

100 European Voices

What Europe
Do Young
People Want?



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About Debating Europe

**The platform that lets you discuss
YOUR ideas with Europe's leaders.**



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We want to encourage a genuine conversation between Europe's politicians and the citizens they serve – and that means taking YOUR questions, comments and ideas directly to policymakers for them to respond.

Since its launch in 2011, we've taken a bottom-up approach, with the citizens very much in the driving seat of the debate, asking the questions they want answered and putting forward their opinions for politicians and thought-leaders from across the EU to react to.

From the start, we've interviewed more than 2,500 policymakers and experts from across the political spectrum. Each has agreed to answer some of the 180,000 comments sent in to us from citizens online, including from a growing 4.5 million strong community since launching, and over 280,000 followers on Facebook and Twitter.

To further our growth, we've embarked on an expansion strategy based on the launch of multilingual versions of Debating Europe. The first new version launched in 2017 – DebatingEurope/DE. It is a German-language discussion platform modelled after Debating Europe, but aimed squarely at a German-speaking audience.

Debating Europe is an initiative of Friends of Europe.

The Project

Europe voted for change. The 2019 European Parliament elections saw the highest voter turnout since 1994, with the established political mainstream losing support to green, liberal and nationalist parties. Young voters turned out in vast numbers, by some measures 50% more than the previous election. Keeping them engaged will be a key challenge for the new European leadership.

What sort of change do young Europeans want? Young people are broadly pro-EU and more optimistic about the future than other age brackets, according to the European Parliament's 2019 Spring Eurobarometer. The issues they care about most, according to this poll, are youth unemployment (20% gave it as their top priority), climate change and the environment (16%), the economy and growth (11%), and immigration (10%).

We wanted to give the floor to young Europeans and find out their thoughts on these four topics, and how the EU can engage them, so we launched the 100 European Voices project. We recruited 100 young people from Debating Europe's 4.5 million strong online community and 280,000 social media followers for a series of focus groups. Citizens aged between 18 and 35, hailing from 26 Member States, joined the conversation. They included students, lawyers, journalists, teachers, job seekers and engineers.

Economy and Employment: Beginning a career is a vital stage in life for young people. We asked the participants about the current state of the European economy, their feelings on the possible future of work and their own experiences of employment. Do they believe the EU is doing enough to help? What more could be done?

Environment and Climate Change: The environment consistently polls as one of the top political priorities for young Europeans, so we gave our participants the chance to answer some of the thorniest questions global leaders currently face. Who should take charge of the climate fight? Are the EU's measures working? Are we doing enough?

Migration: The 2015-16 migration crisis catapulted the issue on to the front pages, so it was important to offer young people the opportunity to put forward their thoughts on the issue. What do they think of the actions of the EU and national governments? How should migration be dealt with moving forward?

The Future of Europe: It was crucial to find out how these decisionmakers of the future envisaged the coming decades, and to compare the responses from across the bloc. What do they think Europe will look like in 25 years? What do they see as the benefits or drawbacks of having a united Europe?

This report summarises the findings, capturing a snapshot of attitudes from this broad cross-section of European youth at one of the most fraught times in the history of the bloc.

The Findings

The young Europeans in our focus groups were almost universally enthused by the opportunities that free movement afforded them. Some credited the EU with preserving peace in Europe, others with securing prosperity for the continent. Looking to the future, they said the EU needed to engage its young citizens, tell them what the bloc does to improve their prospects and make sure there is a two-way dialogue, because citizens need their voices to be heard.

On the economy, Europe should get more involved in the job market. Many of the participants felt that the EU was a minor player in the economy and the job market. While some felt the EU could do little to help, others wanted to see the Union regulate internships and work placements, making sure corporations provide reasonable pay for the work they do. The bloc was also urged to harmonise social-security systems and healthcare across borders to make it easier for workers to move countries.

On the environment, Europe must become a global leader in the battle against climate change. The EU was largely seen as the player most likely to make a difference on the global stage. The participants had little faith in the US or China, which were regarded as the other main players. They wanted to see the EU continue what it had started with the ban on single-use plastics by introducing other standards and regulations. Another idea was for the bloc to include climate-friendly clauses in its trade agreements and regulations, even in subject areas superficially unconnected with the environment.

On migration, human empathy must be the cornerstone of refugee and asylum policy. Europe has to live up to its principles and help those most in need, the participants said. But at the same time, they believed migrants would want to stay in Europe only until their home countries were safe. Europe, it was felt, should be doing more to boost development in sub-Saharan Africa and bring peace to the Middle East. We must “go to the source” of migration so that Europe does not become overburdened, as one participant put it. A substantial number of participants also wanted Europe to start preparing for the next migration crisis, which they felt would be caused by climate change and could even result in Europeans being forced to flee.

On the future of Europe, more integration would help to make the bloc thrive. Many of the participants wanted the EU to move towards federalism, but there was substantial concern over the long-term effects of Brexit, the rise of populism and increasing polarisation of political debate. Some of the participants, however, felt these processes pointed the way forward for the bloc. Brexit, for example, had revealed a steely resolve among the EU-27 to stay united; this unity of purpose should be harnessed. And polarisation and populism were either seen as signs of healthy debate, or as part of long-term political cycles that would soon give way to another phase of integration and togetherness in Europe.

Key Ideas for the Future

1 Greater mobility

Harmonise healthcare, social-security and pension systems across national borders to make it easier for young people to move to other EU countries for work and education.

2 Boost job opportunities

Help young people to get a foot on the career ladder through regulation of internships and work placements, by creating quotas for companies to employ young people, or stipulating minimum wages for internships and outlawing unpaid placements.

3 Step up the focus on climate

Shift the focus of climate-change action from measures that target individual behaviour to challenging industry to do more, including through more regulation.

4 Mainstream environmental protection

EU must be a global leader and role model on climate by insisting all future regulations and trade deals are infused with climate-friendly stipulations.

5 Solidarity with the south on refugees

EU states must step up and help the Southern European countries to deal with asylum seekers and refugees, not only because humanitarian compassion demands it, but also because it would rob populists of their key rallying cry.

6 More help for Africa and the Middle East

The drivers of migration should be tackled at source to help people stay in their own countries or allow them to return to their homes.

7 Broaden Europe's appeal

If the EU wants to thrive, it needs to have an open dialogue with young Europeans, engage in social and cultural outreach, tell young people how the EU works and what it does, and create mechanisms to respond to their concerns.

8 Push ahead with integration

Federalism should be the goal for the EU; it should forge ahead with greater integration and speed up the accession of Balkan countries, taking care to bolster democracy and accountability along the way.

A stylized illustration of a hand holding a pink piggy bank. The hand is dark blue with a lighter blue outline, reaching down from the top right. The piggy bank is pink with a white outline, a white smile, and a white oval on its side containing two white dots. The background is a gradient of blue, with a large dark blue shape on the right and a lighter blue shape on the left.

Economy and Employment

Taking the first step on the career ladder is among the most important moments in a young person's life. Unemployment, according to most polls, is the biggest worry faced by young Europeans. As such, we asked the participants to give us their stories of job seeking in their native countries and elsewhere – and what they thought the European Union could do to help. The results paint a picture of a highly mobile, educated workforce, hugely supportive of free movement and positive about the European Union's role in facilitating travel abroad for work and education.

Social and health systems should be harmonised

Free movement is the undisputed champion of the EU's achievements for the young people we spoke to. It liberates them from their local job markets, provides opportunities for travel and mixing with foreigners, and the travellers who return to their homelands bring with them energy, experience and ultimately economic growth. However, this does not mean that the system is perfect.

“There could be improvements administratively about moving within the EU. Maybe move towards more common health systems to make people's mobility easier”

Saskia, Netherlands

“When I finish college, I would love to live in Warsaw, then maybe Ireland, maybe some other places,” says Milan from Slovakia. “I would welcome some kind of unity in the social welfare systems so that in all these countries I wouldn't have to put money aside for my retirement. If it could be collected automatically somehow that would be good.”

Similarly, Saskia from the Netherlands wants the EU to help citizens negotiate the labyrinthine administration involved in getting healthcare in new countries.

“There could be improvements administratively about moving within the EU,” she says. “Maybe move towards more common health systems to make people's

In brief

- Freedom of movement and the Erasmus scheme were named as the most positive aspects of the EU by many participants.
- National governments and local businesses were considered more influential than the EU in providing jobs and managing the economy.
- Young participants felt the EU could help to harmonise social-care systems across national boundaries and regulate work placements and internships.

mobility easier. For example, just moving from Netherlands to Belgium... how do I do this healthcare-wise? I ended up just keeping my healthcare in the Netherlands. But then I'm doing that illegally because I should be registered. There should be more advice.”

The EU should push businesses to help young people

Unpaid internships or badly paid work placements are regarded by many participants as the only realistic starting point for their careers, but they find the lack of decent remuneration untenable. They feel their national governments are unwilling to regulate for fear of upsetting local businesses, and corporations are unlikely to volunteer such reforms. So, step forward Europe.

“I think the institution of placements needs some critique because a lot of companies get students, use them for six months or a year, then throw them away,” says Theo, a Greek who lives in Belgium. He says his girlfriend is well qualified but cannot find anything other than badly paid work placements and internships. “The EU should take care of this, help young people to get their first job.”

“I think it’s time that I get compensated for the work that I’m doing”

Sibu, Poland

Several participants have stories of bouncing from one internship to another without feeling that they are progressing. “There are plenty of opportunities, scholarships and internships available – all of which I’ve done,” says Sibu, from Poland. “But there comes a certain point where you have to decide – I have this much experience; I think it’s time that I get compensated for the work that I’m doing.”

Valentin from Romania has a bright idea to improve the situation. “There is a rule in football in Romania right now that all the teams in the first league have to have one or two players who are under 21 years old,” he says. “Companies [employing] between 20 and 50 employees, with certain revenues, should be forced to offer one or two internships that are paid. At the moment, there are European companies that know they don’t have to pay – they just take people. If they had to pay, they would put more effort into training them.”

EU-funded infrastructure projects should be expanded to public transport

If free movement is the most tangible sign of the EU in terms of the job market, then big infrastructure projects are the equivalent in the wider economy. “The EU is very helpful for small countries, like my country,” says Alen from Slovenia, “it helped with industry and infrastructure”. Many participants recall seeing the huge blue signs emblazoned with gold stars on road-building projects and other infrastructure initiatives. And they want more interventions like this.

“Public transport in Slovakia even in the capital is so bad that people end up using cars all the time,” says Igor. “The big thing the EU could do would be to help with infrastructure,” he adds. Lukas from Austria agrees and suggested the EU could help improve rail systems. He recalls comparing the prices of rail and air tickets and feeling like the only option was to fly. “I’d love to have a more extensive rail system, and make train travel a bit cheaper.”

Job creation is down to national governments, not the EU

The specific challenges of internships, infrastructure and social security are areas where the EU could have a tangible impact, according to the participants. But they are less sure how the EU could influence broader economic factors and the huge challenge of creating jobs. This kind of work, the participants felt, is more in the remit of national governments.

From schools and universities to corporations and finance, the participants want to see local initiatives to address local problems. Several Brits, for example, complain that the job market is skewed towards London, where property prices are so high that it is hard to survive and thrive. Nathalie is adamant that this is not the responsibility of the EU. “It’s the national

government and local businesses that need to step up and diversify the kind of jobs on offer,” she says. “I disagree that it’s up to the EU to compensate for what national governments and businesses aren’t doing. Jobs need to go beyond London. The housing bubble is unsustainable and not everyone can afford to commute into London.”

For Austrian Jesika, education is key. Many young people leave school and have no idea how to get the right kind of experience, she says. “You’re thinking ‘I want to work there and get experience’ but it’s a vicious cycle – how do you get experience if you can’t get a job,” she asks. Schools should gear up students for this reality, she says, rather than just preparing them for further education. “In Austria they’re really big on going to university... schools should show us more ways to get into jobs.”

Alwin says money is the bottom line. “The only way is to invest,” he says, and he is not fussy where the money comes from. “As a researcher myself I would say research is very important, but also allowing the private sector to develop, companies need to be able to locate themselves in the poorer countries of the European Union and grow there.”

The EU offers opportunities during lean times in domestic job markets

Many participants spoke of the difficulties of finding work in their local job markets. Some felt almost forced to exercise their right to free movement, pushed out of their home countries by financial hardship

rather than being attracted by the glamour of working and living abroad. However, rather than feeling any bitterness about the role of the EU, most felt that the bloc had come to their rescue.

And the EU was never blamed for causing any hardship. For Slovaks, Greeks and Brits, for example, the responsibility for poor domestic opportunities was repeatedly laid at the door of local politicians and businesses. For Spaniards and Portuguese, the global financial crisis was often given as an explanation, showing that it still looms large in their memories even if its most acute effects have now passed. The chance to move abroad offered all these people opportunities they would not otherwise have had.

“It’s not the money, it’s the psychological effect that [youth unemployment] has”
Ricardo, Portugal

For example, Portuguese Ricardo graduated at the height of the crisis. In happier times, he would have strolled into a career in his home country. But in 2008, things were not so easy. “It was 100 dogs to a bone,” says Ricardo of the job market at the time. The immediate hardship of being unemployed is bad enough, he says, but the long-term effects are what really matter. “It was and it is really depressing,” he says. “It’s not the money, it’s the psychological effect that it has. The moment when you come into the so-called real world and you’re not appreciated; you don’t know how to fit in. Those years where you usually have more energy to dedicate to working and learning are all lost. I can really feel the impact that it had on my generation.”

Ricardo left his country and found work elsewhere and says the whole experience made him more positive towards the EU, because it gave Portuguese the opportunity to improve themselves at a time when there were few opportunities at home.

Spaniard Julio also graduated at the height of the crisis and left through the Erasmus scheme.

He says, ultimately, the chance to move to another country was a huge benefit for everyone. “Some people complain that that is not what you should do, but at the same time, all of [my friends] were happy, they had international experience, and some came back. At least you had that as an option.”

“I think the EU market is a lot more accessible. It makes it a lot easier for me to find a job without having to worry about a work permit.”

Greta, Italy

Free movement is central to the EU’s popularity and prosperity

More broadly, free movement and the Erasmus scheme are seen not only as the key interventions of the EU in job markets, but also the most vital reasons for the bloc to exist in the future, according to many of the participants. It either gives them their first taste of life overseas, with new languages and cultures, or provides them with a way of maximising their chances of getting a well-paid job.

“As a Romanian, the gates were opened for us,” says Cristina, “it was really great to try something new, something so different”. Like many of the participants, Cristina left her homeland to study elsewhere in Europe with the Erasmus scheme and later benefited from free movement when she chose to stay in her adopted country.

For Italian Greta, the Single Market allows her to compete in another European country without facing the rigmarole of work permits and visas. She often works in the US and is well aware of the rigours of bureaucracy. “I think the EU market is a lot more accessible,” she says. “It makes it a lot easier for me to find a job without having to worry about a work permit. I think it’s a huge benefit, otherwise I would have been stuck with my own labour market in Italy, which is totally filled up right now.”

Even for those who feel no immediate need to move, the possibility of shifting countries is always in the background. “I got a very good job after my master’s degree and I’ve switched jobs twice,” says Malte, from Germany. “I’m very fortunate, I never had any problems. Knowing it wouldn’t be a big issue for me to go to study in Denmark, for example, was amazing.”

While participants expressed fondness for the Erasmus scheme, some feel it needs to be improved. Alexandre from Portugal says the scheme should be widened, with more outreach to poorer students and others who do not often get the chance, otherwise, he says, “it ends up being a privilege thing because not many people get to do it”. Patrik from Slovakia is also in favour of expansion, but he sees potential in widening the scheme’s remit from student placements to work placements.

Bringing expertise back home is often the goal

The youngest participants speak with excitement about the possibilities their futures hold, particularly when it comes to seeing the wider EU. “If you want to establish yourself in the market, if you want to start a career, you’re better off going somewhere else – going to Germany, Italy,” says Lemonia from Greece. But like many participants, Lemonia wants to come back home eventually. “For me, I would like to try my luck outside Greek borders for a while but ideally I’d like to come back here after five or six years.”

This desire to return home informs the views of many participants on the “brain drain” debate – the presumed loss of talent from poorer countries to richer ones. “Sooner or later everyone comes back and they will be enriched with different experiences that they would not have had in Slovenia,” says Mojca, who has stayed at home even while most of her friends have gone abroad to work or taken part in the Erasmus exchange programme.

Of the young people who have returned to their own countries after living abroad, many are just happy to be back home. “I studied in Italy for four years, and that was enough for me,” says Maria. “I want to stay in Bulgaria.” She says there is plenty of work in the capital, Sofia, but is sanguine about the opportunities free movement has to offer for her

fellow countrymen. “If you want to do science or something that is a little more government funded, it would be a struggle. You should go abroad, it’s impossible in Bulgaria.”

And there remains a hardcore of young Europeans who see enough opportunity in their homelands, particularly in the smaller EU states and those in the east. Mirjam-Meerit says simply that she likes Estonia too much to leave. “When I was in Turkey I was still thinking about Estonia. It’s an overall feeling. We’re small and, somehow, we share the same cultural space. You wouldn’t have it in a bigger country where you have so many regions and people going in different directions.”

Rok from Slovenia concurs: “I love my country too much to work anywhere else.” He says Slovenians like to criticise their country and admits he is a chief culprit, before adding: “I want to live in a better country, but that country is Slovenia.”

The young people we spoke to were almost universally happy with the concept of free movement and the Erasmus scheme.

These two initiatives were the main ways in which the EU improved their job prospects. On the wider economy, big infrastructure projects were the main tangible sign of EU investment. On both these fronts, the bloc should do more, the participants said. With employment, some felt the EU could help further by harmonising social and health services and regulating internships and work placements. With the wider economy, the EU could invest more in public transport.



Environment and Climate Change



With the emergence of Extinction Rebellion and #FridaysforFuture, along with the so-called green wave in this year's European Parliament elections, environmental issues are enjoying unprecedented salience, especially among young Europeans. The environment consistently ranks as the second most important issue on Eurobarometer surveys. We asked our young participants

who should lead the campaign against climate change, how they balanced individual responsibility with political action, and how they regarded the European Union's role. Although there was a lot of concern over the future of the planet, the participants were broadly positive about the EU. They put more faith in the bloc than in their own governments, corporations or other supranational bodies.

The EU is the best-placed institution to act

Who should lead on climate change? Who can lead? These vexed questions are troubling the greatest minds across the globe. The young people we spoke to felt broadly that the EU was well placed to take charge because size matters – and the EU is the right size.

Malte still believes that there is a role for nation states, and that countries like Germany should be setting national goals and targets. But he feels national governments are too prone to influence from major industries, and too concerned about the effects climate measures could have on local job markets.

“I really like the idea of banning single-use plastics. [...] [The EU] need[s] to be a role model”

Milan, Slovakia

Malte still believes that there is a role for nation states, and that countries like Germany should be setting national goals and targets. But he feels national governments are too prone to lobbyists from major industries, and too concerned about the effects climate measures could have on local job markets.

Many of the participants express similar concerns about their own national governments, aware that environmental policies are often not perceived as vote winners.

In brief

- The EU is an honest broker, the participants said, in a game populated by less trustworthy players, such as the US, China, multinational corporations and national governments.
- The ban on single-use plastics got almost universal approval, often contrasted with a lack of action by national politicians.
- Small innovations at the local level, such as placing water fountains around towns to encourage citizens to reuse bottles, were widely appreciated.

As a result, the EU, it is felt, should show its teeth a little bit more. “The EU should definitely have strong, high penalties against countries that are lagging behind, or don’t want to do anything, or cheat on their requirements,” says Tomasz from Poland.

Although the EU is influential on climate change, the participants feel the bloc cannot yet impose itself fully. National governments are still the principal power, with the EU seen more as a coordinating body. “If a company is [emitting] a lot of CO₂, the EU cannot really do anything,” says Uko from the Netherlands. “Only on a national level.” He says the problem stems from the non-binding nature of some EU rules.

Europe must take the lead on the global stage

On the policy detail, there is broad agreement that the EU is doing a good job; the ban on single-use plastics and regulation of CO₂ emissions from passenger vehicles are frequently highlighted as positive developments. On a global scale, the EU is making more progress than the US or China, but the feeling is that more needs to be done.

“Two hundred years ago Europe was a role model for the entire world on how to become an industrial superpower, all the world followed,” argues Milan from Slovakia. “They built industries and really prospered. And now we need to show them that you can live differently. You don’t need to consume that much, you don’t need to produce that much, and you need to do it more efficiently.”

“We’re the biggest market in the world, so we should leverage this internally and externally and make the world a better place”
Luca, Italy

He says it is down to the EU because none of the other world powers are doing anything. “I really like the idea of banning single-use plastics,” he says. “I’d like to see much more like this in the future. The EU could put a tax on palm-oil products that don’t come from eco-friendly processes. We need to be a role model.”

Luca, from Italy, says the EU needs to take a wider approach to climate action, not only setting limits for pollutants and other environmental measures, but also embedding climate thinking in other policy areas. “As long as the EU is strong, and it is still the biggest market in the world, it should impose stricter standards, and impose them in trade agreements with others,” he says, listing workers’ rights, animal rights and food regulations as some

of the areas that could have environmental dimensions. “We’re the biggest market in the world, so we should leverage this internally and externally and make the world a better place before we are too small to count.”

Young Europeans grapple with dilemmas of individual responsibility

If there is broad consensus that the EU is the best institution to fight climate change, there is less agreement over individual responsibility. “Can I really do something as a person? Or should I be focusing on corporations? It’s hard to get your head around,” says Belgian Clara, neatly summarising the dilemmas faced by people across the world.

Rahul, from the UK, feels cynical about the effect an individual can have. “Quite a lot of the time we talk about stuff that individuals need to do but I feel that is quite unfair,” he says. “I have a single-use plastic bottle I’ve been using for three months... but this bottle isn’t going to make one iota of difference to whether the planet combusts.”

Helena from Estonia disagrees: “I don’t eat meat, I avoid dairy, don’t drive cars. The individual can do a lot.” And Finn Charlotta resorts to symbolism to encourage individual action: “I like the metaphor: from tiny drops of water, a great river flows,” she says. “I think I’m a tiny drop of water, so if enough people think alike there will be great flows. I hear about big companies and their responsibility for climate change, I’d say to them they are also tiny drops of water, and if we can direct them in the right place, it will be a great flow. Individuals matter.”

On a smaller scale, two participants from Slovenia argue that governments and individuals can come together to make positive changes. Mariana says her local government has placed water fountains all around her hometown so that locals no longer buy bottled water. “I’m proud of living in a country that’s

eager to stop that and encourage people to behave better,” she says. Mojca is equally positive with efforts on the home front: “People didn’t recycle in Slovenia until we had a law saying non-recycling will be punished. If you don’t recycle you get fined. So now everyone recycles.”

The generation gap exists even among young people

Many national politicians regard climate change as a “young persons’ thing”, according to the participants. But this is an oversimplification, not only of climate politics but also of the generation gap. The focus groups reveal a difference in attitudes not only between young and old, but also between young people. The older participants often admit to being bogged down by the scale of the crisis and unsure who should act. Younger participants are often more focused and more adamant in their demands for action.

Brit Claire admits she has no idea what the EU is doing to combat climate change. “I presume good things, but I don’t know,” she says, before adding: “I see myself as being really separate from the really green-orientated young people as I’m in

my thirties now.” Susanne, also in her thirties, adds: “I’m a bit lost in this whole debate, there are so many voices. I’m changing my behaviour because I hope it makes an impact. But I don’t know.”

Others in the over-thirties age group tend to view the problem with more academic distance, as something approaching an insoluble difficulty. “What are we going to do when 200 million Bangladeshis can no longer live in their own country, or when our own crops are destroyed by extreme weather,” asks Theo.

By contrast, teenage participants and those in their early twenties see climate change with more intensity and take it more personally. “If we don’t do more now, I don’t think we will make it. I don’t think I will make my retirement in 40 or 50 years,” says Tomasz, who is in his early twenties. Those in their teenage years have been raised and educated with climate change as a constant presence – something not necessarily true of the slightly older participants. Hence, when Romanian Valentin suggests that schools should do more to teach about climate change, Jesika, still a teenager, immediately retorts: “In Austria we’re talking about it non-stop in lessons.”



Successful climate policies need to see the bigger picture

Participants of all ages agree, however, that the law of unforeseen consequences is everywhere in climate policy. Estonians flag up that heavy taxes on local production of fuel have forced their government to import energy from Russia. “That’s bad because they are still burning shale,” says Artur. Germans are dismayed by the country’s decision to ditch nuclear power.

“We just bought [energy] from France, so it made no difference, it just moved the problem,” says Anabella. These doubts about climate interventions also go global. “What’s the difference if the European countries stop doing coal mines when lots of them are popping up in Africa or Asia,” asks Pole Arek. He says these moves will severely damage Europe’s competitiveness and may be worse for the environment.

“If everyone acts like [Europe], then climate change is unstoppable.”
Alwin, Netherlands

Similarly, Alwin from the Netherlands argues that even the ban on single-use plastics has unforeseen consequences. “If we talk about ocean plastics, for example, the EU decided to ban single-use plastics, but what is the alternative? Paper products, but then this is like

scamming the public because the public doesn’t realise that paper has higher CO2 emissions and results in lots of pollutants. It’s not a matter of paper versus plastics, it’s about completely redesigning our packaging.”

Alwin touches on the idea that current action is not radical enough. In fact, real progress is only possible with systemic change. For Spaniard Dídac, this must start with a rethink of the way capitalism works. “The big oil companies from UK, Netherlands, Denmark, they are going to continue selling oil because this is a basic thing about the economy of the EU,” he says. “But if we don’t keep those resources under the earth, then the problem will persist.” He says we need to slowly stop making profit from oil and re-orientate our economy. “If everyone acts like us, then climate change is unstoppable. Someone, somewhere has to say: ‘Let’s stop making money from oil!’”

Corporations can help to provide solutions

For Marta, the increasing salience of climate change is encouraging for what it says about Europe more broadly. “It’s only in rich countries where citizens are fulfilled that they can start thinking about climate issues or glyphosate or air pollution – because they have houses, jobs and all the basic needs,” says the Pole. “It’s a symptom of the EU making good progress.”

But for every point, a counterpoint. Slovakian Patrik argues that climate change reveals the limitations of the EU. “This is the problem with the community of 28 countries – it takes so long to reach a conclusion,” he says. “Looking for political solutions to scientific problems just doesn’t work. Democracy is the peak of human politics and we need democracy, but it has its weak spots.”

Marta and Patrik agree, however, that it is corporations that should shoulder the lion’s share of the burden. Marta, like many young people we spoke to, believes existing rules and regulations are targeting the wrong people. “The

current legislation is more focused on individuals,” she says. “The ban on plastics, the air pollution measures, car emissions – I’m absolutely for [these measures]”, but she feels the EU is not doing enough to challenge industry to do more.

Patrik takes a different approach, arguing that measures aimed at

changing people’s behaviour will ultimately force companies to innovate. “Companies always try to come up with the cheapest solution. So, if we ban petrol for boats, who is going to come up with the solution? [The businessman] wants to save money, so he will save your atmosphere in the process. It’s not about him caring for the atmosphere, it’s about him caring for his own business.”



Whether it is the responsibility of the individual, of governments, corporations or supranational entities, climate change engenders an intensity of thought and feeling in young people like no other issue.

Some of the young people we spoke to felt overwhelmed by the scale of the problem, but most felt energised by the actions already taken at EU level. They banked much of their hope for the future on more regulation from the EU, urging the bloc to take the lead on the global stage as well as force action on a local level.



Migration

The migration crisis, which kicked off in 2015 and saw more than one million asylum seekers and refugees arrive in Europe, dominates most conversations about external migration. We wanted to understand not only how young people felt on this subject, but also what they felt

about the future of migration and more broadly about Europe's handling of the issue. Although the young participants mostly regarded the recent past as an era of weak leadership and system failure on migration, they believed strongly that Europe could learn from its mistakes by reconnecting with its core values of compassion and human rights.

Migration is an opportunity, not a problem

Migration is a natural, inevitable habit of humanity. No amount of legislation is going to stop people from moving countries – either to flee war and deprivation, or simply for a better life. As German Malte says, it is “quite natural for people to seek out different living conditions”.

The participants were largely united on this and agreed that Europe had a moral duty to help asylum seekers and refugees. But Malte is one of the few to explicitly make the case for economic migrants as well. “We have to be honest about it,” he says. “In the short term it might cost a lot of money. In terms of refugees and asylum seekers we have a moral duty there, in terms of others, they can make the economy better.”

Spaniard Dídac agrees, saying that Catalonia has always had immigration, and has always regarded it as an opportunity, not a problem. “We just need to have proper structures in society to welcome those people and make them succeed. Because if they succeed, society succeeds.”

Malte and Dídac are reflecting a strain of idealism that permeates the views of young participants, particularly those from Western and Southern Europe, who see migration as a good thing for society and believe we can and should help refugees.

Participants from the EU’s newer states in the east share the broad humanitarian principle, but regard asylum issues as largely unimportant in their national political discourse. “Of course, it’s a very hot topic in

In brief

- **Human empathy must be at the centre of policies on refugees and asylum seekers.**
- **The EU should be making practical preparations for the next influx of migrants, possibly as a result of climate change.**
- **The bloc should provide much more help to the African and Middle Eastern countries to help mitigate the effects of migration in Europe.**

the EU, but here not so much,” says Ana from Croatia. “We don’t have problems with people coming in, we have problems with people going out. It’s something that’s been here since the beginning of time. People are going to be mobile and move regardless of our laws and regulations.” Julius agrees, adding: “We almost know each refugee who came during the migrant crisis by name – that’s how many Lithuania has taken.”

Slovenia has also faced few long-term effects of the migration crisis, says another participant, also called Ana. But she says the asylum seekers who passed through her country at the height of the crisis were treated with humanity. “Slovenians remember 20 or 30 years ago when we had another migration crisis, when people from the south from Bosnia came to Slovenia and there were thousands of them, and we took care of them really well and a lot of them stayed.” So, the migrant crisis was “nothing new” for Slovenia.

One crucial lesson from the migration crisis: Be better prepared

If young people in the EU’s eastern states feel largely unaffected by the migrant crisis, those in the south and west feel very differently. They want the EU to radically change the way it deals

with the situation, become more welcoming to refugees, and crucially creating feasible plans to allow the new arrivals to find work and lead normal lives.

Belgian Michaël says his parents helped a Syrian family to find accommodation, and through this contact he saw much room for improvement. “Bring them to Europe for a few years and have a plan for them to return when the time is right,” he says. “The most important thing was that these people have jobs. When they arrived in Belgium, they had to wait a long time to get an official permit, then they end up working on the black market with bad people and bad things can happen to them.”

“This is the biggest hypocrisy of the EU in the past 50 years – letting people drown in the Mediterranean. [...] That’s when I lose faith in the EU.”
Caroline, Germany

Lemonia, from Greece, wants Europe’s leaders to see for themselves the plight of migrants: “I would invite them to see what the situation is actually like in southern parts of Europe. People drowning a few feet from the coast.” She says closing external borders is contrary to the values Europe is supposed to stand for. “Europe should be more open and more welcoming and, when I say this, I mean the whole of Europe. I would like to see Europe

showing the values we’re supposed to be fighting for to the rest of the world.” Brit Verity agrees, seeing the issue as existential for the EU: “History will remember Europe very badly. If 28 states group together and can’t work it out, then what’s the point [of the EU]?”

Human empathy must be the driving force of migration policy

Many young participants believe the fundamental driving force behind migration policy should be human empathy. “This is a no-brainer,” says Katerina from Bulgaria. “We should all try to put ourselves in their shoes and experience their situation from our own point of view.”

Participants often arrive at this conclusion by considering their own lives and family histories. For example, Spaniard Julio says members of his family fled to South America after World War II. “People in Argentina and Brazil helped them immensely,” he says. “So, I don’t think we’re doing enough.” Alen, whose parents came to Slovenia from Croatia, says he is clear about whether to help refugees. “It’s an ethical issue,” he says. “I personally would help. I can put myself in their shoes.” Charlotta, from Finland, says her family has been inspired by the refugees they have met. “No-one my age in Europe has been in the situation these refugees have been in their own country,” she says. “We have to be humans to each other.”

In Greece, says Apostolos, the problem for many people is the shock of statistics. “When the average person in Greece sees numbers like 500,000 asylum seekers passing through Greece and they think: ‘We’re barely 10 million people!’” He says he does not share this concern: “I work with many migrant workers, asylum seekers who have obtained their work permits and got a job. I see the human side, I don’t see them as numbers, I see them as people.”

“It’s always easy to blame somebody else and the EU is the institution to be blamed.”
Arek, Poland

Other young people without direct experience of migration or the 2015 crisis are nonetheless as passionate about revitalising the humanitarian spirit in Europe, often spurred by a deep sense that the continent failed catastrophically in 2015 and 2016. Caroline from Germany uses the word that comes up again and again: hypocrisy. “This is the biggest hypocrisy of the EU in the past 50 years – letting people drown in the Mediterranean,” she says. “It’s so hypocritical to act as if the EU is all about equality and helping people to get opportunities and judging other countries on how they treat their people, but just ignoring what’s happening [in the Mediterranean]. That’s when I lose faith in the EU.”

Marta, an avowed pro-European, says allowing people to drown in the Mediterranean is the one thing she is “super ashamed” about, and Italian Greta labels it a system failure: “If we consider all the countries of the union as one piece that needs to work together, then the EU has completely failed on migration.”

The EU needs to extricate itself from impossible political positions

Amid the withering attacks on the EU, there are glimmers of sympathy for its invidious position as the butt of criticism in national capitals. “It’s always easy to blame somebody else and the EU is the institution to be blamed,” says Arek, from Poland.

He argues that the EU is caught in an impossible trap: support refugees and see its authority wither in the face of populist attacks, or renege on its principles and fail in its stated policy aims. “The refugee crisis is super complicated. I don’t know if the EU could make it better but there should be more solidarity with Greece, Italy and Spain. But then I see that the government of my country just use it as a tool in the election. What can the EU do in that situation?”

Christian, from Italy, also sees this process up close and argues that the EU’s “first priority” must be to avoid giving right-wing populists reasons to attack. Populist politicians in Italy, he says, are adept at seizing on comments from elsewhere in Europe about refugees. “When there are politicians who say, ‘we are getting zero migrants’ or ‘we are going to send back these migrants’, this is something they see as gold, they see it as their main source of votes.”

Helping Africa and the Middle East can reduce the burden

Although most young participants believe it is a good thing to open Europe’s borders to migrants and refugees, many say the long-term goal should be helping them return to their own countries. “Most of them do not want to come and make a life here,” says Ariadna. “They want to go back to their places. We must let them in, we must take care of them. But the solution is at a European level, trying to see what’s causing this and how to help.” Slovakian Peter agrees:

“What we call a migration crisis was not a crisis at all. The real crisis will come in the next 20 years or so with climate change. [...] [Europeans leaders] should use this time to prepare what to do next, because it will get worse for them, it will get more complicated for us.”

Patrik, Slovakia

“We should start helping the people in their countries, so we don’t have to solve it here. Go to the source.”

This suggestion comes up again and again in various guises. The EU, or a group of states, should be working much more actively to boost the economic situation in African countries, or to find peace in the Middle East. That way, the theory goes, migrants would not need or want to come to Europe. “I would like to see more humanitarian aid and more countries working together to address the root causes of migration, which is war in the Middle East,” says Dani, from Slovakia.

Sofia from Greece thinks Europe’s colonial past should act as a spur, both to welcoming migrants and to careful interventions abroad. “Europe should not forget the ethical responsibility they have over the trauma in Africa and the Middle East, and how Europe became rich out of all these countries,” she says. “We should make all efforts to make the scales even.”

Alwin from the Netherlands builds on this suggestion, arguing that European corporations working in Africa and the Middle East could help. “The EU should put more pressure on European companies that work on other continents to behave in a respectful way – about

the environment, the economy,” he says, arguing that European energy firms need a firmer hand, particularly when they pollute local ecosystems. “We have a responsibility in the EU for the companies based in the EU, for how they behave in other continents.”

Climate-driven migration may turn Europeans into refugees

Climate change looms large, not only in environmental discussions, but also in its impact on migration. Patrik from Slovakia argues that climate change is going to cause a huge upsurge in migration. “What we call a migration crisis was not a crisis at all,” he says. “The real crisis will come in the next 20 years or so with climate change. When you look at the map to the south, and there are water shortages, land shortages, ongoing conflicts for resources. [The situation for] all those people will get worse because of climate change.” He says many people will come to Europe and Europeans “should use this time to prepare what to do next, because it will get worse for them, it will get more complicated for us”.

Several participants highlight climate-driven migration as one of the defining issues of the coming decades. For Spaniard Ariadna, the issue threatens to completely overturn European assumptions about migration. “We like to think about immigration from Africa or poorer countries, but climate change is going to make us move,” she says. “In 50 years, a lot of countries in Europe might not be habitable. We always see immigration as people coming in and we don’t realise that we might be the ones to leave.”

“Bulgarians have been migrating for years, for decades. [...] It’s double standards.”

Maria, Bulgaria

However, Daniel from Germany is unsure that alarmist rhetoric is the right way to handle the situation. “It’s interesting to think about what it would mean if climate refugees come to Europe,” he says. “How to handle that without fearmongering and creating anxiety and fear of the ‘other’. If you say: ‘Oh all of these climate refugees are coming you should be afraid you should do something about the climate,’ I don’t know if that’s the right narrative, it seems very fearful and negative and would create negative stereotypes. How do you address that? You should have fear to some degree but without creating hatred towards others.”

Europeans must make the link between their own mobility and refugee rights

Citizens of EU countries are very happy that they can cross borders unimpeded. Yet these same citizens seem unwilling to accept that asylum seekers should have similar rights, say the participants. This disconnect is most keenly felt in the EU’s eastern states. “Bulgarians are very conservative about refugees,” says Maria. “If you talk to any person on the street, most are going to say: ‘Oh we don’t want them here, we want them out of here’. Especially when

it comes to refugees from Muslim countries because we have this [fear] of Muslims. In Bulgarian history we were under this Turkish yoke, the Ottoman empire, these people oppressed us. They think that this is going to come back with the refugees.”

She contrasts this unwillingness to welcome newcomers with the locals’ attitude towards their own migration. “Bulgarians have been migrating for years, for decades, ever since the fall of communism,” she says. “We have seven million Bulgarians living in Bulgaria and seven million living abroad. It’s insane. If we go to the UK and we’re the people migrating, it’s OK. We can go because we can’t find a meaningful job [at home]. But nobody thinks about that. It’s double standards.”

A similar story emerges from Estonia, where Helena lambasts the local attitude towards refugees. “People go to Finland, work for higher salaries and come back with that money, or they go to Finland and live off social security or government money,” she says. “But when there’s talk of immigrants coming from Muslim countries or even Russia, that is just a no. It really infuriates me that people don’t see things from other people’s perspective.”



Many young Europeans we spoke to feel uneasy at this mismatch between the freedom of movement they enjoy and the EU's own policies on its external frontier. "It'd be impertinent of me not to be in favour of migration," says Aoibhinn from Ireland. "I'm an immigrant myself, I've worked abroad and had these experiences thanks to the host country. In that way I've benefited from migration and I see that side of the argument."

Aoibhinn feels that her movements between countries are just as much acts of migration as the journeys undertaken by asylum seekers or any other migrant. Brit Claire agrees: "We're all migrants. If you're an EU citizen, you have that privilege that you can move between EU countries and you're seen as not so much of a problematic kind of migrant."

The terminology is tricky, but important. The boundaries blur between migrants, expats, refugees, asylum seekers. Pauline from France says there is an implicit value judgement in the terms we use. "People on the street would never say a Swedish migrant, but they would say a Romanian or Bulgarian migrant. We draw this line between the good and bad migrants... and that is very scary."

For some of the young participants, using a wide, inclusive definition of migration to include refugees alongside EU citizens moving between EU countries is an act of solidarity, of saying that we are all the same. To others, it is a false equivalence that plays down the significance both of European identity and the plight of refugees. "For me, I don't consider [moving] inside the EU

really migration," says Tomasz from Poland. "It's like moving to another state in the US. You have almost the same allowances and everything. So, I don't consider myself a migrant."

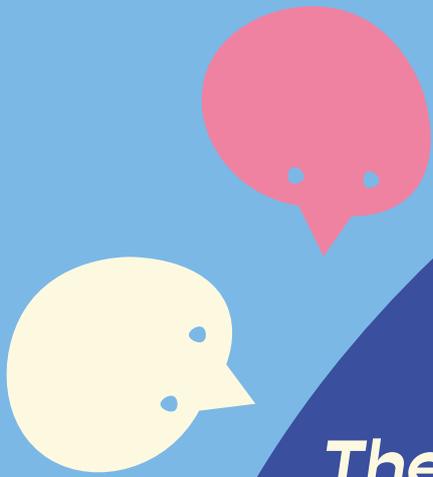
The south needs more solidarity, quickly

The biggest frustrations with the EU fit into two categories: its failure to save people from drowning in the Mediterranean, and its failure to relocate migrants arriving in Greece and Italy. German Caroline has a simple message: "Put ships back in the Mediterranean, change the whole Dublin regulation."

Nina, from Denmark, agrees that Dublin needs an overhaul: "I'm totally with Italy and Spain and Greece complaining about the rules where you have to apply for asylum in the first country you enter." She suggests that the lack of solidarity feeds into her own view that a common European identity is a myth. "It's fine for us in the north because we don't have to handle it. That's why I feel that there's no coherent European identity – we don't care about anyone outside our own countries."

Estonian Klaus also laments the failure of the Dublin regulation. "There should be a fairer way of spreading migrants around EU countries," he says. Although he then gives a nod to the difficulty involved in that process: "It's evident people who are migrants in Estonia will not stay in Estonia, they will go to Germany or somewhere else. So, we need to find a solution to that."

For Carys, a Brit, the issue reflects the wider dilemmas of European politics: "It's a classic European issue – how much is decided at a national level, how much at a European level." She says the policy in the Mediterranean needs to be far more cohesive. "The situation where boats are rescued then they're going from Malta to Italy to France just to try to find somewhere to let them in seems absurd when those countries are in theory working together."



There are strong strains of both idealism and realism running through young participants' attitudes towards migration. Most want a more human-centric approach to external migration, often inspired by their own experiences of mobility.

However, few believe that refugees and asylum seekers want to stay in Europe forever, which leads to a conviction that Europeans need to help bring peace to the Middle East and development to poorer parts of Africa. But these measures are themselves subject to a dose of realism, with an acceptance that Europe's complex political landscape makes any intervention on migration highly problematic.

The Future of Europe



Our participants have grown up in a challenging time for Europe: The financial crisis and Greek bailouts, the migration crisis and Turkey deal, and now Brexit and the rise of populism. We asked them to look beyond the headlines and envisage Europe in 20 or 30 years. What will the continent look like? Will the European Union still exist? If so, what form will it take? The pattern that emerged was of a deep desire for more integration and closer union, offset by lingering concerns over the damage that Brexit and the rise of populism is doing to the bloc.

Brexit rupture could bring Europe together

June 23, 2016. The date of the UK's Brexit referendum is etched not only into the consciousness of British people, but also of young Europeans. Some participants see Brexit as a portent for a tumultuous time ahead. Others see this as the shock that the EU needs; a dose of salts that will focus minds and restore rationality.

"I've been surprised by how much of a single voice the EU is being able to present," says Saskia from the Netherlands. "Contrary to some people's predictions, it seems to be one of the first times that the EU has been able to rally around and have one main message." She says the Brexit process has restored her faith in the bloc's long-term future, comparing it to a power-cut that shuts down all the devices that make your life easier. "Brexit is like that – but multiplied by 100. All of a sudden, all these infrastructural, administrative, very practical daily things have changed. On the EU side, you're able to see the power outage without [feeling] the consequences."

Pole Tomasz agrees, calling Brexit "a necessary wake-up call for Europeans." "I've seen a really tremendous response on every single issue from people inside the EU," he says. "I'm really looking forward to the future, I think [there] will end up being much more integration. People complain that the EU is in crisis, but I think it's because they want it to do better for us."

Some Brits are also sanguine about the Brexit process. Alec sees it as just another drama in the 1,000-year saga of Britain attempting to work

In brief

- **Most participants want more integration and even federalism and urged the EU to be more open, transparent and better at communicating its goals and achievements.**
- **Brexit has revealed a collective solidarity within the EU that can serve as a platform for rebuilding.**
- **Young Europeans are confident their generation will supply a crop of leaders to inspire greater accountability and foster a stronger European identity.**

out its relationship with continental Europe. "The UK is going to get drawn back into some form of relationship with Europe," he says. "Geographically there is no way you can sit 10 miles off a large trading bloc and not have some relationship with it."

He sees this trading bloc as vital to Europe's future, which he says must lie in it becoming a "counterweight to the USA and China". He says: "There's 520 million of us. On the other hand, the largest country in Europe, Germany, doesn't stand a chance if it's forced to compete against the US and China."

Polarisation can be harnessed to strengthen Europe

If some pro-Europeans are surprisingly positive about Brexit, others also find reasons to be cheerful in an even more unlikely area: the rise of populism and polarisation. "I don't think polarisation is that bad, I think it's just there are

“I don’t think polarisation [in politics] is that bad, I think it’s just there are more voices that are being heard.”
Ariadna, Spain

more voices that are being heard,” says Ariadna, from Spain. This year’s European Parliament elections are evidence that more people are getting involved in European affairs, she says. “With Brexit too, I like to think that it was a generational gap. If you see the people that voted Brexit, they are mostly elderly people. The young people, or most of them, understood that you had to stay in Europe. So, I like to believe that in 25 years’ time we’ll be more integrated.”

Gus, from Sweden, also sees a germ of positivity. He says open conversations are precisely what Europe needs, even when some might find the opinions offensive. “That’s the whole point of a democracy,” he says, arguing that populism is flourishing largely because people feel it is the only forum where they can release their anger. “If you’re mad and you can’t really voice anything, that’s the only way you can do it. I think that’s very wrong, you can’t really trust [populist leaders], they don’t have a track record in politics.”

However, Daniel from Germany thinks Europe must tackle polarisation head on. “It’s not possible to have a debate because everything is so polarised right now,”

he says. “We have to move beyond the ‘pro’ and ‘anti’ camps.” He says even the European Parliament elections were framed as a fight between Macron and Orban, a variant of the ‘pro’ vs ‘anti’ polarisation. He wants to see a Europe where engaged citizens can discuss the nuance and detail of the EU and move beyond existential questions.

Estonian Merili, however, sees darker portents in the rise of populism. “One of the countries I’ve been in, Israel, where they have had 10 years of populist right-wing rule, you can see much more people not really caring about building an open and pluralist society,” she says. “I still hope that this is possible in Europe. I want to be optimistic, but I’m not entirely sure if I am.”

Drastic changes are needed if federalism is to emerge

Many of the participants think hard before giving an answer on the future of the EU. They are wrestling with idealism and realism. What they want the EU to become and what they think it will become. Most express a desire for further integration, even federalism, but think the bloc will require major reform: improvements in decision-making processes, more accountability and transparency, better election systems and more positive action in areas including climate change.

Caroline, from Germany, covers most of these suggestions in a single sentence: “I hope that the EU will reform itself and become more democratic, there will be less veto rights in the Council and that everything will become more of a team effort, and that we will have transnational lists so in the European Parliament people don’t sit with member states, they fight for the EU.” She summarises her vision as the EU becoming “more of a mentality than just a system”.

Will the EU even exist in 20 or 25 years? Catriona, from the UK, is not so sure. Although she is enthused by Erasmus and freedom of

movement, she is frustrated by a lack of clarity at the top of the EU. She gives the example of May's glitzy televised debate pitting the contenders for European Commission President against each other. The result? None of those candidates were chosen. "How is this representing me? I don't get it!"

"If the EU wants to escape from insignificance, then it definitely should integrate."
Klaus, Estonia

The sentiment that the EU may be teetering on the brink of disintegration is widely expressed. "Some days I think it might collapse in the future, given recent events," says Spaniard Julio. At other times he is more optimistic: "Some days I think we can be stronger and like a federal state, similar to the US." He says if federalism happens, it will require a common foreign policy, more integration in labour markets and wider acceptance of English as the bloc's lingua franca. "It's not going to be fast," he says.

Klaus is similarly divided. The Estonian wants to see a more integrated Europe, but thinks time is running out. "If the EU doesn't integrate more, and doesn't have a unified voice internationally, and doesn't cooperate for the common benefit, then it will just fall into, not quite insignificance, but it will get nearer to that. So, if the EU wants to escape from insignificance, then it definitely should integrate."

Several participants express concern that the voting age in most EU countries is 18, meaning that today's politicians can largely ignore the concerns of younger people. Gus from Sweden has a neat solution to even up the age divide: "If you can't vote when you're under 18, perhaps you shouldn't be allowed to vote when you're over 75."

A leaner EU is the most likely endpoint

Hovering in the spaces between idealism and fatalism, destruction and growth, many young people we spoke to see a less ambitious, smaller EU as the most realistic endpoint. "Recently we've seen a very divided Europe, and if you look at the history, I'm afraid this will be a trend that will continue for the next few years," says Susanne, from the Netherlands. She says she would not be surprised if more countries left the EU and she is sceptical about the EU's ability to reform its decision-making processes and boost transparency. "With all the right-wing parties rising, I'm not very confident and I don't see what should happen to stop it. The world is becoming a very complex place."

Malte, from Germany, also suspects that the next few decades may bring more unrest and more exits. "I wouldn't underestimate the possibility that one more country might leave the EU in the next 20 years," he says. Although he does not see the current crises as terminal – "it's not going to be dissolved and I don't think it'll be the perfect solution to everything" – he also does not think it will expand much more. "I think it'll be more about defence and arming than it was before; it'll still be struggling with bureaucracy, with detachment from everyday people, with regional crises like Brexit or countries going bankrupt."

Several young people want the EU to get more involved in local issues. Slovakian young people have a specific national bugbear: corruption. "Our politics in our country is really corrupted."

So maybe if the EU could handle it in some way, find some way of alleviating this problem,” says Igor. “Please intervene in some way,” says Milan, another Slovakian. “I don’t think the government will ever snap out of it.” He suggests MEPs could become the face of a campaign against corruption.

The only expansionist vision comes from those who look towards the Balkans. “Within the next 20 or 30 years I’d like to think that the Balkan states that are waiting would be integrated,” says Brit Jamie. Austrian Pirmin agrees: “We shouldn’t forget about the Balkans. I definitely see them within the EU in the next 20 years – Serbia, Bosnia and Montenegro as well.”

Europe must widen its appeal among young people

The recent high turnout in the European elections, and the largely pro-European outlook of young people in the UK’s Brexit referendum, are repeatedly mentioned as beacons of hope that young people are becoming more engaged in politics. If this is the case, the theory goes, then Europe will be in safe hands and issues that affect young people will be given the attention they deserve.

Gea from Slovenia goes along with this theory. She takes heart from the so-called green wave during the European elections, saying: “The fact that the climate is a more important topic is a good sign, and I hope young people will continue to vote more and more and make politicians pay attention to our concerns.” She argues that the EU should concentrate on integration now and make the best of this new engagement. “Politics should represent the interests of young people more. That has to happen quite quickly because we have the most to lose – we’ll be the ones living in the EU for longest.”

But Julia, for one, is not buying it. “If you look at Brexit, yes the majority of old people voted for Brexit and the majority of young people voted against it,” she says. “But a lot of older people showed up and a lot of younger people didn’t.” In her native Hungary, she says young people pay no attention to the news and certainly do not come out on to the streets to protest. “I think that’s a very big problem,” she says. Slovenian Miša is quick to agree: “My generation doesn’t know, doesn’t care, doesn’t read the news,” she says. “When there were elections, nobody went, nobody knew, nobody cared. It’s more than just Hungary.”

How to burst this apathy bubble? The most left-field suggestion comes from Slovakian Patrik, who bemoans the EU’s association with technical, political issues. “Right now, the EU is playing cards that are boring as hell,” he says, suggesting that the EU should get involved in “sports, music, school events and generally stuff that’s cool”. He says Erasmus should be expanded to include work placements, the EU should fight to close the gender pay gap and lead the charge against nuclear weapons.

“What I find missing is explaining to people what the EU actually does.”
Dani, Slovakia

Greek Lemonia is also in favour of expanding the EU’s reach to the cultural sphere, declaring that she is “a big fan of Eurovision” and crediting the song contest with fostering a positive European image. She agrees with Patrik that the Erasmus scheme is crucial for the future of the EU. “I think the best tool of propaganda that Europe has right now is the Erasmus programme, that’s what made a huge difference for me,” she says. “I feel European now and I didn’t before. The decision to increase the funding is one of the best policies of recent years.”

Fake news and negative headlines need to be challenged

The notion of pro-EU propaganda sounds almost fantastical; bragging about its achievements is not something the EU is known for. But when faced with sustained hostility in some national capitals – blamed for everything from straightened bananas to the destruction of national identities – young participants believe it needs to hit back.

“What I find missing is explaining to people what the EU actually does,” says Dani, from Slovakia. “We’ve been part of the EU for 15 years and had the euro for 10 years, but people don’t understand it. People here joke that the EU wants to

try to cut their pensions. To my knowledge, there’s no law like this. If the EU addressed this and had a way of getting feedback on what people think, it could cooperate better and be less antagonistic.”

Theo agrees: “If you go to Greece and ask 10 people who their MEPs are, or how EU legislation is born, they have no idea. And that is a fundamental problem for the EU. People need to know.” The theme comes up time and again. The EU fails to get its message across and fails to counter false claims made by national politicians and media. As Aoibhinn, from Ireland, puts it: “A lot of the frustration that leads to people voting for populism comes down to a lack of information.”

Communication is a two-way street, argues Antero, saying that people need to feel like their voices are being heard in the corridors of power. “If France wants to support the US against Assad, there’s nothing I can do or say that would affect that decision,” says the Portuguese. He is hopeful that closer integration will lead to better communication. Christian from Italy agrees that engaging people, however it is done, is vital to securing the future of Europe. “Whether you’re pro or against the EU, we have to talk about it,” he says. “There are many people who feel excluded from this project, who barely know what the EU is about, who barely know English, who feel completely excluded from this. We have to get them involved.”

A European identity takes root, but still causes controversy

The notion of Europeanness is controversial even among young people. Although the EU has never sought to replace national identities with a pan-European one, many participants feel comfortable identifying as European – either alongside or above their nationalities. “I like this idea of being European,” says Merili from Estonia. “I was working in Washington DC and I liked that I was only European. In Europe you’re always Estonian, or Eastern European. People always want to put you in a box. Looking from America or any other place they only see Europe

and don't care about these smaller categories. Nobody in Europe would ever say 'oh you're so European', but in America they did that."

Polish participants were often the keenest proponents of European identity. Arek goes so far as to suggest Europeanness will supersede other indicators of identity in the coming decades as the EU becomes more integrated. "In 20 or 30 years, most European citizens will identify as European, not with nationalities or ethnic groups," he says. He believes the current tumult is part of a natural cycle. "We've just had the time of integration, now we have the time of nationalists. You see this around the world," he says. "We'll have that for some time, then the general direction will be more integration."

**"I like this idea of being European."
Merili, Estonia**

But Nina from Denmark could not disagree more. She sees integration as a nightmare scenario, wants the EU to "slow down" on its expansion and believes cultural differences are much more ingrained than people think. "I don't really know how you can say you feel European. We're 28 different countries," she says. In fact, she believes these differences make closer integration all but impossible. "We can't be a federation, we don't have the same language, we don't have the same religion, we can't agree on anything."

Slovenian Ana broadly agrees that culturally Europe will not shake off its attachment to national identities. "In 30 years, I'll still say I'm Slovenian and then I'm European," she says, and she believes most Europeans will think the same. "People will still identify themselves by their nationalities and then second as Europeans, because it's hard to change thousands of years of history," she says.

To other participants, the notion of European identity was a sideshow, and the real focus should be on the more tangible impacts of the EU. Alexandre says the EU can be credited with helping to bring peace to Portugal after half a century of right-wing dictatorship. "It's enabled everyone to share ideas, share different cultures, share technological progress, also the economy – we can go and work elsewhere," he says. "At the social level, it's amazing, we can do so many things, it's liberating."

The next generation of leaders will be better

Of course, the question of Europe's future is not just a political question. What about societal changes? Valentin, from Romania, is positive about the prospects for the younger generation. "I think the new generation will be more accountable for their actions," the Romanian says. "The young generation are always thinking 'if I do this what will it be like for my kids in five or 10 years'. It'll be a more aware society, people will be more aware of their surroundings, their actions, and how this will affect their lives."

For Hungarian Agnes, the baseline is prosperity. If Europeans are enjoying stability and wealth, they will not jeopardise themselves. "If you look at people's lives, they have enough money to live, they're better off than people in other continents. When people complain they usually want more EU regulation, not less." Like many people from the smaller EU states, Agnes believes that EU membership is the only way her country can have a voice in world politics. "There

is a view that Eastern European countries don't get as much say in EU matters than Germany and other big countries. But if we compare it with the possibility of not being an EU member state, that would mean even less say in these matters because we wouldn't even have a seat at the table."

Her fellow Hungarian Erik agrees calling the European project "the best thing that has happened in Europe for a while", adding: "There is no other way to be a significant player globally."

However, there are always caveats. "I believe in the general trend of everything improving," says Artur, from Estonia. "The world moving towards globalisation and integration, better quality of life for everyone, more personal freedoms. I don't think it will be fast but I'm pretty sure it's on an upward slope." He pauses for a brief second before adding: "Unless the environment destroys everything."



Overall, the most optimistic visions for Europe's future tended to come from nationals of the newer EU states in Eastern and Central Europe.

Young people from these regions were vocal in their belief that the EU would reform, become more responsive to young people's concerns, that Europe's general prosperity would continue, and that a European identity could take root. For participants in Western Europe, some of these ideas were expressed as goals and ambitions, but with a strong element of hope rather than expectation.

Conclusion

Europe's next generation of leaders will hail from similar backgrounds to the 100 young people we spoke to. The continent will be shaped by them, and for them. The 100 European Voices project reveals just how committed this group is to the idea of Europe. The EU plays a central role in many of their lives, through free movement and Erasmus, and they care deeply about the bloc's future. Overall, they want more from the EU. More intervention, more integration, more regulation. Internally, they want to see more democracy, more transparency and more communication.

Free movement and the Erasmus scheme are the platforms upon which the EU should build its interventions in the economy and employment. Several participants argued for an expansion of Erasmus to cover working people, to be more accessible to poorer and less connected people, or just a general expansion to offer more places. Free movement was universally lauded, with several participants suggesting it could be smoothed out with harmonisation of social and health systems, as well as more advice for foreigners on how to navigate rules and regulations in each country.

The wider economic impact of the EU and free movement was also viewed largely in a positive light. The perceived brain drain from smaller, poorer states to larger ones was played down by most of the participants. However, some did think the EU should address inequalities between countries. Otherwise, the experience of travelling and working abroad was positive both for the individual and ultimately for the country of origin, which stood to benefit from the return of highly qualified young people with international experience and knowledge.

The EU is regarded as the best hope for tackling climate change.

Participants argued that the bloc's intermediate size made it better-placed than either nation states or the UN to tackle environmental challenges. Unlike the UN, it has real power to implement rules and regulations; unlike national governments, it has shown willingness to regulate even the most powerful industries. The caps on CO2 emissions and ban on single-use plastics were widely praised and suggested as models for future action.

The way climate change was viewed was often affected by the age of the participant. Teenagers and those in their early twenties, raised and educated with climate narratives all around them, felt it on a visceral, personal level. Some suggested the planet would not survive long enough for them to reach retirement age unless action was taken immediately. Those in their thirties tended to view it with an academic distance, as an intractable problem. Several older participants admitted to being confused about the issue and unable to form a reasoned opinion.

Europe needs to be ready for the next migration crisis, according to several participants, who felt Europe and its neighbourhood would face far greater challenges from climate-related displacement in the coming decades than they had in 2015 and 2016. Lessons must be learned from how the last migration crisis was handled, which was broadly criticised by the participants as chaotic and shameful. They said the EU and national governments needed to build structures and policies that allow refugees and asylum seekers to work and integrate.

The participants felt that Europe needed to rethink its whole approach to refugee and asylum policy and find a way to put the humanitarian principle back to the centre. If people need to be helped, we should help them. But this was underpinned by a belief that refugees would not want to stay in Europe for good. So, Europe should work to improve the conditions in their home countries, both in order to facilitate returns and to reduce the need for people to trek across the world in the first place.

There was a real desire for reform of the EU

to make sure it thrives over the coming decades. The way the EU communicates with citizens, particularly young citizens, was the principal target for improvement. More should be said on the achievements of the bloc, on the work it is doing and on its basic functions. And it should aim to popularise itself through social and cultural outreach, link-ups with sports stars, social media influencers, musicians or other celebrities.

Communication and outreach were not the only areas with room for improvement. The voting systems in the European Parliament would need to be changed to foster pan-Europeanism rather than simply providing another forum for national politics, there would need to be a better way of choosing European Commissioners, accountability to voters and transparency in decision-making processes would need to be boosted. Such is the buffeting the bloc has taken in recent years – from Brexit to the financial crisis to the rise of anti-EU populism – some suggested simple survival would be a major achievement.

That said, if the EU can harness the political engagement of young Europeans, bolster the free movement and Erasmus initiatives and show it is working on the issues they care about the most, it stands a great chance of becoming the young people's champion. Plenty of young people we spoke to believe this can and will happen; they think it is the nationalists and the populists who are selling a pipe dream, and Europeanness will prevail in the end.



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