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Cross-border mobility and volunteering: Tracing the potential of the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) programme to promote European identity and solidarity

verfasst von | submitted by

Sonia Catherine Zimmermann

angestrebter akademischer Grad | in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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Dott. mag. Ruggero Cefalo PhD

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Abstract:

There is a wide consensus that solidarity is one of the core values of the European Union and at the center of the integration project. The master thesis aims at exploring the interconnectedness between European identity construction and solidarity in the European Union by taking the case study of the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) programme. The ESC, one of the 3 EU flagship programmes implemented by the Directorate-General for youth, sport and culture (DG-EAC) is an international volunteering programme for young people wishing to engage in solidarity activities in a variety of areas. Launched in December 2016, it is open to 18–30-year-old people who reside in the programme countries and partner countries. Its main goals are to build a more inclusive society, support vulnerable people and respond to societal challenges.

There is a vast amount of literature on European identity and on solidarity, however these two terms stay vague and have never received a unanimous definition. While most literature focuses on financial inter-state solidarity in times of crisis, I focus here on a civic cross-border solidarity on an individual scale. Some scholars believe that solidarity relies on a shared identity between members of a group; a European identity would thus appear to be a prerequisite for solidarity at the European level. Research has shown how the meaning of European identity has changed over time and how, in recent years, EU identity policies have been characterized by more bottom-up initiatives and civic participation – which is in line with the objectives of the ESC. By methodologically conducting a document analysis of official statements and reports on the ESC of the European Commission and conducting a series of 11 semi-structured interviews with young people having volunteered with the programme, I evaluate in this study, to what extent the ESC contributes to the promotion of European identity and solidarity. European identity refers here to the sense of European belonging and identification with EU values, of which solidarity.

Keywords: European Solidarity Corps, European identity, solidarity in Europe, youth programme, volunteering, cross-border mobility, EU values

Abstract:

Es besteht ein breiter Konsens darüber, dass Solidarität einer der Grundwerte der Europäischen Union ist und im Zentrum des Integrationsprojekts steht. Die Masterarbeit zielt darauf ab, die Verflechtung zwischen dem Aufbau einer europäischen Identität und der Solidarität in der Europäischen Union am Beispiel des Europäischen Solidaritätskorps (ESK) zu untersuchen. Das ESK, eines der drei EU-Programmen der Generaldirektion Jugend, Sport und Kultur (GD-EAC), ist ein internationales Freiwilligenprogramm für junge Menschen, die sich in verschiedenen Bereichen solidarisch engagieren möchten. Es wurde im Dezember 2016 ins Leben gerufen und steht Menschen zwischen 18 und 30 Jahren offen, die in den Programmländern und den Partnerländern leben. Seine Hauptziele sind der Aufbau einer integrativeren Gesellschaft, die Unterstützung gefährdeter Menschen und die Bewältigung gesellschaftlicher Herausforderungen.

Es gibt eine Fülle von Literatur über die europäische Identität und die Solidarität, aber diese beiden Begriffe bleiben vage und haben nie eine einheitliche Definition erhalten. Während sich die meiste Literatur mit der finanziellen zwischenstaatlichen Solidarität in Krisenzeiten befasst, wird hier die zivile grenzüberschreitende Solidarität auf individueller Ebene thematisiert. Einige Wissenschaftler sind der Ansicht, dass Solidarität auf einer gemeinsamen Identität zwischen den Mitgliedern einer Gruppe beruht; eine europäische Identität scheint somit eine Voraussetzung für Solidarität auf europäischer Ebene zu sein. Die Forschung hat gezeigt, wie sich die Bedeutung der europäischen Identität im Laufe der Zeit verändert hat und wie sich die EU-Identitätspolitik in den letzten Jahren durch mehr Bottom-up-Initiativen und Bürgerbeteiligung auszeichnet - was mit den Zielen des ESK übereinstimmt. Anhand einer Dokumentenanalyse offizieller Erklärungen und Berichten der Europäischen Kommission über das ESK und einer Reihe von 11 semistrukturierten Interviews mit jungen ehemaligen Freiwilligen des Programms, wird in dieser Studie untersucht, inwieweit das ESK zur Förderung der europäischen Identität und Solidarität beiträgt. Europäische Identität bezieht sich hier auf das Gefühl der Zugehörigkeit zu Europa und die Identifikation mit den Werten der EU, darunter die Solidarität.

Schlagwörter: Europäisches Solidaritätskorps, europäische Identität, Solidarität in Europa, Jugendprogramm, Freiwilligenarbeit, grenzüberschreitende Mobilität, EU-Werte

List of Abbreviations

Abbreviations	Definition
ESC	European Solidarity Corps
EU	European Union
EVS	European Voluntary Service
HDI	Human Development Index
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
TSO	Transnational Solidarity Organization
UN	United Nations
YPFO	Young People with Fewer Opportunities

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Chapter I: Introduction

1.1. Contextualization and preliminary remarks

In his declaration in May 1950, French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman stated that “Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a *de facto* solidarity” (Schuman 1950). This famous declaration was held in the context of the proposal to create the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), whose founding members would pool coal and steel production, and was the first of more-to-come supranational European institutions. It is thus a milestone in the European integration process which eventually led to the establishment of the European Union (European Union n.d.a.). It can be noticed that the word “solidarity” is present in this famous declaration which suggests that solidarity is at the very center of the creation of Europe itself.

There is indeed a vast consensus among scholars that solidarity is a fundamental value of the European Union and at the center of the integration process. This is linked to the definition of solidarity itself. Philippe Van Parijs defines solidarity as an “obligation of mutual help between individuals or collectives sharing an identity and, in this sense, belonging to the same imagined community” (Van Parijs 2021:98). This idea that solidarity relies on a shared identity is common in the literature; scholars do however point out the fragilities that such a definition of solidarity entails. When transposed to the European context, if a common identity is a prerequisite to foster solidarity in the EU, it would mean that it is necessary to build an identity that is both strong enough to trigger solidarity but also inclusive enough for the different actors and subgroups, which constitute Europe’s diversity, to embrace it (Miller 2017:73).

The term European identity generally refers to the sense of identification with Europe or the EU, the sense of European belonging and identification with EU values – the term stays however vague and seem to have never received a unanimous definition. Scholars point out that European identity is constructed by different narratives that have evolved through time. In recent years, EU identity policies have been characterized by more bottom-up initiatives and active participation, which seems to be the underlying rationale of the European Solidarity Corps programme.

Thus, I suggest looking at these two concepts – solidarity and (European) identity – through the case-study of the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) programme. The ESC, one of the 3 EU flagship programmes implemented by the Directorate-General for youth, sport and culture is an international volunteering programme for young people wishing to engage in solidarity activities in a variety of areas. Launched in December 2016, it is open to 18–30-year-old people who reside in the programme countries and partner countries. Its main goals are to build a more inclusive society, support vulnerable people and respond to societal challenges. The aim of the programme as officially outlined in the Guide is to strengthen “cohesion, solidarity, democracy, European identity and active citizenship in the Union and beyond” (European Commission 2024:9) – the promotion of both European identity and solidarity are thus key goals of the programme. The aim of this thesis is to assess to what extent this goal of the programme is met by conducting interviews with young people having volunteered with the ESC. Furthermore, the document analysis of official statements on the ESC published by the European Commission will enable a critic comparison of official definitions of European identity and solidarity with youth insights. In that regard, the interconnectedness and degree of reliance between European identity and solidarity in Europe will tried to be assessed. The next section offers a more detailed presentation of the programme.

1.2. Short history and presentation of the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) programme

The ESC got announced in 2016 in the State of the Union Speech of the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, and got officially launched in December 2016 by the European Union Commission Vice-president Kristalina Georgieva (European Commission 2016a). The ESC builds on the success of the previous programme “European Voluntary Service” - which got removed from the Erasmus+ programme – and is, as of the end 2018, the main EU programme providing volunteering activities for young people. It is today one of the 3 EU flagship programmes of the Directorate-General for Youth, Sport and Culture along with the programmes “Erasmus+” and “Creative Europe” and got allocated an estimated budget of 1 billion euros for the period 2021-2027 (in comparison to 26.2 billion euros for Erasmus+ and 2.44 billion euros for Creative Europe) (DG EAC 2022:4). Its main goals and budget are being negotiated for a period of 6 years. The main goals of the ESC can be found on the website of the programme: “build a more inclusive society, supporting vulnerable people and responding to societal challenges” (European Youth Portal n.d.a.)

The programme is open to young people aged between 18-30 from the programme countries and partner countries. The list of programme countries includes the 27 EU member states as well as the non-EU countries Iceland, North Macedonia, Türkiye and Liechtenstein while the exhaustive list of partner countries is Albania, Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, Georgia, Israel, Jordan, Kosovo, Lebanon, Libya, Moldova, Montenegro, Morocco, Norway, Palestine, Russia, Serbia, Syria, Tunisia, and Ukraine. In regard to the distinction of the ESC between the two types of countries “programme countries” and “partner countries”, some activities are open to both types of countries while others have a more limited scope (European Youth Portal n.d.b.). Young people can decide to engage in a variety of fields ranging from creativity and culture, education and training, environment and natural protection, work with refugees and migrants to physical education and sport, disaster prevention or health (European Youth Portal n.d.c.).

There are 4 different kinds of activities which are proposed within the framework of this programme: volunteering activities, solidarity projects, volunteering in humanitarian aid (the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps) and training and support for participants.

Most of the opportunities through the ESC are cross-border volunteering activities – and this is also the branch of the ESC that I will mostly focus on in the paper. Participants can choose to volunteer for a short-term project (up to 2 months) both individually or in teams of 10 to 40 volunteers or for an individual long-term project (between 2 and 12 months). All the basic needs of the volunteering activity are covered by the programme: the accommodation is provided, the volunteers are entirely insured during the activity, they receive linguistic support, money for food and basic necessities as well as some pocket money (European Youth Portal n.d.d.). In case of cross-border volunteering activities, young volunteers are sent by a “sending organization” from their home country to a “receiving organization” (usually a non-governmental organization) with whom they will engage in volunteer work in the local community.

To apply for activities within the ESC, young people have to register on the European Solidarity Corps portal where they will have access to a personal dashboard with published opportunities to volunteer, work or train.

There are different stakeholders of the ESC at European level. The bodies involved in the implementation of the ESC are ultimately the European Commission and the Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). The ESC is indirectly implemented in indirect management by the National Agencies. The National Agencies, appointed in each country associated to the country, implement the ESC on a national level and act like the link between the local participating organizations and the Commission (European Commission 2023).

The ESC can be understood as a part of the EU Youth Strategy, which is the framework for EU youth policy cooperation for 2019-2027. It focuses on 11 Youth Goals which all aim at fostering youth participation in democratic life, supporting social and civic engagement in order for young people to take part in society (European Youth Portal n.d.e.).

1.3. Relevance and research questions

Analyzing the interconnectedness and the degree of reliance between the two concepts of solidarity and common identity in the EU-context is policy-relevant as it fundamentally explores to what extent a common identity is needed (or not) to establish solidarity. It thus delivers important insights for EU policymaking aiming at promoting solidarity and peace in Europe.

In particular, taking the ESC as a case-study for the paper is opportune for various reasons. First, being a recent programme that got implemented less than a decade ago, it didn't receive much academic coverage so far – especially when compared to other EU youth educational policies like Erasmus. There is an explicit call for Action for future research to involve views and opinions of participating youth of the ESC in the pragmatic study of 2022 published by the Research-based analysis of European youth programmes network (RAY) (Strecker et Eick 2023:58). So far, most of the literature on the ESC focuses on the evaluation of the functional aspects of the programme and the experience and opinion of institutional ESC stakeholders. The number of studies analyzing the experience and perception of the programme by participants (young volunteers) is negligible.

Second, my work will constitute a significant contribution to the existing literature on solidarity in the EU as existing literature mostly focuses on financial inter-state solidarity (in times of crises) in the EU. I focus here rather on a civic cross-border solidarity on an individual scale. The potential of cross-border mobility in fostering European identity is also something that is largely agreed upon in existing EU identity literature. Thus, I am here exploring this potential in the case of a mobility aiming at expressing solidarity.

Third, analyzing the interconnectedness between solidarity in the EU and European identity through the case-study of the ESC seems interesting as the word “solidarity” is present in the name of the programme itself. I will thus analyze what meaning and understanding is attributed to “solidarity” in the programme, a value that is undeniably fundamental to the EU, but that however still remains vague and hardly definable according to scholars. Fourth, the potential of the ESC of indeed fostering solidarity and with it European identity and integration is something that has been emphasized by some independent research networks and scholars but that has empirically not been verified yet. Whereas the effects on European identity of other EU youth educational policies like Erasmus+ have been studied often, it is not the case of the ESC.

And finally, it is important to mention that I myself participated in two volunteering projects in Romania (5 months) and Türkiye (2 months) with the ESC – reason why I am quite familiar with the programme. This familiarity with the programme will be an advantage for the conduction of the research and shall not, however, influence my positionality, as I will stay objective for the presentation of the results and the analysis.

Against this background, the research questions I will try to answer in this paper can be summarized as follows: **How does the participation in the ESC programme affect the perception of the EU and impact the sense of European belonging of the participants? To what extent does the ESC programme contribute to promote European identity and solidarity? What is the link between (European) identity and solidarity in the ESC programme?**

To answer these questions, I will first present the conceptual framework and review of the existing literature on European identity, solidarity in the EU and the ESC (chapter 2). I will then explain the methodology of my research (chapter 3). Finally, I shall present the results (chapter 4), before discussing them and answering the research questions (chapter 5), and then concluding (chapter 6).

Chapter II: Conceptual framework and literature review

2.1. Conceptual framework and the core concepts “identity” and “solidarity” in social sciences

The concept of identity has benefitted from a large attention within different disciplines of the social sciences. As a very basic definition, identity refers to the human capacity of knowing who we are. It refers to the fact of being or feeling what you are, the qualities that make a person different from others. The concept is however really complex to define and entails various realities according to the context and discipline within which it is used – for example in psychology or in a political discourse. Historically, the term started to be massively used in the 1950s in the US in social sciences, more concretely in sociology and psychology, but had already been of course the subject of reflections during the antique philosophic tradition B.C. (Baudry et Juchs 2007:158). When analyzed in psychology, identity seems to be mostly referring to individual identity whereas sociologists tend to rather show interest in collective identities.

I will mostly provide an overview of identity through the sociological frame. Within the sociological discipline, the debate exists of how to define identity and whether something like an identity actually exists. In the literature on identity, scholars such as Brubaker or Cooper argue that the word “identity” shouldn’t be used as they believe that the term is overused and meaningless (Brubaker 2002). This meaninglessness of the term “identity” in Brubaker’s perspective can be explained by his affirmation that groups are not real and do not exist – in his argumentation he mostly takes the example of ethnic groups (Brubaker 2002). However, this perspective is far from making consensus among sociologists. The US-American sociologist Jenkins suggests that groups do exist and that the reason Brubaker refuted their existence is that he defines “groups” wrongly. According to Jenkins, “a group is a human collectivity the members of which recognize its existence and their membership of it: there are no implications of homogeneity or definite boundaries” (Jenkins 2008:9). Unlike Brubaker who based his argumentation on the definition of a group like a homogenous collective, Jenkins argues that the “minimal reality of a group is that its members know that it exists and that they belong to it” (Jenkins 2002:12). Jenkins argues then, that using the term “identity” does make sense, as it is one of the basic cognitive mechanisms to refer to certain individuals and as it is used in public (political) discourse. However, the term “identity” has to be used while bearing an important thing in mind: identity refers to a process of identification, it is something that

one does rather than has. This process of identification can be made in different ways, through the power of symbols or certain experiences and rituals for example (Jenkins 2008:9). Consequently, since identity refers to an ongoing process of identification, identities are believed to be fluid – and not static - and susceptible to change over time (Jenkins 2008:43). Thus, using the term “identity” in social sciences and research only makes sense, according to Jenkins, if we remember that we are talking about a process. I believe this definition of identity is opportune for my research as it resonates well with the European Union project itself. The European Union project and European integration is, per definition, a process. The fact that the European Union is several times referred to as an “ever-closer union” in official statements and treaties shows that the making of the union is a process, constantly in the making. Scholars argue that given the fact that European integration is a process, it thus signifies that “it is unfinished and has to remain unfinished” (Grimmel, Giang 2017:2).

This idea that identity construction is an ongoing process is central to Jenkins and other interactionist sociologists who mostly influenced him like Mead, Goffman and Barth. Another key point of the interactionist theory is the belief that identity is not something individuals possess inherently, but rather something that is constructed through social interactions. In that sense, Jenkins adopts another approach in regard to collective identity and individual identity – which, as stated before have traditionally been understood as different, the one being more of interest to psychology and the other to sociology. He argues that individual and collective identity are entangled with each other and come into being through interaction (Jenkins 2008:37). This is all articulated around Jenkins’ internal-external dialectic of identification framework, the process whereby all identities are constituted. According to Jenkins, the identity is constituted by a synthesis of an internal self-definition and an external definition of oneself by others. It is in that sense that the sociologist Mead distinguishes between the “I” and “me” in English language. He argues that the “I” refers to the intrinsic, unique and internal individuality whereas the “me” refers to the internalized attitudes of others (Mead 1934). Thus, according to interactionist theorists, what people think of us is not less significant than what we think of ourselves, and our identities are going through identity-verification mechanisms that are related to positive emotions and self-esteem when our identity is verified by our peers. Central to this discourse is also the notion of the boundary, signifying both the encounter between external and internal definition of someone’s identity and the encounter of members and non-members of a group. According to interactionist theorists, identity is constructed in transactions and interactions at and across the boundary, it is the “synthesis of internal thesis and external antithesis” (Jenkins 2008:142). This idea of an identity that is

constructed and reconstructed – as it is subject to constant transformation and reinterpretation – through interactions is also very relevant for the study of the ESC. As a matter of fact, young people participating in volunteering activities with the ESC programme are part of a group (of different volunteers, of an organization) whose group members interact with each other and interact with the local community they are volunteering at. Thus, acknowledging the fact that young people form their own individual identity and collective identity as a group through interactions is also important when analyzing the group dynamics existing in ESC.

Thus, identity is fluid and never static, it is part of a constant reinterpretation and reconstruction process at the boundary. Collective identities are being formed in a process of interactions, in particular through common experiences.

I suggest giving now a clearer definition and overview of solidarity in social sciences. Historically, the term “solidarity” started to become widely used in Western Europe at the time of the French Revolution. Solidarity was in that context used as a synonym for fraternity and designated a relationship between equals (Bayertz 1999:3). Solidarity can be understood as a “mutual attachment between individuals” which encompasses two levels: a normative level (mutual obligations to aid each other) and a factual level (common ground between the individuals) (Bayertz 1999:3). Bayertz recognizes that the obligations linked to solidarity are of particular nature, as they do not apply to anybody. On the contrary, one is solidary “only with the other members of the particular community to which one believes oneself to belong” (Bayertz 1999:4). Contrary to the beliefs of the so-called ethical universalism, which presupposes that all man would be solidary to each other as they are all fraternal as they are children of God, solidary activities actually seem to be limited to an exclusive group of human beings (Bayertz 1999:8). Bayertz affirms that “one is “solidary” with those to whom one is close due to some common ground: a shared history, shared feelings, convictions or interests” (Bayertz 1999:8). The only obligations to which all humans remain universally bound because of the principle of solidarity, are the negative obligations in contrast to the positive ones (ex. one should not kill, injure etc.) (Bayertz 1999:9). Thus, solidarity can be defined as the cohesion between a limited community.

David Miller has a similar conception of solidarity, however, he distinguishes between “solidarity with” and “solidarity among”, a distinction that had previously been suggested by Onora O’Neill (O’Neill 1996:201). Solidarity “with” is a one-way relationship, it involves emotionally identifying with a group – one suffering hardship for example – and taking

symbolic or practical actions to support them. There is however no expectation of getting anything in return (Miller 2017:63). On the other hand, solidarity “among” a group, which is of major interest to Miller, is characterized by four features. First, there must be a clear and shared understanding that they form a group, unified by certain characteristics or commonalities that connect them. In other words, a sense of “we” must exist, where solidarity is felt and expressed collectively. This relationship is reciprocal, as each member acknowledges and is acknowledged by others as part of this shared “we” (Miller 2017:63). Second, members of the group adopt an attitude of concern and support toward one another, which creates obligations of mutual aid. Solidarity is demonstrated by helping a member in difficulty, with the understanding that, in principle, the favor would be returned if roles were reversed. However, in solidarity cannot be deducted to pure reciprocity. What truly matters is that the person shows will and is ready to assist others within all its means (Miller 2017:63). Third, there is the notion of collective responsibility: individuals in solidaristic groups are expected to take responsibility for the actions of other members (Miller 2017:64). Lastly, there is also a limit on inequalities within a group: resources within the group are distributed in a way that will ensure that no one falls below a certain standard of need and in way that will limit the inequalities within the group (Miller 2017:64). These four features define the characteristics of solidarity, the way it is expressed. According to Miller, this is strictly to be distinguished from the sources of solidarity, the features that make people come together and act as solidaristic to one another (Miller 2017:65).

Thereafter Miller critically examines five theories proposed to explain how solidarity does develop in groups: the expanding circle theory, the interdependence theory, the associational theory, the identity theory and the institutional theory. (Miller 2017:69-74). I will here only present three of them. First, the interdependence theory goes back to Emile Durkheim. He distinguishes between “mechanic solidarity” and “organic solidarity” (Durkheim 1964). “Mechanic solidarity” is the form of coexistence by which primitive societies are characterized. In this kind of societal structure, individuals are highly independent from each other and lack of individuality. This is due to the fact that they mostly live in accordance with a subsistence economic model, hunting or farming by themselves and having thus practically all the necessary resources to isolate themselves from the society. On the other hand, modern societies are characterized by a very complex system of labor division as individuals specialize in some specific tasks and skills. Thus, they cannot isolate themselves from the society, they necessarily have to take part, as the individuals rely on each other and are thus mutually dependent. In modern societies, “organic solidarity” prevails (Durkheim 1964).

Second, Miller presents the associational theory which goes back to Tocqueville and Putnam. This perspective locates the foundation of social solidarity in individuals' involvement in various civic and political associations. Regular interactions, especially when driven by a shared purpose or goal, fosters mutual identification and trust among members (Miller 2017:71). Lastly, the identity theory presupposes that solidarity stems from a shared identity, which not only defines the "we" among whom solidarity is practiced but also fosters the emotional connection necessary for solidarity. It is based on the psychological idea that we are naturally inclined to sympathize with, trust, help, and take responsibility for those we perceive as similar to ourselves. A sense of identity creates this perception of similarity, even with individuals we have never met – simply knowing that someone shares a relevant aspect of your identity is enough to trigger this solidarity (Miller 2017:73).

These presented theories all present weaknesses, and Miller reckons that none can offer a complete explanation of the phenomenon of solidarity (Miller 2017:75). In particular, for the identity theory, the author recognizes that the solidarity-building aspects of a shared identity are strengthened when it also defines an opposing group to contrast with the "we" (Miller 2017:73). This undeniably poses problems related to inclusion and exclusion and consequently, the debate around identity as a foundation for social solidarity centers on whether it is possible to create a broad, society-wide identity that is both strong enough to foster solidarity and flexible enough for different sub-groups to embrace it (Miller 2017:73). It will be discussed further what implications this has for European identity – is it possible to create a European identity homogenous enough to trigger solidarity while also respecting the EU's diversity and other sub-identities that coexist? It seems that the elements central to the associational theory and identity theory – a common goal and convictions and a common identity – which are considered a potential source of solidarity, corresponds to what Bayertz had qualified the "factual level of solidarity", the "common ground".

It is evident from the literature that there is a debate on whether common identity is necessary to foster solidarity. One of the authors representing this thesis is Philippe Van Parijs. He first starts to define solidarity by opposition to two other similar, but yet different, terms: insurance and charity. Even if they all include a dimension of "help", there is a fundamental difference between insurance and solidarity: while insurance is something legal and not necessarily fair, solidarity includes an "element of altruism and generosity" which is completely absent in insurances (Van Parijs 2021:98). On the other hand, what distinguishes solidarity from charity is the fact that in solidarity, there is a "relationship of symmetry and hence of

equality” (Van Parijs 2021:98). In solidarity, the support is provided based on the fact that the person acting in solidarity believes that she could have been the person in need for help. It is thus fundamentally a relationship between equals. In that sense, because the relationship is characterized by an equality and symmetry, there is nothing humiliating or demeaning in solidarity – as opposed to charity or pity (Van Parijs 2021:98). Thus, solidarity – as defined as being symmetric and reciprocal – only makes sense if there is a common identity. The reason why it is believed that the other person in need for help could have been me is because he or she is “one of us”, part of a common group – there is thus an identification between the person providing help with the person in need (Van Parijs 2021:98). This realization is very important as well for the discourse about responsibility. When acting out of solidarity, the support is given regardless of its responsibility. For example, justice would require me to compensate for a damage D suffered by B if I am responsible for D. In solidarity on the other hand, I will help B even if neither me nor B are responsible for D (Steinvorth 2017:11). Thus, Van Parijs is one of the major authors who believe that the “source of solidarity” is a common identity: He defines solidarity as an “obligation of mutual help between individuals or collectives sharing an identity and, in this sense, belonging to the same imagined community” (Van Parijs 2021:98).

Thus, solidarity refers to a symmetric relationship between members of a same group. On the normative level, this implies a mutual obligation between members of a group – like mutual concern, collective responsibility and limits on inequality – and on a factual level it implies the existence of a “common ground” between the individuals of that group. The nature of that “common ground” – the source of the mutual obligations, the justification of it – is what seems to be most often the object of debates among scholars. It could be the share of common beliefs or values, shared feelings, a common purpose or project, or a common identity. What this implies in the European context shall now be explored; the implications of this framework on solidarity in the EU and European identity, and thus the extent to which they seem interconnected, will be outlined in the following.

2.2. Exploration of European identity

2.2.1. European identity in social sciences – is there a European identity?

There is a vast amount of literature on European identity, however never a consensus regarding the definition, nature or actual existence of this identity seems to have emerged. It is a concept that is often used also in the public and political discourse and that in any case undeniably brings with it some expectations and is not used randomly. Some scholars refer to the concept of European identity as a “fiction without essential proportion”, an “abstraction”, “a phenomenon that is discursively shaped” (Bo Strath 2002:387). Undeniably, the term European identity is ideologically loaded. A similar understanding can be found in the work of Klaus Eder who argues that European identity is closely interlinked with a certain storytelling and narratives. He shows how the construction of a community is based on identity markers which are bound to stories. In that context, the EU creates a narrative network embedded in the network of social interactions and relations that is at the origin of European identity formation processes (Eder 2009:427). This shows that the existence per se of a European identity can be questioned, such an identity seems to be rather constructed and the result of storytelling rather than existing transcendently.

When talking about European identity, it first appears necessary to define Europe. While Europe encompasses a significant number of countries geographically speaking, “Europe” is often used in reference to the central roots of Western civilization. The term of European identity is predominantly used in relation to the EU in the public discourse (Henriques 2021), and in the literature the term is most often used without clearly distinguishing between an identification with Europe or the EU (Prutsch 2017:19). Globally, it seems that two main understandings of European identity can be identified: First, European identity as identification with a cultural community built on shared values, common historical and cultural legacies and second, European identity as the identification with a political community grounded in common democratic practices, civic values and the identification with common EU institutions (Prutsch 2017:17).

To study the mechanisms that make individuals identify with a European identity, several scholars come back to fundamental theories about identity and collective identity building that have been outlined in section 2.1. In that sense, Gerard Delanty argues that identity is not

prior to social reality and fluid at its boundary, it is never transcendental and is by definition constructed (Delanty 2003:78). Different identities can coexist – an individual can thus identify with a national, regional or European identity. He argues thus that European identity should be spoken about in the plural – European identity is seen as a plurality of identifications (Delanty 2003:78). Furthermore, the limits between the different levels of identity – be it regional, national or European – are not strictly defined, but rather blurry. This is due to different reasons. First, identities undergo changes in their self-understanding. It can be talked about a Europeanization of identities in the sense that there is an internal transformation of national identities that become more “Europeanized” (Delanty n.d.:5). Delanty argues that as a matter of fact, the symbols of the EU like for example the euro currency, the pink drivers’ licenses, the burgundy passport covers undergo an absorption by the national symbols. Consequently, the border between “European” and “national” become more blurry. In that sense, European identity doesn’t replace national identities but just transforms it and reinterprets it in a process of Europeanization (Delanty n.d.:5). Another reason for the blurriness of limits between the different levels of identity can be analyzed in light of the era of globalization and its major shifts in society that are linked to it. Talking of national and European identity makes less sense, as the European space has grown to an extent where qualifying what is national and what is European is hard to tell (Delanty 2003:79).

Thus, European identity is not a fixed reference point but rather a concept which undergoes a constant process of reinterpretation and changes according to different circumstances. Generally associated with the EU, it is constructed by different narratives – mostly around the cultural and political one. Scholars point out that different levels of identification – like regional, national or European – can coexist and are, in light of the globalization, not strictly separate from each other. European and national identity are thus characterized by a relationship of complementarity rather than tension (Delanty 2003:79).

2.2.2. Historical transformation of European identity and current EU identity policies

Undeniably European identity is based on a common historical heritage, the fact that Europeans share a common history. European identity is often seen as a European cultural model. It refers to the cultural heritage and traditions that are anchored in Europe (Delanty n.d.:2).

When historically assessing the emergence and construction of European identity, it appears that there is a whole rhetoric of a construction of a European community based on a demarcation from the other; there is a whole discourse about “we” and the “other” (Strath 2002:391). Historically, Strath argues, the idea of a European identity has been constructed mainly on a threefold rhetoric of demarcation and opposition. First there is the Europe/ Asia and Orient demarcation, second Europe/ America and third Europe/ the East European. In the Middle Ages, the image and identity of Europe was based on values and realities closely interlinked with Christianity. Strath argues that the demarcation from the “other” dates back already to the Middle Ages in the context of the competition between Christianity and Islam and the Crusades (Strath 2002:392). This demarcation got accentuated in the 15th and 16th century with the peril of the expansion of the Ottomans in Europe. According to Strath, this dichotomy between the two religions shows how European identity got created at the boundary (of what is European and what isn’t Europe) and is articulated in the context of these two monotheistic religions around a “Christian self” and a “Muslim Other” (Strath 2002:392). In the 18th century, with the arrival of the Enlightenment movement and the Thirty Years war, the link between Europe and Christianity got destroyed. If the discourse of demarcation between an enlightened Europe and a fanatic Islam was still present, the new opposition was around an enlightened and civilized Western Europe versus Eastern Europe. In the context of the Cold War and the construction of Berlin Wall, this demarcation and gap between East and West just got accentuated (Strath 2002:394).

The term of European identity began to be more and more used in the public (political) discourse in the post 1945 context when the idea of a European community project emerged. The core aim of the European integration was to foster and create a durable peace on the European continent. Its aims were mostly economic at first, with the creation of the CECA between France, Germany, Italy and the Benelux countries. In 1973 the term “European identity” first officially entered the EU’s political agenda when the Declaration on European identity was signed at the Copenhagen European Summit. Within this document, the Member States identified three primary motives for establishing this European Identity: revisiting the shared heritage, interests, and special obligations of the Nine; evaluating the degree of unity achieved among them thus far; and reexamining the dynamic nature of European unification (Bulletin of the European Communities 1973). Several key points that have been established in this paper so far, can be found in the Declaration. First, the idea of dynamism, the fact that “the European Identity will evolve as a function of the dynamic construction of a United Europe” (Bulletin of the European Communities 1973:7), underlines the procedural nature of the

European integration, that is marked by fluidity rather than rigidity. Moreover, the narrative of demarcation in the construction of European identity that was explained before is present also in the Declaration: “the Nine propose progressively to undertake the definition of their identity in relation to other countries or groups of countries” (Bulletin of the European Communities 1973:7). Thus, European identity seems to rely to some extent on the difference with the rest of the world. The Declaration furthermore acknowledges the painful past that the Nine European states have in common and presents unity as a “basic European necessity” (Bulletin of the European Communities 1973:2). Aligned with this approach, the 1976 Tindemans Report proposed creating a community of citizens by actively fostering European awareness through visible symbols, such as standard passports, common social security systems, and mutual academic exchanges. In 1984, the Italian member of the European Parliament, Pietro Adonnino formed the “Committee for a People’s Europe” (Tekiner n.d.:4). The concept of a “People’s Europe” can be understood as a reaction to the older concept of a “Trader’s Europe”, connected directly with the common market and the economic integration, which were the main means of the European integration project. The main tasks outlined in the ad hoc Adonnino report is to adopt “measures to strengthen and promote [the Community’s] identity” (Bulletin of the European Communities:4). The committee focused on enhancing the free movement of goods and people, as well as the freedom of establishment within the Community. The report included proposals to improve the free movement of persons, mutual recognition of higher education diplomas, and the introduction of a European vocational training certificate for all qualified workers. Furthermore, it suggested a uniform procedure for elections to the European Parliament, a right of petition for European citizens, cooperation between universities, and student exchange programs. However, its main emphasis was on common European symbols: the blue flag with gold stars, a European anthem, postage stamps with European emblems, standardized postal rates within the Community, and the removal of ‘Customs’ signs at internal borders. The European flag with twelve stars, a symbol of the Council of Europe since 1955, was officially adopted in Brussels on May 29, 1986. Additionally, the first European driving licenses were issued by Member States starting January 1, 1986 (CVCE 2016:2).

Thus, the public narratives by which European identity is being shaped seem to have evolved through time. While European identity relies mostly on the cultural legacies of Rome and Greece, Christian values and the Enlightenment movement until the end of the 18th century and stays reserved to some European cultural and political elites (Delanty n.d.:2),

European identity officially enters the public discourse in the aftermath of World War II in the context of the European integration and peacebuilding project. According to Delanty, “the relative success of the post-second world project of European integration is undoubtedly one of the main sources of European identity today.” (Delanty n.d.:3). The European integration was first organized around economic aspects, while the 1970s and 1980s represent a shift towards a culturalist discourse and cultural identity policies with the introduction of numerous symbols in the European space. In recent years, European identity seems to entail a more civic-political dimension.

The shift of European identity construction narratives in EU policy is confirmed by scholar Català Oltra. He traced the concept of identity in EU (founding) treaties and analyzed the evolution of discourses on European identity by official EU institutions. He distinguishes four stages of European identity in the texts produced by European institutions: the primitive stage (1950s - 60s) – when there was no real concern of European identity -, the focalization stage (1970s - 80s) – civic-political and ethnocultural dimensions are central -, the settlement stage (1990s) – cultural elements still persist but there is a dominance of the civic-political dimension. Lastly, the displacement stage (2000s – 2010s) is characterized by a civic-political dimension along with a displacement of a focus on identity due to several crises and conflicts with national identities (Català Oltra 2021:97).

This focus on the civic-political dimension in European identity policy making on EU level in recent years is confirmed by other scholars and studies. Prutsch notices a switch of focus from cultural European identity policy towards a policymaking that enhances more active citizenship (Prutsch 2017:25). In fact, in recent years, the EU seems to have adopted more bottom-up models of identity building rather than top-down models. The focus is put on the potential of civic engagement and active citizenship as vehicles for promoting European identity. As an example for this policymaking the programme “Europe for Citizens”, which was launched in 2006 and entails a support for organizations and activities promoting active European citizenship, can be mentioned (Prutsch 2017:24). According to Prutsch, top-down initiatives of identity-building – being told how to identify – is indeed clearly less effective than bottom-up approaches. In a bottom-up perspective, “identity is [...] perceived as something generated at the level of individual citizen through his/ her concrete action” (Prutsch 2017:25) and allows “citizens to develop an intrinsic sense of belonging to “Europe”” (Prutsch 2017:31). This model of identity-building promoting active citizenship seems to be

in line with the objectives and nature of the ESC programme: young people are given the opportunity to actively engage in the field of solidarity and interact with other young people from different countries. It also resonates with the idea developed by Jenkins according to which the process of identification can be made through (common) experiences (Jenkins 2008:9; see section 2.1.). In that sense, the hypothesis that young people develop a common identity through the shared experience with the ESC programme can be emitted. While the older generation shares the common traumatic history of World War II – background against which the European project emerged, with the will to install durable peace in Europe – current EU policies aim at fostering a model in which (young) people engage actively in society and thus build common experiences together.

Despite the evolution of European construction narratives, scholars identify a common narrative throughout the time: the idea of a demarcation and the dichotomy between “Europe” – “non-Europe” (Strath 2002:396). When drawing back to section 2.1., Miller had established indeed that identity is strengthened when also an opposing group to contrast the “we” is defined (Miller 2017:73), which could hypothetically explain the usage of this narrative. In most recent years, Strath identified the demarcation between East and West Europe; in that line, several scholars criticize the fact that what is commonly referred to as European identity actually refers to a Western European identity and doesn’t take into account the realities of Eastern Europe, which is marked by a socialist and completely different past (Strath 2002:395). Strath argues that this narrative of demarcation should be used as a bridge-building; he urges for a new conception of Europe as mediator and bridge-builder rather than demarcator (Strath 2002:397). The recent EU policymaking seems to be in line with that: instead of inferring an identity based on cultural legacies and a common history – which is actually not so common to every EU member state but rather to the West – European identity is intended to be more inclusive and actively created by the citizens themselves.

2.2.3. European identity and the potential of cross-border interaction

Numerous scholars show the potential of mobility and cross-border interaction in the shaping and fostering of European identity (Fligstein 2008, Henriques 2021). In particular, it is important to distinguish between cross-border interactions that are short-term - for example just to travel, in which there will be (almost) none or very little interaction with the local

community or host country - and long-term, which presupposes a more deep and integrative interaction. By using data from the Eurobarometer survey, Joao Henriques constructs a typology of which cross-border practices are linked to a stronger European identification (Henriques 2021). European identity is here defined by the sense of European belonging. Henriques finds out that intra-European integrative types of interactions – involving a certain integration to the host society – as well as multicultural interactions are among the most effective interaction models to promote a stronger sense of European identity (Henriques 2021). This seems to correspond to the type of interactions that young people are doing in the context of the ESC programme, which would be a major argument why the participation in the ESC is contributing to the fostering of a European identity. This will be further specified later.

While there is a consensus regarding the potential of cross-border interaction in the shaping of a European identity, numerous scholars do also point out the unequal distribution of European identity among citizens of the EU. As a matter of fact, the possibility of going abroad and interact with people from a different culture is mostly reserved to certain parts of the population. Fligstein shows that the people who are the most likely to see themselves as “European” are “owners of businesses, managers, professionals, and other white-collar workers”, as they travel for business and engage in long-term social interactions abroad during which they acquire also foreign language skills (Fligstein 2009:136). In general, people with more economic resources and a more advantaged socio-economic background, are more likely to travel abroad and thus interact with different people. Similarly, young, educated people who travel for education, university exchanges and jobs (often for a few years after graduating) are more likely to identify as European (Fligstein 2009:137).

A major criticism that can thus be made to European identity that derives from what has just been established, is the fact that the patterns of interaction at EU level follow a social class line and that those who may identify with a European identity are the most privileged ones (Fligstein 2009:137). An identification with Europe and the EU is thus socially situated and linked to several inequalities. People who are most likely to feel European are generally, young, mobile and educated (Fligstein 2008). This profile is often associated with values such as liberalism and cosmopolitanism, as opposed to conservatism and authoritarianism, often linked with a rather national identification (Fligstein 2008).

In that sense, certain authors point out the limited impact that European (youth) exchange programs can actually have in fostering a sense of European identity. In particular, there appears to be a debate around the potential of the Erasmus – university-exchange – programme to strengthen European identity. On the one hand, scholars have shown the benefits of a cross-border activity and making experiences abroad in the construction and development of the personal individual identity and European identity (Jacobone et Moro 2014). On the other hand, some scholars also argue that the academic exchange programme Erasmus is ineffective in fostering European identity as the programme addresses young people who are educated – since they are enrolled in university – and are thus already more probable to identify with the EU than their (less educated) peers, who aren't enrolled in university (Kuhn 2012, Oborune 2013).

Consequently, in order to really foster European identity on the same model as a national identity, it seems necessary to promote EU identity also among the less advantaged people and create a “class alliance between elites and members of the middle and working classes” (Fligstein 2009:155). As this isn't the case yet, Fligstein argues that European identity nowadays remains “shallow” (Fligstein 2009:155).

Thus, it has been shown that (European) identity is a concept constructed by different narratives that has evolved through time. In the context of the European integration project, it has been for a long time mostly limited to the culturalist and symbolist discourse. Recent EU policymaking however seem to go in the direction of more bottom-up initiatives and active participation in the European identity construction mechanism. Moreover, scholars have pointed out the potential of cross-border interactions for the fostering of European identity. These two dimensions seem to be at the core of the idea of the ESC programme: it both gives young people an opportunity to take more actively part in society and to interact with their peers across borders.

2.3. Solidarity in the EU

2.3.1. Solidarity as a founding and core value of the EU

Without any doubt, the term solidarity is very central to the EU. Already at the declaration in May 1950 which led to the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), Schuman employed the word “solidarity” (Schuman 1950). The word “solidarity” holds in that sense a very important role and connotation in European treaties and has been at the center of political (pro-) European discourses throughout the history. In 2020, at the occasion of the 70 years of the Schuman declaration – the Europe Day-, a lot of posters featuring a picture of Schuman and the slogan “70 years of solidarity” circulated on social media and online (European Union n.d.b.).

A lot of treaties of the European Union allude to solidarity, however a concrete definition of solidarity doesn’t seem to exist. The word is being used in different contexts with different meanings inferred to that term. In the EU treaties, it seems that the notion of solidarity carries inherent ambiguity, encompassing both a moral imperative to assist those in need and a contractual commitment to mutual aid within a community.

The Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU, Treaty of Lisbon) highlights solidarity as a core value: “the common basis for values to all Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail” (TEU 2009). Solidarity is thus seen as a value – a fundamental value in a pluralistic society. This idea of solidarity as a value is present as well in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, which states that “the Union is founded on the indivisible, universal values of human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity” (Official Journal of the European Communities (2000:1). The Charter of Fundamental Rights also has an entire chapter on solidarity (Chapter 4), that focuses mostly on worker’s rights, social security, health care and environmental protection (Official Journal of the European Communities (2000:16-17).

There is also a dimension of solidarity as a common policy-package. Other sections of the Treaty on the European Union emphasize the equitable sharing of responsibilities among member states, particularly in the domain of external and security policies (“mutual political solidarity among member states”, TEU Article 24). This is also very central in the Treaty of

the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). In Article 67, paragraph 2, solidarity is invoked in the context of the common policy on asylum, immigration and external border control. Special attention is given in the literature to Article 222 of the TFEU, which even has the special title of “Solidarity Clause” and states that “The Union and its Member States shall act jointly in a spirit of solidarity if a Member State is the object of a terrorist attack or the victim of a natural or man-made disaster. The Union shall mobilize all the instruments at its disposal, including the military resources made available by the Member States” (TFEU, Art. 222) (Koeck n.d.:85).

It is also interesting to notice that there is an ambiguity regarding the level at which the word “solidarity” is employed for. The treaties synonymously allude to this term both by referring to the individual scale – solidarity among citizens – and to the national-interstate solidarity among members states (Grimmel et Giang 2017:48). Indeed, “the EU shall promote [...] solidarity between generations [as well as it should] promote [...] solidarity among Member States”, which however seems to be two different natures of solidarity (TEU: art.3).

Thus, it appears that solidarity is at the center of the European integration project as it appears in numerous founding treaties and is invoked in the political public discourse on Europe. It also comes out of the treaties that solidarity is a value that the EU engages itself to promote. If the fact that the EU is based on solidarity – at least in its very idea - can be acknowledged, the nature of that solidarity remains unclear, however.

2.3.2. Link between solidarity in the EU and European identity

As it has been stated before, some scholars believe that the cohesion factor in a group in which solidarity and thus relationships of mutual obligations prevail, is a common identity. The degree to which solidarity relies on a shared identity shall now put into a European perspective, in the context of the EU.

Within the debate, many scholars argue that European identity is a prerequisite for European solidarity (see Faist 2000; Offe 2001; Münch 2001; Kleger and Mehlhausen 2013). Some even confirm that European identity can exist parallel or in addition to other identities at such a level that it could serve as the basis for solidarity (Risse 2013).

Given empirical research seem to confirm this hypothesis. The scholar Soetkin Verhaegen studied how and to what extent individuals who identify with a European identity express (and are willing to express) their support towards the other individual. He argues that having a European identity is expected to influence citizen's attitudes and behavior towards the EU community and is positively related to support for EU integration (Verhaegen 2017:873). In his study, he explores the degree of intra-state support during the time of an economic crisis by analyzing the correlation of two main measurements: "support for solidarity" – measured with the question "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: In times of crisis, it is desirable for (our country) to give financial help to another EU member state facing severe economic and financial difficulties" – and European identity – measured by self-placement as a member of the EU community and attachments to this community. Verhaegen's findings correspond to the hypothesis made: Citizens with a stronger European identity are more supportive of intra-European financial solidarity. It also shows the importance of European identity in the expression of solidarity: the relationship between identity and solidarity is indeed far more important than between solidarity and political ideology or self-interest (variables also tested by Verhaegen).

As it has been shown before, the scholar Van Parijs assumes that a common identity is necessary for the existence of solidarity. He identifies two main reasons why solidarity is easier to set off and stabilize in a more homogenous population: first, he thinks it is easier to turn the population into an "imagined community with a common identity" and second, the greater the homogeneity, the more likely it actually is that the people have a common understanding of what solidarity means and when you should show solidarity (Van Parijs 2021:101). Consequently, he believes the first step to implement solidarity in Europe is to "nurture and develop, from the local to the European level, an inclusive collective identity and a corresponding imagined community" (Van Parijs 2021:102). However, he thereafter touches upon one of the most often cited and debated arguments, which poses a potential obstacle to the construction and strengthening of a European identity: it is unlikely to become "as strong as that of homogeneous populations" (Van Parijs 2021:102), and thus being strong enough to trigger solidarity at the European level.

If an identity "as strong as that of homogenous populations" is necessary to activate solidarity, the obstacle this entails lies in the very idea of the European project. The EU is a supranational union of 27 member states with significant cultural and historical differences and individual traits. As it has been outlined by Miller (see section 2.1.), identity as a foundation

for social solidarity poses significant consequences about inclusion and exclusion and the debate centers on whether it is possible to create a broad, society-wide identity that is both strong enough to foster solidarity and flexible enough for different sub-groups to embrace it (Miller 2017:73). The EU-motto “United in Diversity” is in that sense the ultimate narrative to express both a common identity, a unity that is inclusive and constituted by different facets. Thus, if indeed it is considered that a prerequisite for solidarity is a shared identity, it appears that the notion of European identity deserves greater attention. Efforts must be made to make European identity the most inclusive possible and at the same time strong enough. In that sense, the section 2.2.4. has shown how the understanding of European identity has evolved through time and especially identity construction mechanisms. Recent European identity policies rather aim at bottom-up initiatives and civic participation. Other research points out the importance of inter-class alliances to promote European identity among less advantaged people (Fligstein 2009:155; see section 2.2.2.). As it has been seen, these initiatives should lead to a more inclusive and stronger concept of European identity, on which eventually solidarity could rely.

The certain fragility and significant implications of the theory of identity as a foundation of solidarity, explains why some scholars suggest overcoming it. The scholars Knodt and Tews believe the identity argument is not needed to build solidarity within the European multi-level system by using the argument and distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity made by Durkheim, which was outlined in section 2.1. (Knodt et Tews 2017:49). As in an organic solidarity the individualism is higher and people act out of self-interest while at the same time highly relying on each other, self-interest and solidarity coexist. Self-interest being opposed to common interests; this definition of solidarity doesn’t need the prerequisite of common interests and common identity. In the sense of Durkheim, the EU can be seen as a “highly differentiated multi-level system characterized by a division of labour, interdependence”, where thus a common identity or feeling is a possible aspect, but not a requirement for solidarity in the EU (Knodt et Tews 2017:50).

On a different note, Van Parijs does not reconsider the reliance of solidarity on common identity, he suggests on the contrary to go beyond solidarity, towards a new conception of justice (Van Parijs 2021:102). He suggests going beyond the concept of solidarity and calls for fairness. According to him, a “stronger European demos” that doesn’t have to be unified in one political identity is needed, there is the need for a pan-European civil-society network (Van Parijs 2021:103).

However, beyond the debate of whether a common identity is a necessity for the existence of solidarity within a group, there is certainly a link between these two concepts insofar as the definitions they entail seem to be overlapping. Indeed, as it has been shown in section 2.2.1., European identity also encompasses an awareness and identification with EU values. Moreover, the section 2.3.1. has shown that solidarity is conceptualized as a core value of the EU in its founding treaties. Thus, if solidarity is an EU value and the identification with EU values is central to European identity, it derives that by definition, solidarity is an essential aspect of European identity.

2.3.3. Typology of forms and levels of solidarity in Europe

As seen before, there is an ambiguity in the EU treaties regarding the level at which the word “solidarity” is used for as they allude both to the individual level as well as national level. Both inter-state solidarity and solidarity among citizens are urged to be promoted.

As seen before, several definitions and understandings of solidarity in Europe exist. Most literature about solidarity in Europe focuses on inter-state financial solidarity in times of crisis. Knodt and Tews establish a categorization and differentiate four forms of European solidarity, depending on the type of actor and the level on which solidarity is shown (Knodt et al. 2017:51). The four forms are transnational solidarity (individual actors, horizontal dimension), international solidarity (collective actors, horizontal dimension), supranational solidarity (individual actors, vertical dimension) and intergovernmental solidarity (collective actors, vertical dimension) (Knodt et al. 2017:51).

Transnational solidarity occurs between individual actors in the horizontal dimension (so within one level). It stems from similarity existing between the individuals who collectively advocate for their interests and achieve their common goal. This type of solidarity is marked

by a sense of unity and a shared identity among group members. It encompasses different transnational social movements and civic organizations (Knodt et al. 2017:51).

Supranational solidarity also centers on individuals but pertains to the vertical dimension of the European multi-level system. It fosters direct solidarity among European citizens. Rather than relying on the idea of an existing community, it emphasizes the sense of belonging to a political community as European citizens. Through regulations and distributive or redistributive European policies, supranational solidarity becomes evident in areas where the EU demonstrates its supranational nature through deeper integration. The vertical aspect of supranational solidarity means that it does not solely focus on the European level but also complements and extends solidarity at the national and subnational levels (Knodt et al. 2017:52).

Horizontal solidarity, characterized usually by bottom-up activities, is guided by principles of reciprocity and mutualism which explains why it is connected to political goals focused on empowering communities and driving social change (Kousis et al. 2020:71). Kousis et al. show that transnational solidarity organizations (TSOs) – which in Europe are predominantly NGOs (Kousis et al. 2020:71) – engaged in cross-border activism embrace a form of solidarity grounded in mutualism and reciprocity. These organizations are more inclined to participate in EU partnerships and to engage in activities at European level. In this context, TSOs promote an alternative vision of European solidarity that prioritizes community empowerment and transnational cooperation. While calling on governments and EU institutions to address societal challenges, they also stress the need to cultivate active citizenship across borders (Kousis et al. 2020:80-81). This seems to be in line with the objectives of participating organizations and project topics set out in the ESC programme.

I focus in this paper mostly on transnational and supranational solidarity as they seem to correspond to the idea of solidarity promoted by the ESC. The ESC is a programme funded and implemented by the EU – it is part of the European policymaking and thus a regulation coming from supranational level – and at the same time carried out by individuals horizontally – the young volunteers who participate in the programme – who are encouraged to actively take part in society. A more detailed overview of the understanding of solidarity in the ESC programme will be offered in the next section.

2.4. The role of the European Solidarity Corps

2.4.1. The meaning of solidarity in the ESC

The fact that the name of the programme is the European Solidarity Corps underlines that the emphasis of the programme and major priority is solidarity. But what exactly is the meaning inferred to that term in the programme? So as various definitions of solidarity exist, the term solidarity within the ESC programme doesn't receive unanimous understanding from its participants and stakeholders (Akarcesme 2019a:7). Scholars and organizations within the sector affirm that solidarity has always been a part of Youth Work – though under different names – and not least was deep-rooted in the ESC's predecessor programme, the EVS (Buffet n.d., Baclija Knoch et Nicodemi 2020). The fact that EVS was included in the Erasmus+ programme may have reinforced the perception that it was just a mobility programme whereas the launch of the ESC in 2016 put a clear emphasis on solidarity and offered a chance to re-conceptualize transnational volunteering (Buffet n.d.:4).

Thus, the ESC programme marks a shift to a clear priority on solidarity in youth programmes; however, the understanding of solidarity stays ambiguous. The programme Guide published by the EU Commission encompasses many category titles – like “agriculture, forestry and fisheries” or “employability and entrepreneurship” – that seem to be not directly linked to solidarity but more to economic development (Buffet n.d.:5).

A study on how various stakeholders of the ESC programme perceive the notion of solidarity has been conducted by Nicodemi and Baclija Knoch. In their study, solidarity is first dissected into various concepts, which participants then evaluate based on whether they believe these concepts should be included in the definition of solidarity. They conclude that four concepts universally recognized by all type of participants (researchers, practitioners, young people and policy makers) as integral to the definition of solidarity are: Human Rights, Active Citizenship, Inclusion, and Empathy (Baclija Knoch et Nicodemi 2020:139). In the annexes, the researchers offer an overview of suggested concepts for the definition of solidarity that however didn't receive a unanimous support from the 4 types of actors. It is really interesting to note that the notions that refer explicitly to the EU – like “EU rights and principles” – was majorly excluded of the definition by researchers, while 25% of the policy makers supported this notion (Baclija Knoch et Nicodemi 2020:151). With this result, the notion of “EU rights

and principles” is one of the most contentious concepts related to solidarity (strongly supported by some – policy makers – but also strongly excluded by others – researchers), along with “reciprocity” and “shared values and beliefs” (Baclija Knoch et Nicodemi 2020:158). The notion of “European identity” as supporting the definition of solidarity is common to the 4 sectors, however with neither many people excluding or including it, so the notion would be either excluded or ambivalent for the definition of solidarity (Baclija Knoch et Nicodemi 2020:156). Some concepts associated with solidarity such as “interdependence” or “common ground” resonates with what has been established in section 2.1. and the theoretical reflections on solidarity. A map of all the terms associated with solidarity in the study of Baclija Knoch and Nicodemi can be found in the appendix (A2).

Although the exact meaning of solidarity remains uncertain, it is evident that not all interpretations of the term align with the ESC’s approach to solidarity. The underlying concept of solidarity within the ESC appears to reflect a broad definition of civic solidarity. This could also be viewed as the European Union’s effort to promote and advance this particular understanding of solidarity (Strecker et Pitschmann 2022:13). It also seems to challenge the prevailing notion of European solidarity largely connected to fiscal solidarity, in particular institutionally speaking – as instruments and institutions are mainly limited to economic support (Strecker et Pitschmann 2022:16). The fact that the ESC fosters horizontal cross-border solidarity and active citizenship is also in line with the current bottom-up identity building policies of that the EU seems to pursue (Prutsch 2017:25).

2.4.2. Current research on the ESC: Opportunities, debates and challenges

As mentioned before, the fact that the ESC is a rather recent programme which got implemented in 2016 explains why it has not been the subject of much research so far. There is however some research about the European Voluntary Service (EVS), the predecessor of the ESC. In the *20 years European Voluntary Service Factsheet*, published by the RAY (Research-based analysis of European youth programmes), a selection of positive effects of the European Voluntary Service based on the self-perception of participants, are listed. Among them, 56% respondents stated they had become more interested in European issues and 85% have become aware of common European values. Furthermore, 80% of the project leaders were convinced that the EVS contributed to “the development of solidarity” and “to young

people's respect for cultural diversity" (RAY n.d.). Other positive listed effects include the improvement of intercultural competences and foreign language skills, self-realization and gain of confidence by the participants and the raise of awareness of local communities of young people's interests and ideas (RAY n.d.). Thus, it appears that the predecessor of the ESC, the European Voluntary Service (EVS), already made some important gains in terms of strengthening solidarity and European values.

The majority of the current research on the ESC has been made on the part of the RAY (the Research-based analysis of European youth programmes), the SALTO European Solidarity Corps Resource Center and the Generation and Educational Science Institute (GENESIS) in Austria. Thereafter the most relevant insights will be presented, in particular the contributions of a research report published one year after the implementation of the ESC (Akarcesme 2019) and of a pragmatic study of the years 2022-23 (Strecker et Eick 2023). The main findings focus on the topics and objectives of the ESC projects, and on the opportunities, challenges and obstacles of the ESC.

In what concerns the applicant organizations, most of the application were for volunteering activities (64%), are mostly non-profit organizations (NGOs) and mostly plan to involve young people with fewer opportunities. The majority of the applicant organizations had also already had experience in implementing projects funded by a previous EU Youth Programme, especially among the organizations applying for volunteering activities (Akarcesme 2019a:4). On the other hand, the branch of Solidarity Projects of the ESC attracted the most new-comer organizations.

The three most frequently addressed topics in the projects proposed by the applicant organizations – according to their own indication – were “inclusion” (32%), youthwork (27%) and community development (25%) (Akarcesme 2019a:4). It is interesting to notice that the topic “European identity and values” only figures 9th in the list with 14%. The topics that could be linked to solidarity like “inclusion” and “community development” – and further “citizenship and democratic participation” (listed with 21%) and “equality and non-discrimination” (listed with 19%) – thus appear more frequently and in a higher proportion in the projects than topics related to European identity (Akarcesme 2019a:4).

Another topic that was mentioned by the organizations as being addressed in their projects is “skill development” of the young people (18%). This alludes to one of the fundamental ambiguities in the programme, as identified by the stakeholders – the question of whether the ESC is a volunteering programme or youth programme. The ESC Guide published every year by the Commission emphasizes both the effects of the ESC for the community (“address identified needs within local communities and contribute to overcoming important societal challenges”) and the effects on the volunteers in their acquisition of skills and personal development (“volunteering also enables young people to acquire experience, skills and competences for their personal, educational, social, cultural, civic and professional development” (European Commission 2023:8). However, some stakeholders put the emphasis on the volunteering dimension of the programme, while other stakeholders see the ESC mostly as an educational offering young people learning opportunities (Strecker et Eick 2023:14). These divergences in the perception of the programme also brings further consequences on the characteristics of the programme. Those who see the ESC as a learning programme tend to argue for a reduction of the age minim of 18 years, affirming that the learning outcomes would also benefit younger people than 18. On the other hand, organizations who mainly value the social impact of volunteering tend to argue for a later (or no) age limit (which is currently set at 30). They suggest that volunteering shouldn’t be limited to young people as every person can make a positive impact on the society – independently from the age. On the contrary, they underline the potential benefits inter-generational volunteering could bring and call for a new policy framework for the ESC. Instead of the current European Youth Strategy framework, they call for a framework with more direct links with the volunteering sector (Strecker et Eick 2023:15). However, both points of view acknowledge “volunteering as a solidarity motor”: one lies on strengthening solidarity and associated values within the communities while the other focuses on strengthening these values among the participants themselves (Strecker et Eick 2023:14). And in the end, Strecker and Eick recognize that both approaches aim to meet the objectives of the ESC programmes established by the European Commission (Strecker et Eick 2023:14).

In what concerns the opportunities of the ESC programme, interviewed stakeholders praised the explicit focus on solidarity – especially in a time of many crises in Europe, e.g. the Brexit, the refugee crisis, the rise of far-right parties (Akarcesme 2019a:5). It is a chance for young people to become active for societal challenges and contributing to the development of local communities. Current research also focuses on the interests and motivations of the applicant organizations for joining the ESC. After the interest in “contribut[ing] to the objectives

of [the] organizations” (66%), the three most mentioned motivations are all linked to solidarity: “foster solidarity within society” (63%), “interest in solidarity” (54%) and to “foster international solidarity” (52%) (Akarcesme 2019a:6). It thus appears that among the participating organizations there is a strong motivation and will to promote solidarity and foster this value at different levels. There is, on the other hand, no reference to European identity and only one to Europe in general. As a matter of fact, 44% of the interviewed organizations indicated that their interest for submitting an application for the ESC is linked to the desire to “contribute to the development of Europe” (Akarcesme 2019a:6).

Regarding the obstacles of the ESC programme, the interviewed stakeholders in the two research reports from the RAY mainly identified challenges linked to some contradictions associated with the ESC and concretely the actual implementation including funding issues and a certain complexity. First, some stakeholders consider that a contradiction between the ESC and EU policies in general exists as the ESC puts the emphasis on solidarity while many EU policies are not necessarily considered an expression of solidarity (Strecker et Eick 2023:18). In that regard, as it has been shown in section 2.4.1., there is also no common understanding of the concept of solidarity in the programme (Akarcesme 2019a:7). For example, many applying organizations had difficulties to identify the solidarity aspects in the projects they were proposing, even though the projects were a fit for the ESC (Akarcesme 2019b:21). Some identified contradictions between the official discourse around the aims behind the programme and the implementation of it. Indeed, a non-sufficient allocation of funds and limitation of financial resources might explain the challenges related to the promotion of the new programme faced by some National Agencies (Akarcesme 2019a:7). The funding was thus reported to be insufficient in some cases (Strecker et Eick 2023:19). The funding issue and the linked difficulties with the application to the ESC is one of the reasons that explain the complexity of the programme according to stakeholders (Strecker et Eick 2023:21). While most of the stakeholders recognize the great potential of the programme, this potential is however not used completely, and the impacts tend to remain not really visible (Strecker et Eick 2023:24). One of the top-priorities of the ESC is inclusion, the accessibility of the programme for youth with fewer opportunities (YWFO). However, stakeholders recognize a difficulty and obstacles to indeed include YFWO in the programme (Strecker et Eick 2023:31). When talking about the challenges and obstacles faced by the ESC, it is important to remember that Europe was also confronted to the Covid-19 pandemic and crisis, very shortly after the implementation of the ESC. The pandemic impacted the ESC on many levels: on the

participant, organizational and structural level. For example, the administrative and bureaucratic issues got more complicated during the corona pandemic and visa applications were slowed down in a context where the countries tended to close their borders. These obstacles lead some organizations to not accept anymore applicants with “weaker” passport that require a visa (Strecker et Eick 2023:50). Another part of the applicants who got structurally excluded of the programme because of the pandemic were the young people at the age limit of 30. Those young people exceeded the age limit by turning 30 before the temporary border restrictions got suspended (Strecker et Eick 2023:50). Some young people quit their jobs and accommodations in the expectation to go abroad for the volunteering project, for then having to discover its impossibility due to corona (Strecker et Eick 2023:50). During the pandemic, some new forms of volunteering emerged like online volunteering. While some positive impacts can be linked to online volunteering, most stakeholders agree that it cannot however be a suitable alternative to physical volunteering as they miss “direct interpersonal connections and a shared sense of community, solidarity and belonging” (Strecker et Eick 2023:50).

These findings provide an important overlook on current research on the ESC, stating its characteristics, perceived potentials and obstacles. Interviewed stakeholders agree on the great potential of the ESC in fostering solidarity – although its definition and conception within the programme still doesn’t get unanimous understanding. However, it is important to notice that all the research quoted so far used data of interviews with stakeholders of the ESC (mostly National Agencies and participating organizations), which implies a certain limitation. The pragmatic study of 2022 published by the RAY suggests involving the views and opinions of participating youth for future research (Strecker et Eick 2023:58). This is what I aim to do in my research.

2.4.3. Potential of the ESC to foster solidarity and European identity

I suggest now to explore the potential of the ESC programme to foster solidarity in Europe and European identity. The aim of the programme as officially outlined in the Guide is to strengthen “cohesion, solidarity, democracy, European identity and active citizenship in the Union and beyond” (European Commission 2024:9). The exact objectives will be further outlined and critically assessed in section 4.1., it can however already be observed that the promotion of both European identity and solidarity are a key goal of the programme. Beyond these official goals, it does seem that the ESC programme is indeed well-positioned to contribute to foster solidarity and European identity for various reasons.

First, as it has been established earlier, scholars agree on the effectivity of cross-border interaction in the fostering of European identity, especially if the interaction is long-term and integrative, that is, if the interaction includes a level of integration in the host society (Henriques 2021). Most activities proposed within the ESC programme are cross-border volunteering activities, which presupposes that the young people will engage and interact with the people in their host community, with people from different cultures and horizons. Taking part in an ESC activity is thus fundamentally different than a stay abroad for touristic purposes as young volunteers interact on a regular basis with people from different nations - local people and other (European) people of the project. Fligstein emphasizes the link between interaction, identity construction and solidarity as he believes that “the main source of [such an] identity is the opportunity to positively interact on a regular basis with people from other European countries with whom one has a basis for solidarity (Fligstein 2009:133). Thus, the fact that the ESC programme proposes a lot of cross-border volunteering activities that presuppose the daily interaction with people from a different (European) country and culture constitutes one of the reasons why the ESC could, potentially, be an adequate tool to promote European identity – and with it solidarity if the interconnectedness is being assumed.

Furthermore, the possibility of strengthening solidarity in the EU through the ESC can be explained by the fact that most of the activities involve volunteering and voluntary engagement. By definition, volunteering presupposes to work and engage without any monetary or self-interested motivation. In his State of the Union Speech in 2016, during which the implementation of the ESC got announced, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker stated that: “Solidarity is the glue that keeps our Union together [...] There are many young,

socially minded people in Europe willing to make a meaningful contribution to society and help show solidarity [...] I am convinced much more solidarity is needed. But I also know that solidarity must be given voluntarily. It must come from the heart. It cannot be forced.” (European Commission 2016b:1). This statement underlines the fact that solidarity is spread and promoted through “voluntary” actions, through volunteering activities and cannot be implemented forcefully. The metaphor of solidarity as a “glue” also emphasizes the fact that solidarity is considered to be at the foundation, at the base of the European Union and that this Union does not make sense and cannot exist without solidarity. The potential of volunteering work for the fostering of a European unity and European identity does date back to long before the implementation of the ESC. Already in 1984, the Adonnino reports states that “the Member States [would like to] take steps to encourage young people to participate in projects organized by the Community beyond its frontiers, and in particular to support the creation of national committees of European volunteers for development, bringing together young Europeans who wish to work on development projects in the Third World” (Adonnino 1984). Although the volunteering involves here activities “beyond the frontiers” of the EU, it does acknowledge the potential of volunteering and it shall be reminded that the ESC also involves activities beyond EU member-states. Thus, the ESC programme could potentially be an adequate tool to promote solidarity – and with it European identity - as it is a programme that mostly includes volunteering activities that by definition presuppose a disinterested motivation.

The beforementioned statement of Jean-Claude Juncker in 2016 emphasizes the context and goals with which the ESC programme got implemented – to give young people the possibility to “make a meaningful contribution to society and help show solidarity” (European Commission 2016b:1). This conveys the idea that the ESC could be understood as a tool – to promote solidarity and with it foster the unity of the European Union (as solidarity is considered to be “a glue”). In line with this, the research report *Exploring the implementation of the European Solidarity Corps during its first year* published by the research network RAY (Research-based analysis of European youth programmes) states that: “The EU Solidarity Corps programme could be an important instrument in fostering European solidarity and thus supporting the European integration process.” (Strecker et al. 2022:9). I shall explore the validity of these remarks in my research and try to analyze to what extent the ESC programme could indeed be an “instrument” in strengthening solidarity in the EU and the European integration like suggested by Strecker.

Chapter III: Methodology

3.1. Specificities of the ESC

When conducting research on the ESC, I believe it is important to bear in mind the specific aspects that make this programme unique and distinguishable from other volunteering programmes or youth programmes. Drawing on what has been previously established, they can be summarized as follows: First, it is a programme implemented and funded by the European Commission, its programme countries and partner countries are mostly EU member states – or EU candidate states – it thus has by necessity a European dimension. The vocabulary and terminology used in relation to the ESC can thus assumed to be ideologically charged and has thus to be analyzed with distance in order to keep a neutral stance. Second, it is a programme that mostly proposes cross-border volunteering opportunities in teams. In contrast to national volunteering opportunities, the ESC thus enables young people to engage in an international environment – not only through the contact with the local (foreign) community, but also through the interaction with the other internationals in the volunteering team. Lastly, it is a programme in which all costs are covered for everyone – without any formal requirement of skills or qualifications – which, a priori, makes the programme potentially very inclusive. Stakeholders agree that the fact that “it’s the only programme, [it’s] really the only programme in Europe which funds the costs for everyone. [...] And [...] that really is unique in the programme” (Strecker et Eick 2023:13).

3.2. Reminder of research goals and research questions

The non-exhaustive literature review has shown that European identity – in the same manner of any (collective) identity – is a concept constructed by different narratives, which has evolved through time. In recent years, EU identity policies are characterized by bottom-up initiatives that encourage active participation and entail a strong civic-political dimension. As the ESC programme gives the opportunity to young people to volunteer and take more actively part in society, it can be understood as integral part of the EU’s bottom-up European identity construction policy. Moreover, scholars have pointed out the potential of cross-border interactions in the fostering of a European identity, which also goes in the sense of the ESC as a programme that can indeed foster it.

It is however important to establish what definition of European identity will be adopted here, as it has been shown that its meaning keeps changing in a dynamic process of reconstruction and reinterpretation. European identity shall here be understood as identification with Europe and the EU. First, it refers to the sense of European belonging, which is also how the scholars Fligstein and Henriques (see section 2.2.3.) operationalized it. As my research involves interviews with young people both from both inside and outside the EU, and participants from Europe and transcontinental states – countries which are geographically both in Europe and Asia –, the research will be conducted less close-ended. I will thus not only investigate the sense of European belonging, but more generally the shift of the perception of the EU and Europe after the participation in ESC.

Another aspect of European identity refers to the identification with EU values. The research will thus also investigate to what extent the ESC programme affects the awareness and rapport with EU values. As it has been established, solidarity is considered a core European value and thus an integral part of the EU's set of values. Solidarity refers to a relationship of mutual attachment between members of a community (Bayertz 1999:3; see section 2.1.). There seems to be a normative level of solidarity – which entails mutual obligations – and a factual level, which refers to a “common ground” between the members of that group. The latter is by some scholars referred to as the “source of solidarity”. While it has been shown that some scholars believe that solidarity relies on a common identity (see section 2.1.), others confirm that identities as well “ultimately need the support of solidarity.” (Delanty n.d.:5). There thus seems to be a strong interconnectedness and interdependence. If this interconnectedness and reliance of solidarity on identity is being assumed, it appears that both a strong enough and inclusive European identity have to be fostered in order to install solidarity in Europe (see section 2.3.2.). Current EU identity policies promoting bottom-up initiatives seem to be in line with this.

As stated before, existing literature on the ESC programme shows that most institutional stakeholders are convinced of the opportunities of the programme to address social challenges and the encouragement of young people to take part in society; they praise the focus on solidarity. The fact that the ESC programme could be an important tool to foster solidarity and European integration is acknowledged by several researchers, have however not been verified empirically on the level of young participants.

Thereafter, I will try to answer the following research questions: **How does the participation in the ESC programme affect the perception of the EU and impact the sense of European belonging of the participants? To what extent does the ESC programme contribute to promote European identity and solidarity? What is the link between (European) identity and solidarity in the ESC programme?**

3.3. Methods

In order to answer the research questions, I conducted qualitative research including a document analysis of official statements and reports on the ESC of the European Commission published between 2021 and 2024 and the conduction of 11 semi-constructed interviews with young people having volunteered with the ESC programme. The analysis of both official documents and youth insights permits to compare the goals and expected outcomes of the programme with the actual consequences and perceived outcomes of the youth. It allows to put into perspective the official discourse on European identity and solidarity with the understanding of it by young people, thus assessing if the outlined goals of the European Commission were achieved through that programme.

The corpus of documents encompasses all the publications of the European Commission, available on the website European Youth Portal, reference documents (European Youth Portal n.d.f.). It includes the regulation 2021/888 setting out the legal framework of the ESC, the ESC Guide from 2024, the 2024 Annual work programmes published in 2023. As the content covered in the ESC Guides and the Annual Work Programme are overlapping and do not seem to undergo major differences from year to year, I chose to only select the most recent publications of these documents (2024). The analysis of the documents in the corpus will mostly focus on the parts outlining the objectives of the ESC as well as the policy framework and priorities.

Regarding the interviews, most of the interviewees did their ESC project in Romania (7), while some did it in other countries of the EU (2 participants in Germany, 1 in France) and outside of the EU (1 in Türkiye). I am aware that context-sensitive differences between the studied countries might impact the results of the study – in particular in regard to the development status of the countries and their history (with the EU). This will be further specified when presenting the results (see section 4.2.2.). Out of 11 interviewees, 10 volunteered in the field of non-formal education (the other in a renovation project involving physical work) and

it was a short-term project (up to two months) for 7 interviewees. These 7 interviewees did a “team volunteering”, which means that they were working with other volunteers together. Out of the 4 long-term volunteers, one was not working with other volunteers, however he was living and interacting daily with volunteers participating in other ESC projects. Thus, all the interviewees were interacting daily with people from another country. The interviewees were from EU member-states and from other non-EU participant countries (Türkiye and Georgia). One participant was from Brazil and was however able to participate in the ESC programme as she was legally residing in an EU member-state at the time of the project. A more detailed overview of the interviewees can be found in the appendix (A1).

For the assessment of the official documents and the interviews, I used a thematic analysis framework as developed by Naeem (Naeem et al. 2023). The data was coded with the software MAXQDA. I applied both inductive and deductive data analysis which enables to test the grounding theory presented in the conceptual framework while remaining open to new ideas that may emerge from the data. While I mostly coded inductively for the data addressing the perception of Europe and sense of European belonging, the coding process was done both in a deductive and inductive way for the data touching upon the expression of solidarity. For the deductive coding, a preset of codes from the literature were used – especially codes from the theoretical reflections of Miller, Bayertz and Van Parijs (see section 2.1.) and from the study on the meaning of solidarity in the ESC conducted by Nicodemi and Baclija Knoch (Baclija Knoch et Nicodemi 2020; see section 2.4.1.). It was thus decided to analyze the concept of solidarity through two different frameworks. Applying the framework of Baclija Knoch and Nicodemi enables to test the presence of terms, which had previously been associated with solidarity by researchers, practitioners, young people and policy makers, in the here present interviews. A complete list of these terms can be found in the appendix (A2). On the other hand, applying the framework of Miller enables to review the theoretical conceptions on solidarity and explore the theory according to which a common identity is a foundation for solidarity.

3.4. Context and limitations of the study

Regarding the limitations of the study, it is important to note that the interviews were conducted in English, which isn't the mother tongue of none of the interviewed persons. While all the interviewed people had a good level of English – not least because they participated in

an international project -, it is possible that the answers would have been articulated slightly differently if the interviews were held in the mother tongue of the participants.

Second, most of the interviewed people had done their ESC project between 1 to 2 years before, which potentially offers different results than someone interviewed directly after the end of the project. On the one hand, as the project was some while ago, the participant potentially may have not had the memories of the project freshly in mind, on the other hand the time that passed between the end of the project and the interview may have served as time of reflection for the participant, allowing him to realize and think about his or her involvement in the ESC. Third, as the participation in the interviews was optional, people who agreed on doing the interview are people who have – or want – to say something about the ESC programme – be it positive or negative. It thus automatically addresses rather people on whom the participation in the ESC programme has had, a priori, a considerate impact.

Fourth, the majority of the interviewees (7 out of 11) had done their ESC project in Romania, which of course implies that the results found for Romania are more representative than for the other countries. While the interviews about projects in Romania included interviewees with different profiles, especially in regard to their country of origin (3 from EU member-states and 4 from outside the EU), certain profiles (ex. participant from EU member-state doing an ESC project outside the EU) are only represented in one interview. Consequently, the results found for the projects in the different countries, cannot really be compared among each other, reason why the analysis is here framed as explorative.

Fifth, the potential of cross-border interactions in shaping European identity having been previously empirically assessed, some scholars had, however, defended the idea that European youth programmes (in particular academic exchanges with the programme Erasmus) can just contribute to its spreading in a limited way as they are often accessible to educated young people, who are already more likely to identify with Europe in the first place. While the ESC programme is intended to be very inclusive and the programme objectives outline a clear urge to engage young people with fewer opportunities (YPFO), this study doesn't take into account the socio-economic background of the participants or other barriers that could hamper the involvement in the programme. In regard to the potential of the ESC to promote European identity and solidarity, I focus here rather on the variable of location and type of the project and the participants' country of origin and reveal the importance of these elements for answering the research questions.

Lastly, it is important to mention that the method of conducting interviews among young participants of the ESC is very well positioned to determine the impact that the participation in

the programme has had on them. On the other hand, the impacts on the local community are reported as perceived by the youth. To assess more directly the effects of the ESC on the local community – in particular in regard to the promotion of European identity and solidarity – it appears that field research within the community in which the volunteering activity takes place would be necessary. This would however go beyond the scope of this thesis, reason why the consequences of the ESC will here be described as they are perceived by the youth.

Chapter IV: Presentation of results

4.1. Results in the documents

4.1.1. The aims of the programme: promoting European identity and solidarity

The Guide to the ESC published by the European Commission opens as follows:

“The European Union is built on solidarity, a shared value which is strongly felt throughout European society. Solidarity defines the European project and provides the necessary unity to cope with current and future crises by holding a strong moral ground. Solidarity provides a clear compass to guide the European youth in their aspirations for a better Union.” (European Commission 2024:7).

The totality of the documents of the corpus reassesses the fact that the “European Union is built on solidarity” (European Commission 2024:7). Solidarity is outlined as a necessary value upon which the unity of the European Union relies (European Commission 2024:7). Solidarity is thus framed as a value, a necessity, and a uniting force. Solidarity is viewed as something that enables creating a “better Union” (European Commission 2023:21), which is quite subjective and vague due to the usage of the adjective “better”. However, it is then specified that enhanced solidarity fosters a stronger and more resilient Union (European Commission 2023:21). In that regard it is interesting to notice the usage of the metaphor of a “compass” (European Commission 2023:21) when speaking of solidarity – solidarity is perceived as a guidance, a value that would lead the path for action.

From the outlined objectives of the programme, it is evident that the ESC aims at promoting European identity and solidarity, among other European values. The ESC Guide states clearly that the programme is focused on strengthening “cohesion, solidarity, democracy, European identity and active citizenship in the Union and beyond” (European Commission 2024:9). The Annual Work Programme of the ESC specifies what dimensions of European identity are meant to be strengthened, and thus, how European identity is to be understood here. It states, “The activities supported by the Programme should aim to strengthen European identity (notably as regards to common EU values, the principles of unity and diversity, and participating countries’ social, cultural and historical heritage)” (European Commission 2023:25). This is the only definition of European identity available in the corpus; thus this definition from the official documents should be considered for the analysis. European identity is both aimed at being promoted and at the same time, like solidarity, it appears to be some kind of “compass”, a direction that should guide young people’s actions. In line with the EU Youth Strategy, young people are indeed portrayed as potential actors of positive change across Europe, “inspired by EU values and European identity” (European Commission 2023:18). Although the term “European identity” is not recurrent other than in the outlined objectives, the European dimension of the programme is not to be overlooked. The “solidarity activities should present potential European added value” (Official Journal of the European Union 2021:3). The Regulation 2021/888 that establishes the ESC states in the following what defines such an European added value in the activities:

“(a) transnational character, particularly with regard to learning mobility and cooperation; (b) ability to complement other programmes and policies at local, regional, national, Union and international level; (c) European dimension regarding their themes and aims, approaches, expected outcomes and other aspects of those solidarity activities; (d) approach to involving young people from different backgrounds; (e) contribution to the effective use of Union transparency and recognition tools.” (Official Journal of the European Union 2021:12). These characteristics are also reminded in the important characteristics section of the ESC Guide (European Commission 2024:8). For my research, the points (a), (c) and (d) are the most interesting and will be compared to the findings of the interviews in section 4.2.

Beyond the focus on the strengthening of both European identity and solidarity – next to other European values -, the ESC programme aims to contribute, more globally, to the development of a more integrated, sustainable, positive and “better Union” (European Commission 2023:21). Through addressing societal challenges, it aims at engaging “positive change for communities across Europe” (European Commission 2023:18).

4.1.2. Expected outcomes on participants and communities

Globally, the ESC is expected to “contribute to a positive image of Europe in the world, spread[ing] its fundamental values, thus also facilitating international policy dialogue and EU public diplomacy actions” (European Commission 2023:22). There is thus an emphasis on the promotion of EU values and the will to create a positive image of Europe. In the following parts, outlining the analysis of the interviews, I will show the extent to which the participation in the ESC is indeed contributing to a positive perception of Europe among participants and promotion of European values.

The specific expected outcomes of the programme are set out under the section “2.3.1. Expected results of supported activities” in the Annual Work Programme (European Commission 2023:35) and under section “Which actions are supported?” of Part B in the ESC Guide (European Commission 2024:17). The activities are generally expected to show “positive and long-lasting effects” (European Commission 2023:35); thus, positive repercussions as well as the durability of the ESC project – even after its end - are expected. Three categories of actors on which the ESC programme will show results are identified: the individual participant, the participating organization and the community. As shown before, there is already some research focusing on the ESC from the point of view of participating organizations and ESC stakeholders. This is why, I am rather concentrating on the effects on the individual participant and the communities – as perceived by the participant.

The expected outcomes of the ESC programme on individual participants are set out as follows:

- “• *improved skills and competences for personal, educational, social, civic, cultural and professional development;*
- *more active participation in democratic life and in society in general;*
- *enhanced employability and transition to the labour market;*

- *increased sense of initiative and social entrepreneurship;*
- *increased self-empowerment and self-esteem;*
- *improved foreign language competences;*
- *enhanced intercultural awareness;*
- *better awareness of the European project, its foundations, history, functioning and EU values;*
- *increased motivation for further engagement in the solidarity sector;*
- *increased awareness of humanitarian aid-related themes and values.”*

(European Commission 2023:36).

Regarding the expected outcomes of the ESC programme on the communities where the activities take place, they are laid out as follows:

- “ • *increased ability to address societal challenges;*
- *greater understanding and responsiveness to social, linguistic and cultural diversity;*
 - *increased capacity building among local organisations and local communities in third countries.”*
- (European Commission 2023:36).

The expected results can thus be summarized and divided into five categories which I identified as follows 1) the direct outcomes for the participants including their improvement of various skills and personal development, 2) the effects on the local community where the volunteering activity took place, 3) the enhanced intercultural awareness and competence, 4) the perception of Europe, awareness of EU values and European identity, 5) the expression of solidarity.

These five categories provide an advantageous framework for the thematic presentation of the results from the interviews. While 1) and 2) aim at analyzing the effects of the ESC programme on participating individuals and communities separately, the themes 3)-5) take into account both.

4.2. Results of the interviews

4.2.1. General opinion and impression of participants of the ESC programme

The participants were globally all satisfied with the programme and happy to have lived the experience of volunteering abroad with the ESC. Generally, participants associate with the ESC exceptional moments of their lives, positive emotions and overall, something that has thought them and give them a lot:

“It was the best experience of my life and best period I’ve lived so far”

[I4, Georgia, project in Romania]

“I had a lot of fun. I enjoyed it too much [...] It was a really, really good experience.”

[I6, Spain, project in Romania]

“Globally I think it’s positive initiative and it can benefit participants and also like organizations” [I8, Poland, project in Türkiye]

“I think my global impression on it was... it was very positive.”

[I9, Brazil, project in Germany]

Several interviewees got emotional when talking about their experience and presented it as something life-changing which affected them deeply. Some of these statements are presented in the following:

“I think the project in Romania with the people and the experiences I made there were life-changing for me in a very, very positive way.” [I3, Germany, project in Romania]

“It changed my life, this project.” [I9, Türkiye, project in Romania]

The global impression of the ESC programme by participants is thus very positive and participants seem to have gained a lot from it. Some people even describe the project as being “life-changing” and report that the participation has had a huge impact on them in their personal development.

4.2.2. Clarification of country-sensitive context – a variable influencing the results

Before analyzing more in depth, the findings from the interviews, I would like to raise awareness again about the country-sensitive contexts that could have influenced the results. As stated before, the sample includes interviews with 7 interviewees having done their ESC project in Romania, 2 in Germany, 1 in France and 1 in a non-EU member state, Türkiye. Regarding the participant's country of origin there are both participants coming from EU-member states (Romania, France, Germany, Spain, Poland) as well as from non-EU states (Türkiye, Georgia and Brazil).

While Germany and France are sometimes referred to as the “engine of European integration” - as they are, along with Italy and the Benelux countries at the origin of the creation of the European Economic Community (EEC), established by the Treaty of Rome, which ultimately led to the creation of the European Union – Romania only joined the EU in 2007 along with Bulgaria. Romania is thus the second most recent country to have accessed the EU (after Croatia which joined in 2013) (European Union n.d.c.).

Beyond this rather recent common history of Romania and the European Union, Romania and France and Germany aren't equally developed, and the quality of life differs substantially. Even though the three countries are classified as “developed economies” according to the UN's Human Development Index (HDI), Romania ranked 53rd globally in 2021, the lowest place among EU member states aside from Bulgaria (Dumitrescu 2022). While France and Germany are part of the major developed economies (G7) (United Nations 2024:151), Romania is one of the poorest countries in the European Union, ranking below the EU's average GDP per capita (European Union n.d.d.).

Türkiye, on the other hand, has been officially recognized as EU candidate country in 1999, however accession negotiations have been decided to stay at standstill by the Council in 2018 (DG NEAR 2024). Türkiye ranked 54th in the UN's HDI in 2024, landing in the “very high human development” category, and is considered an upper-middle income country (United Nations 2024:152).

This specific variable related to the hosting country's realities and context, that could potentially influence a participant's perception of the experience, is unmistakably also intertwined with the variable of the participant's home country. I will not provide a detailed list of the specificities of all the interviewed participant's home country (Georgia, Brazil, Spain, Poland

in addition to France, Germany and Türkiye that have been described beforementioned), it is however evident that the variable of geographical origin, in particular in regard to whether they come from a EU-member country or not, will influence the results – let alone variables such as socio-economic background or education status.

Some country-sensitive specificities were also pointed out by the interviewees themselves. First, the different level of development and financial resources accessible in the countries were emphasized by two interviewees (I2, I6):

“I think the volunteering is quite good in these places you know, in countries like Romania that are poorer than others; they need more help.” [I6, Spain, project in Romania]

“Going to Romania made me realize, okay, maybe I’m underprivileged in France, but like, when you compare to what underprivileged means in Romania...”
[I2, France, project in Romania]

Some societal structures and specific challenges were also touched upon, in particular in regard to the marginalization of ethnic minorities:

“Roman communities in Romania, to tell about them briefly, they are not included in the society. And they are not accepted.” [I7, Türkiye, project in Romania]

Moreover, the national history also leads to structural differences and mentalities. In that sense, the interviewee from Romania (I10) evoked the structural obstacle of corruption that persists in Romania, especially among the older generation. In that line, she also reminds of the socialist past of Romania under Ceausescu, which, of course, isn’t a common history with the Western European countries.

Regarding Romania, three participants (I3, I4, I10) also indicated that they remember that Romania is the first country among the participating countries of the ESC to be hosting foreign volunteers and implementing projects but at the same time sending the smallest number of volunteers abroad. This hiatus between number of receiving volunteers and sending volunteers could be an indicator of certain dynamics and realities existing in the country – a hypothesis could be that it might be a society in which communities benefit from solidarity

engagement whereas going abroad or travelling might not be that common or in the collective imaginary.

Another factor influencing the country-sensitive context is the geographical location of a country. In particular, the geographical proximity of Romania – especially of the northern cities – and Ukraine in regard to the Russian invasion in February 2022 might have impacted the experience and perception of volunteering. One interviewee did a reference to the exceptional times and particular atmosphere caused by it:

“We were just there [...] to create something positive, especially in these times – I think right when the project started or a few weeks earlier – Russia attacked Ukraine, and many Ukrainians joined for the ESC.” [I3, Germany, project in Romania]

Regarding Türkiye, the interviewee I8 touched on the difference related to freedom of movement. Given the fact that Türkiye isn’t an EU country, it is more difficult to travel and meet new people compared to countries in the EU:

“I think in Europe it’s easy, easier to travel and meet new people. Again, I think in Turkey it’s more difficult.” [I8, Poland, project in Türkiye]

Moreover, beyond these country-sensitive circumstances, the experience of participating in the ESC within a same country could differ largely according to the place the project takes place (whether for example in a big city or in a rural area). The limited access to various resources that results from empty, rural cities was also mentioned by an interviewee:

“The city [...] looks so empty, dull. [...] In the cities like that, there’s not so much source, [to] reach out and [to] expand the horizon” [I1, Türkiye, project in Romania]

All these statements show that there is generally an awareness of country-specific circumstances from the participants themselves. These differences related to for example development level, history, structure of society, mentality, access to resources in the country do of course influence the participants experiences with the ESC and make the experiences potentially very different from each other. We will see later in further detail what the importance of this variable is in regard to answering the research questions; to what extent the perception of the EU and the promotion of solidarity differs in accordance with the country of volunteering and country of origin of the participant.

4.2.3. Thematic presentation of the results in the interviews

To make the presentation of results to a greater extent comprehensible for the reader, I suggest dividing them into five themes.

4.2.3.1. Outcomes for the participant: improvement of skills and personal development

Globally all participants seem to have benefitted from taking part in the ESC programme. They have improved skills and competencies on various level ranging from educational and professional to social and personal.

Some of the skills developed through the experience with ESC could be qualified as “hard skills” and are quantifiable. This is the case of improved language competences. The participants generally report that English was the common language of work and communication with the other volunteers, which made them improve their English skills (I6, I11). Participants also mentioned the language barrier that could sometimes render the interaction with people from local communities difficult. In that regard, some participants reported having improved also their language competences other than English, in the local language for example (I7, I2, I9, I11). In particular, one interviewee pointed out that it was very nice to improve her German skills in Germany with kids, as they didn’t really care about the correctness of the language:

“When I went to Germany it was hard to speak German and then the kids just wanted to play with whoever would play with them, and that was also very nice in exploring the language and then being able to speak and getting the confidence...” [I9, Brazil, project in Germany]

Improving the foreign language skills was also stated as a motivation to participate in the ESC programme by some participants (I11, I2).

For some participants, the project in which they involved has a direct link with their profession or field of studies, which made them gain useful skills for their future or current career. For example, an interviewee who works as a high-school teacher in his home country and

volunteered in the field of non-formal education reported that the participation in the ESC project made him a “better teacher”:

“I’m a better teacher. Like it influenced me in the way that it made me a better teacher because I had a chance to teach Polish in English and to interact with a wonderful group of people.” [I8, Poland, project in Türkiye]

Another interviewee who studies architecture and volunteered in a project that was about the renovation of an old fortress wall in France reported that thanks to the project she actually got the opportunity to build something and learn useful skills that will help her in her career (I10).

Thus, the ESC programme enabled the participants to gain useful competencies for their professional development, some of the skills being in direct link with the intended career path of the participant. However, the majority of the skills developed through the ESC experience could be qualified as “soft skills” that, despite being non-technical, undoubtedly will likewise benefit the participants in their professional life – and not only.

A skill that was pointed out numerous times by the participants is teamwork, the ability to work in teams (especially in an intercultural context, which will be further developed in 4.3.3.). For some interviewees it was the first time enjoying being working in a team:

“But I think that was the first group project that I loved [...] and it showed me that I can work with other people, that I am able to, and it was a true revelation for me”

[I10, Romania, project in France]

In that regard, the participants also learned problem-solving abilities and resilience to stress:

“Also resilience like not being too overwhelmed with certain situations but trying to solve them and make it work out anyways or find another way” [I3, Germany, project in Romania]

The importance of communication when working in a team – especially in an intercultural team – was pointed out in numerous interviews and in that regard, participants also seem to have improved their communication skills.

When working in a team, the participants also realized that it sometimes is necessary to take initiatives and lead some parts of the group (I2, I9). Other mentioned skills developed through the project are creativity (I5), taking responsibility (I5), flexibility (I2) and independence (I4) specifically in regard to the fact that the participants are living abroad in a foreign country. In that sense, living and working with people from different backgrounds and cultures has globally enhanced their curiosity and open-mindedness, which will later be developed further.

On the personal level of development, another big gain that participants got from the project is the (self-) confidence. For example, for some participants, this meant getting more confident when talking in a foreign language as mentioned before (I9), for others in expressing their art (I1).

Some participants reported not being “scared” anymore after the project, the gain of confidence is thus manifested as opposed to a certain vulnerability or fear that may have existed before participating in the project:

“I feel now that I am not scared [...] like I could be before going there.” [I11, Spain, project in Germany]

“And [...] it just made me realize, maybe, [...] I shouldn’t be scared. And I should just do it; do stuff.” [I1, Türkiye, project in Romania]

When talking about the personal development of the participants, it is very central to mention the importance they attribute to the other people they have met through that project – be it other international volunteers or the people from the local communities. In fact, all participants draw attention to the nice friendships and interhuman relationships they have formed, this being for a majority even the most significant part of the project:

“The most meaningful part for me [...] is the connection I made with the people. This is for me by far the most important thing, and the lasting friendships mean a whole lot to me” [I3, Germany, project in Romania]

“I think that was the best part of the project. The people, I mean.” [I4, Georgia, project in Romania]

“I think the most valuable thing for me [...] I had very good friendships and I think I will never forget them all over my life.” [I5, Türkiye, project in Romania]

“The fact that I met a person which I’ve never seen in my life before, through this project, and I got married to her and now we’re family; that was the most outstanding thing to happen.” [I7, Türkiye, project in Romania]

When asked about their motivations to join the ESC programme, several participants also indicated that they wanted to meet new people, especially from different countries and backgrounds.

Thus, the interviews show that there are undeniably tangible outcomes of the ESC programme on its participants on various levels. While some gained technical skills that may be useful in their future professional life, most of the participants developed soft skills and competences on a personal level, which can be interpreted as development in personality and identity trait.

4.2.3.2. Effects on the local community

I suggest now looking at the impacts of the volunteering work on the local community, as perceived by the individual participants.

From the outset, it can be said that the effects of the volunteering work on the local communities are difficult to measure and they seem to differ largely according to a certain number of variables – in opposition to the outcomes on participants beforementioned.

First, the duration of the project seems to have an influence on the perceived impact on the local community. Out of 11 interviewees, 7 participants had done a “short-term project”, a project of a duration of up to two months – here all the short-term projects were of two months (I2, I3, I4, I6, I8, I9) except for one that was of 2 weeks (I10). Several participants mentioned that it was hard to quantify or name the impact of their work on the communities due to the short time of their project:

“I don't know [...] it's so hard to say what kind of impact it has, because it's such a short interaction that we had. Because it was a 2-month project, but the children would only stay with us 1 week.” [I9, Brazil, project in Germany]

In this particular case, the interviewee participated in a two-month project that was about organizing summer camps for children. After 1 month of preparation, the actual summer camps took place for four weeks, however every week new children would attend the summer camps, which is why the interviewee struggled to name the impact that the project had on the local community.

The similar obstacle of short time is also identified by another interviewee:

“In like two months, it's not long time to see an effect. So, I think because of that, I wasn't able to see a clear effect. If the volunteering program would be longer for let's say 10-12 months, maybe I would be able to see it more clearly.”

[I8, Poland, project in Türkiye]

Beyond the duration of the project, another factor that seems to influence the perceived impact of the volunteering work is the activity field of the project. All interviewees did their project in the field of on-formal education, except for one whose project included physical activities and intended to renovate an old fortress-wall (I10). Despite being an only two-week project, the participant was really satisfied with having contributed positively to the community:

“I think that's the nice part when you're doing physical work, something palpable, because you can really see for yourself the end result.” [I10, Romania, project in France]

This statement underlines the fact that volunteering with something physical and concrete, something “palpable” will potentially have a more direct – leastways visible – impact.

The perceived impact of the volunteering work on the local community is also closely intertwined with the degree to which the activities address societal challenges. When asked to what extent the participant felt like their volunteering project addressed the needs or challenges of the local community, some were a bit skeptical or expressed criticism in that regard:

“I have a little bit of criticism about it. When I got into it, I would say it was my understanding that the people that were being provided the chance to be in the summer camp would be children with less economic opportunities or with a more vulnerable socio-economic background, which was not the case.” [I9, Brazil, project in Germany]

The participant further explained that the children had to pay a cost of attending in order to be able to participate in the camp, reason why the participant concluded that they must have had some financial means to participate and thus, some limits exist to the social impact this can have. Continuing about the perceived impact on the community, the participant remarked the following:

“In terms of the impact [...] think I felt benefited from it personally, like I was being benefited from it.” [I9, Brazil, project in Germany]

This idea that the participant felt more benefited from the ESC programme than the perceived contribution that he or she gave to the local community is something that also emerges from other participants’ perspective and will be discussed more in detail later.

As there is an interconnectedness between response to societal challenges and perceived impact on the community, I believe it is most logical to present the results on community impact separately by country – as societal challenges differ from country to country.

4.2.3.2.1. Effects on the local communities in Romania

Among the interviewees, 7 had done their volunteering project in Romania. Out of these 7, 5 did it in the same organization with similar activities.

Regarding the needs and challenges of the communities, the answers differed but mostly the participants pointed out that they were conducting activities with poor (I6), underprivileged (I2) children, often in rural areas. One interviewee was also engaged in activities addressing specifically an ethnic minority, Roma communities, and helped them with education and basis human needs (I7).

All participants in Romania volunteered in the field of non-formal education. One project was about implementing different activities in local schools and also organizing spring and summer camps in the city. The participants mostly reported having raised intercultural awareness and promoted the ESC programme and opportunities offered by the EU. In that regard, participants observed that the children were generally very interested in the ESC programme and reached out to them via social media even after the end of their project to ask more detailed questions about the recruitment process and functioning of the ESC:

“And it's funny, but afterwards, some of the kids contacted me. For example, I think one was around one month ago, and most of them were just asking questions about the ESC project [...] I don't know exactly if the outcome is that specific [...] but generally I think they got more interested in the ESC.” [I4, Georgia, project in Romania]

The participants also put forward the general big interest and curiosity of the children for the volunteers:

“I think some of [...] were so interested in us, [...] they saw us more or less like heroes or role models or whatever. They were, like really, um, they really liked us.”
[I3, Germany, project in Romania]

As the interviewee pointed out, this curiosity was largely due to the fact that it was international volunteers conducting the activities:

“They were really interested in what kind of a person I am and how I got to Romania, or how I live in Germany as well. [...] So, it was a completely new experience for them. And um, this coupled with the fact that we as international volunteers made these projects” [I3, Germany, project in Romania]

This statement shows that the excitement of the children also led to raising intercultural awareness and interest, which will be further developed in the next section (4.2.3.3.).

Participants also affirmed that they raised awareness, either through presentations or informal interactions, about global challenges and human values like global warming, food waste (I1), or gender equality by deconstructing gender roles (I2) for example.

In the specific example of the participant who worked with children from Roma communities (I7), the interviewee reported having seen a strong impact and change. He emphasized that Roma communities are excluded from Romanian society and thus, Roma children are frowned upon in the local schools. Thus, he was working in a center that was gathering the children and teaching them basic education as well as helping them in basic human needs. The participant was able to determine a visible impact of his work, especially between the elder children and younger children, who started going to the center since an earlier age:

“It was possible to see like day and night the behavior between the young ones and the old ones. How they act. How they speak with you. The things that they don’t do, that the elders do. Like drugs or profanity, things like that. It was day and night visibility.”

[I7, Türkiye, project in Romania]

4.2.3.2.2. Effects on the local communities in France and Germany

Due to the smaller sample of interviews and the fact that the country-profile of France and Germany are quite similar in regard to their development and EU-history, as it has been shown before, I will present the effects of the ESC programme on these communities in the same subsection.

As stated before, the project in France was about renovating an old wall of a fortress, thus a physical activity in which the participant was able to see a “palpable” and visible result. It is however interesting to notice that the interviewee observed that the real impact, the “real goal” of the project wasn’t to renovate the wall:

“What I felt in the end [was that] the aim wasn't really to restore the wall. I mean yeah that was, basically the end goal, but the real challenge was, getting to work with other people, new people you don't know, that you do not share the language with them, and I don't know. It was very interesting to me because in the end we really were a team and, I think that was the real goal of the camp to make us work together, work like a team, for a common target.” [I10, Romania, project in France]

This statement underlines the fact that the perceived real impact of the project wasn't the physical accomplishment but rather the interculturality of it, the fact that the participant got to work with and meet people from different cultures and background. This dimension of the ESC programme will be further developed later (in section 4.2.3.3). The participant also mentioned that she got to meet local people, who would come to visit the volunteers and show interest in their work and progress, which also underpinned the participant's belief that the fortress was important for the common heritage of the community.

Regarding the two interviewees who did their ESC project in Germany (I9, I11) in the field of non-formal education – one for 12 months in a youth center (I11) and one for 2 months organizing and implementing summer camps (I9) – both seem to agree on the fact that the impact the ESC programme had on them is bigger than the one it had on the local community:

“I think for me it was, I always thought like that, for me it [had] more impact than for the community because, I mean, I'm moving there and everything that is around me, it's in German, it's not my comfort zone, so it affects me in a good way.”

[I11, Spain, project in Germany]

As stated before, the other interviewee (I9) was a bit critical about the fact that the children participating in the summer camps were generally not from a vulnerable socio-economic background and also struggled to determine the concrete impact of the volunteering project given the fact that the camps would only last 1 week.

However, both interviewees seem to have noticed an increase in intercultural awareness and competence. I11 pointed out that some children improved their English skills thanks to the activities and communication with him. He also told them some things about his home country, Spain, or cooked traditional meals with them.

Likewise, I9 was implementing the summer camps with a team of international volunteers for children from different European countries. The participant observed that some children would be saying different words in foreign languages throughout the week that they had learned from the volunteers. As they also implemented specific activities about the European Union, its functioning and member states, the participant also believed that the children got more familiar with European and national symbols.

4.2.3.2.2. Effects on the local communities in Türkiye

As stated before, the interviewee (I8) volunteered in Türkiye in the field of non-formal education for only two months, time which, according to the participant was too short to see any concrete visible impact. However, as the project was about animating language classes in the participant's native language and also assisting local sport teachers while speaking English to the children, it enabled young local kids to have a contact with foreigners and a cultural exchange. According to the participant (I8), this intercultural exchange and the possibility to meet peers from Europe was very beneficial for the local community, especially in a country where travelling is much harder than in the EU.

Thus, it can be concluded that the perceived effects of the ESC programme on the local communities differ largely in accordance with a certain number of variables like the duration of the project, the type and themes of the project and the country it takes place. The way this affects the answers to the research questions – especially in regard to the perceived contribution to solidarity - will be further developed later. Beyond those differences in the impact on the local communities, there however seems to be a common ground between all the projects. Indeed, all participants insisted on the intercultural aspect of the experience and the ways in which awareness was raised among local communities in that matter. Intercultural competence is also something that seems to have been gained by the participants themselves during the project.

4.2.3.3. Intercultural awareness and competence

I suggest now looking at the intercultural awareness and competence that was developed through the ESC programme both by the individual participants and the local communities. I will also show to what extent it is linked with the European core values of inclusion and diversity and how it is, ultimately, linked to the European principle of unity and diversity.

The participants globally all underlined the strength of the intercultural aspect in the programme. They emphasized the richness provided by it; how meeting and exchanging with people from different backgrounds and cultures made them change perspectives on various things, broadened their horizon and learn from the differences that exist:

“I think it's really, really, positive that you are with other people, and you are learning from them. And [...] you can see that the life is not the only one that you live in Spain.”

[I11, Spain, project in Germany]

“[Some] of them gave me, like, crazy perspectives, [...] they gave me so many things, actually, like, to think about. And I think over the course of my project, like, I changed with these beautiful people [...].” [I1, Türkiye, project in Romania]

“It's nice to remind that my friend there taught me this; I took it with me, and I think this is also something that changes your perspective.” [I9, Brazil, project in Germany]

“She was like an alien when I met her for me. So, her perspective was unique. I never met a person like this. So, this thing gave me different perspective on something. [...] It was kind of alien perspective on the world for me, and I started to understand it more.”

[I8, Poland, project in Türkiye]

Several interviewees also mentioned that the participation in the project contributed to deconstruct stereotypes or popular misconceptions, in particular because of a wrong representation of a country or national group in their country or home environment:

“First, I had a bad impression of Romania. All the people because they are not really well represented in our country, at least. But, I like them; they were really good people.”

[I6, Spain, project in Romania]

“[...] I think that's why the ESC is really nice because it helps you to maybe, I don't know, destroy these stereotypes or generally know that people are good as they're people and not as they're from like some country” [I4, Georgia, project in Romania]

In that sense, they emphasized the importance of not being judgmental and showing respect towards the other and existing differences:

“I would say, you learn you learn that you don't have to judge people because of their behavior.” [I11, Spain, project in Germany]

“So, you have to respect, and also, that's something that I think is really important with solidarity, to respect people.” [I6, Spain, project in Romania]

It is evident from the abovementioned statements that the changes of perspectives and intercultural awareness are linked to the importance and attempt given by the participants to understand the other, the curiosity to know about each other's countries and backgrounds. The positive impact curiosity can have has been expressed in the following statement:

“[...] the more curious you are about each other's culture, the more respect you gain towards each other and towards each other's culture as well. And it leads to a really good communication. It leads to becoming friends and then visiting each other in each other's country.” [I4, Georgia, project in Romania]

Beyond the awareness of the existence of different cultures and customs, the acknowledgment of a diversity and the need to respect it, there seems to be a consensus among the participants that this diversity is actually a strength, something that potentially brings more positive things:

“The way that people think from the different countries, they add each other up, they create something better and bigger together.” [I3, Germany, project in Romania]

“And it sort of adds on top of each other and becomes more productive.”
[I7, Türkiye, project in Romania]

This intercultural awareness and curiosity as well as the strength of diversity is also something that got transmitted to the local community. As it has been shown before, the children benefited from the intercultural environment; likewise, their horizon was broadened, and they became more aware of different perspectives that exist. Specifically in regard to the European context, one interviewee noticed that:

“And they also got to see like the variety of what like Europe is made of.”
[I2, France, project in Romania]

Thus, the individual participant did globally agree that the intercultural aspect is a specific dimension of the ESC programme that enabled them and the local communities to increase their sense of intercultural awareness and competence. Among the activities that the participants reported to have done together, and which has strengthened their knowledge of other countries were for example interesting conversations, intercultural dinners (I3, I1), movie nights with movies from different countries (I9), and trip through the host country (I2, I3, I4).

It is however also important to notice that some interviewees mentioned some challenges and tensions when working in an international team, especially when the group of volunteers was bigger (I2, I9). One interviewee (I9) mentioned that the team of volunteers were having some fights for example regarding the hour of the dinner, which was linked to different cultural customs. In bigger groups, two volunteers (I2, I9) also pointed out the exclusion of some volunteers, especially in regard to the language. In both cases, there was a majority of volunteers coming from a certain country, who would then reunite among themselves and speak their native language – sometimes even to talk about organizational stuff –, which would exclude others from the project and create a disadvantage:

“But the fact that the group was dominated by Spanish-speaking people was sometimes excluding.” [I2, France, project in Romania]

In line with that, that participant (I2) suggested to not include more than a certain number of volunteers from the same country within a same project, a policy she had already witnessed in another ESC project.

4.2.3.4. Perception of Europe and attachment to the EU

In the following I will present the perception that ESC participants have of the EU and their connection to Europe.

The perception of the EU and the way the participation in an ESC project has influenced participants' thoughts on the EU, seems to differ according to a set of certain variables. Globally however, it appears that participants from Western EU-member states pointed out that the Union has become something more concrete and more real, while participants from outside the EU emphasized the opportunities the Union offers. The participant from Romania (I10) commented that she felt eventually more seen and part of the EU after participating in the project.

4.2.3.4.1. Participants from Western EU-countries: France, Germany and Spain

First, the participants from Western EU-member countries (France (I2), Germany(I3), Spain (I6, I11)) globally expressed that the sense of being part of the EU is something that has become far more concrete and real. Before participating in the project, the Union was something more distant and abstract for some of them:

“Before I did the project of course I knew Germany is in EU and we had all of these economical collaborations with other countries and whatsoever like many different treaties, yeah. But it was so far away from me. [...] For the little civilian that I am. And there was not so much contact with it in general, beforehand. Of course, I had been abroad before in other countries, and there, for example, I enjoyed the freedom of choice where to go inside of the EU, but it was not so present, I would say. [...] So, the European soul, how I said before, is something. It has been strengthened by it a lot.”

[I3, Germany, project in Romania]

“I probably had the idea of Europe or at least the European Union as something remote and only political as in only happening in the institutions, but [...]”

[I2, France, project in Romania]

“I think like before doing ESC I was like not really pro Europe I would say. I was like yeah, I don't care what happened here it's not my business [...] but [...]”

[I11, Spain, project in Germany]

These statements underline that in general, the EU was often for the participants something distant, far away and rather abstract – happening in institutions or economic treaties – with which the direct contact was limited. However, after the participation in the ESC programme, several participants reported that they felt a closer attachment with the EU, that being part of it became something more real, concrete and tangible for them:

“I mean I've always thought that being European is being part of a community, a really big community. It never changed, it was always the same [...], but well, doing the volunteering experience helped me to see this type of things were real.” [I6, Spain, project in Romania]

“But, yeah, somehow, I, I felt part of Europe [...]” [I11, Spain, project in Germany]

In that sense, one interviewee indicated that through the participation in ESC, she became more aware of the importance of communication and having a direct, concrete contact with people:

“[The participation] made me realize the importance of like actual um like communication between people as in like direct and not just through the people who represent us in parliament, like what it feels like as a person to have this firsthand.” [I2, France, project in Romania]

Thus, the interviewees globally report that the participation in the ESC programme has made the EU less distant for them and the fact of being part of it more real and tangible. One interviewee also explicitly stated that the participation in the ESC has positively influenced his view on the EU:

“I think [...] the project improved my thoughts about the European Union. [...] To see all of these things coming together in this project and seeing all the people that it brought just together. Just by being in the European, like a European Union, it improved my way of thinking of it in general. So it had a positive influence for it.”

[I3, Germany, project in Romania]

On the other hand, another interviewee expressed some criticism in regard to the EU, deploring the very tough living conditions – houses with no proper roof that would let rain penetrate – she was able to witness:

“[...] And it's kind of scandalous that, that we, the European Union, who pretends to value above all human rights, and, like, Human well-being still has some of its population living in such conditions, so I think it also made me critical of what ideals the EU stands for and the difference between the speeches and the actual acts.” [I2, France, project in Romania]

In that sense, the interviewee (I2) also recounts how her prior belief, according to which being inside the EU was necessarily a good thing, was challenged by her experience with the ESC:

“And like not everybody has the same idea about their place in the European Union as well and I think as a person who grew up and was raised in France, it kind of was obvious to me that all members of the EU should be grateful for being in the European Union, [...] that this was necessarily a good thing. But yeah, going to Romania and hearing stories of Romanians and how it was difficult to integrate and how they felt they were left behind by the EU, or like also just generally kids who didn't know anything about the European Union also made me realize, okay, like European Union is not happening so much in the East.” [I2, France, project in Romania]

These latter two statements interestingly show how the interviewee's perception of the EU was challenged and changed by coming in touch with other EU-member states who, as she observed, have a different connection and idea about their place within the EU. This specific case of Romania will be put later in perspective with the experience of the Romanian participant (I10).

4.2.3.4.2. Eastern EU: Romania and Poland

Regarding the Eastern countries of the EU, the experiences differ as one participant volunteered outside the EU and the other within its borders. The interviewee from Poland (I8) didn't seem to have any particular opinion or change of perspective on the question of the EU, largely due to the fact he did his project in Türkiye, a country outside the EU. However, the fact that he was volunteering outside the EU, made him feel a stronger connection to Europe as he was able to notice many similarities with the other participants from the EU:

“But in our group of volunteers, there were people from European Union. [...] So, in this moment when I was interacting with people from Europe, with volunteers, I was able to notice many, many similarities between us. [...] I can see we have a lot in common and kind of this creates this identity, because me and you we are born in different countries but together we are abroad in Turkey but kind of... And now there are: We, Europeans and them, Turks. [...] And these are the moments where you can feel this identity because you can see like, despite we are from different countries, we have a lot of in common here in Turkey, like we as a group are the Europeans; we have a lot of in common.” [I8, Poland, project in Türkiye]

The statement underscores that the interviewee had a feeling of European identity, of belonging to Europe when he was outside the EU, largely strengthened by the fact that he noticed similarities with other volunteers from EU-member states.

On the other hand, for the particular case of Romania, the participant (I10) globally reported that she was able to experience more directly what the EU stands for and could actually feel that Romania is indeed part of it.

First, the participant gave some insights about the general perception of the EU in her country, which also influenced her view on it on beforehand:

“In Romania, you don't really think about this, really know what European Union is. I mean, you hear about it, it's there on the TV, but like, nobody really explains to you that it's a community, it's a larger institution [...]. As a Romanian, I can say that we kind of feel unseen, I think, because we are this small, small country. We are ex-Soviet country. And I think that. You know, we have the feeling that we don't really fit in the European

country club. If I, if it makes sense. We, I don't know, we are closer to Serbia, for example. I don't know. Or Bulgaria. [...] I mean, that was the impression, I also had that. We are next to the European countries, but not quite there yet. “

[I10, Romania, project in France]

Similarly to the statements from the Western EU-member state participants, the interviewee (I10) here pointed out that the Union was perceived as something distant and abstract. Additionally, the abovementioned statement shows that there was no sense of belonging to the EU or to “fit in”. The interviewee (I10) seems to be doing a distinction between Eastern European countries (Bulgaria and Serbia) and Western European countries which she calls “the European country club” and “European countries”. In that sense “European countries” seems to be used as a synonym for Western EU-member states.

After participating in the ESC project, the interviewee feels like she got a better understanding of what the EU stands for, underlining the opportunities that come with the membership of it:

“Actually, that's what I learned about European Union in this experience, it's that European Union wants to help you [...] So, the thing is that I learned what European Union stands for. And I don't know, I think like I said, I understood that European Union wants to help us, and it wants to create a better community, a better, linked community between the countries. I think it's very, very important to have that.”

[I10, Romania, project in France]

This statement underscores how the understanding of the EU has changed from the participant. After participating in ESC, the interviewee feels like the EU wants to “help” and create a better community.

Moreover, the participant’s view on the place her country holds within the EU also changed. While she had the feeling before that Romania doesn’t “fit in” the “European country club” before, participating in the ESC made her actually feel like she had a place within the EU and had something to contribute:

“After I participated in this project, I changed my mind, I think. I mean, I realized that we are there, and we aren't really, I mean, I felt a bit seen, you know, like people knew

about Romania. It wasn't like an unknown territory for them. [...] I realized that we can actually take part in this community. [...] It showed me that Romanian people can be a part of EU, for real, and we also have to bring something to the table, maybe.”

[I10, Romania, project in France]

Thus, the interviewee from Poland (I8) reported realizing his connection and sense of belonging to the EU largely because he was outside the EU. The interviewee from Romania (I10) emphasized that the participation in the ESC programme globally educated her more about the values of the EU and its project (“what European Union stands for”). Similarly to the participants from Western EU-member states, the EU was something rather distant and vague before the ESC, which got then more concrete and real. A major difference which comes out from the statements of this participant (I10) and the ones from the Western EU-member states seem to lie in the fact that the interviewee from Romania (I10) didn’t have the feeling to “fit in” the EU before, however the participation in the ESC showed her that Romania actually can contribute and is actually part of the Union.

4.2.3.4.3. Participants from outside EU: Türkiye, Georgia and Brazil

Globally, from the side of participants coming from countries outside of the EU there was an increased mentioning and awareness about the opportunities that come with an EU membership.

Some of the statements underlining this awareness of opportunities can be read in the following:

“It gives more liberalism and the cultural experience with the other nations, and it gives more opportunities and life and the work so... and also justice system.” [I5, Türkiye, project in Romania]

“I realized, in the Union, I don't know, like, even a country like Romania, it looks not great from outside, it doesn't seem to be a strong economy, country, but with the advancements of the European Union, with the help of the European Union, they actually create so many opportunities and facilities for Romanian people. And I was thinking that, you know, a country like Romania getting so much crazy benefits just because they are in the Union, so I was thinking about the Union that it must be nice to be there. In

this sort of Union. [...] And I then, like, from my friends from Europe, actually, like, I listened to their stories, and I realized there's like, so many opportunities [...] brought by European Union.“ [I1, Türkiye, project in Romania]

“And my perception on the subject changed within just not because they may have privileges, let's say that they can travel easily to other countries without visa, and they have a lot of opportunities. [...]” [I4, Georgia, project in Romania]

One interviewee also pointed out the awareness of values such as open-mindedness and curiosity which the participant associated with Europe and the freedom of movement:

“About the European Union, since Georgia is not the country that is part of the European Union and is eager to become part of it, I would say that the reason why I think that it should be a big step for Georgia is because I was around people who come from European Union. [...] People who came from those countries were actually different from my neighborhood and from my country as well. And with different, I mean positively different because they were so open-minded, open to new experiences and challenges and curious and communicative. And it led me thinking that maybe it is because one of the reasons could be that they are raised in a very open, open-minded area where the space and the borders are open.” [I4, Georgia, project in Romania]

In that sense, the participants globally all thought very positively of the EU:

“And overall, like, actually, like, my thoughts about Europe and European Union, it was, like, kind of positive, very positive.” [I1, Türkiye, project in Romania]

“I think my perception of European Union was very positive in the end. I thought, what an amazing project. I also wanted it in my country. Because it is very cool. I think it was very positive.” [I9, Brazil, project in Germany]

Some of the participants expressed an explicit (personal) will or wish to be part of the EU, specifically participants coming from EU candidate countries:

“We always wanted to be part of the European Union [...] I always wanted to be part of the European Union and after the project I want more than before actually.”

[I5, Türkiye, project in Romania]

“It actually helped me to realize European Union is really, like, cool, nice thing to be in. I wish, you know, like, Turkey was in European Union.”

[I1, Türkiye, project in Romania]

“Georgia is not the country that is part of European Union and is eager to become part of it [...]. And this is the place where we want to live.”

[I4, Georgia, project in Romania]

One interviewee (I11) also remarked that it was through the exchange and interaction with other people coming from countries outside of the EU in the context of the ESC that he got to grasp more consciously these opportunities:

“But when I met some people from other countries like Turkey or Georgia for example, they were eager to come to Europe because they have here many opportunities that they don't have in other countries, it was in that moment when I learned that I was so lucky [...] because I have many things that other people that doesn't have in other countries.”

[I11, Spain, project in Germany]

Thus, it can be said that globally, the participation in the ESC affected the perception of the EU in the following way: for participants from the EU-member states, the EU became something more concrete and tangible whereas participants from outside the EU predominantly emphasize the opportunities and values the EU brings.

4.2.3.5. Expression of solidarity

Lastly, I shall show to what extent solidarity was manifested in the ESC projects the interviewees participated in. For the analysis of the interviews in regard to the expression of solidarity, the coding process was done both in a deductive and inductive way. For the deductive part, I used a preset of codes that I took over from the literature – especially codes from

the theoretical reflections of Miller, Bayertz and Van Parijs (see section 2.1.) and from the study on the meaning of solidarity in the ESC conducted by Nicodemi and Baclija Knoch (Baclija Knoch et Nicodemi 2020; see section 2.4.1.). I will organize the presentation of results by authors.

4.2.3.5.1. Expression of solidarity according to the framework of Baclija Knoch et Nicodemi

As it has been shown before in section 2.4.1., the study of Nicodemi and Baclija Knoch displayed four main terms that were associated with solidarity: empathy, human rights, inclusion and active citizenship or participation (Baclija Knoch et Nicodemi 2020).

Out of these four terms, the notion that was most present in the conducted interviews was inclusion.

First, the participants generally observed a high degree of inclusion among the volunteers themselves, all participants were generally well included in the group:

“I mean we were there with other people, and we were taking part of the group of people. I don't know how to explain, it's a feeling it's hard to explain but we felt included, and I think that everybody felt included nor was an outsider” [I10, Romania, project in France]

Of course they are some rare exceptions to this, in particular in groups where a dominance of people from the same country take part, as has been shown before.

Moreover, the participants observed an increased inclusion within the local community through their implemented activities. For example, one interviewee recounts the anecdote of a young boy who liked to dance but was suffering from gender stereotypes, which the volunteers succeeded to deconstruct during the camps:

“But some guys made fun of him during the first camp. So, like he toned it down a bit. But then the second camp was actually... I think there were more girls than boys. And so, it was really taken quite positively that he likes to dance. And so, we organized more activities related to dance for him. And I think in that sense, at least for this boy, we made a difference.” [I2, France, project in Romania]

This empowering of the kids from the side of the volunteers, the effort to include everyone is also something that emerges from other participants' stories. One interviewee relates that he would encourage the children to try new things, including, for example, to try playing chess:

“And we realized that so many students, they did not play chess before. And I told them that, you know, maybe you could try something new. Because you guys are the chess geniuses. You have the master material in you. But you don't know it because you don't try it. So a few of my students actually they tried chess and in the beginning, we were kind of playing games. In the beginning, they were like so amateurs. But later, one of my students started to beat me [...].” [I1, Türkiye, project in Romania]

The latter examples show that the volunteers tried to encourage and empower the children to try out new things and pursuing their passion, regardless of any external stereotypes or ideas that could exist. In that sense, they contributed to promote the values of inclusion and diversity among the local communities. More generally, the value of inclusion was also transmitted to the local community through the topics and themes discussed in the activities.

As stated before, one participant also worked specifically with children from Roma communities, an ethnic minority marginalized from the society with de facto no real access to public education. Gathering them in the education center and working with them is undeniably an attempt to include them to society.

This empowerment of the children can also be seen in the encouragement to actively participate in society from the side of the volunteers. For example, this includes raising awareness and sensibilizing the youngsters about their possibilities and opportunities in which they can actively participate, giving them perspective:

“One of the reasons that this project addressed some kind of local issues, because we were going rural areas [...] it was addressing the issues, like what you can do, for these children who have no access to activities or modern life opportunities, to give them vision.” [I5, Türkiye, project in Romania]

“We made them aware of this possibility and maybe in the future they can take chance themselves and have these kinds of experiences as well, so solidarity in a way that we are making aware or like enabling them to participate to in such projects in general.”

[I3, Germany, project in Romania]

The participants themselves also expressed the joy and satisfaction that they had in participating in society, to contribute to creating something in another country:

“The fact that I participated in a small part there... I don't know it's funny to me to think that somewhere in France there's a wall and I laid the stones in it. I mean, I don't know, it's very satisfying.” [I10, Romania, project in France]

The participants also indicated that the participation in the ESC programme made them more empathetic towards certain people or situations, in the sense that they understood things from a different perspective and tried to show empathy. For example, one interviewee recounts how she came to meet one person from Armenia and one from Azerbaijan in the project and got to hear both sides of the ongoing conflict between these two countries:

“And I had an opportunity to talk to each of them individually. And in the terms of politics. And they were explaining their side of the story. And sometimes it could be like that, that you do not choose the sides yourself. But [...] in the terms of solidarity, I understand the side of each of them.” [I4, Georgia, project in Romania]

This statement underlines the fact that an individual opinion could be sometimes shaped by the public discourse that one hears on a political matter or conflict, but that the individual contact with the people affected by it generates an increased understanding and the ability to show empathy and emotional support. Similarly, another interviewee recounts the anecdote of a Ukrainian person whose father got enlisted because of the war, while participating in the ESC project:

“And I think that this is how it changes. I think it's something that is very hard to quantify but I think it's something that you feel, like you can also relate. It's very different than for example when I was seeing on the news, I would never be able to relate to it.”

[I9, Brazil, project in Germany]

Regarding the term “human rights”, it can be said that there was almost no explicit mentioning from the participants. However, as outlined before, the themes in the activities addressed key issues of human rights like gender equality, inclusion, the right to participate, freedom of expression, right to work and education.

Thus, it can be said that the four terms inclusion, active participation, empathy and human rights, that were identified by Baclija Knoch and Nicodemi as expressions of solidarity, are to be found in the participants’ experiences with the ESC. It is also interesting to notice that while some of the terms like inclusion, active participation and human rights are quite objective and measurable, empathy seems to be more subjective as it is something that is felt and therefore “hard to quantify” (I9) as one interviewee pointed out.

Beyond these four main terms that Baclija Knoch and Nicodemi had identified, other notions were also identified: common ground between differences, interdependence, commitment, shared values, common interests, work for a common good (Baclija Knoch et Nicodemi 2020). A map of all the terms associated with solidarity in their study can be found in the appendix (A2).

Globally, the participants all emphasized a common ground despite the differences existing among volunteers and local communities. The following statements express that idea:

“I was expecting us to be different. And to have different thoughts and opinions. But we, I mean, whatever it was, whatever was the subject or the ideas that we shared, we had a common point, let's say. I mean, after all, we are not that different.”

[I10, Romania, project in France]

“I think this is also something that I had learned from ESC: even though you could be in a place where everyone is so different from each other, you could still find a way to find similar things with people.” [I4, Georgia, project in Romania]

In line with that, some interviewees emphasized the importance of being attentive to each other’s feelings. The feelings and emotional intelligence are hence seen as a common ground, which concurs with what has been stated before regarding the expression of empathy:

“Because there are feelings of the people, and you understand them with your feelings. You don't need to understand his or her language very fluently. So, if you understand each other's feelings, then you can have very good communication and very good relation with this person. You can have your best friend from another country, even if he doesn't speak or she doesn't speak your own language.”

[I5, Türkiye, project in Romania]

The notion of interdependence or complementarity is also something that was present in the experience the interviewees did with ESC. In that sense, some interviewees mentioned that in their projects, they divided the tasks effectively according to the strengths and weaknesses of each individual.

“And we were up there on the scaffolding putting in the stones. We had our people who wouldn't want to go up the scaffolder, and they stood down and they brought us what, buckets of water, buckets of concrete, basically the materials that we needed. We were like little ants; they're all working together, everybody knew what they had to do, and I don't know, we completed each other.” [I10, Romania, project in France]

“We were a big team, so we were like 30 people, so we separated each other in teams. In terms of organizing, we did a very good job, so we had like yellow task force, blue task force, red task force, that was nice.” [I9, Brazil, project in Germany]

“I think like what matters is that you should recognize, okay, who is the strong person for this or this field. Like there would be one person who's like really good for making bandages and like you know, I don't know, doing this type of first aid stuff. So [...], I think it's it comes back to work division.” [I2, France, project in Romania]

The notion of commitment and sense of giving can also be found in the interviewees' experiences. Participants underlined that they were giving some of their time and skills to help other people and try to make a positive change:

“The European Solidarity Corps gives an opportunity to do that, and you can go somewhere; you're giving your time; you're giving your skills; you're given whatever,

everything you have to try to make a little change. [...] Volunteering isn't studying, volunteering isn't working. It's kind of focused on the help; it's kind of idea in it to help others to give your free time. So, kind of, it was more yeah like this: it's more like an idea-driven thing to help.” [I8, Poland, project in Türkiye]

“And I did learn much more about myself at the end of the project. But I felt the sense of happiness of giving something to other people and not, not receiving anything in return, and still make making a change.” [I7, Türkiye, project in Romania]

In that regard, the interviewees globally reported to have common values and interests while participating in the ESC programme:

“And I think almost, I mean, everyone had a good relationship there. Also, because almost all of the people I know in volunteering want to do that thing.”
[I6, Spain, project in Romania]

“[...] Having the mentality that everything we were doing in this moment was something good, that it was in general just positive. There was no goal or like no aim to make money now or have other like [...] focus points given by others; we were just there to have a good time with the people.” [I3, Germany, project in Romania]

“We were all here for the same purpose, since we were all here to do this this solidarity volunteering project. There was a sense of like, well, I would say at least we shared 70% of the same political views. [...] Nobody was here to be a tourist, no everybody was interested in the project and invested in what we were doing, they were quite proactive. And even though some of them realized that okay this rhythm was too much for them they were still willing to help, and they were doing their best.”
[I2, France, project in Romania]

“Generally, I think that working with other volunteers was not a problematic part because everyone there is for the same experience to live in other countries and same. And that means that they are open to new people and new things. [...] I think, the similarities in that case were mostly obvious because those people who participate in ESC generally have the same values of wanting to see new places wanting to see new people traveling and exploring [...]. [That is] something that we all of us had in common, I think.”

[I4, Georgia, project in Romania]

Thus, globally the participants of the ESC seem to have shared similar interests or motivations of participating in the ESC and similar values. The group cohesion of the group of volunteers also seems to rely on the fact that they were driven by a common goal, a common purpose:

“It was amazing for me that in two weeks we were... We created such a connection, between each other. And we worked so hard together. Towards the same goal. I mean, after one day of getting to know each other, we were already good friends. Because we had...I don't know. Maybe it was because we had a goal. A common goal. And that's what made us feel stronger towards each other.” [I10, Romania, project in France]

When comparing the experience with ESC and the experience he had previously made during an academic exchange with Erasmus, one interviewee noted the following:

“Your problem was always passing the exams, doing the homeworks [...] but in the ESC program it was different. In the ESC project, you have some kind of synergy, that I can say. You have this energy, the synergy you know, because you are trying to solve the problem not solving your own problem, solving the community's problem.” [I5, Türkiye, project in Romania]

The abovementioned statements underscore the fact that the volunteers were brought together by a common goal that also seem to have majorly contributed to a certain group cohesion between that group of volunteers.

4.2.3.5.2. Expression of solidarity according to the framework of Miller

As it has been shown before in section 2.1., Miller identifies four characteristic features of solidarity among a group: the sense of a “we”, collective responsibility, mutual concern and limits on inequality.

The most common feature that I identified in the participants’ experience was the sense of a “we”, the precise and shared sense that they were a group, bonded together by a certain number of features:

“We still were a group, and we wouldn't go like two of us somewhere and speak and ignore the others.” [I10, Romania, project in France]

“It's not an official title. It's a group. There are a lot of volunteering groups.” [I6, Spain, project in Romania]

Some of the features creating the group were linked to the organizational and functionalities of the ESC itself:

“I think what was unique about it was how immersive it is with the same people. [...] I wake up seeing the same people, you work with them, you have lunch with them, you have a lot of work time, free time, rest time, sleep time, maybe even book time, but like you're always together with them.” [I9, Brazil, project in Germany]

Being part of the same group, the participants also pointed out the similarities between each other, especially the fact that they were equal in regard to their situation of being abroad, in a new country, far away from their home:

“And that's why I think the fact that we were all of us in the same situation, in the same condition, being in another country and in a new environment when you have to present your country, made a pretty good team and the same equal place for all of us.”
[I4, Georgia, project in Romania]

“I don't know it like creates some sort of bond, like being in the same project together with some other people from other countries, like they are also in a new environment, you're also in a new environment, so like you kind of get close quickly.” [I1, Türkiye, project in Romania]

It is important to notice that when the participants refer to a “group”, a shared sense of a “we”, they are all mostly referring to the group of volunteers engaging with the ESC, not to the local community. The implications of it will be further discussed later in section 5.

The notion of “mutual concern and support” was also present in most of the interviewees’ statements. Globally, the participants reported that in the group of volunteers, the volunteers would look after and help each other:

“Like we get close together quickly, [...] we were helping each other because sometimes like our friends like they needed help [...] so we were kind of like big community that like helps one another. [...] Sometimes, we were helping our friends from another project. [...] And that day, actually, like, I helped them. And two weeks later, when I needed help, they helped me.” [I1, Türkiye, project in Romania]

“The other volunteers that had been there before [...] they prepared for us that you will meet this and you will do this. And this is the problem of it is the challenge of it. [...] And it made us feel comfortable because it's a new fresh place that you have to be there for the next two months. And it also made us feel that we're friends here. And everything we do is here is a teamwork. And next time I'll got your back.” [I4, Georgia, project in Romania]

These statements underline that there was dimension of mutual concern and support towards the other members of the group of volunteers and community. This underlying reciprocity – the fact that the “help” and support was going in two directions – will be further analyzed later. One interviewee also pointed out the mutual support between local community and volunteers:

“They helped between them, they helped us, we helped them, we respected each other, and it was really good.” [I6, Spain, project in Romania]

Globally, in most interviews also the dimension of “collective responsibility” was apparent, most of the participants referring to teamwork and collaboration among volunteers:

“Like, if you like, while you are doing any organization, if you are missing something, your friends, your coworkers, colleagues were helping them and taking your place and helping you. And there was very good friendship and collaborative work.” [I5, Türkiye, project in Romania]

“And I think the collaboration was also important part during the camps, because I think back then it was mostly about you of how much responsibility you would take. [...] And, and that's why they're supporting each other. And also, like having a good communication towards the responsibility of which one was important part of it as well.” [I4, Georgia, project in Romania]

The abovementioned statements show that there was a sense of shared responsibility, the idea that the volunteers, as a group, were responsible for the actions of individual members.

Lastly, the characteristic feature of “limit on inequality”, the fact that in order for a group to be solidaristic, resources should be distributed in a more or less equal way was not something very explicitly present in the interviews. However, as shown before one interviewee (I2) was outraged by the sometimes “tough” living conditions she got to witness in another EU member state which shows that there is an unacceptance of blatant inequalities. When asked about their personal understanding of solidarity, some interviewees mentioned the importance of equality and equal opportunities. Regarding the specific setting of the volunteers, it has been shown before that there were some similarities between the volunteers, in particular in regard to the fact that they were all abroad, in a new country – and equal in that sense.

As it has been shown in section 2.1., these four aspects are the four features that characterize a group in which relations of solidarity prevail. It is important to note that some of the terms presented in the previous section (4.2.3.5.1), especially interdependence, shared values and common interests also form a part of the framework of Miller. However, according to Miller, those concepts are not characteristic features of expression of solidarity but rather sources of it, a foundation on which solidarity relies.

Chapter V: Discussion

5.1. Discussion on the sense of European belonging

5.1.1. European and national identity

I shall now discuss the interrelation and articulation of national and European identity. It seems that the way the interviewees perceive their own country in connection to Europe, and their identity differs according to whether it was their first non-touristic experience abroad or not, and on the country's and individual's characteristics. Some interviewees reported feeling prouder of their home country after the participation in the ESC project.

As it has been stated before, European identity is here understood as the sense of belonging to Europe as well as the identification with EU values, the principles of unity and diversity and social, cultural and historical heritage (as outlined in the Annual Work Programme of the ESC).

Among the interviewees, some pointed out that the experience with the ESC made them more conscious about their national identity and the way their national context of origin defined them or made them different than the others.

“So, I think paradoxically maybe I felt like I was French at that point because when I was in France [...] I think I didn't realize what it meant to be French and like how much it's a part of my identity and how much I have in common with the other French people. And that's really something that I noticed when I was abroad [...], because even though the two French guys who were with me [in the project] were quite different and they were also younger than me, I could see that we had similarities in our ways of thinking, in our ways of handling problems. And also, in the cultural references [...] and this is all something like part of like a cultural stem that you share with the people from your country or sometimes from your region as well, for other countries.”

[I2, France, project in Romania]

“I feel like that my sense of identity, the cultural identity became stronger as I lived in a different country because as I said around my space there are not really different kind of

people within the culture; all of my friends are Georgian and all of them are Christian so it was like my first time meeting new people who come from really different backgrounds and have a different culture and different religion. So, on the one hand, it made me see how diverse the world is, and in this diversity, we are also part within our diversity. And I felt like that I may have some things that others don't because I come from a different culture, and they come from different cultures. And that kind of made me say that my identity is Georgian, which I had not realized before because I lived around Georgians.” [I4, Georgia, project in Romania]

In that regard, some of the interviewees remarked that they became prouder of their home country and national origin through the experience with the ESC:

“Actually, thanks to experiences like this, like ESC, I even feel more proud to be Polish. When you see different places, you know better why you love your country. Like how can you know you love your country without seeing any other? [...] But thanks to this trip, I know the difference, and that maybe I know better solution, thanks to ESC, because something is working better in Turkey. So, kind of, in the future, I can try to implement it sometimes.” [I8, Poland, project in Türkiye]

“I mean now I feel so much more proud of my country than before. Because I saw it wasn't only the bad things that they knew about us, they also knew that we are very hardworking people, and that was, I mean that was something very nice for me.”
[I10, Romania, project in France]

The latter statement especially shows that there seems to be a certain underlying insecurity in her home country (Romania). This gain of confidence towards the national culture is also something that is touched upon by the interviewee from Georgia (I4). In the following she describes how her initial insecurity disappeared thanks to the ESC project:

“I think it was like that; most of the times people didn't know much about Georgia. But it wasn't like that they didn't care about it at all, because I met people who were constantly curious about my country and asking me a lot of questions about it. [...] And it made me feel more welcome and also the fact that people don't know much about Georgia didn't make me feel insecure about it because I saw the curiosity and openness to

know more about it [...]. That curiosity from people towards our country made me feel welcome and made me feel more like a team, because there I was also curious to know about other countries, and they were curious to know about my country.”

[I4, Georgia, project in Romania]

Thus, some of the participants report that they have become more conscious about their national identity and sometimes also more “proud” or more secure about it. It is interesting to note that out of three interviewees mentioning it, it was the first time they did a non-touristic stay abroad for two of them (I4, I10) and one being from a country outside the EU (Georgia), the other from Eastern EU (Romania), which sometimes is perceived as like “less integrated” as shown before in section 4.2.3.4.2.

It has been shown before that, as scholars point out, the sense of European belonging and national belonging are not exclusive and different levels of identification can coexist (Delanty 2003:78; see section 2.2.1.). This is also confirmed by the data provided in the interviewees. The abovementioned examples show that there is a gain of pride and confidence related to the national origin through the participation in ESC, however these are also accompanied by an accentuated sense of belonging to Europe or identification with the EU in the three cases.

As seen before in section 4.2.3.4.2., the interviewee from Romania (I10) did feel “seen” in Europe thanks to the participation in ESC and had finally the feeling that Romania can “fit in” the EU and does have something to contribute. The experience with ESC thus has contributed to strengthen both her national identity – she feels prouder of it – and her European identity, in the sense of feeling of belonging to Europe.

In the particular case of the interviewee from Poland (I8) who did his project in Türkiye, it has been shown in section 4.2.3.4.2., that his sense of European identity has been enhanced by the fact that he was able to see many similarities between the volunteers coming from EU. The interviewee had a feeling of European identity, of belonging to Europe when he was outside the EU, largely strengthened by the fact that he noticed similarities with other volunteers from EU-member states. Thus, both the national identification as well as the sense of European belonging were strengthened.

Thus, for some participants, the experience with the ESC corresponded to a strengthening of both national and European belonging parallelly, which however stay the minority. The majority of the participants didn't do any reference to their national identity.

5.1.2 Generational gap in European identification

It is very interesting to notice that for the case of Eastern EU countries (here: Romania) and the neighboring EU countries Georgia and Türkiye, the theme of an inter-generational gap or difference was very present. The participant from Romania (I10) affirmed that she sees a significant divergence in the mentality between the older and the younger generation in her country when it comes to the perception of the EU and the sense of affiliation to it:

“For us in Romania, there are some people that want to exit the European Union, a small group of old people you know. [...] I mean, there's nobody in the younger population in Romania, they do not want to exit European Union, and you know we realize that it's a good alliance in which we take part.” [I10, Romania, project in France]

This is largely due to the different history and context in which the older generation was brought up:

“But we in Romania. Technically, we have some, I mean, we have some obstacles, but as a community, as people, individuals. I think we are actually there. The youngsters. We are there. We have the values. We share the values. Maybe not our, you know, our parents. And grandparents. They lived through other times. I mean, to put it in perspective, my mom was alive during the Ceaucescu era. So, it was another whole, another set of views and views and things. But. For us. We are turning away from all that. And we are going in the opposite direction. We are going to the European values. We are searching for European values. That can be implemented in our country. I saw it. I felt it. We know that the change comes from us.”

This generational gap, the fact that the younger generation has a stronger sense of belonging and identification with Europe also is visible in the interviews from the participants from Georgia and Türkiye:

“Georgians and especially new generation consider themselves as a part of Europe. [...] I think the exact definition that describes our state most is Eastern European.” [I4, Georgia, project in Romania]

“And actually, we are the generation, always we wanted to be part of the European Union, [...] from our childhood. Even every person, if you are talking in my age range, they will say that we are already Europeans; we want to be part of the European Union.” [I5, Türkiye, project in Romania]

The abovementioned statements underline an apparent generational gap in the EU candidate countries and Romania when it comes to the sense of European belonging. This reference to generation is something that was totally absent in the interviews from the Western-European participants. An explanation for this phenomenon could be the country-sensitive contexts, especially in regard to the history. Romania, as seen before, has a socialist past and only entered the EU in 2007, reason why the mentality and value system of younger generation is becoming more closer to the EU. This is something that will be specified later. Similarly, Georgia gained its independence from Soviet Union in 1991 and has ever since adopted a pro-Western foreign policy and aspirations for integration in the EU (Sabanadze 2023). In December 2023 the candidacy status for Georgia was officially granted by the European Commission. In the case of Türkiye, it has been seen before that the country obtained EU candidate status in 1999. One of the interviewees recalls how these times of accession negotiations were very present in his childhood and left a mark, reason why he feels a strong connection towards the EU:

“So, I remember very well [...] while I was child, I remember we were going to be part of the European Union and our constitution, our laws became part of the like, you know... They just regulate our laws according to European Union. Like, as I remember, like, from the childhood, from the news, from the school, like they were saying that we are going to be part of the European Union. Our regulation will be or according to this and it will give us more freedom and it will give us more opportunities for life [...].” [I5, Türkiye, project in Romania]

Thus, the country-sensitive contexts of the participants seem to explain why the interviewees from Eastern Europe and the neighboring EU countries Türkiye and Georgia revealed a generational gap when it comes to the sense of European belonging. In that line the debate

around the ESC as a volunteering programme can be reminded. Stakeholders valorizing the volunteering dimension of the ESC underline the potential benefits of inter-generational volunteering and advocate for the suppression of the age limit to participate in the programme (Strecker et Eick 2023:15; see section 2.4.2.). Indeed, the Council of the EU emphasized the value of inter-generational volunteering to foster “inter-generational dialogue [and facilitate] inter-generational knowledge-transfer” (Official Journal of the European Union 2022:8). In light of the generational gap in regard to the sense of European belonging, a framework enabling inter-generational volunteering could thus indeed be potentially fruitful.

5.1.3. Answer to first research question

At this point of the thesis, the first research question – interrogating the shift of perception of the EU and Europe after the participation in ESC – can thus be answered.

As it has been set in section 4.2.3.4.1., participants from Western EU-member states stated that the Union is something that has become more “real” or concrete for them. Among them, some explicitly stated that they felt more “part of Europe”, like belonging to Europe, after that experience (I3, I11). For the other two interviewees (I2, I6), it seems to have stayed constant – there is no evidence that the sense of belonging to the EU has diminished nor increased after the experience. A hypothesis could be that they both had – in contrary to the two others – already done other non-touristic experiences abroad in the EU. Globally, the EU is perceived as something more positive by two (I3, I11), slightly hypocritical by another (I2: gap between what the EU’s actions and speeches) or stayed constant – or no explicit perception – by the another (I6).

For the case of participants from Eastern EU-member states, the sense of European belonging got enhanced for both (I8, I10). The interviewee from Poland (I8) reported realizing his connection and sense of belonging to the EU largely because he was outside the EU. In the case of the participant from Romania (I10), the EU was something rather distant and vague before the ESC, which got then more concrete and real – similarly to the participants from Western EU-member states. A major difference seem to lie in the fact that the interviewee from Romania (I10) didn’t have the feeling to “fit in” the EU before, however the participation in the ESC showed her that Romania actually can contribute and is indeed part of the Union.

Thus, it can be concluded that the sense of European belonging for the participants from EU-member states has been either strengthened (I3, I8, I10, I11) or stayed constant (I2, I6).

Participants from non-EU countries predominantly emphasize the opportunities and values the EU brings. The question of European sense of belonging applies to a different degree to interviewees from non-EU member states. While it doesn't apply for the participant from Brazil, the countries Türkiye and Georgia are transcontinental countries – thus have parts of their territories in Europe – and both EU candidate countries. Interviewees from the latter countries underline a generational gap when it comes to the perception of Europe and their relation to it. Some reported that they see themselves as European and expressed an explicit desire to enter the EU, which got strengthened after the ESC project.

These conclusions can also be observed in table A3 in the appendix summarizing the interviewees' shift of perception after the participation in the ESC.

5.2. European identity: EU values, principles of unity and diversity and the socio-cultural heritage

5.2.1. Civic vs. cultural European identity

Beyond the feeling of sense of belonging, European identity also refers to both an identification with civic values and practices as well as with cultural heritage or common traditions. As stated before, the Annual Work Programme of the ESC defines European identity as the identification with and awareness of “common EU values, principles of unity and diversity and the participant countries' social, cultural and historical heritage” (European Commission 2023:25).

This distinction is visible also in the interviews. Some indeed make a reference to a common historical heritage of Europe:

“There is something called Latin civilization, yeah like based on Rome, based on ancient Greece, based on Christianity. And for example, we all in high school we are like reading Plato, we know who Jesus Christ is [...]. I guess the Roman law has influenced every European country as far as I know, so kind of, we have like the common route back in the days which is like for all European nations.” [I8, Poland, project in Türkiye]

The participant is underlining the common history and cultural heritage which could be perceived as the roots for European identity or a European identification. He does however remark in the following that this identity is very fragile as it can be “ruined by politics” – as the way national interests, which might prevail, are portrayed in the news or public discourse might influence the perception of European identity on an individual level (I8). In that regard, he observes that culture and common history isn’t the only pillar in forging a European identity:

“And yeah, we said about these things about like this history stuff but also like parts of European identity and European words like democracy, freedom of speech, tolerance, stuff like that.” [I8, Poland, project in Türkiye]

There is thus a clear acknowledgement of the interviewee of the fact that another pillar of European identity lies in its civic dimension and the values of the EU. In that sense, the participant feels like having contributed to “export” these values outside the EU:

“We were like European volunteers in Turkey so kind of we were exporting these European values abroad to Turkey. I would call it like that. [...] It's not common everywhere around the globe [...]. [As] volunteers from EU traveling to Turkey, we are kind of exporting these values and we are trying to promote these values and trying to build the bridges between different civilizations. We want to promote it as a way of living. In fact, we live in Europe mostly, like free. We have freedom of speech, like democracy, rule of law and stuff like that. So, this particular example, when European volunteers are traveling outside EU, we can show how we live in Europe and promote it and export our values and show the way they are living, how we have our like countries organized.”

[I8, Poland, project in Türkiye]

Thus, the perceived impact of the ESC project was the export and promotion of EU values outside the EU, according to the interviewee. The fact that the EU values are considered a part of European (civic) identity is also explicitly present in another interview:

“I mean, but I don't know, I realized that we can actually take part in this community. I think that's how I understand the European identity. It's something maybe for people that live in a very European country. I don't know, Germany and France and for them, I think that. It's a. It's just. It's the normal feeling. I mean, it's a European country. It's the

economy, the whatever is there. But we in Romania. Technically, we have some, I mean, we have some obstacles, but as a community, as people, individuals. I think we are actually there. The youngsters. We are there. We have the values. We share the values.”

[I10, Romania, project in France]

As shown before in section 4.2.3.4.2., the interviewee here makes again a clear distinction between the “European countries” (Germany and France) and Romania. The participant believes that for countries like Germany and France, “European identity” must be “the normal feeling”. This resonates with the criticism expressed by various scholars according to which the term “European identity” actually refers to a Western European identity and doesn’t take into account the realities and socialist past of Eastern Europe (see section 2.2.2.). While Germany and France are perceived by the interviewee to be well integrated in the EU, due for example to their economic performance (“it’s the economy”), the participant points out that there are some “obstacles” to European integration in Romania. Thereafter, she gives an example of those “obstacles”, which is the problem of corruption and bribery. The negative consequences of corruption are multiple: it damages the economy, hinders economic growth and diminishes citizen’s trust in institutions. In that sense, it is considered one of the most significant barriers to rule of law and human rights – fundamental values of the EU (Mijatovic 2023). Talking about the problem of corruption, the participant affirms:

“We still have to wait a bit and reclaim our system. [...] For example, there's this thing, the corruption. [...] Us, the younger people, we don't do that anymore. I mean, we hate that. We despise that. And we tell our parents to stop doing that. [...] We are turning away from all that. And we are going in the opposite direction. We are going to the European values. We are searching for European values. That can be implemented in our country. I saw it. I felt it. We know that the change comes from us. [...] And it starts with us. So, I think that we are assessing the values common throughout the EU.”

[I10, Romania, project in France]

As it had been shown in section 4.2.3.4.2., the participant stated that she got to experience more directly the EU values during her project with ESC (“what EU stands for”). This present statement even goes a step further: not only does the participant know what the EU values are, she also identifies with them. This is particularly visible by the use of emotional language and the description of feelings. The participant “despises” the practice of corruption and “saw”

and “felt” the European values. In this sense, the participant seems to understand the term of “European identity” as the sense of belonging to a community, in which they can “take part” and with whom they share the values. In that sense, the participation in ESC seems to have contributed to strengthen the participant’s sense of belonging in the EU and identification with its values.

5.2.2. Answer to second research question

Thus, it can be said that concerning the aim of the ESC programme to strengthen European identity in regard to the awareness and identification with EU values as set out in the Annual Work Programme 2024, this goal has been largely met.

Beyond the notion of EU values, the other dimension of European identity that the programme proposes to enhance is the “principle of unity and diversity” (European Commission 2023:25).

The section 4.2.3.3. has globally shown an increased awareness of interculturality and diversity – both among participants of the ESC and among the local community in which the volunteering activities took place. Moreover, the participants seemed to recognize the strength of diversity, the fact that working and being in a group with people from different cultures and background is a value added. Apart from a couple of exceptions, all the participants globally reported to have been working in a very cohesive, united group of volunteers. The principle of unity also got transmitted to the local community through the activities implemented and the effort to foster inclusion.

Regarding the third dimension of European identity that the Annual Work Programme identifies – “participant countries social, cultural and historical heritage” – it can be said that the ESC programme also contributes to the raise of awareness of it.

As it has been shown in section 4.2.3.3., the intercultural aspect of the ESC, the fact that several volunteers from various countries came together, made the participants learn about the cultural heritage of the different participant countries. This discovery of the heritage happened through the interactions with the other participants, through conversations or movie nights, intercultural dinners, language classes as some described. The participants also got more familiar with the heritage of the host country in which they did the project, through the interaction with local people, some visits and trips in the country.

Similarly, as it has been shown before, the common point between all ESC projects, a common outcome that all participants seemed to have identified, regardless of the duration, type and location of the project, is the intercultural awareness the local community gained. This passed both through the interaction of volunteers with the local community as well as through specific presentations participants had to do about their country and country's heritage in some projects (I1, I3, I4, I5, I8).

5.3. Discussion on solidarity

The section 4.2.3.5. has shown that a lot of indications prove the existence of solidarity in the participants' experience with the ESC. It thus seems that the ESC programme globally contributes to the promotion of solidarity. However, a certain number of remarks and precisions have to be made.

5.3.1. Notion of solidarity and perceived impact – the debate of ESC as an educational or volunteering programme

It seems that the notion of solidarity is also intrinsically linked to the perceived impact the participants have of their project on the local community. In that sense, one interviewee remarked that he doesn't feel like having contributed to show solidarity:

“Actually, I would say that this is not really solidarity. Because you are going there to help the people, but they are helping you at the same time. Also, they are giving you a space to live. They are giving you sometimes food. This pocket money or whatever. To survive. It's not just like I'm a really good person. I like to help. I like to help people. I'm going abroad. So, actually, for me it's difficult to say that this that I did, it was solidarity. It wasn't. I think when you do a real volunteer, it's another thing. I mean, this is called volunteer. It's okay. And it's fine. It's fine for me. It's fine for the community that I go. So, I think the kids, they learn a lot with me. And I learn a lot more from them. But it was not solidarity. I would say.” [I11, Spain, project in Germany]

When asked what the notion of solidarity entails, the participant gave the following answer:

“I mean, for me, solidarity, I would say an example. For me, solidarity is go to work to Ukraine now. With a car. Full of food. And give it to them. I don't know. For example. Or wait until the situation in Gaza, in Palestine is finished. And then go there to help the people to build new whatever. New hospital or whatever. That is solidarity. Because you are not getting something back.” [I11, Spain, project in Germany]

These statements underscore that the participant felt like getting more out of the project than bringing to the local community. This perception was present in the interviews of three participants (I4, I9, I11), who explicitly reported that they felt more benefited by the program than the degree to which they feel like having contributed to an impact within the community. In this sense it shall be reminded the existing debate on whether the ESC is a volunteering or educational programme (Strecker et Eick 2023:14), presented in section 2.4.2. The following statement seems to go in that sense:

“We were saying, like, also back then in Romania, volunteers together, that the project was just mostly for us but not for the project. I mean, the things that I took from the project were more than the things that I left for the project. So, mostly, I think the ESC experience is about people who participate in it and the skills and experience that it gives to those people who participate in it. And not just as much as to the community that you work on. But of course, there could be some projects and some organizations that could have more influence on the community that you work with. [...] It's mostly an exchange program for me, even though it's not at the university [...] still is an exchange program for me in an informal way that you communicate a lot with people from different countries.” [I4, Georgia, project in Romania].

The abovementioned statement shows that the interviewee perceives the ESC programme rather as an “exchange programme”, that is more beneficial for the participants – in terms of “skills and experience” made through it – than for the local community. It seems that this perception is largely due to the failure of identifying the exact purpose of the project, the way in which it addresses the societal challenges:

“For example, the first one month of the project was going to schools and presenting our countries, and this is not something that the specific community actually specifically needs, but this is something that also could have a good influence and the general

opening to new cultures and new countries. But this is not something that specifically Romania needs to know more about Georgia. [...] But the summer camp that we had afterwards during the summer, it also was not specifically written for some kind of purpose. It was just to have fun, I guess. But also, camps generally have its own purpose, like helping young people to generally develop their skills and to meet new people and to get close to them and everything. And in that way, it was really fun and nice, but it also wasn't really, specifically had its own goal. We just gathered together and planned these activities to have fun, during the whole day. But we didn't like sort and talk that this camp has to have a goal to a specific kind of community. So, I think it also likes depends on the organization and the things that they do. But ours was not really that specifically determined for them some kind of goal.” [I4, Georgia, project in Romania]

This statement shows that the participant couldn't determine explicitly in what ways the project was addressing the societal challenges of the community, although admitting that the intercultural aspect of the camp might have contributed to their “general opening to new cultures and new countries”. In that sense, it is very interesting to notice the different perceived goal of the same project by a participant from Germany:

“We did presentations in front of children, and we had the task to yeah, to awaken their European soul, maybe or like mentality because, um, the general idea of the project was more or less to give the people the idea that they are also European and have all the advantages that come with the union of it. [...] Regarding the question how this changed, or how this tackled the problems of the community, I think the general idea of the project is something nice to make people aware of their opportunities, in general, or that they have, yeah, they have this opportunity to travel inside Europe without having to face major controls for example.” [I3, Germany, project in Romania]

The two interviewees (I3, I4) participated in the same project, however the perceived way in which the project addressed societal challenges and the outcomes of it differ according to the country of origin of the interviewee. The participant from a non-EU member (Georgia) state didn't identify a specific purpose of the project but recognized an enhanced intercultural awareness, while the participant from a Western EU-member (Germany) country stated the aim of the project was to “awaken the European soul” of the local community. While this different perception is interesting to raise, the two participants (I3, I4) however remarked that

there are, in their opinion, other projects that respond more to societal challenges and thus are a clearer expression of solidarity:

“If you ask me about my personal experience with that specific organization, I would say that it really does not match the needs of the community as much as it did with the other organizations that worked in the same community. For example, there were some organizations that worked with Gypsy people, and I think that's one of the biggest challenges of the Romanian communities in general; and I think the activities that they did were mostly determined to work in a specific Romanian community with Gypsy people, and it was just not a general project.” [I4, Georgia, project in Romania]

“I think the ESC has different projects that have a lot more to do with solidarity than ours. [...] We were in contact with other volunteers from other projects as well and there were also projects where the people worked with the Sinti and Roma people and very, very poor regions of the city which I think fulfilled the aspect and meaning of solidarity even more than our project.” [I3, Germany, project in Romania]

Thus, the two abovementioned statements show that there is the awareness among participants that different type of projects with potentially varying degrees of impact on the local community exist and thus varying expressions of solidarity. This ties in with what has been shown before in section 4.2.3.2.: the perceived impact of the volunteering work differs largely according to a certain set of variables such as the duration of the project, the type of project and the country or specific community within a country that the project addresses.

In that regard, some recommendations for the improvement of the programme that might increase the impact of the project on the local community and enable a more enhanced address of societal challenges can be made. In fact, one interviewee deplored the unsatisfactory communication on the part of the organization's coordination both prior to the start of the project as well as during it:

“We knew, for example, that we would go to schools and work with schools, but we didn't know what we would do there, if there were specific agenda for us, or if we had to organize those kind of activities. And I think that was [...] something that could have been better. Because when we went, for example, I remember we went to the school for

the first time that we had to show, show our culture, some presentation about our countries. And it was so random because I didn't know the specifics of the school. Where was it? What kind of ages would we show our presentation to? And when we went there, it turned out that we went to the second grade. And the presentation that I had prepared for them was like... I think they didn't understand a word. And it was, and not just English. I mean that I could've, for example, make more visual photos and videos for them than just talking about it.” [I4, Georgia, project in Romania]

This statement shows that a clearer communication and enlightenment about the goals of the project and specificities of the local target community could maybe enable a more focused implementation of activities and a bigger social impact. Another interviewee also deplored the lack of communication in several ESC projects that she had done, among others in regard to the functionalities and administrative aspects of the programme (I2).

Thus, as it had been shown previously, the perceived impact of the project differs according to a certain set of variables. The sometimes-perceived limited impact of the project on the local community, when compared to the participant's one can explain why some interviewees have the feeling to have only limitedly contributed to the promotion of solidarity – at least among the local community. It is however important to bear in mind that since 2021, another branch of volunteering became part of the ESC: European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps (EVHAC). The objectives of the Humanitarian Aid Corps are more directly linked to “preserving life, preventing and alleviating human suffering and maintaining human dignity, and to strengthen the capacity and resilience of vulnerable or disaster-affected communities” (European Commission 2023:27). These aims seem to be more in line with the abovementioned examples of solidarity given by the interviewee I11.

In that sense, even if some of the participants felt more benefitted by the programme than their perceived impact on the local communities, which might go in the sense of the ESC as an educational programme rather than volunteering programme, it is evident from what has been established before, that the participation in ESC has contributed to the promotion of EU values at least among participants. As it had been pointed out before, Strecker and Eick recognized that both approaches – strengthening EU values among participants themselves and the local communities – aim to meet the objectives of the ESC programme established by the European Commission (Strecker et Eick 2023:14).

5.3.2. The notion of reciprocity

As it has been shown in section 2.4.1., Nicodemi and Baclijs Knoch identified four main terms associated with solidarity: inclusion, active participation, human rights and empathy, which were to be found in the conducted interviews. These features were promoted both among the participants – mostly through their interactions and engagement as volunteers – as among the local community – through the contact with intercultural volunteers and the topics and aims addressed by the specific projects.

The other terms such as “common ground between differences”, “commitment”, “common values”, “common interests”, “intercultural competence” and “interdependence” were also present in the interviewees’ experiences, which indicates that the ESC programme contributes to the promotion of solidarity.

The notion of reciprocity, which is common to almost all theoretical literature on solidarity, can also be detected in the interviews, amongst other when the participants are asked about their personal understanding of solidarity. It is however important to notice that the participants attribute different meanings to it. In the literature, reciprocity is seen as a key aspect of solidarity: help and support for a person is shown based on the principle that the person being helped would offer help, or at least do everything in their capacity, to help in return when the situation is reversed (Miller 2017:63; see section 2.1). This idea of helping “each-other”, thus of a reciprocal relationship is present in some interviews:

“Solidarity, as I understand it, is when people come together for a common target, common goal, and no matter from what background, country, or from where you come from, you help each other.” [I10, Romania, project in France]

“I think I would say now that when two or more actors help each other in whichever way they can, and not necessarily at a simultaneous time.”

[I2, France, project in Romania]

“Yes, solidarity, from the word, what comes to my mind is, like, being together. Being actually, like, helpful in community, one another. Like, you have to be together.”

[I1, Türkiye, project in Romania]

For others, the understanding of reciprocity seems to be more distant than how it is conceptualized in the literature. The fact of “getting something back” by the action of help is not perceived as a direct help the person offering help would get in case of need but more like something gotten out of the experience of helping itself:

“And then somehow this project will bring me other skills or other types of assets maybe at the same time, but maybe at another point - so could mean that like the friendships that I will make there will be meaningful in my life later.”

[I2, France, project in Romania]

“So, I think for me solidarity is kind of when you want to make a small change and you're using your time, your free time deciding to use your time to make some change even the smallest one. [...] It's also because It's when you're helping, you're also receiving; it works both ways. Because the experience of volunteering can make you better as a person because, as I said, it worked both ways: you're giving everything you have and in return, you're getting wonderful experience and sometimes, wonderful connections, interactions with people you're helping, and you're talking to.”

[I8, Poland, project in Türkiye]

It appears that in this kind of conception, there is no need for the existence of a group or the membership of a community to have relationships of solidarity.

The abovementioned statements show that according to the understanding of some participants, the notion of reciprocity is highly related to solidarity – which is in line with the theoretical framework presented. There is thus the recognition of the necessity of a group, of a community.

The notion of reciprocity in solidarity also means that the relationships between group members are fundamentally relationships between equals, a symmetric relationship (Van Parijs 2017:4; see section 2.1.). As it has been shown before, several participants pointed out that among volunteers, they were all in “equal” positions as they were abroad in a foreign country, outside of their comfort zone. The reciprocity refers also to the normative level of solidarity: mutual obligations persist between members of a solidaristic group; it is a relationship of mutual support and concern (Bayertz 1999:4; see section 2.1.).

It seems that this understanding of solidarity can only be applied limitedly to the relationships existing between the volunteers and the local community – both on the normative as on the factual level. The majority of the sample of interviewees volunteered in the field of non-formal education, engaging thus with younger children who by nature are not in an equal place and able to show support to the same extent. On the factual level of solidarity, the “common ground”, what unites the group of volunteers, appears more tangible than what unites the volunteers and the local community: they are abroad in a foreign country engaging for a common goal through the project.

This is also in line with the fact that the four features identified by Miller as a characteristic for solidarity among a group – the acknowledgement of the existence of a group (a “we”), mutual concern, collective responsibility and limits on inequality – were mostly present in the interviews when referring to the dynamics between the group of volunteers than when talking about the group of the local community

Thus, these past reflections on the notion on reciprocity – and also what has been established earlier regarding the perceived social impact of the project – seem to make it necessary to distinguish different levels of the promotion and expression of solidarity, in particular the promotion of solidarity among participants and among the local community.

5.3.3. Different levels and dimensions of solidarity

It has been shown that the four main words associated with solidarity according to Baclija Knoch et Nicodemi – inclusion, human rights, active citizenship and empathy – are values that are promoted both at the level of the local community as well as among participants of the ESC.

On the other hand, other key dimensions of solidarity established in the theoretical framework, in particular in regard to the normative level - mutual obligations – and factual level - common ground between the members of a group, are present to different degrees among the group of volunteers and with the local community.

In what concerns the group of volunteers, different terms present in the interviews invite to think about what Miller considered the “sources” of solidarity, or what Bayertz called the “factual level of solidarity” which justifies the existence of mutual obligations (see section 2.1.).

As shown in section 4.2.3.5., participants reported a certain interdependence among the group of volunteers; they divided the tasks efficiently according to the strengths and weaknesses of each member of the group. As it has been shown in 2.1., one of the sources of identity presented by Miller, is the interdependence theory that was initially theorized by Durkheim (Miller 2017:70). In modern societies, as the degree of individualization is high, the interdependence between individuals is high, which is the characteristic trait of organic solidarity. Thus, a potential explanation for the source of inter-volunteers’ solidarity could be the degree of interdependence between the volunteers, the fact that they complement each other in the execution of the tasks of the project.

The other theory conceptualized by Miller is the associational theory, the fact that individuals involve in civic and political associations. He points out that regular interactions, especially when driven by a shared purpose or goal fosters solidarity among members of that group (Miller 2017:71; see section 2.1.). It has been shown that the volunteers were brought together by the ESC and volunteering for a common goal. This shared aspect might be seen as the source of solidarity among volunteers.

Lastly, Miller had identified a common identity as a foundation for solidarity (Miller 2017:73). As seen before, participants reported sharing indeed similar values with the other volunteers. Furthermore, it has been seen before that common experiences strengthen collective identities (Jenkins 2008:9; see section 2.1). Thus, it could be considered that the common identity is created between the volunteers of the ESC through shared experience of volunteering and the common memory of it. In that sense, it can be reminded that the friendships and interpersonal connections formed during the common experience of ESC constituted for the majority of the interviewee’s the most significant part of the project. It can be observed that emotional language got used majorly when talking about these aspects of the project. This might be a source of solidarity among participants of the ESC.

It is important to notice that these reflections are highly theoretical and concrete conclusions cannot be drawn on this matter; it is however clear that the sources – the common ground – and expressions of solidarity among the group of volunteers are potentially different than those between the group of volunteers and local community.

At the level of the local community, the ESC programme does also contribute to the promotion of solidarity, however in another form as it seems. While the ESC promotes values associated with solidarity such as inclusion, human rights, active citizenship and empathy among the local community, the normative and factual level of solidarity as conceptualized by Bayertz (1999:4) are not as apparent or at least less marked. There is of course also the existence of a common ground between the local community and the volunteers, not least because, as it has been shown, the ESC project entails a strong European dimension and aims at promoting European identity, thus the idea of membership to a same community of values. Several interviewees reported an enhanced general interest of the local community in the ESC and young people wanting to participate themselves at a later stage. Thus, these young people will potentially engage in solidarity activities later, which corresponds to the reciprocal aspect of solidarity: they will show support and concern for other members of the community of Europe. In general, the clear emphasis on inclusion, encouragement to active participation and empowerment of the local communities in which the volunteering activities takes place, is in line with the model of horizontal solidarity between individuals. As it had been shown in section 2.3.3., horizontal solidarity is usually characterized by bottom-up activities and is focused on empowering communities and driving social change (Kousis et al. 2017:71). In that sense the ESC does contribute to the promotion of solidarity.

This emphasis on civic values and the importance of inclusion and active participation, is also in line with the narratives of recent European identity construction policies. In that sense, the ESC programme could be interpreted as an attempt to build a both strong enough and inclusive European identity – understood as the sense of European belonging and identification with EU values – to foster solidarity in the EU and beyond. It is however important to notice that assessing the direct link between European identity and solidarity – if at all possible – would go beyond the scope of this thesis.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

6.1. Summary and conclusion

The research has given important insights of young participants in regard to the potential of the ESC programme to promote European identity and solidarity within the Union and beyond – the promotion of the latter being outlined as the official goal of the programme. This thesis does thus contribute to filling a research gap, as only a little research on participating youth in the ESC programme had been conducted so far.

The participation in the ESC programme affects the general perception of the EU in a globally positive way. Several interviewees explicitly report that their image of the EU is more positive after having volunteered with the ESC. Participants from non-EU member states globally emphasize the opportunities and values provided by the Union, while participants from within the EU report that the participation in the ESC has increased their understanding of what it actually means to be part of it; it has become something more concrete, palpable and less distant than something that would “only happen in the institutions”. Thus, there seems to be globally a general enhanced awareness about the European project, its functioning and values and the significance of their active participation in it.

First, European identity refers to the sense of European belonging. Apart from a few exceptions, participants from EU member states globally report an enhanced sense of belonging and identification with the EU. Through the experience of the ESC, many interviewees came to realize that they form a “part of Europe” and can participate in it. It can however be distinguished between Western EU-member states and the East. It seems that the sense of European belonging got intensified for Western participants insofar as the Union was something not very present for them. For the participant from Romania on the other hand, there was, previously to the participation in the ESC the idea to not “fit in”, to not really be part of the Union. In the particular case of the participant from Poland, the sense of European belonging was strengthened due to the fact that he was in a country outside the EU, apprehending existing similarities with other volunteers from EU member states. Among the participants from the EU candidate countries Türkiye and Georgia, which territories are also in part geographically located in Europe, some reported that they see themselves as European and expressed an explicit desire to enter the EU, which got strengthened after the ESC project. Participants from

Eastern Europe and the EU candidate states also identified a generational gap in their countries when it comes to European identification – the younger generation feeling more attached to Europe.

European identity refers furthermore to the awareness of and identification with EU values - an understanding that some participants explicitly stated. Globally, the participation in the ESC seems to have contributed to a general increased awareness of EU values. In particular, the intercultural aspect of the ESC programme enabling the interaction between young people from different countries seems to have contributed to a better understanding of the principle of unity and diversity, both among the volunteers of the ESC programme as well as in the local community. The intercultural interaction is also to a large extent accountable for the consciousness of the participant countries social, cultural and historical heritage – both on the part of the individual participants as among the local community.

Regarding the solidarity aspect of the ESC programme, it appears that it is necessary to distinguish also here two levels at which solidarity is expressed: the level of the individual participants and the level of the local community. While key terms associated to solidarity such as empathy, human rights, inclusion and active citizenship are values that appear to be present and fostered at both levels, it seems that the framework of solidarity as a relationship between members of a group attached by mutual obligations and a common ground can be applied rather to the group of volunteers. The “common ground”, what unites the group of volunteers, appears more tangible and direct than what unites the volunteers and the local community: they are abroad in a foreign country engaging for a common goal. Moreover, the promotion of solidarity seems to be intrinsically linked to the perceived impact of the volunteer work on the local community. However, this impact is hard to assess and differs largely according to a certain set of variables, mostly the type of project and location. The variety of profiles interviewed, especially in regard to the country of origin, location, type and duration of the project do not permit to conclude on the general social impacts of the ESC. It is nonetheless certain that the ESC programme does contribute to the promotion of European identity, understood as the awareness and identification with EU values, of which solidarity is part – regardless of the question of whether these aspects are more strengthened among the group of participants or the local community in which the volunteering activity takes place.

All in all, the ESC programme seems to globally meet the objectives as established by the European Commission: it contributes to foster a positive image of the Union and to foster European identity –understood as the sense of European belonging, awareness of Europe’s social, cultural and historical heritage and EU values – and solidarity as a core value.

The activities implemented through ESC projects and the insights of the participants underline both the emphasis on civic values and the importance of inclusion and active participation, which is in line with the narratives of recent European identity construction policies. In that sense, the ESC programme could be interpreted as an attempt to build a both strong enough and inclusive European identity – understood as the sense of European belonging and identification with EU values – to foster solidarity in the EU and beyond.

6.2. Recommendations for the improvement of the ESC programme and outlook

Participants globally were all very satisfied with the programme and convinced of the opportunities it will continue to provide for young people. They talked very positively about the programme and were aware of the personal outcomes and exceptional experiences they were able to live thanks to the ESC.

In light of the participants’ experiences, some recommendations for the improvement of the ESC can however be made. First, in order to enhance the intercultural experience and group cohesion of the volunteers, it is recommended to have groups composed of young people from different countries and avoid groups dominated by participants from one particular country. Second, a more direct and open communication between the participating organizations and young volunteers can be recommended. In particular, some participants deplored not knowing in advance the specificities of the project and its target group, which led to frustration as the activities couldn’t be planned accordingly. This lack of communication on behalf of the participating organizations represents a loss of potential for the programme. Furthermore, the youth insights have shown that not all projects address societal challenges to the same extent, and solidarity seems to be intrinsically linked with the possibility of empowering communities and driving social change. This means that a prioritization of projects or more suitable choice of projects could be considered if the desired purpose of the ESC is to give a greater importance to the volunteering aspect of the programme. Some participants also deplored the new regulation of the programme dating of 2024, which foresees a limit of 12 months total in which young people can engage in volunteering activities with the ESC. It

does indeed seem that to address societal challenges within local communities, the involvement of experienced volunteers as well, is fruitful. Similarly, as some stakeholders advocate for a suppression of the age limit in the programme, the maximum amount of time one can volunteer also does not seem to be justified if the ESC is viewed as a volunteering programme, which aims in priority to address societal challenges.

Further research could involve field research among the community the volunteering activity takes place. This may assess more directly the impact of the ESC programme on the local communities and its actual potential to address societal challenges.

Moreover, this research hasn't taken into account the socio-economic backgrounds and other barriers to the participation of youth in the programme. In light of the acknowledged potential of cross-border mobility in shaping European identity, the actual inclusiveness and accessibility of the programme deserves to be studied more in depth, in particular a mixed method of qualitative and quantitative analysis could be fruitful in that regard.

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Appendix

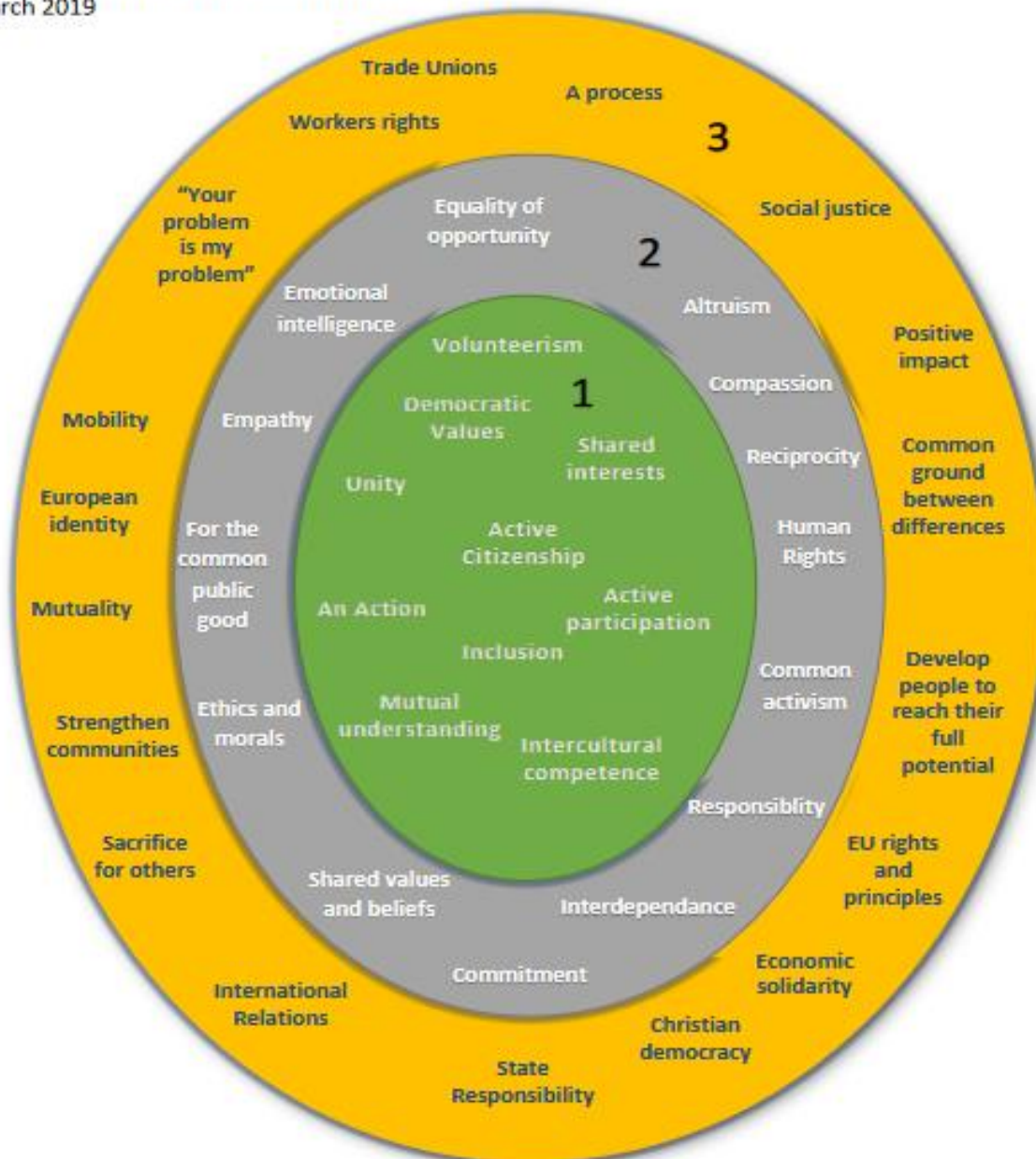
Appendix A1. Overview of interviewee's profiles

Participant	Date of interview conduction	Country of origin	Country of volunteering	Gender	Age when participating in project	Duration of project	Activity field	First non-touristic experience abroad?
Interviewee 1 (I1)	12/08/24	Türkiye	Romania	Male	25-26	Long-term (12 months)	Non-formal education	Yes
Interviewee 2 (I2)	13/08/24	France	Romania	Female	21-22	Short-term (2 months)	Non-formal education	No
Interviewee 3 (I3)	18/08/24	Germany	Romania	Male	20	Short-term (2 months)	Non-formal education	Yes
Interviewee 4 (I4)	18/08/24	Georgia	Romania	Female	19	Short-term (2 months)	Non-formal education	Yes
Interviewee 5 (I5)	19/08/24	Türkiye	Romania	Male	28	Long-term (11 months)	Non-formal education	No
Interviewee 6 (I6)	22/08/24	Spain	Romania	Male	20	Short-term (2 months)	Non-formal education	No
Interviewee 7 (I7)	23/08/24	Türkiye	Romania	Male	22	Long-term (10 months)	Non-formal education	No
Interviewee 8 (I8)	03/09/24	Poland	Türkiye	Male	27	Short-term (2 months)	Non-formal education	No
Interviewee 9 (I9)	05/09/24	Brazil	Germany	Female	26	Short-term (2 months)	Non-formal education	No
Interviewee 10 (I10)	10/09/24	Romania	France	Female	21	Short-term (2 weeks)	Physical activity (renovation)	Yes
Interviewee 11 (I11)	10/09/24	Spain	Germany	Male	26-27	Long-term (12 months)	Non-formal education	No

Appendix A2. Common Ground on the concept of Solidarity according to the study of Baclija Knoch and Nicodemi (2020)

Common Ground on the concept of Solidarity

First findings from practice, research, policy and young people
March 2019



As concepts were mentioned, they were mapped and kept a tally of the frequency they were mentioned was kept. Then they were grouped according to three areas: 1 = concepts are common in all 4 sectors or are mentioned several times; 2 = concepts are mentioned a few times or by more than one sector; 3 = concepts are mentioned by only one sector/only once or twice
Source: Baclija Knoch et Nicodemi 2020

Appendix A3. Table summarizing the participants' shift of perception

	I2	I3	I6	I11	I8	I10	I1	I4	I5	I7	I9
Perception of EU (positive/ negative)	N (gap speeches and acts)	P	-	P	-	P	P	P	P	P	P
Strengthening of national identity	x	-	-	-	x	x	-	x	-	-	-
Enhanced sense of European belonging	-	x	-	x	x	x	n.a.	x	x	n.a.	n.a.
Enhanced awareness and/or identification with EU values	-	-	-	-	x	x	x	x	-	-	-
Generational gap	-	-	-	-	-	x	-	x	x	-	n.a.

Participants from Western EU-member states (France, Germany, Spain)

Participants from Eastern EU-member states (Poland, Romania)

Participants from EU candidate countries (Georgia, Türkiye)

Participants from non-EU country (Brazil)

The table summarizes the participant's shift of views and perception after taking part in the ESC programme, according to their country of origin. Reading of the table : "n.a." question not applicable; "x" this characteristic can be found; "-" this characteristic either didn't change through the experience with ESC or a direct reference to it couldn't be identified in the interviews.

Appendix A4. Interview Guide

The average length of the interviews was approx. 45 minutes to 1 hour. The interviews were conducted following unrestrictedly the successive questions.

0. Quick introduction, name, age, country of origin, place and type of ESC project, global opinion/ impression of the ESC project (negative/ positive)

1. Before the start of the project

1a. How did you find out about the ESC and this ESC project in general?

1b. What were your motivations to take part in ESC? Why did you decide to apply and participate? Were there any specific goals or outcomes you hoped to achieve through this experience?

2. Volunteering topic and perceived impact on the local community

2a. Could you please explain more in details what you were doing in your project. In what ways did your volunteering project address the needs or challenges of the community you were working in?

2b. Did you see any visible change or progress in the community you were volunteering? What were the effects of your work on the local community? To what extent do you feel satisfied that you made a positive change in the community in which your volunteering activity took place?

3. Dynamics and interaction with the other volunteers

3a. How would you describe the group dynamics of the volunteers in the project? How would you describe your relationship and interactions with the other volunteers in the project?

4. Work and interaction in an intercultural environment

3a. What did working together with people from different backgrounds teach you about collaboration and supporting others?

3b. How did participating in a project that involves different (European) countries influence your thoughts on the importance of collaboration across borders?

5. Identification with Europe and perception of the EU

5a. How has your understanding of Europe and its diversity evolved through your interactions with other volunteers and local communities? how has your perspective on being part of a larger community changed? [if applicable]

5b. How has the participation in the ESC affect your perception of Europe and the European Union?

5c. How did being abroad and interacting with volunteers from other countries influence your sense of national identity and/ or European identity? After completing the ESC, do you feel more connected to Europe or to your own country, or both?

6. Understanding of the participant of solidarity

6a. How do you interpret the notion of “solidarity” in the European Solidarity Corps? What does solidarity mean to you? To what extent would you say that you have contributed to promoting solidarity in the community you were doing your volunteering project?

7. After the project: General outcomes and takeaways

7a. How did your involvement in the ESC differ from other volunteering or professional experiences you’ve had before or from other experiences abroad of non-touristic nature?

7b. What does being part of the ESC project mean to you now, compared to when you first joined?

7c. What is the most important value you gained from this experience or/ and what stands out to you as the most meaningful part of your experience?