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IMPACTS OF THE EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS ON
EUROPEAN IDENTITY
CASE OF ESC VOLUNTEERS IN SLOVENIA

BACHELOR THESIS

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Abstract

A plethora of scholarly work on European identity exists, but research on the identity building capabilities of the European Solidarity Corps is largely missing. This thesis addresses the research gap by posing the research question of: What are the impacts of the European Solidarity Corps on European identity? The question is approached through secondary questions that structure the research into three topics of European identity as a part of ESC. The aspects of ESC that have an effect on European identity, role of origin and background on European identity building, and the effectiveness of ESC in building European identity. The research utilizes a mixed-methods approach through qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys. The sample group that was studied consisted of volunteers who attended ESC projects in Slovenia. The results showed that a multitude of aspects affect European identity through ESC, the origin and background of a person did not exclude from participation in the identity building but affected the experience of it, and ESC was deemed to be an effective tool for European identity building. The research concluded that ESC is an effective and beneficial program for the promotion of European identity.

Keywords

European identity; European identity building; European Solidarity Corps; European Union; Slovenia; volunteering

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List of Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
ESC	European Solidarity Corps
EU	European Union
EVS	European Voluntary Service
MCI	Mladinski Center Idrija
ORA	Omladinske radne akcije
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States

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1 Introduction

In July of 2025 the European Commission proposed merging the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) volunteering program into Erasmus+ (European Commission, 2025a). This would end the status of ESC as a standalone program. González Pérez (2025) described this as a major downgrade for a program that supports youth volunteering, community engagement and solidarity-based learning, which the author describes as elements of the European identity of the youth. Being inspired by the potential changes to the ESC program and the expressed views towards the implications of it, this thesis presents the following research question: What are the impacts of the European Solidarity Corps on European identity? This research question aims at providing a comprehensive look into the impacts of ESC on European identity, which is approached through three secondary questions. Which aspects of ESC have an effect on European identity building? How does the origin and background of a person affect identity building through ESC? How effective is the European identity building of ESC? Each of these questions focuses on a different part of the main research question, and they structure the research and the presentation of the results.

Similar research questions have been worked on the fields of European identity and Erasmus studies, but research on ESC and its impacts on European identity is missing. Munta et al. (2022) especially call on more empirical work regarding the effects of the European Union (EU) volunteering activities on European identity. There is a clear research gap on the topic, which is another reason it was deemed as an appropriate topic for this thesis. Additionally, this thesis focuses on the case of ESC volunteers in Slovenia, which is a case with no prior focus on ESC and European identity. The focus on Slovenia came to be through personal experience with ESC volunteering in Slovenia and cooperation with Mladinski Center Idrija (MCI), a Slovenian youth center with experience as a host organization for ESC volunteers. For organizations such as MCI, this research provides valuable information for evaluation of former volunteering projects and for improvement of future ESC experiences. The research is relevant for the EU, as it is in the midst of restructuring ESC and deciding on the future budget of the program. For the EU, the results of this study will provide needed information on the effectiveness of European identity building, and showcase the individual experiences of volunteers, that highlight the significance of the ESC program.

The European Commission (2025b) names strengthening of European identity in the general objective of the ESC program, which serves as the basis for this research. The few studies conducted on ESC and European identity include Munta et al. (2022) and Jatko Stålnacke (2023), neither of which focus on the aspects of ESC that build European identity or the effectiveness of the identity building. Munta et al. (2022) compared ESC and the Omladinske radne akcije (ORA), which was a similar volunteering program of the former Yugoslavia. Jatko Stålnacke (2023) focused on the role of Romanian national identity in contrast to the European identity building project of ESC. Effectiveness of the Erasmus program on European identity has been studied (Mitchell, 2015), which provides perspective on the topic through the resemblance of the program to ESC. European identity and what affects it has been studied extensively by scholars such as Bruter (2003a, 2003b) and Fligstein (2007; Fligstein et al., 2012). Identifying specifically with the EU has also seen scholarly work from authors such as Cram (2012).

The methodology of this research is a mixed-methods approach, which utilizes interviews for qualitative data and surveys for quantitative data. The interviews provide wide-ranging data which is suitable for answering the questions on aspects of ESC which have a limited amount of existing data. The surveys will serve as reinforcement of the interview data to reduce subjectivity of the qualitative results.

The thesis is structured into six chapters with relevant subsections. The following chapter to the introduction is literature review, which includes European identity theory, introduces the ESC program and discusses the European identity building qualities of ESC. The methodology chapter will explain the secondary research questions in more detail alongside the full description on the methodology of the research. The results chapter will present the research results grouped into three main categories along with additional research findings. The discussion chapter utilizes the three results categories to discuss the most important findings and the implications, with the backing of the previously reviewed literature. The conclusion answers the research question and draws on the greater implications of this study.

2 Literature Review

For the purpose of this research, a literature review was carried out. This chapter of the thesis will establish the terminology, theories and the already existing knowledge on the

topic. The ESC program will be introduced in detail and the European identity aspects of it will be reviewed. The literature reviewed will be reflected upon in the chapter on discussion of research results towards the end of this thesis.

2.1 European Identity Theories

The existing research on European identity covers a plethora of theories on what European identity is and the different forms of it. The term European identity can refer to many different ways of feeling connected to Europe or the EU. Thus, it is also important to establish the form of European identity and the terminology that will be used throughout this paper.

The straightforward and overarching way to define Europe is the geographical Europe alongside the culturally and historically close nations on the edges of Europe (Arkan, 2013). The people of the nations that fit under this definition are the people who often identify themselves with Europe instead of another continental identity such as African or Asian. More commonly, European identity is connected to identification with a set of values such as democracy and cosmopolitanism (Mayer et al., 2025), shared culture and social similarities, and a political community controlled by a common doctrine (Bruter, 2003a), which concretize in the form of the European Union. This has led to European identity becoming more associated with EU identity in academic discussions. However, it is still crucial to note that supporting the European Union does not equal European identity (Ciaglia et al., 2018). For the purpose of this paper the latter definition will be used, while including the prospect of non-EU citizens having the ability to develop said European identity or one that is comparable to it.

European identity with a focus on the EU is still not one-dimensional. Multiple authors such as Bruter (2003a), Ciaglia et al. (2018), Leith et al. (2019) and Mayer et al. (2025) distinguish between different components of European identity. Bruter (2003a) defines two main components which make up an understanding of how European identity can be interpreted. These are the “civic” and “cultural” components. The civic component refers to the political side of identity, which is often represented by a state that solidifies certain rights and rules, which in the case of Europeans is the EU. The cultural component, however, is more connected to the individual identifying with a group for the reasons of shared social and cultural similarities. For Europeans this often means shared history, customs, and centuries of interaction between neighboring nations. This

results in the cultural component preventing the exclusion of Europeans who are not EU citizens from a European identity. The components create a dynamic of both inclusion and exclusion of non-EU Europeans, which makes defining European identity such a difficult task.

With increasing immigration from outside of Europe, and growing heterogeneity of the population, a third component of identity reflects the current discourse on European identity more accurately. Leith et al. (2019) and Mayer et al. (2025) discuss a third component of ethnicity and ancestry. This component of “ethnic” identity refers to the feeling of Europeanness based on European ancestry or ethnicity, which leads to exclusion of non-European or in some cases even non-EU ethnicities. According to Alba and Foner (2015) foreign ethnic identities tend to be viewed as competitors to national identities especially in Europe. This can be extended to European identity in a way that an individual may perceive a European to be someone with European ancestry (Mayer et al., 2025). While the ethnic component of European identity acts as unification by exclusion, it can also be counterproductive due to European ethnicity being a parent category to multiple different European ethnic groups. Leaning towards the ethnic component can thus lead to seeing European identity as the competing identity to a national one as observed by Leith et al. (2019). As an example, the authors deemed the British to view European identity predominantly ethnic in comparison to most Europeans who lean towards the civic component. The paper concluded that European identity or more precisely the lack of it, was likely a part of the reason for the United Kingdom (UK) to leave the EU. Cases like Brexit emphasize the need for consideration of the ethnic component in European identity.

Explaining identification with Europe can be helped by examining the opposite. The factors that may lead to exclusion from European identity can be derived from social psychology. The in- and outgroup theory used by Tajfel et al. (2001) explains how social groups tend to associate their own ingroup as “better” and favor it over the “worse” outgroup. The authors used an example of national identities interacting as intergroup interaction, which in the case of this paper can be European identity and a national identity. A strong national identity could thus be seen as the ingroup and European identity as the outgroup that is considered the worse identity. This theory works with European identity as well, since Tajfel et al. (2001) stated that self-identification as a member of the group and outgroups acknowledging the group membership, are

sufficient criteria for forming in- and outgroups. This can be observed in European identity, as stated before in the case of Brexit, where the British tended to view the Europeans as an outgroup (Leith et al., 2019). This theory has been applied to European identity in previous research under the terminology of Self/Other (Bhabha, 1983; Börjesson, 2013; Jatko Stålnacke, 2023; Nasser, 2018). In this paper the concept of Self/Other will be used and referenced later on to analyze European identity building.

2.2 Building Blocks of European Identity

European identity and the construction of it is like a puzzle and the multiple pieces of it contribute to the end product (Diez, 2008). In this section the various ways of European identity building found in previous research will be discussed and reflected on. The concepts defined in the previous section will be made use of.

When it comes to the components of identity, national identities have tended to gravitate towards the cultural aspects of identity (Brkić, 2011). Shared culture and a language are strong unifying factors that are often the basis of a national identity. While Europe and the member states of the EU share cultural aspects, their cultural ties are more loosely connected than the nations within. This is why cosmopolitan views argue that building European identity will require a distinct separation of the civic and cultural aspects of identity, and that the EU has a rare opportunity to create a truly civic identity detached from cultural factors (Kraus, 2003). This is indeed what many scholars have observed happening as the civic component of European identity is the strongest component (Cram, 2012; Mendez & Bachtler, 2016). The civic identity of Europeanness understandably has its roots in the European institutions and common values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law (Banjac & Pušnik, 2014; Ciaglia et al., 2018), but it is the small everyday things like EU passports, license plates, and flags that build and strengthen European identity for so many (Cram, 2012). Many of the studies already conclude that European identity has achieved a certain degree of civic identity which is often what people identify as the European identity (Bruter, 2003a). This means that the cultural component needs more consideration and strengthening to have a more comprehensive and extensive European identity. In fact, the lack of attention paid to the cultural European identity by cosmopolitans has been critiqued, as Kraus (2003) observes that “civic commitments are not developed in a cultural vacuum” (p. 670). The author adds that neglecting the cultural component of European identity may lead to forced conformity with the dominant European cultures such as German and

French culture. This suggests that European identity building requires more cultural perspective and especially the cultures of smaller European countries need more visibility across the continent.

One of the most important things in building European identity is to go and experience it personally, rather than being told to feel European (Ciaglia et al., 2018). This is supported by the findings of Bruter (2003a), which indicate that things like travelling, living, and working abroad increase the feeling of Europeanness. The same findings were made by several other studies (Fuss et al., 2004; Mitchell, 2015; Roose, 2013), which emphasized the role of personal experiences abroad for European identity building. And the perks of the European single market expand to this as well, as Fligstein et al. (2012) noted that people conducting international business and participating in the cross-border economic chain, are the ones who might be called Europeans. The overwhelming common position on experiences in other European countries shows that further development of European identity would benefit from even more cross-border cooperation. Indeed, Fligstein (2007) proposed that “the main source of such an identity is the opportunity to positively interact with people from other European countries with whom one has a basis for solidarity on a regular basis” (p. 3). However, as the quote states the impact of positive interactions, the contrary cannot be left without attention. In fact, the findings of Graf and Paolini (2017) indicate that just like positive intergroup interactions create positive effects, negative interactions have the opposite effect. Based on this, European identity might weaken if the interactions tend to be more negative than positive. This narrative is also observed by Cicognani et al. (2019) who concluded that the quality of interaction across borders, especially friendships, affects European identity building. However, this does not diminish the importance of experiences abroad for European identity building, and the findings of Graf and Paolini (2017) concluded that positive interactions outweigh the negative by a ratio of 4:1. Brexit is another example of this, as Leith et al. (2019) mention that the UK remaining outside the Schengen area likely has an effect on the civic sense of the British. It has to be noted that geography plays a role as well due to the UK being located on islands, but the additional border measures do not benefit the British when it comes to travelling and feeling connected to other Europeans. For these reasons, European identity building should be encouraged to focus on experiences abroad with consideration of the quality and nature of the experiences.

The people who engage the most with experiences abroad have been profiled by many studies. Ciaglia et al. (2018) summarize that “those who are most likely to hold a European identity are young, wealthy, well-educated, and eager to travel, work or study abroad” (p. 23). The already established identity building qualities of travelling and experiences abroad are represented again, but now characteristics such as age, wealth and education are mentioned. Young people are generally more likely to develop a European identity due to them being more open towards international cooperation and globalization (Leith et al., 2019). Several other studies have also emphasized the role of youth and wealth in European identity building (Fligstein, 2007; Fligstein et al., 2012). Since young people tend to be more adventurous, they are more likely to participate in international and cross-border interactions. Wealth often enables participation in such activities and increases the opportunities to travel and experience other cultures. Young people are the future everywhere so it is logical that European identity building would focus on them, since they are already more open for international opportunities. But the focus should not be solely on young people, as Ciaglia et al. (2018) suggest, that establishing an Erasmus program for pensioners could benefit the demographic which has the most time to travel but feels the least European. Similarly, the problem that the less well-off have less opportunities to travel and have positive interactions abroad due to financial reasons, requires addressing to further develop European identity among the common public (Leith et al., 2019).

One of the most relevant things for young people is education, and as it fits the profile of the most likely person to develop European identity, it makes sense to discuss the impact education has on the matter. Banjac and Pušnik (2014) observed that the EU has emphasized the importance of education in European identity building. As Szkudlarek (2011) observed, education plays a major role in shaping the identity of a person, thus a European dimension of citizenship education would be beneficial for European identity building. However, as Munta et al. (2022) state, the EU lacks the power to decide on the national curricula and that is left to the member states. This does not always guarantee that European identity building gets the amount of focus that the EU would desire (Eurydice, 2005). This is why the EU needs to find alternative ways to conduct citizenship education.

For the EU one of the most well-established forms of identity building is European symbolism. Bruter (2003b) states that EU institutions have made serious efforts in

giving the European people national symbols to associate the EU with, and to build a European identity. According to Bruter (2003a) some of these symbols may include the European flag, EU passport, the Euro currency and Europe day on May 9th. Bruter (2003b) concluded that being exposed to European symbols has an effect on European identity. The author also discovered that symbols affect especially the cultural component of European identity, which was already established to be the component that needs more consideration. In the case of the UK, we can once again observe the lack of symbolism in the form of the euro currency. Leith et al. (2019) speculated that not joining the eurozone most likely affected the civic identity as well, since dealings with most other Europeans were not in a common currency. This shows that while symbols predominantly affect the cultural identity, they can also affect the civic component through their functionality, especially in the case of the euro. Cram (2012) determined that the European symbols serve as constant reminders of EU membership and the belonging to a larger group of Europeans. However, it needs to be mentioned that these symbols have the possibility of creating a negative effect as well, since some individuals might perceive the symbols as annoying and pushy (Cram, 2012).

Community is a crucial part of identity. Cicognani et al. (2019) go as far as saying that the feeling of community could be the key to European integration. Europe and the EU are very diverse, and this has led to the EU promoting European community as embracing the diversity (Banjac & Pušnik, 2014). The authors also note that diversity helps create micro-cultures with European values, which in turn will eventually draw the communities closer together. Indeed, Banjac and Pušnik (2014) stated that “the EU is portrayed as a community or, even better, a community of communities” (p. 765). There is no one-size-fits-all European identity or a community, thus this analogy for European community is an appropriate way to approach this topic. Trust plays a key role in building these communities (Cicognani et al., 2019), and trust in other Europeans has been shown to have a positive effect on European identity (Ciaglia et al., 2018). Trust in other Europeans is also built by cross-border friendships which increase intergroup interactions and create communities that ignore national borders (Cicognani et al., 2019). These findings indicate that further focus on communities is beneficial for European identity building.

Cross-border communities and the many cultures of Europe create multilingual environments. The EU takes pride in its diverse linguistics and the functioning of its

institutional multilingualism (Stoicheva, 2015). This is why Fligstein et al. (2012) identified a European as someone who speaks multiple languages. Fuss et al. (2004) also found out that multilingualism leads to more identification with Europe, and the ability to enter into discussions in foreign languages in other European countries, is one of the main drivers in the formation of a European identity. The importance of multilingualism for European identity can once again be observed in the case of Brexit, as in the study by Fuss et al. (2004), it was shown that in the UK the number of languages spoken was comparatively lower than in continental Europe. However, it is still important to mention that English is the main unifying language across the continent, but the national languages offer an additional way to reinforce a common European identity through linguistic diversity (Stoicheva, 2015). This suggests, that on top of increasing English language proficiency for a common language, more focus on the other European languages would be beneficial for European identity building.

Building European identity in contrast to another continental or supranational identity would help accelerate the feeling of Europeanness. As previously established, the Self/Other identity theory might create a sense of competition between national and European identity, but this could also be turned into an asset in relation to another regional identity. The research by Jatko Stålnacke (2023) found that Europeans as a group tend to discover the differences between each other more easily than the shared similarities. This resulted in discussion about seeing the similarities between Europeans if there was an outgroup such as Americans or Asians to compare to. The Self/Other identity can create a sense of ingroup for Europeans when it is faced off against an outgroup of a similar magnitude. Jatko Stålnacke (2023) described creation of identity as being, and realizing being, different from others. This narrative supports the building of European identity against other regional identities.

2.3 The European Solidarity Corps

This section will introduce the European Solidarity Corps, its objectives and policy priorities, and the solidarity aspect of it. ESC is a volunteering program by the European Commission for 18- to 30-year-old people (European Commission, 2025b). It provides young people with opportunities to volunteer in a participating program country with funding from the EU. Young people may take part in individual volunteering projects, group volunteering projects, and local solidarity projects, which range from 2 to 12 months individually and 2 weeks to 2 months in a group. The volunteers will have their

transportation to and from the project covered, they are provided with accommodation, insurance, financing for meals and pocket money. The volunteering projects aim at increasing solidarity in Europe and beyond, and the topics may include environmental protection, youth work, cultural heritage protection and other community projects (European Commission, 2025b). Individual volunteering projects will include on-arrival and mid-term trainings, which are organized by the national agency of the host country. During the trainings volunteers are offered socializing opportunities with other volunteers, support, and knowledge on the ESC program. ESC and the host organization will also provide additional support and training, such as language training and assistance with required paperwork. The countries that are participating in the program are the 27 EU countries, third countries associated with the program (North Macedonia, Liechtenstein, Türkiye and Iceland), third countries not associated with the program (Norway), and third countries neighboring the EU which includes the Western Balkans, Neighborhood East, and the South-Mediterranean countries (European Commission, 2025b). The budget of ESC for the period of 2021 to 2027 is 1.009 billion euros.

The objective of the ESC program is to,

enhance the engagement of young people and organisations in accessible and high-quality solidarity activities, primarily volunteering, as a means to strengthen cohesion, solidarity, democracy, European identity and active citizenship in the Union and beyond, addressing societal and humanitarian challenges on the ground, with a particular focus on the promotion of sustainable development, social inclusion and equal opportunities. (European Commission, 2025b, p. 6)

This objective is supported by policies such as inclusion and diversity, environmental sustainability, digital transformation, active participation, and European identity (European Commission, 2025b). Additionally, important characteristics for ESC include respect for EU values, non-formal and informal learning, European added value, international dimension and multilingualism.

For the purpose of this paper, European identity as one of the objectives of ESC is the most relevant to consider. European Commission (2025b) writes that ESC aims at improving European identity especially through common EU values, unity in diversity, and social, cultural and historical heritage. This goes along with educating young people about the EU, raising awareness, and increasing democratic participation. The objective is not touched upon in more detail which creates the impression that European identity is still shaping and taking its form. The findings of Arkan (2013) support this narrative,

as the way the EU talks about European identity is more focused on the creation and construction of Europe. Thus, ESC has a multidisciplinary approach on identity building, and it can take liberties in accomplishing this objective.

The European Solidarity Corps, just like its name suggests, has a major emphasis on solidarity. European Commission (2025b) uses the keyword solidarity throughout the program guide. Solidarity has been in the center of the European project for decades in the various treaties of the EU (St. John, 2021). Sangiovanni (2012) observed that the EU sees solidarity as “a value binding together member states and as a value binding together the citizens of each and every member state” (p. 214). St. John (2021) describes European solidarity in a similar way, as individuals and collectives acting together for common good. ESC specific solidarity in the form of solidarity activity was defined as “a high-quality, inclusive activity that addresses important societal challenges, that contributes to the achievement of the Programme objectives” (Regulation 2021/888, p. 41). Communication regarding ESC really emphasizes the importance of common values, unity, inclusion and doing good for the community, which can be considered as the solidarity aspect of ESC. Solidarity is one of the key pieces of the whole program and it is used as a guideline for the program objectives, which also includes European identity building.

2.4 The European Solidarity Corps: Building European Identity

European identity building through ESC can be connected to the different aspects already discussed during this literature review. In this section, the existing limited literature on ESC and identity building will be examined and connected to European identity building.

The civic and cultural aspects of European identity building are both present in ESC. Munta et al. (2022) observed that the cosmopolitan values promoted by ESC aim at creating a civic sense of identity connected to the liberal and democratic values of the EU. This is being done to give the young Europeans a sense of belonging to a larger community of Europeans, as they are the future of Europe and the EU. The cultural component, as deemed to require more attention, is addressed throughout ESC in indirect ways, but also in projects with a cultural focus. As the European Commission (2025b) names the preservation of cultural heritage as one of the areas of operation for ESC. And according to the report by RAY Network (2020), 22% of hosting

organizations reported that culture was one of the topics in their ESC projects. For examples of ESC promoting the cultural component of identity, Jatko Stålnacke (2023) mentions interacting with new cultures and meeting volunteers from other countries. Additionally, the author mentions that learning more about other European cultures resulted in more in-depth analysis and understanding of one's own culture. ESC seems to have the tendency to give more perspective and comparative potential between European cultures. This can also be reflected in the Self/Other concept as mentioned by Jatko Stålnacke (2023), that some of the participants felt more connected to their national identity after interacting with other cultures. However, as Munta et al. (2022) stated, the EU believes in ESC as a unifying cultural factor to rather showcase the shared history and cultural aspects of Europe. Hagh Talab (2013) discovered that participants to the predecessor of ESC, the European Voluntary Service (EVS), saw the difference in cultures but the similarity in humanity as a strengthening factor of an identity that transcends national borders. These examples showcase that ESC has an effect on the civic and cultural components of identity, but more data is required to make conclusions about the impacts and effectiveness of ESC regarding these components.

Cultural exchange is one of the key parts in experiencing Europe, which was deemed to be one of the most important aspects of European identity building. The very nature of ESC as international volunteering guarantees a chance to experience Europe through travelling and living abroad. As host organizations provide assistance to ESC participants on travelling and on bureaucracy related to living abroad (European Commission, 2025b), this is likely to result in positive experiences abroad. The funding and simpleness of attending ESC is a way to provide everyone with the possibility of experiencing Europe without much effort. On top of regular financial assistance, ESC offers additional support for young people with fewer opportunities (European Commission, 2025b). This is done to encourage the participation of all backgrounds, financial situations, and young people with disabilities or social barriers. This is an aspect that was called upon earlier, to increase European identity among the people who do not typically have a strong European identity. The data from RAY Network (2025) reveals that 42.4% of participants in individual ESC volunteering projects faced barriers to fulfilling their potential, while for the participants in group volunteering projects this was 41.7%. This indicates that encouragement and additional support measures have enabled the participation of young people with less opportunities. The data also

indicates that the profiling of the young, educated, and eager to travel, as the most likely to develop European identity, are also the people attending ESC. 67.2% of participants in individual projects and 68.9% of group volunteers had a higher education degree according to RAY Network (2025). Mitchell (2015) observed European identity building among the age group of young adults to be effective in the case of Erasmus, which suggests that ESC can similarly be effective in this regard. The demographics and an integral part of experiencing Europe that come with ESC, line up with the proven methods of European identity building.

European citizenship education for young people has a new approach through ESC. As the EU lacks sufficient power over the national education systems, it has turned towards non-formal and informal education in the form of ESC (Munta et al., 2022). Hagh Talab (2013) defined non-formal learning as learning that happens in planned and organized education that is outside the formal education system. Examples of this include workshops and language courses. Informal learning on the other hand refers to learning that happens outside the planned educational activities of formal and non-formal learning (Hagh Talab, 2013). Informal learning happens every day through daily experiences throughout the lifetime of a person. The European Commission (2025b) names non-formal and informal learning as important characteristics of ESC. The Commission emphasizes the inclusion aspect of non-formal and informal learning for young people with fewer opportunities, and the importance of skills learned for employment in the future. According to the findings of Hagh Talab (2013), in the EVS program informal learning helped participants to learn more about the world they live in, and the volunteers recognized aspects of a shared identity. Due to the similarity between EVS and ESC, it can be argued that similar findings would surface from ESC participants as well.

Multilingualism is an important aspect of ESC. European Commission (2025b) names multilingualism as one of the most important values of European identity and as a symbol of European unity in diversity. Multilingualism and more traditional symbols such as the EU flag and the European Solidarity Corps logo are emphasized throughout the program, contributing to the already discussed European identity building mechanism. On the other hand, multilingualism itself is a key piece of European identity building for ESC. European Commission (2025b) states that “the lack of language competences is one of the main barriers to European cross-border activities in

general such as those supported by the European Solidarity Corps” (p. 10). This is why ESC also provides language learning tools such as the Online Language Support and financing for organizations to accommodate the volunteers with language learning (European Commission, 2025b). Learning a new language or developing language skills was named as the third most common reason to participate in ESC (RAY Network, 2025). The study also found that 76.6% of volunteers learned something about using different languages, which was the second most common response regarding competences developed during ESC. These findings indicate that ESC can be a useful tool in language learning and subsequently in strengthening European identity.

ESC volunteering and local solidarity projects directly benefit the community they are based in. The volunteer work addresses problems and limitations in the community, which helps with the difficulties communities face (European Commission, 2025b). This is a logical direction for the EU, as Munta et al. (2022) stated that the EU expects ESC to develop European identity through community building. International volunteers can enrich a community by sharing cultural practices, cuisine, and languages in a more intimate way than just learning through online resources. This exchange also benefits the older generations whose European identity was deemed to be the weakest, as they get to experience Europe through volunteers in their community. This is a more suitable way for the elderly to experience Europe without having to travel, which is often more difficult for them. Especially rural and more isolated communities can learn a lot from volunteers coming from a background that might have some prejudices towards them. Jatko Stålnacke (2023) found out that EVS helped to reduce stereotypes, which can help to increase intercommunity trust. Once again, this is likely the case with ESC as well, and according to RAY Network (2025), 83.1% of the communities with ESC volunteers appreciated the intercultural dimension of the volunteering project. Exposing communities of Europe to positive experiences with volunteers from other parts of Europe, is at the core of ESC, and through that also European identity building.

European identity building is not without its limitations and difficulties, which have been noted during this paper. ESC has the potential to address some of these issues. In fact, ESC was launched by the European Commission in the first State of the Union address following the UK vote on Brexit (Dalboni, 2017). This was the answer of the Commission to the weak European identity that played a role in the UK leaving the EU. The Commission hopes that ESC contributes to the feeling of Europeanness, to prevent

other member states from following the path of the UK. Some results on the effectiveness of this have been already published, as RAY Network (2025) observed that the closeness to Europe increased after the ESC volunteering period, compared to the period before taking part in the program. According to the data, the mean and median closeness of an ESC participant to Europe increased from around 6, on a scale of 0 to 10, to a mean of 7.8 and a median of 8.0. Additionally, ESC has often been associated with Erasmus due to the nature of the programs, and studies on the effects of Erasmus on European identity have been conducted. Mitchell (2015) found that students taking part in Erasmus increased their identification with Europe. Moreover, the students who chose to take part in Erasmus did not showcase a higher European identity before the mobility period than students who did not attend Erasmus. Following this pattern, we can expect ESC to yield similar results. This shows that ESC was established in a time when European identity was questioned, and it has been a contributor to strengthening the feeling of Europeanness, alongside already established European identity building programs.

2.5 The European Solidarity Corps: New Approaches to European Identity

This paper has already discussed established European identity building theories and how the ESC program connects to them. In this section, additional theories on European identity building which are more specific to ESC and volunteering will be introduced and reflected on.

In this paper European identity was defined as EU identity with the prospect of EU candidate countries having the ability to develop said identity. ESC has an integral role in enabling this development between EU and non-EU countries. European Commission (2025b) established that the international dimension of ESC enables creating connections between the EU and countries outside of it. The countries referred to are especially the western Balkans and Eastern Europe. Already EVS shared this goal, as European identity and solidarity between the EU and non-EU countries was emphasized (European Commission, 1996, as cited in Munta et al., 2022). European Commission (2025b) states that ESC aims at aiding EU candidate countries to align their legislation with the EU standards. This is one of the ways the EU tries to bridge the gap between EU member states and the rest of Europe. While diversity is at the core of the EU and European identity (Fligstein et al., 2012), bringing the societal standards closer to the EU is likely to help in integrating new member states. This type of process was

described as “graduation from Eastern Europe to Europe” by Kuus (2004, p. 477). This does not come without its problems, as Wiarda (2005) expresses worries about the political and identity-based differences being too far apart. Regardless of this, EU candidate countries taking part in ESC have the possibility to align their European identity with the identity of EU countries. ESC contributes to this through the international volunteers bringing a more EU centric perspective to the organizations in the candidate countries, and through the candidate countries sending their nationals to be immersed in an EU centric European environment. Additionally, the ESC unifying European identity is not limited to the people from outside of the EU. Jatko Stålnacke (2023) observed that among ESC and EVS participants the stereotypes about western Europeans compared to Romanians were more often positive. This led the interviewed Romanians to feel like “Europeans in development”, but they acknowledged the roles of ESC and EVS in bridging the gap between western Europeans and the newer EU member Romanians. Thus, it can be argued that not only the new and non-EU members are in need of fitting into the common European identity, but that ESC can help the western EU members to understand and come closer to the identity of the east as well. ESC can be a useful tool in addressing these worries of European identity not being unified enough. And from the perspective of the EU, this can be called as “planting the seeds of European identity”.

Volunteering programs and them being used for identity building is not a new phenomenon. A comparable program to ESC, the US Peace Corps, has been an example of American values globally (Hall, 2007). The international volunteering program of the US government was a crucial tool during the Cold War for creating solidarity and understanding between the Third World and the US, in the emergence of a new American led world order. While the US Peace Corps is primarily aimed at helping underdeveloped countries and promoting American values, it has been a way for Americans to boost their identity and perspective on themselves, American culture, and the government (Hall, 2007). The author also states that the Peace Corps has clarified the role of humanitarian values for American identity. Another example program was the Omladinske radne akcije (ORA) from Yugoslavia (Munta et al., 2022). ORA was a youth labor organization of the Yugoslav government concentrating on socialist patriotism and manual labor. It aimed at creating a Yugoslav identity and a sense of unity between the nations of Yugoslavia. The program had participants from all over the country and from all social backgrounds united in the values of communism. In fact, a

lot of the participants of ORA identified as Yugoslav, but due to the authoritarian nature of the regime, the data should be assessed critically (Munta et al., 2022). Forging of a brotherhood and the communist values lost a lot of their meaning as years went by, but the new motivation for participating in ORA, having fun and creating friendships across Yugoslavia, still suggested that the youth wanted to be attached to Yugoslavia (Munta et al., 2022). ORA was clearly an identity building volunteering program, but its main difference to ESC identity building was that ORA tried to replace national identities with a Yugoslav identity. ESC instead aims at building a supranational identity that can coexist with national identities of Europeans and complement them (Munta et al., 2022). The volunteering programs of the US Peace Corps and ORA have shown identity building capabilities and results, which give perspective to the goals of ESC.

Cosmopolitan values are a part of European identity and ESC. European Commission (2025b) includes a dimension of cosmopolitan values in ESC through emphasizing action on global problems such as climate change. Promotion of sustainable behavior and green practices in all parts of ESC will address the common challenges humanity faces, which are in line with the values that are often associated with Europeanness. Similarly, the focus of ESC on democratic participation and values contributes to the creation of more democratic societies in the EU and outside of it (European Commission, 2025b). The need for democratic education has become a global issue through the rise of authoritarianism (Lauder, 2024), and the efforts of ESC to showcase the commitment of the EU to democracy and liberal values, underlines what it means to be European. Thus, it can be acknowledged that a dimension of cosmopolitanism in European identity building through ESC exists.

3 Research Design

This study is aimed at answering the following research question: What are the impacts of the European Solidarity Corps on European identity? The research question is approached through three secondary questions, which need to be addressed in order to answer the main research question. First: Which aspects of ESC have an effect on European identity? Meaning which aspects of ESC promote European identity and in what kind of ways. Second: How does the origin and background of a person affect identity building through ESC? This question aims at discovering the possible differences between the ESC European identity building of EU and non-EU Europeans, and the role of other background-related factors. It will simultaneously include the role

of other characteristics that play a role in identifying with Europe. Third: How effective is the European identity building of ESC? This means that the effectiveness of the identity building of ESC is measured and evaluated. In this chapter the used research methods, context in which the research was carried out, and the limitations of this study will be discussed.

This research was carried out in cooperation with Mladinski Center Idrija (MCI), which acted as the hosting organization for the author of this thesis during his participation in the ESC volunteering program. MCI is a youth center located in a rural town of Idrija in Slovenia, and the organization has hosted multiple ESC and EVS volunteers throughout the years. The author of this thesis established an alumni network for all the previous volunteers who volunteered at MCI. Because of the cooperation and the availability of the volunteer alumni network, ESC volunteers in Slovenia were chosen as the target group of this study. Since the available contacts conducted their volunteering at MCI, the majority of the studied group consisted of them. But in order to increase the sample size, volunteers who volunteered in other Slovenian hosting organizations, and were available to be contacted, were also included in the study.

For the purpose of answering the research question and the secondary questions, a mixed-methods research approach was taken. The data collection methods chosen ended up being interviews and surveys, with interviews acting as the main qualitative data, and surveys providing quantitative data to reduce subjectivity and confirm patterns that appeared in the interviews. Potential individual findings from the surveys will not be neglected however, and the data will be used to present more comprehensive results. These methods were seen to fit the purpose of the study and were perceived to yield results that are manageable to analyze in the limited time that this research had. To address the time limitations and to help with a more comprehensive analysis of the acquired data, artificial intelligence (AI) was used for these purposes. The use of AI during this thesis will be noted and explained in detail.

3.1 Methodology of Interviews

Interviews were chosen to conduct qualitative research on European identity. Interviews are an effective method of documenting the opinions, feelings, and views of people and their personal experiences (Saldana, 2011). This makes interviews a suitable method, as the objective was to find out which parts of the ESC experience affect European identity

and in what type of ways. Interviews also allow for in-depth answers and analysis, which is especially useful in identity-related questions. The nature of interviews allows for unexpected answers and follow up questions that can result in even more analyzable material (Börjesson, 2013). For this reason, the interviews were formatted as semi-structured with a set of questions guiding the interview, while allowing for reactionary questions depending on the situation. All of the questions were not asked from each of the participants, and the answers of participants often overlapped with other questions, which would have made asking every question unnecessary repetition. The questionnaire used for the interviews can be found in Appendix I.

A total of eight interviews were conducted, seven of which were individual interviews, and one that was a group interview. The individual interviews lasted from 15 to 35 minutes with an average duration of 23 minutes. The group interview lasted for 10 minutes and had 11 participants. All but one of the interviews was recorded, for the purpose of having more accurate data to analyze later during the research process. The group interview was not recorded due to the setting and nature of the interview. Six of the individual interviews were conducted online through a video call, and one in presence with the participant. The group interview was conducted in presence, and each participant had the opportunity to contribute as much as they deemed appropriate.

The participants for the interviews were selected using two sampling methods. Firstly, purposive sampling which refers to selecting the participants from a specific sampling population, of who have the required knowledge or understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Akkaş & Meydan, 2024). This meant that the participants had to either have taken part or currently take part in an ESC project. This was the main requirement, as people who have not experienced European identity building through ESC would not have personal experience, and thus could not provide accurate information. A second requirement was that the attended ESC project was located in Slovenia. As the study had a focus on ESC identity building in Slovenia, the participants would need to have experienced this firsthand in Slovenia to have a sufficient understanding of the case studied. This requirement was purposefully not fulfilled in one of the individual interviews, since the participant took part in a unique ESC project in Aruba, which was deemed to serve as a useful additional resource for the study. The findings from this interview will be communicated and discussed with the information that this case differs

from the rest, as it is not related to the case of Slovenia, but still valuable to the general objective of European identity building through ESC.

The second sampling method used was convenience sampling. This sampling method refers to a selection of participants based on availability and willingness to participate in research (Akkaş & Meydan, 2024). Convenience sampling was suitable for this research, as volunteers who took part in an ESC project in Slovenia is a specific demographic. This made selecting the participants based on their availability the most logical option. Due to the availability of the MCI Alumni network, contacting potential participants through that was a convenient and efficient way to organize interviews. Five of the participants in the individual interviews were contacted through email and the contacts were acquired through the alumni network. Of the remaining two, the other participant was asked personally due to previous familiarity with them, and the other participant was recommended to the author of this thesis. The group interview participants were a group of ESC volunteers on an ESC related training that the author of this thesis took part in, and the interview was requested by the author as a part of the training course.

The sample group for the interviews resulted in a diverse demographic with representation from 12 different countries including EU and non-EU European countries. All but one of the interview participants took part in a long-term volunteering project, and four of the participants had attended an ESC group volunteering project. Out of the total 18 interview participants, 12 were current ESC volunteers and six were former volunteers. The sample group was mostly females with only four male participants. The sample group for the interviews was deemed sufficient for the purpose of this study.

The interview results were codified to conduct a more structured analysis. In Vivo coding was selected as the coding method to keep the original meaning of the interview responses. In Vivo coding is a method where the code is constructed based on direct quotation from the transcript (Saldana, 2011). The obtained In Vivo code was then grouped into three main categories in order to conduct a thematic analysis. The categories selected were the aspects of ESC that build European identity, role of origin and background on identity building through ESC, and effectiveness of ESC for European identity building. These categories were also utilized in conducting simple

grounded theory on individual interviews, to discover causality chains that can be used to explain the key findings.

3.2 Methodology of Surveys

Surveys were selected as the second research method. In this study the surveys provide quantitative data that is aimed at validating the qualitative data of the interviews (Goodfellow, 2023). The survey data will also be used independently from the interview data for analysis and discussion. Surveys are an effective research tool for acquiring answers to specific questions from a large group of people. As this research concerns itself with the question of European identity, surveys are an appropriate method of data collection. The surveys were formatted mainly as multiple choice questions, but true or false questions, sliding scale questions, and open-ended questions were also included. The surveys were conducted anonymously and only basic information about the background of the respondents was acquired.

Two surveys were conducted with two different sample groups. The first survey had 38 questions, which included some questions that were not directly related to this research, but could provide additional information if deemed appropriate. The second survey consisted of 25 questions, all of which appeared in the first survey as well. This means that the two surveys were identical for the 25 questions, and the other survey included additional questions for the primary purpose of inquiries on behalf of MCI. All of the surveys were conducted online. The 25 questions that were identical in both surveys, and two additional questions from the first survey that are relevant to the research, can be found in Appendix II.

The survey participants were selected using two sampling methods. Purposeful sampling was used to select the group of people who were invited to participate in the survey. This sampling method means that the researcher uses their judgement to select a sample that is believed to be a sufficient representation of the target population (Stratton, 2023). As the purpose of this research is to study the impacts of ESC on European identity, the sample had to consist of people who were attending or had attended ESC. Keeping in mind that the special focus on ESC volunteers in Slovenia makes the population even smaller, purposeful sampling was deemed appropriate. This resulted in the use of the MCI Alumni network to send out one of the surveys, as this group would fulfil both of the requirements for the study. The other survey was shared

with the ESC training group, since they were all current ESC volunteers in Slovenia, and they were deemed to have a sufficient understanding of the studied subject.

The other sampling method used was voluntary response sampling. This method means that people from the target audience are invited to participate in the survey and they can voluntarily choose whether to participate or not (Stratton, 2023). Both of the surveys that were sent out were completely voluntary and no one was forced to take part in them. Both groups received a link to the survey and were asked to participate, with the decision to do so left entirely to them. This resulted in an answer rate of 44%.

The sample group resulted in 92 respondents. Majority of the respondents were from EU countries and lived in urban areas. The sample included both individual ESC volunteers and group volunteers, with 52% being individual volunteers. The sample included former and current volunteers, but no gender statistics were collected. The diversity and the size of the final sample group was deemed sufficient for the purpose of this study.

3.3 Use of Artificial Intelligence

During this study AI was used to help process the acquired data. The AI tool used was Otter.ai, which is a transcription software using a large language model. Otter was used to create transcripts out of the recorded interviews, which enabled the coding of the interviews. All of the work done by AI was always quality checked and it performed well in the creation of the transcripts. Otter.ai was tasked with In Vivo coding all the transcripts and sorting the codes under the three selected categories. Additionally, the AI was asked to create individual grounded theory within the categories using the created In Vivo coding, which was modified by the researcher to be accurate based on the findings of the study. The prompts used in Otter.ai can be found in Appendix III.

3.4 Limitations

A study concerning group identity is almost certain to have its limitations due to the complexity of the topic. The first limitations in this study arise from the sample group. The sample groups of the interviews and surveys were selected using non-probability sampling methods, which means that each individual of a target audience did not have the same probability of being selected for the study (Stratton, 2023). This was unavoidable for the research, as the contacts of all people who have taken part in ESC

volunteering in Slovenia, would not have been feasible to acquire. According to Goodfellow (2023) “non-probability sampling results provide less certainty and allow for fewer generalizations of the study to a population, as opposed to random sampling” (p. 1311). This has to be kept in mind when discussing the results of this study as the selected sample group cannot be generalized as the whole population of ESC volunteers. The sample group can however be used to discover trends and tendencies among ESC volunteers in Slovenia.

The size of the sample group is also limited. A larger sample would yield more credible information. This was again affected by the number of available contacts and the voluntary participation in the surveys and interviews. Majority of the respondents also conducted their ESC volunteering at MCI, meaning that the results of the study might be more centered on the experiences from a single hosting organization, instead of the case of Slovenia. This is a risk of bias as people willing to participate in the interviews and surveys often have some motivation behind it, which could be positive experiences in the case of ESC volunteering. However, discovering positive volunteering experiences does not prove a bias or the lack of it, which needs to be kept in mind when discussing the results.

The demographics of the sample group have limitations as well. Especially in the interviews a majority of the respondents were female resulting in a lack of male perspective. This is however only a minor issue, as the aim of the study was not to study gender perspectives on European identity. The gender imbalance and the other limitations of this study were affected by the limited time that this research had. The time and resource factors affect the final product, but these limitations do not invalidate the findings and implications of this study.

As AI was used in the research process, the limitations it brings need to be considered. AI is prone to making mistakes and making up content in order to fill a command and can thus provide unreliable and falsified results. To avoid this, all work done by the AI was quality checked and cross referenced to the original content. During this process no mistakes were found, and the AI had stayed true to the source material. Additionally, the final decision and assessment of the material always remained with the researcher. Because of this, the usage of AI during the thesis can be deemed appropriate and acceptable.

3.5 Ethics

Identity is a sensitive topic and thus conducting a study focusing on it requires careful consideration during the research process. In this study the sample group consisted of a multicultural population, and studying such a population requires knowledge and understanding of the cultural differences (Akkaş & Meydan, 2024). The participants also need to be addressed without prejudices or biases. During the interviews these were taken into account, as the author of this study has a background in intercultural communications and international teamwork. On top of this, it was important to communicate the aim and nature of the study, so the sample group would know what the data would be used for, and for what purpose. This information was communicated already at the time of contacting the potential participants, and then repeated at the beginning of each interview, and at the start of the surveys. All of the participants showed signs of understanding why this study was being conducted, and none of the participants expressed any concerns during the process of data collection.

Attending the interviews and surveys was completely voluntary and this was communicated to the participants before any of the data collection was conducted. Additionally, participation in the study was anonymous and this was emphasized before and after the data collection. To honor the anonymity of the participants, made up names will be used when direct quotes or opinions of the interviewees are presented. The surveys were already conducted fully anonymously, and the author of this paper does not know who provided each answer.

The interviews were recorded, which requires acknowledgment. All of the participants were asked before the interview if they would accept them being recorded, and none of the participants showed any opposition or further questions regarding this. The interviewer made sure to communicate the reasons for the recording, how it would be handled, and that the recordings would be deleted after the conclusion of the study.

The use of AI may present an ethical problem in research. Misusing AI can lead to falsification of research material or results. Large language models especially have the ability to generate ready text that could be directly inserted into a study. These issues were touched upon earlier, and during this thesis AI was strictly used only for the purposes stated and explained in this thesis.

4 Research Results

The research yielded large amounts of data which will be presented in this chapter. The mixed-methods research will be presented by focusing on the categorization and codifying of the qualitative interviews, while the results are backed up by the quantitative data of the surveys. Each of the three categories will be presented separately. The categories and codes can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Interview coding

Categories	Codes
Aspects of ESC that build European identity	Program design, cultural exchange and interaction, experience of EU support, opportunity, host organization, life and experiences abroad, language learning, practical skills and knowledge
Role of origin and background on identity building through ESC	EU membership, civic-cultural feeling, home country and roots, pre-existing views on Europe, external perspectives on European identity
Effectiveness of ESC for European identity building	Perceived effectiveness, EU views, changing perspective, reinforcing identity, variables, limitations

4.1 Aspects of ESC That Build European Identity

The first category of the ESC aspects building European identity was the most common across the interviews conducted. The selected codes revolve around concrete aspects of ESC that foster and promote the feeling of Europeanness. Additional codes could have emerged as well, but some of the codes with less repeatability were grouped in with applicable existing codes, to achieve a clearer structure of the category.

The program design of ESC was a common theme mentioned during the interviews, as an aspect of building European identity. Many of the participants saw value especially in the organized on-arrival and mid-term trainings. The trainings provided the volunteers with valuable information about the ESC program, great activities, and a lot

of contacts to other ESC volunteers in Slovenia. Michelle mentioned that meeting other volunteers at the on-arrival training was very influential, and that it changed her experience completely by having friends to discover Slovenia and its culture with (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 26, 2025). The meeting of others enabled by the ESC trainings gave volunteers the chance to see new perspectives and learn from other Europeans. Marlena felt like the opportunity to go there, meet people and see what motivates others, settled her down and created a sense of connectiveness (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 25, 2025). These observations were made by the survey participants as well, since 77% of the participants who attended on-arrival or mid-term training, named them as aspects that promoted European identity during their ESC (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, December 17, 2025). The program design was also noted by Daiana who said that,

So it was really smooth, because it's not like, okay, so now at 10 in the morning, we are going to talk about European values, and how do you feel about it, and how you should feel. But it was more okay, we are going to mix everyone and an Italian person and a Czech or a Bulgarian guy. They are going to cook together. So it was these, mixing the countries and mixing everything that made it really smooth for them to see how they were all the same. And they are not that different as some countries, they try to pretend. (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 16, 2025)

She appreciated that the European identity building was subtle and natural rather than something forced and scheduled. Marlena agreed that taking part in the ESC program itself was building European identity by placing the participants in a special context. She saw the value of being in such a European program, that is designed to give young people the opportunity to be in an environment designed to be European (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 25, 2025).

Cultural exchange and interaction with other Europeans were other major things mentioned. Learning about cultures, experiencing them, and interacting with people from other cultures, are the most prevalent methods of European identity building that the ESC participants experience daily throughout the project. Mixing and interacting with other cultures was already mentioned earlier by Daiana, she added to that,

So it was a lot of mixing cultures. The hostel was open. So also people around, around Europe, they were coming here. So it was a really mix of the European cultures and countries. And I think that they were really promoting it. And we were having like, okay, we have our differences, like culture, but we are going to mix them. So I really like how they were doing it, and I think that they were promoting it correctly. (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 16, 2025)

Mixing of cultures was a recurring theme across the interview with Daiana, but all the other interviewees mentioned the importance of this in different ways. For Brita the cultural aspect stood out even more, as she felt like ESC was more of a cultural exchange than a creative experience, which was the focus of her project (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 19, 2025). Cultural learning was a significant part of the ESC experience, and for Michelle it really was a new situation,

So we were five different nationalities in one lunch. And I was like, what I'm gonna do here? And then the next week, I was a participant for project. So I met again, 11 people from different countries. I never did that in my life. It was like, well, I was really impressed by this, and I think I didn't know at the beginning, what was it. And I think during all the year, I really discovered the local culture and Slovenian culture, like I had the feeling that I knew more about Slovenia than France. (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 26, 2025)

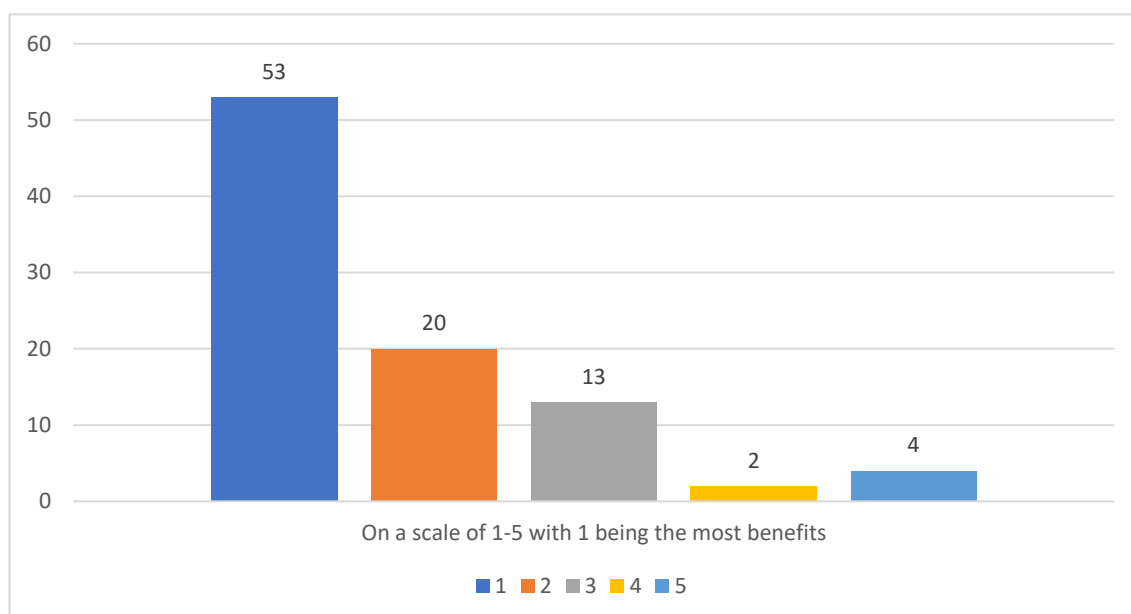
Michelle really felt the effects of the cultural exchange, and she felt like she knew more about her ESC host country than her home country, which brought the different European cultures closer together. Cultural exchange taught Nejla to respect diversity and difference, while some things were weird in the beginning, in the end they were normal and accepted (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 19, 2025). The positive cultural experiences by the interview participants were acknowledged by the survey results as well, as 80% of the respondents named cultural exchange, and 79% named interacting with other Europeans, as an aspect that promoted European identity during their ESC project (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, December 17, 2025). These were the two most often mentioned aspects, which showcase the significance of these ESC experiences.

ESC made many of the participants feel personally supported by the EU. This was a strengthening factor of European identity, especially the EU side of it. For instance, some were very surprised about the quality and existence of the program, as Henry stated that,

I think, the fact I was just shocked that the European Union would actually just pay for my trip, like going into the trip. I again, I was more under the impression of like, okay, this is going to be slave labor. Basically, I'm just going to do like, manual labor. Get paid basically nothing. But hey, my flights are paid for, so I can't complain. But then by the end, it was like, oh, this is actually a very well organized thing. And it wasn't just slave labor, like we did very little work. It was more just a European paid for holiday with the excuse of work on top of it. (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 17, 2025)

This made Henry feel less cynical towards the EU and he gained faith towards a more unified Europe. In addition to the program quality, financial assistance as a part of the ESC program made the interviewees feel more personally affected by the EU. Brita expressed that this was the first time she had realized that these benefits are directly from the EU. She added that usually the benefits are only felt on higher levels (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 19, 2025). She described that ESC brought the EU closer to the individual, and all the other interviewees acknowledged that they have benefited from the EU as well through partaking in ESC. This sentiment was clearly shared by survey participants, as 57.6% of respondents stated that they have clearly received benefits from the EU, and an overwhelming majority was on the positive side of the scale, as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1: I have benefited from the European Union



Opportunity was a key word across the interviews. Many of the interviewees expressed the significant role of the opportunities provided by ESC for the identity building project. Brita explained that while she would be able to travel without such a program, she met many participants who had never left their country, and ESC enabled this experience for them (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 19, 2025). Similarly, during the group interview the funding from ESC arose as an important factor for providing an opportunity. They felt like without the support they could not have taken part in the program, and as a result missed on the many aspects of European identity building (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 6, 2025). For Ivona, who attended the ESC program in Aruba, the opportunity of attending ESC and

the opportunities that the program provided were key in European identity building. She stated that,

I think that's the biggest part, yes, because, like I said, it's a small island in the middle of nowhere, far away from Europe, far away from my country, and just stepping there, living just one week and enjoying the opportunity that ESC gave me, I saw the difference about the people. (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 26, 2025)

Ivona did not just feel grateful for the opportunity to travel and live in Aruba, but also the different opportunities her hosting organization provided, such as giving her a car to use and choosing the preferred daily work tasks.

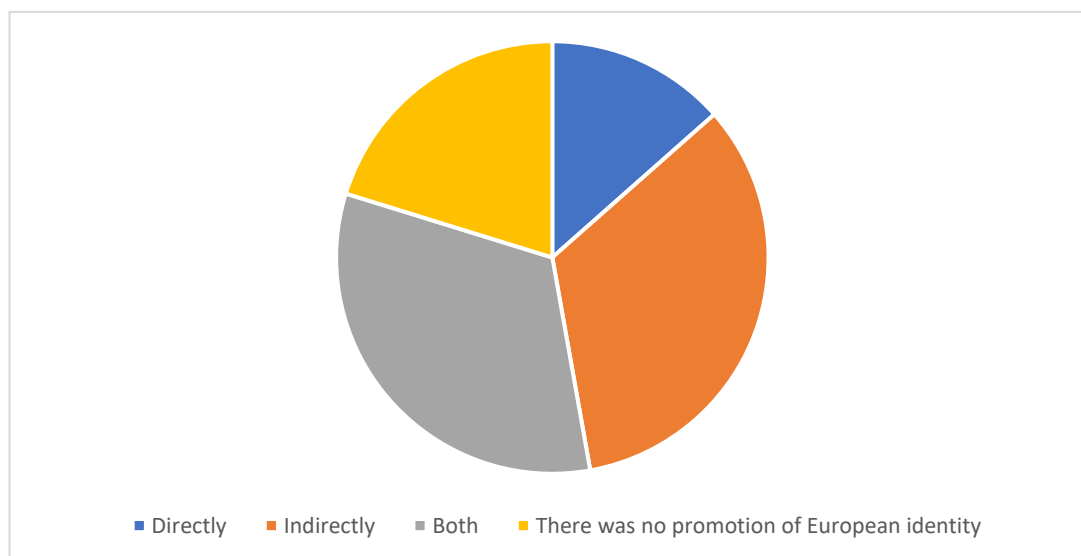
The role of ESC hosting organizations was discussed with each of the interviewees, and for the majority of them, it provided a lot of resources and practices that were advancing the feeling of Europeanness. Marlena said that the hosting organization made her feel at home and in the right place. She enjoyed her short-term ESC project at MCI so much, that she returned to do a long-term ESC there (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 25, 2025). Nejla shared this sentiment and told how the host organization always supported her ideas, helped implement them, and provided new ones when the need for that emerged (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 19, 2025). The host organization was also credited with the way work was organized in ESC group volunteering projects. Henry noted that,

Because we were doing more, like physical renovation work, like painting walls or doing furniture, you were given kind of like a work buddy. That was actually really fantastic, because that meant you were basically isolated for, like, I don't know, three, four or five hours a day doing work with that one person, and then you really built, like, a close connection with that person. (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 17, 2025)

This kind of arranged socialization was something that Henry believed to be especially beneficial, and he expressed how even without a shared language, he built friendships with his work partners. He believed that socializing in the traditional sense would not have had the same result, as he would have likely interacted with other English speakers. Henry was also thankful for the efforts of MCI to showcase the local culture through food, traditions and museum visits. He stated that thanks to these efforts, he felt more welcomed and connected to the project. Additionally, the host organization was given credit for helping the volunteers feel more connected to the host community. Daiana commended MCI on their years of work with international volunteers, which had become visible in the local community, in the form of openness towards her and

other ESC volunteers (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 16, 2025). The majority of survey respondents agreed that their host organization (or sending organization) promoted European identity, but the way it was done and how each participant perceived it varied a lot as seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Did your hosting or sending organization promote European identity directly or indirectly?



The role of the sending organization was not mentioned by the interviewees, and in the surveys only 5.4% mentioned it as an aspect promoting European identity, which was the lowest out of the available options (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, December 17, 2025).

Living abroad and experiencing life in another environment was an aspect that was present throughout the interviews. Life abroad was described as a major contributor for identity building. Daiana mentioned attending the local food festival, which gathered participants from neighboring countries, as a concrete situation where she felt the feeling of Europeanness (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 16, 2025). Brita felt that repeated opportunities for travelling and meeting other Europeans are more beneficial than learning about cultures online. She stated that online learning does not even compare to real life experiences (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 19, 2025). For Michelle, living abroad normalized travelling and international friendships. She was impressed by how easy and effortless it was to travel to neighboring countries from Slovenia, which made her more familiar with even more European countries. Learning more about Slovenia and its surroundings made Michelle realize that the difficulties and problems in life were the same here as back home in

France, which quickly became a unifying European factor for her. Michelle also took part in promoting the ESC program in local schools, which she named as a specific action that promoted her European identity (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 26, 2025). Ivona did the same during her ESC in Aruba, and she felt that promoting something she was taking part in, and enjoying that process, was strengthening her European identity (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 26, 2025). The survey participants also felt that living in another country was a contributing factor, as 73.9% agreed with it (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, December 17, 2025).

Languages were mentioned in different contexts but learning them was especially useful for European identity building. Michelle knew almost no English before coming to volunteer in Slovenia, but during ESC she could learn by making mistakes and having an environment to practice English every day (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 26, 2025). For Brita learning Slovenian was a major contributor, as she stated,

That's actually a big part, the language learning. Because now when I hear, like, for example, Balkan languages, like Croatian or something, I'm like, oh, I recognize that word, and that has made me get a much bigger connection to these countries that I've never been to in Europe, even though it's just like some language parts. So, I think it's really made a difference. (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 19, 2025)

Brita really saw the value of language learning, and she created connections even to countries she had never been to. The sentiment of language learning and multilingualism was noted by the survey results, as 54.3% named them as promoting European identity during ESC (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, December 17, 2025).

The final code of the category revolves around practical learning, skills, and the knowledge acquired during ESC volunteering. Different skills, working styles, and the implications for future careers were seen as important. For Marlina, ESC enabled her to get work experience in her field directly, which helps her to apply for permanent positions earlier in her career. She added that the practical learning in Slovenia helped her to understand the functioning of working life in the EU better (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 25, 2025). Nejla also emphasized the role of practical learning in European identity building by stating that,

This project teaches you something in a more practical way. It's not just something that you hear, and so through teamwork, cooperation, listening to each other, learning from each other, somehow we open our mind and we are ready for cooperation with other people. So I think that it's really important, especially for young people, to participate in this kind of projects, because in any case, it will be very, very useful for them for their European identity. (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 19, 2025)

Especially teamwork was an important factor for Nejla, as this brought people closer to each other and it normalized cooperation with people from different European countries. Henry mentioned that learning how to properly cut an onion, taught by his fellow volunteer, was not just a very useful skill but a long-lasting memory of his time in Slovenia, and the things he learned while working with other Europeans (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 17, 2025). The survey results showed that 52% of the respondents felt that gained skills and knowledge promoted European identity (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, December 17, 2025).

4.2 Role of Origin and Background on Identity Building Through ESC

The second category focused on the role of origin and background on identity building through ESC. The coding of this group focused on the specific aspects of personal characteristics and background, that were noticed to affect how European identity building was perceived, and how these variables might affect the outcome.

The first code includes the findings about how European identity building was perceived based on not having EU citizenship. Interview participants coming from outside of the EU were especially inquired about this, as they had firsthand experience of the matter. Henry talked a lot about the role of Brexit and how it created a concrete divider between feeling British and European, and in this case EU membership was seen as being European. He explained that while he thinks that Brexit was a terrible idea, he got more defensive of the position that he did not support, as he saw the different views coming from the EU Europeans during discussions about Brexit. Henry felt that from a British perspective, the Europeans coming from the EU already had a more established European identity, and while he already identified with Europe to a certain extent, he felt closer to the identification of others at the end of the project (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 17, 2025). Another approach to this aspect appeared during the group interview, when a participant from Georgia felt like ESC brought her country closer to the EU. She felt that she can do more for her country

now that she experienced living in the EU, and that she feels more European due to resonating more with the values and standards of the EU compared to Georgia (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 6, 2025). Nejla on the other hand felt a lot of stress and uncertainty about having to apply for a visa to stay in the EU, which did not make her first impression of the project optimal. Despite this, she did not feel like the lack of EU citizenship was a hindrance for her when it came to European identity building (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 19, 2025).

The civic and cultural divide of European identity played an important role in distinguishing between EU and European identity that was promoted through ESC. Nejla felt more connected with the cultural side of European identity as her home country of Bosnia and Herzegovina is not a member of the EU. She named values such as hospitality, diversity, and desire for cooperation as common European values that align with Bosnia. Nejla stated that her country does not have the same rights and responsibilities that EU membership would bring, and that being able to attend ESC despite this, brought her closer to the civic part of European identity (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 19, 2025). Henry felt that in the case of the UK, the civic part of identity is tied within his country, which already is a union of countries. He thought that this makes it more difficult to identify with another union such as the EU, when compared to a country like the Netherlands without a competing union. Henry also described that he has a British accent, education, and a sense of humor, and he does not believe that inherently European alternatives for these exist. Thus, he saw the difficulties in European identity building on both sides of the civic and cultural identity, but he emphasized that ESC made him resonate more with both (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 17, 2025). Daiana instead felt a strong connection to the civic side of European identity and culturally she felt closer to Spain. She noticed cultural differences during ESC such as dinner times, which were more closely aligned among other European volunteers than Spaniards. Her closeness to the civic identity stems from not resonating with the politics of Spain but instead feeling that EU politics and programs, such as ESC, are closer to her values (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 16, 2025). A survey respondent made the same observation in an open answer question, on explaining how the origin of a person affects the experience of European identity building through ESC. They explained that they disagreed with the political situation in their home country, but taking part in ESC made

them feel more European politically, as the views of the EU aligned with them more closely (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, December 17, 2025).

The home country and roots of the interviewees had a lot of effect on the identity building. Daiana noticed during her on-arrival training that in the beginning the volunteers from Türkiye felt like outsiders compared to other participants, but she described them having a more European belonging after a while (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 16, 2025). Participants with dual nationalities or acknowledged ancestry in another European country, felt more European already before taking part in ESC, and it made them more open towards European identity building. This was the case with Henry, who believed that he was more open to taking part in ESC and the European identity building due to his Danish roots, compared to his pro-Brexit friend (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 17, 2025). Brita shared this sentiment due to her Danish roots as well. She also believed that in her home country of Sweden it is more common to not have a strong national identity in the first place, which in turn leaves more space for a European identity. Brita was seeking opportunities to be more associated with a European mindset, which she believed to achieve through ESC and travelling (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 19, 2025). While Brita did see European identity building of ESC positively, she felt like it was especially an efficient way of learning more about her own country. She said that,

I think actually the experience with ESC probably made me identify more with my own country, because I, for once, got more immersed into another culture in Europe, and then I ended up seeing the differences more, which in turn made me, as a Swede, feel more Swedish. I kind of realized the things about me that are Swedish. So, it actually kind of had the opposite effect, not in the way where I'm like, oh, I'm so Swedish and not European, but more like just I realized my identity more. (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 19, 2025)

Identifying more with Sweden was not an intended outcome, but Brita did not see it as an issue either, as she does not feel that her national identity and European identity are competing with each other. Many of the survey respondents discovered this as well in the open-ended question about their identity changing during ESC. The responses included a newfound appreciation for national identity in addition to European identity, feeling proudness of their home country, and learning more about home country through the differences abroad (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, December 17, 2025).

How ESC volunteers perceived Europe and being European before their volunteering impacted their experience. Brita wanted to immerse herself in a more European space, and she thought that ESC would be a perfect opportunity for this. She felt like she had not experienced enough to know what being European meant (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 19, 2025). The views Daiana had on Europe and being European before attending ESC, were shaped by many factors. She described that the Spanish education system often portrayed the EU in a negative way when it came to affecting the economic and political system of Spain. And before attending ESC she used to think that Europe is something big and far away which is difficult to relate to, but her father used to travel for work, which inspired her to take part in ESC. For her the realization that she can have the same rights and “be the same person” as someone from another EU country, was a big surprise because of her education. And she believed that made it more effective, as she had witnessed both sides of feeling Europeaness (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 16, 2025).

The final code of the chapter is related to having or acquiring external perspectives on European identity. The US and the Americans were often compared to when talking about Europeans, which constructed a clearer perspective for many volunteers. Ivona noticed in Aruba how the surroundings reminded her of the US, and that the local people were not predominantly identifying as Europeans. Despite this, she felt that the lifestyle of Arubans was closer to her home country of North Macedonia than the US. She did notice a big contrast to the Lithuanian ESC volunteers in Aruba, who were shocked to learn how Aruba was functioning, and that attending ESC outside of Europe made them see bigger differences between their perception of Europe, and the places outside of it (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 26, 2025). Brita had met an American who had a stronger view on what Europeans are than the Europeans themselves. This inspired her to think that,

When you've only been in Europe and mostly only know European people, it's the same thing as if you would just be in Sweden and never go outside. You never really get a true kind of image of what being a Swede is. Same with like, if you don't go outside of Europe, maybe you don't get like, a real image of what it actually means. (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 19, 2025)

She felt that understanding what being European means was easier to understand if time was spent outside of Europe, just like she noticed the Swedish qualities of herself better once living in Slovenia. Brita also described that for her European identity meant that she has more in common with other European people than those who come from outside

of Europe. Henry explained that the British feel more close to the Commonwealth countries, especially Australia, New Zealand and Canada, which makes it more difficult to identify with Europeans (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 17, 2025). Daiana also had personal experience with Latin Americans, majority of which did not hold a Latin American identity, and explained that compared to them, the EU with programs such as ESC, has brought Europeans closer to each other and created a sense of brother and sisterhood (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 16, 2025).

4.3 Effectiveness of ESC for European Identity Building

The third and final category focuses on the effectiveness of European identity building through ESC. The codes in this category were selected to showcase how effective ESC was in identity building towards Europe and the EU, how effective it was for individuals, and which variables and limitations made an impact on the effectiveness of the European identity building.

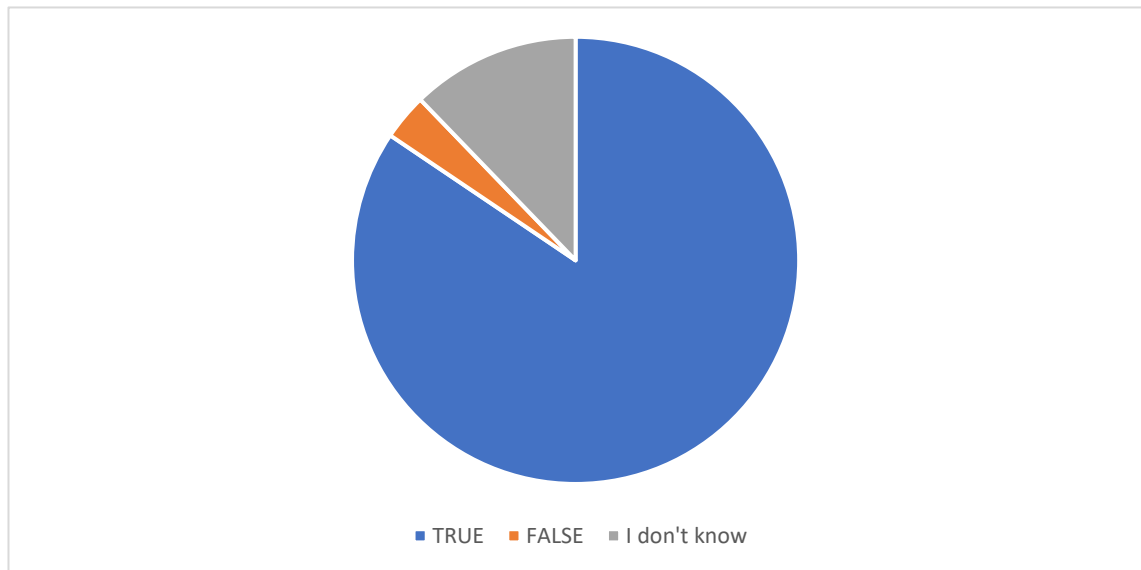
The first code is about how the sample group saw the effectiveness of the European identity building, and did they believe it to be effective in their case. All of the interview participants thought that ESC is an efficient tool for European identity building. Henry thought ESC was definitely an efficient identity building tool. He said that mobility programs such as ESC are some of the best ways to keep peace in Europe, because they enable an easier way of creating international friendships and connections to other parts of the continent. He added that,

And I think, yeah, there's a tremendous amount that can be gained from that. Because if you feel inherently like you're an out group, the best thing you can do is just being shown something, someone from the other group, just doing something nice, you know, like seeing that they're human. (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 17, 2025)

He felt that the positive interactions created by ESC volunteering are some of the most efficient in creating linkages between in- and outgroups, or in this case national identities in Europe. Daiana saw the difference between her and her similarly aged coworkers who had not taken part in ESC. She feels clearly more European compared to them, and her coworkers have been really curious about the fact that she feels this way. Daiana herself credits ESC for this (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November

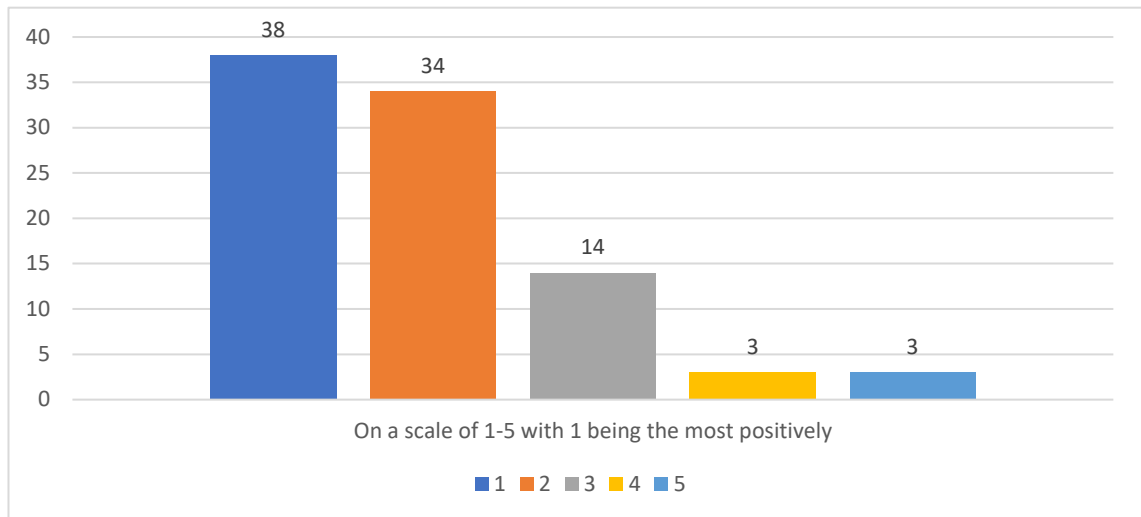
16, 2025). The survey respondents agreed with this, as 82.6% said that ESC is an efficient European identity building tool, as seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3: ESC is an efficient European identity building tool



ESC had a positive effect on how the volunteers viewed the EU. In the group interview, the interviewees were aware of the European identity building that the EU is trying to achieve through ESC, and many of them said that they were open to the process and as their ESC progressed, they became happier about this happening and being part of it (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 6, 2025). Ivona felt the same way during her ESC in Aruba, as she thought that it was positive for the EU to try and create a European identity. And even though she was coming from outside of the EU, she did not feel like the EU was excluding the non-EU Europeans, because of the possibility to attend ESC even from North Macedonia, like in her case. Ivona expressed that the identity building project motivates Macedonians to “open their eyes” and see what is happening around them as well, not only focusing on their country (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 26, 2025). The survey participants agreed, as 70.6% of the respondents named volunteering and mobility programs as a way that the EU brings the people of Europe closer together. This was the second most popular answer in this category, only behind freedom of movement which was selected by 78.2% of the respondents (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, December 17, 2025). Another survey question showcased that ESC volunteers generally had a positive view towards European identity building through ESC, as seen in Figure 4.

Figure 4: How did you view European identity building during your ESC volunteering?



The interview participants changed their perspective towards Europe and European identity. Some of the interviewees identified notably more as European after attending ESC than before it. Marlena described that the experiences during her ESC made Europe seem like a big country. She said that her European identity is still processing, as through ESC she meets new people every day, which makes her feel more connected to Europe day after day (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 25, 2025). Nejla learned more about herself and started to feel like she is part of a wider community, while still retaining her national identity. She believes that ESC is a great opportunity to learn and grow, and that she learned to be more tolerant and understanding of the perspectives of others (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 19, 2025). One survey respondent wrote into the open-ended question that they had taken part in a short-term ESC, where a young Moldovan-Russian man had used the volunteering opportunity to avoid being enrolled in the war in Ukraine. He had criticized European values and stated that he does not believe in them, but at the end of the project it was visible that he had found some understanding towards Europe. On top of this, the survey data shows that 73.9% of respondents feel more European because they attended ESC (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, December 17, 2025).

Most of the interviewees already had some sense of European identity, but they believed that ESC was a reinforcing factor to it. Henry described that ESC definitely built on top of his European identity. He felt that during ESC the European values and morals that Europeans aspire to have, became clearer (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 17, 2025). Ivona felt that her ESC experience in Aruba strengthened her sense of Europeanness and that it really motivated her to seek out more European

experiences. She now wants to take part in ESC again but in Europe this time, to see the differences between these experiences and have a more traditional ESC volunteering (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 26, 2025). Many survey respondents also wrote into the open-ended question on changing identity, that their underlying connection to Europe became stronger and more visible in their opinions, throughout their daily lives (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, December 17, 2025).

The effectiveness of the identity building has variables that might affect the outcome. Michelle explained that while she believes ESC to be an effective tool for the purpose, it is not always easy to achieve these results. She explained that the organization and the volunteer need to be suitable for each other, and now that she is working on the organizational side, she has noticed difficulties in finding the right volunteers. She believes that negative experiences can decrease European identity, and that is why she thinks that the organizations need to be careful when hosting ESC projects. Michelle added that for the participant the experience also comes down to luck, depending on whether the volunteer makes friends or what kind of people they meet. She said that her first roommate during ESC felt lonely, due to missing the on-arrival training (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 26, 2025). Nejla thought that she was in an advantageous position compared to other ESC volunteers she worked with, since she was able to speak Slovenian, while her fellow volunteers were not. She felt like she got more immersed and had more opportunities to interact with the locals because of her language skills (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 19, 2025).

The final code of the category focused on the limitations in the effectiveness of European identity building through ESC. Some limitations appeared during the interviews, especially Henry expressed that the UK leaving the ESC program was a shame. Now UK residents are not eligible to take part in ESC anymore, which Henry feels like is wasted potential, since he felt the effects of ESC. He also said that some participants in ESC used the program as a means to a free holiday. These participants did not really care for the project, which in the case of group volunteering can be a limiting factor for the overall experience (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 17, 2025). Michelle felt that physical features such as skin tone could become a challenge, especially in countries or regions where racism is more widespread. She thought that feeling European would be difficult after experiencing racism in an environment that is supposed to promote European identity through

positive experiences (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 26, 2025). The lack of interest in feeling more European can also be a challenge for ESC. 43.4% of the survey respondents said that they do not want to feel more European. The remaining 56.6% wanted to feel more European on the other hand, which shows the divisiveness and potential responsiveness of volunteers towards European identity building (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, December 17, 2025).

4.4 Additional Research Findings

In this additional section, interview findings that were not repetitive enough to be grouped into their own code will be presented. These findings did not form a clear category but could nevertheless provide interesting information and talking points for the discussion part of this thesis.

Some of the interview participants mentioned the opportunity to participate in Erasmus projects during their ESC, as a major contributor to their European identity. Brita named the participation, but also helping in the organization of the Erasmus youth exchange as one of the highlights during her ESC. She felt that especially during the youth exchange, she was immersed in a multicultural space in a more memorable way (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 19, 2025). Michelle also got to take part in Erasmus trainings, and she was a key contributor to organizing a youth exchange during her ESC. She felt that being on the organizational side of Erasmus helped her to understand the work and effort that goes into it, and the European layers of it (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 26, 2025).

European symbolism was not a well discussed topic throughout the interviews, but it got brought up in two ways. During the interview with Daiana, in her background there were postcards from different places around Europe that she had visited. After the formal part of the interview, the postcards were discussed and Daiana really felt like they were a symbol of her time spent abroad on her travels, but also from her time at ESC. Many of the cards were from Slovenia or the surrounding areas, which she had visited during her volunteering, and for Daiana they brought joy and memories of her time spent around Europe (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 16, 2025). On the contrary, the possible lack of symbolism for ESC was brought up by Brita, as she felt like it is a shame that ESC is not as widely known as Erasmus is. She added that while ESC has its own branding, it does not reach all the people who would

benefit from it the most, especially those with a lack of European identity (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 19, 2025). The surveys also show that European symbolism did not play much of a role in promoting European identity during ESC, as only 15.2% of the respondents thought it had an impact (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, December 17, 2025).

Finally, ESC had an impact on the cosmopolitan and global values side of European identity. Michelle discovered the ease of travelling across countries in Europe, which made her realize that taking the bus or a train to other countries is a viable option. She said that she now prefers green travel methods thanks to her experience during ESC (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 26, 2025). Marlena described that the people she met during her ESC shaped her idea of Europeanness, as being open to change and the ambition to improve our world. She was inspired by the young Europeans and their energy and motivation to work for a better future (V. Mäntyneva, personal communication, November 25, 2025).

5 Discussion of Findings

This chapter will discuss the presented results of the study through analysis and references to the literature review. The following sections will each focus on one of the secondary questions and answer them. In each section, a grounded theory breakdown will be presented to clarify the impacts and results of the ESC program on European identity. The grounded theory was compiled with the help of AI, as mentioned previously in this paper.

The main findings of the study are implications that ESC functions well and effectively in relation to European identity building. A clear majority of the interview and survey results showed positive attitudes and effectiveness of the ESC program as an identity building tool. Different aspects of ESC clearly had an effect on European identity, the origin and background of a volunteer did not exclude them from taking part in identity building, and ESC effectively achieved the desired results of European identity building.

5.1 From Aspects of ESC into European Identity

The first category of results showed that ESC affects identity through different aspects. The aspects of ESC that contribute to European identity are program design, cultural

exchange, interacting with new people, personally benefitting from the EU, opportunities, host organization, language learning and practical learning. All of these aspects have an effect, some were mentioned more often than the others.

The program design of ESC was mainly related to the on-arrival and mid-term trainings, and this was a key part of the European identity building. While the trainings provide a lot of useful information and fun activities, it became apparent that the ease of socializing and making connections with other volunteers was the main aspect that contributed to the feeling of Europeaness. This is what Fligstein (2007) suggested, that repeated positive interactions with other Europeans is one of the strongest ways to build European identity. Attending the trainings provided the volunteers with friends to spend time with after the training had concluded, which enabled repeated positive interactions throughout the volunteering experience. Interaction with other Europeans and attending the trainings were a part of the ESC program design, and while ESC states European identity building as an objective, it is mainly not approached directly, but through indirect means. As noted by Ciaglia et al. (2018), feeling European needs to be experienced instead of being told to feel so. ESC is well in line with this as the results showed, such as the importance of real-life experiences compared to online experiences. This method of indirect identity building was perceived as the right way to approach European identity by the volunteers as well.

Cultural exchange during ESC was educational but also taught the volunteers to respect diversity and differences. This also helped participants such as Michelle to develop an interest in cultures and discovering Europe. Through cultural learning it became easier to see that while European countries have their differences, they also have a lot in common with each other. Like Brkić (2011) mentioned, national identities are mostly shaped by cultural aspects. Thus, the function of ESC bridging gaps between the national cultures in Europe, has the ability to create a sense of European culture, which is a key aspect of future European identity building.

ESC especially increased identification with the EU, as participants felt like they were personally supported by the EU through financial assistance. For most interviewees this was the first concrete example of benefits from the EU, which increased the positive sentiment towards EU and Europe. Fligstein et al. (2012) stated that the ease of European cross border business enabled by the EU made people more European. Similarly, Leith et al. (2019) noted that being outside the Schengen area decreased the

feeling of Europeanness among the British. These are examples of the EU benefits which are visible in the daily life of average people, and they are strengthening factors to European identity. ESC follows this logic as well through the opportunities provided by the program and the financial assistance, which are arguably even stronger means of support to the individual. Leith et al. (2019) also stated that people with less opportunities need more opportunities to travel to feel more European. ESC provides exactly this, as some volunteers had never travelled outside their country before, or they could not have taken part in ESC without financial assistance from the program. Travelling and living abroad became normalized due to ESC, and international friendships became important. Bruter (2003a) also discovered that travelling and living abroad were major contributors to European identity.

The ESC program provided opportunities for communities to internationalize and feel more connected to Europe. Ciaglia et al. (2018) called for a “pensioner Erasmus” to provide old people with opportunities to feel more European. ESC acts as one, through bringing international experiences to their home communities. Daiana described that through ESC volunteers at MCI, the host community had become more open to international volunteers, which increased the European feeling in the community. Communities were deemed by Cicognani et al. (2019) as key contributors to European identity. The author also noted that trust is important in building communities, and according to Ciaglia et al. (2018), trust in other Europeans builds European identity. Marlena felt the connection to her host community and the trust towards her host organization, which inspired her to come back to Idrija for another ESC project. The host organization helped volunteers feel welcome in the community and provided opportunities for them to engage with it. As an example, engaging with the community happened through promoting ESC in the local schools. The volunteers believed that made them identify more as a European, since they were teaching others about something they were taking part in that had the characteristics of European. Bem (1967) stated that an individual observes their unclear identity and beliefs through their own actions. This supports the idea that engaging in ESC promotion would make the volunteers identify more with the values of the ESC program and subsequently feel more European.

Language learning was a major contributor to European identity building. Brita especially mentioned that learning Slovenian helped her to be more connected to

Slovenia during her ESC, but also to other Balkan countries which she had never visited, by understanding words from these languages that she heard being spoken back in her home country. She described this as enhancing her European identity, and these findings are in line with Fuss et al. (2004), who stated that multilingualism increases the feeling of Europeanness. The Online Language Support platform was never mentioned in the interviews though, which indicates that the language learning tool provided by ESC requires improvement, and that the language learning happens mostly through the community and host organization. Language skills were not the only skills that affected European identity, practical skills were also important. The skills were learned through non-formal and informal learning, which the European Commission (2025b) set as a model for the program. Hagh Talab (2013) found that the informal learning of the EVS program helped the participants to develop a shared identity through everyday practices and learning. These findings are in line with the results of this research on ESC.

Using grounded theory, the aspects and how they transform into European identity can be explained. The conditions are the ESC program and the EU funding that concretize with the host organization and the host community. They enable interactions such as on-arrival and mid-term trainings, multicultural space, cultural exchange, learning skills and languages. These interactions create the consequences of practical mechanisms for European identity building, feeling the benefits of the EU firsthand, and recognizing the commonalities across Europeans. This answers the secondary question of which aspects of ESC have an effect on European identity building. The theory can be visualized in Table 2.

Table 2: Grounded theory: Aspects of ESC that affect European identity

Conditions	Interactions	Consequences
ESC program, funding, host organization, host community	ESC trainings, multicultural space, cultural exchange, learnings skills and languages	Practical mechanisms for European identity building, feeling the benefits of the EU personally, recognition of commonalities between Europeans

5.2 Origin and Background Shape the ESC Experience

The second category of results showed that the origin and background of a person affect responsiveness, openness, and willingness to European identity building through ESC. The results indicate that EU membership, home country, civic and cultural aspects, roots, pre-existing views of Europe, and external perspectives all had an effect on the ESC identity building experience. None of these qualities were deemed to exclude from experiencing European identity, but they all shaped the way it was experienced.

This paper defined European identity in a way that includes non-EU Europeans, as ESC has participants from non-EU countries as well. Attending ESC from outside of the EU was not deemed to exclude from European identity building, but the experience varied depending on the country of origin. In the case of the UK, Henry clearly was more skeptical towards the ESC program than any of the other interviewees. For him it was surprising that the EU would fund his stay in another country. This sentiment was not brought up by anyone else during the research, which shows the unique relationship between the UK and the EU. Henry thought that ESC definitely increased his feeling of Europeanness, which shows that even for British participants it can be a useful tool. The case of Henry is directly related to ESC being launched right after Brexit, which was to address the lack of European identity as mentioned by Dalboni (2017). Participants from non-EU Eastern European countries had a very different sentiment towards the EU. Participants from countries like Georgia and Bosnia and Herzegovina felt more hopeful towards the EU and already had a sense of Europeanness, along with a desire to acquire a more comprehensive European identity closer to the EU. For them ESC was an opportunity to live in and experience the EU, and to better understand what being a European meant to the EU Europeans. This is what Kuus (2004) described as graduating to Europe, in reference to non-EU European countries developing and identifying closer to the EU European countries. Turkish and Russian participants felt more like outsiders at the beginning of their ESC projects, but towards the end they had a more European belonging. Wiarda (2005) worried about the differences between the EU and non-EU European countries being too far apart, which seems to be more apparent in the case of more distinctively different and nationalistic identities.

The civic and cultural components of identity varied depending on the country of the volunteer. For Henry, the British identity was difficult to define as European, due to the civic part of British identity being tied to the union of countries that the UK already is.

Similarly, the cultural component was tied to being British and having British qualities. This is why the third component of ethnicity was brought up, as Leith et al. (2019) observed the British to associate European identity as more ethnic. This is in line with the observations of Henry, and it explains why the identity building through ESC was effective in his case, as ESC promotes the civic and cultural parts of European identity, which are more unifying than the ethnic component. Nejla instead already had a cultural European identity but lacked the civic part of it, due to her non-EU home country of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Munta et al. (2022) explained that ORA was aimed at creating a Yugoslav identity, and to some extent it succeeded, which implies that ESC can work in a similar way to build the civic component of identity even for non-EU Europeans. Daiana on the other hand felt the civic connection to Europe but cultural connection to Spain. She described that the politics of the EU are closer to her values than of those in Spain, especially democracy, human rights and liberal values, which are the base of the civic European identity (Banjac & Pušnik, 2014; Ciaglia et al., 2018). Even though Daiana felt that her cultural identity was Spanish, she had started to collect European postcards after being inspired by ESC to do so. The symbolism of the postcards is tied to the cultural component of identity as stated by Bruter (2003b). This indicates that Daiana has an underlying cultural European identity due to the European symbolism that these postcards represent, which seems to have developed during her ESC volunteering.

Having roots or connections to other European countries meant having more openness towards European identity building, as was observed with Henry and Brita. This indicates that combining multiple national European identities under one European identity, is a logical step for many people with connections to multiple European countries. Brita also found that she identified more with Sweden after attending ESC, but this did not mean that her Swedish identity was competing with her European identity. Jatko Stålnacke (2023) observed this happening with Romanian ESC participants as well. Munta et al. (2022) pointed this as one of the strengths of ESC when compared to ORA, which tried to replace the national identity with a Yugoslav identity, while ESC aims at building a coexisting identity. Schraff and Sczepanski (2022) noted that developing European identity does not require suppressing or replacing the national identity, which was observed throughout the research.

How ESC participants perceived and viewed Europe before the project affected their experience. Brita was motivated to attend ESC because she felt European but did not have enough experience to explain what being European is. She felt that attending ESC will help her clarify the idea. This is what Bem (1967) described as observing own behavior and experiences to clarify identification. This implies that volunteers with an interest and willingness to identify as Europeans are given a powerful tool for that by attending ESC. Even if underlying negative images of Europe and the EU exist, such as in the case of Daiana, who experienced the portraying of the EU in a negative manner through her teachers, they can be reversed through ESC attendance. As Munta et al. (2022) stated that the EU lacks the ability to determine the national curricula, which may lead to a lack of European citizenship education (Eurydice, 2005). In fact, Daiana felt that it was beneficial for her to experience both sides of the argument, which indicates that people with negative views towards European identity would be an appropriate target group for ESC participation. The ESC target group consists of young people, who were deemed by Mitchell (2015) to be more open towards European identity building. Marlina was especially inspired by the young Europeans she met and their motivation to change the world for better. This shows that the positive group interactions that are part of the ESC experience help to portray Europe in a positive way. Just like Graf and Paolini (2017) stated, that positive intergroup interactions create positive effects.

External perspectives had a large impact on understanding European identity. The comparisons between the US and Europe were observed often, and many volunteers believed it to be easier to define an American compared to defining a European, due to established American values and qualities. Ivona felt that during her ESC in Aruba, she developed a clearer picture of what European is, when she spent time in a predominantly non-European environment. Jatko Stålnacke (2023) also found that ESC participants saw the European qualities in each other better, when faced with a comparison to the Americans for example. This is how the author described building of identity through the Self/Other concept as well. Especially attending ESC outside of Europe provided a clear Self/Other divide between Europeans as Self and the host country as the Other. Having ESC participants from outside of Europe would also benefit the Europeans attending ESC in Europe, by giving them a concrete example of the Other in their daily life.

Using grounded theory, how the origin and background of the ESC volunteer shaped the experience can be explained. The conditions are EU membership, home country, roots, existing views on Europe, and European centralized worldview. These will lead to interactions such as confronting European identity, diverse European backgrounds, reevaluating Europeanness, and external perspectives on European identity. These lead to consequences such as being more open to European identity building, resonations with the civic and cultural components of European identity, and reinforcing European identity. This answers the secondary question of how origin and background affect identity building through ESC. The theory can be visualized in Table 3.

Table 3: Grounded theory: Effects of origin and background on European identity building

Conditions	Interactions	Consequences
EU membership, home country, roots, existing views on Europe, European centralized worldview	Confrontation with European identity, diverse European backgrounds, reevaluation of Europeanness, external perspectives on European identity	Openness to European identity building, resonation with civic and cultural components, reinforcing European identity

5.3 ESC as an Effective Tool for Identity Building

The third category of results showed that ESC was an efficient European identity building tool. ESC participants perceived the program as effective in identity building, increasing positive views towards the EU, and strengthening of European identity. The effectiveness was shaped by some variables and limitations. Additional effectiveness regarding subsequent Erasmus participation and green travel preferences were observed.

The ESC participants saw ESC as an effective European identity building tool. The interviewees emphasized the effectiveness of it, and Daiana credited ESC for feeling more European herself, compared to her coworkers. Jatko Stålnacke (2023) presented similar results, which showed that ESC bridged gaps between Europeans, resulting in a more European belonging. The EU views of ESC participants were also positive, and many were happy about the existence of the EU identity building project. The results

showed that majority of the ESC participants felt more European after attending ESC, which shows a stronger European identity. RAY Network (2025) also observed an increased closeness towards Europe.

The effectiveness of ESC was still subject to variables and limitations. Variables such as luck, pre-existing language skills and selection of the right volunteers. Michelle believes that selecting the right volunteers is crucial for identity building, as negative experiences that weaken the feeling of Europeanness could occur when the volunteer and the project are incompatible. Graf and Paolini (2017) also noted this, that negative group experiences may be counterproductive. Another limitation is the countries left out of the ESC program, as Henry mentioned the UK leaving the program was a huge shame. The UK and Switzerland are the major countries not participating in ESC (European Commission, 2025b) and including them in the program could be beneficial for all parties. Especially in the case of the UK, which has a conflicting national identity when it comes to European identity (Leith et al., 2019).

Specifically effective measures included the “double participation” in ESC and Erasmus. Participants who had the opportunity to be part of an Erasmus exchange during their ESC named it as one of the most effective moments in their European identity building experience. Mitchell (2015) deemed Erasmus as an effective European identity building tool, which supports the views of the ESC participants. Additionally, European Commission (2025b) named promotion of sustainable practices and green behavior as one of the objectives of ESC. Michelle was inspired by the ease of green travel during her ESC project, which made her only use green travel methods even after the end of her volunteering. This suggests that ESC has the capability to succeed in its global objectives as well, which Mayer et al. (2025) named as a way to shape European identity into a unifying factor in the form of cosmopolitanism.

Using grounded theory, the effectiveness of ESC as an identity building tool can be explained. The conditions are pre-existing amount of identification with Europe, alongside variables and limitations of the ESC program. These will lead to interactions such as identity development in practice and ESC program opportunities. These lead to consequences such as stronger European identity, perceived effectiveness of ESC, and positive views towards the EU. This answers the secondary question of how effective the European identity building of ESC is. The theory can be visualized in Table 4.

Table 4: Grounded theory: Effectiveness of ESC as an identity building tool

Conditions	Interactions	Consequences
Pre-existing identity, variables, limitations	Identity development in practice, ESC program opportunities	Stronger European identity, perceived effectiveness of ESC, positive EU views

6 Conclusion

This thesis aimed at answering the research question: What are the impacts of the European Solidarity Corps on European identity? The question was approached with three secondary questions regarding the aspects of ESC that impact European identity, the effects that origin and background have on it, and the effectiveness of ESC as a European identity building tool. A mixed-methods approach using qualitative interviews and quantitative survey data was taken to answer each question. The results of this study answered the research question by deeming that ESC constitutes of multiple aspects with identity building qualities, with different experiences based on origin and background without exclusion based on them, while effectively building European identity. The results showed that the ESC participants believed ESC to be an effective identity building tool, especially in strengthening European identity and belonging to Europe. The identity building happened through multiple aspects with cultural exchange, interactions with other Europeans, learning languages, and opportunities provided by the ESC program, as the aspects that stood out the most. The origin and background of ESC participants shaped the experience, especially the home country, the level of civic and cultural identification with Europe, and the external perspectives on European identity. However, the origin and background of the volunteer did not exclude them from European identity building and identifying with Europe. The results were in line with previous research that was showcased in the literature review.

This thesis showed that ESC had positive effects on the European identity of volunteers. While this was the focus of the research, it simultaneously revealed the importance of the program for so many of the participants. The interviewed volunteers and the encounters enabled by the ESC showed a plethora of positive effects on the careers, self-growth, mental health, and the life in general of the volunteers. The author of this

thesis also observed the positive impacts of ESC volunteers on the host organizations and host communities in the form of events, growth of operations, and international perspective. As the ESC program faces restructuring, it remains crucial to take into account that the observed impacts and the conducted research show, that ESC and the hosting organizations contribute a lot to the life of young Europeans, which is why it is a valuable asset to all of Europe, and that Europeans need the program in the future as well.

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Appendix I. Interview Questionnaire

Topic 1: About the interviewee and ESC experience

1. Where are you from?
 - a. Country, urban or rural?
2. Tell me about your ESC project.
 - a. What did you do?
 - b. How was your experience?

Topic 2: Identity

1. Do you identify with:
 - a. Only your country
 - b. Your country more than Europe
 - c. Your country and Europe equally
 - d. Europe more than your country
 - e. Only Europe, not your country
2. Has this identification changed during or after the ESC? How?
3. What does European identity mean to you? And why so?
 - a. Is it different from a European Union identity and how so?

Topic 3: How did the project promote European identity

1. How did your hosting organization promote or strengthen European identity?
 - a. Did the hosting organization do something better than the hosting community regarding this aspect?
2. Which specific situations or aspects of ESC promoted directly or indirectly European identity? (On-arrival training, activities, travel, foreign language learning etc.)
3. Have your views towards the European Union or European identity changed because of ESC? And how?
 - a. Would you say it has been overall positive or negative?
4. Do you think that the origin of a person affects how they experience European identity building through ESC? How and why?

Topic 4: Evaluating ESC

1. Looking back at ESC, do you think it is an efficient tool for European identity building and why so?

Appendix II. Survey Questionnaire

Part 1: About your volunteering

1. Which volunteering program did you take part in?
 - a. ESC individual volunteering
 - b. ESC group volunteering
2. How long was your volunteering period?
 - a. Less than 1 month
 - b. 1-2 months
 - c. 2-6 months
 - d. 6+ months
3. Where are you from?
 - a. From a EU country
 - b. From a non-EU European country
 - c. Not from Europe
4. Do you come from a more urban or rural place?
 - a. More urban
 - b. More rural

Part 2: Identity

1. Which of these identification profiles fits you the best?
 - a. Only my country, not Europe
 - b. My country more than Europe
 - c. My country and Europe equally
 - d. Europe more than my country
 - e. Only Europe, not my country
2. I feel connected to Europe. (on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being the most)
3. I feel connected to the European Union. (on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being the most)

True or false:

4. I feel more connected to the European Union than Europe as a whole.
5. I believe a European identity is possible to achieve.
6. I think people in Europe have a lot of things in common.
7. Volunteering and living in another country made me feel more European than before.
8. I want to feel more European.
9. I believe that Europe is meant to be more unified.

Part 3: Views on the European Union

1. I view the European Union (on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being very positive)

2. I have benefited from the European Union (on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being a lot of benefits)
3. In what ways does the European Union bring the people of Europe closer together? Select the 3 options that you see as most important.
 - a. Democracy and the rule of law
 - b. Values
 - c. Culture
 - d. History
 - e. Freedom of movement
 - f. Languages
 - g. Volunteering and mobility programs
 - h. Economy
 - i. Sports
4. I view the enlargement of the European Union (adding new member countries).. (on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being positively)

Part 4: ESC and identity

1. Did your identity change during or after your ESC volunteering?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
2. If you answered “Yes”, explain shortly.
3. Do you feel more European because you attended ESC?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Other:
4. Did your hosting or sending organization promote European identity directly or indirectly?
 - a. Directly
 - b. Indirectly
 - c. Both
 - d. There was no promotion of European identity
5. Which of the following aspects promoted European identity during your ESC project? Select all that apply.
 - a. Travelling
 - b. Living in another country
 - c. Host community
 - d. Host organization
 - e. Sending organization
 - f. On-arrival and mid-term trainings

- g. Cultural exchange
 - h. Interacting with other Europeans
 - i. Fun
 - j. Independency
 - k. Responsibility
 - l. European symbolism
 - m. Gained skills and knowledge
 - n. Learning foreign languages / multilingualism
 - o. Free time
 - p. The received funding during the volunteering period
 - q. Other:
6. How did you view European identity building during your ESC volunteering?
(on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being positively)
 7. Do you think the origin of a person affects how they experience European identity building through ESC?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. I don't know
 8. If you answered "Yes", explain shortly how may the origin of a person affect it.
 9. ESC is an efficient European identity building tool.
 - a. True
 - b. False
 - c. I don't know
 10. I believe that ESC can stay a part of my life after the volunteering period ends.
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. I don't know

Appendix III. Artificial Intelligence Prompts

Prompts used on Otter.ai

1. How would you code this person's answers using In Vivo coding?
2. Group the applicable In Vivo coding into these categories: Aspects of ESC that build European identity, Role of origin and background on identity building through ESC, Effectiveness of ESC for European identity building.
3. Use the grounded theory method to explain the conditions, interactions and consequences in each of these three categories.

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Declaration of Authenticity

I, Visa Mäntyneva, hereby declare that the work presented herein is my own work completed without the use of any aids other than those listed. Any material from other sources or works done by others has been given due acknowledgement and listed in the reference section. Sentences or parts of sentences quoted literally are marked as quotations. The work presented herein has not been published or submitted elsewhere for assessment in the same or a similar form. I will retain a copy of this assignment until after the Board of Examiners has published the results, which I will make available on request.

Idrija, 14/01/2026
