

POLARIZATION

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AN INTRODUCTION



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2023

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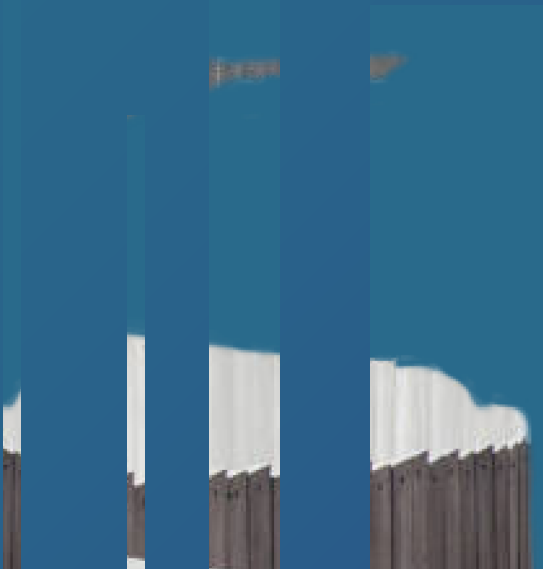
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INTRO



INTRO

Polarization in Europe has been increasing in the past years, and a substantial proportion of people see their societies as less tolerant than ten years ago. The normal multiplicity of differences in society increasingly aligns along a single dimension and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of 'Us' versus 'Them.'

The more polarized a society, the more people view difficult issues through a tribal lens rather than in terms of the common good of all. They grow less able to comprehend opposing views, they get increasingly prone to regarding people of the 'opposite side' as incompetent and depraved, or at worst motivated by bad intentions. On the other hand they start to consider themselves as morally superior. Affective polarization appears as well, where positive feelings are reserved for in-group members, while out-group members generate feelings of fear, anger and distrust. In the STOP consortium we have countries where polarization has become especially prominent in the last decade. These societies struggle in general with the same issues, though divisions might appear along different lines.

Despite growing polarization in the selected countries, common grounds still exist and this can give hope that creating an efficient intervention is possible. People belonging to opposing groups often overestimate their differences 'false polarization', believing that the two groups are further apart in their views than they actually are. There is a need for tools that can effectively deal with intergroup conflicts, that offer low-barrier and cost efficient ways to engage ordinary citizens more meaningfully, that create opportunities to foster empathy by exposing people to others with different backgrounds and beliefs to their own.

The goal of this book is to create background material for adult educators, teachers, community workers who give lectures about polarization or develop interventions aiming to decrease polarization.

Chapter 1 provides a short theoretical introduction of polarization, its similarities to and differences from conflicts, the types and level of polarization people experience in the countries of the STOP consortium (Hungary, Italy, Spain, Turkey, the Netherlands), the wide array of negative consequences polarization has on societies, and some of its potential positive impact (in cases where it hasn't yet escalated to dangerous levels).

While in Chapter 1 we rely on the findings and insights of published surveys, research articles, theoretical works, in Chapter 2 we share the results of our own online surveys about perceived polarization, levels of trust in different types of groups and institutions. We also assessed how our respondents evaluated the importance of different values in their life.

Chapter 3 is based on one-on-one interviews that we conducted in the countries of the consortium about the interviewees' personal definitions of, and stories related to polarization. Compared to the information we gathered through our online surveys, in which we mainly used closed-ended questions, in the interviews we could give the interviewees the opportunity to express themselves freely about the polarizing topics that concern them most.

Chapter 4 describes the results of the focus group discussions. These were conducted in all five countries, with heterogenous and homogenous groups of people in terms of their attitudes to selected polarising topics. These discussions allowed us to observe how people who might have strong opposing opinions (sometimes convictions) about the topic of the session interacted with each other; whether they were willing to listen to each other and to challenge their own position to any extent.

Lastly, in Chapter 5 we describe suggestions and techniques, found in the literature, to decrease polarization and we summarize the conclusions drawn from our own data.



CHAPTER 1:

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

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CONFLICT AND POLARIZATION

To be able to study polarization, we should define ‘conflict’ first and see how these two concepts are similar to, and different from each other.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines conflict as:

“an active disagreement between people with opposing opinions or principles.”

There are numerous conflict areas: at home, in schools, at work, in politics, football stadiums, on a local, regional, national and even global scale. Conflict is not negative in itself, it can be a tricker for personal growth. Brandsma (2017) phrases this as follows: *“Conflict is the condition that allows spiritual growth to happen. I’m not aware of any (religious) ideology in which conflict, in the broad sense of the word, does not occupy a central position, no matter what the ultimate prospect it presents: enlightenment, salvation, paradise, success in life, or the ultimate balance between yin and yang.”*¹

A system of similarities (and differences)

In all communities, whether we talk about neighbourhoods, organizations, villages, businesses or families, people from various backgrounds - religious, ethnic or cultural – with different opinions live together. And when we deal with diversity, we should not forget to also mention the differences caused by economic terms; the gap between the haves and the *have nots*. We refer to these communities as being ‘heterogeneous’. And they are at risk of conflict.

We are not particularly referring to conflict as in war zones, but to conflict that endangers the peace in a community. Not all conflicts endanger this peace; conflicts are actually part of our society. We even dare to say that life does not exist without conflict, whether inner and outer. But conflict becomes a danger when we do not know how to handle it. Or, as Bart Brandsma states on his website ‘Inside Polarization’: *“Peace is not the absence of conflict, it is the way we deal with a series of conflicts in a constructive way.”*²

1. Brandsma, B. (2017). *Polarization: Understanding the Dynamics of Us Versus Them*. BB In Media. ISBN 9789082595727, p. 47

2. <https://insidepolarization.nl/en/>

Thus, when we say communities are at risk of conflict, we do not mean the conflict itself is the risk, but the way we deal with it. In a heterogeneous group, people are divided. This division causes a way of thinking, namely in terms of ‘us’ versus ‘them’, which is linked to a certain behaviour. To understand this better we should take a look at the construction of social identity.

Previously, social identity has been defined by Tajfel (1972) as: “*the individual’s knowledge that he/she belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him/her of this group membership.*”³ The Social Identity Theory proposes that the focus of people’s self-definition is partly caused by their group membership and contributes to a person’s self-concept and self-esteem. People tend to classify themselves and others into categories based on certain features and then identify more with members of their own category (in-group) than with members of other categories (out-group). A strong social identity can thus lead to a high group identity. Individuals with a high group identity tend to incorporate aspects of that group in their self-concepts. When interpersonal similarity among in-group members is high, this also tends to increase attraction between individuals. This leads to a similarity bias in favour of similar in-group members and bias against out-group members.

Based on the Social Identity Theory, the Self-Categorization Theory and the similarity-attraction paradigm, we now know people tend to classify themselves and others into categories and in terms of group prototypes that reflect belief sets, attitudes, norms, values and behaviours. (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1986) As people tend to like their in-group members more than the out-group members, bias in favour of similar in-group members and bias against out-group members is created. We create assumptions and labels to identify the other, but meanwhile we are just reinforcing our own identity. We are therefore inclined to focus on the differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’ rather than the similarities, because the idea that the other is equal to us is unbearable.

In relation to conflict, and especially conflict that leads to polarization, scarcity is also mentioned as a driver. Yuval Harari (2014), for instance, suggests in his writings that human existence has been shaped by four existential realities: famine, pestilence, war and death. In addition, the (evolutionary) history of mankind has developed in us a strong desire to survive and a deep fear of scarcity.

When it comes to scarcity, a form of mimetic desire - a subconscious imitation of another person’s desire - can play a part in conflicts.⁴ For instance, Amos Oz (2012) suggests that there is no essential misunderstanding between the Palestinian Arab and the Israeli Jew. In essence, there is no religious conflict: the Palestinians want the land they call Palestine. They have very strong historical reasons to want it. The Israeli Jews want exactly the *same land* for exactly the same historical reasons, which provides for a perfect understanding between the parties. At the same time this is where they (and their current cultures) collide with each other, which causes a terrible tragedy.

3 Tajfel, H. (1972). *Some developments in European social psychology*. European Journal of Social Psychology, 2(3), p. 292.

4 Mimetic desire is the basis of the mimetic theory, an explanation of human behaviour and culture developed by the French historian and philosopher René Girard (1923-2015).

In the mid-1950's social psychologist Muzafer Sherif and others carried out the Robbers Cave experiment on intergroup conflict and co-operation as a part of a research programme at the University of Oklahoma. (Sherif, 1954, 1958, 1961) In this famous Robbers Cave experiment Muzafar Sherif and his colleagues purposely created scarcity, with an enormous polarizing effect: They brought a group of 22 white, 11-year-old boys with similar social and religious backgrounds together in a remote summer camp in Robbers Cave State Park in Oklahoma. They divided the boys into two groups that needed to battle each other in a series of games. Only one group could be the winner (scarcity). Within days the groups started acting violently towards each other and the team had to intervene in order to avoid serious harm.

Sherif and his team do make clear that scarcity can lead to extreme situations. We might even say: to extreme polarization.

The definitions of polarization

In the previous paragraphs we identified the most important drivers of conflict and maybe already of polarization. Now it is good to take a look at several definitions of polarization, in order to get a better understanding of the phenomenon.



"The act of separating or making people separate into two groups with completely opposite opinions."

It is interesting to see that this description refers to an action, either actively or passively. We can easily and safely conclude that polarization is a creation and cannot exist without the interference of mankind. It is a construction. In addition to that we can say that polarization always contains two groups (poles) with opposite meanings, opinions, or interests, though we already explored the fact that these opposite meanings and opinions might come from a source of similarity. That is already a matter of narratives, something we will focus on later.

Dictionary.com gives the following explanation of polarization:



"A sharp division, as of a population or group, into opposing factions."

What we might take from this description is the word 'sharp'. By identifying a 'sharp division' as an essential component of polarization, it distinguishes it from conflict.

In an ex-post paper of the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), presented at a meeting on radicalization in Amsterdam in 2017, polarization is defined as:



“.. a thought construct, based on assumptions of ‘us’ and ‘them’ identities. In a process of polarization, the dominant and active narrative is about the perceived (and often exaggerated) differences and simplistic narratives about the others. There is a neglect of what the ‘us’ and ‘them’ might have in common.”⁵

The phenomenon is a thought construct and involves communication and thinking based on ‘Us and Them’; ‘others’ are perceived or presented as being different and a problem or a threat to the group.

Though we are already heading towards a more political direction of studying polarization, it is interesting that this definition underlines both the concept of construction and the one of identity. It is a more universal approach, helping us to understand the general dynamic of it.

Jennifer McCoy, a political science professor at Georgia State University and a specialist on democratization and polarization, mediation and conflict prevention defined polarization as follows: *“Polarization is a process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly align along a single dimension and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of ‘Us’ versus ‘Them.’”⁶*

Also in this definition the ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’ thinking is pivotal, which leads us to believe that this way of thinking is one of the the main characteristics of polarization.

Other characteristics can be found when directing our attention to the ‘bystanders’, the people not involved in the polarization. Brandsma refers to them as the *“silent middle”*.⁷

When defining polarization, the relationship between the two sides is as important as each side’s relationship with this silent middle, also called ‘the neutral bystanders’. According to Dean Pruitt and Paul Olczak, neutral parties in the process of polarization have to take sides in a conflict, whilst individuals on either side of the conflict take increasingly extreme positions that are more and more opposed to each other. As parties move toward these opposite poles, they define themselves in terms of their opposition to a common enemy.

5 Ex-post paper RAN, polarization management manual, presented at a Thematic event on 6 July 2017 in Amsterdam (NL), https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2020-09/ran_polarization_management_manual_amsterdam_06072017_en.pdf, p. 3.

6 McCoy J., Rahman T., Somer M., (2018). *Polarization and the global crisis of democracy: Common patterns, dynamics, and pernicious consequences for democratic polities*. American Behavioral Scientist. Jan 2018; 62(1): 16-42, p. 18. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0002764218759576>

7 Brandsma, B. (2017). *Polarization: Understanding the Dynamics of Us Versus Them*, BBIn Media. ISBN 9789082595727

The American peace and negotiation researcher, Jeffrey Z. Rubin, also put an emphasis on the role of the (formerly) neutral non-participants in a conflict. They are pulled to one side or the other and fewer community members can retain their moderate positions. According to him, this is partly because those involved in the conflict demand that neutral non-participants decide whether they are with us or against us (Rubin et al, 1994).

It is interesting to determine the form and limits of polarization based on these definitions. Can we only talk about polarization if every silent bystander is forced to take sides, or is the presence of silent bystanders enough to speak of polarization? In the case of the latter, how can we differentiate between deep conflict and polarization? Apparently, it is hard to take the degree of separation into poles as a (sole) criterion. We should take a look at other criteria as well.

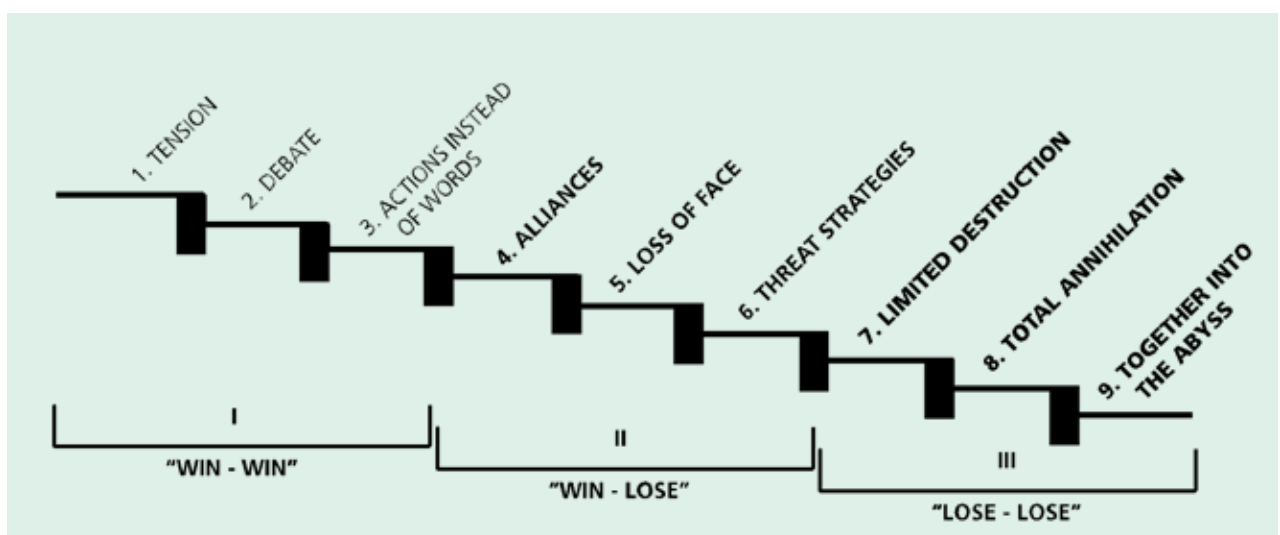
Escalation ladder

In our search for a definition of polarization - and what distinguishes it from conflict - we might look at the escalation ladder that was developed by the economist and conflict researcher Friedrich Glasl (Glasl, 1980).

He describes conflict escalation in a nine-stage model. This model can be used to analyse all sorts of conflicts: divorces, conflicts between colleagues or students, but also conflicts between organizations, or nations. It does not show a higher and higher rising escalation but a ladder downwards into an abyss of more and more primitive forms of behaviour, ending in (potentially) uncontrollable menace.

Towards the first main level both parties can still win because it still ensures a cooperative solution on the factual level. Respecting the second main level means that one is still guided by moral-ethical scruples – but it will turn to one party being the winner. In the third main threshold phase both parties lose.

The different stages can be described as follows:



First Level (Win - Win) – Everything is still possible

Stage 1 – Tension

Conflicts start with tensions, e.g. occasional clashes of opinions. It is commonplace and is not perceived as the beginning of a conflict. If a conflict does arise, opinions become more fundamental. The conflict could have deeper causes.

Stage 2 – Debate and emerging polarization

From here on, the conflict partners consider strategies to convince the other of their arguments. Differences of opinion lead to a dispute. One wants to put pressure on the other. Black and white thinking develops.

Stage 3 – Actions instead of words

The conflict partners increase the pressure on each other to assert themselves or their own opinion. Conversations can be broken off. Verbal communication no longer takes place and the conflict intensifies more quickly. Compassion for the ‘other’ is lost.

Second Level (Win - Lose) - From here on, winners and losers

Stage 4 – Alliances, image damaging

The conflict is aggravated by seeking sympathizers and allies for his cause. Since one believes oneself right, one can denounce the opponent or competitor. It is no longer about the cause, but about winning the conflict so that the counterparty loses.

Stage 5 - Loss of face

The opponent is to be destroyed in his identity by all possible insinuations. Here the loss of trust is complete. To lose your face means loss of moral credibility.

Stage 6 - Threat strategies

With threats, the conflict parties try to control the situation totally. They will have to illustrate their power. Threats can become demands (“you will have to pay..”), which become amplified sanctions (“otherwise I will...”) and are underpinned by a potential for retaliation (“...and I can...”). Here, the proportions decide on the credibility of the threat.

Third Level (Lose – Lose) - From here on, only losers

Stage 7 - Limited destruction(s)

Here the opponent is to be sensitively harmed with all tricks. The ‘other’ is no longer perceived as human. From here on, a limited damage to oneself is already considered a gain, should the other’s damage be greater.

Stage 8 – Fragmentation

The opponent’s support system is to be destroyed with destructive actions.

Stage 9 - Together into the abyss

From here on, you calculate even your own destruction in order to defeat your enemy.

If we combine the information we can derive from this escalation ladder with the definitions of polarization we quoted above, we could say that Glasl’s third level is the level of polarization. We see that the perceived differences are blown up and used to dehumanize. Every notion of common ground is gone. Dialogue is replaced by mutual aggression. We see a sharp division, actively constructed by the two poles by using narratives about each other and in the end maybe even violence. And as Glasl indicates, there are only losers.

POLARIZATION TRENDS IN THE PARTICIPATING COUNTRIES

In 2018 Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute conducted a poll that surveyed more than 19,000 people from 27 countries around the world about polarization trends in their countries. Four of these 27 countries form part of the STOP project consortium: Hungary, Italy, Spain and Turkey. We collected and summarized the information provided by the polls with regard to these four countries. Information about polarization in the Netherlands, also represented in the STOP consortium (but not in Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute's poll), is added separately to this chapter.

Summary of the main findings with regard to polarization in Hungary, Italy, Spain and Turkey

Table 1

Division/tolerance in the society (% of responders who agree)	Hungary	Italy	Spain	Turkey	Average of 27 countries
Our society is very/fairly divided <i>(Rank among 27 countries)</i>	86% (6.)	89% (5.)	84% (10.)	65% (22.)	76%
Our society is more divided than 10 years ago <i>(Rank among 27 countries)</i>	69% (6.)	73% (3.)	77% (1.)	59% (14.)	59%
People in our country are very/fairly tolerant towards people with different backgrounds, cultures or points of view <i>(Rank among 27 countries)</i>	16% (27.)	34% (23.)	37% (20.)	40% (17.)	46%
Mixing with people from other backgrounds, cultures or points of view causes conflict <i>(Rank among 27 countries)</i>	34% (1.)	23% (5.)	9% (18.)	8% (20.)	14%

Division/tolerance in the society (% of responders who agree)	Hungary	Italy	Spain	Turkey	Average of 27 countries
Our society is less tolerant than 10 years ago <i>(Rank among 27 countries)</i>	62% (1.)	57% (3.)	41% (13.)	52% (4.)	39%
People across the world have more things in common than things that make them different? <i>(Rank among 27 countries)</i>	48% (26.)	55% (23.)	70% (12.)	57% (20.)	65%

As Table 1 shows, three-quarters of respondents in all countries think that their societies are very/fairly divided and 59% are of the opinion that their societies are more divided than 10 years ago. Hungarian, Italian and Spanish societies seem to be even more divided than the majority of the countries in the poll.

Furthermore, Hungary, Italy and Turkey are all in the top 4 when it comes to the decrease of tolerance towards people with different backgrounds, cultures or points of view, in the past 10 years. Despite less tolerance and more division experienced in the 27 countries, 65% on average think that people across the world have more things in common than things that make them different – which makes an intervention on finding common grounds hopeful. The situation is more difficult – and as a consequence, intervention is even more needed - in Hungary, Italy and Turkey, though, as less people from these countries share the aforementioned opinion.

Table 2 shows what people think the main sources of tension are in the selected 4 countries.

Table 2

Sources of tension in society (% of responders)	Hungary	Italy	Spain	Turkey	Average of 27 countries
Between people with different political views	50%	26%	57%	63%	44%
Between rich and poor	44%	29%	32%	24%	36%
Between immigrants and people born in the country	31%	61%	34%	22%	30%
Between different ethnicities	34%	38%	14%	26%	25%
Between different religions	7%	27%	23%	22%	27%

In Hungary, Spain and Turkey differences in political views is seen as the biggest cause of tension. People in Italy cite differences between immigrants and those born in the country as the number one source of tension. In all of these countries, but especially in Hungary, an important cause of tension is the difference between rich and poor and between different ethnicities.

The last table (Table 3) describes the level of interpersonal trust that people in these 4 countries reported.

Table 3

Interpersonal trust (% of responders who agree)	Hungary	Italy	Spain	Turkey	Average of 27 countries
Between people with different political views	17% (17.)	14% (20.)	20% (14.)	9% (24.)	24%
Least trust in people who have different political views than you	16%	16%	19%	28%	18%
Least trust in people who are wealthier than you	20%	13%	16%	11%	13%
Least trust in immigrants who have come to live or work in your country	28%	24%	15%	24%	16%
Least trust in people who have different religion than you	8%	15%	11%	8%	10%
Least trust in people who have different ethnicity than you	22%	18%	10%	10%	9%

Source: Ipsos, 2018

Globally, only 24% say that most people can be trusted, while this proportion is even lower in the selected 4 countries. The level of interpersonal trust is one of the lowest in Turkey (9%) out of all the 27 countries involved in the poll.

In Hungary, while immigration is not a huge concern in reality, suspicion towards immigrants is especially high. Distrust can also be seen towards people from different ethnic groups and towards rich people. In Italy, people trust immigrants the least, while in Spain and in Turkey political divisions drive trust issues the most.

Summary of the main findings with regard to polarization in the Netherlands:

The Social and Cultural Planning Office (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau) paid explicit attention to polarization in the Netherlands in its first quarterly report 2019 of the Continuous Research Citizens' Perspectives (Continu Onderzoek Burgerperspectieven). In this survey 1052 respondents in the age group 18+ participated.

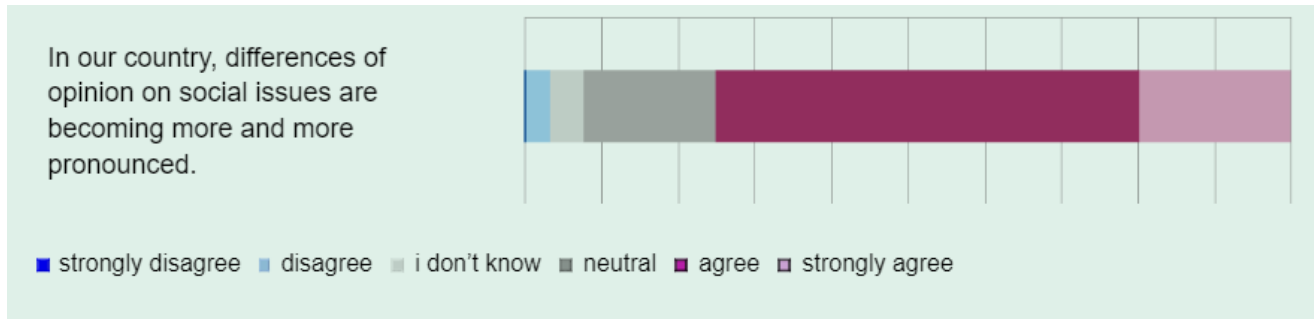
To summarise the results of the survey with regard to antagonism and polarization in key points:

- Dutch people perceive tension and conflict mostly between people without and with a migrant background (17%). This tension stands out when comparing groups in the Netherlands and the Netherlands stands out in the EU.
- However, Dutch people more often perceive a major antagonism between poor and rich people (76% of the respondents). The antagonisms between immigrants and natives and between lower and higher educated people come second (both 66%).
- About three quarters agree with the statement that differences of opinion in our country are increasing. People cite mentality, the media and the multicultural society as reasons for this.
- Approximately half agree with the statement that, in the case of the refugee issue, there is strong pressure to take sides. However, people often take intermediate positions in surveys.
- Almost three quarters agree with the statement that the Internet and social media increase antagonisms between people, approximately half agree with the statement that traditional media do so. Young people more often agree with the statements than older people.
- The development of opinions on a number of political issues in population surveys does not show increasing differences of opinion on the entire scale. Over the past ten years, however, there has been a decline in agreement on the desirability of EU membership, globalisation and the direct control of citizens.
- Compared to the 1970s, the Dutch people have not started to 'hate' people more because of their views.⁸

The researchers signal major concerns among the general public about how we treat each other. The quantitatively strongest distress signal is that three quarters of the respondents agree with the statement "In our country, differences of opinion on social issues are increasing".

8 'Hate' in inverted commas, because the researchers do not know whether fewer people find hate unacceptable or whether more people use the word less seriously. Based on the results of previous surveys, they found that between 1970 and 2019, the level of hatred first decreased and then increased again.

Views on differences of opinion



The people who think that the differences of opinion have increased often also give examples, such as the discussion about Black Pete and differences of opinion about measures for the environment and climate. Others mention possible causes of the increasing diversity of opinions or polarization, such as the change(s) in mentality, the multiculturalism of the Netherlands and polarization in politics and especially in the (social) media.

The outcome could indicate that three quarters of respondents believe that polarization based on opinions has increased. However, the survey shows that actual developments in public opinion put this into perspective: there is no polarization across the board and no outbreak of (reported) feelings of hatred towards dissenters. Compared to previous similar studies, in the short term (2008 - 2019) there are only indications of divergence or polarization when it comes to globalisation, EU membership and more direct democracy.

Having established this, the researchers wondered whether affective polarization has increased; whether the opinions are not so much further apart, but the differences of opinion are more often and more extensively accompanied by negative impressions and feelings towards those who think differently. The statement “There are people I have come to hate for the views they hold” receives slightly more support in 2018 (16%) than in 2012 (13%), but less than in 1970 (19%). The researchers conclude that the most important change seems to be that the taboo on hating people who think differently has become less.

Harteveld studies the extent and configuration of affective polarization in the highly fragmented, multiparty context of the Netherlands (Harteveld 2021).⁹ For his research a panel of 1071 randomly selected participants completed an ‘affective polarization’ questionnaire, including a feeling thermometer. Respondents were asked to express their feelings towards various groups (see the next table) on a continuous scale from 0 (cold and negative), through 50 (neither warm nor cold) to 100 (positive and warm).

9 Harteveld, E., (2021). *Fragmented foes: Affective polarisation in the multiparty context of the Netherlands*. Electoral Studies, Vol. 71, June 2021, 102322, Elsevier, p. 5.

 Overview of feeling thermometer items.

Identity dimension	Items
<i>Party</i> (8 items)	“People who vote for ...” Eight main parties were listed: conservative liberal <i>VVD</i> , populist radical right <i>PVV</i> , Christian democratic <i>CDA</i> , social liberal <i>D66</i> , Green <i>GroenLinks</i> , radical left <i>SP</i> , social democratic <i>PvdA</i> , populist radical right <i>FvD</i> .
<i>Ideology</i> (2 items)	“Left-wing people” and “Right-wing people” ^a
<i>Issue</i> (6 items)	<i>Refugees</i> : “People who want to take in more refugees” and “People who want to take in fewer refugees” <i>Welfare</i> : “People who want to lower the general benefits” and “People who want to raise the general benefits” <i>Gender roles</i> : “People with a traditional views of the role of women” and “People with feminist views of the role of women”
<i>Non-political</i> (11 items)	<i>Education</i> : “Lower educated people” and “People who studied at university” <i>Ethnicity</i> : “People with a Moroccan immigration background” and “People without an immigration background” <i>Religion</i> : “Christians”, “Atheists”, and “Muslims” <i>Region</i> : “People from the Randstad” and “People from outside the Randstad” <i>Urbanity</i> : “People who live in a back city” and “People who live in the countryside”

^a I opted for ‘Left’ and ‘Right’ rather than ‘Progressive’ and ‘Conservative’ (or a variation thereof) because the former terms arguably remain dominant in everyday conversations on politics in the Netherlands.

The Netherlands is - based on party evaluations - the least affective polarized country in Europe. Nonetheless, Harteveld’s analysis shows that respondents do distinguish between parties and partisans. They report more dislike towards political outgroups than towards almost all non-political outgroups defined by education, ethnicity, urbanity, or region. Muslims, however, were an important exception. They were judged more unfavourably by a significant right-wing section of the respondents than ideological opponents. The survey also showed that rather than disliking all out-partisans equally, evaluations grow gradually colder as ideological distance towards a group increases. Affective polarization is especially strong between those who disagree on cultural issues, and between those who support and oppose the populist radical right.

THE DANGERS OF POLARIZATION

After having explored the extent and characteristics of polarization in the countries of the STOP Consortium, we now describe why polarization is a problem in societies.

*“The more polarized a society, the more people view difficult issues through a tribal lens rather than in terms of the common good of all.”*¹⁰ Tribalism compels citizens to take sides, tribe membership increasingly influences one’s overall identity, and an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ thinking starts to dominate.

This process leads to a series of negative consequences we try to summarize below.

Beliefs and opinions become more extreme and people become more confident about them

Driving factors behind this phenomenon:

- Confirmation bias: People tend to seek and consume information that is in accordance with their previously held beliefs, and that leads toward more extreme positions (Jacobson, 2010).
- Motivated reasoning: Twisting the interpretation of received information that contradicts one’s beliefs to fit the pre-existing expectations (Jacobson, 2010).
- People overwhelmingly seek out epistemic authorities (individuals they can rely on to provide them reliable information) amongst the members of their own group (Yudkin, 2018). What is being said matters far less than who is saying it.
- Discounting opposing views: people grow less able to comprehend opposing views, more likely to dismiss objections to their opinions and increasingly prone to regarding dissenters as incompetent and depraved.
- Perceiving opposing views as threats: once group polarization has taken effect on a person, he or she tends to regard the expression of viewpoints that differ from the group’s viewpoints as an attack on his or her personal identity.
- Viewing uncertainty as a mark of weakness.

¹⁰ Dixon, T., (2019). *Here’s how we solve the global crisis of tribalism and democratic decay*. Article, part of the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2019.
See: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/01/can-globalization-tackle-tribalism-and-democratic-decay/>

Positive perception of in-group members and negative perception of the others

- Social identity leads group members to hold positive sentiments toward in-group members and negative sentiments toward out-group members. The more salient the identity, the stronger the loyalty toward in-group members and the prejudice and antipathy toward out-group members tend to be (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Gaertner et al 1993).
- Participants tend to choose all positive attributions/adjectives for the supporters of the party they support (e.g they are working for the benefit of the country, honorable, smart, generous, open-minded), while they see supporters of opposing parties in a negative light (e.g they are selfish, arrogant, misguided, unable to comprehend the ‘facts’, lazy, irrational, untrustworthy) (Pew Research Center, 2016; Dixon, 2019; Erdogan, 2018; McCoy et al., 2018).
- Assuming that one’s opponents are not simply misguided, but are motivated by bad faith, it can reach a point when members of opposing groups perceive each other as enemies (Wodak, 2015, Mackie et al, 2000; Smith et al, 2007).
- *“At the extreme, each camp questions the moral legitimacy of the others, viewing the opposing camp and its policies as an existential threat to their way of life or the nation as a whole.”¹¹*

Homophily and stereotyping

- Homophily, or seeking out people with similar traits, leads people to decrease interaction with the out-group and increase it within the in-group (McCoy, Rahman & Somer, 2018).
- A propensity to view the opposing group as essentially homogeneous and treat the members of that group according to some stereotypical notion.

Zero-sum thinking

- Zero-sum thinking is the belief that one group’s gain is another group’s loss, if ‘they’ win, ‘we’ lose (Davidai & Ongis, 2019; Green et al, 2002; Mason, 2015; Wodak, 2015).
- It prevents people from opposing groups to seek joint collective actions and have shared experiences, thereby perceiving more group difference and tending to develop ‘rival’ (mutually exclusive) perceptions of their identities (McCoy et al, 2018).
- *“People whose dominant discursive-conceptual environment tells them that they are mutually exclusive ‘others’ do not seek joint collective actions. The less they undertake joint collective actions, the more their perceptions of difference, and the more likely it is that they will perceive their interests to be zero-sum.”¹²*

11 McCoy J., Rahman T., Somer M. (2018). *Polarization and the global crisis of democracy: Common patterns, dynamics, and pernicious consequences for democratic polities*. American Behavioral Scientist. Jan 2018; 62(1): 16-42, p. 19.

12 Somer, M. (2005). *Failures of the discourse of ethnicity: Turkey, Kurds, and the emerging Iraq*. *Security Dialogue*, 36(1), 109-128, p. 120.

Positive feelings towards in-group members, negative feelings towards others

- People who are on opposite sides of a polarised issue not only see each other in a certain way, but also harbour intense feelings towards each other based on their affiliation. This phenomenon is called ‘affective polarization’: positive sentiment towards in-group members and negative sentiment towards out-group members (Druckman et al., 2021; Iyengar et al. 2012; Iyengar & Westwood 2015; Mason 2015).
- Affective polarization means increased empathy towards in-group members and reduced empathy, feelings of hostility, fear and anger towards out-group members.
- *“The anger felt by partisans in the face of a threat to the party’s status is not simply anger at the prospect of failing to implement their desired issue positions. They are angry because someone is threatening their team, and the stronger their affiliation with the team, the stronger the emotional reaction to that threat, independent of the strength of the issue positions they hold.”¹³*
- *“... polarization as rooted in affect and identity stands in contrast to a long tradition in political science of studying polarization as the difference between the policy positions of Democrats and Republicans.”¹⁴*
- *“... the level of antipathy that members of each party feel toward the opposing party has surged over the past two decades. Not only do greater numbers of those in both parties have negative views of the other side, those negative views are increasingly intense. And today, many go so far as to say that the opposing party’s policies threaten the nation’s well-being.”¹⁵*

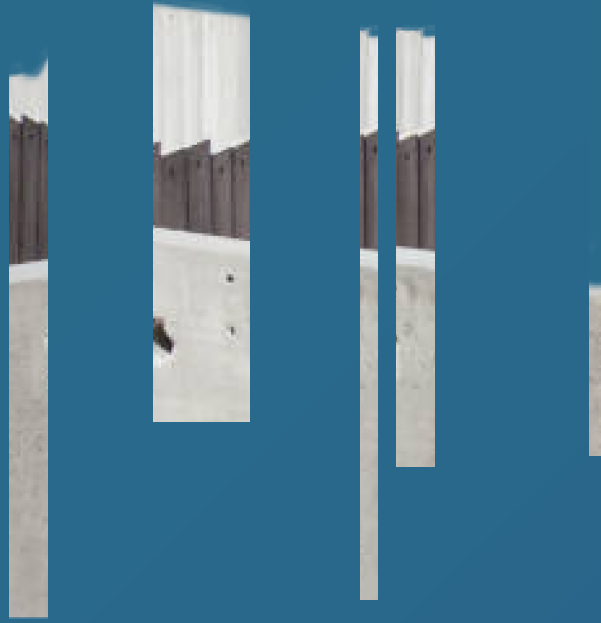
Although polarization leads to several problems in modern day society, it has to be noted that as a complex process it is not completely devoid of less damaging aspects; the recognition of these aspects helps us to better understand the phenomenon and acknowledge its benefits as well (though they are vastly outweighed by negative aspects as the process escalates):

- In-groups (an ‘us’ in opposition to a ‘them’) can serve the goals of survival and success.
- Polarization creates a sense of belonging which can give life meaning and reduce loneliness, stress, and anxiety.
- Sharply drawn political differences can help to hold politicians and parties accountable.
- Polarization can be an effective mobilization strategy.
- Polarizing tactics can help those with minority views win public attention.

13 Mason, L. (2015). *I Disrespectfully Agree: The Differential Effects of Partisan Sorting on Social and Issue Polarization*, American Journal of Political Science, Vol. 59, No. 1, 128–145, p. 130.

14 Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., & Westwood, S. J. (2019). *The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States*. Annual Review of Political Science, 22(1), 129-146, p. 131.

15 Pew Research Center, (2014). [Political polarization in the American public](#), Section 2: Growing Partisan Antipathy, p. 32.



CHAPTER 2:

**PERCEIVED
POLARIZATION,
LEVELS OF TRUST
AND POSSIBLE
COMMON GROUNDS**

CHAPTER 2:**PERCEIVED POLARIZATION,
LEVELS OF TRUST AND
POSSIBLE COMMON GROUNDS**

The first step in our research was to produce an online questionnaire that could reach a wide variety of anonymous respondents in each of the partner countries. The objective was to understand the general population's perception of polarization across the different countries, as well as the amount of trust they have towards different communities and institutions. When we formulated the online questionnaire we used questions from the Ipsos MORI survey on polarization from 2018 (that we referred to in the previous chapter, see Chapter 1/Table 3) and we also added our own questions that reflected our local experiences. Furthermore, we incorporated questions from the European Social Survey's Human Values Scales (Schwartz, 2003), so that we could assess people's value orientations. Realizing that people who have opposite views on a polarizing topic might share similar basic human values can lead to finding common grounds.

The online questionnaire was disseminated through partners' email lists, Facebook pages, websites and other digital means during the months of April and May 2021, reaching a total of 532 subjects across the participating countries.

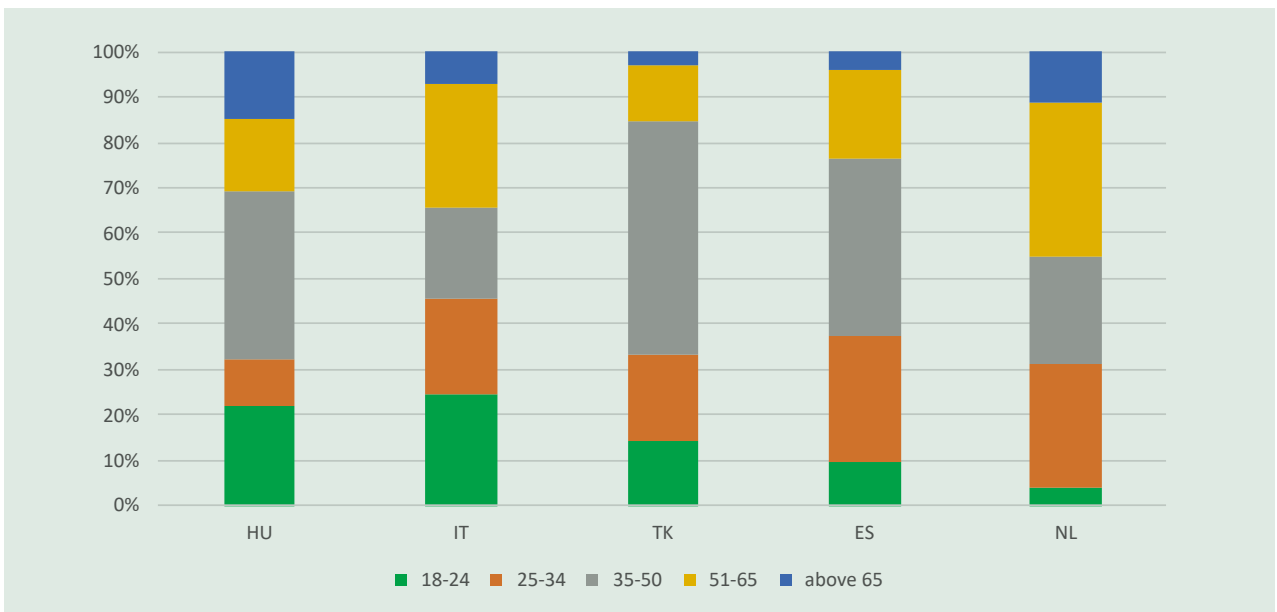
TABLE n°1: Sample size in each country

Hungary (HU)	Italy (IT)	Turkey (TK)	Spain (ES)	The Netherlands (NL)
108	114	105	105	100

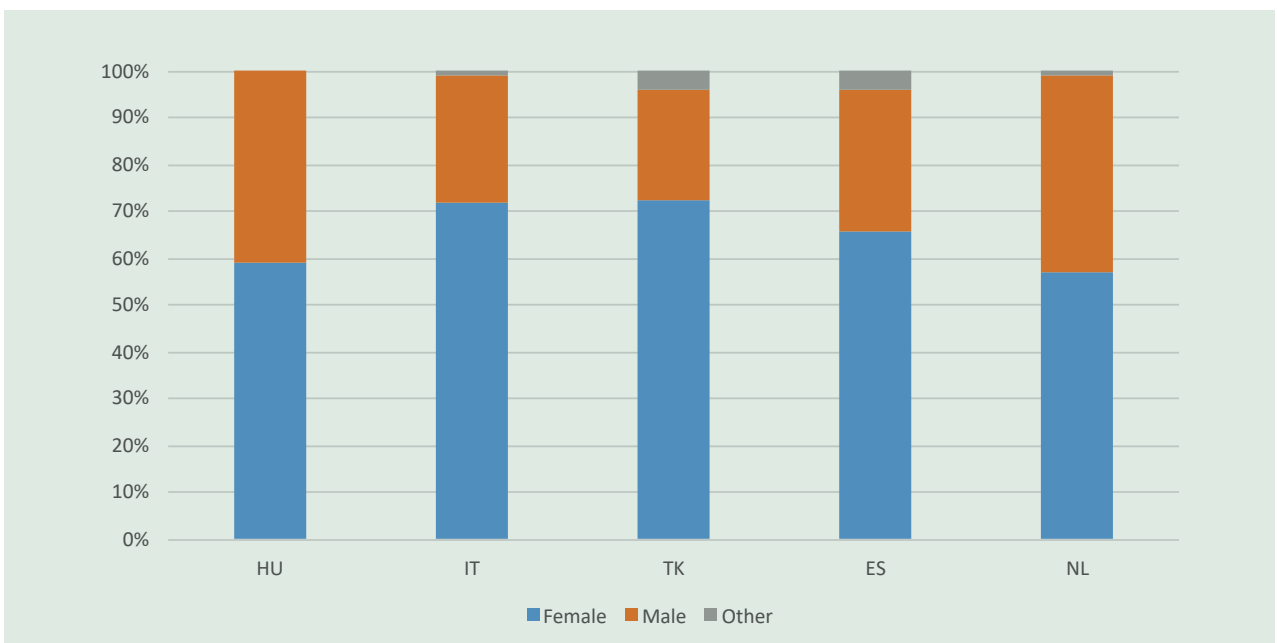
On average the participants were equally divided across the different age groups, while people above the age of 65 were underrepresented (possibly due to the use of digital media to share the survey).

Regarding genders, most respondents were female.

IMG. N°1:
Distribution of age groups in the sample



IMG. N°2:
Distribution of genders in the Sample



LEVELS OF PERCEIVED POLARIZATION

The first section of our survey was focused on how the participants perceived polarization, if and how they felt its presence in their daily life and if they perceived it as a danger to their society.

We asked the respondents to express, on a scale from 1 to 5, their agreements with specific statements regarding polarization, where 1 represented ‘complete disagreement’ and 5 represented ‘full agreement’. In the table below we indicate the average score given to each statement in the five countries.

TABLE n°2:
Average scores of Perceived Polarization

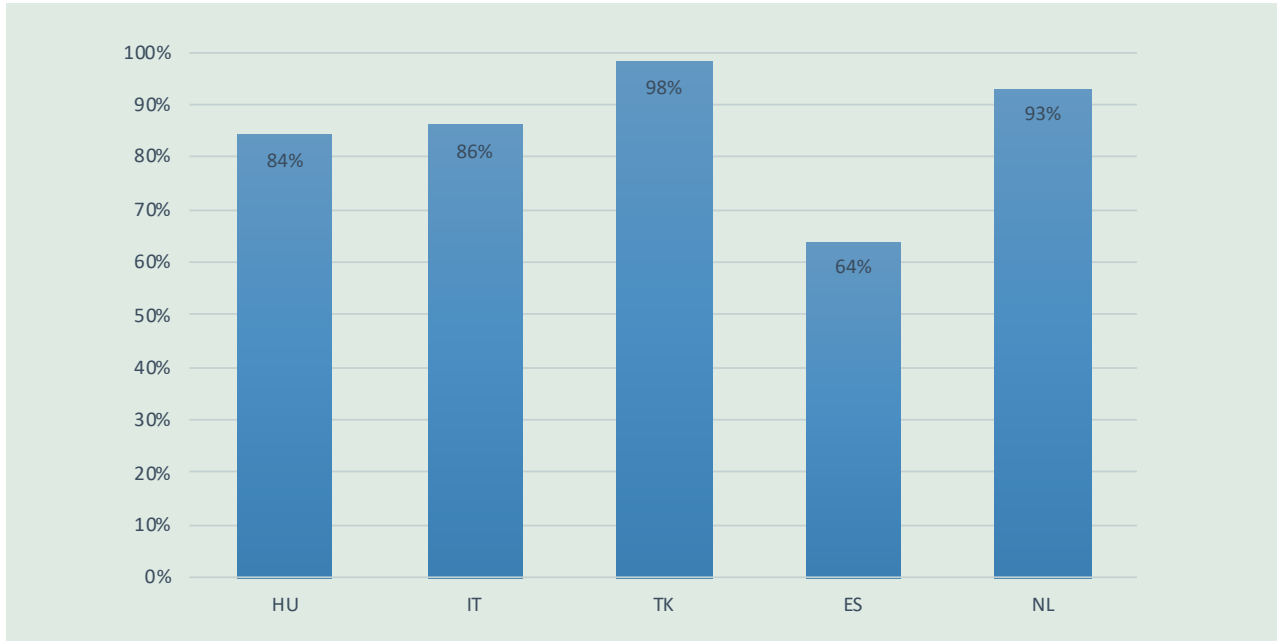
	Our society is divided	Our society is more divided than 10 years ago	People in our country are tolerant towards people with different back-grounds, cultures or points of view	Mixing with people from other back-grounds, cultures or points of view causes conflict	Our society is more tolerant than 10 years ago	People across the world have more things in common than things that make them different
HU	4,5	4,2	2,5	3,0	2,4	3,4
IT	4,0	3,5	2,6	3,1	2,7	3,8
TK	2,3	2,0	4,3	4,3	4,0	1,5
ES	3,5	3,5	3,3	3,2	3,0	4,2
NL	3,8	3,6	2,7	1,8	2,3	4,4

Based on our data, Hungarians see their society as the most divided among the partner countries – followed by Italy - , scoring above 4 on the first two questions (regarding division) and below 3 when discussing tolerance, recognising a decrease in tolerance in the past ten years. Turkish respondents perceive a good amount of tolerance in their society, but still show disbelief in shared common grounds and peaceful cohabitations. Spain and the Netherlands seem to be the most optimistic about finding common ground, but people from the Netherlands see their country as less tolerant than people in Spain.

When asked to mention a specific form of polarization they were bothered by, the majority of the respondents identified at least one form of division in their country.

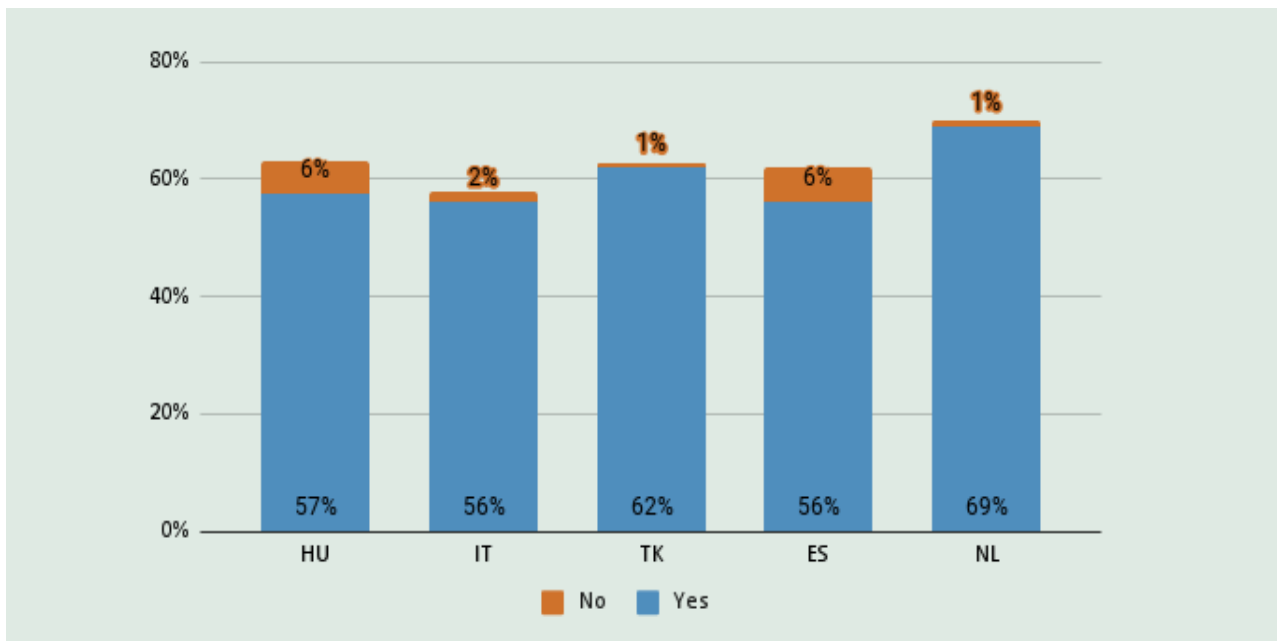
Turkey seemed to be the most bothered by such divisions, while Spain appeared to be the least, being the only country among the partners where less than 70% of the respondents showed worries about polarization in their community (see IMG n°3).

IMG n°3:
Is there any type of division that bothers you? (Yes%)



As IMG n°4 shows, the Dutch seemed the most interested in reducing the level of conflict in their society, with nearly 70% expressing a willingness to work towards a less polarized society.

IMG n°4:
If it bothers you, would you be willing to do something in order to decrease the tension?



The following table lists the issues that our respondents found most polarising in their country.

TABLE n°3: List of polarizing topics

Hungary (HU)	Italy (IT)	Turkey (TK)	Spain (ES)	The Netherlands (NL)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political polarization • Hungarians vs migrants • Habitants of big cities vs of the countryside • Rich vs. poor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reception of immigrants • LGBTI+ rights • Political polarization • Vaccinations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reception of immigrants • LGBTI+ rights • Socio-economic groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Catalan independence • Socio-economic groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reception of immigrants • Socio-economic groups

One of the processes we wanted to observe was the development of one's own position on a polarizing issue. We agreed that the ability to obtain information on a specific topic shapes our own understanding and position of an issue, therefore we decided to focus our attention to the preferred sources of information among our subjects.

TABLE n°4: Availability of reliable information sources

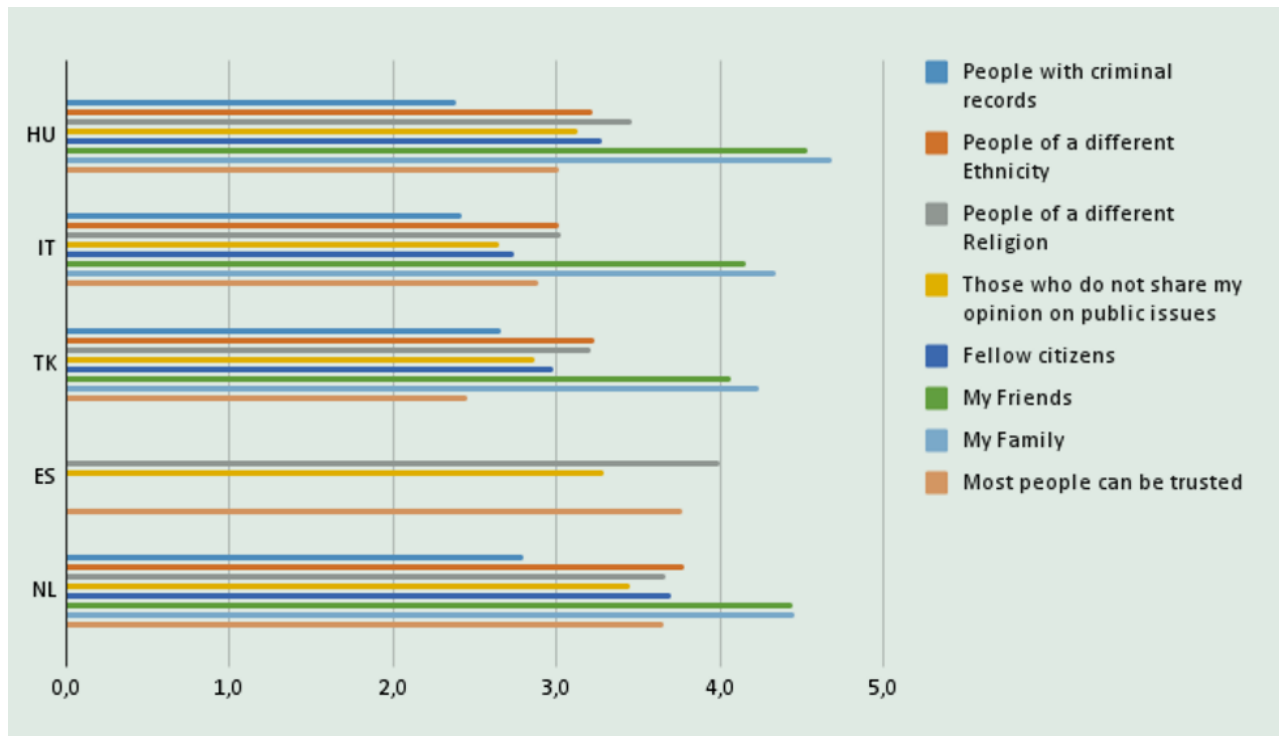
	I can find reliable information on public affairs in my own language on the main media channels (TV, radio, newspapers, online news portals)	I can form an informed opinion on public issues that are important to me	I prefer to read/ listen/follow the media of my social group/community/ political party	I search for information and make comparisons between different sources
HU	3,3	3,9	3,4	3,8
IT	3,4	4,0	2,8	2,8
TK	2,6	3,5	3,1	3,9
ES	3,8	4,2	3,1	4,0
NL	3,9	4,0	3,1	3,6

On average people in the Netherlands showed the highest, and those in Turkey the lowest level of trust in their mainstream media outlets. Spanish respondents showed the most confidence in their ability to form a well founded opinion, and they also actively compare information sources. In Italy, people express almost the same assuredness about their ability to form an informed opinion, although they are much less likely to look for information from different sources.

LEVELS OF TRUST

Different levels of trust seem to influence the escalation (or de-escalation) of tensions and conflicts in different communities.

IMG n°5: Levels of trust, per country

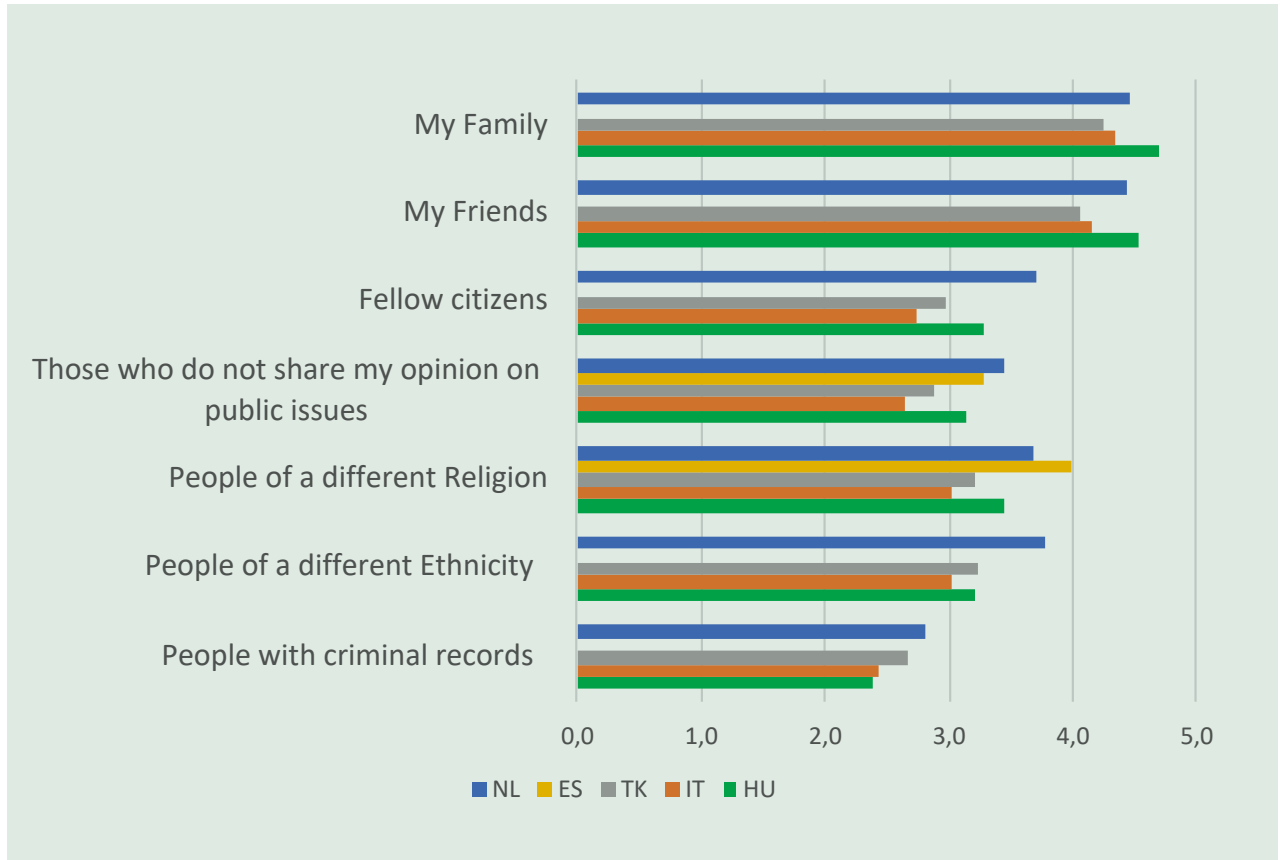


As shown in image n°5 both Hungary and the Netherlands showed above average levels of trust towards the majority of the categories suggested, showing level of distrust only towards people with criminal records. Italy showed a higher than average level of trust towards members of their close community only. Spain didn't include some of the categories in their survey, so data for comparison is insufficient.

All showed higher levels of trust in people of different ethnicities than in people with different opinions on public affairs. In Hungary, Italy and Turkey respondents showed greater trust in people of different religions than in people with different opinions on public issues, or in fellow citizens.

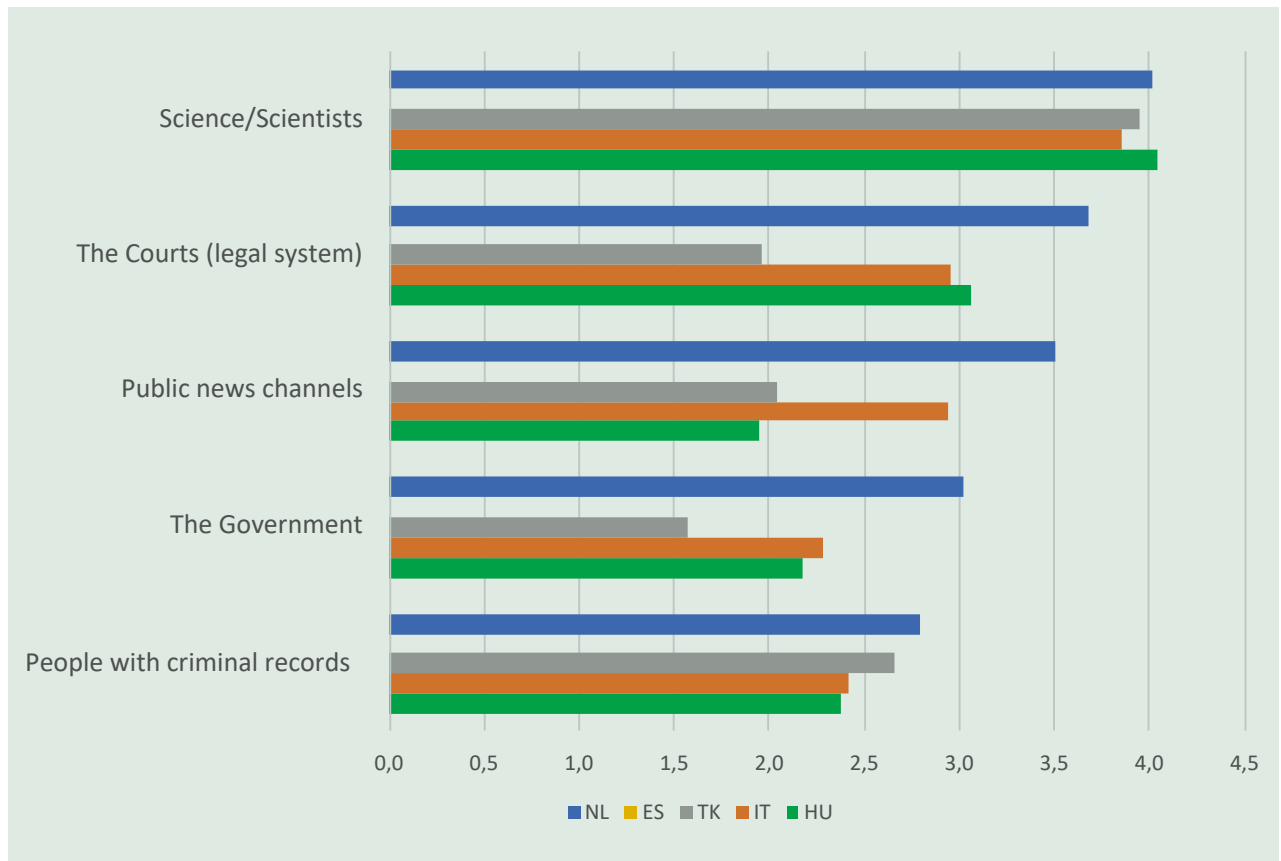
Image n°6 depicts the same data as the previous one, but broken down by trust category instead of country. The Netherlands seems to be the most trusting country, scoring on average higher than any of the other countries. Spain shows the highest level of trust in people who adhere to different religions. Hungary scored highest in the categories related to close community (friends and family) and scored above average in all other categories, except for the category 'people with criminal records', where it scored lowest. With the exception of 'friends' and 'family', Italy scored below average in all other categories and had the lowest score of all, except for the category 'people with criminal records', where it was tied with Hungary. Turkey and the Netherlands showed the highest levels of trust in persons with a criminal record.

IMG n°6: Level of trust in people, per category



We then looked at the level of trust in systems and institutions (see IMG n°7).

IMG n°7: Level of trust in systems



IMG n°7 shows that the Netherlands once again proved to be the most trusting country.

Hungary only shows a high level of trust in the scientific community, with the lowest score given to the category 'public service news channels'. Turkey shows to be the most distrustful towards their own government. Hungary, Italy and Turkey, declared to have more trust in people with criminal records than in their own government. We looked at this result more closely and found that in all three countries, the majority of the sample (around 60% in Hungary and Italy, 88% in Turkey) represented people who had little or no trust in their government (scoring 1 or 2 out of 5 on this scale), and these were the people who had slightly more trust in people with criminal records. Those who trusted the government more (scoring 3, 4 or 5 on this scale) gave slightly lower scores to people with criminal records. In summary, our questionnaire reached mostly people who were opposed to the government in these countries.

In the Netherlands, this question was formulated differently (instead of asking about trust in the government, the question was worded as: is there trust in politicians and civil servants), in Spain the question was omitted.

Further studies on a larger and more representative sample would be needed to get a better insight in the issue.

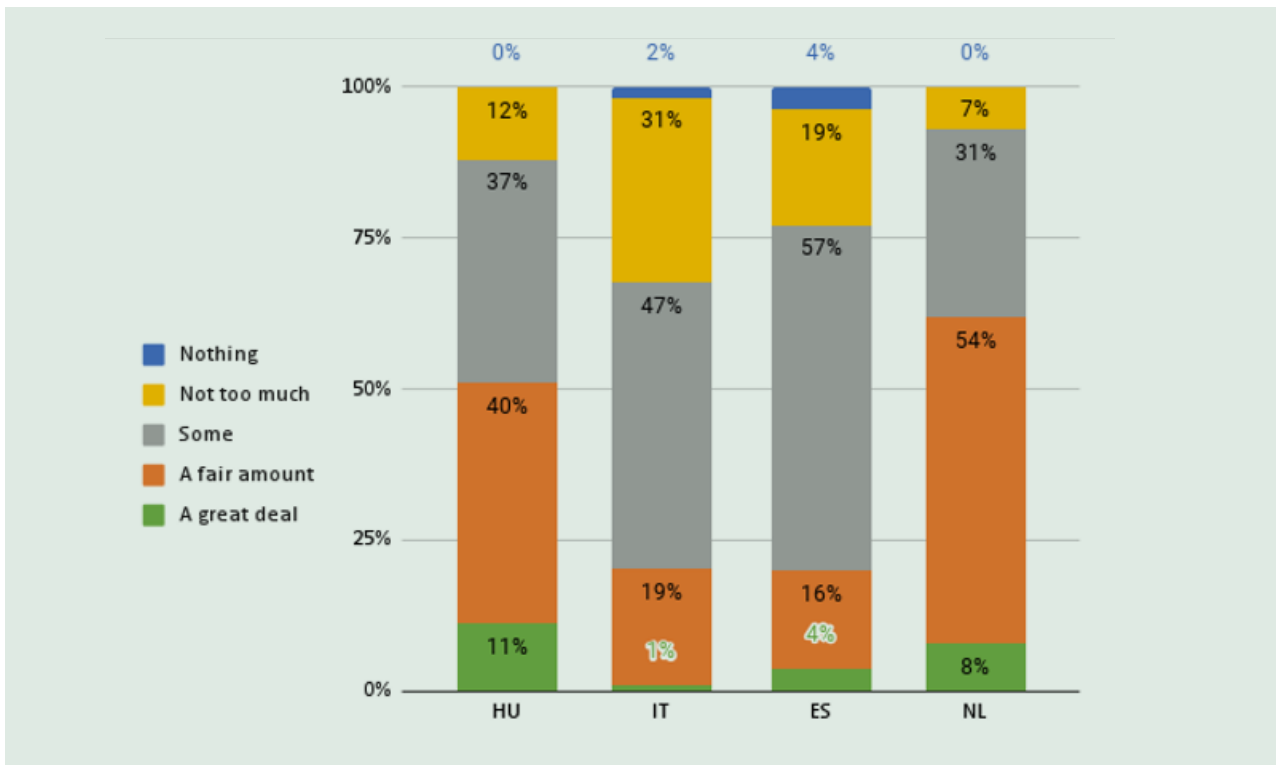
RELATIONSHIP WITH, AND VIEWS OF ‘THE OTHER’ SIDE

In the next section, we analyse how people perceive those who hold views that are contrary to their own, and whether they have personal contact with such people.

We asked the following question first (see IMG n°8):

“In your opinion, how much common ground is there between you and those people who don’t share your opinions on public issues that are important to you?”

IMG n°8: Common grounds



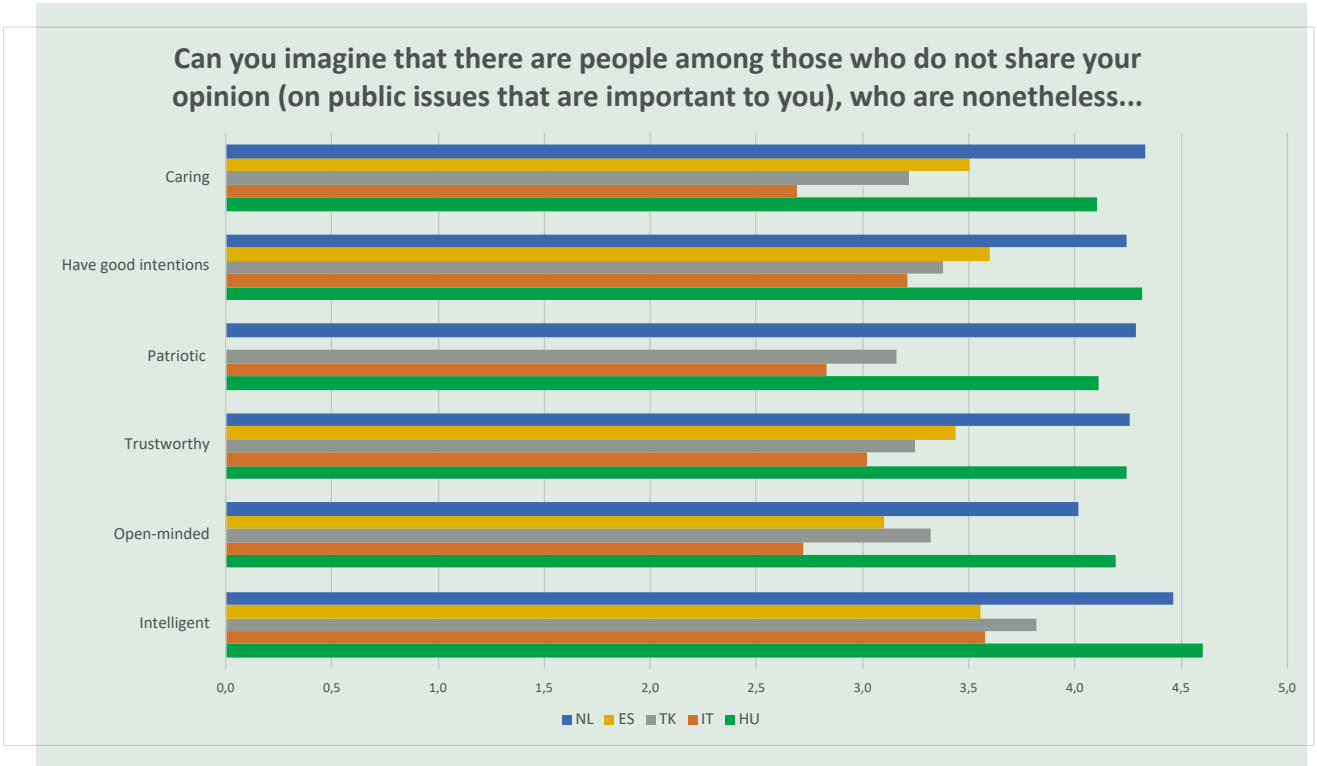
As shown in Figure 8, in the Netherlands and Hungary more than 50% of respondents thought they had quite a lot in common with those who held opposing views, while in Spain and Italy the proportion was around 20%.

Next, we wanted to know what characteristics, traits and intentions respondents attribute to those who hold views contrary to their own.

IMG n°9 shows the results. It appears that of the partner countries, Hungarian and Dutch respondents are the most likely to recognise that the ‘other’ can have positive traits.

Intelligence was the most recognized quality in the ‘other’ in all countries, while devotion for one’s country (patriotism) was the least recognized. Italy appears to recognise the qualities of an ‘opponent’ the least, with the lowest average score in all categories.

IMG n°9: Perception of the other



Another aspect of the interaction between polarized groups that we wanted to analyse, was the relationship between people belonging to opposite ‘groups’. We wanted to know if the respondent had an ongoing relationship with someone who held an opposing view and what kind of relationship they had.

TABLE n°5: Relationships with people on ,the other’ side

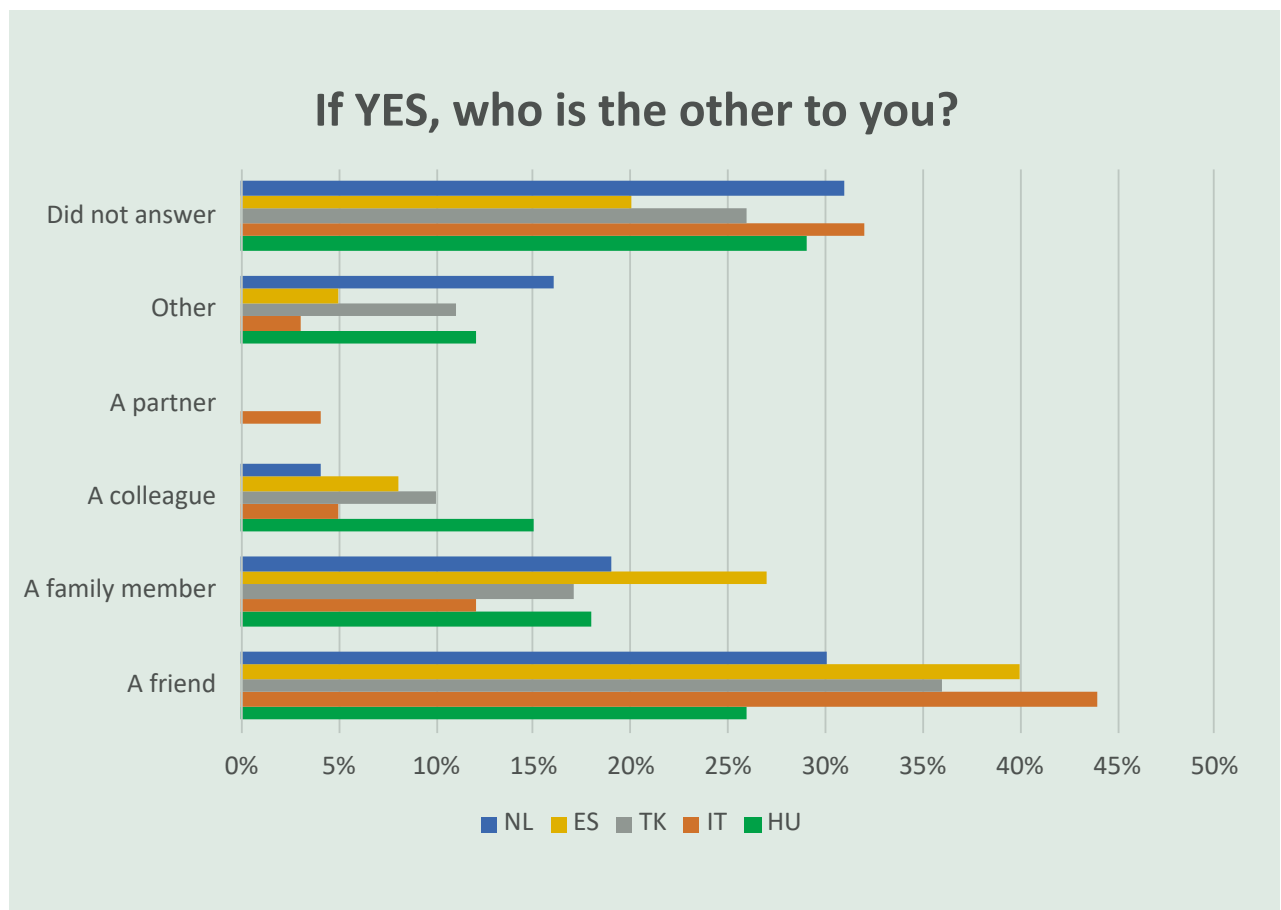
Do you have a close, personal relationship with someone who has a very different opinion on public issues than you?				
	Yes	If NO, would you like to have such a relationship (YES, %)	If NO, would you like to have such a relationship (NO, %)	I search for information and make comparisons between different sources.
HU	55%	4%	28%	3,8
IT	68%	11%	22%	2,8
TK	73%	11%	20%	3,9
ES	78%	24%	18%	4,0
NL	61%	18%	8%	3,6

As table n°5 shows, we had a wide array of answers.

Spain and Turkey were found to be the countries where relations between opposing groups are most common. Those in Spain seem to be the most open to such a relationship if they do not already have one. Hungarians seem to have the least contact with people who think differently from their own group, and they are the least open to such contact if they do not have it, and the most vocal in their rejection of such contact.

When asked what type of relationship respondents have with the ‘other party’ (see Image n°10), ‘friendship’ was the most common answer in all countries. Hungary and the Netherlands had the highest proportion of respondents who did not answer this question. Spain had the highest proportion of respondents who had family members with whom they held opposing views.

IMG n°10: Types of Relationship



VALUES PEOPLE FIND IMPORTANT

The last part of our survey was devoted to analysing the values shared by the different groups.

We wanted to explore:

- Potential common ground between groups
- Potential differences in values between groups
- Potential cross-cultural differences

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, we based this section on the guidelines proposed in Dr. Shalom H. Schwartz's paper "A Proposal for Measuring Value Orientations across Nations".

In the values questionnaire proposed by Schwartz, people are asked to assess how similar they are to different fictitious persons who hold specific values. Respondents must decide whether the personality described is:

- very much like them
- like them
- somewhat like them
- a little like them
- not like them
- not like them at all

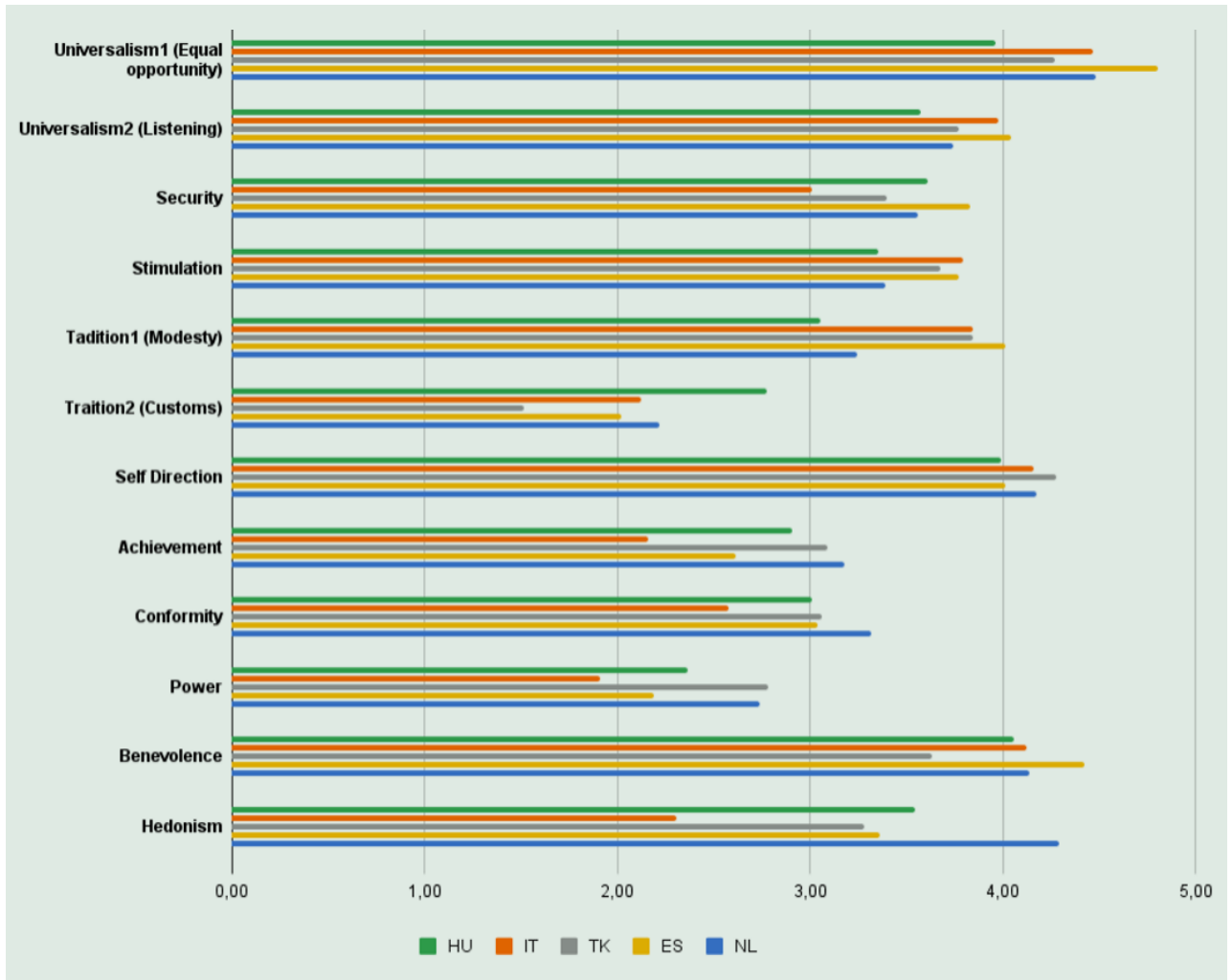
Responses were scored on a scale of 0 to 5, where 0 corresponds to 'not at all like me' and 5 to 'very much like me'.

In order not to overwhelm our participants with too many questions, we selected 12 items out of the 21 items of the original questionnaire in a way that all values (see below) were represented by at least one question. Below we list the sentences we have asked our participants to react to:

1. **UNIVERSALISM 1 (Equal Opportunities):** S/he thinks it is important that everyone in the world is treated equally. S/he believes that all people should have equal opportunities in life.
2. **UNIVERSALISM 2 (Listening):** It is important to him/her to listen to people who are different from him/her. Even when s/he disagrees with them, S/he still wants to understand them.
3. **SECURITY:** It is important to him/her to live in secure surroundings. S/he avoids anything that might endanger his/her safety.
4. **STIMULATION:** He/she likes surprises and is always looking for new things to do. S/he thinks it is important to do lots of different things in life.
5. **TRADITION 1 (Modesty):** It is important to him/her to be humble and modest. S/he tries not to draw attention to himself/herself.
6. **TRADITION 2 (Customs):** Tradition is important to him/her. S/he tries to follow the customs handed down by his/her religion or his/her family.
7. **SELF DIRECTION:** It is important to him/her to make his/her own decisions about what s/he does. S/he likes to be free and not depend on others.
8. **ACHIEVEMENT:** Being very successful is important to him/her. S/he hopes people will recognise his/her achievements.
9. **CONFORMITY:** It is important to him/her always to behave properly. S/he wants to avoid doing anything people would say is wrong.
10. **POWER:** It is important to him/her to get respect from others. S/he wants people to do what s/he says.
11. **BENEVOLENCE:** It is important to him/her to be loyal to his/her friends. S/he wants to devote himself/herself to people close to him/her.
12. **HEDONISM:** S/he seeks every chance s/he can to have fun. It is important to him/her to do things that give him/her pleasure.

In the following graphs we report the average scores for each value in each country.

IMG n°11: Values



From the data collected, it seems that ‘universalism’ is a highly recognised value, with people generally agreeing with the importance of equal opportunities, although they attach slightly less importance to listening, despite the fact that it represents the same value.

Listening is still one of the most popular values, scoring above 3.5 in all partner countries.

The importance of ‘security’ seems to be most recognised in Spain and least in Italy, but it scores at, or above the average (3) in all countries.

‘Stimulation’ seems to be more important for people in Italy, Spain and Turkey and less important for people in Hungary and the Netherlands, according to our samples.

If we conceptualise ‘tradition’ as the importance of modesty, it is a popular value in Spain, Italy and Turkey, and to a lesser extent in Hungary and the Netherlands. On the other hand, if we conceptualise tradition as the importance of keeping family and religious customs, its attractiveness is much lower in all 5 samples.

‘Self-Direction’ is generally considered very important, with autonomy being seen by many as a state to strive for, with Turkey scoring the highest.

The importance of ‘achievement’ as a value varies between countries, with the Netherlands and Turkey reporting it as of average importance, while Hungary, Spain and Italy attribute lower scores to it.

‘Conformity’ is not a very popular value in our samples with most scores averaging around 3.

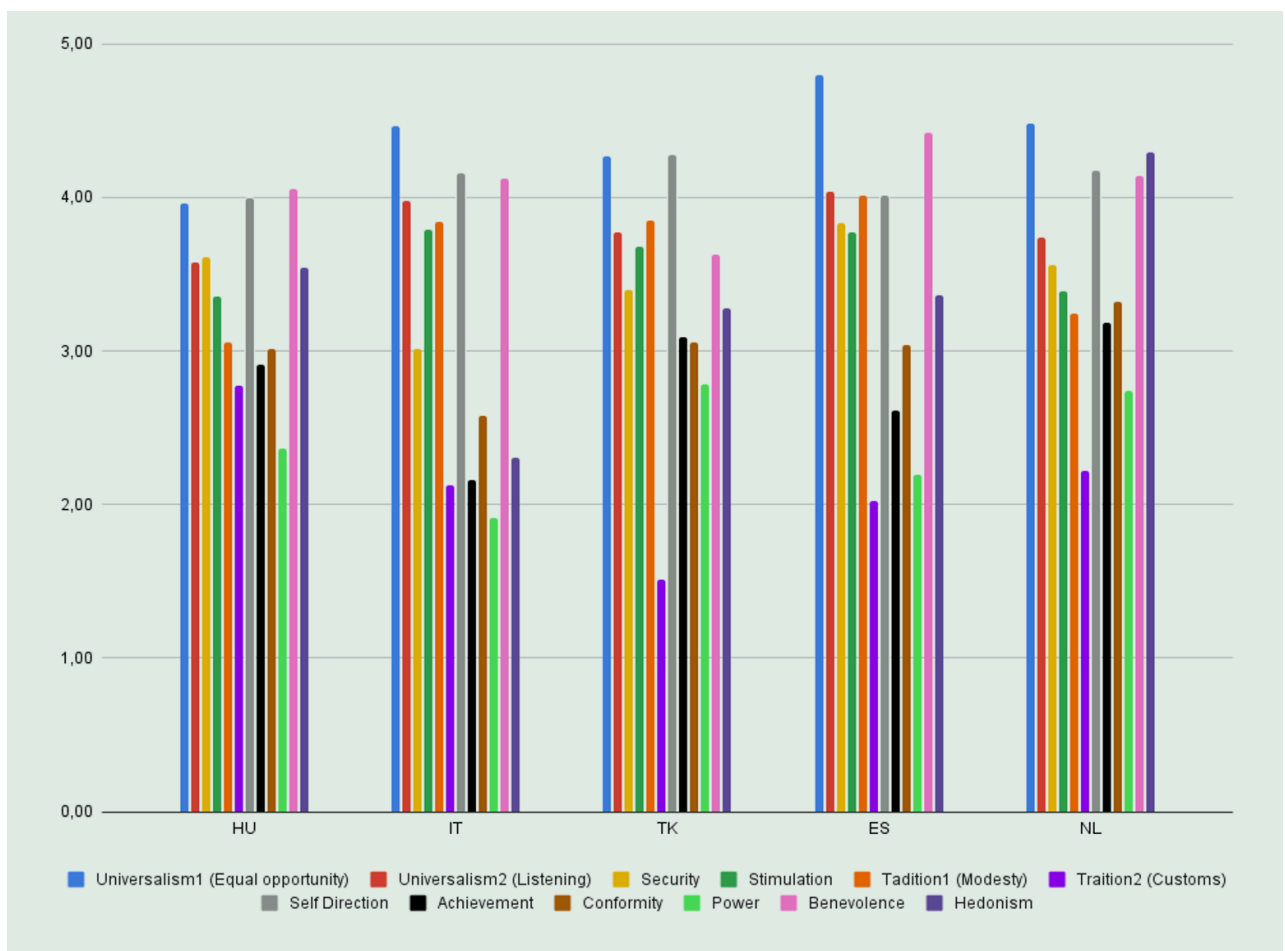
‘Power’ is among the least popular values in the questionnaire. This may reflect the particular characteristics of our respondents - as discussed earlier, people who do not trust the government are over-represented in our samples and these people may tend to lean towards ‘liberal values’ - where solidarity and equality are more important than power or achievement.

‘Benevolence’ is one of the few values for which the majority of scores are above 4. Loyalty to our friends and devotion to people close to us seems to be important across countries and presumably across polarization lines.

‘Hedonism’ scores high in the Netherlands (above 4), medium to high in Hungary, Spain and Turkey, and one of the lowest scores in Italy.

In IMG 12 (below), we can observe and compare the importance given to the selected values in each country.

IMG n°12: Values, per country



Hungarians are the only ones who do not give 'Equal Opportunity' the highest score. At the next level are 'Security', 'Listening', 'Hedonism' and 'Stimulation'. At the middle-low level are both aspects of 'Tradition', as well as 'Conformity' and 'Achievement'. The lowest score is given to 'Power'.

The Italian graph is slightly more varied, with the highest recognised values being 'Equal Opportunity', 'Self-Direction' and 'Benevolence', followed by 'Listening', 'Modesty' and 'Stimulation'. 'Security' has an average score, while 'Conformity' scores slightly lower (and it gets the lowest score here out of the 5 countries). As in Hungary, 'Power' is the least popular of the values and the only one that does not reach a score of 2.

Turkey has the largest gap between the highest and lowest scores, with 'Equal Opportunity' and 'Self-Direction' both above 4 and 'Tradition - Customs' well below 2 (the lowest score of all). It is also striking that the majority of the scores are consistently in the medium-high zone, with 'Achievement' and 'Conformity' just above 3 and 'Power' just below 3.

Spain assigns the highest importance to 'Equal Opportunity' (of all values in all countries). Among the other partner countries, Spain gives the highest scores to 'Benevolence', 'Listening', 'Tradition - Modesty' and 'Security'.

Among the partner countries, the Netherlands gives the highest score (above 4) to 'Hedonism', which was considered more important than 'Benevolence'. Dutch respondents rated 'Power' and 'Tradition - Customs' as the least important, with 'Power' scoring below 3 and 'Tradition - Customs' just above 2.



CHAPTER 3:

**POLARIZATION-
PERSONAL
DEFINITIONS AND
EXPERIENCES**

CHAPTER 3:

POLARIZATION- PERSONAL DEFINITIONS AND EXPERIENCES

After having carried out the online surveys, we wanted to gain deeper insight into how people perceive polarization in their countries, how they would define the phenomenon and how they experience it in their everyday lives. We were eager to collect personal stories linked to polarization and more in-depth information about what experiences have shaped our interviewees' opinions.

Interviewees were not challenged, they were just asked to describe their perceptions and experiences. They did not need to look at their own position from a different angle or to try to find redeeming qualities in the opposite sides. (We explored these situations in focus groups, described in Chapter 4).

The interviews followed a similar structure in the different countries to allow us to compare responses. First of all, we asked the interviewees to define the concept of polarization, to share which polarizing issues they had encountered in their personal life and what their feelings and thoughts were about them. The formulation of specific questions was left to the individual interviewers in order to better adapt to the information received from the interviewees and to create a friendly atmosphere in which it would be easier to talk.

In some countries, interviewers suggested specific polarising topics of concern to their own community (for example, political polarization); in others, the conversation was more free.

We intended to select people from all ages, genders and from different locations and views when we selected our interviewees in order to get access to different lines of thoughts, experiences, concerns. Each partner country interviewed an average of 6-7 people, with a total of 32 people interviewed in 5 different countries. The interviews were conducted in person, by phone or online (depending on the interviewee's place of residence and the COVID situation) and lasted approximately 30-60 minutes.

DEFINITION OF POLARIZATION

The first step in the interviews was to ask people to try to define the concept of ‘polarization’. As the backgrounds of the subjects were very diverse, there was a wide range of responses, but there were still some recurring elements.

“It’s just that instead of being able to talk to each other in a normal tone of voice, people are berating each other.”

“Assuming we’re not dealing with physics, I would define polarization as radicalised dualism in differing, strongly opposing opinions. If I were to make a comparison, I would say that it is to address social issues and debates as if we were cheering for two different teams at a football match.”

“... when people are so stuck in their thinking that a discussion about politics, for example, is never an exchange of ideas. They just repeat the ‘facts’ and don’t listen. This ultimately leads to nothing but annoyance on both sides.”

“Two positions that are completely opposite and repel each other. This is what defines the division, the separation, the lack of contact and the contact, the total disengagement. The two sides can communicate with each other, but they are separated”.

“It is impossible to reach an agreement; these two sides will never come to an agreement.”

People have linked polarization to groups of people divided by

- ethnicity or race and/or
- political views and/or
- views on sexual preferences and their acceptance
- and/or material resources.

Or to certain thoughts and behaviours, such as:

- ‘us’ versus ‘them’ thinking and behaviour;
- people’s inability, once they have ‘chosen’ one group, to listen to and consider the views or thoughts of people in the other group. (The ‘chosen’ is in brackets, because the interviewees’ statements suggest that they believe few people really choose. They merely follow someone they look up to in their own circles and do not question why they follow a group leader).

Some things stood out to us because they were mentioned by several interviewees:

- the impact of the difference in financial resources on the emergence and persistence of polarization;
- the lack of independent thinking by people who align themselves with a person or group they look up to.

Although our studies have not confirmed the role of privilege and inequality between the two opposing sides in the development of polarization, it is certainly worth noting the perception of power dynamics between the two groups, as each side tends to complain about the ‘power’ of the other or the ‘threats’ they pose to the community.

PERCEIVED CAUSES OF POLARIZATION

We then asked respondents to explain what they think are the reasons that drive polarization.

The responses were varied, with many of our interviewees unclear whether polarization is a conscious process. There were examples where people noted that polarization is often used as a tool by politicians to divide the population.

“Whenever the ruling party announces anything, tries to do anything, the opposition immediately jumps in and often denounces government members in a derogatory tone”.

Others argued that polarization was a natural escalation of daily conflicts left unresolved for too long.

“When you try to dictate your ideas to others, it leads to polarization. Because when someone does that, the other party starts to build walls against that person.”

What they all seemed to agree on, however, was the major role of aggression, frustration and miscommunication in the escalation of polarized disputes:

“If there was only a difference of opinion, the left and the right would balance each other out, one could appease the other. But what we are facing cannot be solved by communication, because every possible platform for free expression is dominated by the ruling party. Therefore, the other side can only express its opinion by shouting, it has to fight to be heard, which is not a discourse that fits in a constitutional state.”

Some interviewees described the polarized debate as a source of entertainment, referring to the way in which television talk shows often use the debates between polarized parties to attract and entertain audiences.

“I like debating, after all there is always something to learn from others, even if we disagree, it’s different when you find someone who doesn’t really have the knowledge to debate but thinks he (or she) does, that’s when the fun starts, the more slogans and clichés, the more fun it is to refute what he says. He ends up spinning round and round like a hamster in a wheel, I hope that person realises how ridiculous he is.”

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH POLARIZATION

Many of our interviews described to us how polarization affects their lives and the lives of others.

“I’ve always experienced it, the language around me... these migrants who don’t work and live off what we pay in taxes ... You hear this discourse on the TV, on the bus ... you go to a bar and there are people sitting at the table next to you who talk like this ... and not necessarily people with a lot of resources, but people in the middle class, or even people who are very close to people who don’t have resources.”

“It’s actually everywhere, you don’t have to look for it, just sit in a bar for an hour and you’ll see a group of old people arguing about this and that, just arguing, nothing interesting in what they’re saying. Last week there were a couple of men just arguing about which politician was better than the other, all I could hear was the shouting.”

“Even in TV programs I see people talking at the same time, without listening to each other. They set a very bad example. Our problem is to not listen to each other.”

Many interviewees described situations in which they felt a wide range of upsetting emotions: rage, anger, sadness, hopelessness, fear. Conflicts and tensions are difficult situations, they have an emotional toll and activate coping mechanisms.

“I couldn’t interact with any of the groups, it felt absurd to me, the strangest thing was that at a certain point the discussion turned into the repetition of sentences like -you want to suppress our freedom of expression- or -you want to censor us-, all of those were accusations the community had used in the past against other more serious opponents.”

Most of them avoid getting deep into arguments as they don’t like conflicts, they don’t have a firm opinion and/or they feel that there is no point arguing, neither side would persuade the other.

“I’m a sensitive person, I rarely want to argue with someone, also I felt outnumbered and it was not a topic I was very well versed in... at that moment I simply wanted to stop, I felt this great sense of letdown and frustration, if I had felt like it I could have continued, but what was the point? We dropped the topic and started talking about something else, I felt a great emptiness.”

There are rare occasions when discussion is still possible, to a certain extent:

“I remember a argument I had with a friend of mine, years ago, I don’t really remember what we were saying to each other, but a certain point he stopped me and said-I think we should stop here, you said what you had to and I did it too, we are now just repeating ourselves and we’re not gonna change each other opinion today, this exchange is not constructive any more, let it rest, you gave me lots to think about and I hope I did the same, lets stop and see if something else happens tomorrow- I think I learned a great lesson that day.”

Although recognizing the inability to move on in the discussion, it is not sufficient in itself to break the chain of conflict:

“We can get pretty angry at each other and both of us can be very angry at the other’s ‘ignorance’. Sometimes we decide to just ‘disagree’ and promise to look into the subject and talk about it another time. Often the next time, we’ll be at each other’s throats again, but we’ll never part as enemies.”

In another case, the debate is possible as neither side is fully committed:

“We can resolve this in a reasonable way, we both know that there is no point in arguing about this, because neither of us is fully committed to either side, we can see how in certain matters it’s one side and in others the other side that is worthy of support.”

Sometimes an agreement is not reached, but there are no intense negative emotions as people understand how their friends or relatives became supporters of a position.

Other testimonies deal with the big sense of confusion that polarization creates around a controversial topic, highlighting how often polarized groups stop looking for a solution for the purpose of arguing with each other:

“I am very happy that van der Laan [the former Mayor of Amsterdam] abolished Black Petes in Amsterdam and introduced Rainbow Petes instead. But my children consider the Sint Nicholas festivities a children’s party which should include Black Petes. They do not see any racism in the phenomena. I think that the debate is missing content in the sense that it is not clear to everybody what the debate really is about. And when a well-known black football player who plays Black Pete with Ajax says that he has no problem with that, it is of course grist to the mill of the advocates of the preservation of Black Pete. The unrest caused by the Black Pete discussion has meanwhile led to policemen in blackface being included in the Saint Nicholas parade to defuse that unrest. That is no longer a children’s party, is it?”

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN 'TRIBES'

Many of the interviewees talked about the risk of creating tense vibes at work when it comes to a discussion regarding controversial topics. The same can happen between friends and in the family.

".. there were times when there were serious differences between us and when we were out drinking, our conversations turned into these offensive arguments and accusations ...(..) we can agree on certain current political issues, but not on the fundamentals."

"I have very opposing friendships. When I turned 50, my friends threw a party for me and I almost had a breakdown, thinking 'these people can't get along'. For me it was a shock to see them all together...at that moment I was the bond of union...I wasn't comfortable at that party, because I thought 'at some point this is going to blow up'."

Some interviewees seemed more sensitive to the issue of relationships with members of the 'opposite side', as conflict often occurred with a parent, creating a damaging environment in the family.

"The classic family scene is me and my father arguing in front of my mother, she usually shouts "I can't stand it any more, stop it now!" I remember one day she reached her limit, she simply took the door and went out of the house leaving me and my father alone to shout at each other. I usually stay silent, I leave my father talk, or it would be non-stop fighting. He doesn't understand, he keeps talking about stuff he really doesn't know about and after a while I snap and answer him, that is the beginning of the end."

"It is frustrating: when we argue I feel the rage growing and growing inside of me, I see it growing inside of him, after a while I reach the point of no return, I stop, I leave, try to be alone and try to make this anger leave me, usually by crying."

The opposite is also possible; many interviewees denied trying to maintain relationships with members of the 'other side', some describing it as a conscious act, others as a natural part of growing up.

"I don't think I have such friends. After all, by growing up you start developing your personality, you start to frequent places you like, where you meet people with similar tastes, with a shared background. Yes, sometimes we argue, but nothing separates us so much to disturb our friendship. We all share the same values after all."

EVOLUTION OF OWN VIEWS

To better understand the different positions, we asked our interviewees to explain how their positions were formed and what ultimately made them ‘choose sides’. Many recognised the importance of personal experience in shaping one’s ideas.

“There are not many young people who decide to be loyal to one party for the rest of their lives [...] not like the current 60-70 year olds who grew up in a completely different system. They were part of the regime change, and see today’s politics completely differently from us, who have been involved in these things for only a few years.”

Interviewees also highlighted the important role that information sources play in the development of one’s own view on any given subject. The ability to gain and interpret information seems to be the key (according to our interviewees) to ‘choose the right side’ (although many pointed out that the ‘right side’ is purely a matter of perspective).

Almost all interviewees agreed that the media, including social media, play a major role in polarization processes. One spoke about the availability of platforms that give people the opportunity to voice their ideas and thus gain followers, another mentioned the danger of one-sided information that people choose in order to gain confirmation of their opinions, while yet another one emphasized the fact that people choose a particular source of information because everyone around them chooses it, which also leads to a one-sided orientation.

“I think everyone forms their opinion in the same way, the difference is where they look for information. One of the things I noticed is that often there is confusion between opinions and facts: people would simply listen to what a trusted person says and accept it as a fact without question.”

“The first thing that comes to my mind is algorithms. Basically, because the most tangible thing I see about polarization, beyond the media, is what happens on social networks, on Facebook, for example... How, based on your searches, your likes, your comments... all these algorithms that are behind it are the ones that then show you one thing or another and are the ones that in some way contribute to this polarization, that make us believe that everyone thinks like us and that’s not the case... what happens is that we only see that.”

“I am curious and try to fathom what something is about; really about. Many people don’t do that, they just parrot each other without really getting to know something or they let themselves be informed by one source. And that is often an accessible source, or information that confirms what they already thought.”

The idea of living in a bubble is very relevant when analyzing polarization. The interviewee talks about this strong feeling of shared experience, thoughts, tastes, ideas....its power and effects at the emotional level and also at a cognitive level, as those individuals 'living in a bubble' form a group who believes that everyone thinks or should think the same way as they do, and that those who do not think the same way constitute a small and wrong minority.

Also the different access of education and the variety of inputs received is recognized as a turning point in the development of one's own position.

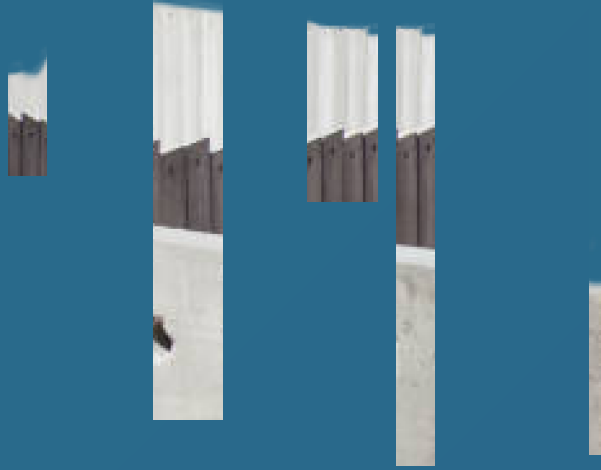
"I had many opportunities: I traveled the world, met many people, studied abroad, I had the possibility to form a broad knowledge on many topics. My father lived almost all of his life in a small town, couldn't study. Of course he would be so closed minded."

"... the inequality in access to good education, healthcare, labor market, etc. and most of these inequalities can be traced back to money and having or not having it and to being a migrant or not."

The need to belong to a group was also listed as a reason for the eventual 'choice' for a side. It is thus no surprise that many people acknowledge that a lot of members of two different sides are simply in need to be part of a group.

"I always felt like there was some emptiness in her: she felt the need to be part of something, something good, something big, she wanted to be guided, and those rigid structures, those well organized activities gave her what she needed, but behind the volunteer work and the cultural meetings there was a well hidden hypocrisy."

"We label other people as we label ourselves...we are continuously looking to belong to something."



CHAPTER 4:

**DYNAMICS
IN POLARIZED
GROUPS**

CHAPTER 4: DYNAMICS IN POLARIZED GROUPS

WHAT IS A FOCUS GROUP?

To be able to explore how people interact in a group that includes individuals holding opposite views, we organised focus groups in all 5 countries. A focus group is a small-group discussion, guided by a trained leader. It has a designated topic which the group discusses through a set of pre-defined, open questions. The composition of the group is carefully planned as it is important that all participants feel safe to express their opinions. Group members react to each other and in this way new thoughts could be generated, which might not occur during one-on-one interviews. Non-verbal communication can also be studied.

In our case we wanted to explore how group dynamics work in a polarized group in which sensitive/taboo topics are not avoided. We wondered whether participants were willing to open up, to listen to each other and whether they could gain a better understanding of where people from the opposite side come from. We also needed to test whether heated arguments could be controlled in such a way that the group would not fall apart. Lastly, we wanted to see how rigid participants' opinions are, and whether they were willing to criticise their own position and/or acknowledge the merits of the 'other' position to any extent. When positions are not that rigid any more, 'depolarization within' can start; people begin to think less in black-and-white terms.

In the following we will describe how we organised the groups, what kind of polarizing topics we explored through these groups, how we structured our questions, and what insights we gained during these sessions. We will also address the group dynamics and the conclusions we have drawn from our experiences. We hope that the insights gained from these discussions can help develop future training, aimed at decreasing tension between opposing groups.

ORGANISING FOCUS GROUPS ON POLARIZATION

Each partner country organised a total of 3 focus groups in 2021-2022. Some of these were carried out online, others were organised in a way that allowed the participants to meet each other in person. Both methods worked fine. The group discussions lasted about 2 hours each and usually 6-10 people participated, with the exception of one, in which 18 students were involved.

We explored topics that deeply affect people's lives in our countries; topics that generate strong feelings and tension between people and divide them into opposing groups, such as: political polarization, attitude towards (mandatory) Covid vaccination, attitude towards independence for Catalonia, attitude towards adoption rights for same-sex couples, among others.

The recruitment process was organised in various ways. Some partners gave the participants a small incentive (like Tesco vouchers, worth about 12 euros). We recruited individuals through the networks of our organisations, through paid Facebook ads, or through street protests (in the case of one group that explored attitudes towards mandatory Covid vaccination). In some cases participants knew exactly which topics they were going to discuss with each other (e.g. political polarization in the country, vaccination), in other cases they knew only about the focus on polarization, but not about the type of polarization because that was not pre-defined. And in one case (the class of young students) the participants were initially in the dark.

In a couple of cases the initial interest in participating in a focus group turned out to be bigger than the number of participants who actually showed up. A possible explanation for this is that while the topics we chose are relevant and (we thought) provoking, for some people an open discussion on these issues may seem scary and too sensitive, even if they are theoretically interested in them.

The size and composition of the samples varied as well. When we examined political polarization, we invited people from different sides (pro-government, opposition, neutral/undecided) and created different groups, based on their age range (old, middle aged, young). People came from different educational and professional backgrounds, and from different parts of the country. In terms of gender, they were also mixed.

When exploring the attitude towards adoption right for same-sex couples, a high school class (all of them between the age of 18-19) was invited. To study how people take sides in the pro-, and anti-vaccination issue, two homogenous groups were formed: one consisted of people who opposed mandatory vaccination (though some of them were moderate and others more extreme in their stances, all between the age of 30-45), and one consisted of people who were all in favour of mandatory vaccination (aged above 45).

There were all women groups, a group that consisted of people who were born in the region (related to the issue of Catalan independence), and people with migrant backgrounds participated.

Below we describe the main points participants brought up in relation to each topic. We also use verbatim quotes from the participants to illustrate our findings. We don't always indicate which topic was raised in which country as we try to highlight those findings that could be interesting for everyone who studies or works with polarized groups.

We also observed group dynamics, and we summarise our findings regarding that as well.

INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS, ESTABLISHING TRUST WITHIN THE GROUP

The conversation in the focus groups usually started with an introduction, in which we explained the goal of the session and agreed on the group rules (for example; participants should not interrupt others, should respect others' opinions, and instead of trying to persuade each other they should just try to understand and listen to the other). We also reassured the participants that they would remain anonymous if we would use direct quotes in our publications, that we wouldn't link any personal information to these quotes on which someone could identify them.

This was followed by an introductory circle: participants told their first names, occupations, their ages and where they live (in a way that they still kept their privacy in front of each other, so, for example, they didn't mention the name of the organisations/companies they worked for, only the field they were linked to, or they didn't share their exact addresses but only the region they were from/lived).

Lastly, in some of the groups we used introductory questions that were related to the topic. For example, when we focused on political polarization, we asked participants about their hopes and concerns for their families, communities and/or the country. These questions already raised some of the main topics of the forthcoming discussion, such as a general feeling of uncertainty and/or worry about the future.

The overall sentiment was that there we are dealing with quite a bad situation, that we are in the middle of a process in which we are in need of something different on a systemic level. Environmental crisis and climate change was mentioned by most participants, regardless of the side they chose, and uncertainty was a returning factor as well.

Fear of a major threat to society as a whole was articulated often, but the specificities of this fear depended on the side a participant supports.

Quotes that support the above mentioned findings:

“What is happening in this country is happening in the world at large. People do not come together, but are turned against each other. This is the worst possible thing that could happen. It can be felt on micro and macro levels: within the family, on the street, in the grocery store, on public transport, in our workplaces, everywhere there is this constant confrontation, this constant scrutiny of each other, this constant judgement of each other.”

“... the mental state of people that I experience on a daily basis, especially on the internet, because I don't get out much, is disheartening. And well, the state of our planet is horrible, and I'm very worried about what we're going to leave for our grandchildren and descendants.”

“What I see - very sadly - is that vaccination for example, including Covid vaccination, has become not a medical issue, but a political issue, and that's how people decide whether to vaccinate or not to vaccinate. And that's why I'm concerned, because it can cost lives.”

PARTICIPANTS' PERCEPTION OF POLARIZATION

After people got to know each other a bit and a general feeling of safety was established, we asked them whether they perceive polarization in a certain area at all, for example whether they think there is tension and animosity between groups who support different parties, or between people who support and who oppose mandatory vaccination, or who support or oppose the independence of Catalonia. We also asked them about the extent of polarization they experience, and the way they deal with this tension in their everyday lives.

Almost everyone agreed that polarization as a phenomenon (growing tension between two opposing groups, more and more people taking sides and this decision also impacts one's identity) existed, though the word was not used in each group. The Italian groups were mostly unfamiliar with the word, but the 'tribal' thinking was present: people on either side considered the other side as an opposing one (us versus them). And in the Spanish groups people rather avoided the word 'polarization' and used 'conflict' instead. 'Polarization' seemed to be too scary a word, and participants did not feel comfortable using it.

Many participants reported examples of growing tensions in their personal lives. There was hardly anyone who described a life path where he or she had not experienced polarization. People felt that polarization influenced their human relationships drastically, because taking sides has become a crucial part of one's identity: it shapes life at work, in families or when making new connections with others. This trend could be witnessed in relation to various types of polarization.

Quotes that support the above mentioned findings:

"You can hear it on the radio, on TV, at work, at the bus stop, in the shop, people are trashing each other. They are not trying to understand each other, instead everyone is clinging to their own truth and hating the other."

"I was on a train once, having a good conversation with a nice lady. At one point she started praising the government that I don't find so praiseworthy. I told her I am more on the liberal side. And then the air immediately froze between us and we couldn't continue the conversation."

"The division definitely increased. And this is precisely because of the hate speech, because we hate migrants, we hate gays (..). Whereas before I couldn't tell who voted for which party, now it becomes clear right after about the fifth sentence."

There are usually two sides, and a seemingly unbridgeable gap between the two. And both sides have their own communication bubbles in which they are rarely exposed to the views of the other side. Still, some groups involved ‘neutral’ people as well. In such a group the neutral participants felt left out (“they are just fighting among themselves, they completely forgot we are here”). In the groups formed around the issue of Catalan independence, some participants had difficulty in forming a clear opinion or expressing it in front of those who had an opposing view or who were more directly affected by this issue. They shared a few concerns of the pro-independence group, however when talking to pro-unionist they tended to identify with their arguments. This situation made them feel under pressure. They felt like they could or should not take a clear position on the issue. The members of this neutral group were mostly people who were not born and/or raised in Catalonia. They thought that expressing a clear opinion on the Catalan independence could endanger them and expose them to additional types of discrimination, and this situation hurts their feelings.

Participants’ opinions were divided on whom they found responsible for polarization, but the responsibility of politicians and people in power positions came up several times.

Quotes that support the above mentioned findings:

“Obviously this is a conscious political strategy - where there is no unity, it is easier to control or divide people, and to achieve the goals of those who are driving this whole process. I do not know where this is going, but it is going to be ugly.”

“There is obviously money involved, everyone has some kind of interest in this, rich people in pharmaceuticals, that has a friend in the government, that has his hands in that newspaper, so they want to sell it as they can and everyone gains something.”

The members of our focus groups in general were not optimistic about the possibility of bridging the gap, of decreasing tension between opposing sides. Some mentioned that the topic of Catalan independence is like an ‘elephant in the room’, a taboo, meaning that while this topic is present everywhere and that it has a great impact on people’s daily lives, they prefer not to openly speak about it in order to avoid conflict. Other types of polarization are also often treated as a dead-end in a discussion. The assumption is that since there is no possibility of agreement, it is not worth the effort of exposing oneself and feeling vulnerable. The polarizing issue was recognized as too big to be discussed, too dangerous, too emotionally demanding and at the same time impossible to be resolved. That is why many preferred to surround themselves with likeminded people.

TAKING A SIDE

After having learnt about the participants' perception of polarization (whether they think it exists, to what extent they experienced it and how they dealt with it), we were curious to know whether they took any sides and if they did, how they developed their stances.

We found the exploration of the history of people's position important as sharing their personal journeys around the subject can open the way to be better understood by others. If people start to see the 'rationale' behind others' choices then it can potentially decrease the intensity of the negative feelings towards them, and it can also go against the stereotypes they hold about others' positions (e.g. they are ill-informed, they disregard traditions, etc).

Several different motivations came up to take one side over the other. Some participants emphasised the importance of information gathering, of becoming informed on the subject (through their own efforts or through the school system) and of making an informed decision.

Quotes that support the above mentioned findings:

"The most important influence for me was studying sociology at college, and suddenly it all clicked in me, I understood the processes and correlations that are present in society. Since then, I have been seeing these structures consciously or unconsciously."

Others came to the conclusion that it was impossible for them to be able to decide which information is true and which is false, so the most they could do is to choose what information source or which leaders/authority figures they trust.

Quotes that support the above mentioned findings:

"Sometimes I think: 'are you a doctor?' I certainly am not. I read a lot, I tried to understand all of this as much as I can, but I have my limits, so I take what I can understand and then go and ask my doctor. He's there to cure me, isn't he? He is a professional, he studied all of this, he understands this. He tells me: 'it's better to get the vaccine' and I trust him."

*"I have no idea what's in a vaccine, whenever I try to understand one side says 'it's good stuff' the other says 'it's S*it'. On TV one expert lists data, numbers, names of papers and important doctors, the other expert does the same and they say two opposite things, but it doesn't really matter cause I don't understand one thing they say, and yet I have to choose who to trust."*

Many emphasized personal value systems as a main factor in their decision-making. People in Hungary who supported the opposition wished for a closer alignment with European values, or simply values of openness and democracy and more focus on individual's rights. Pro-government participants thought that Fidesz successfully upheld the value of national identity and autonomy.

Pro-independence participants backed their position with a strong criticism against the Spanish monarchy and the Spanish political system, its roots in Franquism and the lack of reconciliation during the transition to democracy. For many years, the Catalans were deprived of their language and autonomy; nowadays they want to be ‘paid back’ with independence. They highlighted the importance of autonomy, the possibility to make decisions on their own and for their community. Anti-independence (unionist) focus group members valued inclusiveness highly and thus perceived the sole dependence on Catalan politicians as a threat.

Quotes that support the above mentioned findings:

“I was never at a single point interested in politics, I could not even watch a news broadcast. It will never be how I want it, and everyone steals, cheats and lies anyway. I got interested in it recently. I might be a conservative, because I think the mother is a woman and the father is a man.”

“My personal value system is what brings the scale to one side or the other. Honesty and openness.”

A sizable number of participants mentioned that interests and practical benefits may link people to certain sides, especially in relation to political polarization. People do not want to lose access to current status or benefits. This aspect came up regarding the issue of Catalan independence as well, as unionists oppose giving up the backup of the Spanish State and are afraid of losing economic power and recognition at the European level.

Psychological needs, the need to belong, and intense emotions (admiration and dislikes, and especially the feeling of being threatened, fear) also play an important role to shape which side one takes, be it political sides or a stance in the vaccination debate.

Some answers reflect that the key factor in how people form their opinions seems to be family background and/or peer pressure and the influence of their social circles and groups.

Quotes that support the above mentioned findings:

“I am on the opposition’s side, my whole family has always been on the left. I come from a very accepting, very tolerant family, and this has determined my path.(..).”

PERCEPTION OF 'THE OTHER'

After participants shared how they developed their opinions on the selected polarising topic, they were asked how they saw 'the other side' and whether the participants felt threatened by the other side or not. The exploration of negative feelings is important as it can make it hard to establish an atmosphere where people on different sides of the polarizing topic are willing to listen to each other. It is also worth assessing what intentions, motivations, characteristics participants attribute to others who don't share their opinions. The insights drawn from discussing these topics can be used to design interventions aiming to decrease polarization, to decrease hostility between the opposing sides. People often described the others who were on the other side of the polarising topic as misinformed, ignorant, manipulated, sheeps.

Quotes that support the above mentioned findings:

"They follow the call as if they were sheep."

"They are unable to ask questions and doubt the louder voice."

*" They think themselves so smart, but talk only b***-***t."*

" They just don't understand and refuse to learn, maybe it's too difficult for them."

In some cases people were reluctant to share opinions about the other side, they didn't want to articulate open criticism. We also observed that they often blamed the other side for the division, and gave the other side more responsibility for the escalation of conflict.

Other adjectives that were used to describe 'the other' were: privileged, unfair, aggressive, not willing to listen, not willing to understand other points of views, not showing respect, behaving in a condescending way ("they think we are stupid").

In groups where the focus was on political polarization, participants sometimes attributed ill intentions or malice to the other side, or at least to the leaders of the other side ("they are committing treason", "they are serving foreing interests and not the interest of the country/ community"). This was true for both sides.

When we asked whether they felt threatened physically, some of them answered that they did. They were worried about different scenarios. A pro-government supporter in Hungary feared about the consequences of letting in a substantial number of migrants into the country, while an opposition supporter worried that the impoverishment of masses of people would lead to riots and chaos sooner or later.

"The worst fear I have is that they will open the borders, there will be no jobs and that migrants will come in and women will be abused(..) In socialism, there was death penalty which was a force holding back people. Nowadays, however, we have crime for a living, we have a lot of crimes against human life, and there is very little deterrent... What will happen if these migrants really do manage to get into the country, and what will happen to us? It will be that we will have to protect our lives(..)."

“I do not rule out riots, because of the depth of poverty in society. As a parent, I can imagine that certain steps might be necessary to provide for my kids when in poverty, like breaking into private housing or whatever. What else can you take away from a hopeless person? Nothing. They have nothing to lose.”

Sometimes the actions of the other side is perceived not as a concrete physical threat, but as a threat to a specific value. Here we give examples of the threats identified by different groups in relation to the values threatened. Values will be categorised following the guidelines from Shalom H. Schwartz as we did in our questionnaire.

Topic: Adoption rights of same sex couples

Position: Opposing

Threatened values: Tradition, Conformity

Those who thought same sex couples should not have the right to adopt children highlighted the importance of sticking to the traditional familiar roles they grew up with and showed their worry in how challenging them would be dangerous for the well-being of the adopted children.

“A child needs a father and a mother, a male and a female to grow healthy, or he would grow confused, he needs inputs from two different people to grow balanced.”

Here, the supposed consequence of not following the tradition would be confusion by the child. Others of the same opinion emphasised the value of conformity, the necessity to fit in, the absence of which resulting in exclusion and suffering by the child.

“He will be shunned by others, he would be different, simply because of his parents’ wish, other children would make fun of him and he would suffer.”

Topic: Adoption rights of same sex couples

Position: Supporting

Threatened values: Universalism (everyone should be treated equally)

Those who support same sex couples’ right to adopt children argues that all couples should have equal opportunity to raise a child, that heterosexual partners are not always good parents and it is not fair towards orphaned children to prevent them from becoming a member of a family member, just because the couple who would adopt the child do not fit to stereotypical ideas of a family.

“Think of all those children in orphanage, they could have a chance to have a loving family, and you would say no, simply because the parents are of the same sex?”

Topic: Mandatory Covid vaccination

Position: Opposing

Threatened values: Security, Self-direction (autonomy)

Some participants felt that vaccination would threaten their physical health, unsure of the effects of the vaccine on their body.

“I avoid medicines as much as I can, my body is as clean as possible, last time I had to take some paracetamol I had to sleep for hours, what if I have a bad reaction, some people had nothing, others had a fever, some died, I’m not ready to risk.”

The most often mentioned value that was under threat in the eyes of people opposing mandatory vaccination was self-direction, the right to be able to decide on their own about their own body.

“I know my body, how to cure myself when I’m unhealthy, now they come and tell me what to do with my own body?”

“it is something completely personal, it’s me and what’s inside of me, are they scared of the virus? Let them take their chemical trash, it’s their own choice. Why should they force me? They are already safe after all.”

Topic: Mandatory Covid vaccination

Position: Supporting

Threatened values: Security, Conformity

People supporting mandatory Covid vaccination also mentioned the importance of security and felt that people who would not take the vaccine threaten the well-being of the community.

“If they don’t vaccinate, the virus circulates again and again, we cannot be safe. What if it mutates? New variants, more infections, more deaths, lock-downs, fear.”

When confronted by the possibility that the other side simply wants to express their ‘freedom of choice’ the value of conformity was brought as a counter argument.

“Yes, freedom is important, we all want to be free! For example, I want to be free to listen to the TV at high volume, I’m in my house and I’m free to do it, but I disturb my neighbour who wants to sleep. He is free to sleep if he wants, but I’m preventing him... so what do we do? We make a deal: I can watch television at a certain time so he can sleep at another time, we are not completely free, but we both have our dose of freedom. We have been stipulating these deals ever since we created society, we limit ourselves a little for the well-being of the community. Now they want to be free in disregard of this, they don’t care how this affects the others around them. I want to do it too: tomorrow I want to go to work naked, it’s my body, I should be free, and during lunch I will smoke in the restaurant cause why shouldn’t I? And I want to eat from the plate of the guy at the other table cause I like what he is eating... when do I stop?”

As we see, both sides can feel that important values are threatened in case the other side’s will prevail, and sometimes even the same values can be referenced, though from different angles. Several factors (e.g. whom we trust, whether we focus on the individual or the community, etc) can have an influence on how we take sides in these questions.

Sometimes people think that the ‘other side’ doesn’t really believe in certain values, only playing lip service to them in order to achieve personal gains. For example participants who supported the opposition in Hungary felt that the government took values such as the importance of preserving the national identity and used them for their own purposes, in order to benefit from them, so their actual meaning and importance disappeared.

“The right, or at least the figures on the right who are in the forefront, are committing treason, not because of right-wing values, but because of the dishonest use of right-wing values.”

DEPOLARIZATION WITHIN

Up to this point participants had the opportunity to express their views, how they adopted them and how they see the other side but apart from having to listen to the other side's stories and views as well, they were not asked to challenge their way of thinking.

So now, we went a step further and asked participants to look at their own positions a bit more critically. We asked them to mention aspects that they don't like about their side and, if they can, mention ideas, aspirations, arguments of the other side that they could appreciate or relate to. We call this phase 'depolarization within', and the purpose of this step is to drive people away from their own black and white thinking, to make them realise that things are more complex than they seem at first. Maybe the truth is not exclusively found on either side.

In relation to political polarization in Hungary, both sides were willing to name areas where they were dissatisfied with their side's behaviour.

Government supporters emphasized the excessive spending of public money on unnecessary things rather than developing public infrastructure as a drawback. Participants talked about feeling the effect of the underfunded infrastructure in their everyday experiences, whether because of being affected by it because of working in the field (social worker, teacher, etc..) or because of the dissatisfactory services they receive. Those on the opposition's side almost always mentioned the temporality and seeming weakness of the coalition, that the only thing holding these politicians together is their desire to defeat FIDESZ. This was coupled with an uncertainty about what would happen should they get into power. Giving space to new people in power was a shared desire, either about Viktor Orbán and FIDESZ currently, or about Ferenc Gyurcsány, the former left-wing prime minister who currently campaigns in the opposition. People on both sides found the obsession with these figures and their overwhelming presence in politics harmful.

Quotes that support the above mentioned findings:

"I am terribly opposed to reckless spending. They squander a lot of money and show it to the outside world, so there is absolutely no modesty on the right. They should give due respect to the left, too, because there is a chance that the higher the horse, the bigger the fall."

"For me, it is a very painful point that while health workers and teachers are being pushed to the forefront, people working in the social sector, who would deserve the same, don't get the same recognition. I am also the master of life and death, to put it very theatrically, other people's lives may depend on my decisions, and so I do not understand why we are now treated less than health workers and teachers in every way. We are at the bottom in terms of respect and in terms of wages."

"In the senior home where I work, we have a patient who, in their final will, left their apartment to FIDESZ as a sign of gratitude. When I think about how much of that flat could be sold for – it is on the banks of the Danube, next to the parliament with French windows, 150 square metres – and could be used for good (thinking about disadvantaged people and children), it's a little hard for me to swallow. This is basically fanaticism. You wouldn't believe it, but I also saw an altar in someone's flat once, with a cut-out newspaper photo of Orbán with flowers and candles surrounding it."

When we asked anti-vaccine advocates, they admitted they felt they were very different from each other, they said “there’s no real unity, we have the same goal, but for different reasons, sincerely... Some of the people at the demonstration yesterday were ridiculous”. This sentiment was shared by many from this group.

“We are many, with too many different motivations, when we manifest we are all over the place, those who shout, those who want to have fun as if it was a party, in the end there are few who make sure to work well for their rights to be respected.”

Some participants felt that some of their fellows were sometimes too aggressive and expected all members of the group to be dismissive of the other side.

*“That was kind of crazy, attacking us like that because we weren’t talking s**t about others.”*

“In the end what happened today is the exact example of what I don’t like about the no-vax movement: they are aggressive.”

“I’m not like them, they accept people from everywhere, Anarchists, new fascist, whoever wants to make noise. you will never know who you are standing next to.”

Participants supporting mandatory vaccination were also willing to share their reservations about their own position.

“We were too weak.”

“A different communication with a more positive objective would have changed the vaccination campaign, instead we presented only doubts and controversies thrived.”

“We let disinformation spread, we should have fought it with simple facts easy to understand, instead we flooded discussion with data and numbers, we only confused people, and those who wanted to confuse them more took the chance and did their best.”

The next part of the task proved to be more difficult when people needed to mention things they appreciated from the other side. In general, not many of them went in depth in their answer: they were willing to mention one small thing they appreciate, or might appreciate on the other side, but were ready to supplement that immediately with a critique of why it is not a real asset, and return to bringing down the other side’s credibility.

“Orbán is a genius politician, he can realize in one person something that affects the whole country. I consider his goal to be rather bad, I don’t think that this enormous talent should be used for this purpose..the techniques, warfare, manipulations with which he achieves his goals.”

“The sense of being Hungarian, not to forget who we are. But I think they go way too much to the extreme by not letting anything in from other places. It’s good to cherish who we are, but let’s not forget that we also have to be open-minded.”

“More democracy or less corruption, these are very nice ideas, but the problem is that for me they are not credible. The things they (the opposition) said, the things they did, I didn’t like any of them very much.”

“I liked the vaccine promotion by the government (..), really liked these posters, and finally it wasn’t about mud throwing, spreading hate.”

“I do not follow the activity of the opposition. I am sure they make sympathetic steps, because that is what they gain trust with, but again, one can promise, but they also need to deliver. And I’m not sure that they can.”

In the focus groups in Hungary, as a last step, we asked another question as well:

Can you imagine any scenario – even a magical one – in which you would switch sides? What would need to happen for you to change sides? Though this question was the most difficult one, it made people think, and many participants reported that it was the first time that they ever contemplated this question in their life. And it gave some of them a new perspective, a new understanding of what they really needed, what they were really worried about, on a personal level.

For those participants who support the opposition and experience some sort of struggle in their everyday life (mostly financial), the deciding factor would be the clear prospect of development in their own circumstances. Similarly, one strong pro-government participant mentioned that should she and her family lose the sense of comfort they experience now, she would consider changing her vote. Some opposition supporters mentioned that more clarity in FIDESZ’s politics, so they could see the actual reason behind its otherwise very radical actions, would be a turning point for them. Seeing political power become more distributed and having Orbán gone might convince some to vote for FIDESZ, too. There were also very dedicated participants on both sides, who would never change their vote.

Quotes that support the above mentioned findings:

“If I didn’t perceive that certain activities are covered up by lies, and I could see why things are happening, that what they want to do in this violent way, with this style, with this manner is good, then I would say yes, let it be. But so far what I have experienced is that my feelings are hurt in different ways.”

“Actually, I would lose faith in the governing party if there were cuts. For example, if I and my family, friends and acquaintances lost their jobs. (...) Then I would think twice about who I vote for, because obviously you make your decisions on emotional grounds.”

PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCE WITH FOCUS GROUPS

At the end we asked participants to share their experiences in the group.

Some participants felt that a lot of impulse was released, which could point to a lack of these discussions between people with different views in their everyday lives. In another group where the atmosphere was calmer, people appreciated how 'normally' they were able to discuss diverse worldviews with each other, calling it a meeting of different perspectives. The fact that polarising topics are mostly a taboo in everyday life contributed to this conversation becoming a special experience for them, and many expressed their surprise how much they could open up about these sensitive topics in a group of strangers.

"I'm very glad that we can talk about these topics in such a civilised way, so that everybody can have their say and try to listen to the other side and how constructive they can be."

Even in groups where the experience was less enthusiastic, we observed encouraging details. For example, people who thought there was no hope for being understood by the other side were surprised to learn that this feeling was mutual and everybody was hurt by it.

GROUP DYNAMICS, OBSERVED BY THE FACILITATORS

Group dynamics differed significantly based on what kind of group setting was present. In an all-female group where participants were closer to each other in terms of age (in their 20s), there was a sense of sharing and attentive listening from the get-go, and as a consequence, people were more willing to critique their own views and look for sympathetic elements in the other side as well. In another group (with older participants), there was heated discussion and passionate engagement from the very beginning. It was clear that the topic had a lot of weight and importance in their lives, and they were clearly concerned on a personal and national level. Because of this they expressed their views in a more argumentative and defensive way. Nevertheless, in both cases, there was a great and clear sense of curiosity towards each other, and most of the time, respect for each other's personal opinions, too.

In a third group people were reluctant to discuss their views at length at first, but later an atmosphere of sharing opinions and experiences was created. Even though clashing and controversial issues were brought up openly, there was an overall quality of listening and interest in the group towards each other.

It was clear from the high level of engagement that many people do not experience the chance to discuss these topics with people other than their own, immediate social groups, which tend to be rather homogenous in terms of orientation. This chance to be exposed to perspectives formerly unheard by people, from complete strangers was appreciated by many participants at the end of the sessions, and some clearly felt challenged in their own perspectives. Of course all of this can only happen if an atmosphere of trust, safety and respect is first established within the group.

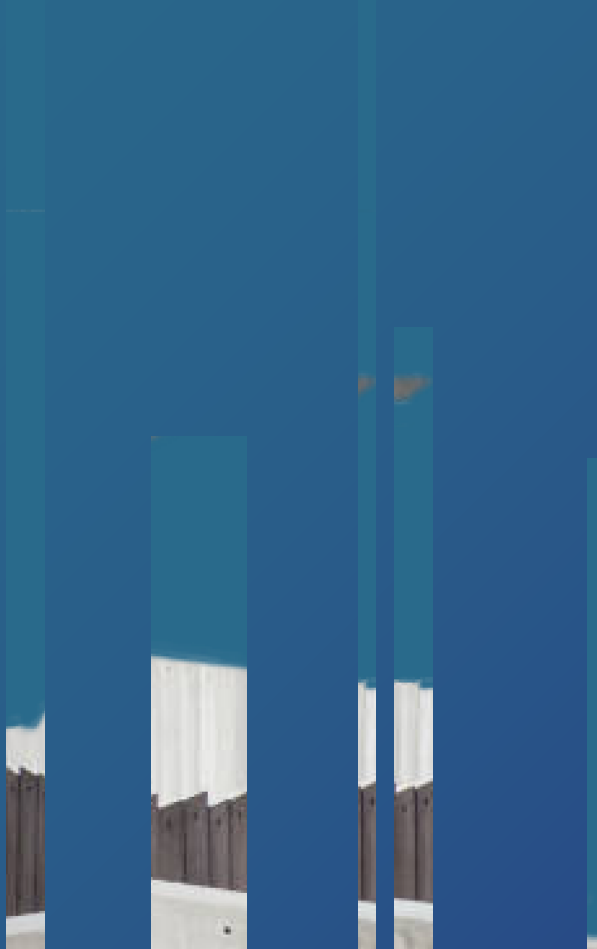
People were generally passionate about most questions, but were eager to discuss their own views the most and were less eager to engage in a dialogue. Still, most of the time they showed respect regardless of their divergent opinions. During the sessions, participants with opposing positions did not find agreements, as the topic at the base of the polarization seemed to lay on crucial elements which have to do with how people understand themselves, the world and their relation to others. However, they showed a willingness to listen to the other side and question their own position to an extent. Additionally, participants from both sides shared the need to be listened to and to have the possibility to express their position. Being threatened by the other side came up a lot, and it was a defining factor in people's decision which side to support.

The main takeaway from the focus group discussions is that personalised, anecdotal questions, those that propel people to share stories from their lives are successful ways to make people talk at length about their worldviews. It helped in shifting the conversation away from a more analytical and dry style of discussing polarization, and seemed to bring the topic closer to the individuals in the group.

Also, questions related to fictional scenarios and imagination (what would make you change your position, or what could be the worst case scenario in the country) made participants contribute a lot and go deeper into the details of their views.

CHAPTER 5:

CONCLUSIONS



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“Combating us-versus-them tribalism and polarization may be one of the greatest social and political challenges of the digital age. As much as building a just and democratic society requires thousands of initiatives large and small, so does defending one from these threats. It may well take a generation, but these efforts start with understanding how we can effectively counter this polarization.” (Hawkins et al, 2018)

“Always remember that to argue, and win, is to break down the reality of the person you are arguing against. It is painful to lose your reality, so be kind, even if you are right.” (Murakami, 2014)

We will now try to summarise the insights we have gained from studying the literature and conducting our own research, which may be useful for trainers and educators working with polarization.

As we have seen, conflict and polarization are not the same thing. Conflict is an inevitable and often very useful part of our lives. Learning how to resolve conflict can lead to better mutual understanding, to solutions that can be more satisfactory for the whole group. The problem starts when an ‘us versus them’ mindset, a kind of black and white thinking, develops, when people from opposing groups increasingly begin to see each other as enemies, a threat to their own well-being. This process also leads to affective polarization, which means that opposing parties develop distrust, anger/hate towards each other and attribute ill intentions to each other. The groups begin to see the struggle between them as a zero-sum game, in which success achieved by one party means the other party’s loss.

Our interviewees and focus group participants reported various family and work situations in which tensions increased between parties with opposing views, and there was no prospect of a solution. These situations typically escalate into shouting matches, or opposing parties giving up in an early stage, preferring not to talk in order to avoid conflict. Though people were bothered by polarization, they often felt powerless to deal with it. Nevertheless, they showed willingness to do something about it.

Experts of More in Common, an international team (involving the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Germany) working on initiatives to address the underlying drivers of fracturing and polarization expresses the need for (Dixon et al., 2018):

- low-barrier ways to engage ordinary citizens more meaningfully, not just the loudest voices with the most strident views
- doing more to promote empathy and understanding across lines of division
- creating opportunities to foster empathy by exposing us to people with different backgrounds and beliefs to ours.

Research suggests that fostering contact between members of different groups is one of the best ways to bridge divides, but only under certain conditions. The contact hypothesis – developed by Allport (1954) - states that intergroup contact can be effective in reducing negative intergroup stereotypes and mutual prejudices, if the following conditions are ensured:

1. equal status of both groups in the contact situation;
2. ongoing personal interaction between individuals from both groups;
3. cooperation in a situation of mutual dependence, in which members of both groups work together toward a common goal;
4. institutional support – the individual, group, or organization that is bringing the parties together must be seen by both to be impartial and not biased toward one side or the other.

The majority of people we reached do find some common grounds with people who do not share their views on important issues. As we have seen, there are values that the majority of our respondents consider very important (e.g. ‘Equal Opportunities’, ‘Benevolence’, ‘Self-Direction’) – and this can be used as a starting point. We can ask participants to recall and share stories that illustrate why a value is so important to them. We are likely to find that the same value appears in very different stories, and that the same value might be important to all kinds of people, regardless of where they stand on the polarizing issue. Attitudes towards other values, such as ‘Power’ or ‘Achievement’ can trigger more diverse reactions.

We could focus on people’s individual characteristics instead of their group identity. Wheeler and Fiske (2005) showed that when people see someone from an opposing group, their brains respond as if they’re confronted with a physical threat. However, when they’re encouraged to see those other people as individuals, each with their own unique tastes and preferences—for instance, by imagining the person’s favorite vegetable—their brains no longer jump into threat detection mode.

If, instead of trying to convince the other person, we listen to her or his story and get a picture of the steps s/he has taken to arrive at her/his current position, of her or his basic human needs, and past personal experiences; if we find out who s/he trusts and why, who s/he fears and why; if we know someone's motivation better, we don't have to attribute bad intentions to her/him.

People belonging to opposing groups often overestimate their differences ('false polarization'). They overestimate the extremity of the average view held by the other side, believing that the two groups are further apart in their views than they actually are.

We hope that, although it is extremely difficult to build bridges in an environment where tensions are constantly escalating, the situation is not hopeless. So many people seem to need better relations. As one focus group participant put it:

"I'm very glad that we can talk about these topics in such a civilised way, so that everybody can have their say and try to listen to the other side and realises how constructive that can be."

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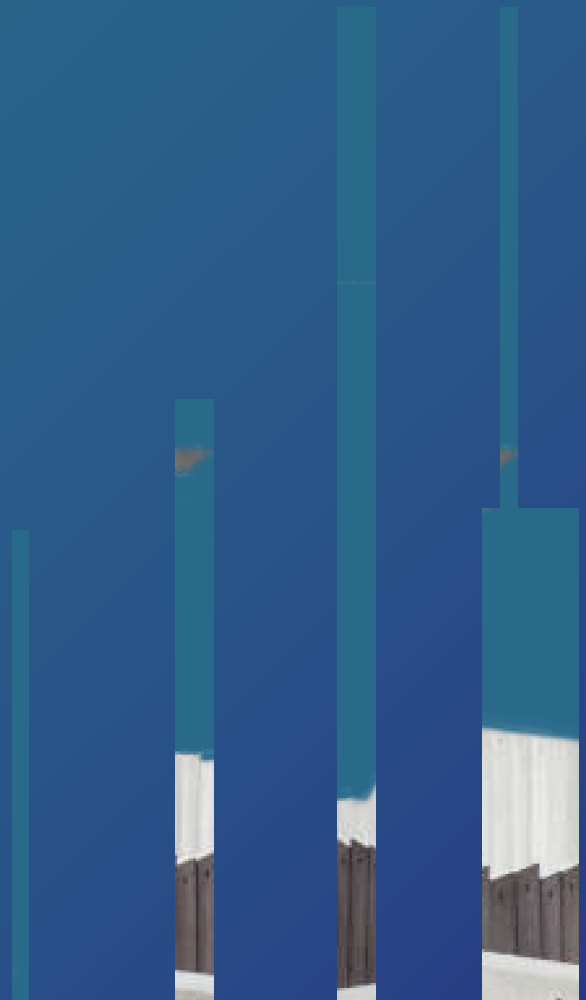
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IMPRESSUM



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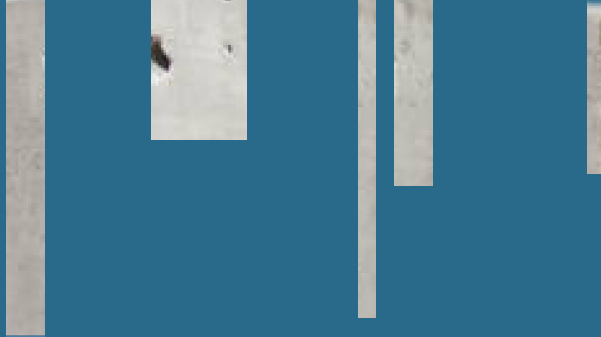
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