RESEARCH REPORT

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Quality of life

Towards the future of Europe: Social factors shaping optimism and pessimism among citizens

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European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

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Executive summary

Introduction

Increasing dissatisfaction with democratic institutions in many Member States and discontent with the European project have given rise to populism and anti-establishment parties in several parts of the European Union over the past decade. This could adversely affect the political climate within individual Member States and also undermine the legitimacy of the European project. Therefore, it is important to explore the roots of these problems – to learn, for example, how people feel about the future, who tends to be pessimistic and what these people believe, how they feel, what their profile is. In view of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is particularly important to understand the drivers of optimism and pessimism in order to address challenges arising from potentially escalating disillusionment.

This report is based on empirical data relating to the 27 EU Member States (EU27), drawn from several European Commission Eurobarometer surveys during the pre-COVID-19 period. It seems likely on the basis of recent evidence that these results will remain valid even after the pandemic.

Policy context

Europe is at a crossroads, as the European Commission's *White paper on the future of Europe: Reflections and scenarios for the EU27 by 2025* concludes. Even before the pandemic, Europe faced many challenges: the consequences of new technologies and automation, climate change, migration, increased security concerns and terrorism, the legacy of the Great Recession that started in 2008, the ageing population, social welfare systems in need of reform and the rise of populist and nationalistic rhetoric. Some of these issues fuel Europeans' pessimism and lead to a decline in trust in institutions and in the European Union project. Such negative feelings could have a critical impact on the future of Europe.

The initiative to convene a Conference on the Future of Europe, with the aim of involving citizens in a debate in order to strengthen trust in European institutions, is a response to the challenges. The main aim of the Conference is to 'look forward and forge a vision for our future', based on the rationale that 'many Europeans remain concerned about their future and the European Union has to show that it can provide answers to their concerns'.

Key findings

Pessimism seems to have prevailed in the EU even during the pre-COVID-19 period: almost half of all Europeans (49%) think that things are going in the wrong direction in their country and the majority (54%) are convinced that the lives of the children of today will be more difficult in future than those of today's adults.

The results of the research show that social optimism or pessimism can be attributed to a complex set of factors at individual level.

Key drivers of optimism and pessimism

- Of the demographic factors, age seems the most relevant: the positive net effect of age on social optimism is high in youth, falls in middle age and rises again in old age.
- Being in a poor position in the labour market tends to make people pessimistic, and living in a household that is in a bad financial situation adversely affects optimism.
- People are more optimistic if they feel they are living in a cohesive society: they feel attachment to a community, have a sense of belonging and view positively the contribution of immigrants to the economy and society.
- Participatory factors play an important role: people who perceive that their voice counts in the EU and/or in their country are significantly more optimistic than those who do not think they have a voice in decision-making processes.
- Social optimism and pessimism are highly correlated with degree of life satisfaction or happiness, as well as with level of trust in institutions and satisfaction with democracy. The strong relationship between personal and societal dissatisfaction proves that pessimism is closely linked to discontent with established institutions.

Profile of European optimists and pessimists

- Pessimists tend to have less interest in politics (for example, participating less in elections) than optimists. Pessimists are much less satisfied with how democracy works and tend not to trust in political institutions.
- Optimists and pessimists have very different views about the European Union. While few pessimists seem to have a positive image of the EU, most optimists regard the EU as democratic, modern, forward-looking or protective. Nearly half of social pessimists say they do not feel they are a citizen of the EU.

- All self-reported social classes share some social pessimism, but members of the lower middle class are most likely to be pessimistic.
- Social pessimists are more likely than optimists to feel that society has not treated them fairly or is not fair for all in general. Most pessimists take the view that justice does not prevail, political decisions do not apply to all citizens and people do not usually get what they deserve.

Comparative cross-country findings

- Country rankings in terms of social optimism do not reveal the East–West or North–South divide often found in comparisons of Member States: although the Nordic countries are the most optimistic, central and eastern European and Balkan countries are more optimistic than Mediterranean ones, and even more so than Continental ones.
- High relative levels of social pessimism were detected in some highly developed European countries, such as France, Belgium and Italy.
- Trust in institutions and growth rates of gross domestic product per capita in purchasing power parity were found to be the key country-level drivers of optimism.

Policy pointers

- People's perceptions about the future reflect the general climate in a society. A high level of pessimism can undermine social cohesion and even the legitimacy of the established political system. The report shows that pessimists often feel excluded from society. In order to include pessimistic groups, it is essential to identify their needs and remedy their situation, relying on solidarity from the rest of society.
- Involving citizens systematically and to a significant degree in the recovery process following the COVID-19 crisis will be vital. As the research found, people who feel their voice counts tend to be more optimistic not only about their own future but also about that of the society they live in.
- The results show the key role that labour market position plays in people's perceptions about the future. As emphasised by the Porto Declaration, adopted on 8 May 2021, a shift in focus from protecting to creating jobs is needed. The declaration refers to the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which aims to create not only more but also better jobs.
- Trust in institutions proved to be strongly associated with optimism at both individual and country levels. Eurofound's previous research has shown that facilitating access to high-quality public services could help to build trust in institutions.

Introduction

Increasing dissatisfaction in many Member States with democratic institutions, including political parties and the establishment in general, as well as discontent with the European project, has given rise to populism in several parts of the European Union in recent years. This is likely not only to adversely affect the political climate and reduce trust in institutions within individual Member States – it also has the potential to undermine the legitimacy of the European project. Many European citizens believe that society is in decline and that the future will be worse than the present and even the past.

This report makes no value judgement in favour of either optimism or pessimism. However, it assumes that the way people see the future has relevant personal and societal consequences. In addition, the perceptions of European citizens about the future could have a major impact on the European project.

The report offers a comprehensive overview of optimism and pessimism in Europe by analysing and measuring people's perceptions about the future at a social level. The aim is to explore what the key drivers of these perceptions are. Based on empirical information on the pre-COVID-19 period from several Eurobarometer surveys (conducted on behalf of the European Commission), the report seeks to draw conclusions about the possible impacts on society.[1] As the phenomenon under study has so far received little theoretical and empirical attention, the research was designed as an exploratory study to investigate perceptions about the future from different angles.

In view of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis, understanding the roots of discontent prior to the crisis is of particular importance. It can be assumed that the health, social, economic and emotional crises brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic will exacerbate the population's prospects overall, further deepening the current pessimism.

If lessons are learned about what to change to address the drivers of pessimism, the recovery from the pandemic can be built on a more solid base. This could help to increase optimism levels, which in turn could boost social engagement, increase trust in governments and institutions, and result in a more cohesive society – in other words, a better future for Europe.

Policy context

The European policy document *White paper on the future of Europe: Reflections and scenarios for the EU27 by 2025* declares that Europe is at a crossroads and needs to decide how it wants to tackle today's challenges (European Commission, 2017). Leaving aside the particular decisions to be made, the future of Europe will also depend on Europeans' perceptions about the future, and whether they face these uncertain times with an optimistic or a pessimistic attitude. The white paper enumerates some of the issues that Europe needs to tackle, such as the challenges arising from new technologies and automation; climate change; migration; security and terrorism; Europe's changing place in the world; the legacy of the Great Recession that started in 2008; the ageing population; the future of social welfare systems; and the rise of populist and nationalistic rhetoric. These are precisely the issues that most social researchers identify as fuelling Europeans' pessimism.

When she took office as President of the European Commission in 2019, Ursula von der Leyen laid out her priorities and political guidelines. These included an initiative to convene a Conference on the Future of Europe, with the aim of involving citizens throughout the process of preparing and implementing the conference. The initiative can obviously be regarded as a response to a decrease in trust in European institutions, as the conference aims to build greater trust and seek ways to increase it further: 'In an increasingly multipolar world, many Europeans remain concerned about their future and the European Union has to show that it can provide answers to their concerns' (European Commission, 2020a).

In her inaugural speech to the Conference, on 9 May 2021, Ursula von der Leyen said, 'For the first time in a generation, more people worry that their children will not be better off than them' (European Parliament, 2021). The idea of listening to citizens' voices is still at the centre of the Commission's efforts. This is obvious, for example, in the emphasis placed on communication and outreach.

The conference is designed not as a one-off event but as a two-year process, and its main aim is to 'look forward and forge a vision for our future' (European Commission, 2020a). It is intended to be a new public,

1 The complete list of Eurobarometer studies, on which these data are based, can be found in the bibliography on p. 53. It should be noted that the Eurobarometer data have been adjusted to cover the EU27 only.

bottom-up forum for open, inclusive and transparent debate with citizens, using a multilingual online platform. As the President of the European Parliament, David Sassoli, said in April 2021, this platform represents

> *a key tool to allow citizens to participate and have a say on the Future of Europe. We must be certain that their voices will be heard and that they have a role in the decision-making, regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic.*
>
> (European Commission, 2021)

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and in view of its consequences, it is more important than ever to understand the drivers of optimism and pessimism. Hemerijk and Huguenot-Noël (2020) point to the enormous impact of the crisis:

> *Barely having had time to absorb the economic and social aftershocks of the Great Recession, the world is confronted with an even more disruptive exogenous shock – the coronavirus pandemic, costing above all human lives but also causing massive dislocation.*

Despite huge EU-level recovery efforts (especially in the form of the €750 billion temporary recovery instrument NextGenerationEU), the pandemic poses great challenges in all Member States, in particular by undermining European welfare states – already severely impacted by the shocks caused by the Great Recession.

In the framework of the challenges facing Europe at present, the report sets out to investigate societal perceptions of the future. It is clear that Europe has to manage uncertainty and pessimism about the future by implementing policies designed to increase optimism. The report is intended to serve as an informed starting point to be taken into account by policymakers and citizens concerned about the future of Europe.

Key research questions and focus

There is a theoretical interest in explaining the optimistic or pessimistic climate in advanced societies, but relatively few studies on this topic have been based on empirical analyses. This report relies on empirical data, supported by a conceptual framework.

The key research questions examined in the report are:

- What was the level of optimism of European citizens at a personal and social level during the pre-COVID-19 period?
- What was the emotional climate? Did pessimism prevail in Europe?
- What factors explain the different levels of optimism and pessimism among EU citizens? How do citizens' optimism and pessimism relate to their own social, economic, cultural and political characteristics?
- Can social exclusion, inequality, a sense of unfairness, political disaffection and other social problems be regarded as drivers of citizens' pessimism?
- Can Europeans be divided into optimists and pessimists? Are there differences in the ways optimists and pessimists behave, think, value and feel?
- What was the level of optimism in the different Member States? On the basis of certain factors, can some countries be considered more optimistic or pessimistic than others?

This report cannot give a definitive and complete answer to all these difficult questions, but it aims to provide sound statistical analyses to enhance knowledge and understanding of the subject. The challenges are threefold: conceptual, empirical and methodological. First, 'optimism' and 'pessimism' can be defined in many ways. Second, as there is no European survey on optimism and pessimism, this research is based on secondary data, taking empirical information from several rounds of Eurobarometer surveys and using many variables. Third, as this was an exploratory study with various aims and research questions, the author selected distinct statistical techniques to carry out each empirical analysis (these will be explained in the relevant sections of the report).

The report is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 offers a conceptual background for the research. Chapter 2 explores the key drivers of social optimism (a general expectation that social issues will turn out well), explaining the main factors underlying them. In order to measure the different dimensions of social optimism and pessimism, the author designed an index, called the Social Optimism Index, and its construction is explained in Chapter 2. Chapters 3 and 4 analyse numerous rounds of Eurobarometer surveys to see how socially optimistic and pessimistic people think, feel and behave, revealing their sociopolitical and socioeconomic views and attitudes. Chapter 5 presents a ranking of EU countries according to their level of social optimism and gives the results of a multilevel analysis carried out to show the relevance of country-level characteristics. The report ends with a concluding chapter that sums up the analysis, showing the general drivers of social optimism and social pessimism and pointing to the potentially adverse consequences of the high levels of social pessimism for the future of Europe, particularly in a few Member States.

1 Conceptual background

Rise of pessimism in Europe

Social researchers and thinkers are increasingly focused on the relevance of social perceptions about the future. This is reflected in a substantial increase in the number of entries that include the term 'optimism' in the social science bibliographic database Sociological Abstracts during the past three decades, reaching 6,839 entries between 2010 and 2019.[2] A similar pattern regarding 'pessimism' can be observed: in this case, the number of entries added between 2010 and 2019 was 2,050, nearly 12 times the figure for the 1980s (173).

Some thinkers and social scientists have pointed to a change in perceptions about the future. As early as 1958, R. B. Bailey referred to forms of pessimism as creating an atmosphere of negation that was weakening the idea of progress. Based on the equation of rationality, truth and social utility, the modern notion of progress entailed a belief that the future could and would be better. In 2001, Oliver Bennett published his book on 'cultural pessimism', defined as 'the conviction that the culture of a nation, a civilisation or of humanity itself is in an irreversible process of decline'. He analysed four narratives of decline: environmental, intellectual, moral and political. Robert Heilbroner's *Visions of the future* (1996) distinguished between the distant past, yesterday, today and tomorrow. He claimed that today's vision was marked by a new degree of pessimism, a new mood of apprehension and anxiety. However, today's mood was sombre rather than black, uncertain instead of despairing. This mood was driven by changes in science, capitalism and mass politics, three forces that were no longer regarded unambiguously as carriers of progress. Leo Marx (1994) alluded to technological pessimism as 'the sense of disappointment, anxiety, even menace, that the idea of technology arouses in many people these days'.

Several reports by the Pew Research Center have examined perceptions about the future using data from its Global Attitudes Survey, showing that pessimism is unequally distributed worldwide. Rich countries are far more pessimistic than those with developing and emerging economies. In one study, 65% of the population of 10 countries with advanced economies agreed with the statement 'When children in our country grow up, they will be financially worse off than their parents'. In the US and Europe, pessimism is equally widespread (65%) (Pew Research Center, 2014).

By 2018, a decade after the onset of the global financial crisis, the economic mood had improved significantly in many countries. However, in advanced economies, pessimism remains, as only one-third of people believe that when the children of today grow up they will be better off financially than their parents (Pew Research Center, 2018). Even before the Great Recession and after some years of economic growth, the core economies of Europe showed apparent symptoms of social pessimism (Liddle, 2008). A 2018 Eurobarometer survey also proved that in most EU countries, pessimists outnumber optimists, meaning that the share of people thinking that 'the life of those in the EU who are children today will be more difficult than the life of those from their own generation' exceeds that of those thinking that it will be easier – see Figure 7 on p. 25 (EB90.2). Societal pessimism persists even in an improved economic situation, which could be interpreted as a sign that this pessimistic outlook has an undeniable cultural component.

Nostalgia is also an issue, as in many countries a large proportion of people believe that, compared with 20 years ago, the financial situation is worse for ordinary people: for example, Greece (87%), Italy (72%), Spain (62%), France (56%) and Germany (46%) (Pew Research Center, 2018). Steenvoorden and Harteveld (2018) have studied the relationship between nostalgia, societal pessimism and support for populist radical right parties. And de Vries and Hoffmann (2018) conclude that 'a majority of the European public can be classified as nostalgic. 67% think that the world used to be a better place'. It can be assumed that the health, social, economic and emotional crises brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic will exacerbate the population's prospects overall, further deepening the current pessimism.

Eefje Steenvoorden (2015, 2016) has carried out the most comprehensive empirical research on societal pessimism to date. She distinguishes between societal

2 The maximum number of entries per decade between 1950 and 1990 was 286. This number increased to 2,079 in the 1990s and escalated to 5,263 in the first decade of the 21st century.

unease and societal pessimism. 'Societal unease' is defined as

> *a latent concern among citizens [in contemporary Western countries] about the precarious state of society, which is constituted by perceived unmanageable deterioration of five fundamental aspects of society, namely distrust in human capability, loss of ideology, decline of political power, decline of community, and socioeconomic vulnerability.*
>
> (Steenvoorden, 2015, p. 105)

Societal pessimism, on the other hand, 'does not refer to specific aspects of society, but merely the gut feeling that society is in decline' (Steenvoorden, 2015, p. 89). She believes that surveys show that dissatisfaction with society is prevalent among the general public in all Western societies, and that Europe can be considered a pessimistic continent.

Empirical studies, for example that carried out by de Vries and Hoffmann (2020) for the Bertelsmann Stiftung, show that

> *a significant share of Europe's population expresses anxiety with regard to how their societies will cope with large-scale societal changes due to globalization, migration and automation, among other factors ... A total of 58% of respondents in the EU27 feel optimistic about their personal future, while only 42% feel pessimistic. On the other hand, only 42% express optimism regarding their country's future, while a full 58% are pessimistic in this regard.*

Like many other studies, this report distinguishes between societal pessimism – the concern that society is in decline and heading in the wrong direction – and personal pessimism. Many studies have found that people tend to be optimistic about their own personal future but pessimistic about their country's future (for example, Whitman, 1998; de Vries and Hoffmann, 2020). Data in this report confirm this finding, and Figure 16 (p. 46) illustrates the 'pessimism gap' for each EU country.

Other studies provide evidence of this climate of social pessimism in various countries: Watts et al (1989) among young and older people in Germany, Eckersley (2000) among the Australian general population, Elchardus (2015) among Belgian young people, Schnabel (2018) on Dutch public opinion, Prandner et al (2020) on personal and social expectations in Austria, Steenvoorden (2016) on societal unease in the Netherlands and Ramos Torre (2017) on social uncertainty about the future in Spain. Qualitative studies (Ramos Torre, 2017) and surveys with open questions (Eckersley, 2000) reveal an even more pessimistic outlook on the future. In a nutshell, it seems that pessimism is prevalent among the general population in Europe.

Paradoxes with regard to optimism

All the social researchers cited above point to two significant dichotomies, characteristic mainly of perceptions about the future in Western societies.

First, there is a sharp contrast between personal and societal pessimism (Eckersley, 2000). By and large, people are personally optimistic but socially pessimistic in most countries. The 'optimism bias' hypothesis is a well-known explanation for this dichotomy (Sharot, 2011). Optimism, hope and thinking positively about the future are crucial for a person to lead a healthy and happy life. Hence it is possible to talk about an 'optimism imperative' (Bennett, 2011, 2015), a tendency to see one's personal future as better than it probably will be.

Second, there is a striking contrast between the most advanced societies, which are much more pessimistic, and developing or emerging economies, which are relatively optimistic (Pew Research Center, 2014; Roser and Nagdy, 2020). How, then, is it possible that people with the highest levels of well-being, living in the most developed societies, are those who look at the future most negatively? Social scientists have offered numerous explanations for this puzzle, subjective and objective, cultural and structural.

Joel Best (2001) focuses on four aspects of the relationship between a society's progress and perceptions about the future: (1) belief in progress and social perfectibility highlights failures to achieve perfection, and thereby fosters pessimism; (2) progress reduces large problems, making smaller problems seem relatively large; (3) social progress encourages recognition of a larger number of problems; and (4) progress fosters fear of social collapse. Prandner et al (2020, p. 238) link pessimism to

> *three potential states of crisis, which threaten social integration of citizens. Firstly, the crisis of social structure which manifests itself in rising social inequalities and feelings of deprivation. Secondly, the crisis of cohesion which is reflected in a decrease in social trust and perceptions of exclusion. Finally, the crisis of regulation which becomes evident in the decline of political efficacy and political trust.*

Since all these social integration indicators are interrelated, the overall analysis would seem to point to an underlying societal malaise.

Some economists have suggested a 'threshold hypothesis' (Max-Neef, 1995), explaining that economic growth brings about improvements in quality of life, but only up to a point (the threshold), beyond which quality of life may begin to deteriorate. This deterioration would explain the higher levels of pessimism in highly

developed countries. Other economists, such as Branko Milanovic (2019), think that Western malaise, particularly among the Western middle classes, and the rise of populism have been brought about by the uneven distribution of the gains from globalisation, which has benefited the US and European countries much less than might have been expected.

The literature offers a long list of economic, social and cultural factors to explain the current pessimistic emotional climate. Liddle (2008) points to changes in labour markets, such as the erosion of decent working-class jobs and the alienation of working-class men; the perceived threats posed by globalisation; the meritocratic battle to succeed in formal education; the inequality between generations, which puts pressure on young and older people alike; and the EU's role in opening markets, liberalising trade and guaranteeing the free movement of workers. Lowenthal (1995) expressed the views that 'today's increasingly complex world has brought about as much consternation as hope' and that 'technology-aided exploitation of the natural environment has made us fearful of irreversible damage to the ecosystem'. It is undeniable that the fast pace of economic, political and social changes shapes people's visions of the future. In this context, citizens fear many social trends that they perceive as menacing or causing uncertainty.

Based on a survey eliciting US people's views on what their country would be like in 2050, Gramlich (2019) presents a set of pessimistic expectations and feelings: people believe that income gaps will widen and that living standards will decline; they think that older adults will be less financially prepared for retirement; they are worried about environmental sustainability and climate change; they are apprehensive about the incursion of widespread job automatisation, robots and artificial intelligence; they have mixed feelings about the impact of having a majority non-white population by 2050; they envisage a smaller role for the US on the world stage; and they expect political divisions to intensify. Furthermore, views regarding how to improve life in the future are sharply polarised along political lines. In short, most US citizens predict a weaker economy, a growing income divide, a damaged environment and a broken political system (Pew Research Center, 2019). Although the EU has not yet carried out a similar survey, it can be assumed that EU citizens would broadly share these pessimistic views – in particular in the post-COVID-19 situation.

Finally, it should be noted that, although a majority have a gloomy outlook on the future, people can be pessimistic for very different reasons. Schweizer and Schneider (1997) distinguish between three basic orientations. Economic issues guide the views of those with a conservative orientation, people concerned about general dangers to humankind have a progressive orientation, and those with a security orientation focus on law, order and moral issues. Furthermore, each era is subject to its own social anxieties. Therefore, it is crucial to research and learn about the issues that EU citizens are worried about and the specific sources of their pessimism.

Social consequences of optimism and pessimism

As seen above, many social scientists claim that a sentiment that society is in decline is widespread nowadays among citizens. Pessimistic expectations, feelings and judgements about the future of advanced societies pervade public opinion and the collective mood. Social scientists are also trying to figure out which factors explain optimism and pessimism, and the inherent dichotomies. And most of them, consciously or unconsciously, give the impression of being genuinely worried about this drift towards pessimism. One way or another, they convey the sense that optimism is mostly good while pessimism is bad.

Concerning value judgements about optimism and pessimism, two key debates need to be considered. First, there is the question of truthfulness. Both optimistic and pessimistic predictions could turn out to be true or false, and they can be based on actual or fictitious premises. These issues are the subject of the 'realism debate'. Second, bearing in mind the celebrated Thomas theorem formulated in 1928 ('If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences'), it is necessary to think about and evaluate the personal, social, economic, political and cultural consequences of optimism and pessimism. These effects are the subject of the 'pragmatic debate'. Nowadays, social media has an important role in shaping these debates.

Bennett (2011, 2015) introduces the concept of the 'optimism of everyday life' as a mode of viewing the future, suggesting that it performs significant psychological, social and cultural functions across a broad range of contexts. Seligman (1998), founder of positive psychology, and Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) compiled evidence from many studies proving the link between optimism and success in education, electoral campaigns, military leadership, business and sport, to mention only a few fields. Bennett (2011, p. 17) argues that 'the necessity of optimism has given rise to a complex of optimism promoters, which function as agents of implicit cultural policy'. The development of a whole sector of psychotherapy and counselling, the creation of a colossal happiness industry and the never-ending political production of optimism, among other factors, are part and parcel of this institutional complex. Optimism is seen as highly useful to individuals and societies, with some commentators advocating the need for 'stubborn optimism' to confront major global

challenges such as climate change. Paradoxically, this widespread demand for personal and social optimism derives from what Bennett calls an 'optimism deficit' and hence constitutes tangible evidence of a culture of pessimism.

Steenvoorden (2016) points out that the negative consequences of pessimistic attitudes are discussed in political and intellectual debates. Political and economic leaders warn that societies should not be overwhelmed by pessimism or fear, that economies need optimism to increase consumption and that pessimism can hamper innovative thinking. She has analysed three negative social consequences of pessimism: (1) an increase in populist radical extreme right voting, (2) a decrease in political and civic participation, and (3) the mitigation of multiple identifications with political-geographical collective groups. Many other researchers have reflected on the link between populism, pessimism and nostalgia (Taggart, 2004; de Vries and Hoffmann, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2018; Steeenvoorden and Harteveld, 2018). When it comes to the European project, Taggart argues that 'it is difficult to reconcile an essentially future-oriented project with the values derived from a past-oriented and rather vague notion of the heartland'.

Eckersley (2000, p. 13) affirms that 'the widespread perception that things are getting worse at the societal level is significant, regardless of whether it is "factually" or "objectively" true' and that 'the implications and consequences for society of this loss of faith are serious'. He cites Kenneth Clark (1993), who warned that 'it's lack of confidence, more than anything else, that kills a civilisation'. Pessimism is associated with many other negative emotions at personal and societal levels, such as fear, dissatisfaction, anxiety, apprehension, mistrust, nostalgia and depression (Marx, 1994; Heilbroner, 1996; de Vries and Hoffmann, 2020). These emotions tend to weaken both the self and society. Some authors (McKenzie, 1997; Whitman, 1998; Roser and Nagdy, 2020) think that Western pessimism is not justified, as it is based on misinformation and misperception of reality. According to them, the mass media and education systems contribute decisively to this distorted perception of the facts. This is why Roser and Nagdy (2020) argue that we should combat pessimism, because 'if our perceptions of the reality are wrong, we can end up prioritising the wrong things and making ineffectual change'.

Beyond mainstream thinking, which tends to value optimism positively and pessimism negatively, the argument is that blind optimism can be as damaging as blank pessimism. For instance, according to Bennett (2011), an optimistic vision or ideology can legitimise the hardships of the present. Berlant (2011) reflected on 'cruel optimism', for example when a person's optimistic desire to achieve a goal far beyond their reach becomes an obstacle to their flourishing.

The pragmatic effects depend on the kind of optimism or pessimism: short- or long-term, generalised or specific, fatalistic or romantic, realistic or idealistic, visionary or illusionary, self-protective or combative. Kaida and Kaida (2016) focus on 'the idea that pessimistic anticipation of the future might facilitate actions aimed at avoiding an undesirable future'. They call this attitude 'constructive pessimism'. Writing in praise of pessimism, Selwyn (2011), after showing that educational technology can be seen as a system of radical optimism, argues that 'a pessimistic stance is the most sensible, and possibly the most productive, perspective to take'. For him, 'pessimism should not result in a passive resignation to one's fate but an active engagement with continuous alternatives', what he describes as the 'purposeful pursuit of pessimism'.

Neves (2003), in analysing optimism, pessimism and hope in the work of sociologist Émile Durkheim, concludes, 'It seems that without hope, the critical potential of pessimism is lost, since the logical conclusion is despair and possibly death'. Gramsci's famous motto 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will' (Gramsci, 1971), which inspired his whole political project, advocates combining a realistic description of the status quo with a genuine commitment to the possibility of transforming reality (Antonini, 2019). Perhaps indeed these challenging times call for a judicious combination of pessimism and hope.

Social optimism: A conceptual and operational definition

In modern usage, optimism denotes 'a tendency to hold positive expectations of the future' (Bennett, 2011, p. 3). It can be regarded as 'the generalized expectation of a positive outcome' (Schweizer et al, 1999). Conversely, pessimism points to 'an inclination to expect worse things in general and expect not to succeed in what one tries to accomplish' (Steenvoorden, 2015, p. 89). The literature distinguishes between personal and societal optimism. For de Vries and Hoffmann (2020), personal optimism concerns 'people's perceptions regarding their own personal future',[3] and societal optimism refers to 'the belief that society is likely to do well and will progress in the future'. Societal pessimism, in contrast, describes 'the concern that society is in

3 They operationalised the concept using the question 'In general, what is your personal outlook on the future? Positive or negative?'

decline and heading in the wrong direction'.[4] For Steenvoorden (2015, p. 89), societal pessimism is an affective evaluation about society, 'a sentiment among citizens that their society is in decline'.[5]

This report introduces the concept of 'social optimism', which was inspired by Schweizer and Schneider (1997), who defined it as a 'generalised expectation of a positive outcome concerning social and environmental affairs'. However, as a single survey question can capture only a specific aspect of optimism, for this study a composite indicator – the Social Optimism Index – was designed and constructed, based on six variables. The index includes three dimensions, each containing two variables. The dimensions are as follows: (1) expectations about your life in general and about your country's situation, (2) views on whether things are going in the right or wrong direction, in your country and in the EU, respectively, and (3) feelings regarding general confidence in the future and optimism about the EU's future. These six variables make up a valid, robust and reliable measure of social optimism and pessimism – that is, of whether individuals' generalised expectations about future social outcomes are positive or negative.

Data from Eurobarometer 91.5 (June–July 2019) were used to estimate the index scores. These scores were used to analyse the key drivers of social optimism and also to create a typology of social optimism. The report also uses a simplified version of this typology, made up of only the two variables on whether things are going in the right or wrong direction, to analyse the sociocultural and political profiles of European optimists and pessimists. For this purpose, a substantial amount of data from 10 Eurobarometer surveys were used.

The next chapter outlines the methodology behind the construction of the Social Optimism Index and explores the key drivers of social optimism.

4 They used the question 'Overall, do you feel optimistic or pessimistic about the future of your country?'

5 The concept was measured using two items from the European Social Survey: 'It is hard to be hopeful about the future of the world' and 'For most people in this country, life is getting worse'.

2 Key drivers of social optimism

This chapter investigates the main individual-level drivers of social optimism in Europe. Many single variables measure social optimism, but each one shows a slightly different aspect of the phenomenon under study. In order to overcome this problem, a composite indicator – the Social Optimism Index – was designed and constructed. The index is made up of three dimensions and six variables. Once the index scores were estimated, an initial exploratory analysis was carried out. Finally, using a multiple regression technique, a model was obtained that includes the key drivers of social optimism. Data were drawn from Eurobarometer 91.5 (June–July 2019).

Social Optimism Index: A multidimensional measurement

Social optimism and pessimism cannot be defined solely in terms of cognitive expectations about future social outcomes (good/bad). From an evaluative perspective, they can be seen also as relating to judgements about society's behaviour (right/wrong) and, from an emotional perspective, as relating to subjective feelings (positive/negative). Bennett (2001) states that cultural pessimism has affective, judgemental and cognitive aspects. Therefore, a person's 'generalised expectation' about social outcomes is simultaneously a feeling, an evaluation and an idea about society's future. Scherer, in his multicomponent theory of emotions (2005), states that an emotion includes cognitive, motivational and affective components.

Thus, as explained above, the Social Optimism Index takes into consideration three aspects of the phenomenon under study: (1) feelings, or the emotional component, (2) judgements, or the evaluative component, and (3) expectations, or the cognitive component (see Table 1). The combination of these three essential components of culture (Bericat, 2016) makes it possible to get a more robust, valid and reliable measure of social optimism – that is, the perceptions that European citizens have about their society's future.

Six questions about Europeans' perception of the future

The index includes two variables, drawn from Eurobarometer 91.5, in each of the three dimensions (Table 1). It uses 'confidence in the future' and 'optimism and pessimism about the EU's future' to measure the respondents' general feelings. It incorporates opinions on whether things are going in the right or wrong direction, in the respondent's country and in the EU, to measure the evaluative dimension. Citizens' opinions about the country's direction will depend on their political preferences and the political direction of the ruling party, so the index takes into account the general judgement about the EU to compensate for this effect. And, finally, it contains future expectations about the respondent's own country and their personal life in general. Questions 1.1 and 3.1 are intended to reflect not the personal characteristics of the respondents (the concept of 'I am optimistic/pessimistic') but expected future social outcomes for individuals' lives. As individuals occupy different social positions, they are differently affected by the social conditions and circumstances they live in.

Table 1: Social Optimism Index – Six questions

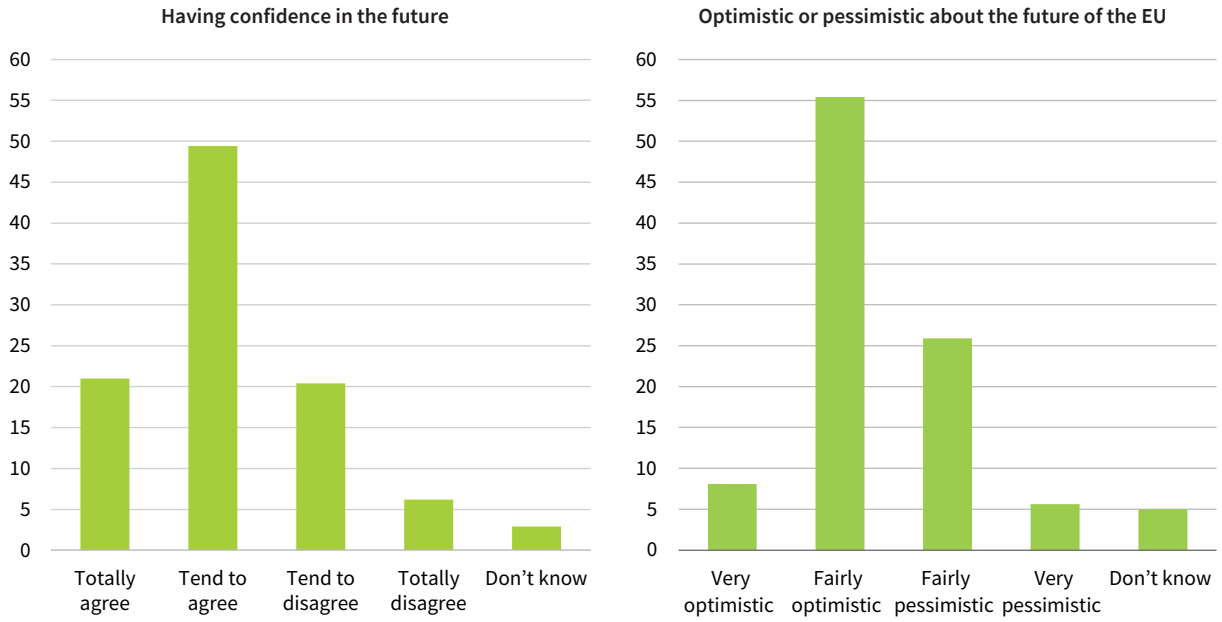
Dimensions	Questions
Emotional	1.1. (QD9): To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? 'You have confidence in the future.' 1.2. (QA19): Would you say that you are very optimistic, fairly optimistic, fairly pessimistic or very pessimistic about the future of the EU?
Evaluative	At the present time, would you say that, in general, things are going in the right direction or in the wrong direction, in ... 2.1. (D73a1): our country? 2.2. (D73a2): the European Union?
Cognitive	What are your expectations for the next 12 months: will the next 12 months be better, worse or the same, when it comes to ... 3.1. (QA2a1): your life in general? 3.2. (QA2a2): the situation in our country in general?

Note: *The question codes used in the Eurobarometer 91.5 questionnaire are in parentheses.*
Source: *EB91.5, June–July 2019*

The answers to these six questions provide an overview of people's optimistic and pessimistic feelings in Europe. As Figures 1 to 3 – which present the results for 2019 – show, the level of optimism varies according to the question asked. However, these variations can easily be explained by how the questions are phrased. For example, Figure 1 depicts people's confidence both in the future in general and in the future of the EU in particular. Seven out of ten Europeans are confident ('totally agree' and 'tend to agree') about the future (70%), and almost two-thirds of the population (64%) are confident ('very optimistic' and 'fairly optimistic') about the future of the EU. In short, looking at the emotional component of optimism, European citizens are overall quite optimistic. However, it must be borne in mind that the positive phrasing of these two questions creates a bias towards optimism. In addition, about 3 out of 10 Europeans are pessimistic about the future of the EU (see Figure 1).

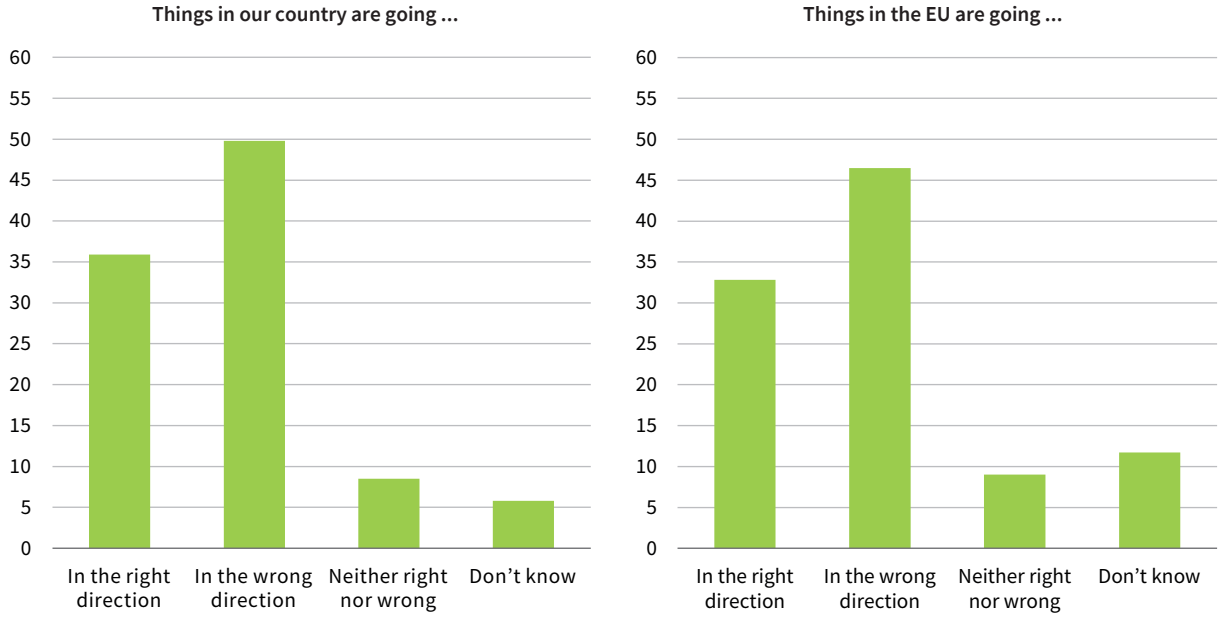
When European citizens are asked in which direction their societies are heading (right or wrong), the picture that emerges from the answers is markedly different (Figure 2). In this case, optimism drops sharply, with only one-third of European citizens considering that their country (36%), or the EU (33%), is moving in the right direction. The rest of the population either belongs to the undecided group – that is, those who do not have a clear opinion on the situation ('neither one nor the other') – or to the pessimists' group. With regard to both the direction in which the country is heading and that in which the EU is heading, the share of pessimists is about 15 percentage points higher than that of optimists. These data clearly show that pessimism dominates perceptions about European societies' future. People who think that the direction in which society is heading is wrong believe that tomorrow they will find themselves in a worse societal situation than today, and the data can be interpreted as a sign that Europeans have the perception of societal decline.

Figure 1: Social optimism: emotional dimension, EU27, 2019 (%)



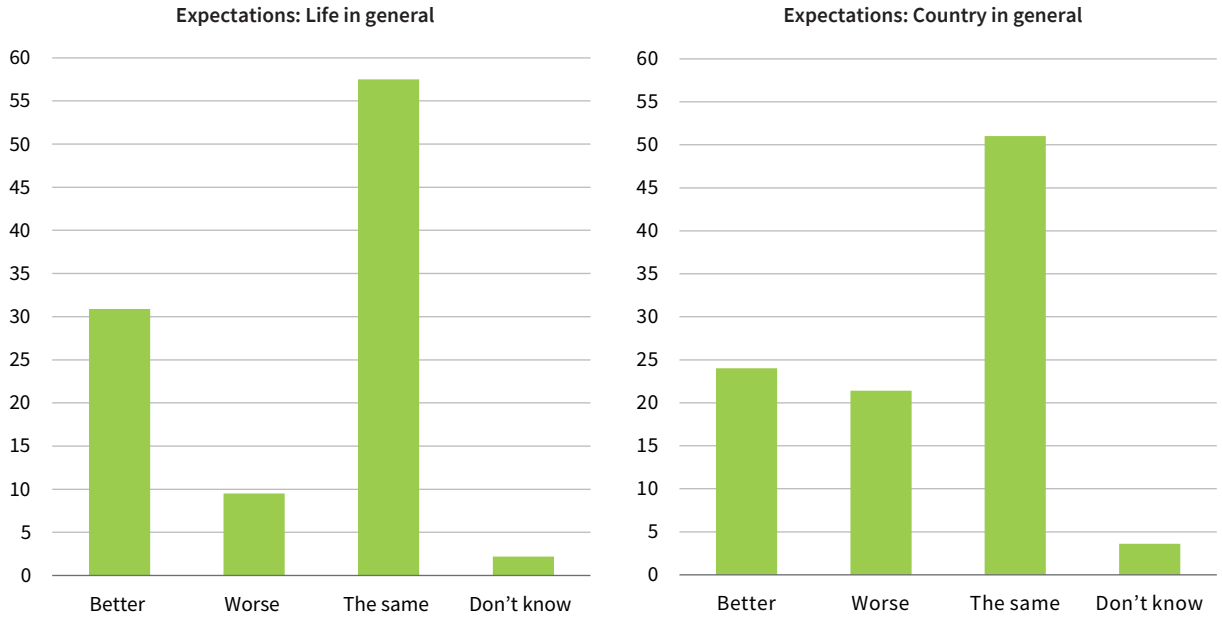
Source: *EB91.5, June–July 2019*

Figure 2: Social optimism: evaluative dimension, EU27, 2019 (%)



Source: *EB91.5, June–July 2019*

Figure 3: Social optimism: cognitive dimension, EU27, 2019 (%)



Source: *EB91.5, June–July 2019*

Figure 3 shows the results regarding the cognitive component of optimism. In this case, Europeans report on their expectations for their life in general and for their country in general 12 months ahead. The picture is not very optimistic in this dimension either: only 3 out of 10 Europeans think that their life will be better in 12 months (31%), and only 1 in 4 thinks that their country will be better overall (24%). The largest category is made up of those who believe that they and their country will be the same in a year's time.

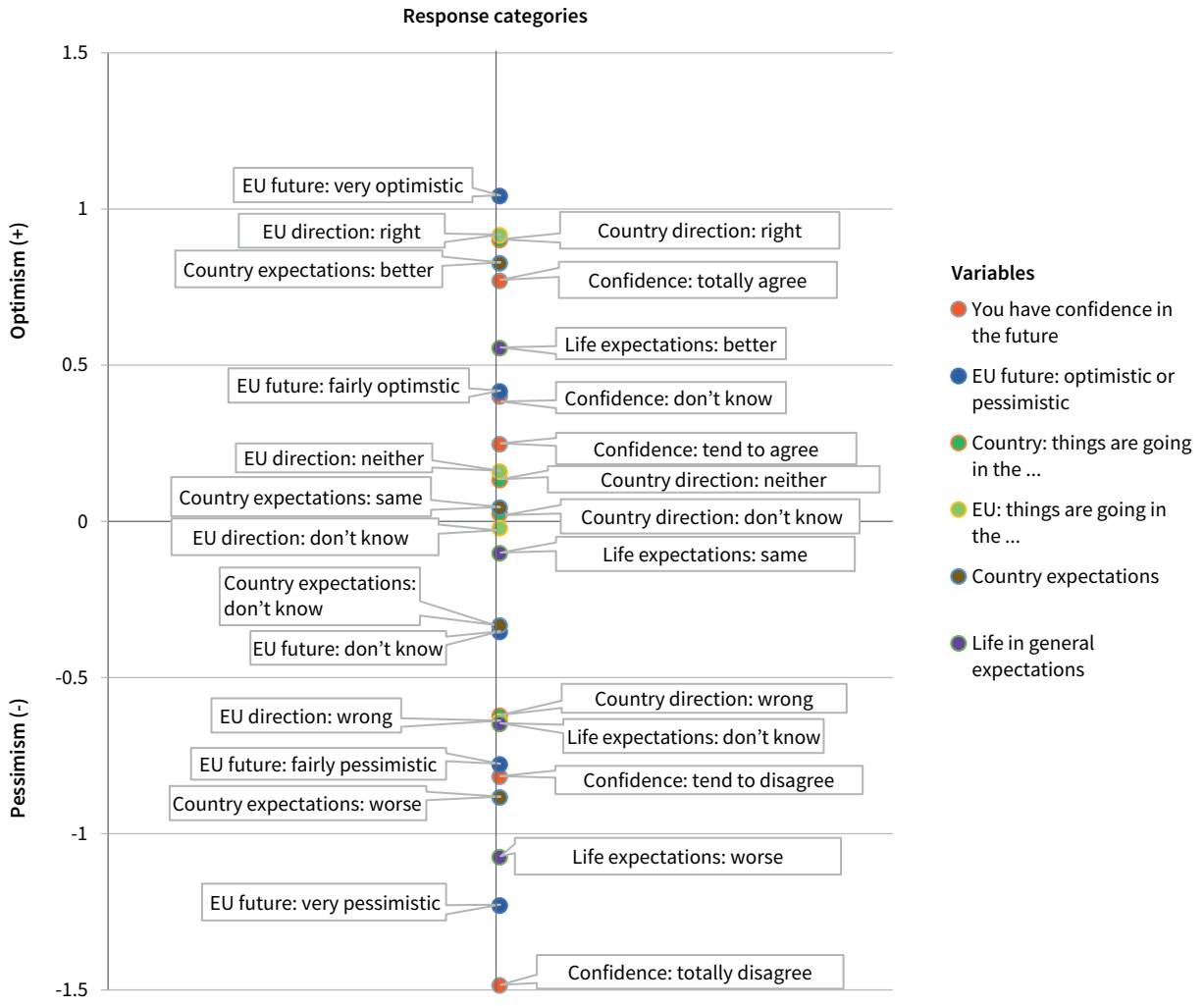
Taken together, these figures show a complex situation, from which some preliminary conclusions can be drawn. First, these data prove that the level of optimism about one's own future is higher than that about one's own country or the EU, something already seen in many other reports (Everett and Bowman, 1998; Eckersley,

2000; Liddle, 2008; de Vries and Hoffmann, 2020; Roser and Nagdy, 2020; Eurofound, 2020).[6] Second, they show that the optimism bias has an influence also when the question is general, or when it refers to society. In other words, when questions refer to emotions such as confidence in the future or optimism, the answers tend to be more positive. Third, these data show that the longer the time horizon of the question, the higher the level of pessimism. When asked about the direction that societies are taking, interviewees envisage a rather distant future, which amplifies diffuse pessimistic feelings among the population. This is why the two questions about the direction, right or wrong, that societies are heading in are the ones that best express the feelings of uneasiness, anxiety or uncertainty that people have when thinking about the future development of their societies. The impact of the time frame on the results is also evident if respondents are asked about the future of their children and grandchildren: perceptions are generally more negative than those about respondents' own future. (See Table 5 on p. 23)

A valid, robust and reliable measure of a person's level of social optimism cannot be based exclusively on the answer they give to just one of the six questions above. Each of them captures a different aspect of social optimism. Therefore, it is necessary to merge the answers to all these questions into a single measure, the Social Optimism Index. The index scores were estimated using multiple correspondence analysis, a statistical technique that is described in detail in Annex 1.

Figure 4 shows the average level of optimism/pessimism of all those who have chosen each of the response categories for the six variables included in the analysis. For example, the responses to the statement 'You have confidence in the future' are well distributed along the vertical axis. Total agreement with this statement

Figure 4: Social Optimism Index scores by response category



Source: *EB91.5, June–July 2019*

6 According to the second edition of Eurofound's *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey, in July 2020, 49% of respondents agreed with the statement that they were optimistic about their own future, but only 31% were optimistic about their country's future (Eurofound, 2020, p. 27 and p. 57).

means high social optimism; 'tend to agree' answers indicate mild optimism; respondents who answer 'don't know' are neither optimistic nor pessimistic; 'tend to disagree' equates to mild pessimism; and 'total disagreement' means high social pessimism. Furthermore, all the categories of the other five variables are congruently placed at these five levels of social optimism. All those who answered 'don't know', 'neither right nor wrong', or 'the same' are slightly below the European average in terms of social optimism. The most optimistic answer categories for the six variables can be found at the top of the figure, and the most pessimistic ones at the bottom.

Considering the quantification of categories shown in Figure 4 and segmenting the distribution of the Social Optimism Index scores, a typology of social optimism was created. The typology classifies European citizens into five groups according to their level of optimism (see Figure A1 in Annex 1): very optimistic, optimistic, neither optimistic nor pessimistic, pessimistic and very pessimistic. The bottom row of Table 2 shows the percentage of the EU population made up of each of the five types. Looking at how these five percentages vary makes it possible to compare social groups. For instance, this typology can be used to offer an overview of the percentages of optimistic and pessimistic people in each EU country (see Figure 15 on p. 41). It could also be used to compare women with men, to compare age groups or to compare social classes. These percentages help to explain the sociological meaning of the Social Optimism Index scores.

To check if this typology worked, accurately classifying people according to their social perceptions and feelings about the future, an assessment was carried out of the views of people in each category on the persistence of the effects of the economic crisis on the labour market. As Table 2 shows, optimists' and pessimists' opinions differ sharply. While 69% of very optimistic people believed that the impact of the crisis on jobs had already reached its peak, only 20% of very pessimistic people thought the same. In 2019, 11 years after the onset of the economic crisis, 51% of pessimists and 72% of very pessimistic people believed that the worst was still to come. In short, these data prove that the typology sharply discriminates between social optimists and social pessimists.

Key drivers of social optimism and pessimism

Multiple correspondence analysis was used to estimate the Social Optimism Index score for each respondent. Using index scores as the dependent variable and applying multiple linear regression techniques, a complete exploration of Eurobarometer 91.5 data was carried out. These analyses aimed to discover the key drivers of social optimism (for technical details, see Annex 2), because it is crucial to understand the social conditions that underlie people's perceptions about the future.

Based on previous literature (Pew Research Center, 1997, 2014, 2018; Schweizer and Schneider, 1997; Liddle, 2008; Steenvoorden, 2016; Steenvoorden and van der Meer, 2017; de Vries and Hoffmann, 2018, 2019, 2020; Prandner et al, 2020; Roser and Nagdy, 2020), the analyses looked at variables in four spheres likely to be related to social optimism and pessimism, namely:

1. sociodemographic (age, gender, education, etc.)
2. socioeconomic (financial and employment situation, social class, social mobility, etc.)
3. social (attachment, shared culture, attitudes to immigrants, etc.)
4. political (trust in institutions, satisfaction with democracy, political interest, etc.)

Table 2: Assessment of the impact of the economic crisis on the job market by social optimism level, EU27, 2019 (%)

	Social optimism level					Total
	Very optimistic	Optimistic	Neither	Pessimistic	Very pessimistic	
The impact of the crisis on jobs has already reached its peak	68.8	56.9	44.5	32.2	19.9	45.7
The worst is still to come	20.6	28.9	39.5	51.4	71.6	41.3
Don't know	10.6	14.2	16.0	16.4	8.5	13.1
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Share of the total European population	21.6	21.6	20.6	17.1	19.0	100

Source: *EB91.5, June–July 2019*

Table 3: Key drivers of social optimism and pessimism

Spheres	Key drivers	Magnitude of effect/ direction of relationship[a]
Sociodemographic	Age	-0.287
	Age2 (age squared)	0.208
Socioeconomic	Financial situation of household *Rather bad* (*reference: very good)*	-0.113
	Personal labour situation *Rather bad* (*reference: very good*)	-0.075
	My quality of life was better before *Totally agree* (*reference: totally disagree*)	-0.107
Sociocultural	Attachment to communities (+) *Index: local, national, EU, Europe*	0.120
	People have a lot in common (+) *Index: country, EU*	0.146
	Attitude towards immigrants/refugees (+) *Index: qb3_1, qb3_2, qd9_1, qd9_4*[b]	0.205
	I understand today's world (+) *Totally disagree* (*reference: totally agree*)	-0.015
Sociopolitical	My voice counts in the EU (+) *Totally disagree* (*reference: totally agree*)	-0.092
	My voice counts in my country (+) *Tend to disagree* (*reference: totally agree*)	-0.135

Notes: *Output variable: Social Optimism Index.* [a] *Beta coefficients.* [b] *The index 'Attitude towards immigrants/refugees' consists of four variables, as follows: the first two questions (qb3_1 and qb3_2) ask about positive or negative feelings towards migrants from other EU countries and from third countries, and the second two questions (qd9_1 and qd9_4) ask for agreement or disagreement with two statements, 'Immigrants contribute a lot to the country' and 'Your country should help refugees'.*
Source: *EB91.5, June–July 2019*

The variables selected for each of the four spheres were checked to see which were the most relevant – that is, which had the strongest effects on social optimism – once the effects of the other variables belonging to the same sphere had been controlled for. Finally, all these variables were incorporated into a regression model. The final model also took into account the diversity of EU countries (it controlled for country heterogeneity by including the Member States as dummy variables). The model does not include 'usual suspect' variables, such as gender, education and others, because their effects proved to be very small and not statistically significant.

Table 3 shows the final model for key drivers of social optimism. The variables included in the model explain 37.4% of the total variance in social optimism. The coefficients indicate the magnitude of the effect of each variable. The sign, positive or negative, shows the direction of the effect. A positive coefficient means that the variable increases social optimism, while a negative coefficient means that it increases pessimism. When variables are categorical, the coefficients indicate the magnitude of the effect of one category compared with the category used as a reference (shown in parentheses). For instance, if the financial situation of the respondent's household is 'rather bad', his or her Social Optimism Index score will diminish by 0.113 compared with those who enjoy a 'very good' financial situation. Complete statistical information on the model can be found in Table A2 in Annex 2.

Interpreting the dimensions and their main factors

The key drivers in Table 3 shows those underlying factors that fuel optimism and pessimism. It is essential to connect these specific variables with more general sociological factors to adequately understand the final model's results. This section focuses on the interpretation of the factors revealed in each of the four spheres.

However, before presenting these specific interpretations, it is crucial to note that no single factor can explain social optimism or pessimism by itself. The analysis found that many different variables in various dimensions have a relevant and statistically significant effect on social optimism and pessimism. Many circumstances influence the outlook of European citizens on the future of their societies. Therefore, it can be concluded that social pessimism is a complex phenomenon that can be explained only by a combination of demographic, economic, social, political

and cultural factors. Following this argument, it appears that, as an emotional climate, social pessimism in Europe is not driven by any specific kind of dissatisfaction or discontent. Instead, it seems to be a diffuse, general and collective mood, linked to a complex set of factors.

Sociodemographic factors

Age, gender, length of time in education, marital status, and living arrangements were the sociodemographic variables included in the dimensional and general regression models used to explore the key factors driving social optimism and pessimism. Once the rest of the variables had been controlled for, the only statistically significant regression coefficient with a considerable magnitude was age. The relationship between age and optimism is quadratic, justifying the inclusion of the 'age squared' variable in the model (see Table 3). This means that optimism decreases with age but that, from a certain point, entering old age, optimism increases again. In general, people in old age tend to be more pessimistic, but, once all other factors are controlled for, age in itself does not seem to increase pessimism among them.

The regression coefficients of the rest of the sociodemographic variables are statistically non-significant in many cases, and the strength of these coefficients is also usually quite small, which is why none of these variables has been included in the final model. This is the case for gender, educational level, marital status and living arrangements. Although in some cases some effects were detected – for example, being single increases optimism and widowhood increases pessimism – most of these effects are cancelled out when other factors are included in the model. This is also the case with education: its net effect on optimism is positive in some models but ceases to be statistically significant once other more important factors are taken into account. This happens also with living arrangements. Living in a big city seems to be slightly more likely to increase pessimism than living in a medium-sized city or small town.

However, the fundamental fact to be highlighted here is that, with the exception of age, sociodemographic variables alone do not seem to substantially alter people's degree of social optimism or pessimism. In short, from this perspective, it can be said that a pessimistic emotional climate spreads uniformly throughout the sociodemographic structure of a society.

Table 3 shows that the age regression coefficient has the greatest magnitude of all the values included in the model (-0.287), which shows the importance of this trait for an optimistic perception of the future. In fact, optimism can be considered an essential component of life (Sharot, 2011). In young people, the social situation, however unfavourable it may be, does not succeed in diminishing natural optimism (Pew Research Center, 2012). However, in both adults and older people, an unfavourable social situation is capable of considerably increasing their pessimism. In any case, the model shows that age is an important driver of optimism.

Socioeconomic factors

Unlike the demographic variables, almost all the socioeconomic factors have regression coefficients that are statistically significant. This means that the social position of an individual affects his or her degree of social optimism or pessimism. Since the magnitude of the effects of these variables is also quite high, the final model incorporates three socioeconomic variables. The relationship between socioeconomic resources and social optimism shows the extent to which economic inequality and social injustice could be driving pessimism in European societies. With scarce financial resources and in vulnerable employment situations, people left behind expect fewer social outcomes from their communities. Moreover, people may not understand why families continue to experience economic and labour hardship within a wealthy and affluent society. These feelings of injustice and unfairness could be fuelling different forms of social and political dissatisfaction, and thus social pessimism.

As Eurobarometer surveys do not offer objective financial information, the three factors included in this dimension relate to subjective assessments of the respondent's present situation. In this way, their effects will be comparable. The most important socioeconomic factor is the financial situation of the household, which determines the living conditions of all its members. By comparing the views of members of households in a rather poor financial situation with those of people whose households are in a very good financial situation, it can be seen that this factor has an impact on social optimism (beta coefficient = -0.113 – see Table 3 and Table A2 in Annex 2). The worse the financial situation of the household, the greater the social pessimism of its members. It is important to note that those in a poor financial situation are not only personally more pessimistic; their perceptions about society's future are also much gloomier. In short, an individual's poor financial situation profoundly alters his or her ideas about the society in which he or she lives.

Eurobarometer 91.5 also asked respondents whether during the past 12 months they had had difficulties in paying their bills. This variable's effect on the social optimism index is also statistically significant, although its magnitude is smaller than that of the other socioeconomic factors. Given that having difficulties paying bills correlates strongly with the household's financial situation, that variable was not included in the final model. However, its statistically significant effect reflects the demoralising effect of getting through an extreme and distressing situation such as not being able to pay the bills.

The second most crucial socioeconomic factor is the employment situation of an individual. This subjective variable correlates strongly with objective labour conditions, such as unemployment. Although in European societies work is the main source of income, the presence of this factor in the model reflects the fact that its effect is independent of financial situation. In other words, even if the financial situation of the household remains constant, a poor personal employment situation increases social pessimism (see Table 3 and Table A2 in Annex 2). This result is significant, and it shows that economic redistribution policies would not be sufficient to reduce social pessimism. Work brings more than income to people's lives; therefore, in addressing pessimism, the importance of job creation and other active labour market policies should be emphasised. Decent work brings meaning, pride and a sense of social usefulness to people's lives, and, without these vital components, both personal and social optimism will be negatively affected. The regression coefficient that compares the social optimism of those who experience a rather poor employment situation with those who are in a very good situation has a relatively high magnitude (beta coefficient = 0.075).

Finally, the model includes a socioeconomic variable indicating change in the interviewees' quality of life. They were asked to agree or disagree with the following sentence: 'Overall, regarding your quality of life, it was better before.' The model shows that worsening of an individual's quality of life has a large negative effect on social optimism (beta coefficient = -0.107). This is statistically significant and independent of the two other socioeconomic factors already discussed. This is a very significant result, first, because advanced societies are subject to continuous crises that worsen the living conditions of many people, such as the Great Recession and the COVID-19 crisis. And, second, but not less importantly, because it is becoming less and less clear, as the threshold hypothesis states (Max-Neef, 1995), that economic growth in hyper-developed countries translates directly and only into improvements in quality of life. This being the case, the feeling of a continuous deterioration or lack of improvement in people's quality of life may be fuelling social pessimism. Hence the importance of introducing other criteria, such as happiness or quality of life, in addition to economic growth and wealth as measures of a country's development.

Sociocultural factors

The first three factors in the sociocultural dimension are related to interviewees' feelings of social cohesion.[7] If individuals maintain emotional ties with the community they live in, think that all citizens have many things in common, and believe in an inclusive society and favour the integration of all the people living in their country, their Social Optimism Index score tends to be high. Conversely, discriminatory and segregationist attitudes, believing the country is made up of social groups that share almost nothing and detachment from the various communities people are living in drive social pessimism. In short, a cohesive society, with its sense of belonging and responsibility for others, its higher levels of predictability and trust, and its secure social ties, offers ontological security to its citizens (Giddens, 1990; Konecki, 2018).[8] Conversely, ontological insecurity creates mistrust and anxiety, which in turn lead to greater social pessimism. Hence the urgent need to understand people who feel excluded from society, their ontological insecurity and the factors that lead them to exclude others from their imagined society.

Of the three sociocultural factors mentioned in the previous paragraph, the one that correlates most closely to optimism is attitude towards immigrants. The index is made up of four variables. The first two questions ask whether immigration from other EU countries and immigration from non-EU countries evoke positive or negative feelings. The second two ask for agreement or disagreement with two statements: 'Immigrants contribute a lot to the country' and 'Your country should help refugees'. The stronger the rejection of immigrants, the greater the degree of social pessimism. It is worth noting that the effect (beta coefficient = 0.205) is the largest of any of the drivers presented in Table 3, with the exception of the age-related drivers.

An index was also used to measure the feeling of attachment to any of the following communities: your city/town, your country, the EU and Europe. The results show that identification with and attachment to any type of community increases people's social optimism (beta coefficient = 0.120) (Steenvoorden, 2016; Prandner et al, 2020). As mentioned above, these feelings of belonging constitute an essential dimension of social cohesion, proving that a more cohesive society would be a more optimistic one. In the same vein, those who think that people in their country have a lot of things in common, or that people in the EU do so, are far more optimistic than those who think the opposite (beta coefficient = 0.146).

7 These three factors were operationalised through multiple correspondence analysis, as composite indicators. Table A2 names the categorical variables included in each index.

8 Giddens defines 'ontological security' as 'a person's fundamental sense of safety in the world and includes a basic trust of other people' (Giddens, 1991).

It is important to stress that these three factors are independent of each other: they maintain their respective effects even when the other factors are kept constant. The rejection of immigration correlates with some sense of social exclusion. Attachment to a community constitutes a feeling of sharing a collective identity. Feeling that one has a culture and way of life in common with others facilitates mutual recognition, empathy and solidarity. Social cohesion enables societies to face the challenges of the future together with optimism. Conversely, lack of cohesion tears apart the social fabric, leaving individuals alone and isolated, at the mercy of an uncertain future. And this contributes to the spread of pessimism.

Finally, a key factor associated with social pessimism is worth noting. The nature of this factor, unlike the three discussed above, is purely cultural, mainly relating to the cognitive component of culture. It relates to people's ability to understand with some clarity how this globalised, complex and continuously changing world works. But it also relates to the capacity of the culture to offer credible and convincing interpretations of both how the world works today and how it will change in the near future.

Eurobarometer 91.5 asked interviewees if they 'understand well what is going on in today's world'. The results show that those who think they understand the world today are more optimistic, while those who do not are more pessimistic. In short, the difficulty people face in perceiving, knowing, interpreting and understanding the world explains the feelings of disorientation and loss experienced by many individuals today. It is not just a question of individuals' cognitive capacity; rather, the culture does not offer them a coherent interpretation of the world. The lack of a cultural map to understand the world generates ontological insecurity, and therefore results in widespread social pessimism. In this regard, it is essential to increase support for culture (such as theatre and cinema), so that it can offer ways of understanding the world, a complex world that can no longer be grasped using the cultural tools of the past.

Sociopolitical factors

This dimension (see Table 3 and Table A2 in Annex 2) includes two variables that reflect the extent to which citizens believe their voice counts in their own country and in the EU. 'Political voice' can be defined as the ability to express opinions and interest in influencing policy- and decision-making processes. The data show that political voice is an important factor associated with social optimism. When citizens feel that their voices are not heard, their sense of pessimism increases, whereas, when they think that their wishes and demands are taken into account by society in general, and by the political system in particular, their social optimism increases. This negative correlation (when people feel their voices are not heard) is confirmed both at national level (beta coefficient = -0.135) and at European level (beta coefficient = -0.92). Moreover, the effect of political voice on optimism and pessimism remains statistically significant, and moderately high, even when personal and political satisfaction variables are included in the model. This means that these are independent variables, and that political voice has its own influence on social optimism.

Concerning the political domain, an interesting question is whether degree of interest in politics is associated with optimistic or pessimistic perceptions about the future. On the one hand, some argue that, without a certain degree of hope, people would lose their motivation to fight for a better future. On the other hand, if people are convinced that the future will be better than the present, they may not feel the need to intervene in politics. Eurobarometer 91.5 provides an index of interest in politics, distinguishing four levels: strong, medium, low and not at all. This index was included in an extended regression model, and the results seem at first sight somewhat paradoxical. They show that, when all other variables are kept constant, a strong interest in politics is associated with social pessimism. This paradox is dissipated to some extent when personal and social optimism are considered simultaneously: the highest levels of civic participation are found among those who are personally optimistic but socially pessimistic.

As explained below, the interaction between personal and societal dissatisfaction is vital to understanding both personal and social pessimism. Positive psychology, oriented to promoting the individual's happiness from an individualistic and therapeutic perspective, has gained much popularity lately. The underlying premise of this psychology, aimed at achieving personal happiness and self-fulfilment, is that the individual is responsible for his or her own dissatisfaction. In contrast, social pessimism directs attention at the societal level. Political agents and institutions are involved in this process because they are responsible for leading society as a whole. The deep dissatisfaction with political agents and institutions leads citizens to express their demands for a reorganisation of life and society – for a new society in which their personal well-being is adequately taken into account.

Personal and societal satisfaction

A correct understanding of the final model in Table 3 requires consideration of the role of other subjective factors, such as personal satisfaction or happiness and trust in institutions or satisfaction with democracy (Steenvoorden and van der Meer, 2017). For both theoretical and methodological reasons, these emotional variables were excluded from the final model. Nevertheless, this does not mean that they were not strongly related to social optimism or pessimism – rather the opposite. The decision to omit them was

made to ensure that the magnitude of the effects of other variables not so directly related to perceptions of the future could be correctly estimated.

Finally, an extended model was run, adding personal and societal satisfaction variables to the model in Table 3 to check their relevance. This extended model proved that personal and societal satisfaction are closely correlated with social optimism and pessimism.[9] For example, even controlling for all the final model variables, it confirmed that the higher a person's satisfaction with life, the higher their social optimism (beta coefficient = 0.101). Conversely, people who are unhappy and more dissatisfied with their lives are more pessimistic. But the relationship between satisfaction and social optimism occurs not only on a personal level but also on a societal and political one. Trust in political institutions is the factor with the most determining influence on social optimism (beta coefficient = 0.272). Other crucial political emotions, such as satisfaction with democracy, whether in one's own country or the EU, are also strongly related to social optimism (beta coefficients = 0.178 and 0.144, respectively). As expected, political dissatisfaction strongly relates to social pessimism.

From these data, some important conclusions can be drawn. Unhappy people, or people personally dissatisfied in general with their lives, tend to be much more socially pessimistic. Likewise, people dissatisfied with their society and especially with their political system tend to be much more pessimistic. This close correlation between social pessimism and personal and societal dissatisfaction demonstrates that a gloomy outlook about the future is rooted in the general climate of dissatisfaction and discontent in developed societies.

Chapter 2 – Summary

To sum up, first, this chapter has shown that social pessimism is associated with individuals' personal dissatisfaction and citizens' political discontent. It has also demonstrated that optimists' and pessimists' opinions differ sharply on the impact of the economic crisis even 11 years after it started, with a majority of pessimists thinking that the worst was still to come. (This finding could have important implications with regard to the long-term effects of the COVID-19 crisis on the general climate.) Second, it was proved in this chapter that independent demographic, economic, social, cultural and political factors affect individuals' social optimism and pessimism. These factors include age, the financial situation of a person's household, self-reported labour market position, changes in quality of life, sense of belonging, attitude towards immigrants and being confident that one's voice is heard (or not). Finally, looking carefully at all the key drivers revealed by the analysis, a fundamental conclusion emerges: that only by fostering a deep sense of social cohesion can Europe start to pursue the future with renewed optimism.

As political and socioeconomic issues must be taken into account when considering social cohesion, the two following chapters put forward a more detailed analysis aimed at presenting the sociopolitical and socioeconomic profiles of optimists and pessimists in the EU.

9 While the final model in Table 3 explains 37.4% of the total variance in social optimism, the extended model explains 50.3%.

3 Outlook of optimists and pessimists regarding political and social issues

Whereas the aim of the previous chapter was to reveal key explanatory factors for individual levels of optimism and pessimism, this chapter and the next will analyse how optimists and pessimists think, feel and behave regarding political and social issues, two crucial areas in the study of optimism and pessimism. It will be shown that they differ in an ample variety of beliefs, thoughts, opinions, perceptions, attitudes, feelings, behaviours, values and wishes. Moreover, knowing how these two types of people think and feel makes it possible to envisage, focus and reflect on the social, cultural and political consequences of having a positive or negative perception of the future.

To facilitate working with data from many different Eurobarometer surveys, all the analyses in Chapters 3 and 4 use a simplified version of the typology of social optimism used in Chapter 2. This simplified typology is composed of three basic categories, instead of five: very optimistic, slightly optimistic and pessimistic people. This typology combines the answers to two questions that ask 'At the present time, would you say that, in general, things are going in the right or the wrong direction?' in relation to the respondent's country and the EU. The very optimistic people made up 28.7% of the EU population, the slightly optimistic people 27.5% and the pessimistic people 43.7%. Annex 1 sets out the combination of answers for each type, and the correspondence between the simplified and the full typology of social optimism (Table A1). As the analysis used a considerable amount of information from many different questions and surveys, each question included in the tables in Chapters 3 and 4 is followed by a superscript letter referring to its source – that is, the Eurobarometer number and date.

It has been shown that pessimism correlates strongly with political dissatisfaction. Therefore, this chapter focuses on four issues relevant to the political development of European societies. First, it looks at the way pessimistic people think about the consequences of economic crises, with the aim of discovering if crises in general have a negative long-term impact on the political mood of the population. Second, it assesses the extent to which pessimistic views about prospects for younger generations shapes people's outlook on the future. The third section examines the political profiles of optimist and pessimists (for example, their level of interest in politics, propensity to vote in elections and assessment of the political system). The results reveal the high level of political disaffection characteristic of European pessimists. Finally, it is crucial to understand how different the attitudes of optimists and pessimists towards the European project are. On this fundamental issue, the analysis shows a great divide between the two groups.

Economic crises and pessimism

Social optimists and social pessimists perceive economic crises in very different ways. This is evident in people's opinions about the evolution of economic downturns. This may be related to their different economic and social situations, as analysed in the previous chapter. In 2012, one-third of Europeans thought that the impact on the job market of the economic crisis that began in 2008 had already reached its peak. As might be expected, Europeans' perceptions were significantly more positive by 2019. However, the difference in proportions between very optimistic and pessimistic people was still over 30 percentage points. Regardless of the question asked (see Table 4), the perceptions of the future among optimists and pessimists are significantly different. For instance, the majority of very optimistic people (64%) believe that prospects for the future in their country are much better or somewhat better than for EU countries on average, but only around one-quarter of pessimists (27%) believe this.

Table 4: Perceptions relating to the economic crisis by level of social optimism, EU27 (%)

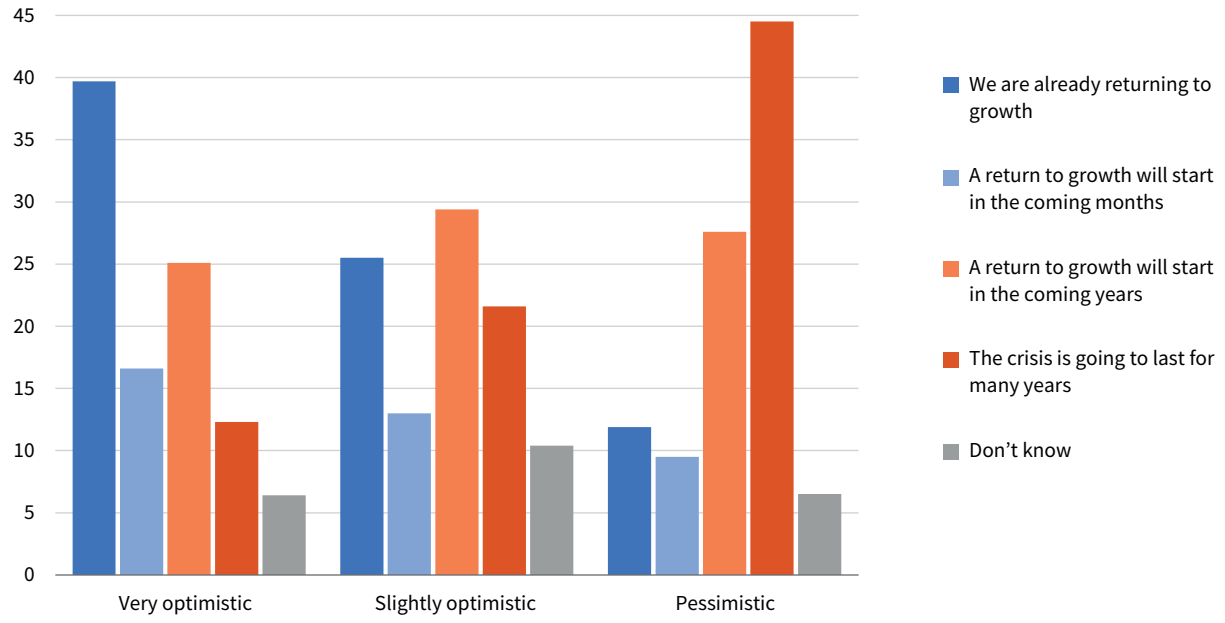
Question	Answer	Social optimism level			Total
		Very optimistic	Slightly optimistic	Pessimistic	
2012: Impact of crisis on job market[a]					
– It has reached its peak	Chosen	62.4	40.4	21.3	35.1
– The worst is still to come	Chosen	37.6	59.6	78.7	64.9
2019: Impact of crisis on job market[b]					
– It has reached its peak	Chosen	64.1	47.9	32.1	45.7
– The worst is still to come	Chosen	23.0	36.0	56.6	41.3
2012: Future prospects for your country compared with those for the EU[a]	Much/somewhat better	64.3	45.6	27.1	40.3
2012: After the crisis, the EU will be stronger in the long run[a]	Totally/tend to agree	81.2	68.1	50.5	62.2

Sources: [a]*EB77.3, May 2012.* [b]*EB91.5, June–July 2019*

Figure 5 shows that, as late as 2017, with growth already underway, 45% of pessimists still thought that 'the crisis is going to last many years' and 28% that 'a return to growth will start in the coming years'. In short, it can be concluded that a crisis in general, economic or otherwise, has a long-lasting impact on the emotions of the public, making the political management of recovery periods more difficult. It seems that many pessimists live with an ever-present sense of crisis.

Thus, in terms of perceptions, it could be said that Europe is divided into two halves, one with a constant spirit of optimism and hope and the other in a permanent mood of pessimism and despair. Should we therefore ask how Europe can solve this emotional divide and reconcile people living with such different perceptions? Perhaps this lack of hope could be regarded as the most reliable indicator of a lack of social cohesion.

Figure 5: Expectations about a return to growth following the economic crisis by level of social optimism, EU27, 2017 (%)



Source: *EB87.1, March 2017*

Prospects for future generations

One of the central beliefs forming part of the pessimism that pervades Europe is that prospects for the next generations are poor. Even though they often think that the quality of their own lives will continue to be as high as before, most Europeans firmly believe that the living conditions of their children and grandchildren will deteriorate as time goes on.

Eurobarometer 90.2 asked in 2018, 'Generally speaking, do you think that the life of those in the EU who are children today will be easier, more difficult or about the same as the life of those from your own generation?' The share of people who answered 'more difficult' (54%) was more than triple that of those who answered 'easier' (17%). In short, more than half of Europeans have a pessimistic view of the future in this regard.

As this question refers both to a distant future (when today's children are grown up) and to other people (children, not oneself), the respondent's sense of control is much lower, which increases their pessimism (Ajzen, 2002).

> *One source of the considerable anxiety felt by so many people might be the perception that many of the processes that go on outside the bounds of their daily lives and experiences are so complex that they cannot do much about them.*
>
> (de Vries and Hoffmann, 2020)

People may project their own pessimism and anxiety onto future generations, amplifying them in the process. In any case, these gloomy views that Europeans have about the life prospects of the next generations point to a critical cultural change, which may pose a political and social problem. Maybe pessimists are right, but such a bleak outlook could have significant consequences even leaving aside the realism debate.

The data show that only 1 in 10 pessimists thinks today's children will have a better quality of life in future than today's adults. And even among the optimists, only one in four holds this opinion. Interestingly enough, this gloomy perspective on the future of the next generations is prevalent not only in the general population but in all self-reported social classes. The difference in proportions between social status groups are relatively low. The lowest percentage of people thinking that children's lives will be more difficult corresponds to the highest class (47%) and the highest to the lower middle class (61%). It is worth noting that lower-middle-class people appear to be more anxious about the future of their children than working-class people (56%) (see Table 10). Commenting on the situation in Austria, Prandner et al (2020) state:

> *although the Austrian middle class is mostly able to achieve stable positions in the labour market, they are also more and more confronted with vulnerabilities due to the rise of atypical work conditions.*

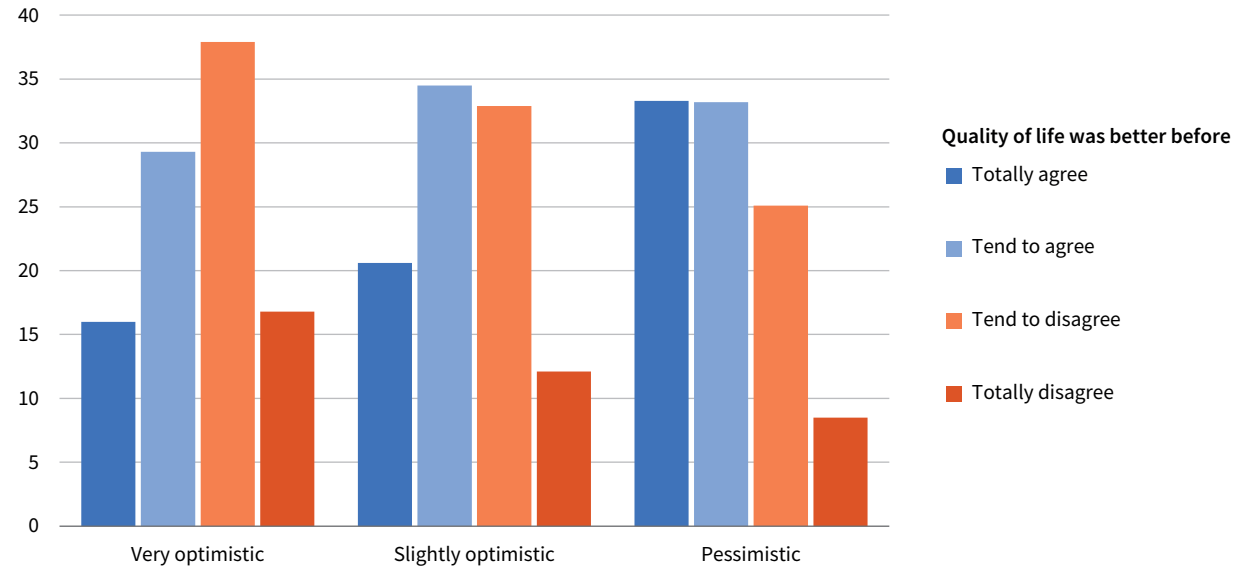
The bottom row of Table 5 includes some particularly relevant information regarding optimism and pessimism. These data relate to the temporal horizon of the life plans of households. In 2012, more than one-third of European people (36%) declared that their current situation did not allow them to make any plans for the future (they were living 'day by day'), and another 33% only knew what they would be doing in the next six months. Uncertainty prevents people from making life plans, which can have severe consequences for any person, and especially for young people. It seems that the impossibility of making plans for the future leads to a rise in pessimism. In turn, a pessimistic mood diminishes people's interest in making plans for the future.

Table 5: Views on the future living conditions of children and young people by level of social optimism, EU27 (%)

Question	Answer	Social optimism level			Total
		Very optimistic	Slightly optimistic	Pessimistic	
The life of those who are children today will be[a]					
– Easier	Chosen	26.5	19.7	9.9	16.9
– More difficult	Chosen	38.5	48.9	66.0	54.1
– About the same	Chosen	31.5	26.7	21.1	25.3
The EU project offers a future perspective for youth[b]	Totally agree	36.1	24.6	16.8	23.1
	Tend to agree	48.2	46.3	40.9	44.0
Household situation: planning for the future[c]					
– No plans	Chosen	24.5	32.0	43.3	36.2
– Short-term plans (6 months)	Chosen	34.7	34.0	31.7	32.9
– Long-term plans (1–2 years)	Chosen	39.1	32.4	23.7	29.4

Sources: [a]*EB90.2, October–November 2018.* [b]*EB91.2, March 2019.* [c]*EB77.3, May 2012*

Figure 6: Perceptions about change in quality of life by level of social optimism, EU27 (%)



Source: *EB85.2, May 2016*

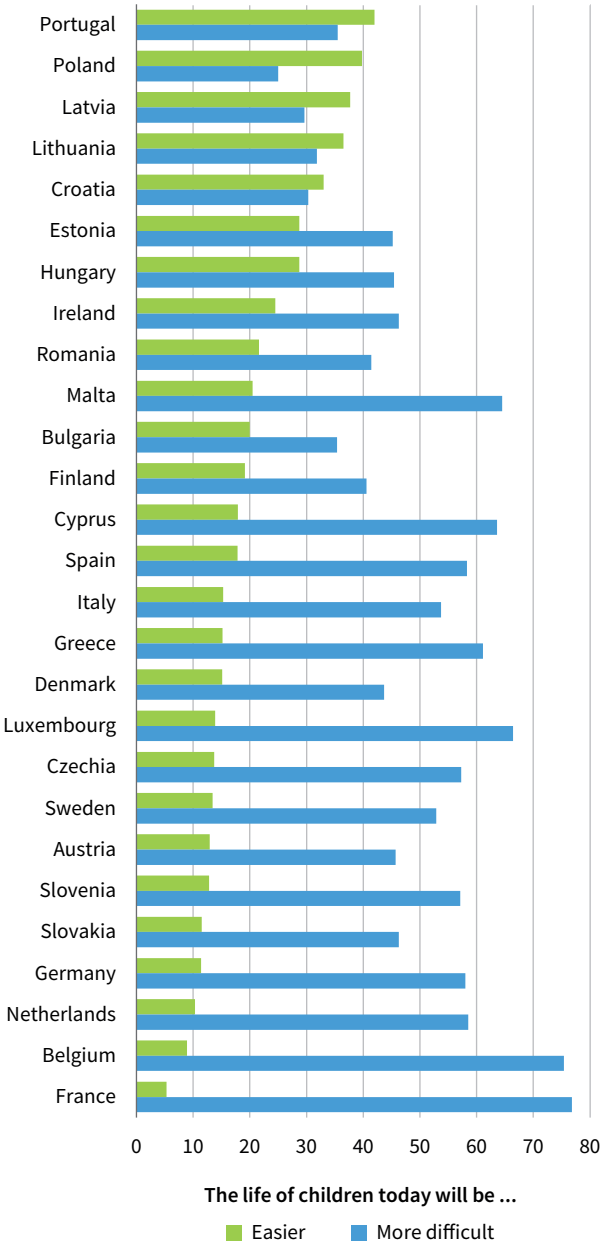
As Figure 6 shows, a pessimistic mood is also related to nostalgic perceptions about the past. In 2016, Eurobarometer 85.2 asked whether people agreed with the statement that overall, the quality of life was better before. The survey data demonstrate that 6 out of 10 Europeans (60%) totally agree or tend to agree with that statement. Definitively, most Europeans view the past as a better time to have lived than the present. From a historical perspective, this is a radical change in European culture, which has been fully oriented to the future and driven by a desire for progress throughout the whole modern era. Its optimism enabled Europe to take a leading role in social progress and also in improving quality of life. This nostalgic view of the past intensifies among pessimists (67%). Other studies have reflected on this critical connection between nostalgia, pessimism and support for populist right-wing parties (Pew Research Center, 2018; Steenvoorden and Harteveld, 2018).

Given the critical role that this question plays in current analyses of pessimism, this section finishes by offering an overview of how opinions on prospects for future generations are distributed in countries around the world and in the EU. Gloomy views about prospects for the next generations affect many countries in the world, but not to the same extent (Pew Research Center, 2014). In the advanced economies surveyed by the Pew Research Center in its Global Attitude Survey in 2018, only 34% of people (median for all countries) believe that, 'when children today in their country grow up, they will be better off financially than their parents' (Pew Research Center, 2018). Paradoxically, in most of these countries, a majority considers that the current economic situation is good (48%). Conversely, among the emerging economies, the share of people stating that the current economic situation is good decreases (43%). However, the share of those who think that children today will be better off financially (42%) is higher than in the advanced economies.

In any case, pessimists – those with a negative outlook on prospects for future generations – outnumber optimists. Among the countries surveyed, only in Indonesia (75%), the Philippines (69%), India (66%), Nigeria (65%), Poland (59%) and Russia (51%) do optimists outnumber pessimists. On the other side of the spectrum, France (80%), Japan (76%), Greece (69%), Spain (72%), the United Kingdom (70%) and Canada (67%) are, among the economically advanced countries surveyed, the countries with the highest percentages of people thinking that children today will be worse off than their parents (Pew Research Center, 2018).

Turning now to Europe, Eurobarometer 90.2 asked in 2018, 'Generally speaking, do you think that the life of those in the EU who are children today will be easier, more difficult or about the same as the life of those from your own generation?'. Figure 7 shows the split between optimists ('easier') and pessimists ('more difficult'). The emotional climate is unmistakable. In no EU country does the percentage of optimists exceed 50%. Only in seven countries – Portugal, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Croatia, Estonia and Hungary – is the percentage of optimists over 25%. In all the other EU countries, the share of pessimists is above 25%, and in 13 countries it is above 50%. It is important to note that several Member States (including all the countries of the original European Community) – such as France (77%), Belgium (75%), Luxembourg (66%), the Netherlands (59%),

Figure 7: Opinion about prospects for future generations by EU Member State (%)



Note: *Only 'more difficult' and 'easier' response categories are included, so the percentages do not add up to 100.*
Source: *EB90.2, October–November 2018*

Spain (58%), Germany (58%) and Italy (54%) – are included among those in which the highest proportions of people perceive prospects for the next generations as poor.

In summary, in 22 out of the 27 countries of the EU, more people believe that in future today's children will be worse off and have more difficult lives than adults today than believe the reverse. This belief, and the underlying mood that is feeding it, is a clear symptom of how radically the ethos of modern Europe is changing – whereas previously Europe was always ready to meet the challenge of achieving a better future. During the past three decades, there has been a unique transformation in perceptions. This justifies the need to analyse the profiles of European optimists and pessimists. The following section focuses on their political beliefs, feelings and behaviours.

Interest in politics and political participation

This section looks at the political efficacy and political participation of social optimists and social pessimists. As seen in the previous chapter, trust in institutions and citizens' political efficacy ('my voice counts') are key drivers of social optimism. Many other studies reinforce the idea that political feelings exert a significant influence on people's outlooks on the future (Zmerli and Newton, 2017; Prandner et al, 2020). Therefore, here this vital relationship is analysed in greater detail, looking at optimists' and pessimists' political profiles. There are many interesting questions to be answered. Do optimists and pessimists show equal levels of political efficacy? Are their levels of electoral participation similar? Do they declare the same reasons both for voting and for not voting? Are their assessments of the political system similar?

Political efficacy

According to political scientists,

> *political efficacy captures the extent to which people think their political participation will be effective – that is, the belief among citizens that the political system serves their interests in the best possible way, and that politicians are doing the most they can to ensure this.*
>
> (de Vries and Hoffmann, 2019)

Internal efficacy refers to people's ability to understand the political system and their willingness to participate in it. In contrast, external efficacy has to do with people's belief that politicians and the political system attend to their demands.

The frequency with which people discuss national, European or local political matters when they get together with friends and relatives is a clear indicator of their interest in politics. Table 6 shows data on this, as well as on the political interest index that Eurobarometer offers, summarising interest across the three political arenas (national, European, local). By this measure, interest in politics among optimists is 10 percentage points higher than among pessimists. Furthermore, 4 out of 10 pessimists have a low level of interest in political matters or none at all, which demonstrates the intense political disaffection of many pessimists.

Table 6: Political efficacy by level of social optimism, EU27 (%)

Question	Answer	Social optimism level			Total
		Very optimistic	Slightly optimistic	Pessimistic	
Political interest index (national, European, local)[a]	Strong/medium	70.1	66.2	60.1	64.3
	Low/not at all	30.0	33.9	39.9	35.7
Political discussion: national matters[a]	Frequently	23.4	24.0	23.3	23.5
	Occasionally	58.4	54.9	50.7	53.8
	Never	18.0	20.7	25.8	22.4
Political discussion: convinced friends[b]	Often/from time to time	49.7	51.5	47.2	49.1
Importance of voting in national elections[c]					
– It is essential	8–10	76.7	74.8	64.5	70.3
– Neither	4–7	18.6	20.0	23.7	21.4
– It has no importance	1–3	4.1	4.4	10.9	7.5
Interested in next European Parliament election[d]	Very	17.6	15.4	11.2	13.9
	Fairly	43.6	40.4	31.0	36.6
Best way of ensuring one's voice is heard[e]					
– Voting in elections	Mentioned	63.1	53.1	48.2	52.8
– Going on strike	Mentioned	8.8	10.7	15.5	12.7

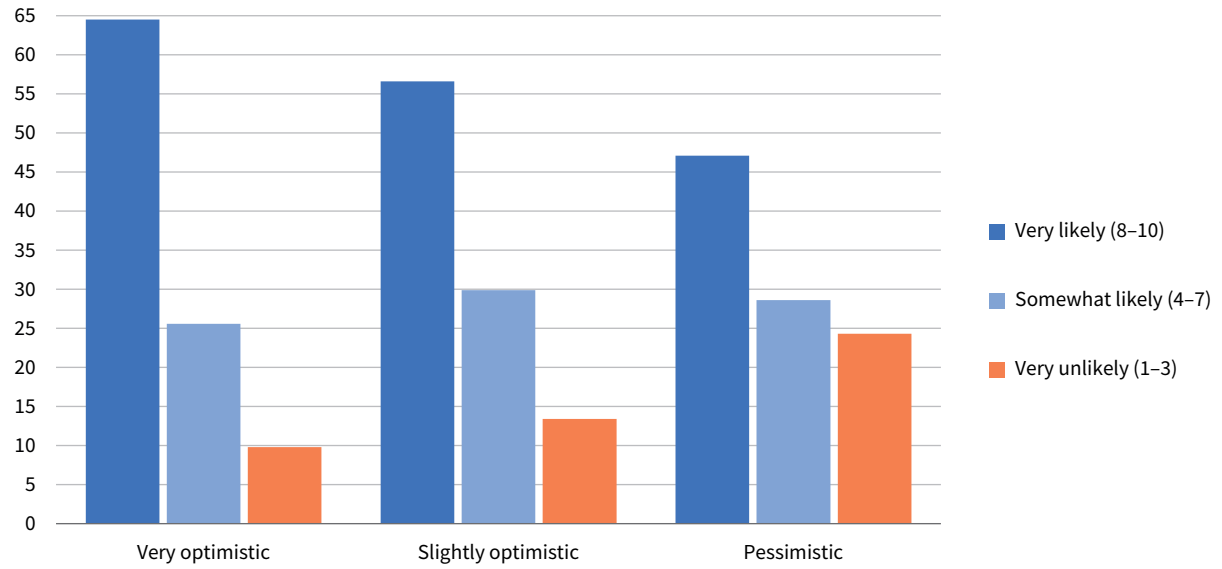
Sources: [a]*EB92.3, November 2019.* [b]*EB91.5, June–July 2019.* [c]*EB90.1, September 2018.* [d]*EB91.1, February–March 2019.* [e]*EB77.3, May 2012*

The value or importance that people assign to voting in a democratic election is also a measure of their internal political efficacy, as it measures their engagement with the political system. In this regard, while 77% of optimists think that voting in national elections is essential – that is, a fundamental duty of citizens – only 65% of pessimists believed the same thing. In the same vein, very optimistic citizens (61%) are more interested to some degree in European Parliament elections than pessimists (42%). Therefore, these data prove that optimists are more interested in democratic elections than pessimists. Finally, the bottom row of Table 6 offers an essential piece of information, as it shows that optimists and pessimists can perceive the best ways of achieving political efficacy and participating in politics very differently.

Political behaviour

The previous subsection found that optimists and pessimists do not attach the same importance to voting and to democratic elections, and they can be expected to behave accordingly. Figure 8 shows the extent to which the likelihood of voting changes according to social optimism. The share of those who are very likely

Figure 8: Likelihood of voting in the next European Parliament election by level of social optimism, EU27 (%)



Source: *EB91.1, February–March 2019*

Table 7: Voting behaviour by level of social optimism, EU27 (%)

Question	Answer	Social optimism level			Total
		Very optimistic	Slightly optimistic	Pessimistic	
Last national election[a]	Voted	62.4	55.8	53.8	56.9
Next European Parliament election: very likely to vote[a]	8–10	63.8	55.6	46.2	52.8
Last European Parliament election[b]					
– Voting behaviour	Voted	60.3	53.4	49.9	53.8
– Always sure which party I would vote for	Yes	71.6	65.1	64.0	66.7
– Always vote like this	Yes	49.3	42.4	40.3	43.8
Main reasons for voting[b]					
– To express disagreement	Mentioned	6.3	8.1	14.5	10.1
– To express disapproval of national government	Mentioned	4.4	6.8	9.6	7.1
– To support national government	Mentioned	14.9	11.6	8.0	11.2
– In favour of the EU	Mentioned	31.3	27.1	22.5	26.6
Main reasons for not voting[b]					
– Sick/health problem	Mentioned	10.4	10.6	6.7	8.7
– Holiday/away from home	Mentioned	12.5	13.1	6.3	9.8
– Mistrust/dissatisfaction with politics	Mentioned	10.9	19.3	27.9	21.3
– Not interested in politics	Mentioned	14.1	16.7	20.8	18.0
– Vote does not change anything	Mentioned	9.7	11.3	17.4	13.8

Sources: [a]*EB91.1, February–March 2019.* [b]*EB91.5, June–July 2019*

to vote is greater among optimists (64%) than pessimists (47%). The share of those who are very unlikely to vote reaches almost 25% for pessimists.

Table 7 includes three kinds of data on electoral behaviour: declared participation in the most recent national election; self-reported likelihood of voting in the next European Parliament election; and declared participation in the most recent European Parliament election. This information proves that the level of electoral participation of social optimists is higher than that of pessimists. For instance, the share of pessimists who voted in the most recent national election (54%) is lower than that of optimists (62%).

Data from Table 7 also show that the proportion of people who were always sure which party they would vote for in the most recent European Parliament election was higher among optimists (72%) than among pessimists (64%). Eurobarometer 91.5 also asked people when they decided to vote for the political party or candidate that they voted for in the most recent European Parliament election. The results for the first possible answer, 'You have always voted like this', show that the level of electoral fidelity of social optimists (49%) is greater than that of social pessimists (40%). In short, it seems that there are more undecided voters among pessimists and that they change the party/candidate that they vote for more frequently.

A pessimistic view of the future seems to reduce electoral participation. As electoral absenteeism is one of the most critical problems that democratic systems face nowadays, it is worth analysing the reasons that optimists and pessimists give for voting or not voting. In general, optimists mentioned more positive and favourable answers, such as supporting the national government, being in favour of the EU or to support a political party that they feel close to in ideological terms. Conversely, pessimists were more likely to give answers with a negative or combative character, such as to express disagreement, to express disapproval of the national government or to express disapproval of the EU. Optimists and pessimists also diverge in their reasons for not voting. Optimists tended to identify some objective impediment, such as sickness or a health problem at the time, or being on holiday or away from home. However, pessimists explicitly and powerfully expressed their general dissatisfaction with the political system, choosing answers such as 'lack of trust in or dissatisfaction with politics in general', 'not interested in politics as such' or 'vote has no consequences or does not change anything'. Such responses are associated with negative emotions, namely mistrust or dissatisfaction, indifference or a sense of uselessness or frustration, respectively. A lack of internal political efficacy seems to characterise pessimistic people.

Assessment of the political system

Unlike the majority of pessimists, who tend to strongly mistrust both their national government and their national parliament, most optimists express trust in these two and other political institutions. It is well known how the crisis of legitimacy directly affects political parties, and optimists and pessimists agree to

Table 8: Assessment of the political system by level of social optimism, EU27 (%)

Question	Answer	Social optimism level			Total
		Very optimistic	Slightly optimistic	Pessimistic	
Trust in[a]					
– National government	Tend to trust	66.8	38.0	16.5	35.0
– National parliament	Tend to trust	64.0	38.2	19.5	36.0
– Political parties	Tend to trust	39.9	20.7	8.5	19.9
Satisfaction with democracy in my country[a]	Very/fairly satisfied	84.9	62.2	37.9	56.5
My voice counts in my country[a]	Totally/tend to agree	83.1	65.6	46.8	61.3
My interests are taken into account in my country[b]	Totally/tend to agree	67.7	44.9	28.4	41.4
Rise of new political parties: a matter of concern[b]	Totally/tend to agree	70.4	60.1	58.8	61.7
I understand what is going on in today's world[c]	Totally/tend to agree	77.1	67.7	61.3	66.5

Sources: [a]*EB92.3, November 2019.* [b]*EB91.2, March 2019.* [c]*EB91.5, June–July 2019*

some extent on this lack of legitimacy. However, it is worth noting that, even on this particular issue, there is considerable distance between the two groups. The percentage of optimists who tend to trust political parties (40%) is more than four times higher than the percentage of pessimists who do so (9%). There is also a sharp contrast in their levels of satisfaction with how democracy works at country level: 85% and 38%, respectively.

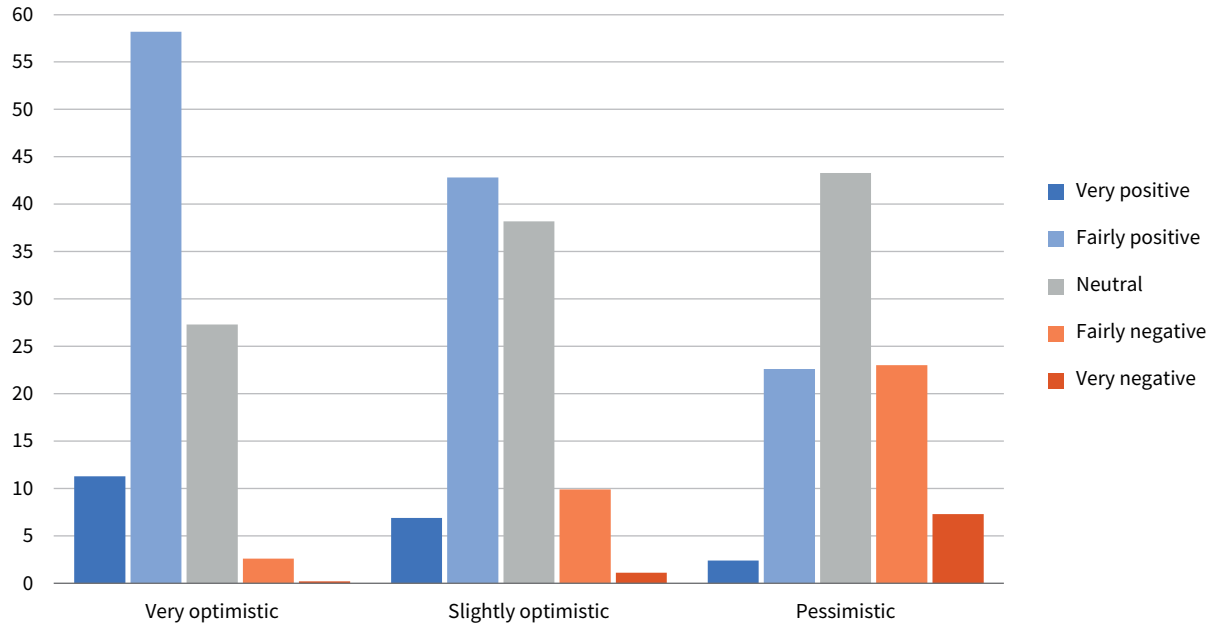
Two pieces of information shown in Table 8 (the percentages of people who feel that their voice counts in their country and that the interests of people like them are taken into account by the political system in their country) focus on the issue of external political efficacy. The wording of these questions produces disparate results, although replies to both questions indicate a remarkable deficit in people feeling that their political voice is heard. More than half of the European population (61%) feels that their voice counts in their country. However, when the wording of the question ('the interests of people like you are well taken into account by the political system in your country') includes 'interests', 'well taken' and 'political system', the proportion of European citizens who feel well represented by the national political system drops considerably (41%). It seems that making people feel that their voice counts is much easier than representing and reconciling different interest groups. For both questions, the difference in the proportions of optimists and pessimists responding positively is enormous, at 36.3 and 39.3 percentage points, respectively. It is evident that the political representation crisis, or the crisis of regulation (Prandner et al, 2020), is felt profoundly among pessimists. More than half of them feel that their voice does not count (53%), and more than 7 in 10 (72%) believe that their interests are not properly taken into account by the political system in their country.

Finally, the bottom two rows of Table 8 add two complementary items of information. First, optimists are more worried than pessimists about the rise of political parties as a protest against the traditional political elites in various European countries. The fact that pessimists are not so concerned about the emergence of these political parties could mean that at least some social pessimists welcome any chance to disrupt or transform the present political system. Second, optimists claim more than pessimists (77% versus 61%) that they understand well what is going on in today's world. The greater inability among pessimists to understand the world or their more profound cultural disorientation is likely to reduce their internal political efficacy.

Attitudes towards the European Union

It is socially and politically crucial for the future of Europe to know how optimists and pessimists think, feel about and evaluate the EU. To set the general tone, this section first looks at whether optimists and pessimists have a positive or a negative image of the EU. As Figure 9 shows, while most optimists have a very positive or positive image of the EU (70%), only one out of four pessimists (25%) share this view. As the difference in these proportions is 45 percentage points, it is clear that the gap between the two groups in this regard is immense.

Figure 9: Image of the EU by level of social optimism, EU27 (%)



Source: *EB92.3, November 2019*

Beyond the general image that optimists and pessimists have of the EU, what are the specific aspects on which their opinions are based? Table 9 covers some of the items presented to the interviewees in two questions, the first aimed at finding out their ideas about the EU ('Please tell me for each of the following words if it describes very well, fairly well, fairly badly or very badly the idea you might have of the EU') and the second at discovering what it means to them ('What does the EU mean to you personally?'). According to these data, optimists and pessimists differ considerably in almost every aspect. The largest differences can be found in the proportions agreeing that the EU could be described (fairly or very well) as 'forward-looking' and 'efficient'.

In each case, there is a difference of more than 40 percentage points between optimists and pessimists. In contrast, most optimists and pessimists in Europe agree that the EU is a remote political and administrative institution.

The Eurobarometer question about what the EU means to respondents personally included 15 possible answers (in addition to 'other' and 'don't know'). The pattern shown by these data is consistent. When it comes to a positive aspect, a higher proportion of optimists than pessimists indicate that they relate it to the EU, and vice versa. Table 9 includes only the four elements with the largest differences in proportions. Among pessimists, 3 in 10 (30%) think that the EU is a waste of money,

Table 9: Perceptions of the EU by level of social optimism, EU27 (%)

Question	Answer	Social optimism level			Total
		Very optimistic	Slightly optimistic	Pessimistic	
Ideas[a]					
Modern	Describes very/fairly well	81.8	69.5	48.5	62.7
Democratic	Describes very/fairly well	88.3	76.0	50.8	69.2
Protective	Describes very/fairly well	78.9	62.3	39.2	55.6
Efficient	Describes very/fairly well	66.0	46.5	25.2	41.4
Forward-looking	Describes very/fairly well	81.0	63.9	39.6	56.7
Remote	Describes very/fairly well	43.6	49.4	59.5	52.7
Meaning[b]					
Waste of money	Mentioned	9.5	15.2	29.7	20.7
Economic prosperity	Mentioned	27.2	18.8	10.5	17.0
Quality of life for future generations	Mentioned	29.5	23.9	14.7	21.0
Unemployment	Mentioned	4.6	5.7	13.7	9.3

Notes: [a]*Question: 'Please tell me if [WORD] describes … the idea you might have of the EU?'* [b]*Question: 'What does the EU mean to you personally?'*
Source: *EB92.3, November 2019*

compared to 10% of optimists. Conversely, almost 3 in 10 optimists (27%) think that the EU means economic prosperity, while only 1 in 10 pessimists (11%) feels the same. As expected, the percentage of pessimists who believe that the EU means 'quality of life for future generations' (15%) is much lower than that of optimists (30%). Finally, the EU means 'unemployment' to 14% of pessimists and 5% of very optimistic people.

As has been shown earlier, pessimists do not trust political institutions and are not satisfied with the way democracy works. This mistrust and dissatisfaction are felt strongly towards the EU institutions. Only 32% of pessimists, compared to 74% of very optimistic people, trust the European Commission. And this pattern is the same when it comes to trust in the European Parliament, trust in the European Council, satisfaction with how democracy works at EU level and whether citizens' voices count in EU-level politics. These data confirm the enormous impact that social pessimism could have on perceptions of the political legitimacy of the EU. The differences between optimists and pessimists are huge. Roughly, only one-third of pessimists, compared to just three in four optimists, trust the EU institutions, are satisfied with the way democracy works at EU level and believe that people's voices count at EU level.

Finally, not only do optimists and pessimists have differing views about the EU, which could be considered a mere cognitive aspect, but their identity as EU citizens is greatly affected as well. Social and political identities are anchored in feelings, conscious and unconscious, that function as the cement of society. Figure 10 depicts optimists' and pessimists' feelings with regard to their identity as EU citizens. Close to 1 in 2 optimists (44%), but only one-fifth of pessimists (22%), definitely identify themselves as EU citizens. The number of pessimists who do not feel themselves ('not really' and 'definitely not') to be EU citizens amounts to 39%. In short, social pessimism erodes feelings of belonging to the EU.

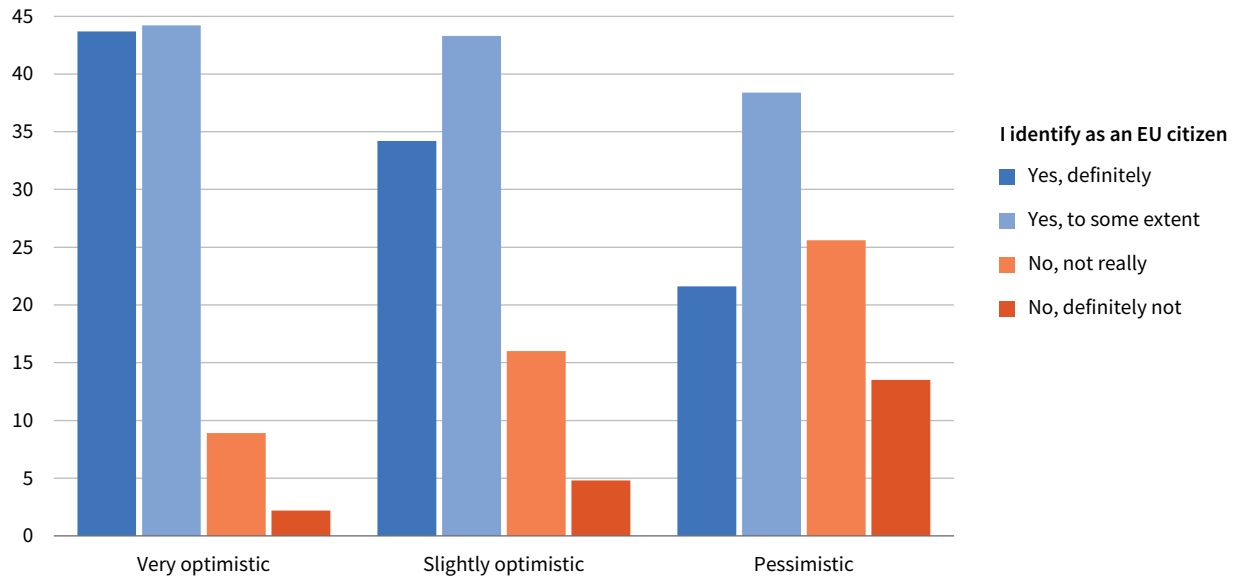
This final section has demonstrated how significantly optimists and pessimists differ concerning their perceptions of the EU. While optimists have a positive image of the EU and what it means, and hold positive ideas and sentiments about it, pessimists think and feel about and evaluate the EU very negatively. These contrasting views present a homogeneous and systematic pattern, offering a warning about the risks that social pessimism poses to the development and consolidation of a socially cohesive European project.

Chapter 3 – Summary

This chapter has demonstrated that optimists and pessimists differ considerably on issues of the utmost political importance. After having experienced a social crisis, pessimistic people recover hope at a very slow pace, if ever. They feel a general and profound political disaffection, affecting almost every political issue analysed. And they combine a nostalgic vision of the past with a definite sense that prospects for future generations are poor.

The next chapter examines some crucial socioeconomic issues, such as fairness, inequality and social stratification. Do pessimists feel that fairness and social justice prevail in European societies?

Figure 10: European identity by level of social optimism, EU27 (%)



Source: *EB92.3, November 2019*

4 Social status, inequality and sense of fairness

Despite efforts to make European societies more egalitarian, almost any socioeconomic report published in recent years points to a continuous increase in social inequality. As seen in Chapter 2, social integration and cohesion are key drivers of optimism and pessimism; therefore, it seems crucial to analyse in more detail the relationship between, on the one hand, social structure and stratification and, on the other hand, optimism and pessimism. Three relevant questions in this regard are as follows. First, do people in different social positions have different levels of optimism and pessimism? Second, do optimists and pessimists view, feel and evaluate social inequality in the same way? And, third, do pessimistic people have a sense that our societies are unfair? The empirical analyses offered in the following three sections aim to answer these questions.

Self-reported social status, social mobility and optimism

Opinions about future prospects for one's children and grandchildren are at the heart of societies' mood. The data on EU countries in Figure 7 and Table 5 in the previous chapter showed the extent to which pessimists and optimists hold different views on this important issue. This section seeks to understand what people in different social positions think life in Europe will be like for the next generations – whether it will be easier, more difficult or about the same.

Eurobarometer 90.2, run in 2018, included a question asking about the subjective social class of the interviewees. It asked interviewees to state the social class they and their household belong to, choosing from one of the following: 'the working class of society', 'the lower middle class of society', 'the middle class of society', 'the upper middle class of society', 'the higher class of society' or 'other'. Table 10 shows how widespread pessimism is among EU citizens, and how it is distributed among self-reported or subjective social classes. The table shows that, even though the differences between social classes are statistically significant, those differences are relatively small. The actual living conditions of the members of each social class are quite different, but they all agree that the lives of their sons and daughters will be more difficult than their own. In short, there seems to be a cultural consensus on pessimism about prospects for future generations.

However, data from this table reveal some particular features about middle class views on prospects for the next generations. The percentage of pessimists in the lower middle class (61%) is the highest, even higher than in the working class (56%) and much higher than in the middle class (53%). Thus, it seems that members of the lower middle class feel particularly anxious about the future of their offspring. It has been established that the middle classes are concerned about their social reproduction, but these data reveal the anxiety or insecurity about status (Steenvoorden, 2016) that they feel, believing that their sons and daughters may not do as well in life as they have done.

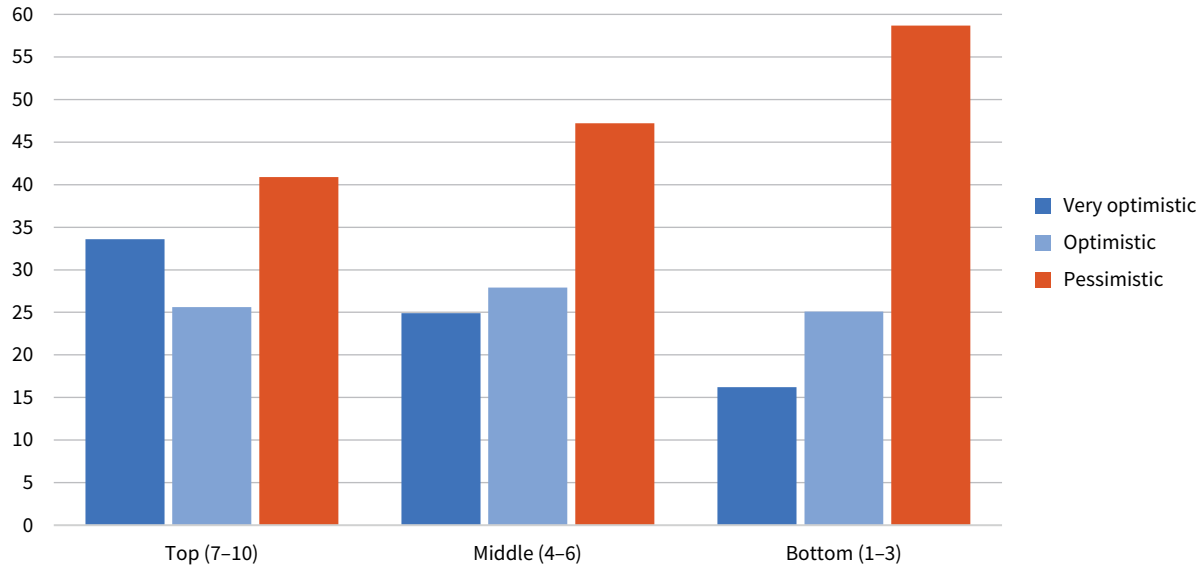
The Special Eurobarometer 88.4, on fairness, included a question asking about interviewees' position on the social status ladder. The introductory text to the question invited them to think of the ladder as representing where people stand in society. The higher up on this ladder someone is, the closer they are to the very top in terms of social status (10) and, the lower they are, the closer they are to the bottom (1). The question asked was: 'Where would you place yourself on this ladder relative to other people in your country?'

Table 10: Prospects for future generations in the EU by self-reported social class, EU27 (%)

Life for future generations in Europe will be ...	Working class	Lower middle class	Middle class	Upper middle class	Higher class	Total
Easier	18.9	15.0	16.7	14.0	23.3	16.9
More difficult	56.1	61.4	53.0	52.7	47.3	54.2
About the same	20.3	20.3	27.6	30.3	28.2	24.9
Don't know	4.7	3.3	2.7	3.0	1.2	4.0
Total	100 (5,829)	100 (4,183)	100 (12,904)	100 (2,047)	100 (163)	100 (26,337)

Note: *Numbers of sample cases are given in parentheses.*
Source: *EB90.2, October–November 2018*

Figure 11: Social optimism by self-reported social status, EU27 (%)



Note: *The social status scale is from 1 to 10.*
Source: *EB88.4, December 2017*

Using a simplified typology of three categories, Figure 11 provides a slightly different perspective on the relationship between social status and social optimism. Of the people occupying the bottom of the social status ladder, 59% are social pessimists, and only 16% are very optimistic. Among those at the top, things are quite different. The proportion of very optimistic people in the top group is double that in the bottom group, at 34%. And at the top the proportion of pessimists drops significantly, to 41%.

In short, people with different social statuses have differing perceptions of the future. However, it is worth noting that a significant number of those occupying top positions in terms of social status still have a socially pessimistic outlook. And this means that social pessimism is shared by all social classes. This is not to say that personal expectations are the same. For instance, only 11% of people in the top social status group report that they expect their living conditions to be worse in five years. But, despite their good personal expectations, many of them also believe that things in society are going in the wrong direction.

Eurobarometer 88.4 also asked interviewees about their parents' social status. This question reveals that social optimism depends not only on the respondent's social status but also on the respondent's parents' social status. For instance, only 20% of people whose parents occupied the bottom of the social status ladder are very optimistic, while 54% are pessimists. Although more empirical proof is needed, these data suggest that social classes reproduce themselves through time, that is, the effect of the respondent's social status on optimism is similar to the effect that the social status of the respondent's parent has on optimism.

Does subjective intergenerational social mobility have an impact on the emotions European citizens feel regarding the future? In the 'Pessimistic' column in Table 11, the percentage reaches a peak when the respondent's parents are from the top of the social ladder and the respondent is at the bottom. In other words, 69% of those who have experienced downward social mobility are pessimistic. Conversely, among those who started life in a family at the bottom of the social ladder and have managed to reach the top – that is, when they have experienced a high degree of upward social mobility – the percentage of pessimists falls to 36%. In general, these data prove that optimism and pessimism vary according to the degree of upward or downward intergenerational mobility experienced.

Table 11: Subjective social mobility and optimism, EU27 (%)

Social status		Social optimism level			Total
Respondent's parents	Respondent	Very optimistic	Slightly optimistic	Pessimistic	
Top (7–10)	Top	35.4	24.4	40.2	100
	Middle	24.3	28.8	47.6	100
	Bottom	17.7	13.4	69.0	100
Middle (4–6)	Top	31.1	27.0	41.9	100
	Middle	25.9	27.7	46.4	100
	Bottom	15.5	26.3	58.2	100
Bottom (1–3)	Top	36.1	28.0	35.9	100
	Middle	20.4	28.0	51.6	100
	Bottom	16.5	24.7	58.9	100

Note: *The social status scale is from 1 to 10.*
Source: *EB88.4, December 2017*

Views on social inequality and policy actions to tackle it

This section shows differences between optimistic and pessimistic people regarding their perceptions and evaluations of and support for political actions to tackle socioeconomic inequality.

The top row of Table 12 shows the state of public opinion concerning the degree of economic inequality in EU countries. It proves that there is an almost universal consensus around the belief that 'nowadays in our country differences in people's income are too great'. Almost everyone in Europe holds this opinion (85%). When the question refers to inequality between social classes, there is again consensus (83%). However, the data show that pessimists are somewhat more sensitive to the level of social inequality.

How do optimistic and pessimistic people envisage the future evolution of social inequality? Pessimists, more than optimists, think that in five years' time the inequalities between the different social classes in their country will be much greater (34% and 21%, respectively). Moreover, pessimistic people tend not to believe that, compared with 30 years ago, opportunities for getting ahead in life have become more equal in their country (only 34% report that this is the case).

Table 12: Perceptions of social inequality by level of social optimism, EU27 (%)

Question	Answer	Social optimism level			Total
		Very optimistic	Slightly optimistic	Pessimistic	
Income differences are too great[a]	Strongly agree	38.2	41.4	50.5	44.8
	Agree	44.2	42.3	36.9	40.3
Importance: inequality between social classes[b]	Very	30.1	29.0	38.9	34.0
	Fairly	55.0	52.1	43.3	48.6
Future importance: inequality between social classes[b]	Much more	21.1	24.3	33.5	27.9
	A little more	43.6	39.8	36.7	39.3
Opportunities, compared with 30 years ago, are more equal[a]	Strongly agree	18.1	10.9	6.8	10.9
	Agree	43.0	36.3	27.5	34.0

Sources: [a]*EB88.4, December 2017.* [b]*EB90.1, September 2018*

Table 13 covers people's opinions on political measures to tackle social inequality, showing that the majority of the population believes that governments in EU countries should take measures to reduce differences in income levels. The total proportion in favour of this kind of political action is above 80%, and pessimists strongly agree more frequently than optimists (50% versus 37%).

When respondents are asked to choose specific policy measures that they would like to see implemented, pessimistic people choose those intended to tackle unemployment, a guaranteed minimum pension across the EU and universal basic income much more frequently than optimistic people. All these data indicate that, for one reason or another, pessimists are more in favour of the implementation of redistributive measures to support socioeconomic rights. However, interestingly enough, other rows in Table 13 show that their support for redistribution or solidarity does not seem to extend to people in other countries, either within or outside the EU. Furthermore, it also seems that terms such as 'welfare state' and 'solidarity' have more positive associations for optimistic people than for pessimistic people. In line with the distinction made by Schweizer and Schneider (1997) between conservative, security-oriented and progressive outlooks, pessimists could be said to focus more on material claims (conservative) and optimists on symbolic ones, such as solidarity and environmental issues (progressive).

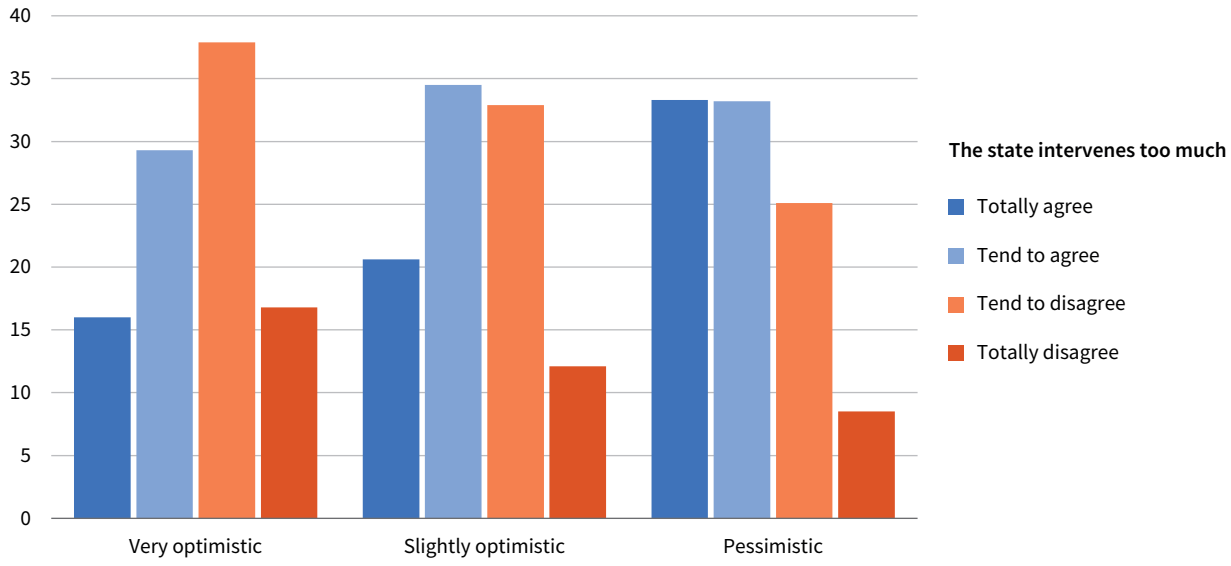
In short, it seems that pessimistic people are in favour of specific equality-promoting and redistributive economic measures, such as unemployment benefits, guaranteed minimum pensions and universal basic incomes. However, at the same time, they seem to show less solidarity or to be less in favour of inclusion than optimistic people when it comes to helping other social groups. At first glance, this might seem a paradoxical result. However, it may be that pessimists are particularly affected by shortages of public resources, and they may feel that they are more entitled to public support than others (van Oorschot, 2000). Frustration and resentment may arise from these tensions about deservingness, although this hypothesis would need further empirical proof. Certainly the socioeconomic situation of pessimists seems much more complicated than that of optimists. Hence, perhaps, a further paradox: Figure 12 shows that pessimists believe, more than optimists, that the state intervenes too much.

Table 13: Views on potential political actions to tackle inequality by level of social optimism, EU27 (%)

	Answer	Social optimism level			Total
		Very optimistic	Slightly optimistic	Pessimistic	
The government should take measures to reduce income differences[a]	Strongly agree	37.2	41.2	49.7	44.1
	Agree	40.9	39.8	35.5	38.1
Main EU challenges[b]					
– To tackle social inequalities	Mentioned	40.5	39.5	39.7	39.9
– To tackle unemployment	Mentioned	35.2	39.8	45.3	41.1
Ideal: guaranteed minimum pension across the EU[b]	Mentioned	24.7	27.5	30.0	27.9
To provide economic security[b]					
– Universal basic income	Mentioned	17.4	18.5	21.3	19.5
– More welfare benefits	Mentioned	17.4	15.3	15.2	15.8
Should countries help other EU countries to guarantee a minimum living standard?[b]	Yes, definitely/probably	84.1	78.8	77.8	79.7
European Parliament priorities[c]					
– Solidarity between EU countries	Mentioned	36.8	35.8	29.2	32.9
– Solidarity on the part of the EU with poor countries in the world	Mentioned	24.8	21.7	20.6	22.0
What associations do the following terms have for you?[d]					
– 'Welfare state'	Very positive/positive	82.7	70.4	59.4	69.1
– 'Solidarity'	Very positive/positive	89.4	81.1	75.8	81.2
The state intervenes too much[e]	Totally agree	16.5	21.9	32.0	26.6
	Tend to agree	37.1	42.0	42.3	41.3

Sources: [a]*EB88.4, December 2017.* [b]*EB90.2, October–November 2018.* [c]*EB90.1, September 2018.* [d]*EB91.5, June–July 2019.* [e]*EB85.2, May 2016*

Figure 12: Views about state intervention by level of social optimism, EU27 (%)



Source: *EB85.2, May 2016*

Citizens' sense of fairness

This section presents some data on how optimists and pessimists perceive fairness, both in their countries and in the EU. Table 14 includes the answers to six questions included in Eurobarometer 88.4, run in 2017, which focused on perceptions of fairness. The questions focus on three essential aspects of fairness from a double perspective, personal and societal. Personal sense of fairness relates to the respondent's perception of fairness in his or her own life. Societal sense of fairness relates to justice in society as a whole. The first pair of questions ask generally about fairness in personal life and justice in society. The second pair are about socio-relational fairness. The third pair focus on the practical application of the principle of equality of opportunity. These last two questions are fundamental because, in European societies, equal opportunity and meritocratic principles play a crucial role in legitimising social inequality – in other words, if they are functioning well, they should diminish any general sense of unfairness.

The first conclusion that can be drawn from Table 14 is that the feeling of societal injustice is far greater than the feeling of being personally affected by unfairness. First, the percentage of those who 'believe that most of the things that happen in my life are fair' (52%) is higher than the percentage of those who strongly agree or agree with the statement 'I am confident that justice always prevails over injustice in our country' (39%). Second, the proportion of Europeans who feel that 'the important decisions that are made concerning me are usually taken in a fair way' (60%) is double that which believes that 'in our country, the political decisions are applied consistently to all citizens' (32%). Third, while more than half of the EU's citizens think that 'nowadays, in my country, I have equal opportunities for getting ahead in life, like everyone else' (57%), only a little over one-third of the population believes that 'by and large, people get what they deserve in our country' (37%).

The second and most striking conclusion relates to the high levels of unfairness felt by Europeans. Europe is one of the most economically and socially developed areas of the world. Nevertheless, it seems that feelings of social unfairness are widespread. Even focusing on the most favourable result in Table 14, it can be seen that 4 in 10 Europeans think that the essential decisions concerning them are not taken in a fair way (41%).

Table 14: Personal and societal sense of fairness, EU27 (%)

Personal sense of fairness		Societal sense of fairness	
	Total population	Total population	
Things that happen in my life are fair	51.7	38.7	I am confident that justice always prevails
Decisions affecting me are taken in a fair way	59.5	31.8	Political decisions apply to all citizens
I have equal opportunities	56.6	36.8	People get what they deserve

Source: *EB88.4, December 2017*

Table 15: Personal and societal sense of fairness by level of social optimism, EU27 (%)

Personal sense of fairness				Societal sense of fairness			
	Social optimism level			Social optimism level			
	Very optimistic	Slightly optimistic	Pessimistic	Very optimistic	Slightly optimistic	Pessimistic	
Things that happen in my life are fair	67.0	53.3	42.1	56.5	40.3	27.8	I am confident that justice always prevails
Decisions affecting me are taken in a fair way	74.0	59.8	51.2	48.7	32.8	21.8	Political decisions apply to all citizens
I have equal opportunities	72.4	56.2	47.9	51.9	40.0	26.4	People get what they deserve

Source: *EB88.4, December 2017*

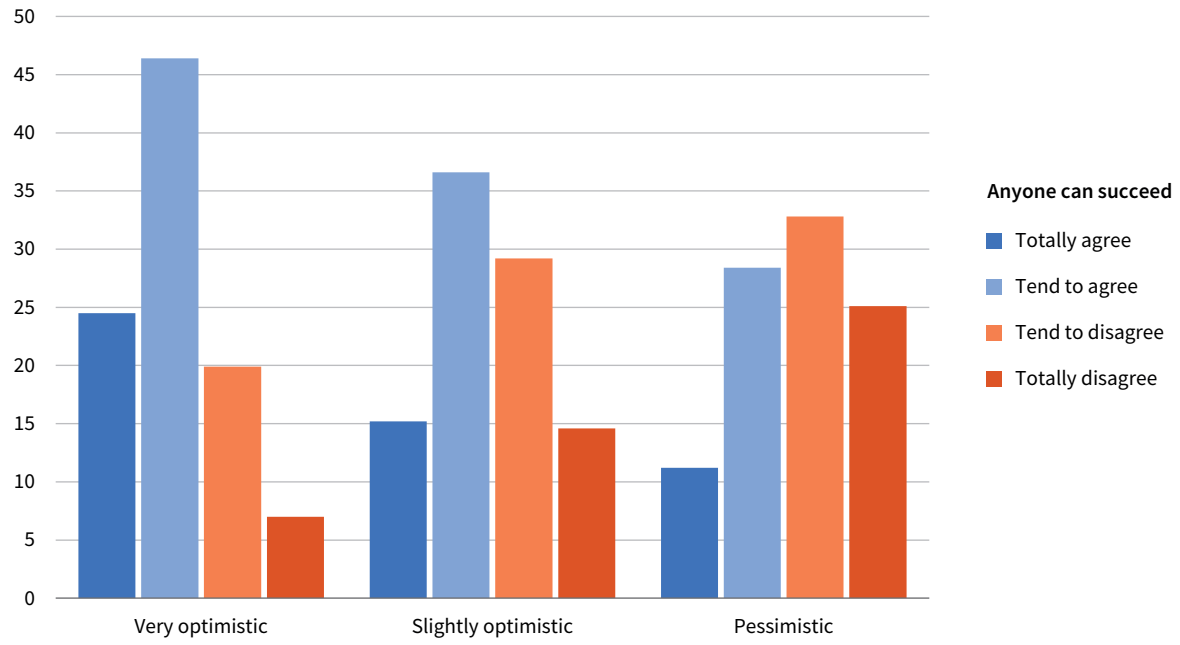
The extent of this feeling is just one indicator of how much a sense of unfairness permeates Europeans' mood nowadays. Moreover, it is worth noting that 63% of the EU population thinks that people do not get what they deserve. In short, Europeans firmly believe that they are living in an unfair and unjust society.

Do optimists and pessimists have the same perceptions about societal and personal fairness? As Table 15, using data from Eurobarometer 88.4, shows, the answer is a definite no. Overall, pessimists' sense of fairness is roughly 25 percentage points lower than that of very optimistic people. Approximately, only one in four European pessimists believes that their society is fair (27.8%, 21.8%, and 26.4%). In short, the sense of unfairness that pessimistic people feel is very deep, and this means that Europe is facing simultaneously two sociopolitical problems, that of social injustice and that of pessimism. These two problems reinforce each other, so that it will not be possible to solve one without tackling the other.

The bottom row of Table 15 provides data on optimists' and pessimists' personal experiences of equal opportunities and their opinions on the application of meritocratic principles. Pessimistic people feel much more than optimists do that they have not had the same opportunities as others and that people do not get what they deserve. When Eurobarometer 91.2 asked about the degree of agreement with the statement 'in our country everyone has a chance to succeed', only half of the population stated that that they agreed or strongly agreed that Europe achieved the principle of equal opportunities.

To close this section, Figure 13 shows that optimistic people believe that anyone can succeed, a belief that feeds into motivation to achieve. On the contrary,

Figure 13: Belief in functioning meritocracy by level of social optimism, EU27 (%)



Source: *EB91.2, March 2019*

pessimists do not think that this is the case. Therefore, as many pessimists are in lower social classes and have lower social status, this belief could act for them as a negative self-fulfilling prophecy.

Chapter 4 – Summary

This chapter focused on the relationship between optimism/pessimism and social structure, inequality and fairness. First, it was found that, although pessimism is widespread among European citizens in all social classes, those on the top rung of the social status ladder tend to be more optimistic than those on the bottom rung. Likewise, those who have experienced upward intergenerational mobility tend to be more optimistic, while those who have experienced downward intergenerational mobility tend to be more pessimistic. Second, data prove that pessimists do not think and feel about and evaluate social inequality in the same way as optimists. In general, pessimists are more sensitive to material and economic disparities, demanding more political measures to reduce differences in income levels. At the same time, pessimists show less economic solidarity with foreign people and members of social out-groups. Finally, the analysis demonstrated that half of pessimists feel that neither life nor other people have been fair with them. This sense of unfairness is even more profound regarding society. Pessimists lack confidence in social justice and political decisions, and they believe that people do not usually get what they deserve. In a nutshell, it seems that the belief that society is not fair fuels social pessimism.

5 Social optimism across EU Member States

Chapters 2–4 of this report analysed social optimism at an individual level. This chapter provides complementary information on social optimism in Europe, taking the EU Member States as the unit of analysis. Using the Social Optimism Index scores, the first section presents a ranking of EU Member States according to their social optimism levels. The second presents the results of multilevel regression analyses, showing some key country-level drivers that explain most of the social optimism variance between countries. The third and final section focuses on optimism gaps at country level (de Vries and Hoffmann, 2020) – that is, on the difference between the level of personal optimism and the level of social optimism in each EU country. In summary, this chapter shows the very different levels of social optimism and pessimism existing in the EU, tries to explain this variety of perceptions about the future and suggests some potential consequences for the European project.

Social optimism by Member State

The ranking presented here is based on the Social Optimism Index average scores for each country. As shown in Table 1, the index is a composite indicator made up of six variables. The first two questions ask about personal and national expectations. The second two questions ask about the direction, right or wrong, of the respondent's own country and the EU. The third two questions focus on two sentiments: confidence about the future in general and optimism or pessimism about the EU's future in particular. Combining these six variables results in a comprehensive, robust and valid measure of each country's social optimism, understood as individuals' generalised expectations about future social outcomes.

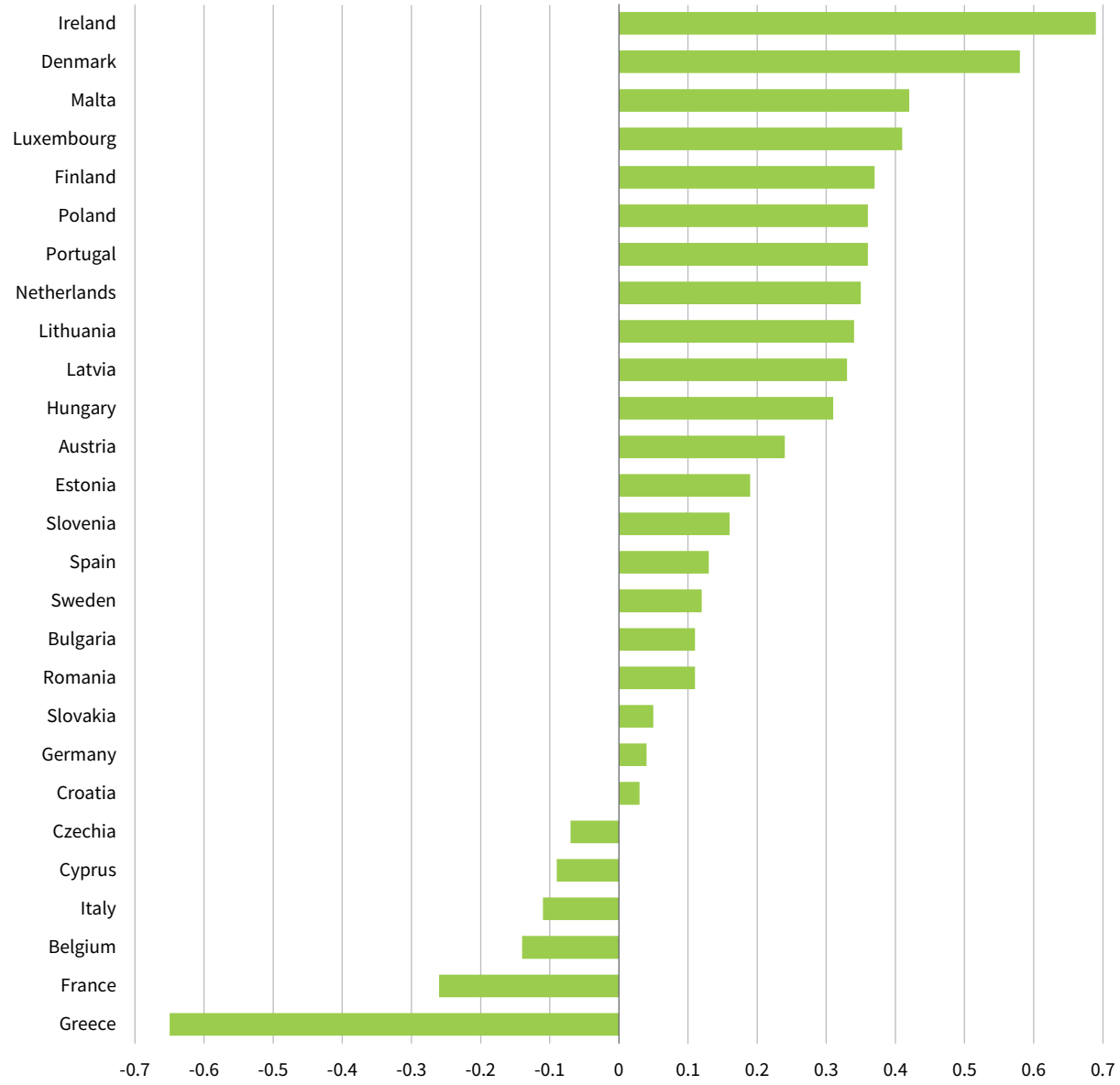
According to the Social Optimism Index scores, as Figure 14 shows, Ireland (0.687) is the EU's most socially optimistic country, whereas Greece is the most socially pessimistic one (-0.650). This sharp contrast is testament to the vast diversity of emotional climates about the future that exist in EU countries. The high degree of social optimism in Ireland and Denmark (0.582) stands out from the rest of the countries; these two are followed by Malta (0.424) and Luxembourg (0.407). After these four countries, a group made up of seven Member States (Finland, Portugal, Poland, the Netherlands, Lithuania, Latvia, and Hungary) share a relatively high level of social optimism, ranging from 0.366 to 0.308. In the group from Austria (0.239) to Bulgaria (0.105), the social optimism level is lower. Slovakia, Germany and Croatia follow this group before the countries' Social Optimism Index scores reach negative values: Czechia (-0.067), Cyprus (-0.092), Italy (-0.111), Belgium (-0.135), France (-0.262) and finally Greece (-0.650).

Figure 14 offers a robust, reliable and precise measure of EU countries' social optimism levels. At a glance, it is apparent that this index does not rank countries in the usual sequence found in other rankings measuring these countries' levels of wealth, social development or quality of life. In this figure, highly developed countries, such as Denmark and France, and less affluent countries, such as Portugal and Czechia, occupy very distant positions in the ranking. This unusual order gives rise to new questions about the factors that drive countries' social optimism levels. In any case, it seems that further efforts have to be made to improve our understanding of countries' perceptions of the future, their moods and emotional climates.

Despite its accuracy, and as is usually the case with composite indicators made up of statistical combinations of different variables, it is hard to intuitively grasp the meaning of the Social Optimism Index scores shown in Figure 14. For instance, how should the distance between Hungary (0.308) and Spain (0.132) be interpreted? What do the scores of Ireland (0.687) and Greece (-0.650) mean in terms of the prevalent feelings about the future in each country?

To understand these scores, this chapter uses the typology of social optimism, based on the Social Optimism Index scores and consisting of five types (see Figure 4 and Figure A1 in Annex 1): very optimistic, optimistic, neither optimistic nor pessimistic, pessimistic and very pessimistic. Figure 15 shows the four types expressing clear optimism or pessimism (those who were neither optimists nor pessimists are omitted). Accordingly, this figure shows the percentages of optimists (very optimistic and optimistic) and pessimists (pessimistic and very pessimistic) in each EU country. For instance, the reader can see that over half of the population reports socially optimistic feelings in Hungary (51%), whereas this proportion drops to 45% in Spain. Moreover, there are more pessimistic people in Spain (34%) than in Hungary (27%). A small difference in Social Optimism Index

Figure 14: Social Optimism Index scores (mean) by EU Member State

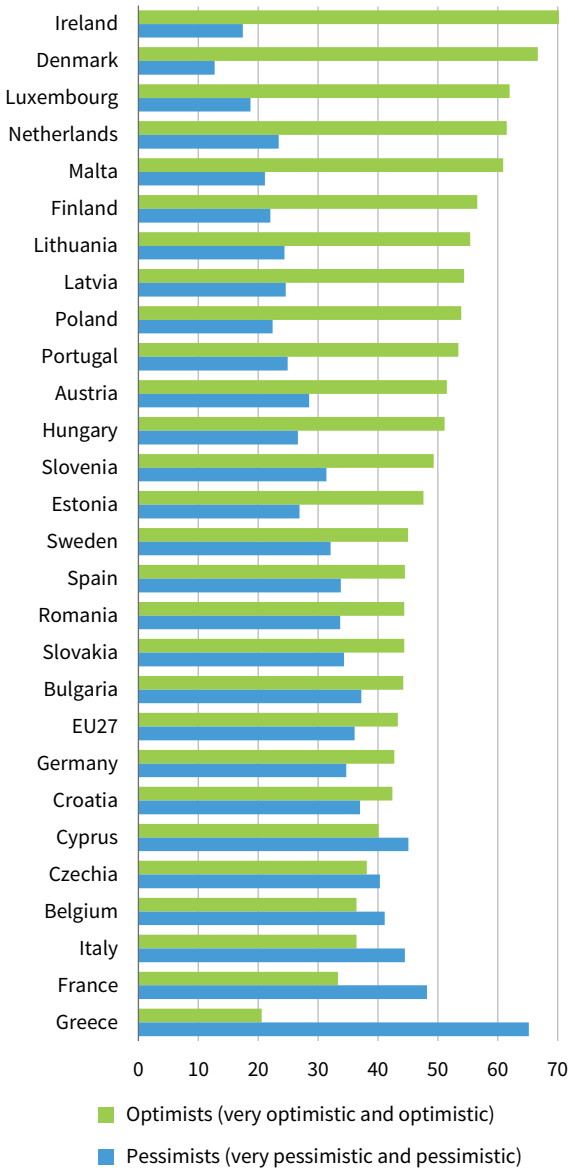


Source: *EB91.5, June–July 2019*

score, such as that between these two countries (see Figure 14), can equate to significant differences in the shares of optimistic and pessimistic people. In short, the number of optimists in Hungary is twice as high as the number of pessimists, yet feelings about the future are much more balanced in Spain.

There is a large distance between Ireland (Social Optimism Index score = 0.687), the most socially optimistic country, and Greece (Social Optimism Index score = -0.650), the most pessimistic one. In Greece, the effects of austerity measures were so severe that they were felt even 10 years after the crisis, with devastating social consequences suffered by the whole population. This is reflected not only in personal perceptions of the future but also in attitudes towards society. As optimists and pessimists are at odds in many of their opinions and attitudes, these significant changes in mood can drive, for better or worse, many other societal changes – a phenomenon that is still understudied. Figure 15 shows that 7 in 10 Irish people are social optimists, while less than 2 in 10 (17%) are pessimists. In Ireland, optimism is a collective mood, shared by practically the whole population. In contrast, 65% of Greeks are socially pessimistic, while only 2 in 10 (21%) are optimistic. Thus, 11 years after the start of the economic crisis, the emotional climate in Greece remained profoundly pessimistic. Conversely, it seems that the economic boom experienced by Ireland in recent years has also had a clear impact on the population's feelings, with Ireland now more optimistic than any other EU country.

Figure 15: Proportion of optimists and pessimists by EU Member State (%)



Note: *This figure does not include percentages of those who were neither optimists nor pessimists, so the percentages do not add up to 100.*
Source: *EB91.5, June–July 2019*

In addition to these two extremes, there are other contrasting cases that deserve to be studied in greater detail. For instance, the contrast between Denmark's mood – it is the second most optimistic country in the EU – and that of France, which is the second most pessimistic country, is as revealing as it is intellectually disquieting. Whereas only around 1 in 10 in Denmark (13%) are social pessimists, this percentage rises to 48% in France. What factors might explain the fact that citizens from a highly developed country, such as France, who also enjoy a high standard of living, hold this very pessimistic outlook about their collective future? There have been many social protests by citizens in France in recent years, such those instigated by the 'yellow vests' movement. However, it is unclear whether these have been brought about by present and objective life conditions or by the gloomy prospects for the future that French people envisage. If the latter is the case, it is crucial to examine the roots of social pessimism in France. Conversely, it would be worth asking why the general mood in Denmark is so optimistic.

Figure 15 shows that there are 12 countries in which more than half of the population is socially optimistic. It is worth noting that this group has a highly diverse composition, including Nordic, central and eastern European, Mediterranean and Continental countries. As already noted, the diversity of countries occupying the top positions makes this ranking unique. Therefore, in order to answer all the questions that this raises, further research is needed.

Those countries with a share of optimists between 40% and 49% make up another group in the ranking. In this group, the optimists still outnumber the pessimists. In descending order, the members of this group are Slovenia, Estonia, Sweden, Spain, Romania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Germany, and Croatia. The diverse composition of this group is also evident. The contrast between Sweden and Denmark, Lithuania and Estonia, or Slovenia and Czechia might suggest new ideas and hypotheses on the societal drivers of optimism and pessimism. Moreover, considering its high level of development and large population, as well as the role that it plays in the EU, Germany's low position in the optimism ranking is also remarkable. Only slightly over 4 in 10 Germans (42.7%) are optimists, more than 3 in 10 are pessimists (34.7%) and 2 in 10 (22.6%) are neither optimists nor pessimists. Finally, the last group in the ranking includes six rather pessimistic countries: Cyprus, Czechia, Belgium and Italy, France, and Greece. In all these countries, the share of pessimists is higher than that of optimists.

All these data prove two relevant facts: first, that social pessimism is quite widespread in Europe and, second, that EU countries are very diverse in terms of their level of social pessimism. In addition, it is worth noting that some highly developed European countries are relatively pessimistic (Liddle, 2008). According to the Social Optimism Index (Figure 14), Continental European countries such as France and Belgium are among the most pessimistic Member States. However, Nordic countries such as Denmark and Finland are among the most optimistic EU countries. Central and eastern European countries such as Lithuania, Latvia and Poland are relatively socially optimistic, although Czechia, Croatia and Slovakia are somewhat pessimistic. Finally, among the Mediterranean countries, Portugal is in the top part of the ranking, Spain in the middle, and Italy and Greece at the bottom.

Contextual drivers of social optimism

Social optimism is far from being evenly distributed across the EU and, at least in some cases, there are huge differences between countries. This calls for some explanation. However, it is critical first to determine how much of the variance observed in EU countries' social optimism levels can be explained at individual or country level. The level of optimism in a country could depend on the characteristics of its population at individual level. For instance, as was shown in Chapter 2 on the key drivers of social optimism, the age of an individual has a net effect on his or her optimism. But it is still unclear if an ageing society will have consequences for the social optimism of the country as a whole. In the same vein, although income has some effect on people's perceptions about the future (social optimism/pessimism), it is not known if richer countries are more optimistic than poorer ones. In short, the optimism level of a country could be the result not only of some characteristics of its citizens, taken individually, but also of some specific features of the country itself. Furthermore, country-level variables cannot be seen simply as individual-level ones taken together. While composition effects may have an impact, contextual factors could also be important, as is known from previous research and the literature. For example, Steenvoorden and van der Meer (2017, p. 192) argue that to a large extent, societal pessimism cannot be viewed separately from its political and economic context', and Morselli (2017) acknowledges the influence of context on individuals' perceptions of the future. In addition, a relational characteristic, such as income inequality, cannot be applied to an individual because it is a group or second-order trait.

In order to find out whether countries' characteristics affect social optimism, this section presents the results of a series of multilevel regression analyses. First, the amount of the total variance due to individual- or contextual-level features was estimated. Second, multilevel regression models were applied to discover country-level drivers of social optimism (see Annex 3 for technical details).

Country-level domains and factors

First, by running the null model, the extent to which social optimism depends either on individual-level or country-level variables was estimated. The analysis shows that most of the observed differences in social optimism and pessimism result from individual variables – more precisely, 88.3% of the total variance. The country context, however (the social economic, political and cultural features of each country), still influences people's perceptions about the future (social optimism and pessimism), and this effect stands at 11.7% of the total variance (see Annex 3).

Second, the analysis sought to discover country-level drivers to explain as much as possible of the 11.7% of variance due to this level. Several variables highlighted in the literature were taken into account in the analysis (Pew Research Center, 2014; Steenvoorden and van der Meer, 2017). The model was run using indicators from four different societal domains (Table 16). The four domains used are the following: (1) economy, (2) fairness–inequality, (3) social dynamism and (4) politics. Each domain includes two variables. The first considers two economic factors, (a) gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in purchasing power parity (PPP) (EU in 2020 = 100) and (b) real GDP growth rate, averaged for 2017–2019. The second includes (a) at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) rate, which is an indicator of inequality, and (b) perception of fairness, measured by level of agreement regarding the statement that people in the country get what they deserve. The social dynamism domain takes into account (a) old-age dependency, estimated as the ratio of the population aged 60 years or older to those aged 20–59 years, and (b) intergenerational social mobility, measured subjectively by the difference between the respondent's own self-declared social status and that declared by the respondent for their parents. Finally, the political domain includes (a) trust in institutions, which is an indicator measuring the respondent's trust in several institutions, and (b) Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index 2019.

This framework aims to explore some hypotheses about the relationship between country-level features and social optimism. For instance, it aims to provide information on the extent to which dynamic factors, such as economic growth, ageing and social mobility, affect countries' social optimism levels. It can be used to compare the influence of economic and political factors on a country's perceptions about the future. And it can verify whether a country's level of economic inequality and its inhabitants' sense of how fair things have some effects on its level of social optimism.

Table 16: Social optimism: country-level domains and factors

Domains	Factors
Economic performance	– GDP per capita (PPP) (EU in 2020 = 100) – GDP growth (average between 2017 and 2019)
Social fairness and inequality	– Perception of fairness – Income inequality (AROPE rate)
Societal dynamism	– Old-age dependency – Intergenerational social mobility
Political legitimacy	– Trust in institutions – Perception of corruption

Sources: *GDP data, Eurostat; perception of fairness, EB91.5, June–July 2019; AROPE, Eurostat; old-age dependency, Eurostat; intergenerational social mobility, EB88.4, December 2017; trust in institutions, EB91.5, June–July 2019; perception of corruption, Corruption Perception Index 2019, Transparency International*

Results of the analysis

The main results of models 1 to 4 are presented below. Each model concerns one domain only and includes the factors for that domain (full results and details of each model are provided in Table A4 in Annex 3).

Model 1 is concerned with the economic domain and includes one static and one dynamic factor. The former is annual GDP and the latter the GDP growth rate. The estimates of this model suggest that these two factors relate to social optimism. Both are statistically significant. However, the magnitude of the effect of the GDP growth rate (0.135), which is the dynamic factor, is much bigger than that of the static economic factor, GDP (0.005). People could view the recent past as indicating what may happen in the near future. If that is the case, we can expect that a booming economy today will increase optimism and confidence in the country's future. The introduction of the economic factors into the model explains almost one-third (32%) of the variance caused by country-level drivers.[10]

Model 2, or the fairness–inequality model, combines an objective measure, the AROPE rate, with a subjective one, degree of agreement with the statement 'in our country, people get what they deserve', which is a measure of views on the actual implementation of meritocratic principles. As the social science literature suggests, objective inequality is neither closely nor necessarily related to social discontent. Social unease has more to do with a sense of unfairness and injustice than with sheer inequality. This may explain why the fairness factor is statistically significant, whereas the income inequality indicator is not. In fact, the positive sign of the latter coefficient would seem to indicate that, the greater the income inequality, the greater the optimism of a country. Some economists would argue that periods of economic growth are also times of increasing inequality. In this case, the positive relationship could also be explained by the fact that less developed countries, usually more unequal, are more optimistic. In any case, the coefficient of perception of fairness (0.019) is higher than that of objective income inequality (0.010) (see Table A4 in Annex 3). The introduction of fairness–inequality factors into the model explains 29% of the variance caused by country-level drivers, which is comparable to the percentage explained by economic factors.[11]

Model 3 deals with the domain of societal dynamism. The rationale behind these factors is that a dynamic country might be expected to be more optimistic. First, the old-age dependency ratio was introduced to see if ageing societies are more pessimistic than younger ones and if countries with a shrinking workforce tend to be more pessimistic. Second, Chapter 4 showed that at individual level intergenerational social mobility is related to optimism; average social mobility in a country was introduced to the model to see if it also relates to optimism. Neither of the two factors is statistically significant, although the significance level of the old-age dependency ratio is relatively close to the 0.05 threshold. The negative sign of both parameters is worth considering (see Table A4 in Annex 3). The higher the dependency rate, the lower the optimism of the country. And the higher the intergenerational social mobility of a country, the lower its optimism (although, as can be seen from Table A4, the magnitude of this effect is very small). This last result is surprising and counterintuitive. However, it should be borne in mind that this indicator mainly reflects the social mobility of the current population with respect to the past. In fact, a high degree of past social mobility does not guarantee that expectations about social mobility in the future will be high. As social dynamism is a complex phenomenon, still not appropriately conceptualised, these can be considered provisional results in need of further investigation. At this point, however, it seems that these variables do not help to explain the variance due to country-level variables in social optimism.[12]

Model 4 considers two subjective political factors, trust in several institutions and perception of corruption. Both are statistically significant, but the intensity of the relationship between trust in institutions and social optimism (1.106) is much stronger than that between perception of corruption and social optimism (-0.017). This model shows that political factors are relevant country-level variables explaining social optimism and pessimism. Optimists express confidence in the future. Given that, in our complex and ever-changing societies, people think that political institutions are responsible for our present and future, political mistrust is the most direct and relevant indicator of social discontent, and therefore of pessimism. The introduction of political variables into the model explains 60% of country-level variance. These political variables account for a higher level of reduction in unexplained variance than any of the other three domains analysed above.[13]

10 This is indicated by the intraclass correlation (IC) coefficient, which in this model equates to 8.0%. This value means that, after introducing the economic factors, the variance left unexplained has gone down from 11.7% to 8.0 % (see Table A4 in Annex 3) .

11 The variance left unexplained by this model (IC coefficient = 8.29%) is slightly higher than but similar to that of the economic factors (see Table A4 in Annex 3).

12 The IC coefficient of model 3 is 11.04%, which means that these two factors do not significantly reduce the country-level variance left unexplained (see Table A4 in Annex 3).

13 The IC coefficient of this model is 4.67%. The variance left unexplained decreases from 11.7% to 4.67%, which means that these two variables explain 60% of country-level variance (see Table A4 in Annex 3).

Finally, the general model was run with the eight factors to see whether the intensity and the significance of the factors changed when the rest were kept constant (model 5 in Table A4 in Annex 3). By and large, there were no major changes compared with the previous four models. As expected, the magnitude of every factor decreases a little. And when other factors were controlled for, sense of fairness, which was statistically significant in model 2, became insignificant. Furthermore, the intensity of its effect decreased, becoming lower than that of the objective income inequality indicator. The data show that only two factors, one political (trust in institutions) and one economic (GDP growth), maintain statistically significant regression coefficients. Their magnitude is also large, although the effect of political trust (0.894) seems to be far stronger than that of the economic growth rate (0.117).

After running several regressions to find the most parsimonious model, the one with only two factors, trust in institutions and GDP growth, was selected (model 6 in Table A4, Annex 3). In summary, these two variables were able to explain 77% of the country-level variance.[14] These results are in line with other available analyses. A report by the Pew Research Center (2014) found a correlation of 0.64 between GDP growth and optimism about children's future. And Steenvoorden and van der Meer (2017) confirm that, when trust and satisfaction with the political system is taken into account, the effect of perception of corruption disappears. These authors also show that the state of the economy and political satisfaction are related to social pessimism, the effect of the latter factor being greater than that of economic growth.

Personal expectations and societal outlooks

Chapter 1 noted that the optimism gap – that is, the contrast between personal and societal perceptions of the future (de Vries and Hoffmann, 2020) – is one of the most relevant optimism dichotomies. In Chapter 2, Figures 1–3 show how disparate the answers to personal and societal questions can be. This section comes back to this issue but takes a country-level perspective. First, it reflects on pessimism gaps using data from the EU as a whole (Table 17). Second, it shows the pessimism gap in each European country (Figure 16), where there is a wide diversity between countries.

Table 17 includes four questions, two about personal issues and two about societal ones, and shows how EU citizens' responses change depending on the question asked. The optimism gap also varies depending on the personal and societal questions selected. For instance, the level of pessimism based on personal expectations changes if the question wording changes the time frame from 12 months to 5 years. A longer time horizon means a lesser degree of control for individuals, which increases their pessimism. However, greater uncertainty should not always lead to increased pessimism. When people live in an optimistic culture, more uncertainty means more freedom to think that a flourishing future awaits them. It can be seen, however, that nowadays this is not the case in the EU.

Table 17: Personal and societal expectations: level of optimism in the EU27 (%)

Expectations				Direction	
I expect the future to be ...	Personal life[a] (12 months)	Country situation[a] (12 months)	Personal life[b] (5 years)	Country situation[a]	Things are going ...
Better	31.0	24.1	30.7	36.4	**Right**
Worse	9.4	21.0	19.0	49.0	**Wrong**
Same	57.3	51.1	42.8	8.8	**Neither**
Don't know	2.3	3.7	7.6	5.8	**Don't know**
Total	100	100	100	100	**Total**

Sources: [a]*EB91.5, June–July 2019.* [b]*EB90.1, September 2018*

14 The intraclass correlation (IC) coefficient of this two-factor model (2.64%) is even lower than that of the general model, which means that fewer variables explain an even higher percentage of country-level variance (see model 6 in Table A3, Annex 3).

The comparison between personal and societal expectations provides a first measure of the optimism gap. Whereas 31% of European citizens think that their personal life will improve in the next 12 months, only 24% think so about their country's situation. The difference in proportions between negative personal and national expectations is even more remarkable. The proportion of individuals who believe that their country's situation will worsen (21%) is twice as large as the proportion of those who think the same regarding their personal situation (9%). Comparing personal and national expectations, the optimism gap equals -7% and the pessimism gap equals +12%.

The question about the respondent's country's future direction does not indicate a time frame, and the respondent is therefore able to project optimistic or pessimistic feelings onto a distant future. Thus, this question works as a magnifying glass, allowing us to detect a cultural mood that otherwise might go unnoticed. The direction our societies are heading in matters a lot to people. Therefore, as Table 17 shows, only a tiny proportion of interviewees (9%) choose the neutral answer 'neither right nor wrong'. Almost half of EU citizens (49%) are pessimistic regarding their own country. Pessimists far outnumber optimists (36%). Finally, comparing this societal outlook on the future with expectations about personal life in 12 months' time, we can see how big the gap is between personal pessimism (9%) and societal pessimism (49%). The latter percentage is five times as large as the former.

Although this sharp contrast between personal and societal perceptions of the future is striking at first glance, the pessimism gap is to some extent quite understandable. First, the two kinds of questions have distinct targets, so the answers are bound to differ. This effect also appears when measuring other phenomena from both perspectives, for example when asking interviewees about their personal economic situation and their country's economic situation. Amid an economic crisis, for instance, even respondents who enjoy an excellent personal financial situation may be fully aware of the critical situation in their country. In no way does their good financial situation prevent them from being conscious of the bad situation other people are going through or result in their ignoring the economic system's problems. Even a slight decrease in GDP can create a collective emotional climate of concern. However, this does not necessarily mean that everyone has financial problems. In all these cases, we are talking about two interrelated but distinct social phenomena.

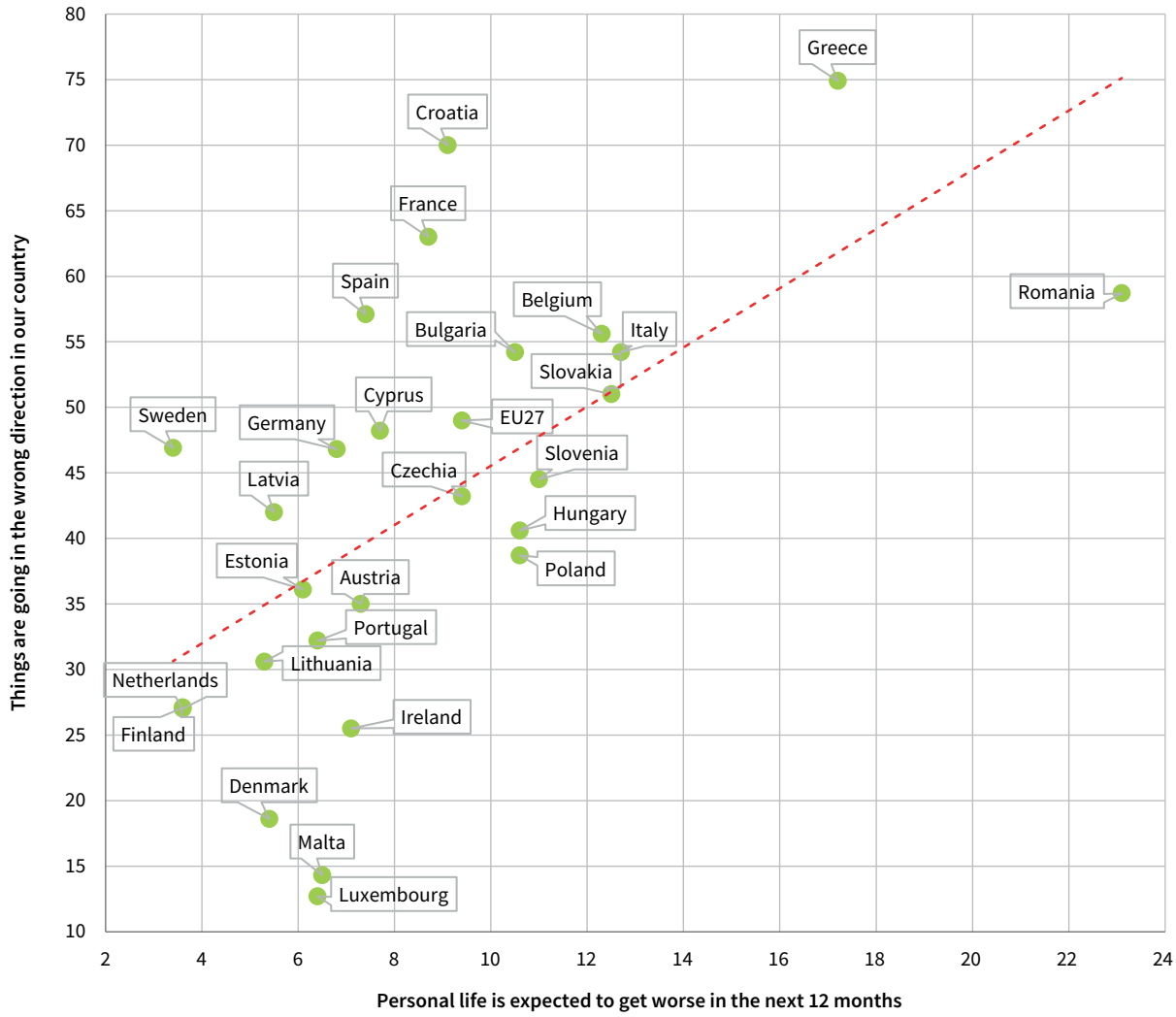
Coming back to Table 17, this explains why the percentage of Europeans who answer that their personal life in 12 months will be about the same is so high (57%), while the percentage of those who think that the country is going in neither the right, nor the wrong direction is very low (9%). This difference can only partially be explained by the optimism bias hypothesis (Sharot, 2011). The fact is that among those Europeans who report having good expectations about their personal life for the next 12 months ('better'), 45% think that things in the country are going in the right direction, while 43% think that they are going in the wrong direction. Conversely, among those who expect their personal lives to get worse, only 20% think that the country is going in the right direction, while a large majority (72%) think that things are going in the wrong direction. In short, it seems that being in a bad personal situation makes the respondent more pessimistic about the country's future. However, being in a good one does not prevent him or her from making a negative judgement about the country's direction.

Figure 16 shows negative personal expectations (horizontal axis) and societal pessimism regarding the respondent's own country (vertical axis), for each EU Member State. At first glance, a high degree of diversity between countries can be seen. As expected, the percentage range for personal expectation is smaller than that for societal pessimism. However, this does not mean that personal issues are less important: they reflect not a mere opinion about the country but people's real living conditions, which are an entirely different matter. As argued in the preceding paragraphs, these are distinct variables and thus they present a low linear correlation ($R^2 = 0.368$).

The share of personal pessimists in most EU countries is between 5% and 10%. Some countries – Belgium, Italy, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland – have a 10–15% share of personal pessimists. Romania (23%) and Greece (17%), with high percentages of people reporting expectations of a worsening personal life for the next 12 months, are at the negative end, whereas Sweden (3%), Finland (4%) and the Netherlands (4%) are at the positive end, with few people expecting worse living conditions.

Shares of societal pessimists, shown on the vertical axis, are highly diverse, ranging from a minimum of 13% in Luxembourg to a maximum of 75% in Greece. The high levels of societal pessimism that countries such as Greece, Croatia and France, or even Romania and Spain, experience may go hand in hand with deep negative emotional climates in terms of public opinion. The case of Greece could be explained by the profound emotional mark left on the country by the Great Recession. It seems that in 2019, 11 years after the start of the economic crisis, the mood in Greece remained profoundly pessimistic. In general, any country with higher societal pessimism than Cyprus (48%), or the 50% threshold, can be considered pessimistic. It is worth noting that some EU15 countries, such as France (63%), Spain (57%), Belgium (55%) and Italy (54%), as seen previously, are societally pessimistic. Conversely, countries below the threshold, such as Luxembourg

Figure 16: Pessimism gap: personal and societal pessimism by EU Member State (%)



Source: *EB91.5, June–July 2019*

(13%), Malta (14%), Denmark (19%), Ireland (26%), the Netherlands (27%), Finland (27%), Lithuania (31%) and Portugal (32%), can be regarded, on the basis of this specific information alone, as societally optimistic.

Looking at the single indicators of wrong societal direction and worse personal expectations, Figure 16 also depicts the pessimism gap in EU countries. The average pessimism gap for the EU27 population equals 34 percentage points, showing the difference between people's expectations at personal and societal levels. However, as anticipated, there is considerable diversity among countries. Looking at the upper part of the figure, the countries above the regression line are those with the largest pessimism gaps. Croatia (61 percentage points), Greece (58 percentage points), France (54 percentage points) and Spain (50 percentage points) are among these countries. In all of them, it can be stated that citizens' negative personal expectations cannot exclusively drive the widespread societal pessimism. It seems that something beyond mere negative personal expectations that citizens have regarding their living conditions is causing pessimism. Citizens could be said to share a general mood or collective emotion, a kind of culture of pessimism. Looking at the bottom of the figure, below the regression line, we see some EU countries with very low personal and societal pessimism levels. Accordingly, the difference in proportions between these two measures is very small, as in Luxembourg (6 percentage points), Malta (8 percentage points), Denmark (13 percentage points), Ireland (18 percentage points), the Netherlands (23 percentage points) and Finland (24 percentage points). In these countries, pessimism seems more closely related to expectations about personal living conditions, and not so much based on a shared pessimistic culture concerning society's future.

Chapter 5 – Summary

This chapter has focused on levels of social optimism in EU Member States, the key drivers at a contextual level, and country-level differences in personal and societal pessimism. The country ranking according to the Social Optimism Index indicates the diversity on this issue found within the EU. It also shows that countries with the same level of development can have very different emotional cultures. In this regard, it is worth noting that some very highly developed European countries are particularly pessimistic. Individual-level factors explain 88% of the total variance in social optimism, while country-level factors account for 12% of it. Among the latter, GDP growth and trust in institutions emerged as the most relevant factors. Finally, data on pessimism gaps suggest that, especially in those countries with a large gap, a kind of collective pessimistic mood is culturally shared.

6 Conclusions

The main objective of this report was to measure and analyse people's perceptions about the future. Previous research has concluded that people tend to feel uncertain about the future (see, for example, OECD, 2019). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and in view of its consequences, it is more important than ever to examine societal levels of optimism and pessimism. The pandemic poses great challenges for all Member States, including in terms of people's perceptions about the future. The aim of this report is to provide an informed starting point for policymakers and citizens concerned about the future of Europe.

The report investigated key drivers of people's perceptions about the future. It was demonstrated that quality of life and living conditions in general affect people's perceptions about their own future. Living conditions depend largely on social position, so people's social status determines the level of their personal optimism or pessimism. Feelings about society are a different issue. Almost half of Europeans (49%) think that things are going in the wrong direction in their countries, and almost the same number think that the same is true of the EU as a whole. Only one in four believes that the general situation in their country will be better in the future, and the majority are convinced that life will be more difficult for those who are children today than it is for today's adults.

Prevalence of social pessimism in Europe

These negative feelings about the future of our societies, called social pessimism, are a symptom, and their prevalence signals a radical societal change. Historically, from the very beginning of the modern era, European countries have been future-oriented, motivated by the idea of progress. Progress meant that the future would always bring improvements, such as economic growth and increased wealth, social and cultural development, stronger democracy and more freedom, better health and increasing life expectancy, greater equality and fairness. Nowadays, it seems that the ethos of Europe has shifted towards pessimism. A cultural pessimism is shared by the whole population, the well-off and the poor, urban and rural people, men and women, the well-educated and the undereducated, those on the political right and left, and, of course, populists. Most Europeans nowadays are confronted by serious problems on a global scale: pollution, terrorist attacks, disastrous consequences brought about by climate change, the unstoppable spread of viruses, the dehumanisation caused by the virtualisation of life, the threat of a hyper-technological third world war and of new devastating economic downturns, or the risk of a sudden downfall of all our digital communication and information systems, to mention a few.

Social pessimism seems to be prevalent in Europe, with worrying consequences. The social, cultural, economic and political consequences could be unpredictable, long-lasting, powerful and far-reaching. However, with some exceptions (Schweizer and Schneider, 1997; Bennett, 2001; Steenvoorden, 2016; de Vries and Hoffmann, 2020; Roser and Nagdy, 2020), this phenomenon has received scant attention so far, both in academic discourse and in public debate. The report aimed to make a new and significant contribution to the understanding of this emotional climate. It revealed several key general drivers of social optimism and social pessimism, using a multidimensional composite indicator called the Social Optimism Index to measure the drivers.

Main drivers of optimism and pessimism

What are the key factors fuelling Europeans' current optimism and pessimism? The model developed for the report shows a complex situation in which many drivers play an essential role in this societal change from an optimistic outlook to a more pessimistic one. This pessimistic mood is strongly associated with political dissatisfaction but also with personal dissatisfaction with life. Therefore, pessimism should be seen in the context of preceding individual and political malaise. This research is challenging, since a pessimistic emotional climate is founded on subjective perceptions and feelings with presumably deep roots, both conscious and unconscious. The analysis revealed four key factors driving pessimism in various life domains: sociodemographic, socioeconomic, sociocultural and sociopolitical.

Age is the most relevant of all the sociodemographic drivers. Once the rest of the variables are controlled for, gender, educational level, marital status, and living in an urban or a rural area have no statistically significant effects on social optimism. The relationship between age and social optimism is quadratic. This means that the positive net effect of age on social optimism is high in youth, falls in middle age and rises again in old age. All the socioeconomic factors included in the model proved to be statistically significant, showing a relatively strong effect on social optimism. The financial situation of the household and the employment situation of the individual are two crucial factors. Regarding labour market position, the findings are supported by very recent Eurobarometer results – drawn from Special Eurobarometer 509 on social issues –

which conclude that access to the labour market is among the most pressing issues for citizens (data.europa.eu, 2021). In addition, changes in quality of life, throughout the life course or recently, have a significant effect on individuals' social optimism or pessimism.

Social cohesion fuels social optimism

The report revealed a close relationship between social cohesion, at least as perceived by individuals, and social optimism. A cohesive society, with a sense of belonging and responsibility for others, strengthens social ties and offers ontological security to its citizens. Attachment to the community, the feeling of belonging and the sense of having a lot of things in common with the people living in one's country or the EU are factors that fuel citizens' optimism. Conversely, negative attitudes towards immigrants, and a desire to segregate, discriminate against or reject them, are associated with social pessimism. Furthermore, people's difficulty in understanding how this globalised and complex world works is also a relevant cultural factor in explaining social pessimism.

Political disengagement linked to social pessimism

Politics and participatory factors constitute the fourth domain where a strong connection to social optimism and pessimism was found. For example, political voice – defined as citizens' ability to express their opinions – and interest in influencing policy- and decision-making processes are fundamental to generating the required legitimacy for the political system.

The analyses of the sociopolitical and socioeconomic profiles of optimists and pessimists, in Chapters 3 and 4, demonstrate that they are very different in an ample variety of beliefs, thoughts, opinions, perceptions, attitudes, feelings, behaviours, values and wishes. These differences are overall so significant that two kinds of social types emerge. For social pessimists, the effects of an economic crisis are felt for much longer, and prospects for future generations seem much worse; they have short temporal horizons for household planning, and their outlook on the past is more profoundly nostalgic. This report can make no judgement on whether pessimists or optimists are right or wrong nor on which stance is more likely to be useful in meeting the challenges that the EU faces. However, it did find that these two types are internally congruent, consistent and coherent in how their distinctive social personalities are shaped and how this translates in terms of their attitudes and behaviour. The differences between the types become particularly evident when analysing their political participation, their sense of justice and equality, and their attitudes towards the EU.

In the political domain, the data show that interest in politics, assessment of the importance of voting in democratic elections and likelihood of doing so are higher among optimists than among pessimists. Pessimists are more often undecided voters, and they change the party/candidate that they vote for more frequently. The reasons optimists and pessimists give for voting and not voting are also very different, with the pessimists expressing more confrontational attitudes and more negative feelings and opinions. Unlike the majority of pessimists, who tend to be strongly mistrustful of both national governments and national parliaments, most optimists trust in these and other political institutions. Pessimists neither think their voice counts in their country nor feel their interests are well represented. They feel a strong political disaffection.

Upward social mobility fosters social optimism

Regarding inequality, people at the bottom of the social ladder are more socially pessimistic than those at the top. However, even among the middle and upper classes, social pessimists abound. The report also found that experiencing upward intergenerational social mobility increases social optimism, while experiencing downward intergenerational social mobility increases social pessimism. Because of their typical social position, social pessimists are more sensitive to inequality issues. They favour policies to support socioeconomic rights, such as unemployment benefits, guaranteed minimum pensions and universal basic incomes. However, at the same time, they show less solidarity than optimists when it comes to helping other groups of people, such as immigrants. Pessimists generally believe that the level of injustice in their country is higher than optimists think it is. They also feel that in European societies there are not equal opportunities for all.

Optimists and pessimists think and feel about and evaluate the EU in radically different ways. Most optimists are convinced pro-Europeans, whereas among pessimists anti-Europeans outnumber pro-Europeans. More than half of pessimists think that the EU is not efficient, forward-looking, protective or modern. And nearly 4 in 10 pessimists, but only 1 in 10 optimists, do not feel themselves to be EU citizens. Identities are anchored in intense feelings, conscious and unconscious, that function as the cement of society. Therefore, these data confirm the enormous impact that social pessimism could have on perceptions of the political legitimacy of the EU.

Optimism and pessimism: Country differences

Chapter 5 examines the differences in social optimism and pessimism across European countries, and it shows that these differences are large. Thus, for instance, the average proportion of European citizens who think that things in their country are going in the wrong direction is 49.0%. However, 75% of Greeks but only 13% of Luxembourgers think so. Greece and Croatia stand out for their very high levels of social pessimism. However, it is also worth noting that some more affluent countries, such as France (63%), Spain (57%), Belgium (56%) and Italy (54%), are also societally very pessimistic. The same applies when analysing the prospects for future generations. More than half of EU citizens (54%) think that life will be more difficult for today's young people than it is for adults today. However, countries such as France (77%), Belgium (75%), Luxembourg (66%), the Netherlands (59%), Spain (58%), Germany (58%) and Italy (53.7%) are among the most pessimistic. For an indication of the extent to which social pessimism has spread throughout Europe, it suffices to say that in 22 of the 27 EU countries more people believe that future generations will be worse off and have a more difficult life than believe the reverse.

Which are the most optimistic and most pessimistic countries in the EU? According to the Social Optimism Index scores, Greece is the most pessimistic Member State and Ireland is the most optimistic one. With regard to Greece, more research is needed to establish the reasons, but the fact that it was in Greece that disposable household income was furthest from the pre-crisis level even in 2018 (European Commission, 2020b) may have played some role in fuelling pessimism. In general, the findings of this report show that country rankings in terms of social optimism do not show the East–West or North–South divide often found in comparisons of Member States, which frequently relate closely to the Member States' levels of development. Although Nordic countries, in general, are the most optimistic, eastern and central European countries are more optimistic than Mediterranean ones, and even more so than the Continental countries. It was shown that some of the most affluent European countries, such as France, Belgium and Italy, have relatively high levels of social pessimism. This could pose a severe problem for the future of Europe.

The issue of social pessimism could be the subject of a more in-depth investigation, specifically looking at these countries, to explore the reasons for the negative climate there. For now, it can be stated that, on the one hand, economic stagnation and mistrust in social institutions explain most of the variance in social pessimism caused by country-level factors. On the other hand, a lack of social cohesion has been proved to be the main phenomenon underlying social pessimism at an individual level. In summary, analysing a huge variety of empirical information about social optimism and pessimism, this report has pointed out some crucial problems that European citizens face. It seems that these problems fuel their pessimism, which in turn limits their possibilities for future development. In Heilbroner's words (1996), 'visions of the future express the ethos of our time'.

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Annexes

Annex 1: Social Optimism Index: Multiple correspondence analysis

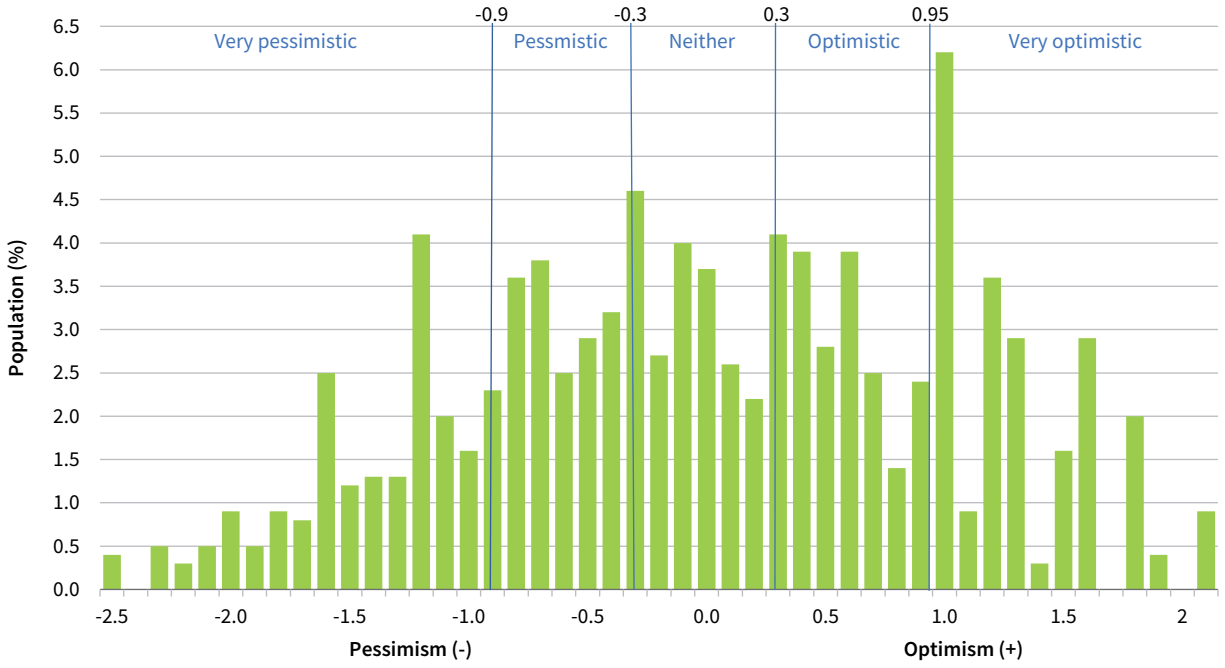
Data reduction techniques, such as factor analysis, are suited for the purpose of estimating indexes. However, since all six social optimism variables are categorical, the most appropriate technique in this case is multiple correspondence analysis (MCA). This aims to produce a solution in which respondents in the same category are plotted close together and respondents in different categories are plotted far apart. For a one-dimensional solution, MCA assigns optimal scale values (category quantifications) to each category of each variable in such a way that overall, on average, the categories have maximum spread (IBM SPSS Statistics Categories 26).

On exploring the data structure, it was possible to confirm the existence of a concept underlying the six questions, that of social optimism. The analysis showed a coherent distribution of the response category scores, revealing a gradient from high social optimism to high social pessimism (see Figure 4). A one-dimensional solution was finally run, and hence the scores obtained by the MCA can be taken as a measure of the level of social optimism of each individual. In short, the Social Optimism Index scores reflect the respondent's level of optimism taking into account the answers given to all six questions.

Data reduction techniques estimate factor scores according to a normal distribution, with a mean equalling 0 and a standard deviation equalling 1. Therefore, positive scores indicate that the respondent has an above-average level of optimism, while negative scores mean that he or she is more pessimistic than the average citizen of the EU.

Figure A1 shows the distribution of the EU population according to Social Optimism Index scores. Analysis of Figures 4 and A1 made it possible to define some thresholds to sort citizens according to their relative degrees of social optimism. After some exploratory analyses, the distribution was segmented into five population groups: very optimistic (≥ 0.95), optimistic (≥ 0.3 < 0.95), neither optimistic nor pessimistic (≥ -0.3 < 0.3), pessimistic (≥ -0.9 < -0.3) and very pessimistic (< -0.9). By transferring the thresholds shown in Figure A1 to Figure 4, the reader can check the response categories that correspond to each of the five groups in the typology of social optimism.

Figure A1: Distribution of scores of optimist and pessimist types, EU27



Source: *EB91.5, June–July 2019*

Table A1: Correspondence between the full and simplified typologies of social optimism

	Typology: three categories			Total
	Very optimistic	Slightly optimistic	Pessimistic	
Typology: five categories				
Very optimistic	69.9%	5.5%	0.1%	21.6%
Optimistic	23.2%	43.4%	6.9%	21.6%
Neither	5.8%	31.9%	23.2%	20.6%
Pessimistic	1.0%	14.6%	29.3%	17.1%
Very pessimistic	0.1%	4.6%	40.5%	19.0%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%
Social Optimism Index mean score	1.13	0.20	-0.76	0.05
EU population	28.7%	27.5%	43.7%	100.0%

Source: *EB91.5, June–July 2019*

Each of the three categories of the simplified typology used in Chapters 3 and 4 is made up of a combination of responses given to the two questions asking about the direction (right, wrong, neither right nor wrong, don't know) that the respondent's own country and the EU are heading in.

The very optimistic type is made up of people who answered 'right' to both questions (80%) or who combined one 'right' answer with a 'neither' or 'don't know' answer (20%). The slightly optimistic type combines those who gave one 'right' and one 'wrong' answer (62%), those who gave two 'neither' answers (21%) and those who gave two 'don't know' answers (17%). Finally, the 'pessimistic' type is made up of people who answered 'wrong' to both questions (82%) or who combined one wrong answer with a 'neither' or 'don't know' answer (18%).

Table A1 shows the correspondence between this simplified typology (three categories) and the full one (five categories). The labels for the three types (very optimistic, slightly optimistic and pessimistic) reflect their scores on the Social Optimism Index (1.13, 0.20 and -0.76, respectively).

Annex 2: Key drivers: Multiple regression analysis

The MCA made it possible to estimate a quantitative measure of every interviewee's degree of social optimism. Hence, the Social Optimism Index scores could be used as the dependent variable in a multiple linear regression analysis to explore the key drivers of social optimism.

The methodological strategy proceeded in sequential phases. In the first, an exploratory analysis of means and a one-way analysis of variance, taking the Social Optimism Index scores as the dependent variable, were carried out.[15] Second, an independent multiple regression analysis was run with the variables of each of the four spheres: sociodemographic, socioeconomic, sociocultural and sociopolitical. Third, to get and present the reader with a parsimonious final model, an analysis was run including only the two most important variables of each sphere. And, finally, the analyses were carried out running a stepwise regression to confirm that no theoretically or empirically relevant variable had been left out of the model. All these analyses were carried out using the 2019 Eurobarometer 91.5 data.

The final model also included countries as dummy variables to control for national variance. But it did not include 'usual suspects' such as gender or educational level, because their effects were not statistically significant. The results from this final model are those presented in the report. Table A2 shows the final ordinary least squares regression model, which includes 11 variables from 4 spheres. Beta values indicate the magnitude of the effect of each variable on social optimism, once the rest of the variables, included in the model, were cancelled out.

15 'The means procedure calculates subgroup means and related univariate statistics for dependent variables within categories of one or more independent variables. Optionally, you can obtain a one-way analysis of variance, eta, and tests for linearity' (IBM SPSS Statistics Base 26).

Table A2: Key drivers of social optimism and pessimism (dependent variable: Social Optimism Index)

Spheres	Variables	Standardised beta coefficients	*t*	Sig.
Sociodemographic	Age	-0.287	-10.408	0.000
	Age2 (age squared)	0.208	7.427	0.000
Socioeconomic	Financial situation of household *Very bad* (*reference: very good*)	-0.096	-13.778	0.000
	Rather bad	-0.113	-12.407	0.000
	Don't know	-0.024	-4.316	0.000
	Rather good	-0.027	-2.989	0.003
	Personal labour situation *Very bad* (*reference: very good*)	-0.047	-6.997	0.000
	Rather bad	-0.075	-9.367	0.000
	Don't know	-0.021	-2.707	0.007
	Rather good	-0.014	-1.650	0.099
	My quality of life was better before *Totally agree* (*reference: totally disagree*)	-0.107	-14.133	0.000
	Tend to agree	-0.067	-8.142	0.000
	Don't know	-0.011	-1.872	0.061
	Tend to disagree	-0.008	-1.048	0.295
Sociocultural	Attachment to communities (+) *Index: local, national, EU, Europe*	0.120	22.178	0.000
	People have a lot in common (+) *Index: country, EU*	0.146	25.206	0.000
	Attitude towards immigrants/refugees (+) *Index: qb3_1, qb3_2, qd9_1, qd9_4* [a]	0.205	34.877	0.000
	I understand today's world (+) *Totally disagree* (*reference: totally agree*)	-0.015	-2.485	0.013
	Tend to disagree	-0.015	-2.165	0.030
	Don't know	0.020	3.578	0.000
	Tend to agree	0.031	4.422	0.000
Sociopolitical	My voice counts in the EU (+) *Totally disagree* (*reference: totally agree*)	-0.092	-9.201	0.000
	Tend to disagree	-0.060	-6.272	0.000
	Don't know	-0.021	-2.407	0.016
	Tend to agree	-0.001	-0.056	0.956
	My voice counts in my country (+) *Totally disagree* (*reference: totally agree*)	-0.126	-13.662	0.000
	Tend to disagree	-0.135	-15.232	0.000
	Don't know	0.005	0.558	0.577
	Tend to agree	-0.063	-6.919	0.000

Notes: [a] *The index 'Attitude towards immigrants/refugees' consists of four variables, as follows: the first two questions (qb3_1 and qb3_2) ask about positive or negative feelings towards migrants from other EU countries and third countries, and the second two questions (qd9_1 and qd9_4) ask for agreement or disagreement with two statements, 'Immigrants contribute a lot to the country' and 'Your country should help refugees'.*
Source: *EB91.5, June–July 2019*

Annex 3: Country-level drivers: Multilevel regression analysis

Multilevel regression models make it possible to analyse data at individual and contextual levels. Therefore, this technique was used to study the country characteristics that could explain social optimism variance due to context-level factors.

Variance at individual and country levels

Multilevel regression modelling makes it possible to estimate the percentage of variance that could be explained by individual-level and country-level variables (Hox, 2010). Such models are needed when the intragroup variance is lower than intergroup variance – in other words, when the members of a group share some similarities. In this case, the case could be that the optimism felt by individuals stemmed, at least in part, from living in a particular country. The intraclass correlation (IC) coefficient makes it possible to estimate the extent to which the social optimism of individuals depends on the characteristics of their country.[16] Table A3 shows the estimates for this model.

The IC coefficient results from dividing the variance of the country-level errors by the sum of the variance of both levels, that is, the total variance:

IC coefficient = 0.126609 ÷ (0.955481 + 0.126609) = 0.117004

The estimated IC coefficient means that 11.7% of the total variance in social optimism in the EU can be attributed to country-level characteristics. Hence, most of the variance, precisely 88.3%, depends on individual-level features, those studied in Chapter 2 (see Table A2 on the key drivers of social optimism). In short, most of the observed country differences in social optimism and pessimism result from level-one, or individual-level, variables. However, the IC coefficient also demonstrates that the context – that is, the social, economic, political or cultural peculiarities of each country – has some effect on the social optimism and pessimism of each country's citizens.

Country-level drivers

Country-level variables able to explain at least part of the second-level variance, which amounted to 11.7% of the total variance, were sought. The following equation includes all the terms needed by a multilevel or mixed model with an explanatory variable (z_j); two fixed effects, that of the intercept and the regression coefficient ($\gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}$), and two random effects, those due to second- and first-level errors ($u_{0j} + e_{ij}$):

$$Y_{ij} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01} z_j + (u_{0j} + e_{ij})$$

The analytical strategy consisted of estimating several models. First, the null model, presented at the beginning of Annex 3, was estimated. Then, four independent models including only the two factors of each of the four dimensions were run. Thus, the amount variance explained by each dimension and the effects of its two factors was calculated. Third, a general model with the eight factors was run to understand the magnitude of their impact on social optimism once all the other factors were kept constant. Finally, taking into account the results of the general model, a final model, including only two variables that explain 77.4% of the variance due to context-level characteristics, was arrived at.

Table A3: Null model – estimates of covariance parameters

Parameter		Estimate	Standard error	Wald *Z*	Sig.	Confidence interval (95%)	
						Lower	Upper
Residual		0.955481	0.008688	109.973	0.000	0.938603	0.972662
Intercept [subject = COUNTRY EU27]	Variance	0.126609	0.038594	3.281	0.001	0.069661	0.230110

Note: *Dependent variable = Social Optimism Index.*
Source: *EB91.5, June–July 2019*

16 This coefficient was estimated using the simplest multilevel model, usually called the empty, null or intercept-only model. The equation of this model is:

$Y_{ij} = \gamma_{00} + u_{0j} + e_{ij}$

where Y_{ij} are the scores of the dependent variable, γ_{00} the intercept, e_{ij} the individual-level error, and u_{0j} the country-level error.

Table A4: Country-level drivers of social optimism – multilevel models with factor-fixed effects

Effects	Models						
	Null	1	2	3	4	5	6
Fixed effects							
Intercept	0.221 (0.005)	0.0832 (0.236)	0.1808 (0.007)	0.1689 (0.034)	0.1165 (0.024)	0.0216 (0.655)	0.0244 (0.561)
GDP		**0.005** (0.002)				0.001 (0.641)	
GDP growth		**0.135** (0.004)				**0.117** (0.018)	**0.136** (0.000)
Inequality			0.010 (0.438)			0.006 (0.627)	
Fairness			**0.019** (0.005)			0.000 (0.940)	
Dependency				-0.023 (0.083)		-0.007 (0.536)	
Social mobility				-0.000 (0.803)		-0.000 (0.430)	
Trust					**1.106** (0.000)	**0.894** (0.001)	**0.758** (0.000)
Corruption					**-0.017** (0.007)	-0.008 (0.517)	
Random effects							
Residuals	0.955481	0.955517	0.955550	0.955489	0.955585	0.955543	0.955574
Country	0.126609	0.077427	0.086351	0.118600	0.046815	0.032284	0.025936
IC coefficient							
	0.1170	0.0800	0.0829	0.1104	0.0467	0.0326	0.0264

Source: *EB91.5, June–July 2019*

Table A4 shows the null model, the four paired-factors models (1–4), the general model (5) and the final model (6). The fixed effects area includes the regression coefficients of the eight variables. The figures in parentheses give the significance of the t-test. A value in parentheses greater than 0.05 indicates that the corresponding parameter is statistically non-significant at a 95% confidence level. The bottom row of Table A4 includes the IC coefficient of each model, which indicates the percentage of variance left unexplained after taking into account the factors included in each model. The IC coefficient of the null model (11.7%) is the value against which the IC coefficients of all other models need to be compared. This makes it possible to understand the extent to which a model explains the variance caused by country-level factors – in other words, by how much each model reduces the total unexplained variance at country level.

Looking at the value of the IC coefficient of the general model (model 5), the unexplained variance, which was 11.7% in the null model, drops to 3.26%. This means that the general model explains 72% of otherwise unexplained country-level variance, which is a considerable amount. The final model (IC coefficient = 0.0264) explains 77.4% of variance due to country-level drivers.

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For more than a decade, uncertainty about the future in most parts of the EU has been growing. Many people believe society is in decline and this has given rise to a general sense of pessimism. Is there a link between the rising popularity of anti-establishment parties and increasing pessimism? These negative sentiments could adversely affect the political climate within individual Member States and also undermine the legitimacy of the European project. This report identifies the key drivers of people's perceptions about the future and explores whether optimists and pessimists differ in their socioeconomic, cultural and political characteristics. To examine the extent to which optimists and pessimists behave and feel differently, the report looks at their socioeconomic and sociopolitical profiles. Finally, it explores how the level of optimism differs in the Member States in relation to country context. The analyses use data from before the COVID-19 pandemic, and the results demonstrate the importance of monitoring how people's feelings about the future evolve during the recovery from the crisis.

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