the canon of values. But I don't see this universal argument. I think we just don't take into account then certain customs or traditions or religions. So I can't assume that we simply transfer our canon of values bluntly there." Nuria (Spain) talks about racism: "Even the countries that have better social systems, such as the Nordic ones, are especially racist, and it is especially difficult to integrate into that society. Perhaps it would improve the feeling of each of us as a community citizen if you knew that for being European, you have rights that are similar to those next doors." Estefania (Spain) further discusses the challenge regarding racism and social justice in Spain: "Who is going to say that there should not be equality for all the people in the country to have those rights? No one. And I'm not just referring to Spain, because when the polls come out, everyone says, 'we are not racist' (now I am going to refer to Spain only, I am not going to refer to France or Germany). But then they also say, 'they come to take away our jobs'."

Finally, participants also have Eurosceptic attitudes and welfare Eurosceptic attitudes, particularly related to lacking trust in the EU, the EU parliament, and EU elites. There is a consensus among the groups that the EU has not held together in the last crises (e.g., financial crisis, refugee crisis, Corona pandemic) and has done too little and should have intervened more. Participants criticize that EU

countries have acted/are acting independently and autonomously. Lennart (Germany) says: "Everybody stands for themselves when there are problems." Silvio (Spain) thinks the national governments are left alone by the EU in times of crisis: "In previous crises, they should have intervened within the government's internal power, but they didn't care. The problem was that they didn't do anything."

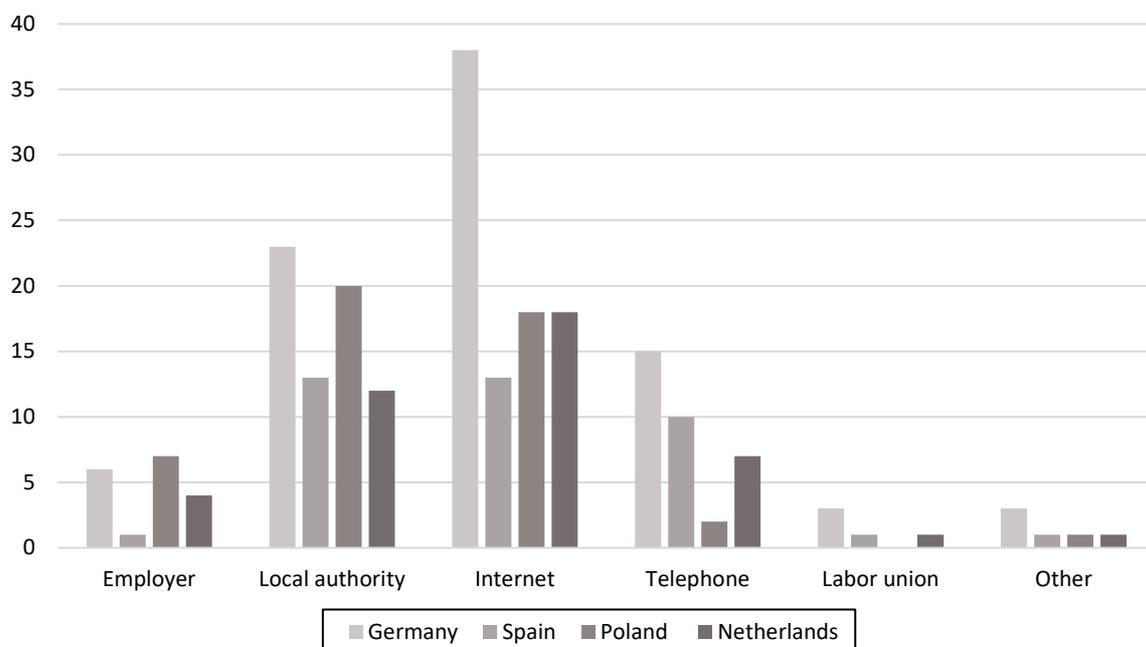
Some participants also have little trust in the EU to achieve unified cooperation between EU countries, and they believe national governments will (still) make decisions individually. One reason that is mentioned are major divergences between the EU Parliament, the EU Commission, and the member-states (the Council), which makes it difficult to find a common and unified approach. Another reason is the accumulating crises that endanger the survival of the EU. Says Martyna (Poland): "I think, however, that the perspective of 30 years, the climate crisis and the climate refugees, who, unfortunately, sooner or later will simply come to Europe, because it's a bit colder here, will either cause the Union to strengthen internally and create a certain barrier, in fact, against these refugees or, on the contrary, this situation simply related to the climate will completely simply tear down this structure. Here I have such mixed feelings."

In general, some participants, both younger and older generations in the focus groups, seem very pessimistic about the future of the EU. There are even participants who think the EU won't exist anymore in 30 years. Felix (Germany) explains this: "I also think that they will no longer exist because there are so many things that the EU already does, and people don't know them. And if people don't understand where the added value is, then that's what they vote for at the ballot box."

## 5. Focus group discussions on the provision of resources

### 5.1 Survey results on how to access social rights

In the last part of the focus groups, access to social rights are discussed. A corresponding survey question covers different contact points for the participants to access social rights. The results from Figure 3 have to be interpreted carefully because participant numbers vary across countries, and participants could choose various answers. Hence what matters here is within-country variation. The most popular contact point is for all countries either the internet or local authorities. Surprisingly, labor unions are almost not mentioned at all.



**Figure 3. Survey results on the question "If you needed government assistance, who would you contact for access to the programs? ", respondents were allowed to choose as many of the above categories as they liked, total N = 132.**

### 5.2 Knowledge about social rights

When discussing access to social rights (initially on the national level), differences between more and less educated participants become noticeable. The higher educated (individuals with at least some degree of tertiary education) are generally more aware of their social rights and, if necessary, also know where and to whom they can turn in case of uncertainties and questions. Christoph (Germany) says: "I'm going to say I feel informed or I think I know what my rights are in the social sphere. And

even if I miss out on certain things, so to speak, I know where I can get the relevant information." Nikola (Poland) has a similar attitude: "The information is there, but you have to look for it."

On the contrary, lower-educated participants have less knowledge about their social rights and also do not feel well informed (by the authorities and institutions). Antje (Germany) explains: "Active support from the government to enforce one's rights is rare. I just wanted to say that. Unfortunately, this is very blatant here. You almost have to go to a lawyer in the meantime. You have to go twice for every case. That's why I don't see myself supported by the government." Among this group, there is a feeling of being left behind and having to chase after their social rights. This comes particularly through in Karina's (Germany) story: "But the job center has so many employees who say: No, you're not allowed to do that, where I really have to pick out the paragraph myself and say: But according to this and that, I'm allowed to do that, and you're paying me for this additional certificate or something else."

Magdalena (Poland) elaborates on matters that might be particularly relevant for lower-educated individuals: "I wanted to focus here on the complexity of the law and the formalities that may be associated with it. This can scare many people too. I can say myself when I applied for a student loan, which I think is such a form of social assistance if the government helps in this, I got a file, I think 100-120 pages, and to be honest, I gave up on it, because I also had a lot on my head, and however, I just opted for other things instead. It is also very complicated, and it can scare many people." And Martyna (Poland) also talks about the amount of information: "I mean, it's also impossible for us to be up to date with the changes in the law at the various strange times of the day and night that have been going on in Poland lately, so I think it's important that we know where to source this information. It's also important that first of all, we know where to source, and secondly, we have some kind of institutional understanding, that is, there's institution X, and rather if I'm looking, I'm looking in that institution."

Lena (Poland) suggests: "Simplifying this information as much as possible because it is sometimes written in such language that you don't understand and in such a way that it is difficult." Other participants, like Patrick (Germany), find awareness more problematic: "The access to it is there. Awareness is not always there, and it is not always offered directly. For example, I had my first flat of my own and didn't know that I could apply for initial equipment. So you first have to know that from somewhere. And that's where it starts [...] when I came out of school. I didn't know how to do paperwork or how to get my rights. So you learn that somehow, yes, mostly through experience." And Pia (Germany) says: "I mean, you can always call somewhere yourself, I don't know, for example, the job center and ask what you have available, how you can do something. But I think people should be informed about this much earlier. Also, at school." Hence, even if opportunities and access to information are given, knowledge about social rights is still limited. On the one hand, individuals need to know what they are looking for, and on the other hand, they also need skills to overcome specific bureaucratic hurdles to realize their rights.

When discussing social rights access on the EU level, it becomes apparent that few participants have experience with the EU. In particular, lower-educated participants have little knowledge about their social rights at the EU level. This group also has little knowledge about EU programs, such as Erasmus.

On the contrary, higher educated participants already had experiences with EU programs, for example, through Erasmus or comparable EU education programs, like the Da Vinci program.

Erasmus stands out as a particularly popular policy during the focus group discussions. Ramiro (Spain) says: "Erasmus is an enriching experience that generates European culture." And Doreen (Germany) emphasizes the social element of this program: "I think Erasmus is good. It's been proven for decades. Because students who come from poorer families simply also have the opportunity to go abroad. Because studying abroad is actually only possible if the parents can pay." And the program's success gives hope to Klaudia (Poland) for the integration of further similar EU programs: "But see, for example, there are different educational programs like Erasmus running all over Europe, it doesn't have to be financial or something like that. There could be such programs, and that's what you should focus on."

Other existing EU social programs, such as SOLVIT, are virtually unknown among the participants. Pia (Germany) says: "It would be nice if people knew about it if it was somehow made more public. As has just been said, it would also be nice if it were taken up in schools."

### 5.3 Reasons for access challenges

Focus group participants give different reasons for the challenges in accessing social rights (beginning again with the national level). Some of the hurdles that are mentioned include an overly complex bureaucracy, health factors, education levels, or understaffing of public services. For example, Tanja (Germany) explains: "And there one should really put a little bit more value on the fact that really everyone, who has perhaps also parents, who do not speak the language now, or ... Well, my mother didn't have a proper school education back then either, so she wouldn't be able to help me in any way in my life now. And that one enables the children to get out of this loop and not to remain in this uninformed status." Alicja (Poland) argues: "In my opinion, such a first contact with information that we do not acquire should be school and that the education system should enable us to do."

Speaking about EU-level social rights, there is little to no knowledge among the focus group participants about access opportunities. Holger (Germany) says: "It's a jungle of authorities that we can't see through. And we don't learn that at school. Where do you go when you have a problem? Where can I get advice when I have a problem?" So there is again a preference for more education about access to social rights in school. Specifically, participants mention that there is also too little information and communication about the social dimension by the EU itself.

### 5.4 How to improve access to social rights?

Apart from school education, focus group participants make several concrete recommendations on how to improve access to social rights. For both national and EU levels, the most supported recommendations are to improve social rights access via the Internet and via local authorities (particularly in Spain and Netherlands). Access via the internet can take different forms, such as an exchange of data between various authorities, a newsletter, social networks, chatbots, a webpage that bundles all the information, or the same on a mobile app. Melanie (Germany) suggests: "Fill out a form. Just online. I'm just thinking of something like a choice-o-mat or something where you

somehow tick off this, and that is my problem XY, or I'm interested in courses of study or in moving into a flat and I don't have any startup capital or or or. It's super easy, super simple to fill out something online via smartphone. And then you get possible funding opportunities or offers of help or organizations that you can turn to or government institutions that you can turn to. So I would actually find something like that super uncomplicated." Participants are in favor of such digital platforms because they can be used 24/7 and are, therefore, more accessible for different individuals. Furthermore, participants explain that the language should be accessible and easy to understand (implying once again that there are difficulties in understanding the information that is available). Martyna (Poland) adds that different groups are likely to use/consume different types of (digital) content: "I think that we should choose the promotion channel for this to the appropriate target group, that, for example, things that are aimed at young people can be advertised by Youtubers, and what I liked the most, what form of promotion and information about the European Union, it was a product placement in series, in television programs."

Regarding social rights across countries, participants specifically refer to the Covid-19 crisis when push notifications were sent when crossing borders. A similar example is mentioned by Maximilian (Germany): "Precisely because it always concerns cross-border situations, I didn't think the push notification was bad at all. Because if that means, just as you get a text message when you travel to Belgium, you are informed about the data tariff, it can be included in the text message, or I can send a second text message, well, if you need help, then here via the following link or something. That would be, I think, a kind of first access, where you've at least read something about it. And then, when you really need help, it's much easier for you to think about it. So I think it's a smart idea and can probably be implemented quickly."

Finally, participants also discuss different ways local authorities or organizations could simplify access to social rights. Wolfgang (Germany) mentions: "There should be a kind of social welfare office, something like a citizens' office, where you can go with your everyday problems, which then says, like an answer catalog from A to Z, where it can help you." Many agree with this approach, but lament that access to the specific offices is dwindling. As Barend (Netherlands) noted, "City-service offices [stadsloketten] are shutting down in lots of neighborhoods... That used to be the place in my part of town to get all the information I needed for social services." Other participants go a step further than emphasizing local organizations. As Eliana (Spain) put it, "The first thing to do is dismantle that bureaucratic plot that any administration has. I am going to refer only to the 3: the local, the regional, and the national government. The City Council is the channel closest to the citizen and should have a petition sheet, an offer sheet so that the information reaches the citizenry." For newcomers to a country, Antje proposes the following: "I think it would be better if we get text messages all the time now: Welcome to this and that country, you have this and this right, here you can get in touch if something is wrong. E.g. as a text message or email." Specifically, phone or contact numbers should be listed in such messages to arrange particular services.

As to who provides such contact, information about, and assistance in accessing social assistance, focus respondents generally talked of various levels of government and public authorities. But they also talked sometimes about the importance of non-state actors like social actors (unions and employers) and non-governmental organizations. One Amsterdam respondent, for instance, had experience as a social service provider (in the health services sector) and in her retirement was struck

by how many of the traditional sources of help – city contact points, unions, and employers – weren't helping or had closed down. Echoing the views of others, she praised particularly the idea of 'social counselors in public-spirited non-governmental establishments that can provide outreach to vulnerable groups'. As she put it, 'there are also plenty of illiterate citizens, and these people have little use for standard outlets or for better internet websites. For them, these people, outreach organizations [such as Dora, such an organization in Amsterdam] can really work'.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

Deepening quantitative survey questions through focus group discussions can shine a light on the deeper understandings of individuals about social citizenship, and also demonstrate how ambivalent and multidimensional attitudes are about such social citizenship in Europe. This does not mean one is more useful than the other; the methods of empirical investigation can complement each other, depending on the research questions. The main insights from this initial, descriptive analysis of focus group data can be summarized as follows.

First, increasing income inequality in Europe (and beyond) and associated policies constitute a significant concern for European citizens and their views on Social Europe. A large number of empirical studies have assessed political support for redistributive policies by asking whether the government should reduce income inequality (Burgoon et al. 2012; Jæger 2013; Schmidt-Catran 2016). The focus group discussions shed light on what the standard item on redistribution actually measures. The focus groups discussions reveal that it is not always clear what is being measured when respondents answer the frequently-fielded survey question, "The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels." This is because participants have very concrete, but often different ideas in mind when thinking about income inequality and interventions to reduce such inequality. More often than not, focus group respondents think of progressive tax restructuring or the provision of social transfers and services to the poorest, most vulnerable citizens. But the particular target populations and policy tools vary a lot. Some respondents talk of inequality as being about the low pay of nursing staff, others about precarious small business owners, and then again others about families.

The discussions about inequality and government interventions to redress it even hint or drift towards some structural patterns, such as women thinking more often about the gender pay gap than men. Such wide-ranging conceptions of inequality and redress suggest that there could be big differences across countries, regions, cities, and neighborhoods, since everyday experiences with income inequality vary so much across cultural and societal contexts. Still, this does not mean that the survey questions are not useful.

The overall tendency of participants to support income redistribution by the government, which is commonly found in quantitative surveys, is indeed reflected in the discussions. From whom and to whom income should be redistributed or what specific government action should be taken is, however, a different matter and cannot be answered through the quantitative item alone (see also Dallinger 2022).

Second, a Social Europe has been evolving into a significant policy component of the EU. Therefore it is vital to explore existing public attitudes towards Social Europe in greater detail and what they mean in concrete terms. For instance, when asked whether the EU should give all EU citizens the same social rights or maintain differences at the national level, majorities in the Netherlands, Germany, Poland, and Spain rather prefer the first. But what do social rights mean for the participants? Do they pose any restrictions on accessing social rights? And what is their understanding of social rights on the EU

level? The focus group discussions that deepened this survey question revealed several important issues.

Participants often differentiate between "basic social rights" versus "financial social rights", and the ways these rights are described are reminiscent of the broader debate on social investment versus social transfers. Support for basic social rights is much higher and participants feel like these types of rights (like education or healthcare) should be available for everyone without conditions. The concrete examples of 'basic' social rights might in fact have quite far-reaching consequences, if implemented comprehensively, and they refer to social investment type policies. In contrast, the 'financial social rights' that participants discuss (like unemployment benefits or social assistance) spark more debate because participants are concerned about individuals using these resources without deserving them. And these examples refer more to social transfer programs.

In the current literature, the distinction between social investment and consumption policies is already well established (see, e.g., Bonoli 2013; Hemerijck 2017; Busemeyer et al. 2020; Eick & Larsen 2022). Social investment policies, in general, are intended to create, mobilize, and preserve skills and capabilities and are typically associated with policies such as education and training, active labor market policies, childcare, and work-family reconciliation policies. In contrast, social transfers compensate individuals for income losses caused by more traditional social risks such as unemployment, old age, or illness. As a result, these policies are less concerned with long-term investment goals and more concerned with short-term compensation. It is telling, although fitting with quantitative evidence from a related study of the above-mentioned Eurobarometer data (Eick et al. 2023), that respondents seem to associate social investment policies more with the EU and social transfer policies more with national welfare states.

A related issue is that the concerns around financial social rights particularly are often associated with migrants and refugees, who are often referenced by focus group participants during the discussions on this topic. This includes concerns about granting migrants and refugees social rights (welfare chauvinism) (Eick & Larsen 2022) and concerns that more migration may lead to lesser social rights for all (the progressive dilemma) (Larsen 2022). It appears that the willingness to work is the key component for deserving financial social rights, no matter whether the individuals are nationals, EU citizens, or non-EU citizens. Working is seen by participants as a way to join the (national) community. In the literature, the welfare-to-work or workfare policies research already shows similar patterns, where solidarity is based on the willingness to work (van Oorschot 2010). And it makes sense that this mostly applies to the described financial social rights, as basic social rights are described by participants as policies that help individuals to get a job. Eick and Larsen (2022) describe that this particularly relates to migrants whom the public wants to be integrated for economic and cultural purposes, for example, through education measures or childcare. On the contrary, social transfers (for migrants) are often perceived as a burden to society by the public.

The link between social investment policies and the EU level can also be seen in the discussion about the role of education. When discussing particular EU-level policies, participants argue in particular for education systems in Europe to be aligned. Some participants argue that this could be easier than adjusting financial rights, such as unemployment benefits. Others say that the educational degrees of EU citizens should be better recognized, so it would be easier to work when moving to a new country.

Here it shows that the discussions keep coming back to the preference for individuals to work and contribute to society through work. So far, few studies have focused on attitudes toward social investment as opposed to social transfers in Social Europe (Burgoon et al. 2022). Recent studies show that if EU-wide unemployment provisions, including those administered at the EU level, receive more support once combined with social investment elements that are aimed labor market reintegration. So far, these studies remain narrowly focused on unemployment competencies and do not include education policies in general. In a broader context, a greater emphasis on social investment and work aligns with the EU's Single Market project's strengthening of market mechanisms and the EU's social policy-making elites' prioritization of social investment (de la Porte & Palier 2022; Ferrera 2017). What is more, the participant's emphasis on the important role of education fits quite well with the fact the institutionalization of a common European area in higher education and vocational training has already proceeded significantly further via, for example, the Bologna and Copenhagen processes (Voegtle et al. 2011) compared to the more complicated process of creating a common EU social policy.

Third, Social Europe aims to address inequalities across and within member states by extending access to different social rights to citizens. The focus group discussions provide important insights regarding existing inequalities in access to social rights. Addressing these could help the social dimension of the EU to rise to its full potential. The access inequalities across member states often center on inequalities related to socioeconomic background and income. Participants mention this issue directly by pointing out that salaries in certain member states significantly differ from each other and that this is not fair. However, participants also mention this issue indirectly when discussing fears about migrants from less wealthy member states taking advantage of generous social rights provisions. These discussions demonstrate how ambivalent attitudes and preferences can be and that solidarity across the EU comes with some caveats about trust and tolerance. Some of the issues mentioned are also member-state specific, because the countries in which we conducted the interviews have different welfare states, labor markets and family structures. Thus, participants also discuss the importance of administering certain social rights on the national level. This hints at perceptions of national states knowing better what their citizens need than the EU.

The discussions around individual inequalities regarding social rights access concern particularly lower and higher socioeconomic status groups. Lower socioeconomic status groups (here particularly lower educated groups) tell different stories about situations in their life where they needed access to their social rights but had difficulties realizing these rights. Sometimes they gave up without the need for support and sometimes, they received help from other actors, such as trade unions or lawyers. On the contrary, higher socioeconomic status groups do not mention examples of such inequalities and rather tell stories about their successes in accessing social rights. These differences are referred to in the literature as 'Matthew effects', since higher socioeconomic status groups often benefit more from social rights than lower socioeconomic status groups (Cantillon 2011; Van Lancker 2013).

The most important reason for this access gap appears to be an information deficit, mainly when social rights administered at the EU level are discussed. The only policy that is known by participants is Erasmus, and this is only known by tertiary-educated individuals who had direct experiences with this program. In line with the preferences for social investment on the EU level, Erasmus is very popular amongst the focus group participants, even those without tertiary education. Representative studies

have also shown that Erasmus is a popular EU initiative (see also Eick et al. 2022), but since it mainly addresses tertiary educated individuals, it can only address some inequalities, such as intergenerational inequality. And to the extent that highly educated individuals have mobility opportunities that lower educated do not have, it might even enhance existing inequalities.

More generally, it is well known that citizens have limited access to accurate and relevant information about the EU, which contributes to a lack of political knowledge and engagement with EU-related issues (Clark 2014). The EU is sometimes criticized for its democratic deficit, which can be seen as a result of the EU's complex decision-making processes and the fact that the EU's political institutions are not directly accountable to citizens (Follesdal & Hix 2016). This deficit could partly be attributed to a lack of understanding of the EU's political institutions and decision-making processes, which are different from national ones (Crombez 2003).

Following the focus group discussions, these arguments also hold value for the social dimension of the EU and need to be addressed. One reason is that the lack of a European public (social) sphere can impact public trust in the EU, and how information is processed and communicated to citizens can either foster or hinder trust in the EU (Brosius et al. 2019). The participants mention already many times how disappointed they are about the lack of action from the EU in times of crisis, and there are low levels of trust regarding the EU being able to fully realize a Social Europe within the next decades. Hence, while Social Europe is supposed to increase trust in the EU, it may as well have the opposite effect if not executed in a way that pleases the public. Furthermore, if a large share of the public does not even know about EU-level social policy initiatives or perceives them as national initiatives instead, this might further undermine trust. At the same time, it is important to monitor that EU-level initiatives do not amplify pre-existing inequalities due to Matthew's effects (see the example of Erasmus mentioned above). This would be problematic for the aim of Social Europe to address inequality but also for the already more Eurosceptic part of the public, which is typically part of the lower socioeconomic status groups (de Vries 2018).

Overall, participants have difficulties understanding what social rights on the EU level mean in comparison to social rights on the national level. They tend to think about social rights in a more practical sense, such as where they have to go to realize certain social rights. And these are often local authorities. A suggestion by the participants to make social rights access easier is, however, not only to improve local services. A lot of the discussion is about digitalizing social rights, for example, through websites that collect information or social media. De Zúñiga (2015) also states that digital and social media can create a more inclusive and democratic European public sphere, but also the potential for the digital divide and the spread of misinformation. Also, media technologies could help bridge the disconnect between citizens and EU institutions (Michailidou 2008).

In sum, the focus groups have produced valuable insights into the deeper lying dynamics of public attitudes and preferences on Social Europe. To a large extent, existing findings from quantitative studies can be confirmed, such as the overall high level of support for a strengthening of the EU's social dimensions. However, the focus groups also revealed a significant degree of welfare Euroscepticism and welfare chauvinism, which may not be so apparent when merely looking at quantitative survey data. We plan to further analyse these issues in greater detail in future research outputs.



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# Appendix

## Appendix A. Focus Group Consent Form

### “Focus Groups: The Future of European Social Citizenship (EUSOCIALCIT)”

In order to analyze your opinions, the group discussion will be recorded with video and audio, for exclusive and protected use only by the researchers. Data will be safely stored in a GDPR-compliant server at the University of Konstanz, no identifying information about you will be made public, and any views you express will be kept completely confidential.

Participation in the focus group is entirely voluntary, and you may stop at any time. There are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions posed – either in the survey or in our focus-group discussion. We want to hear many different viewpoints and would like to hear from everyone. We therefore ask that only one individual speak at a time in the group, and that responses made by all participants be kept confidential.

We appreciate your willingness to participate and contribute your perspective.

### Data Privacy Information

In accordance with Article 26 of EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), we kindly inform you that your personal data will be processed by four European universities (serving as joint controllers) based on a mutual agreement to distinguish respective responsibilities, legislative compliance with applicable data, and protocol to respond to queries and complaints from data subjects. Below is the main content of the arrangement: Personal information is collected and used confidentially and in accordance with the statutory data protection provisions, in particular the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Access to your personal information is only granted to researchers directly involved in the project and to entities that provide necessary research-related services (e.g. transcription of interviews) obligated to data protection and strict confidentiality. Personal data will not be passed on to uninvolved third parties. Collected personal data is transferred to the University of Konstanz GDPR-compliant storage service and shared only with the representative institution in your country. Video and audio data will be stored on encrypted servers with strictly limited access until January 2034. Researchers will use pseudonymized data (with not identifying information) for publication purposes (saved on the UKON server until January 2024 and then moved to a research repository without public access). Participation in focus groups is voluntary. You have a right to request modifications or deletion, restrict processing, object to processing, and withdrawal your consent at any time, without affecting the lawfulness of processing based on consent before its withdrawal. You have the right to lodge a complaint with a supervisory authority for personal data protection. The four partner institutions on the EuSocialCit project are: SGH Warsaw School of Economics (SGH), Al. Niepodległości 162, Warszawa 02-554, Poland, Data Protection Officer contact information: [iod@sgh.waw.pl](mailto:iod@sgh.waw.pl) Universiteit Van Amsterdam (UVA), Spui 21, Amsterdam 1012wx, Netherlands, Data Protection Officer contact information: [fg@uva.nl](mailto:fg@uva.nl) Universidad Carlos III De Madrid (UC3M), Calle Madrid 126, Getafe (Madrid) 28903, Spain, Data Protection Officer contact information: [dpd@uc3m.es](mailto:dpd@uc3m.es)

	Ja	Nein
I have read and understood the study information dated [DD/MM/YYYY].	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions and that I can withdraw from the study without having to give a reason within two weeks following the group interview.* In case I withdraw all the information I provide will be deleted.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I consent to the group interview being audio and video recorded.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that the information I provide will be shared with the team of researchers involved in the EuSocialCit project (UKON, UvA, SGH, UC3M) and used for research reports and publications.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that all the information collected about me that can identify me, such as my name, or the name of the organization I work for, will not be shared beyond the study team.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree that my information can be quoted in research outputs. I understand that all the information quoted will be pseudonymized.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I give permission for the pseudonymized transcripts of the information that I provide to be archived in a research repository (only to be used by EuSocialCit researchers).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

### Participant Consent

I understand this information and agree to participate fully under the conditions stated above:

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*\* If you want to withdraw your participation or have any other questions about the research, you can send an e-mail to [name and e-mail address]. If you would like to submit a complaint about how your personal data has been handled, you can contact Data Protection Officer [name and e-mail address] at [name institution].*

**“Focus Groups: The Future of European Social Citizenship (EUSOCIALCIT)”**

**NUMBER:** .....

**This questionnaire is designed to get some background data from you. Your name will be replaced by a number to ensure anonymity. Unless you would like to, you are not required to disclose any of this background information in the discussion that follows.**

**Part 1: Demographic data**

**Year of birth:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Gender:**

- male
- female
- other

**What is the highest school or university degree you have obtained?**

- Finished school without graduation
- Elementary/high school diploma or polytechnic high school diploma with completion of 8th or 9th grade
- Secondary school leaving certificate or Polytechnische Oberschule (secondary school) with completion of 10th grade
- Advanced technical college entrance qualification or high school diploma or extended high school diploma
- Degree from a college/university (e.g. Bachelor, Master, Magister, Diploma)
- Another degree, namely: \_\_\_\_\_

**Which best applies to your current professional situation?**

- Paid full-time job (e.g. dependent employee, self-employed, assisting family member; working time 30 hours per week or more)
- Paid part-time job (e.g. dependent employee, self-employed, assisting family member; working time 29 hours per week or less)
- School/training (not paid by employer; also during vacations or during vacation)
- Unemployed and actively looking for a job
- Unemployed, desire for a job, but no active search
- Chronically ill or disabled
- In early retirement/retirement/pension
- Housework, taking care of children or others
- Other

**What is your current profession?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Have you ever been unemployed and looking for work for more than three months?**

- Yes
- No

**What is your current marital status?**

- Married or registered civil partnership
- Live together with my partner - without legal recognition
- Divorced or registered partnership annulled
- Widowed or registered partner deceased
- Single (NEVER married or in a registered partnership)

**How many children under 18 live in your household?**

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3 or more

**How many adults (over 18) live in your household, including yourself?**

- 1
- 2
- 3 or more

**What is approximately your net monthly income (after deduction of taxes and social security)?**

- under 500 Euro
- 500 – 1.000 Euro
- 1.001 – 1.500 Euro
- 1.501 – 2.500 Euro
- 2.501 – 3.500 Euro
- over 3.500 Euro

**Were you born in Germany?**

- Yes
- No

**Was your mother born in Germany?**

- Yes
- No

**Was your father born in Germany?**

- Yes
- No

In politics, people sometimes talk about "left" and "right". Where would you place yourself on the following scale, where 0 is left and 10 is right?

Left						Right					
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	

In Germany, many people tend to vote for a particular political party for a long time, although they also vote for another party from time to time. How does it look for you? Do you - in general - tend to vote for a particular party? And if so, which one?

- CDU/CSU
- SPD
- Alliance 90/The Greens
- FDP
- The Left Party
- AfD
- Other party
- I do not identify with any party

## Part 2: Opinion data

1. Please circle the response on a scale of 0-5 that best describes how much you agree or disagree with the following statement: **The government should take action to reduce income inequality.**

Strongly dislike	Decline	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

2. On a scale of 0-10, please tick the answer that you think best describes how much responsibility governments should have to ensure a decent standard of living for the unemployed?

Not at all the responsibility of the government						Entirely the responsibility of the government					
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	

3. On a scale of 0-10, please circle the answer that you think best describes how much responsibility governments should have to ensure sufficient child care services for working parents?

Not at all the responsibility of the government						Entirely the responsibility of the government					
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	

**4. In the EU, different countries have different welfare states. Some are more generous, others less. Do you think that ...? (Please select one)**

- It would be good to give all EU citizens the same social rights, so that it does not matter in which EU country they live
- It is better to maintain the differences between national welfare states, even if this means that some EU citizens have fewer social rights than others

**5. Thinking of people coming to live in Germany from other countries, when do you think they should obtain the same rights to social benefits and services as citizens already living here? (Please select one)**

- Immediately on arrival
- After living in Germany for a year, whether or not they have worked
- Only after they have worked and paid taxes for at least a year
- Once they have become a citizen
- They should never get the same rights

**6. For the question below, check off the answer that best characterizes your response to the following statement: At what level do you think we can most effectively address each of the following areas?**

	National				European Union
Unemployment	0	1	2	3	4
Childcare	0	1	2	3	4

**7. Have you ever applied for or received government assistance? (Please select all that apply)**

- Yes, for unemployment assistance (training or income support)
- Yes, for family assistance or childcare
- Yes, for healthcare and disability support
- Yes, for education assistance
- Yes, for other: \_\_\_\_\_
- No

**8. If you needed social assistance from programs run by your own government, who would you contact to access the programs? (Please select all that apply)**

- Employer
- City hall counter
- Internet sources
- Telephone information desk
- Trade union
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**9. If you needed social assistance from programs run by the European Union, who would you contact to access the programs? (Please select all that apply)**

- Employer
- City hall counter
- Internet sources
- Telephone information desk
- Trade union
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**10. When you think about the role of the EU in your daily life, do you think the EU helps you get better access to your social rights (for example, unemployment or family assistance, education, healthcare)?**

- Yes
  - No
- If so, how exactly? \_\_\_\_\_

**If no, do you think it should be more involved?**

- Yes
- No

**11. Have you ever heard about the following programs run by the European Union?**

	Yes	No
SOLVIT		
Erasmus		
European Social Fund		

**Thank you very much for answering the questions, we will discuss them during the focus group!**

## **Guide for Focus Group Facilitators: The Future of European Social Citizenship (EUSOCIALCIT)**

**Italic: This is advice and directions only for the moderator & co-moderator (not to be spoken out loud)**

### **1. Greeting**

*Allow participants to enter and check the list of names to verify. Distribute the documentation (name tag, survey with assigned number, privacy statement).*

Sign data agreement at the entrance

Begin filling out the survey

*Offer refreshments/food. Let everyone find a place. Briefly explain the Corona rules.*

### **2. Introduction (Moderator)**

The aim of these focus groups is to bring together citizens from all walks of life to discuss their views on the role of the European Union in social policy. The project "The Future of European Social Citizenship" (EUSOCIALCIT) is funded by the European Union. We are interested in understanding citizens' attitudes and perceptions on this important issue.

We will video and audio record your comments today. We will not identify anyone by name in our investigation. You will remain anonymous. The information from the video and audio recordings is only intended for the research team so that we can correctly attribute your comments.

All information collected will be kept confidential and the names of participants or identifying information will not be shared. Quotations or comments from you will also not be identifiable. We hope this encourages you all to speak up.

The purpose of the name tags is to make it easier to talk to each other. Of course, in our documentation we will pseudonymize your names and we will use a number to identify you in our system. This data will only be accessed by the research team.

### **3. Ground Rules (Moderator)**

We would like your input today. We want you to share your honest thoughts and opinions with us. We want you to talk. That means we want everyone to participate. I'll reach out to you if I haven't heard from you for a while.

There are no right or wrong answers. This means that everyone's experiences and opinions matter. Speak whether you agree or not. Please let us know your point of view, even if it differs from what others have said. You can say anything, even if you don't have a specific opinion on the subject, just a hunch in one direction or another. We would like to hear a wide range of reactions. There are no wrong answers, just different points of view.

And please remember: what is said in this room stays here. Because we want people to feel comfortable speaking their minds. So that we can all concentrate, please turn off or silence your phones.

### **4. Complete the Privacy Policy and Survey (Moderator)**

We now need to fill out this privacy statement that summarizes all the points we just talked about. Please tell me if you have any questions about it. We'll collect the data protection declaration right away and then we can finally start with the exciting topics.

*Participants fill out survey. Collect the questionnaire and the privacy policy.*

Next we will start with a short questionnaire in which we would like to collect some background information about you and some general attitudes towards European social citizenship. Please select only one answer at a time, unless otherwise stated.

Let us know if you have any questions or when you're done, we'll collect the questionnaires and the privacy statement. As you can see, we have assigned you a number to guarantee you complete anonymity. After that we start our discussion.

Do you have any questions before we start the discussion?

Okay, so let's turn on the recorder and the camera now.

### **5. Short round of introductions (Moderator)**

Thank you for filling out the documents. We will now do a short round of introductions before we start the discussion.

*The moderators start and then we proceed clockwise (name, age, professional status).*

### **6. Start discussion (Moderator)**

We now have different blocks of questions on different topics in the field of European social citizenship. Each block lasts about 10 minutes, maybe we will also connect some blocks together, let's see how the discussion goes. In any case, I will give you a signal when we need to move on to the next topic.

Just so you know, as moderator, I will largely withdraw from the discussion. I want you to talk mostly to each other and not to me.

My co-host and I might take some notes. Please do not let this distract you and please continue the discussion. This is only done so that we can deepen the discussion later.

### **7. Warm up with survey (Moderator)**

You have all just completed a short survey. One question was whether the government should take action to reduce income inequality.

To warm up, let's discuss the question in detail:

"On a scale of 0-5, please circle the answer that best describes how much you agree or disagree with the following statement: Governments should take action to reduce income inequality. Agree strongly, Agree, Neither, Disagree, Disagree strongly."

What did you think of when we asked whether the government should take action to reduce income inequality?

What comes to mind when you think of income inequality?

### **8. EU Social Rights (Moderator)**

Thank you for your answers. We will now move on to the next topic, which has to do with inequality in the European Union. The European Union consists of 27 countries with very different social rights. Regardless of the actual differences between these countries as they exist today, do you think it would be good to have a common set of social rights for all EU citizens, regardless of where they

live? Or do you think that citizens from different European Union countries should also have different social rights? And why?

Please remember that social rights affect a number of areas of life, such as poverty or unemployment, but also areas such as health, education, housing, equality between the sexes, social mobility and various events in our lives, such as starting a family or old age.

And what do you think is the special role of the European context in this context? Or do you think this should apply to all people in the world, no matter where they come from?

And would you differentiate here between people who have lived in their home country all their lives and those who have just moved there - either from another country in the European Union or from outside the European Union (i.e. migrants from the EU and outside the EU)? Why would you (not) distinguish between these citizens and migrants?

differentiate between EU and non-EU citizens here?

When should they receive the same social rights? That is, migrants from the EU and outside the EU? In the questionnaire we had the following options for this, how did you decide or why?

"If you now think about people who come to Germany from other countries to live here. What do you think: When should they get the same rights to social benefits as the citizens who already live here? Immediately upon arrival, after they have lived in Germany for one year, whether they have worked or not. Only after they have worked and paid taxes for at least one year. As soon as they become German citizens. They should never get the same rights."

## **9. National versus EU Social Policy (Moderator)**

Until recently, the process of European integration was very much focused on the creation and development of the "internal market". The internal market enables the free flow of goods, services, capital and people across the borders of the European Union. So far, the European Union has not been very active in the field of social rights, leaving this issue largely to the Member States.

In general, we are interested in whether you believe that the European Union can play an important role in improving social rights for its citizens in the future. We would like to hear your own opinions or suggestions on these questions.

Let's discuss this with three examples (*distribute examples*)

### **The role of the European Union in minimum income provision**

Particularly, the creation of a European right for a minimum income. This would be a safety net for people without any other source of income or very low wages. Many European Union countries already have minimum income or social assistance schemes, but the question is whether this should be done with some involvement or help by the European Union. The European Union could, for instance, define common standards for people who fall below a given minimum income level and require governments to provide these people with cash payments.

### **The role of the European Union in education policy**

Currently, European Union citizens can choose freely where they want to pursue their education within the European Union. In the future, the European Union could for instance define and limit or extend rights for citizens to get access to different kinds of education, to define educational standards, to promote inclusion and equality of opportunities. EU education policy could also involve a right of citizens to get financial support for their studies and training.

### **The role of the European Union in unemployment policy**

Many Europeans live and work in other countries. Currently, national member states are still primarily responsible for employment policies, but in the future, it would be possible to establish

rights for unemployed people at the European Union level. For instance, the European Union could set standards to make unemployment benefits comparable across countries. It could also establish a European unemployment scheme, which would help out countries financially that are particularly affected by unemployment.

What do you like about these examples? What do you dislike?

Besides these examples, are there other policy areas that come to mind when you think of the role of the EU?

*If necessary: Please discuss in the group which of these three areas the EU should prioritize and in which order (priority 1, 2, 3) and why.*

Finally, how do you think the European Union should get involved? Rough goals, guidelines or legally anchored measures? To go back to one of our examples, the European Union could require that all countries raise the minimum wage in the respective EU country without being required by law to do so, or the European Union could enact a law that requires this to be implemented because otherwise sanctions may be imposed on the particular country violating this law.

### **(Optional)**

And how would you describe the EU's role in creating a welfare state? What comes to mind when you think of the EU's role in promoting social rights and equality?

Is the role of the EU in the creation of social rights different from the one you attribute to your national government?

Why do you think the European Union should fight for certain social rights more than others?

*If necessary: Discuss the survey on unemployment and childcare at EU and national level.*

### **10. Provision of resources: EU vs. national (Moderator)**

You are doing great! Now we come to the penultimate block of topics. We have already spoken about the fact that there are social rights to which we are entitled. But not everyone in our society is equally well informed and knows how to exercise these rights. Do you believe that you are well informed about the social rights you have as a citizen? Do you think you can use these rights effectively? If not, what are the obstacles and hurdles holding you back?

Please remember that social rights relate to a number of areas of life, such as: poverty or unemployment, but also on areas such as health, education, housing, equality between the sexes, social mobility and various events in our lives, such as. starting a family or old age.

*If necessary, describe some possible hurdles: What about bureaucracy or digitization?*

First, think about the social rights that your national government gives you: Do you think your national government could help you use your social rights more effectively? Do you have any examples of specific actions you can think of that your national government could help with?

What other actor(s) might be important here, e.g., unions, civil society, local governments? Of course, there may be different points of contact for different social rights.

As we asked you in our questionnaire, if you needed government support from your own government, who would you turn to for access to programs and why? As an example, we gave you: Employer, local government, internet resources, counseling center, union, others (perhaps family or friends). Have you experienced this before, or do you know someone who has access to such a national program and how they experienced it?

We will now give you an example of a European Union program, it is called SOLVIT, or in German "Solutions to problems with your EU rights". SOLVIT is a service offered by the national administrations in each EU country. SOLVIT is free of charge. It is mainly an online service that can help you if your EU rights as a citizen or as a business are violated by authorities in another EU country. This can involve many rights, including social rights, such as health insurance, unemployment benefits, access to education or working abroad. SOLVIT aims to find a solution within 10 weeks - starting from the day the SOLVIT centre in the country where the problem occurred accepts your case.

What do you think about SOLVIT?

Erasmus+ is the EU program for the promotion of education, training, youth and sport in Europe. The program is particularly well known for scholarships to universities in other EU countries. These exempt students from tuition fees abroad and provide a financial grant - the amount of which varies depending on the destination country. What do you think of Erasmus+?

Do you think that the EU's involvement facilitates access to social rights? Or would you prefer your national government to fully take care of social rights? Why do you think so?

### **12. The role of the EU in times of crisis (Moderator)**

Thank you, I find the discussion very interesting, so please stay alert and active for a moment. Now we come to our very last topic: In the past few decades there have been major crises that have not only affected us in (Germany/Netherlands/Poland/Spain), but also other people in the European Union (and beyond): For example, the financial crisis of 2007/2008, the Refugee crisis 2015/2016, the coronavirus crisis and most recently the war in Ukraine and the current climate crisis.

What do you think of the European Union intervening in times of crisis like this? Have these times of crisis changed your view of the European Union?

And should the European Union intervene more or less in such times of crisis? And do you think this makes a difference in how well/badly the crisis is managed?

And why is it good that the European Union intervenes more/less in times of crisis than in other times?

Our project is called "the future of European social citizenship": do you think that in 30 years we will have the same social rights throughout the EU, or do you think that national governments will still be responsible for social rights?

### **13. Finally, a short survey (Moderator)**

1. Please raise your hand if you think that the EU welfare state should be further expanded?
2. Please raise your hand if you think your opinion has changed after our discussion?

### **14. Conclusion of the discussion (Moderator)**

Thank you for the exciting discussion, we really learned a lot from you all today!

Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

Thank you again for your time today! Today you have given us a comprehensive look at how citizens see social policy. Using the anonymous data, you have provided us with today, we will publish a

report for the EU. If you want to consult it, you can find it on our website (<https://www.eusocialcit.eu/>).

For your participation today we will provide you with 30 Euro Amazon vouchers. All you have to do is fill out this form (which is only used for university accounting).

*The co-moderator will give you the voucher directly after you have signed the form. Please take a look inside the envelope. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us.*