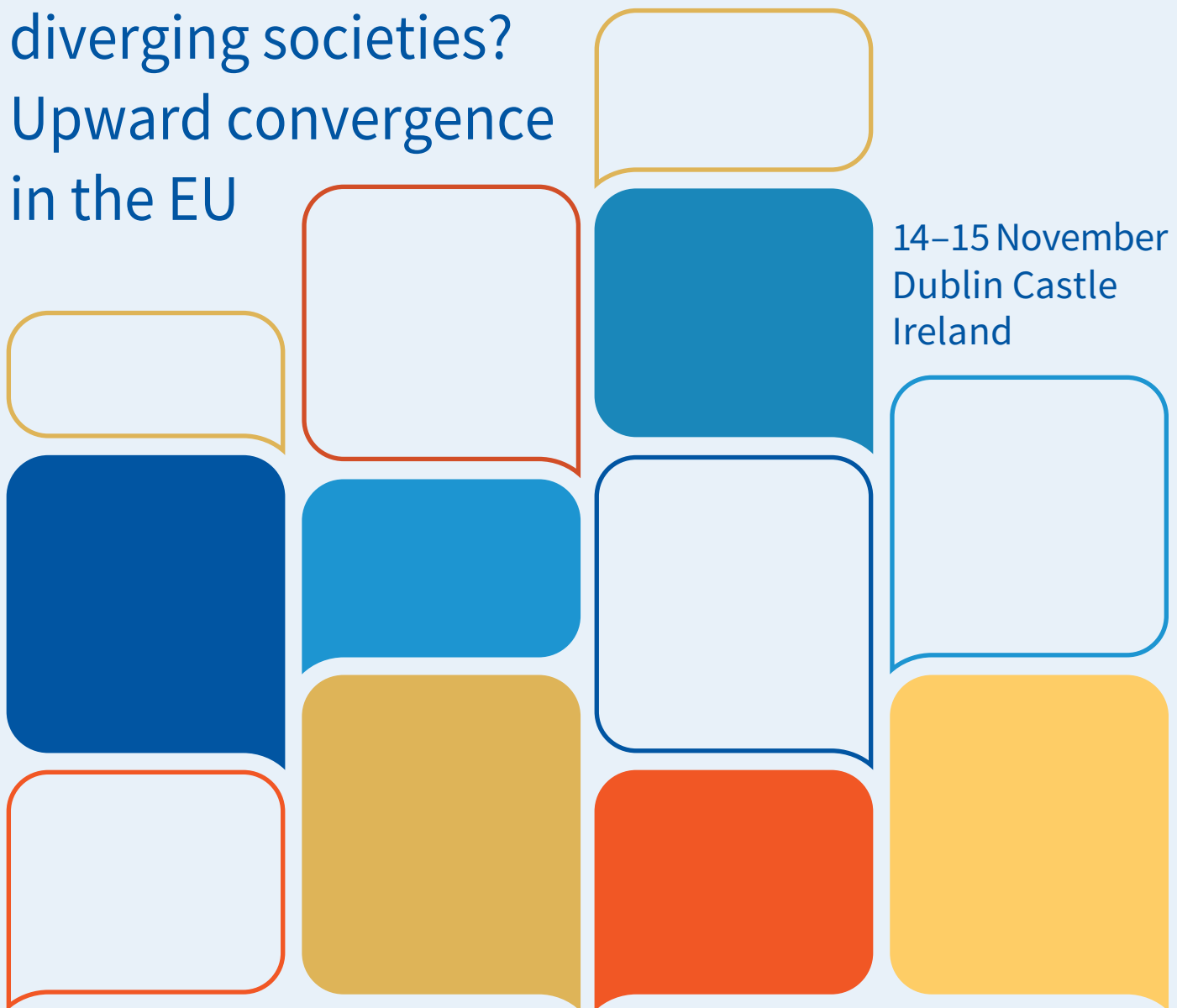


Session 2: Living conditions

Converging economies,
diverging societies?
Upward convergence
in the EU

14–15 November
Dublin Castle
Ireland



Background

The preamble to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union cites as an essential objective for Member States ‘the constant improvements of the living and working conditions of their peoples’. This paper provides brief background information on a number of topics foreseen for discussion in Session 2 ‘Living conditions’: satisfaction with standard of living; the relationship between age and life satisfaction; work–life balance and gender; perceived tensions between different societal groups; and optimism about the future. The findings derive from one or more waves of Eurofound’s European Quality of Life Survey, conducted in 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2016. Comparing trends over time permits some conclusions to be drawn regarding progress towards greater convergence in Europe, in terms of European’s perception of their lives and the societies they inhabit.

Relevant data on living conditions

Findings from Eurofound’s European Quality of Life Survey map the deterioration in quality of life experienced by Europeans in the economic crisis and its subsequent – uneven – improvement in different aspects. In nearly all countries, the number of people reporting difficulties in making ends meet is now lower in 2016 than in 2011, although in 11 Member States more than half of the population still report such difficulties.

In terms of satisfaction with standards of living, there are signs of upward convergence (Figure A1). In 15 Member States, satisfaction with the standard of living has improved significantly since 2011: Sweden, Ireland, UK, Germany, Malta, Portugal, Poland, Slovakia, Estonia, Romania, Hungary, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Latvia, Bulgaria. Furthermore, in 2016 the difference in satisfaction levels between the countries in the lowest and the highest quartile was smaller than it was during the height of the crisis (2011). The satisfaction rate in the countries on the ‘borders’ of the two middle quartiles has also gone up in comparison to 2007 as the rise in the position of the third box (representing figures for 2016) in Figure A1 demonstrates.

Differences in living conditions are also visible between age groups, as evidenced by associations of age with difficulty in making ends meet: among the Member States where this is less difficult for older people are many continental and northern European countries with well-developed pension systems; the opposite holds in several eastern and southern European countries where far larger proportions of elderly people report difficulties in making ends meet than younger people.

In general, life satisfaction in the EU tends to decline with age. However, this general trend hides interesting differences in country patterns (Figure A2), the most common being (for 10 Member States) a decrease in life satisfaction for the middle age group (35–64 years) and then this not changing significantly for those aged over 65 (the third, bottom chart). For another seven countries, life satisfaction seems to gradually decrease with age (right-hand chart). In six countries, life satisfaction remains mostly constant throughout the life course (first, left-hand chart).

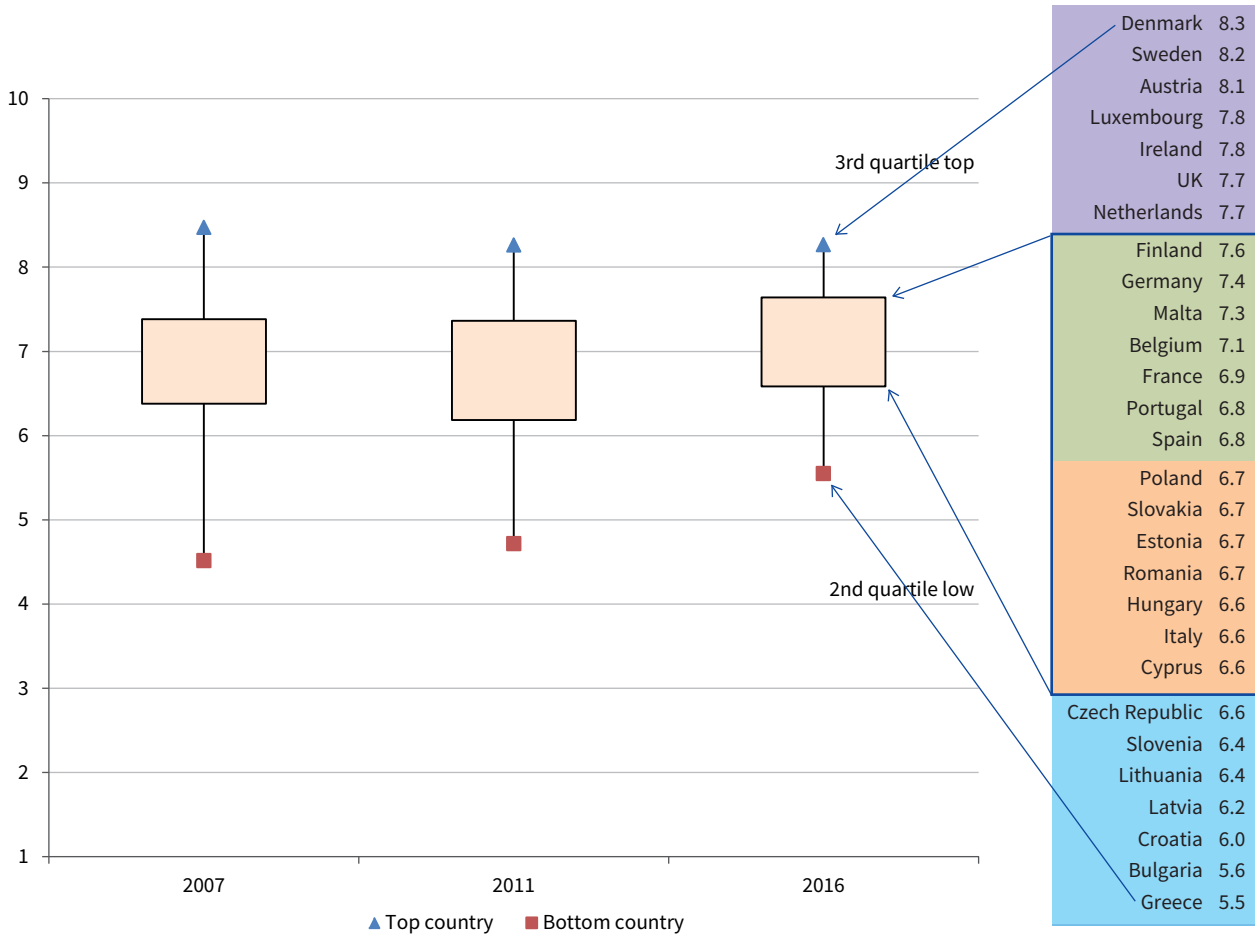
Another key quality of life issue is work–life balance where growing numbers of workers appear to have difficulty (Figure A3). Overall, nearly two-thirds of respondents have issues with work–life balance at least several times a month. But the proportion increased substantially between 2007 and 2016 – especially between 2011 and 2016. And there are visible gender differences: women experience tiredness due to work more than men. Two-thirds of women under 34 claim to be too tired from work to do household jobs (up 15 percentage points compared with 51% in 2007). Work–life balance has deteriorated most since 2007 for both men and women in Croatia, the Czech Republic and Romania, countries where very few women work part-time and where working hours for women are long. With its high levels of part-time work for women, in contrast, the Netherlands has the best work–life balance.

The perception on the part of respondents that there exists ‘a lot’ of tension between certain social groups declined between 2011 and 2016 – for perceived tensions between men and women, old and young, management and workers, and poor and rich (Figure A4). However, there was a substantial increase between 2011 and 2016 with regard to tensions between different religious groups: 28% of people perceived ‘a lot’ of tension in 2011, rising to 38% in 2016. The biggest increases – of 10% or more – are largely seen in countries with higher rates of immigration and recent arrivals of asylum seekers – Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK.

Europeans have become more optimistic about their own future and about their children’s and grandchildren’s future than they were in 2011 (when Europe was still stuck in crisis). In five countries – people are more optimistic about the future of the next generations than their own (Figure A5). However, in 12 other countries, people are more pessimistic about their children’s future than their own. It may be that in the first group the trend of rising living standards has been influential in shaping attitudes, while in the second group a generation has come of age having experienced a decline in living standards due to recession.

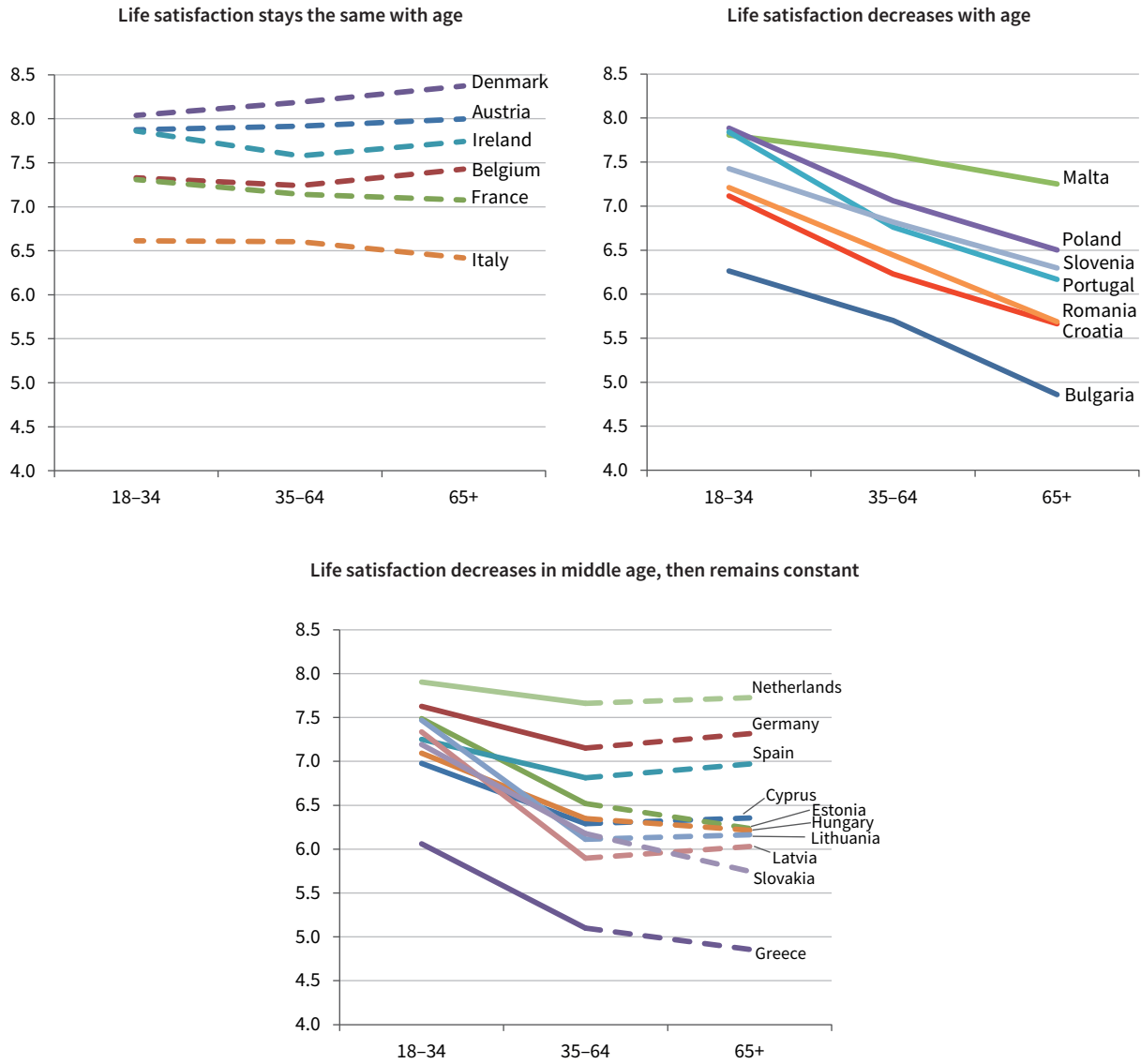
Annex: Figures

Figure A1: Country differences/convergence in satisfaction with standard of living, 2007–2016



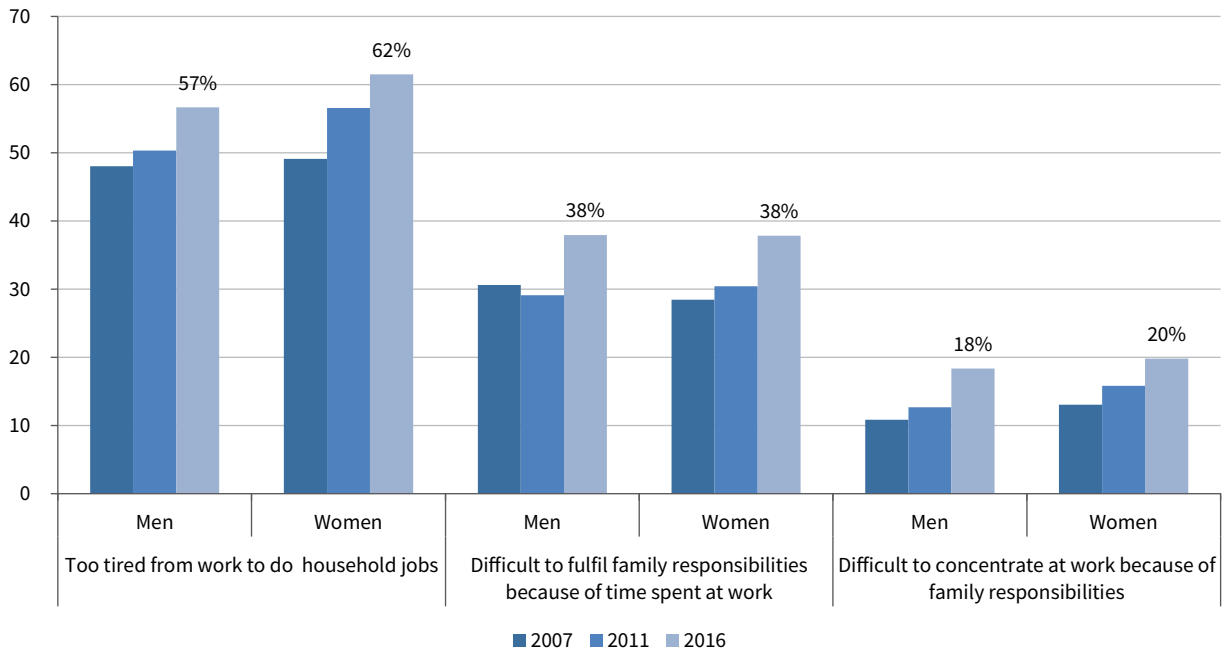
Note: The 28 Member States are divided into four quartiles of seven countries.

Figure A2: Life satisfaction and age, by country and age group, 2016



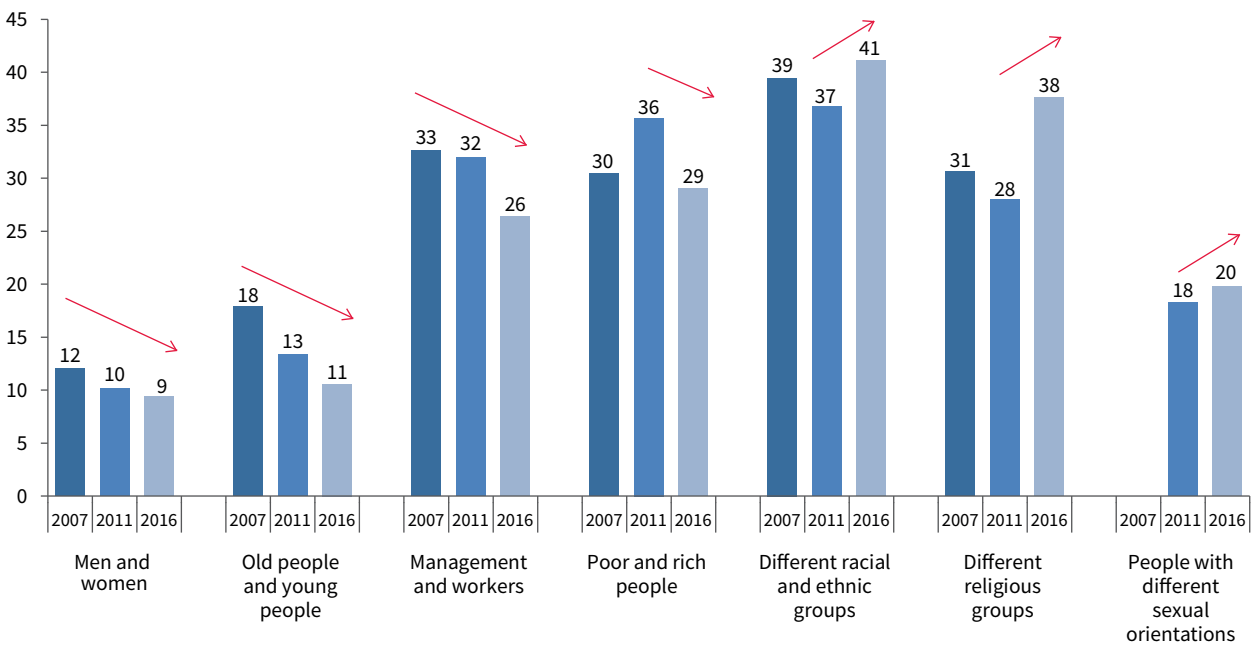
Notes: Ratings were given on a 10-point scale. T-tests were used to measure significance with Bonferroni correction. Not all countries are displayed: the Czech Republic, Finland, Luxembourg, the UK and Sweden are not displayed since they have other patterns that do not fit those shown.

Figure A3: Trends in work-life balance, by gender 2007–2016 (%)



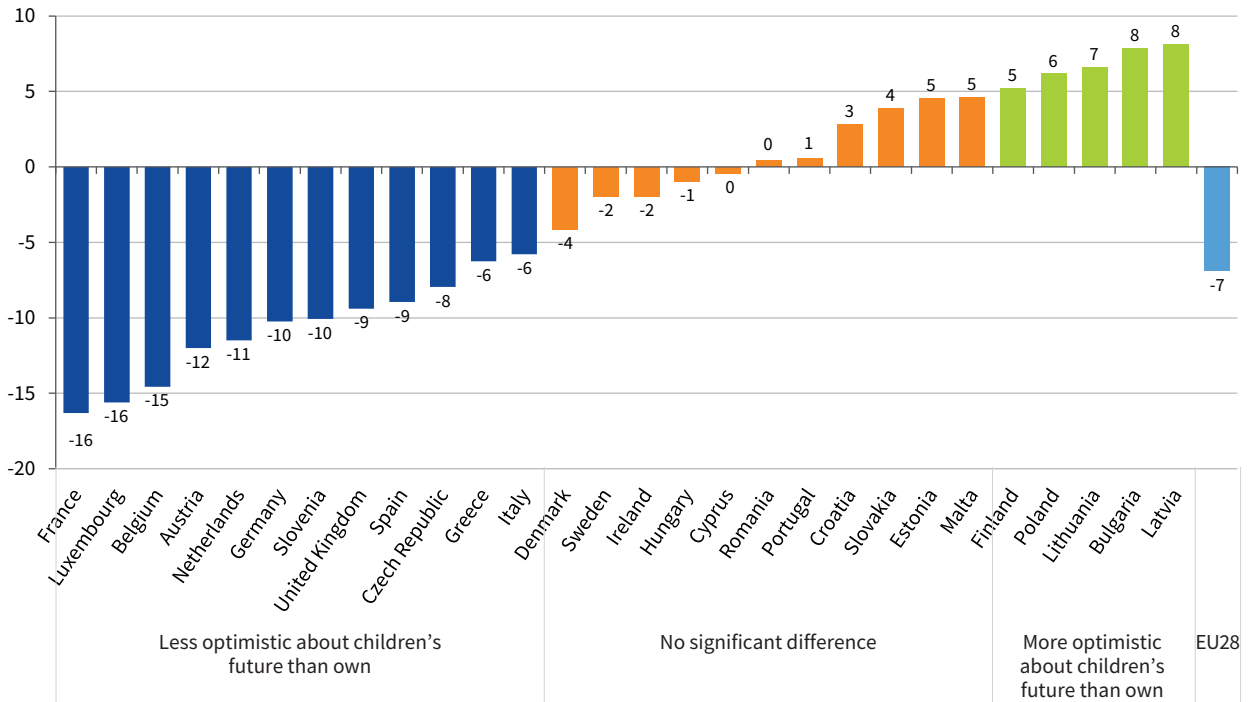
Note: Figures are the percentage reporting an issue at least several times a month.

Figure A4: Perceptions of tension between different groups, 2007–2016 (%)



Note: People aged 15–64 years; figures for Italy, Spain and the UK refer to those aged 16–64 years.

Source: EU-LFS quarterly data, from online database, extracted 26 July 2017

Figure A5: Optimism about the future, by country, 2016 (percentage points)


Notes: Q7 'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? a. I am optimistic about my future. b. I am optimistic about my children's or grandchildren's future'. The graph shows the difference between (b) and (a).

Some key questions

- Which aspects of living conditions do you regard as most relevant to monitor in the context of questions about convergence and divergence?
- The title of the conference *Converging economies, diverging societies* underlines differences both between and within Member States. What do you regard as the most pressing dimensions of divergence within Member States, other than income?
- How would you operationalise and measure 'social convergence'?
- There is much discussion of job and income insecurities, but there are other important aspects of social insecurity – related to housing and health, for instance. What are the priorities for social protection to address and prevent these insecurities?
- What would be your priorities to address problems in reconciliation of work with family life?
- How can Member States respond to the growing sense of tension between religious and ethnic groups? Is there a role here for the social partners?
- What can governments do to increase levels of optimism regarding quality of life for the next generation?
- How well do the indicators of the social scoreboard cover relevant aspects of living conditions? What other indicators should be proposed?

Note: The survey results presented are preliminary and not for citation at this stage. Visit <http://eurofound.link/ef1733> to be notified when the overview report is published.

