



**Strict, Fair and More Open
Towards EU Enlargement!**
*Dutch Public Opinion on EU Membership of
the Western Balkans*

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d|part, EFB & BiEPAG

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Executive Summary

The Netherlands is often portrayed as fundamentally sceptical about EU enlargement - a view underpinned by several rather simplistic surveys. Yet, the most recent Eurobarometer 97 (field work June – July 2022) showed that public attitudes in the EU towards EU enlargement have changed to a more positive stance, including in the Netherlands. This study by d|part, the European Fund for the Balkans (EFB), and the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) goes beyond these existing and sometimes simplistic studies to examine Dutch public attitudes towards EU enlargement, specifically with the Western Balkans, through innovative methods.

By using a representative public opinion survey conducted in April and May 2022, in-depth focus groups that took place in Rotterdam in June 2022, and interviews with Dutch politicians and high-level civil servants from July throughout October 2022), this research project reflects a nuanced and positive picture of how the Dutch public currently views EU enlargement with the Western Balkans.

1. The Dutch public appears to be more open towards EU enlargement with the Western Balkans

Our data shows that Dutch public opinion nowadays is not entirely negative about EU enlargement with the Western Balkans. In fact, public opinion is rather split, tilting more towards positive attitudes about enlargement: 45 percent of the public thinks that EU enlargement with the Western Balkans would be very good or rather good, 34 percent state that they perceive it as rather negative or very negative. The remainder is unsure about it.

2. For many the topic is not a salient issue and only a minority fears negative effects on key EU policies if the Western Balkans join the EU

For the majority of the Dutch population EU enlargement with the Western Balkans is not a salient issue. 51 percent expect that their lives will not be affected much or even at all if the Western Balkan countries join the EU. 34 percent think that it will have an impact on their lives while the remainder is unsure about it.

While it emerges that the Dutch public has concerns about Western Balkan countries, for instance, in terms of rule of law, civil rights or Dutch tax money, in the survey, however, a majority of the Dutch is convinced that key EU policies would either improve or remain the same if the Western Balkan countries joined the EU.

3. General attitudes towards the EU reflect how the Dutch population views EU enlargement with the Western Balkans

Based on attitudes towards EU enlargement with the Western Balkans and personal salience of the topic, we created five attitude profiles: approval-high salience (15 percent), approval-low salience (30 percent), disapproval-high salience (14 percent), disapproval-low salience (19 percent), and unsure (22 percent).

When comparing the attitude profiles, the study undoubtedly demonstrates that those who support EU enlargement with the Western Balkans are also those who have a more

positive image of the EU. The approvers also largely feel that the Netherlands are well represented in the EU and most of them trust national and European institutions. This is not the case for most of the enlargement disapprovers and the unsure group.

4. EU accession criteria are crucial for the Dutch public if their fulfilment is verified by a credible institution. Knowledge about the EU enlargement process and about the candidate countries is, however, low

Across all attitude groups, two out of three respondents state that candidate countries should join if the accession criteria are fulfilled. Close to 90 percent of the EU enlargement approvers agree with the statement, but it is interesting to note that close to 50 percent even among those who do not want the Western Balkan countries to join the EU, also agree with that statement.

While people care about EU accession criteria being upheld, most of them actually know little about them. Knowledge about the EU enlargement process and the Western Balkan candidates is not very profound - across all profiles. The attitude profiles hardly differ in terms of knowledge, but they vary a lot regarding personal experience with the Western Balkans: people who personally know somebody from the Western Balkans or who have travelled to those countries are more supportive of EU Western Balkan enlargement.

5. A vast majority of the Dutch public worries about the war in Ukraine, but the attitude profiles come to different conclusions regarding EU enlargement

80 percent of the Dutch public worries about the war in Ukraine, but only 26 percent wants the EU to enlarge quickly because of the war. Again, there are big differences between the attitude profiles: over 40 percent of those who support EU enlargement with the Western Balkans think that the EU should enlarge quickly because of the war. In turn, only some ten percent of the enlargement disapprovers share this view.

In the interviews with Dutch policy makers, the war in Ukraine was highlighted as one of the central driving factors why the Dutch public has become more enlargement friendly over the past months. This seems to be supported by the most recent Eurobarometer 97 (summer 2022).

I. Introduction

The Dutch parliament prominently vetoed the start of EU (European Union) accession negotiations with Albania in 2019. Together with the simultaneous French opposition to the start of talks with North Macedonia and Albania as well as visa liberalization with Kosovo – albeit not part of the enlargement process - it became clear how fragile the efforts to expand the EU in southeast Europe are and how many obstacles Western Balkans countries are facing inside many EU member states. Since then, many parameters of EU enlargement policy have been modified. Particularly the Russian aggression in Ukraine on 24 February 2022 reinforced European unity and placed EU enlargement back in the centre of public attention.

Many observers have classified the Netherlands as fundamentally skeptical about enlargement over the past years¹, which is often linked to a negative attitude towards EU enlargement among the Dutch population, but also to the government which has embedded such an attitude over the years. The 2016 Dutch Ukraine – European Union Association Agreement referendum, where as many as 61 percent voted against, is a case in point. Several successive surveys confirmed this negative public attitude. For instance, in the following editions of the Standard Eurobarometer² between Spring 2016 (EB 85) and Winter 2021-2022 (EB 96) support in the Netherlands for future EU enlargement ranged between 29 to 36 percent and therefore much lower than the average opinion in the EU27. However, the most recent edition of the Standard Eurobarometer (EB 97 Summer 2022³ - field work June – July 2022) displays a strong increase of support for future enlargement from the Dutch public which is even slightly above the EU average (NL 58 percent, EU27 57 percent).

¹ Antoaneta Dimitrova & Elitsa Kortenska (2017): What do citizens want? And why does it matter? Discourses among citizens as opportunities and constraints for EU enlargement, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 24:2, 259-277, DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2016.1264082.

Rem Korteweg (2017): How the Dutch Fell Out of Love With the EU. Carnegie Europe. Available at <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/68155>;

Dekker, Paul en Josje den Ridder m.m.v. Adriaan Schout (2019): Wat willen Nederlanders van de Europese Unie? Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau. Available at:

<https://www.scp.nl/publicaties/publicaties/2019/05/17/wat-willen-nederlanders-van-de-europese-unie>.

Wouter Zweers & Iris van Loon (2020) The Netherlands as a champion of EU enlargement? Clingendael Policy Brief. Available at https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/Policy_brief_The_Netherlands_as_a_champion_of_EU_enlargement_November_2020.pdf.

Josje den Ridder & Maja Djundeva (2022): De publieke opinie over uitbreiding van de Europese Unie. Expertmeeting Tweede Kamer der Staten Generaal Commissie Europese Zaken op 9 juni 2022. Available at: <https://www.scp.nl/binaries/scp/documenten/publicaties/2022/06/09/kennisnotitie-de-publieke-opinie-over-uitbreiding-van-de-europese-unie/Kennisnotitie+De+publieke+opinie+over+uitbreiding+van+de+EU.pdf>.

Rijksoverheid (2022): Onze kijk op Europa – Eindrapport, p. 19. Available at:

<https://www.kijkopeuropa.nl/resultaten/documenten/verslagen/2022/03/08/kijk-op-europa-eindrapport>

² The Eurobarometer asks whether respondents support the following statement “Further enlargement of the EU to include other countries in future years”. European Commission (2016-2022): Standard Eurobarometer 85-96. Available at <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/browse/all/series/4961>.

³ European Commission (2022): Standard Eurobarometer 97. Available at <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2693>

This recent jump in support of EU enlargement indicated by Eurobarometer data and the geopolitical developments of 2022 question this supposedly deeply rooted objection in the Dutch population. This study expands our understanding of public perceptions in the Netherlands. It not only provides new insights into what the Dutch public thinks about EU enlargement with the Western Balkans, it also adds a more nuanced picture by studying whether the topic is actually of great importance to the Dutch population and how some still prevailing negative attitudes towards EU enlargement are related to broader perceptions of the European Union. Furthermore, there has been little evidence so far about how the Russian war in Ukraine has affected public opinion about the EU, European unity or EU enlargement.

This research project presents a continuation of a similar study on “French public opinion on the EU membership of the Western Balkans”⁴ conducted jointly by d|part and Open Society Foundations in 2021. In 2022, the European Fund for the Balkans (EFB), Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG), and d|part decided to conduct similar comprehensive research on Dutch public opinion on EU enlargement with the Western Balkans that encompasses three methods:

1. a public opinion survey conducted in April and May 2022,
2. in-depth focus groups that took place in Rotterdam in June 2022 and
3. interviews with decision and policy makers in the Netherlands from July throughout October 2022.

The study examines in depth the attitudes of the Dutch population towards EU enlargement with the Western Balkans, the perception of previous EU enlargement steps, and a general view of the EU. The results of the representative survey and the focus groups are presented in chapters 2 to 5 and the findings of the interviews with Dutch policy makers are featured in chapter 6.

The key results show that the Dutch public is currently split about EU enlargement with the Western Balkans. 45 percent of the Dutch approve of it. For many in the Netherlands, the topic is not salient and only a minority fears any negative effects on key EU policies if the Western Balkans join the EU.

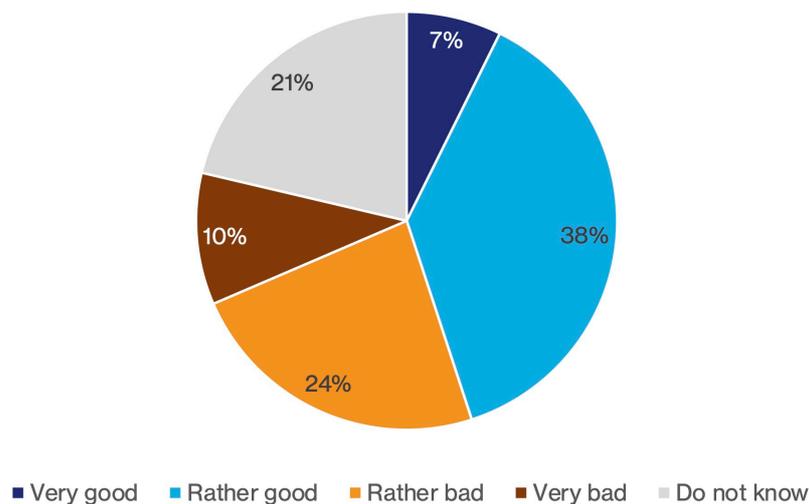
However, several concerns about the Western Balkans prevail with the Dutch public, particularly when it comes to rule of law and civil rights in candidate countries and how Dutch tax revenue is distributed in the EU. Further, the study shows that the perception of the EU and the fulfilling of the accession criteria are especially crucial to the Dutch population. Those who are in favour of the EU support its enlargement and vice versa. At the same time, even half of the disapprovers of EU enlargement with the Western Balkans think that once the EU accession criteria are fulfilled candidate countries should join the EU.

⁴ Christine Hübner, Jan Eichhorn, Luuk Molthof & Srđan Cvijić (2021): It's the EU, not Western Balkan Enlargement. French Public Opinion on EU Membership of the Western Balkans. Available at: <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/its-the-eu-not-western-balkan-enlargement>

II. The Dutch public is split about EU enlargement with the Western Balkans; many do not regard it as a salient issue

Dutch public opinion on EU enlargement with the Western Balkans is divided. This is quite surprising bearing in mind the traditional negative attitude of the Dutch towards enlargement. The largest proportion of participants in the survey are rather positive about it. Almost half of the respondents (45 percent) supported the Western Balkan countries joining the EU, as shown in Figure 1. More specifically, 38 percent of the respondents said it would be rather good, while 7 percent said it would be very good, if countries like Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia joined the EU. By contrast, 34 percent of the respondents felt rather or very negative about it. A further 21 percent said that they did not know how to evaluate the question⁵.

Figure 1: Views on EU enlargement with the Western Balkan countries



Data: own survey 2022 / representative sample of the Netherlands / N = 1 500

Approval rates towards EU enlargement for individual countries

A closer look at approval rates in the Netherlands towards EU enlargement for individual countries shows only minor differences between the Western Balkans countries. Compared to other countries located in Europe geographically, approval rates for Western Balkan countries joining the EU were much lower than for, for example, Norway and Iceland, but similarly as high as for Ukraine and Turkey. Yet, the disapproval rates were on the same level as for Ukraine but much lower than as for Turkey.

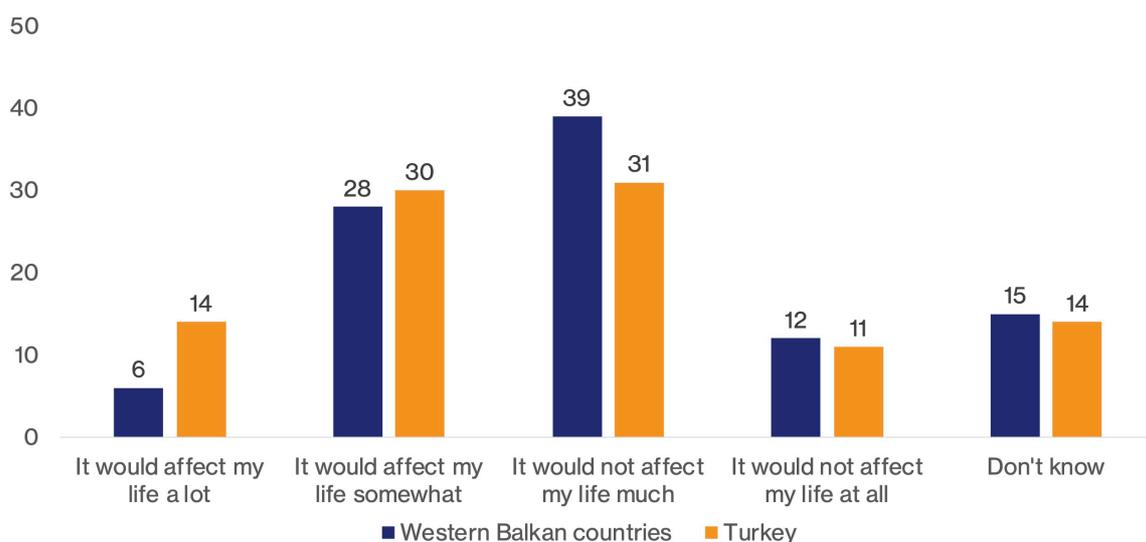
⁵ In our previous study on public opinion on the topic in France (Hübner et al. 2021), just 22 percent support EU enlargement with the Western Balkans while a clear majority of 59 percent of the French public opposed it. 19 percent of the French public were unsure about EU enlargement with the Western Balkans.

Dutch majority thinks EU Western Balkan enlargement will not affect their life

To assess Dutch public attitudes and perceptions of EU enlargement with the Western Balkans, we asked respondents of the survey and participants of the focus groups not only about their opinion on that topic, but also how salient they thought it was for them personally. To get a more nuanced picture of Dutch public opinion, it is not only important to assess respondents' concrete attitudes, but to analyse them in combination with the salience of the issue to the respondents and the firmness with which they held on to those views. In other words, to assess how do their attitudes on the issue translate into political and voting behaviour.

The results show that a majority of Dutch respondents did not feel strongly about EU enlargement with the Western Balkans. Only about a third (34 percent) said that the addition of the Western Balkan countries to the EU would affect their lives a lot or at least somewhat (see Figure 2). 51 percent of the respondents felt that EU enlargement with the Western Balkan countries would not affect their lives much or at all. A further 15 percent were unsure about the salience of the issue for their personal lives.

Figure 2: Extent to which the accession of Western Balkan countries/Turkey to the European Union would affect respondent's life (in %)



Data: own survey 2022 / representative sample of the Netherlands / N = 1 500

The low salience became particularly clear when we compared the attitudes of the respondents towards EU enlargement in the Western Balkans with other countries, specifically Turkey. More than twice as many participants than for the Western Balkans (6 percent) felt that Turkey joining the EU (14 percent) would affect their lives a lot. In total, the proportion of respondents thinking that EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans would affect their life a lot or somewhat (34 percent) was 10 percentage points lower than for Turkey (44 percent).

At the same time, roughly half of the respondents (51 percent) thought that the Western Balkans joining the EU would not affect their lives much or at all, while only 42 percent

thought the same for Turkey⁶. Accordingly, the salience of the issue of EU enlargement for Dutch respondents varied significantly depending on the perception of different countries and was comparatively lower for Western Balkan countries.

Shifts in both directions: opinions towards EU enlargement with the Western Balkans are not held very firmly

In addition, we found that not only is the salience of the issue relatively low, but that respondents were less adherent to their opinion or at least less firmly committed to it. Asked at the end of the survey, 31 percent of respondents had changed their views in comparison to the beginning of the survey. This shows that a large proportion of respondents were still in an opinion formatting process or were not sure about their views towards the issue of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans.

Changes went in all directions, especially amongst those with softer views. While 89 percent of those who originally said enlargement would be “very good”, still held positive views at the end and 86 percent of those who said it would be “very bad” were still negative at the end, there was more shifting in the middle. Amongst those who first thought it would be “rather good”, 72 percent kept a positive outlook, compared to 55 percent staying negative who initially said it would be “rather bad”.

While shifts happened both away from positive and negative perceptions there were more of the latter kind, thus showing some potential to shift public attitudes towards increased support of EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans. 34 percent who initially held negative views, either indicated a changed positive perspective on Western Balkan EU enlargement at the end of the survey or had moved to the “don’t know” group. Of those who held positive views at the start only 25 percent changed to “don’t know” or negative views.

This indicates that the Dutch public is open to argumentation and change of opinion – after having been exposed to a wider set of questions making them think more deeply about the topic. Moreover, it became clear that the issue did not seem to be of major importance to the Dutch public. Not being of particular centrality, it is thus unlikely that for the majority the issue either strongly shapes general political views, nor conditions their voting behaviour in elections.

⁶ When comparing the recent results from the Netherlands to those in France from 2020 (Hübner et al. 2021), salience of EU enlargement with the Western Balkans is very similar. 28 percent of the French public stated that their life will be affected if the Western Balkans join the EU while 53 percent did not expect any changes on the personal level. 19 percent of the French public were unsure. The striking difference between the Netherlands and France concerns EU enlargement with Turkey. In the French survey a majority of 53 percent expected changes to their lives if Turkey would join. Interestingly, 30 percent of the French public said that Turkey’s EU accession would affect their life a lot, which is just the case for 14 percent in the Netherlands.

Typology: approval, salience and unsure

Combining attitudes and issue salience on the question of whether or not the Western Balkan countries should join the EU, we identified five distinct subgroups of people, who hold different attitudes and levels of importance regarding the question whether the Western Balkan countries should join the EU (Figure 3):

- **Approval – high salience:** A sizeable group of people (15 percent of the total sample) who have positive attitudes to the Western Balkans joining the EU and who think it is going to make a big difference to their own lives; i.e. for whom it is a salient issue.
- **Approval – low salience:** Around a third of the respondents (30 percent of the total sample), are principally in favour of the Western Balkans joining the EU but do not think it would make a big difference to their lives, i.e., for whom the issues are of low salience⁷.
- **Disapproval – high salience:** 14 percent of the total sample are opposed to the Western Balkan countries joining the EU. For this group the issue is a salient one; i.e., they have a strong concern.
- **Disapproval – low salience:** A group of roughly a fifth of the respondents (19 percent of the total sample) show some concern and opposition to Western Balkan countries joining the EU, but do not think it would make a big difference to their own lives, i.e., who not consider it a salient issue.
- **Unsure:** A group of people (22 percent of the total sample) who are unsure or have no opinion on the issue of Western Balkan countries joining the EU.

Figure 3: Attitude and salience profiles towards EU enlargement with the Western Balkans

		Views on Western Balkan countries joining EU		
		Very/rather good	Very/rather bad	Unsure
Impact on own life if Western Balkan countries joined EU	Would affect life somewhat/a lot	15% <i>(Approval-high salience)</i>	14% <i>(Disapproval-high salience)</i>	22% <i>(Unsure)</i>
	Would not affect life much/at all	30% <i>(Approval-low salience)</i>	19% <i>(Disapproval-low salience)</i>	

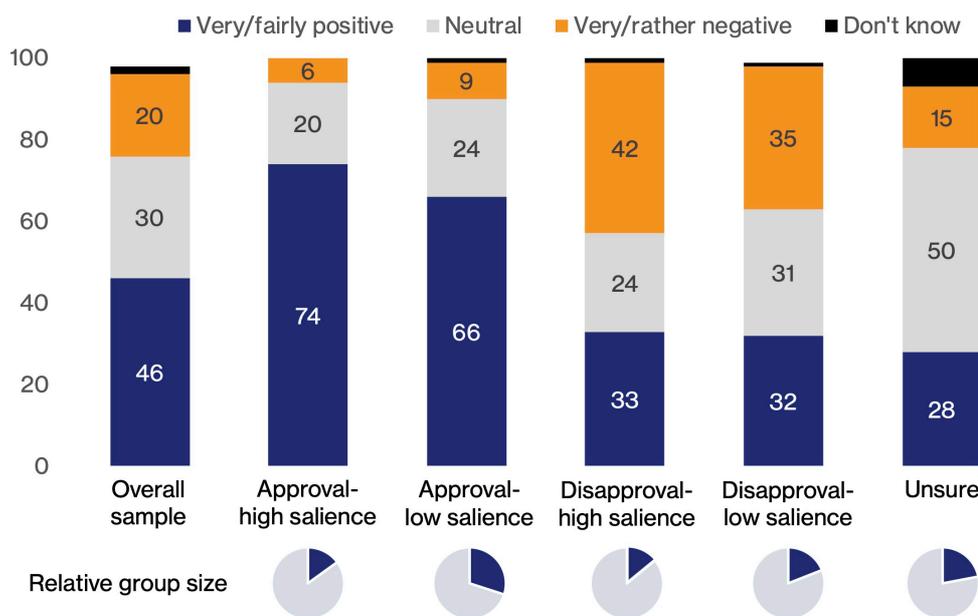
⁷ Overall, for around a half of the people (51 percent of the total sample) the issue of the Western Balkan countries joining the EU was generally of low salience. In this group, even though people did not hold strong beliefs about the issue, they expressed attitudes when asked. This group also includes respondents who expressed an attitude but said that they are unsure how important the issue is for them. We can either treat this as a distinctive “Don’t know” response to the salience of the issue, or we can consider it as an expression of low salience overall. The latter seems to be justified: if a person says, “Don’t know”, they do not feel that the issue is important or do not want to engage with it strongly.

III. It's (almost) all about the EU and EU accession criteria

In the Netherlands, attitudes towards EU enlargement with the Western Balkans are closely connected to people's general stance towards the European Union, how they view Dutch representation in the EU or their level of trust in political institutions. At the same time, the accession criteria and their monitoring play an important role for a large share of the Dutch population. Briefly summarized, attitudes towards EU enlargement with the Western Balkans are primarily about the perception of the EU and to a lesser degree about the actual candidate countries.

Figure 4 shows that the two approver groups consist mainly of people who generally have a very or fairly positive perception of the EU. In the approval-high salience group, three out of four have a favourable view of the EU, and two out of three support the EU in the approval-low salience group⁸.

Figure 4: Image of the EU by Western Balkan attitude groups (in %)



Data: own survey 2022 / representative sample of the Netherlands / N = 1 500

The focus groups confirmed the findings of the survey. Those who supported further enlargement also appreciated the EU, European cooperation and European values more. They might not fully agree with all EU policies but appreciated the overall idea of European countries working together and sharing policies, especially because the Netherlands is a relatively small country.

⁸ The results of the Netherlands are similar to the results of France from 2020. The difference is that a bigger share of the approval-high salience group in the Netherlands (74 percent) has a positive view of the EU compared to France (62 percent). This is also true for the disapproval-high salience groups: in the Netherlands 42 percent view the EU negatively while it was 55 percent in France.

*“The Netherlands is not a big player worldwide. It really helps to team up as EU”
(Patrick, 22, approval group)*

In contrast, in the two disapprover groups, only one out of three persons held positive attitudes towards the EU. 42 percent of the disapprovers-high salience group and 35 percent of the disapprovers-low salience group had a very or rather negative position towards the EU. Those who were sceptical about further EU enlargement stated in the focus groups that the EU is becoming more and more powerful in an undemocratic way, i.e. “not being checked” (Victor, 36, high salience disapprovers). Many participants viewing the EU negatively linked this sentiment to the belief of the Netherlands being a net payer who has given everything and received close to nothing from the EU:

“How long are we a member and what has ever materialized? I feel there is no advance made at all.” (Karin, 49, low salience disapprovers)

At the same time, because of the current state of the European Union, the disapprovers were especially rather sceptical about the EU’s ability to integrate and absorb new members in a beneficial way for the union and the Netherlands. Perceiving the EU as non-transparent and ineffective, disapprovers argued that the EU should first deal with its own issues and get its own affairs in order before adding new countries to the union.

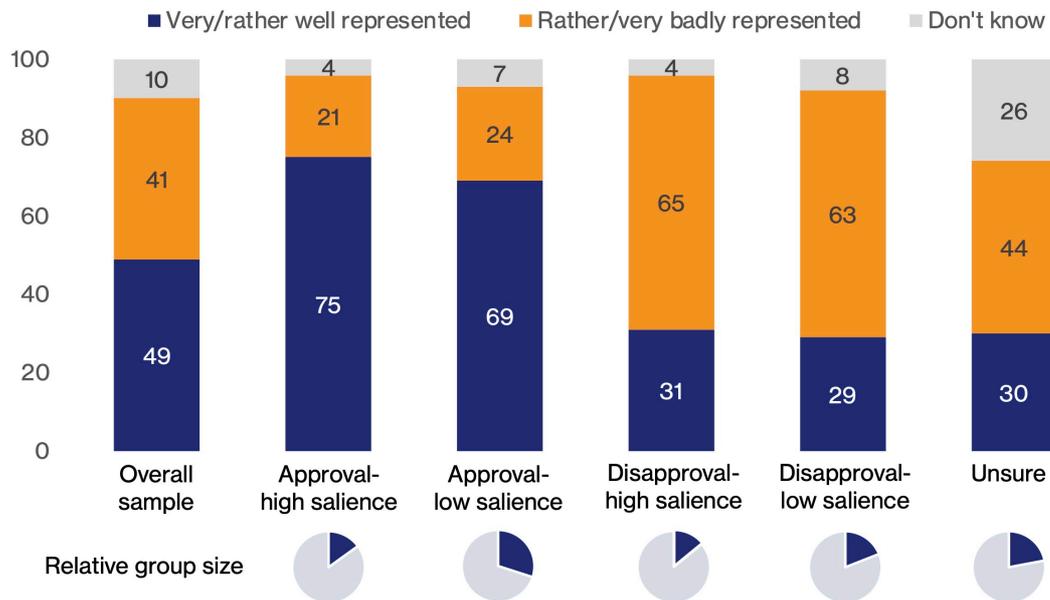
*“Please don’t add any new countries otherwise it’s completely unmanageable. The EU needs to change its own rules before they can allow in new member states.”
(Gerard, 49, high salience disapprovers)*

Those who are unsure about EU enlargement with the Western Balkans are also unsure about their assessment of the EU. Half of the unsure group consists of people with a neutral position towards the EU. Close to 30 percent favour the EU whereas 15 percent hold negative positions towards the EU. The remaining 7 percent stated that they do not know.

Figure 5 further substantiates the link between general EU views and perceptions of Western Balkan enlargement. The latter is strongly related to the perception of Dutch representation in the EU. The vast majority of the two approver groups stated that they felt the Netherlands was very or rather well represented in the European Union (75 and 69 percent). Similarly, the two disapprover groups are also alike regarding their views about Dutch representation in the EU: in both groups almost two out of three people stated that the Netherlands was rather or very badly represented in the EU. The focus groups demonstrated again that for this part of the Dutch population “Brussels” is seen as something that restricts national sovereignty.

*“The whole regulation of Brussels is oppressive and suffocating”
(Vivian, 25, high salience disapprovers)*

Figure 5: Views on the Netherlands' representation in the EU by Western Balkan attitude groups (in %)



Data: own survey 2022 / representative sample of the Netherlands / N = 1 500

The approvers trust political institutions more

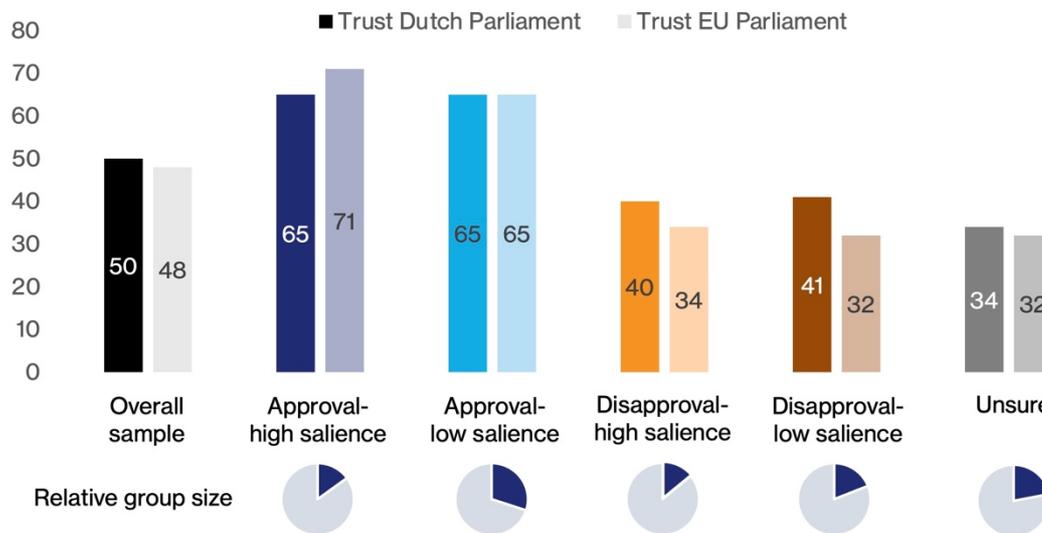
In addition, trust in political institutions at the European and national level shows a similar connection to attitudes on EU enlargement with the Western Balkans (see Figure 6). Overall, 50 percent of the Dutch population stated that they trusted the Dutch parliament and 48 percent had faith in the European Parliament (EP). The group of high salience approvers trusts both parliaments the most. Their level of trust in the EP is even higher (71 percent) in comparison to the national parliament in The Hague (65 percent). In a similar fashion, almost two out of three persons among the low salience approvers trust both parliaments.

In the two disapproving groups, in contrast, trust in both parliaments is much lower. In both groups more people tend to trust the national parliament more than the EP (40 and 41 percent compared to 34 and 32 percent respectively). The lower levels of trust in the EP were also voiced by participants of the disapproval focus groups who did not feel represented by the Members of European Parliament (MEP).

“The people in the European parliament have been chosen, but not by me” (Victor, 36, high salience disapprovers)

When comparing trust levels of the approving and disapproving groups, the same pattern becomes apparent again: those who are sceptical about EU enlargement with the Western Balkans are also more critical about EU institutions compared to national level institutions.

Figure 6: Trust or great trust in the Dutch and European Parliaments by Western Balkan attitude groups (in %)



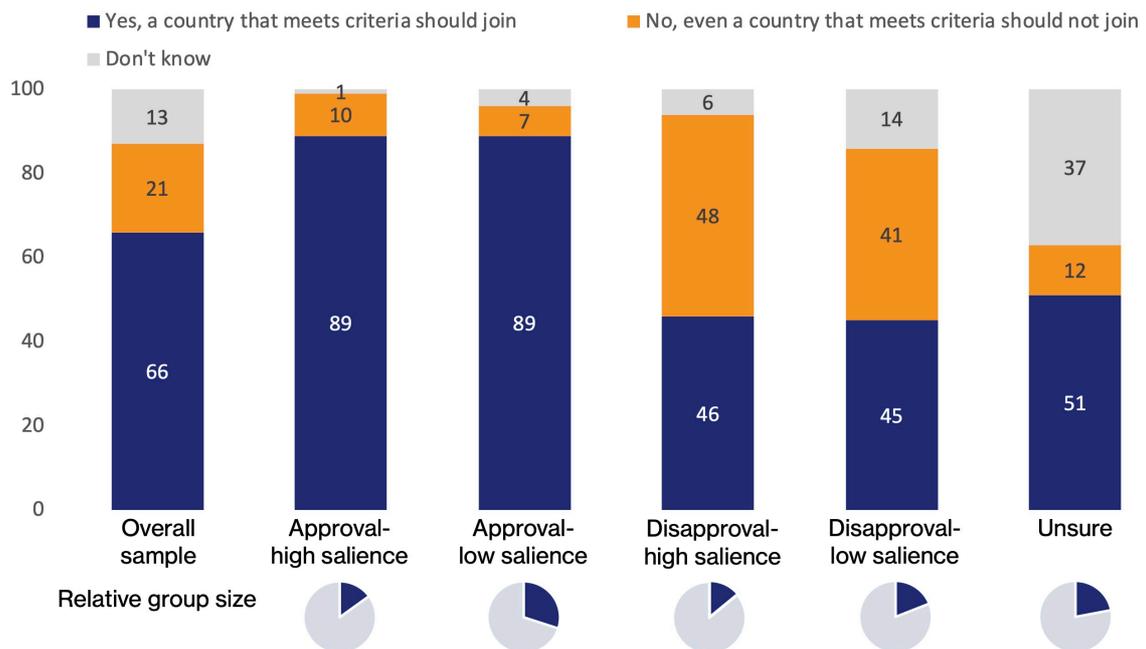
Data: own survey 2022 / representative sample of the Netherlands / N = 1 500

Dutch public wants accession criteria to be monitored and fulfilled

A particularly important dimension for the Dutch public that appears to partially condition decisions on Western Balkan enlargement, is EU accession criteria. All five groups display a substantial share of people who state that a country should join the EU if it meets the criteria (see Figure 7). Close to 90 percent of the two approver groups support the accession of a country when the criteria are fulfilled.

Even the disapproving groups and the unsure ones acknowledge the importance of the criteria. Almost half of disapprovers and some 50 percent of the unsure group agree that countries should join when the criteria are met. While there is a substantial share of the two disapprover groups that simply does not want to have any further enlargement (48 percent of the high salience and 41 percent of the low salience group), nearly half of the disapprovers indicate some openness to changing their view on enlargement, if they find the EU accession criteria to be met.

Figure 7: Importance of EU accession criteria by Western Balkan attitude groups (in %)



Data: own survey 2022 / representative sample of the Netherlands / N = 1 500

Discussions in the focus groups strongly support these findings. Many participants of the focus groups highlighted the importance of the accession criteria and their strict monitoring, although many were not aware of the substance and exact details of them.

“They need to meet the criteria. They don’t need to become the richest country, but we need them to get to an acceptable level. [...] We should be very strict in the implementation and the checking, then the whole EU would benefit.”
 (Erik, 66, low salience disapprovers)

“I think it is only good, but they need to meet requirements. It shouldn’t be made too easy for them. [...] Like I don’t know the criteria, I am assuming that we should all meet them. For example, the democratic process, those kinds of things.”
 (Adisa, 36, unsure group)

The discussions in the focus groups about accession criteria often led to an assessment of the status quo of the EU and its members. Two issues were mentioned in the focus groups several times. One was unanimity in EU decision-making, which some participants perceived to hinder progress at EU level.

“We actually need to change the criteria within the EU. Now when they take a decision everyone needs to be in favour.” (Maarten, 60, low salience disapprovers)

Furthermore, some participants voiced that current members would not fulfil the accession criteria and therefore undermine the European project.

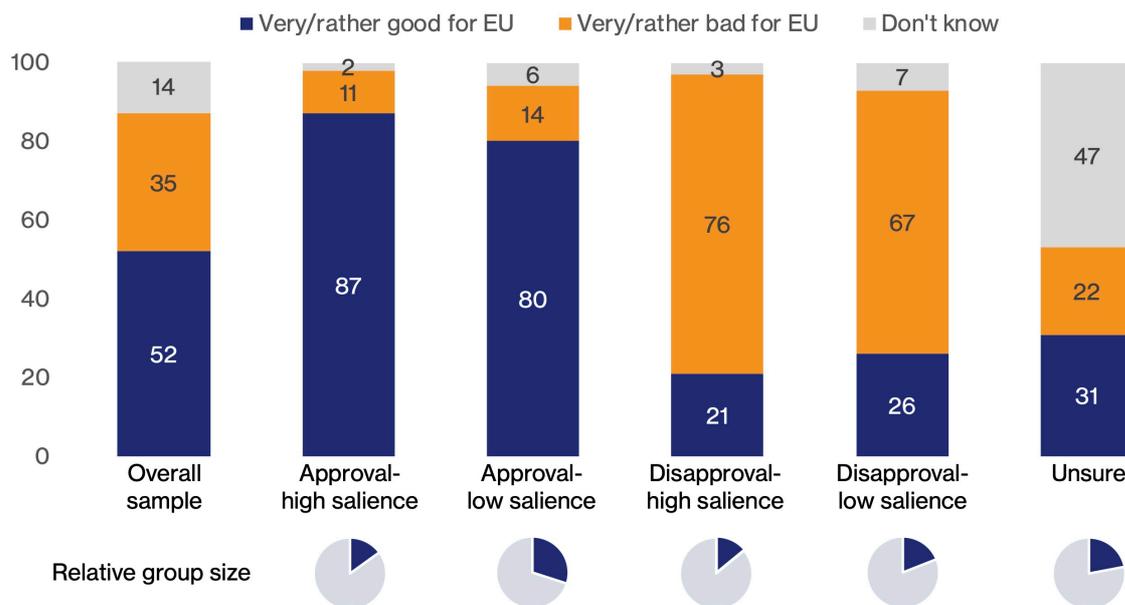
“It is almost like during the game we change the rules so that we are keeping countries in that should have been kicked out. And leave out countries that should have been included.” (Vivian, 25, high salience disapprovers)

Dutch public split about past EU enlargement rounds

When speaking about issues within the European Union, several participants of the focus groups referred to countries that have joined the EU since 2004, especially Poland and Hungary.

In the survey, the majority of the approvers evaluates those previous enlargement rounds in a positive way (approval–high salience 87 percent, approval–low salience 80 percent). The two disapproving groups not only oppose future EU enlargement with the Western Balkans, but they also perceive the 2004 and 2007 enlargements negatively (disapproval–high salience 76 percent, disapproval–low salience 67 percent). Almost half of the unsure group is undecided about the previous enlargement steps in 2004 and 2007. 31 percent of the unsure group is positive about them whereas 22 percent oppose them⁹.

Figure 8: Evaluation of EU enlargement rounds 2004-2007 by Western Balkan attitude groups (in %)



Data: own survey 2022 / representative sample of the Netherlands / N = 1 500

Moreover, many focus group participants across all attitude groups raised concerns about current members that have joined the EU since 2004. Poland and Hungary were repeatedly linked to democratic backsliding, issues with rule of law and civil rights. Many

⁹ The results from the Netherlands are again similar to those from France in 2020 (approval–high salience 78 percent, approval–low salience 83 percent). Yet again, even a bigger share of the disapproving groups in France assessed the previous enlargement rounds negatively (disapproval–high salience 88 percent, disapproval–low salience 78 percent).

participants were therefore afraid of the potential reversibility of the reforms reached before joining the EU.

“Poland and Hungary want to benefit but don’t move along with the policy. If you only want the money, but don’t do what you need to do, you shouldn’t be a part of it.” (Patrick, 22, approval group)

“Look how they treat the gay community in Poland” (Gerard, 49, high salience disapprovers)

“Orbán is almost a dictator” (Marika, 48, low salience disapprovers)

Others mentioned corruption in Bulgaria and Romania in this context. Due to those concerns, many participants in the focus groups across all attitude groups favour economically richer and more democratic countries like Switzerland or Norway to become EU members.

The big difference is, however, that the approvers believe in the transformative power of the EU whereas the disapprovers perceive new members, for instance from the Western Balkans, predominantly as a burden for richer EU members.

“Candidate countries can start the reforms. If they do implement it, they get to benefit from all the great things EU have to offer.” (Patrick, 22, approval group)

More enlargement-sceptical participants do not share this notion and stated instead that further enlargement “will cost us money” (Gerard, 49, high salience disapprovers) because the current candidate countries are perceived as economically weak and might cause further unwanted migration to the Netherlands.

“It would be positive if they can guarantee that they [people living in candidate countries] are not coming over and work here because we have plenty of foreigners already. (Nasrin, 44, unsure group)”

While the overall pattern is clear – EU approvers support EU enlargement and EU disapprovers are sceptical about accepting new members because of feared consequences for the Netherlands or the EU – there is also more nuance in Dutch public opinion. Experiences with past enlargement rounds, particularly with Hungary and Poland, do matter and have a negative impact on the perception of future enlargement with the Western Balkans.

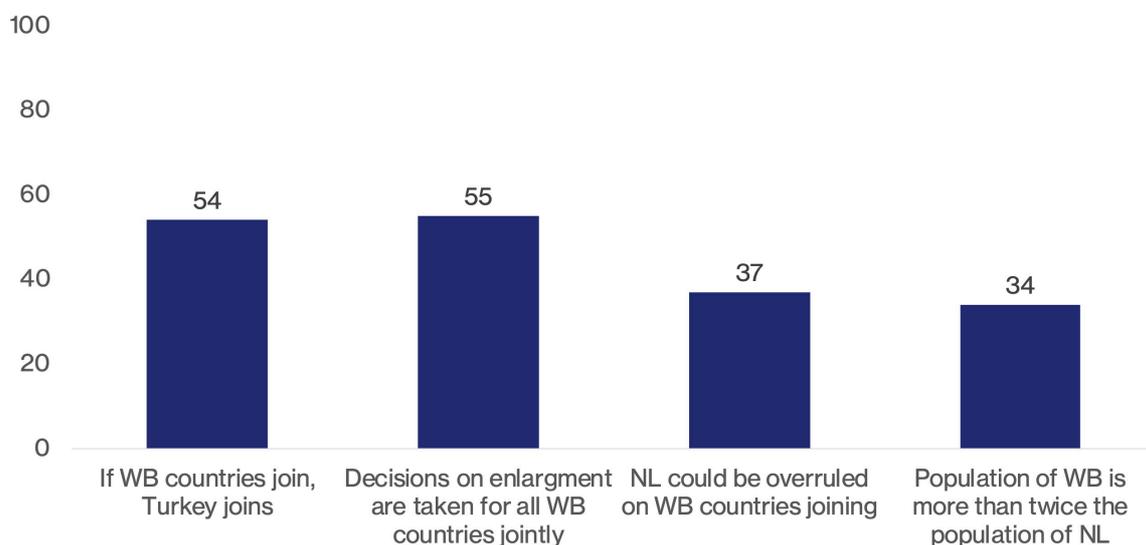
IV. Personal ties matter more than knowledge or specific concerns

As indicated above, Dutch public views on the EU's Western Balkan enlargement process are strongly linked to general EU attitudes, the degree of trust in political institutions, as well as questions related to the fulfilment of the accession criteria. Additionally, they are also shaped by personal experiences and sentiments. In our study we found that across the various attitude groups, personal ties and subjective perceptions of the Western Balkans mattered more in shaping public opinion towards EU enlargement with the Western Balkans than factual knowledge or views on specific policy fields of concern. How much factual knowledge respondents had about Western Balkan countries, as well as the general EU enlargement process, did not make a significant difference in how they evaluated the issue. Rather, we observed slight differences between the various attitude profiles regarding the associations and sentiments attributed to the Western Balkans by the respondents.

Knowledge of the EU enlargement process and Western Balkans is not very profound

In the survey as well as in the focus group discussions we found that both knowledge of Western Balkan countries, as well as the EU enlargement process, was not very profound throughout the Netherlands.

Figure 9: Knowledge on EU enlargement process among all attitude groups, % correctly saying true/false



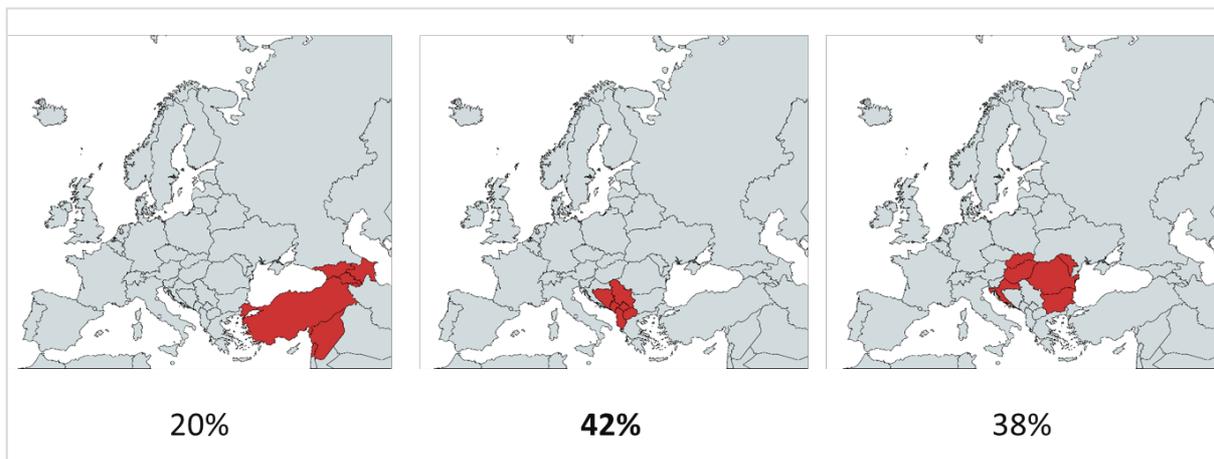
Data: own survey 2022 / representative sample of the Netherlands / N = 1 500

On average, all five groups scored low on a range of questions testing respondents' factual knowledge about the EU enlargement process. For instance, 55 percent of the respondents thought that decisions on enlargement are taken for all the Western Balkan countries jointly, while this is, in fact, not the case. Similarly incorrect, 37 percent believed

that the Netherlands could be overruled on new countries joining, whereas this is, as we know, not possible. Moreover, 54 percent of Dutch respondents thought incorrectly that if the Western Balkan countries joined the EU, Turkey would necessarily join as well¹⁰.

Thus, although a high percentage of respondents saw the fulfilment of the accession criteria as crucial to EU enlargement (see above), most respondents were unsure about what these criteria actually are or how the associated monitoring process actually works. Regarding specific factual knowledge about Western Balkan countries, the average rate of correct responses was also low, even on something as basic as their geographic location. Respondents were shown different maps with selected groups of countries, one of which was the countries of the Western Balkans (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: Geographic knowledge about Western Balkan countries across all attitude groups (% identifying the map showing the Western Balkan countries)



Data: own survey 2022 / representative sample of the Netherlands / N = 1 500

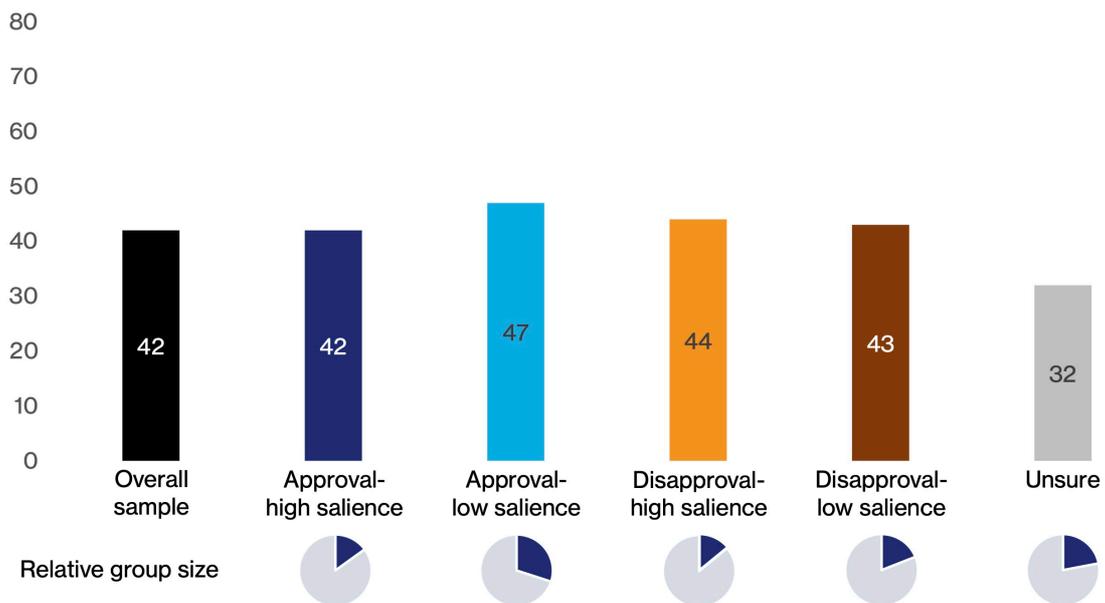
The percentage of those that managed to identify the correct countries of the Western Balkans on the map was 42 percent of the overall sample, only slightly higher than the 33 percent probability to pick the right map by chance.¹¹

Similar to results from the French study, the level of knowledge of Western Balkan countries did not differ much between the various attitude groups in the Netherlands. As shown in Figure 11, among all attitude groups, only between 42 and 47 percent of participants could correctly identify the map of the Western Balkans. At 31 percent, only the unsure group was even less likely to select the right map.

¹⁰ In France, overall more people managed to identify the correct answers. The first question on Turkey was answered correctly by 84 percent, the second one stressing that all Western Balkan countries will join jointly by 69 percent, and a question comparing the populations by 56 percent. The only question that was equally answered correctly is the one on the overruling of the own country when deciding upon the Western Balkans to join the EU (France 38 percent).

¹¹ Geographic knowledge about the location of the Western Balkans was very similar in France. Here, 43 percent of the French respondents managed to pick the correct map.

Figure 11: Correctly identified map by Western Balkan attitude groups (in %)



Data: own survey 2022 / representative sample of the Netherlands / N = 1 500

Likewise, across all focus groups, most participants found it difficult to name and locate the countries of the Western Balkans on the map, when asked. While some of the participants could name the region as a whole, only few were able to name all countries of the Western Balkans, both in the approval groups as well as in the disapproval and unsure groups.

“The countries behind Gods back” (Roland, 68, approval group)

“Former Yugoslavia” (Vivian, 25, high salience disapprovers)

“I don’t have much knowledge of these countries. It isn’t close to home.” (Freyda, 26, low salience disapprovers)

“Non-EU Balkans” (Nasrin, 44, unsure group)

Hence, how much factual knowledge respondents had about the countries in the region, and the EU enlargement process in general, did not make a significant difference in how they evaluated the issue. The low level of knowledge of the Western Balkans and the EU enlargement process is, however, not that unexpected given the low salience of the issue and the extent to which latent and more general feelings about the EU and EU enlargement seem to drive attitudes.

Sentiments towards the Western Balkans rather negative, approvers more positive

Instead of factual knowledge, we found in our study that the underlying perceptions and sentiments about the Western Balkans play a stronger role in Dutch attitudes on EU enlargement.

In the survey, participants were shown a wide range of positively and negatively connoted words (in random order) that have sometimes been associated with Western Balkan countries in popular discourse. They were then asked to pick as many words as they liked that were connected to the countries overall. Those expressed sentiments varied in correspondence with the different attitude profiles respondents had.

Figure 12: Sentiments towards the Western Balkan countries by Western Balkan attitude groups (% , scores over 40 percent are highlighted)

	Approval - high salience	Approval - low salience	Disapproval - high salience	Disapproval - low salience	Don't know
Poor	52	54	71	61	39
Corruption	35	36	68	57	28
Insecurity	30	35	60	48	32
Natural beauty	43	49	34	26	26
War	28	32	46	35	27
Holiday	42	42	20	18	20
Friendly	44	43	13	13	18
Pollution	24	17	29	24	11
European	26	23	6	9	8
Hostile	12	8	27	19	8
Peace	23	16	3	6	4
Exotic	17	12	6	5	4
Democracy	14	10	3	9	5
Rich	12	4	3	4	1

Data: own survey 2022 / representative sample of the Netherlands / N = 1 500

Across all five attitude groups, the attribute "poor" was selected most often as a sentiment towards Western Balkan countries. Especially among the disapproval groups, the percentage of participants who chose that term was high (71 percent and 61 percent), followed by the terms of "corruption" and "insecurity". In contrast, these attributes were selected only half as frequently by those in favour of the Western Balkan countries joining the EU. Instead, the approver groups most often selected the attributes "poor", but also "natural beauty", "friendly" and "holiday". The unsure group showed a more mixed perception of the Western Balkans as the associations of "natural beauty" and "holidays" were selected almost equally often "poor", "corruption" and "insecurity".

If we look at other attributes, we can observe further differences in sentiments towards the Western Balkans between approvers and disapprovers: while among the approver groups a quarter of respondents associated the Western Balkans with the term "European", in the disapprover groups it was only one in ten. Similarly, the association of "Peace" was selected roughly four times more often and the association of "Democracy" about two times more often among the approver groups than the disapprover groups. In addition, for the question of sentiments and perceptions towards the Western Balkan countries, the focus group discussions were particularly informative in developing a more nuanced picture of the differences between the attitude groups.

In the approval groups, participants on the one hand discussed Western Balkan countries as cheap and welcoming travel destinations with beautiful nature and great hospitality. On the other hand, they associated the Western Balkans with ongoing pain between the countries after a long history of conflict and war, that they perceive as still simmering. However, the approval groups perceived Western Balkan countries as European-minded and were optimistic about the countries becoming "more democratic" and "fighting corruption", if they move along with the EU member states and stick to the requirements. Thereby, approvers gave great leverage to the Netherlands and the EU as being examples but also setting the rules for the Western Balkans.

"There is great hospitality, it is relatively cheap. It is beautiful." (Roland, 68, approval group)

"It is not a matter of 1 2 3 poof, but I feel that if they become a member, at one point it will wear off. You have to start somewhere." (Joanne, 47, approval group)

"They are super Europe minded, their government as well. It would be great to have them on board. It could help them and us, everybody." (Patrick, 22, approval group)

Among the disapproval groups the sentiment about Western Balkan countries as being poor and marked by conflict was more prevalent. Disapprovers recognised the Western Balkans for their natural beauty and as a cheap holiday destination but associated Western Balkan countries at the same time strongly with poverty and insecurity, as well as low levels of infrastructure and services. They perceived Western Balkan countries as still linked strongly to war and ongoing rivalries which, to the participants, laid the basis

for missing rule of law and human rights standards, high levels of corruption and weak economies. In this context, disapprovers shared stereotypes and culturalist explanations about Western Balkan countries as being, for example, “a bit more primitive” (Jacqueline, 62 high salience disapprovers) and expressed racist concerns about Muslim societies becoming part of the EU. Hence, disapprovers expressed a supremacist sentiment of a large cultural and political gap between the Western Balkan countries and the EU which would be difficult and costly to overcome.

“I think that the Balkans is linked to war quite a lot, it is fifty years ago. The seaside is lovely, if you travel inward there is so much going on” (Nasrin, 44, unsure group)

“They cost heaps and heaps of money. Lots of hatred and war. Infringement of human rights (Marika, 48, low salience disapprovers)”

“We can’t compare it to the Europe that we know. All of these countries are dodgy.” (Jacqueline, 62, high salience disapprovers)

This analysis demonstrates that approvers and disapprovers not only hold different opinions and perceptions of the EU and enlargement process in general, but also have divergent intuitive associations connected to the Western Balkan countries. Personal sentiments and associations and their evaluative nature consequently matter for the stance of the Dutch public towards EU enlargement with the Western Balkans.

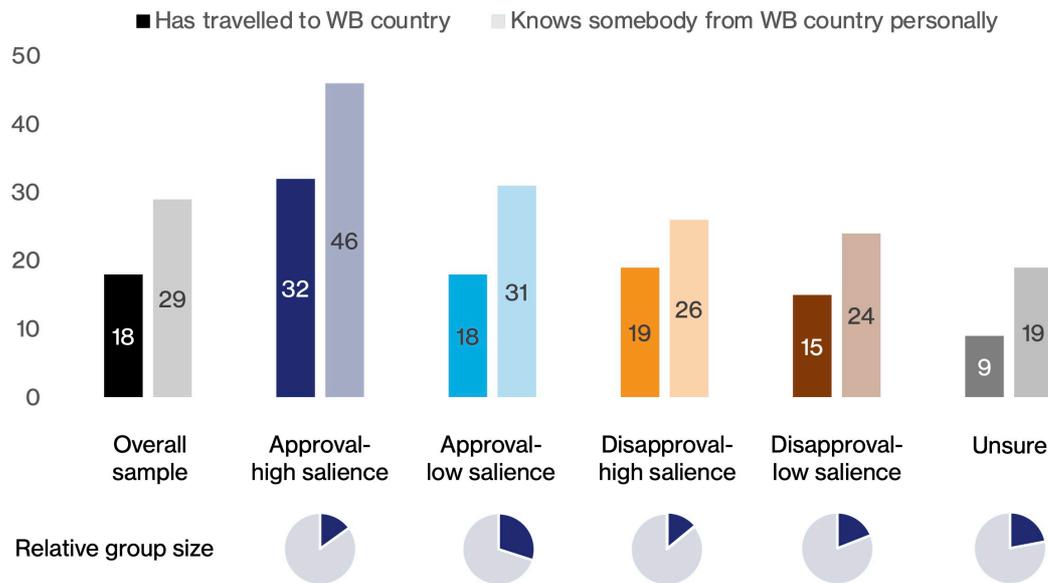
Personal experience with the Western Balkans matters

Besides sentiments about the region, similar to the 2020 French research¹², personal experiences with one or more of the Western Balkans countries also significantly affected attitudes towards EU enlargement. Having travelled to and knowing somebody from a Western Balkan country personally plays a crucial role for the attitudes and salience of respondents towards EU enlargement with the Western Balkans.

Respondents of the survey who approved of EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans were much more likely to say they knew someone from the region or to have had already travelled there. The percentage of respondents who knew someone from a Western Balkan country was particularly high in the approver groups: almost half of the respondents of the approval-high salience group and roughly a third of the approval-low salience group knew somebody from a Western Balkan country personally. Likewise, 32 percent of respondents of the approval-high salience group have already travelled to a Western Balkan country which is almost twice as high as the average of 18 percent.

¹² Overall, Dutch people appear to have more personal experiences with the Western Balkans compared to the French. In the French survey, only 10 percent of the respondents had travel experience in the Western Balkans and 18 percent knew somebody from those countries personally. Similarly, also in France both types of personal experiences were higher in the two approving groups compared to the disapprovers.

Figure 13: Personal experiences with Western Balkan countries by Western Balkan attitude groups (in %)



Data: own survey 2022 / representative sample of the Netherlands / N = 1 500

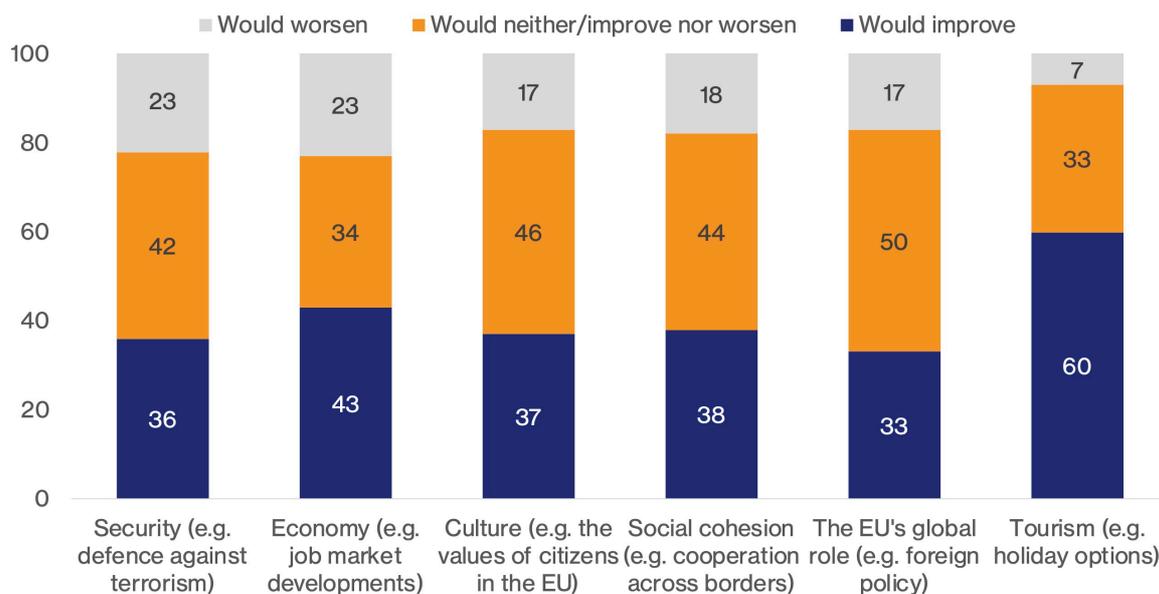
In general, however, it should be noted that a significant proportion of the Dutch population has already had personal experiences with the Western Balkans. On average, 18 percent of all respondents have travelled to the region at least once (in comparison to only 10 percent of French respondents in the 2020 study), and almost a third of all respondents knew someone from one of the Western Balkan countries (in comparison to only 18 percent of the French respondents in 2020).

V. The economy, geopolitics and tourism – many expect unchanging impact on EU policies if Western Balkan countries join

Generally, participants across all five attitude groups identified multiple policy areas that could be impacted by EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans. Respondents in the survey - regardless of attitude and salience profile - acknowledged, for example, a potential impact on economic disparities in the Union, new travel opportunities, potential labour migration or challenges for the democratic stability of countries in the Western Balkans and in the EU as a whole. However, there was no single topic of concern that stood out as particularly pertinent to any of the attitude groups. That is why Figure 15 shows the results for all respondents combined.

Overall, the survey results demonstrate that the majority of respondents expected rather positive or unchanging impacts on EU policies if the Western Balkan countries join. Across all given policies, around three quarters of respondents expected that EU enlargement with the Western Balkan countries would not have an impact or would rather bring along positive effects: between 33 to 60 percent (depending on the policy area looked at) of all respondents expected the EU to improve with an accession of the Western Balkan countries while between 33 to 50 percent thought it would neither improve nor worsen. With under 25 percent across all different policy areas, the share of respondents expecting negative effects on the EU was at the same time relatively low. The Dutch public was thus not very concerned about negative effects on the EU in case of the accession of Western Balkan countries.

Figure 14: Expectations about impact on EU in various policy areas if Western Balkan countries joined (in %)



Data: own survey 2022 / representative sample of the Netherlands / N = 1 500

More specifically, the domain of tourism stood out positively, as in total more than 90 percent of respondents thought the EU would see either positive impacts (60 percent) or would stay the same (33 percent). This result was supported in the focus groups as discussed above. It became clear that across all attitudinal groups, tourism and free travel was not only a key issue for the Dutch public in relation to the EU, but many participants also expected enlargement with the Western Balkans to have a positive impact on their personal travel opportunities.

Approvers see benefits for all stakeholders, disapprovers fear the costs of further enlargement for the EU and the Netherlands

Similarly, on the topic of the economic impact on the EU, participants in the survey tended to give a slightly better assessment than for other areas of concern (see Figure 15), overall expecting rather positive effects for the economy with the accession of Western Balkans countries to the EU.

Particularly in terms of policies related to the economy, the focus groups provided many in-depth insights into how the attitude groups perceive the impact of EU enlargement with the Western Balkans. The approvers tended to see advantages for the Western Balkan countries in terms of their economic opportunities, democratic development, and overall stability in the light of past tensions and conflict. They thought that enlargement would help to boost the economy and to overcome conflicts in the region as the more prosperous parts of Europe would stimulate welfare and labour in the Western Balkan countries once they were part of the EU. Optimistic about the EU's ability to integrate Western Balkan countries, they saw it as the EU's task to support the Western Balkan countries in their efforts towards higher democratization, provide more economic support and to strengthen the region.

*“We shouldn't have any concerns. Once they become a part of the rest of the EU, I think that the prospective part of Europe will stimulate labour”
(Joanne, 47, approval group)*

Approvers saw enlargement as beneficial also for the EU and the Netherlands, specifically in economic terms. They believed that the Netherlands today is heavily reliant on labour migration in many sectors and could benefit from a skilled labour force from the region. In addition, accession to the EU could also set decent minimum standards and improve the regulation of working conditions for labourers from Western Balkan countries. Yet, they also expressed concerns regarding the ongoing housing crisis in the Netherlands being intensified with new labour migration to the country. However, overall, the approvers saw the inclusion of the Western Balkans into the EU as beneficial across many areas and perceived both the EU and the Netherlands as being well capable to deal with the tasks and challenges involved.

In contrast, the disapprovers similarly acknowledged the possible advantages of an accession for the Western Balkan countries in multiple areas but were more concerned about potential negative economic impacts on the EU and the Netherlands. Although they mentioned the advantages for the democratic stability and economic development of the

Western Balkan states in the case of EU accession, they did not see this as a sufficient argument for enlargement.

“For example, the democratic process in these countries. Well, they would benefit, but this is not a reason to let them become members.”

(Jimmy, 55, high salience disapprovers)

Reproducing negative stereotypes of the Western Balkans regarding economic development, criminality, the level of corruption and cultural cohesion, disapprovers argued that the EU would not have the capacity to provide for any new members, specifically not those that would need a lot of support and subsidies.

Moreover, the high salience disapprovers especially expressed their discomfort for the Netherlands being one of the net-payers in the EU. According to them, integrating more members into the EU would lead to further costs for the Dutch public, which, from their perspective, should rather be used for national purposes instead.

“Well, they need money to give them a boost. Where is that money coming from, from us. There is not a jar of coins in a basement. We pay way too much anyway I feel.” (Gerard, 49, high salience disapprovers)

In particular, the focus groups provided more nuanced insights into the expectations and concerns of the different attitude groups regarding the various policy fields. For an overview, a table with quotes on the different policy fields is included below to illustrate the varying attitudes of the participants in the focus groups.

Figure 15: Interpretations of concerns regarding economic impact, migration, democratic development, and peace, stability, and geopolitics

	Approvers	Disapprovers
Economic impact	<p><i>“Collaboration is fine, really good even and also pulling up other countries towards welfare, that will be great as well.” (Roland, 68, approval group)</i></p> <p><i>“I think enlarging the EU will definitely help increasing the welfare in these countries” (Patrick, 22, approval group)</i></p>	<p><i>“Economically we are really going to suffer. It will cost us money, because their economies are super awful. So many countries are relying on us. At the moment it is not a good decision to allow them in the EU” (Gerard, 49, high salience disapprovers)</i></p> <p><i>“But we get poorer as a result if we include them” (Jacqueline, 62, high salience disapprovers)</i></p>
Migration	<p><i>“[...] you do see a lot of labourers from these countries. We need them quite desperately. The only problem is that we don’t have enough houses.” (Roland, 68, approval group)</i></p>	<p>Moderator: <i>“What could be the benefits to us?”</i> Participant: <i>“Labour migration, we have shortages!” (Maarten, 60, low salience disapprovers)</i></p>
Democratic development	<p><i>“Well, if you join us, they become European. At one point you have to go along with us, become democratic. It will take a while. It is not an overnight matter. But if you stick to the requirements, they will move along” (Patrick, 22, approval group)</i></p>	<p><i>“In our part of Europe, generally speaking we have a democratic government. In those countries they probably have a very undemocratic way to do things. That will have a huge influence on us.” (Freyda, 26, low salience disapprovers)</i></p>
Peace and stability, geopolitics	<p><i>“This change will happen from one generation to the next [...]. You see the new generation is viewing that war as their parents’ war. You can be hopeful of the next generation” (Henk, 50, approval group)</i></p> <p><i>“You want to keep a broad range of influence. If you look at China for example, they are also sort of pulling on some countries and get power there. If you make the countries an offer, that they could be a member, they are maybe more aware to choose us” (Patrick, 22, approval group)</i></p>	<p><i>“There are so many conflicts there already. How is that going to work in the whole of Europe?” (Kevin, 24, unsure group)</i></p> <p><i>“That’s like look these countries are a candidate and are in the process to become a member of the EU. That’s a message towards China and Russia that we are welcoming these countries. But by doing that you are feeding the conflict. I hope that there won’t be a conflict with China and Russia” (Freyda, 26, low salience disapprovers)</i></p>

The geopolitical argument: attitude towards EU Western Balkans enlargement closely linked to war in Ukraine

In the survey, overall, the respondents' answers on the expected impacts on security or foreign policy affairs did not differ much from other queried policies. Just 23 percent stated in the survey that they expect EU security policy to worsen, and only 17 percent said that the global role of the EU would decline if the Western Balkan countries would join (see Figure 15 above). This is somewhat different than in the 2020 French research where, across all focus groups, participants recognised that the integration of the countries in the Western Balkans into the EU would bring geopolitical advantages – especially so after seeing the geographic position of the countries on a map showing them encircled by the EU's current member states.

The discussions in the focus groups about EU foreign policy and security and how they could be impacted by enlargement with the Western Balkan countries were dominated by the war in Ukraine¹³. Across all groups many participants stated, even unprompted, that they worry about the consequences of the war, also for the EU or the Netherlands.

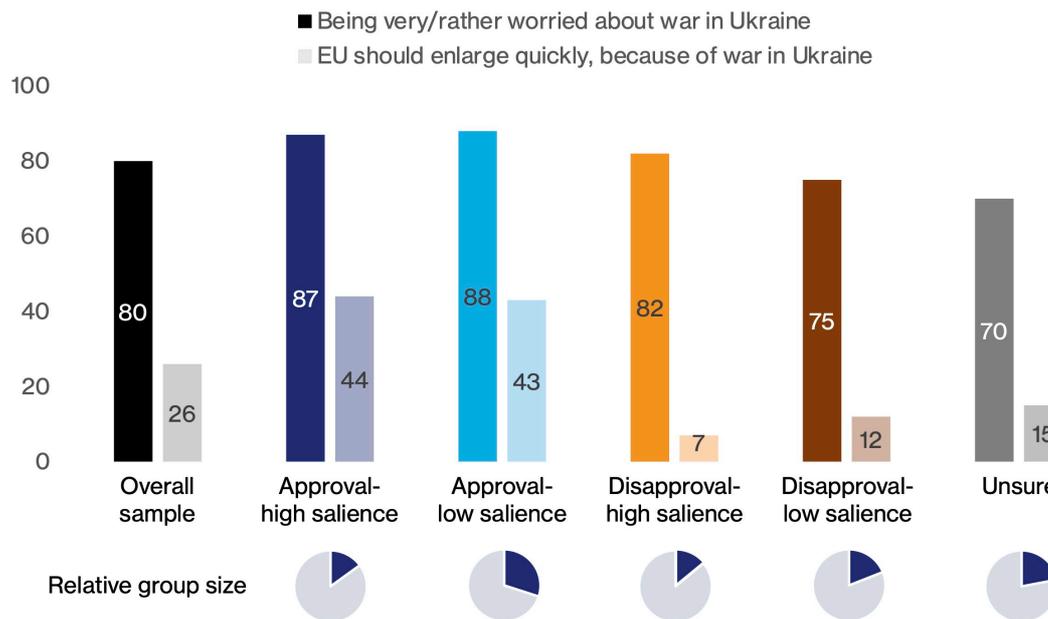
“Now Ukraine wants to become member. I wonder why they want to become a member. I am afraid that it brings the war closer to home.” (Erik, 66, low salience disapprovers)

This matched the findings of the survey, where four out of five Dutch people were very or rather worried about it, as displayed in Figure 16. There were some differences between the five groups, with the two approver groups having the highest share of people worried (87 and 88 percent). The disapproval–high salience group came third with 82 percent and was followed by the disapproval–low salience group (75 percent) and the unsure group (70 percent).

Despite all groups being worried about the war, big differences existed between the groups in terms of the future of EU enlargement. Overall, one out of four people in the Netherlands thought that the EU should enlarge quickly because of the war in Ukraine. 44 and 43 percent of the two approver groups supported a quicker EU enlargement whereas only a small minority (7 to 15 percent) approved this in the other three groups.

¹³ The outbreak of war in Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has not only brought massive changes to foreign, economic or energy policy. It also generated an intensified debate about belonging in the European Union, European values and EU enlargement. As the survey was conducted in April and May 2022 and the focus groups took place on 20 and 21 June 2022, right before Ukraine and Moldova received EU candidate status on 23 June 2022, this study can capture some of the impact of the war in Ukraine on Dutch attitudes towards EU enlargement with the Western Balkans.

Figure 16: Views on war in Ukraine by Western Balkan attitude groups (in %)



Data: own survey 2022 / representative sample of the Netherlands / N = 1 500

In the focus groups, all groups - even those who generally disapprove the EU and its enlargement - mentioned that the war in Ukraine causes a great necessity to collaborate more and thus to become stronger.

“Together we are strong. Because these countries like Russia and China. The more we team up with other countries, the better it is.” (Meriam, 23, high salience disappers)

Yet again, the case of Ukraine demonstrated how the approvers tended to think about the EU and EU enlargement. They were more positive about the transformative power of the EU, also in geopolitical terms.

“There are all these countries who clearly do not meet the requirements yet, who are between Russia and the EU. If you tell them start your reforms, be very strict about it, maybe they gravitate towards the EU soon than towards Russia.” (Patrick, 22, approval group)

For all participants of the focus groups, helping Ukraine was accepted even though it might provoke Russia. However, in the disapprover groups and the unsure group, participants were generally sceptical about EU membership for Ukraine. In particular the cited economic reasons, as Ukraine was perceived as a corrupt and economically weak country by some. The level of support for Western Balkans and Ukraine enlargement tends to be similar but Ukraine is definitely seen as a bigger cause for concern.

“We are helping Ukraine with food and weapons. That is fine, but you don’t want to get involved any further. [...] Becoming an EU member is a different thing. If they become a member, it will cost us heaps of money” (Karin, 49, low salience disapprovers).

The current war in Ukraine and international politics were also linked to some Western Balkan countries, particularly to Serbia that has relatively close political and economic ties with Russia. Those participants who knew about those relations assessed Serbia’s EU accession negatively because of ties to Russia or China.

“I know that Serbia is kind of inclined to tagging along with China and Russia, they are a little bit more Putin and China minded. That is kind of negative.” (Patrick, 22, approval group)

While most of the Dutch population worried about the repercussions of the war in Ukraine, only a few, mainly in the approver groups, wanted the EU to enlarge quickly because of the war. Even those who did not favour the EU and were against future enlargement, supported further cooperation between European countries in general and assistance to Ukraine in particular. The perceived external threat by Russia or China convinced many to support further cooperation. However, when it came to the EU membership of Ukraine, three aspects were emphasised in the focus groups that are also mentioned in the context of Western Balkan countries joining: (1) an orderly, not rushed accession process, (2) the importance of fulfilled accession criteria that are verified by relevant authorities at the European level and (3) potential economic costs for the EU, and hence, the Netherlands.

When considering all policy fields, the current global political situation, with the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, seemed to play a central role in the strategic considerations of EU enlargement for both approvers and disapprovers. While the approvers saw the current crises as a further argument for a strengthened and enlarged EU, the disapprovers saw the uncertain times as precisely the reason not to enlarge the EU further at the moment, while cooperation with, and assistance for Ukraine or the Western Balkans were unquestioned.

VI. Dutch decision-makers: indicate recent shift, but yet surprised about it

To reflect and to gain more nuanced perspectives, the results of the study presented in the last chapters, were also shared, discussed and reflected on with Dutch political decision-makers. This chapter presents the results of the interviews with eleven Dutch politicians both from the national and European level, their policy officers and high-level Dutch civil servants. The purpose of the interviews was to grasp the perspective of policy and decision-makers on Dutch public opinion, as well as to discuss and present them with the results of the survey and the focus groups. As most of the interview partners requested that the content of the conversations and quotes be anonymized, all quotes used in this chapter are anonymous.

Most interview partners were surprised by the rather positive public opinion

In general, the interviewed politicians and civil servants were slightly surprised about the split and rather positive Dutch public opinion towards EU enlargement specifically with the Western Balkans. Few of the decision-makers interviewed would have estimated the proportion of those who are positive about EU enlargement as high as 45 percent as indicated in our results.

"I'm quite surprised by how positive people are about enlargement in general"
(Interview partner 1)

"I would have expected it to be a bit more negative, but that was mainly my view of looking what were previous perceptions before the war" (Interview partner 5)

Moreover, the policy and decision-makers expected more people in the Netherlands to have no opinion about EU enlargement at all. Accordingly, with reference to many urgent national and international challenges, they expected the salience of the issue, in line with our results, for the majority of the public to be rather low. However, they recently perceived a rising public attention to the issue in the context of the war in Ukraine and geopolitical concerns.

Perceived key factors shaping public opinion: domestic economic and social policy, and previous EU enlargement since 2004

Regarding the question, what, in their perception, centrally drives public attitudes on EU enlargement with the Western Balkans, Dutch decision-makers identified a number of key factors: most of them expected economic impacts and financial security in connection to further EU enlargement as central to shaping public opinion in the Netherlands. In line with the results of our focus group discussions, many of the policy and decision-makers saw questions and concerns around (labour) migration and housing policies as closely connected in public debates around enlargement.

"I think you know, also like the economic security of people [...], I would guess they would be less likely to want to invite more countries in the EU because we are net contributors to the EU and that might then increase and have an effect on people" (Interview partner 8)

"Mainly economy and jobs [...] and migration, also related to that people are more or less afraid that if these countries come into the EU, that people would come here to 'steal their jobs', to use the extreme right narrative." (Interview partner 5)

Besides this, many of the interviewed decision-makers identified the EU enlargement rounds of 2004 and 2007 and their assessment as decisive for the public stance towards further enlargement. Following this, the Dutch position on enlargement is seen to be driven largely by the "strict and fair" model as a dominant narrative through the last decade, substantially shaping public opinion. In line with the findings of this study, decision-makers thus expected the public to emphasize the rule of law and the fulfilment of criteria as one of the most prominent concerns of the public regarding the question of further EU enlargement.

"The Netherlands has for many years been following a policy of strict and fair in terms of judging the qualities of candidate member states. [...]. If they comply with the conditions, then they can join. And this is if people know something about it. This is the view they would be sharing because they've been hearing this for the last 10-15 years" (Interview partner 10)

"I think everybody in the Western Balkans basically knows the Dutch mantra: It's strict fair enlargement." (Interview partner 11)

Dutch policy makers: public image of the Western Balkans is prevalingly negative because of the past, but a few, more recent positive messages have emerged

Underlining the findings of our study, many of the policymakers considered the role of sentiments and common narratives about Western Balkan countries as more relevant than factual knowledge in shaping Dutch public attitudes on the issue. As perceptions matter, the public image of Western Balkans countries is considered to be coloured still with feelings and associations that are not necessarily negative, but which are strongly influenced by historical events and frame the region as less developed in economic and democratic terms. Many of the interviewed decision-makers saw negative associations as prominent in the narratives around the Western Balkans and dominating public discourse in the Netherlands.

"Well, the average public does not know a lot about the Western Balkans region. What we know is basically bad news" (Interview partner 10)

In this context, the interviewed decision-makers attributed a large role to the media in the production of negative narratives and sentiments that would decisively shape public opinion on Western Balkan EU enlargement. As some of them argued, precisely because

factual knowledge is considered as generally rather low, stereotypical media representations and simplified narratives (for example around connected criminality, corruption and poverty) could dominate public opinion about the Western Balkans. Some of the decision-makers also noted that lurid headlines and narratives may also be further fuelled and used by certain politicians for the purposes of opinion-making and election campaigning.

“Then you know there, there was a lot of negative narrative and stereotypes [...] But I think it's a lot more positive now.” (Interview partner 8)

However, as some of the decision-makers interviewed have noted, the public image of the Western Balkan countries has improved over the past couple of months. On the one hand, new and diverse media representations of the Western Balkans, such as in the television series “Who is the mole”¹⁴ (2021) filmed in Albania or in major sporting events, such as the final of the UEFA Europa Conference League between AS Roma and Feyenoord Rotterdam in Tirana's National Arena in May 2022, could, as mentioned by some of the decisionmakers, increase nuanced knowledge about Western Balkan countries and positively influence sentiments towards the region.

“And what's much more important than the explanation issue [...] I do think in general is if there's more interaction, people to people contact. If you've been somewhere on holiday, if you know someone from the Western Balkans, if you watch a soap opera, which was recorded in one of the candidate countries.” (Interview partner 3)

On the other hand, personal experiences such as increasing tourism to Western Balkan countries, as well as personal contacts with people from the region, are seen to have a crucial influence on more nuanced views and more positive attitudes. This largely reflects our findings from the study: personal experiences and contacts particularly matter for the Dutch public attitude towards EU enlargement with the Western Balkans.

Lack of information and missing understanding of the EU is perceived to fuel public dissatisfaction with the EU and EU enlargement

The interviewed Dutch decision-makers were not surprised about our finding of the strong connection between the general stance towards the EU and the attitudes towards EU enlargement with the Western Balkans. Often stereotypically perceived as a bureaucratic institution, the EU and its decision-making processes would be widely seen as too complicated and technical in the view of many Dutch. Missing understanding of the EU, how it functions and how it affects daily life in the Netherlands would, in the perception of many decision-makers, lead to distrust and dissatisfaction among the public. In their opinion, it is precisely when dissatisfaction and incomprehension of EU policies and decision-making processes are shared that the population would also be more sceptical about further enlargement of the EU.

¹⁴ The original title in Dutch is “Wie is de Mol?”.

“If you are a European Union, who wants to keep a political public support, people need to understand how it works.” (Interview partner 9)

In this context, the interviewed politicians and civil servants often expressed that they see public communication about the EU as a key factor for general dissatisfaction with the EU amongst the Dutch public. Many interview partners stated that easier and more understandable information about the EU and the enlargement processes as well as positive messages from the Western Balkans would help to shift Dutch public opinion to a more supportive position. More accessible information and more understandable decision-making processes would help to prevent scepticism towards the EU and lastly also its enlargement.

“I think what needs to happen is definitely get rid of the veto when it comes to foreign policy, especially on human rights, sanctions and all those issues, because that's another big frustration of those people who do still believe in in the EU.” (Interview partner 3)

Following on from this, some of the decision-makers also referred to the problem of unanimity at EU level in enlargement policies, which would often lead to unresolvable blockages. They suggested discussing possible changes to the decision-making process and the veto power at the EU in order to move enlargement policies forward in a constructive way, especially with a Union with many member states. In their opinion, this could also help to make the EU's enlargement policy more apparent and understandable to the public, and thus possibly create more positive support. Having in mind that only a minority of the Dutch public is aware that Member States have the right to veto candidate countries – despite the Dutch veto in 2019 - taking away the veto on EU enlargement does not appear problematic in the Dutch context.

The shift towards a more EU enlargement-friendly public attitude explained by the war in Ukraine, the pandemic and new media representations of the Western Balkans

In the interviews with the decision-makers, the war in Ukraine was often highlighted as one of the driving factors as to why the Dutch public has recently become more enlargement friendly. According to their perception, fewer people in the Netherlands supported EU enlargement with the Western Balkans before the war in Ukraine. Geopolitical arguments especially appear to be increasingly present in the public debate, making cooperation and possible EU enlargement with Western Balkan countries also a strategic question of national security for the public.

“The war had just started, and everyone was looking at the Balkans at that time as in a more geopolitical way I think. And that realization has sunk in in society so in that sense, I think the attitude towards enlargement from the Dutch public has improved over the past well half a year I would say.” (Interview partner 7)

Some policy and decision-makers regarded the COVID-19 pandemic as another factor for a recent shift towards a more EU enlargement friendly public attitude in the Netherlands. They argued that the pandemic has made it more apparent that many crises and challenges affect people transnationally and thus transnational cooperation is perceived as more crucial for tackling them. Especially with regard to vaccine distribution, EU policies were perceived as particularly positive in the Netherlands and thereby demonstrating a positive example of European cooperation.

“I think people were more much more negative in the past and I think that people have become much more positive about the EU. Maybe also because of the war and the corona crisis and the way they tackle the climate crisis and so I think that people are becoming much more positive about it.” (Interview partner 1)

Additionally, as mentioned before, many decision-makers saw one of the factors for a recent shift to a more nuanced and positive image of the Western Balkan countries in new media representations as well as in increased tourism. These new impressions from, and experiences with, countries of the Western Balkans would help create a more diverse perception and rising support for EU enlargement with them.

Alongside recent political movements in the EU enlargement process with several of the Western Balkan countries, some of the interviewed politicians and civil servants see a window of opportunity for a new impetus for enlargement policy with Western Balkan countries. At the same time, many interview partners were wondering about how long the effect of the war in Ukraine will last or whether it has shaped Dutch public opinion towards a more EU enlargement-friendly position permanently.

VII. Concluding Discussion

Dutch public opinion on EU enlargement with the Western Balkans is split. 45 percent of the population approve including new members in southeast Europe (7 percent very good, 38 rather good) while 34 percent oppose it (10 very bad, 24 rather bad). The remaining 21 percent are unsure about it. Compared to previous studies and as well as the perception of many of the interviewed Dutch policy and decision-makers in this study, the finding is surprising, as the Netherlands has been seen as one of the most sceptical EU member states when it comes to EU enlargement.

Furthermore, the results of this study importantly present a more nuanced analysis as the research not only includes public attitudes towards EU enlargement with the Western Balkans, but also examines the salience of the issue to the public. 34 percent of the Dutch public feel that enlarging the EU with the Western Balkans would affect their life (14 percent much affected, 28 percent somewhat affected) while a slight majority expects hardly any impact on their life (39 percent not much affected, 12 percent not affected at all). 15 percent are unsure about the effect. Consequently, the topic of EU enlargement with the Western Balkans is not a salient topic for the majority of the Dutch public. This is in line with another finding of the study: a clear majority of the Dutch public thinks that key EU policies, for instance, security, economy, culture, social cohesion, will either improve or remain the same if the Western Balkan countries joined the EU.

Based on those two variables, attitude and salience, we identified five distinct subgroups of people, who all hold different attitudes and levels of importance regarding the question whether the Western Balkans countries should join the EU. High salience approvers (15 percent), Low salience approvers (30 percent), Low salience disapprovers (19 percent), High salience disapprovers (14 percent) and the unsure group (21 percent). Those five attitude profiles help to better understand and to analyse public opinion on EU enlargement with the Western Balkans in the Netherlands.

Stark differences between enlargement approvers and disapprovers according to their general stance on the EU and their assessment of former EU enlargement rounds

Having a closer look at the differences between the five attitude subgroups reveals that they particularly share different perceptions and opinions on the general state of the EU and the Netherlands' representation in it. For instance, the two approver groups view the EU, in general, in a much more positive light compared to the two disapproving groups and the unsure ones. The approvers are also more prone to feel that the Netherlands is well-represented in the EU and they tend to trust national and European political institutions more.

One key finding from the focus group discussions is that the approvers believe in European cooperation and the transformative power of the EU. They value Dutch EU membership because they see an added value of EU membership for all, both current and potential new EU members. For many disapprovers the EU is an undemocratic and

bureaucratic institution for which the Netherlands has to pay a lot of tax money. Public attitudes towards EU enlargement with the Western Balkans are therefore closely linked to the general perception of the EU.

Furthermore, Dutch public opinion on EU enlargement with the Western Balkans is affected by previous EU enlargement rounds, particularly since 2004. People with different attitude profiles, again, view those enlargement rounds differently. The two approver groups view it largely positive (positive assessment ranging from 80 to 87 percent) whereas a majority of the disapprovers perceives it overall negatively (negative assessment ranging from 67 to 76 percent).

Many concerns exist in the Dutch public on EU enlargement with the Western Balkans, some of them are linked to previous enlargement rounds, especially with Hungary and Poland. Many, especially in the disapprover groups, fear that the Netherlands has to pay even more money to economically weaker countries and many worry about an increase of labour migration from new EU members that could worsen the housing situation in the Netherlands. Additionally, many are concerned about rule of law and civil rights in Poland and Hungary, but also in the Western Balkans.

Strict and fair criteria and a “properly checked” process matters to most Dutch

Following the Dutch motto of EU enlargement – strict but fair – two out of three Dutch people think that a candidate country should join the EU if the accession criteria are fulfilled. Again, we see big differences between the five attitude profiles. Close to 90 percent of the two approver groups want candidate countries in the EU once the criteria are met. This is also the case of close to 50 percent of the disapprovers. This means that if a majority of the Dutch public is convinced that candidate countries fulfil the EU accession criteria, support for EU enlargement with the Western Balkans is expected to be even higher.

Personal experiences and sentiments matter more than factual knowledge about the Western Balkans

When assessing people’s knowledge about the Western Balkans, we found that across all attitude profiles knowledge about those countries is not very profound. For instance, two out three Dutch people incorrectly think that the population of the Western Balkans is more than twice of the population of the Netherlands. Similarly, Dutch people tend to not know much about the EU enlargement process in general or EU accession criteria. Many interviewed Dutch policy and decision makers are convinced that EU topics need to be communicated better and that the current lack of information and the missing understanding of EU policies and processes leads to anti-EU attitudes and contributes to negative attitudes towards further enlargement steps.

This is in line with further findings of this project. Personal ties with the Western Balkans, for instance in terms of travel experience or personally knowing somebody from the Western Balkans, matter. The share of people in the approver groups who know

somebody from the Western Balkans was much higher compared to the disapprovers or the unsure ones.

The war in Ukraine as one driver of the shift towards a more EU enlargement- friendly public attitude

Lastly, we found that the war in Ukraine had a great influence on how Dutch people think about European unity and enlarging the EU. While almost everybody worries about the war in Ukraine, over 40 percent of the approvers want the EU to enlarge quickly because of the war. This is only the case for 10 percent of the disapprovers. However, when discussing the war in Ukraine and what it means for the EU and the Netherlands in the focus groups, even the disapprovers were more open towards new members, as more countries would mean a stronger European Union in geopolitical terms.

The war in Ukraine was also mentioned many times in the interviews with Dutch policy and decision-makers as one of the driving factors to explain why the Dutch have become more open towards EU enlargement with the Western Balkans. In this context, the interview partners also referred to new positive messages and images from the Western Balkans, for instance the TV show “Who is the mole” (2021) that was shot in Albania or the UEFA Conference League final in Tirana (2022). Such positive messages and stories portray the Western Balkans differently and can create a new more nuanced image of the countries.

VIII. Notes on the method

For this project, an online survey designed to interview a representative group of people in the Netherlands about their perceptions of EU enlargement with the Western Balkans was conducted from 28 April until 25 May 2022. The survey was followed by in-depth focus group discussions to learn more deeply how distinct parts of the population engage in discussions about EU enlargement with the Western Balkans, but also to study their general perception of the EU and its policies. The focus group discussions took place on 20 and 21 June 2022 in Rotterdam. The last step of data collection consisted of eleven interviews with Dutch politicians at the national and European level, their policy officers as well as high-level Dutch civil servants. The interviews took place online and face to face between 26 July and 20 October 2022. The questions guiding this research project were developed in a two day-long workshop with experts from a range of European institutions involved in debates on EU enlargement with the Western Balkans, especially in the Netherlands.

Survey

The survey consisted of some 50 questions. It was designed to take up no more than 18 minutes of the respondent's time. The survey was programmed to be conducted and administered in cooperation with Lucid – A Cint Group company. A total of 1,571 people were included in the final sample. The sample frame was based on detailed quotas and stratification variables aimed at achieving an accurate representation of the Dutch population of adults (18 years and older). Stratification variables included gender, age groups, regions, and levels of education including cross-targets of gender and education as well as age groups and income. Within this setup of stratification objectives, sampling was random from within the panel to approximate representativeness meaningfully and reduce biases. To compensate for minor overrepresentation and underrepresentation of some groups and to ensure that results are representative of the national population in terms of demographics and geography, additional weighting was carried out. After data cleaning, 1,500 respondents were included in the sample used for the survey analysis.

Focus groups

Based on the survey results, focus group discussions were designed to learn how people who hold the most different attitudes identified in the population engage in discussions about the EU, EU policies and the EU enlargement with the Western Balkans. The groups represented the following attitudes:

1. **Approvers:** those who were in favour of EU enlargement with the Western Balkans and who either saw EU enlargement with the Western Balkans as a high or low salience issue
2. **High salience disapprovers:** those who were against EU enlargement in the Western Balkans and considered it a higher salience issue
3. **Low salience disapprovers:** those who were against EU enlargement in the Western Balkans but for whom it was not a high salience issue
4. **Unsure group:** participants who were unsure what they thought of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans regardless of how salient they felt the issue was.

Participants were recruited by telephone in and around the city of Rotterdam in the Netherlands and sorted into one of four groups according to answers to survey questions that determined attitudes to, and evaluations of, the salience of EU enlargement in the

Western Balkans. The focus groups were held in Dutch in cooperation with Bureau Fris, and independent researcher and moderator Edith van der Does. A total of 24 people participated across the four focus group discussions, with six participants present in each group. Discussions lasted between 90 to 120 minutes each. Focus group participants were between 22 and 68 years of age, with an average age of 44. 13 out of 24 participants were female. Participants have been given pseudonyms reflecting their gender.

Interviews with Dutch policy makers

Eleven Dutch politicians from the national and European level, their policy officers and high-level Dutch civil servants, were interviewed to grasp their perspective on how the Dutch public views EU enlargement with the Western Balkans. To gain more insights, some of the results from the survey and the focus groups were shared and discussed with the interview partners during the conversation. All interviews were conducted face-to-face and online. The interviews lasted between 25 and 60 minutes. As requested by most interview partners, the quotes used in this report are anonymized.

European Fund for the Balkans (EFB)

The European Fund for the Balkans (EFB) is a joint initiative of the Erste Foundation, Robert Bosch Foundation and King Baudouin Foundation that envisions and facilitates initiatives strengthening democracy, fostering European integration, and affirming the role of the Western Balkans in addressing Europe's challenges. Its strategy is focused on three overarching areas – fostering democratization, enhancing regional cooperation and boosting EU Integration.

The EFB supports the process of affirming the efficacy of EU enlargement policy across the Western Balkans, improving regional cooperation amongst civil society organisations based on solidarity and demand-driven dialogue. It provides means and platforms for informed and empowered citizens to take action demanding accountable institutions and democracy. The focus is on continuous reforms of the policies and practices of the Western Balkans countries on their way to EU accession.

Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG)

The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) is a joint initiative of the European Fund for the Balkans (EFB) and the Centre for Southeast European Studies of the University of Graz (CSEES), promoting the European integration of the Western Balkans and the consolidation of democratic, open countries in the region. BiEPAG is grounded in the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. It adheres to values that are common to a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.

It is composed of prominent policy researchers from the region and wider Europe with demonstrable comprehension of the Western Balkans and the processes shaping the region. Current members are Florian Bieber, Bojan Baća, Matteo Bonomi, Damir Kapidžić, Dimitar Bechev, Srđan Cvijić, Marika Djolai, Milica Delević, Vedran Džihčić, Donika Emini, Richard Grieveson, Dejan Jović, Marko Kmezić, Nikola Dimitrov, Srđan Majstorović, Zoran Nechev, Tena Prelec, Corina Stratulat, Nikolaos Tzifakis, Alida Vračić, Gjergji Vurmo, Natasha Wunsch.

dlpart

dlpart is a non-profit, non-partisan and independent think tank based in Berlin. Its team works in Germany and across many European countries using high-quality social research to enhance political debates and participatory practice. The think tank has worked with a wide range of partner organisations and funders to achieve this goal on projects ranging from civil society values to climate crisis perceptions and understandings of economic policy as well as topics such as EU enlargement and the political participation of marginalised groups, such as young people or people with migration biographies.

dlpart has demonstrated how to make such research useful to policy makers and civil society actors through a wide range of engagement activities – some of which have led to high-level advice and consultancy for institutions such as the European Commission, various country and sub-national governments as well as non-profit organisations. The work from dlpart has also been featured extensively in public media outlets in Europe and North America (both in print and broadcasting).

