



# 100 European Voices

Young People Debate  
Europe's Recovery Plan

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# Contents

ABOUT DEBATING EUROPE	1
INTRODUCTION	
The Project	2
The Findings	3
Key Ideas	4
RESULTS IN DEPTH	
Life in Lockdown	6
Pandemic Response	12
Economic Support	18
Green Recovery	22
CONCLUSION	28



# About Debating Europe

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

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 3,000 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 5.6 million strong community since launching, and over 271,000 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 of which being DebatingEurope/DE, 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 Brussels-based think tank for a more sustainable, inclusive and forward-looking Europe.



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# The Project

The world has changed. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated existing trends and inequalities, it has hit “fast forward” on the digitalisation of society and has exposed an urgent need to develop resilience and sustainability ahead of the green transition. It has also prompted state intervention in society and the economy on a scale rarely seen outside of wartime.

Young people have been among the most impacted by these changes. In terms of education, employment, lockdowns and social distancing, paying back the mountain of accumulated public debt, not to mention the coming upheaval from the digital and green transitions, young people are at the forefront of our changing world. So, what do young people think about Europe’s recovery plans? What sort of Europe do they want to build back after the pandemic?

We wanted to give the floor to young Europeans and find out their thoughts on Europe’s recovery, so we launched 100 European Voices: Young People Debate Europe’s Recovery Plan. We recruited 100 young people from Debating Europe’s 5.6 million strong online community and 271,000 social media followers for a series of focus groups. Citizens aged between 18 and 35, hailing from 26 Member States, joined the conversation.

**Pandemic Response:** How did young people experience the pandemic? Do they approve of how the EU and national governments handled the pandemic? Do they feel EU countries helped one another during the pandemic response? When (if

ever) do they think life will get ‘back to normal’? How do they think that will happen? And what lessons do they think the EU should learn from the pandemic?

**Life in Lockdown:** How did young people experience lockdown? How was internet access during the lockdowns? Were young people able to work, study, or keep in touch with friends and family? Do they think the lockdowns affected their mental health? Were they able to get exercise, get fresh air, etc., during the lockdown? Would they support future lockdowns?

**Economic Support:** How has the pandemic affected young people in terms of finances, work, etc.? Do they feel they’ve had the right amount of economic support during the crisis? What do they think of the EU’s economic response to the crisis? Do they feel there has been enough economic solidarity between EU countries?

**Europe’s Recovery:** What do young people know about Europe’s recovery plan? What do they think of it? Do they think the pandemic will bring European countries closer together, drive them apart, or make no difference? What do young Europeans think Europe should look like 10 or 20 years after the pandemic?

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 articulated the most pressing hopes and concerns of many in their age group across the world. They urged policy makers to start preparing for another pandemic while the public is still onside. They want a more inclusive decision-making process to make sure their voices are heard. And they called for more support for young people, particularly for the institutions they rely on most – schools and universities.

Life during lockdown hit many of them hard. The stories we were told often featured life-changing decisions – whether that was being forced to return from a long-planned gap year, quitting school or changing jobs. Technology was a universal theme in the focus groups. Whether it can be harnessed for the benefit of society was one of the hottest discussions. Students were almost unanimous in believing online lessons are not a long-term replacement for in-person teaching.

Governments' initial responses to the pandemic were broadly welcomed. Lockdowns, curfews and other restrictions were seen as necessary to stop the spread of a deadly virus. But there were two main points of criticism. Many felt their governments backed out of these restrictions too early, prolonging the agony for many. And the EU failed to foster genuine harmony between states, leading to a patchwork of measures and a lack of solidarity.

The young people in our focus groups had little direct experience of receiving financial aid. But in general, the sums on offer were seen as too little with too many bureaucratic hurdles to clear. Several young people felt that the packages failed to target those most in need, such as freelance workers. EU aid to member states was most often seen in terms of the difficulties involved rather than the potential benefits.

Longer-term ideas for a green recovery in Europe generated one of the most lively discussions, with opinion split on whether jobs and medium-term social needs should trump longer-term climate concerns. Several young people suggested that creating a Europe less reliant on imported goods would shorten the production chain, improve the economy and benefit the environment. Many called for more solidarity with southern countries and called for northern nations to overcome attitudes framed in the last financial crisis.

# Key Ideas

1

## Use technology wisely

Harness technology for the benefit of society but understand its limits, particularly in the classroom where videoconferencing can never replace in-person learning

2

## Plan for the next pandemic

Harmonise lockdowns and curfews across EU countries to avoid the patchwork of measures imposed after the current outbreak

3

## Border closures are a last resort

Maintain free movement between EU countries but consider shutting EU's external borders next time to avoid economic crisis

4

## Show faith in restrictions

Maintain lockdowns and other restrictions if they stop the virus circulating, even if they are unpopular initially

5

## Boost economic support

Increase funds available to freelance workers, schools, universities, the arts, and reduce the paperwork

6

## Push for real institutional reform

Reform institutions and widen debate on Europe's long-term recovery to include stakeholders other than national and EU officials

7

## Find new ways of measuring recovery

Frame realistic climate goals that measure things other than economic growth

8

## Push for a self-reliant Europe

Focus investment on green manufacturing within Europe's borders and reduce reliance on China

9

## Build a fairer European Union

Engage more directly with regions and other stakeholders to create a union for the ordinary people

10

## Exercise tighter control on spending

Ensure EU money is not spent on projects that contravene European values

# Life in Lockdown

**1** Getting out into green spaces and developing new hobbies and interests was the key to dealing with lockdowns, our participants said

**2** Students were grateful for online classes but missed in-person learning and mixing with their peers

**3** Different lockdown rules in different countries were considered unnecessary and unmanageable

Since March 2020, ideas of normal life in Europe have been revolutionised. Over the past year, almost every major cultural and sporting event has been cancelled or held behind closed doors.

Travel restrictions – not only between countries but even between regions within countries – have become a daily inconvenience. Curfews and shutdowns of non-essential businesses have largely closed city centres across the continent. Sitting inside a bar or restaurant is something of a distant memory. And much of professional life has moved online.

Many young Europeans have cross-border relationships, others were looking forward to starting university in foreign countries or starting new jobs. Pandemic restrictions have been particularly hard on them.

## Keeping active was the key to surviving and thriving

While business owners have been hit hardest with the economic fallout, and older people have suffered the worst health effects, young people have struggled more than any other section of society with the new regime. Being separated from families and friends has sparked loneliness and despondency, frustration with technology, but also novel coping strategies.

In fact, many young people remember the early stages of the pandemic with some fondness. “I really enjoyed the last year,” said David from Hungary. “I decided at a certain point in the very beginning that I would develop myself. A lot of people were very optimistic and started to bake bread at home, and all this online streaming. I decided to start a new sport, so now I’m a fencer.”

Not satisfied with mastering his epee lunges, David also threw himself into his hobby of family research and organised research trips to Austria.

Perhaps spurred on by one of the world’s toughest lockdowns, young people in Spain were also keen to broaden their horizons. “Because my flatmates are very good friends, we started doing things like podcasting,” said Karan. “I learned how to play guitar, I finished my degree and I was working as well. I didn’t get bored but, of course, there was a lot of ups and downs.”

“I kept going because I had a job and had schedule, which helped a lot,” said Myrto from Greece. “I’m fortunate enough to have a lovely roommate that I get along with very, very well. I don’t know what I would do if I lived alone, I would be talking really differently right now.”

Like many young people, Myrto felt compelled to take action to keep active. “I had to force myself to incorporate little things in my daily life, to keep me sane. Whether that is waking up and doing half an hour of yoga every morning. Just to get going with my day.”

## Green spaces were vital for mental health

The shrinking of space, both mental and physical, was a major facet of the lockdowns for young people across Europe. They tried any way they could to use the space around them. Some were luckier than others. “I live with my boyfriend and we’ve got 90 square meters and a garden, so we did quite well during the first lockdown,” said Muriel from Germany.

Despite being together every day all day and struggling to keep a routine, Muriel was broadly positive about the experience. Perhaps because she and her countrymen had a secret coping mechanism. “Like a lot of people in Germany, I started gardening. I grew my own tomatoes and cucumbers and whatever, so I was out in the garden a lot.”

For those without large apartments and gardens, getting out into public green spaces was vital. “I have to have access to fresh air,” said Bogdan from Romania. “I live next to a park and I can go to the forest from the city centre in one hour, so that’s fine.” However, it was not enough. “When it comes to exercise, I need high intensity exercise. That need cannot be fulfilled in this kind of state... I am not healthy anymore.”

Even for those like Tomas from Portugal who were normally quite happy to stay in their homes, the confinement changed their view. “I’m introverted and in my free time I usually stay home and play games... so when the first wave hits my life continued as normal,” he said. But then he “started craving going outside”. He had to adapt by trying to persuade his friends to play games online.

## Technology helped some to stay fit

In the battle to keep a healthy mind and body, technology has proved both a blessing and a curse. For Cristina, the first Spanish lockdown meant weeks of confinement. That encouraged her to seek out exercise videos online. “The youtubers who make fitness videos – they boomed, like millions of subscribers, it was really a thing to do home workouts. And that was fun.”

However, with the slow opening of Spanish society Cristina has found herself less motivated. “Now that it is possible to go for a run, and even with some sports facilities open, we are so tired that I don’t feel like doing physical activity anymore.”

As the lockdowns and restrictions have waxed and waned, young people in other countries have also become more jaded. “I only go out once a week,” said Sophie from Belgium. “I know it’s not good and my parents motivate me, telling me: ‘Oh, you should go outside more.’ But where do you find the motivation to go for a cold walk with no friends or by yourself when you could snuggle up to your TV and Netflix at the same time. In the summer it’s way different than right now.”

## Online classes cannot replace in-person teaching

One of the most crucial changes over the past year – and possibly the one that will have the biggest long-term impact – has been moving work and study online. University campuses have been emptied, offices are still largely deserted. The jury is still out on the relative benefits of these new ways of living.

For student Gianluca, online classes were a revelation. “You could actually watch a lecture whenever you wanted,” he said. “For me, it was very positive, because either I cannot attend all the time, or have meetings and you want to have your own pace in terms of studying and preparing for the exam.”

“Me and my friends, we created a small study group, so we were never alone,” says Tyra, a Swede. “Studying has been going very, very well but getting an internship or getting a job, that’s a different question. It’s much harder now in the middle of pandemic.”

**“Studying has been going very, very well but getting an internship or getting a job, that’s a different question.”**

*Tyra, Sweden*

Mariana was less enthused from the off. “The transition between the in-person lectures and at home online classes has been quite awful, let’s be honest,” she said. “You don’t get to learn as much, and the teachers don’t know how to transition to this online state... I think a lot of people went into a state of burnout because no one really knew what they were doing.”

Maria Vittoria started a master’s degree in September in Milan, a university she has never visited. “I still don’t know who my colleagues are or who my professors are,” she said. “I literally spend eight, nine even 12 hours per day in front of a screen talking with people that I don’t know... Mentally and emotionally, it’s not a perfect way of living.”

For Theodora, there were more basic problems when she tried to study online from her family home in Romania. “My parents are both teachers and imagine being in an apartment with two teachers and my sister and myself trying to... attend a lecture or a seminar at the same time,” she said. “That was horrible because it was freezing, or I was just not able to connect, or I was being kicked off.”

A central part of university experience, for many, is the social interaction – either between students or between lecturers and students. For Sophie, this was a major downside of online classes. “I felt like education lost such an important layer,” she said. “Not only material and resources but also the layer of talking to students talking to teachers and getting that extra information, and that was just completely missing.”

## Sharing a bag of chips beats talking online

For many young people, technology has allowed them to keep in touch with family and friends – even those who would not normally be online. “For older people such as my parents, using WhatsApp and other stuff more intensively, it was a bit of a godsend to be able to have a WhatsApp call,” said Bogdan.

“I was so lonely that at a certain point I didn’t even want to do the stuff that I would normally want to do,” said Theodora. “Why would I exercise? I just didn’t feel like it. I was calling my friends or my boyfriend and my parents at home and being on a video call with them to feel people around me.”

But for Marijke, chatting online was no substitution for human contact. “When you’re online, the main thing to do is talk,” she said. This is just a small part of what makes life enjoyable, she said.

“Me and one of my friends, for example, we’d always have dinner together, then go get ice cream and they share a bag of chips and watch movie every week,” she said. “I think it’s those kinds of things that you take for granted that you really start missing and once all of this is over that’ll definitely be the first thing we do again.”

## Solidarity was a tricky issue for international travellers

Like many young people, Marijke has witnessed the pandemic in more than one country. She found it difficult to keep up with the ever-changing requirements, particularly concerning travel and quarantine when moving between Belgium and the Netherlands.

Emi, too, is used to crossing the border between the two Benelux nations. In recent decades, this journey has become so easy that it is possible to forget the two are different countries. But that sense of togetherness changed during the early phases of the pandemic “I remember going to the Netherlands and the shops there were open and I remember people saying ‘people of Belgium, you should stay in Belgium, because your shops are closed’. Don’t bring corona here,” said Emi.

Shortly after, the roles were reversed with Belgium opening up and the Netherlands closing down and the same thing happened with Dutch people crossing the border. “It’s kind of funny,” she said.

For Barbara, it was a lack of information that worried her when she was travelling between Portugal and Spain just as the first lockdowns were announced. “I didn’t know if I would be able to get back to Spain because I don’t have any papers,” said Barbara, who is from Poland but was studying in Spain. “I was terrified because I wasn’t sure if all the information that came to me was true or not because I didn’t really know the language and there was no English information.”

Audrey moved between the Netherlands and France during the early stages of the contagion, saying she initially favoured the more liberal Dutch model, feeling like the French restrictions were too harsh. “In the first lockdown, we were still able to do things and the number of cases was not that big and the economic impact was not that hard,” she said of the Netherlands.

However, she believes how the Netherlands paid the price for enforcing rules like mask-wearing later than other countries. “Now, the Netherlands imposes longer measures and people’s mental health starts to be really, really bad, because you never see the end.”

For many others, getting stuck in foreign countries was the story of the early part of the pandemic. “I’m in a long-distance relationship,” said Maria Vittoria, who was meant to head from Italy to Germany in March last year, when the borders were closed. “I was blocked in my country and it was awful for me, especially because I had to do other things in Germany. I was meant to start as an au pair.”

## Adapting is now the most important thing

Many young people admitted that the pandemic had forced them to reassess their priorities. Simina concedes that there are no easy answers. “I found it very difficult to change my life plan,” she said. She was forced to return to the Netherlands, cutting short a long-planned gap year travelling. “It’s not like I can plan that gap year again, because it seems like corona will never be over.”

**“It’s not like I can plan that gap year again, because it seems like corona will never be over.”**

*Simina, Netherlands*

She feels she cannot just stop her career and retake her gap year. “At the back of my mind it’s still there – I could have been somewhere in the sun this whole time and meeting new people and not be stuck inside. But you gotta do what you gotta do I guess.”

“One idea keeps me going,” said Milan. “That we are doing it for something, that it has a meaning... I keep telling myself this and I don’t feel so bad about being alone.” But he reflects that spending so much time alone has crushed his confidence and he now suffers from waves of anxiety.

Myrto, too, has found herself questioning her choices. She went abroad to study just as the pandemic hit. “I attended university on campus for like a couple of weeks, and then we moved it online. So it’s kind of like: ‘Why did I do that?’” She sought counselling for the anxiety she felt and has come through the worst. “It was just a good way to make sure that my feelings were valid and that I’m not crazy to be thinking that way.”

Manuel, whose job used to take him overseas a lot, accepts that right now he has to pull back his ambitions. “I more or less found out how much of a luxury it is to be able to move around different places to meet so many interesting people,” he said. “Of course I miss it, but on the other hand, I feel very privileged that I had the opportunity in the first place, and will have it at some point again.”

## Some pastimes may be lost forever

With new variants cropping up all the time and fears growing that vaccines may not protect against some of them, the long-term effects of the pandemic are impossible to predict. For Jakob from Germany, the emergence of new variants is causing him to lose sleep. “My doomsday scenario is that we’re going to return to normal and then later, we’re going to find some mutation we just overlooked that doesn’t care about the protections we built up,” he said. “And then we start at square one again. It depends a lot on how much the leaders learn from this pandemic.”

Milan hopes the virus will operate more like a flu. “I do believe that we maybe will have a little break again during the summer,” he said. “But I’m afraid it will return again in the autumn, and we will have it again next winter. But I am really, really looking forward to a small window during summer.”

Some young people feel their favourite pastimes could be gone forever. Italian Michele laments the decline of nightclubs and wonders if such packed-in venues will ever reopen. “I miss disco a lot, going dancing with my friends. I don’t know when it’s going to be back, maybe never. Discos were so crowded and everyone was so close. Before, we didn’t even think about it.”

**“Discos were so crowded and everyone was so close. Before, we didn’t even think about it.”**

*Michele, Italy*



Many of our young participants looked at the isolation ushered in by lockdowns as an opportunity to develop new pastimes and skills. But as the pandemic continued, young people have found themselves struggling to cope. They believe that the pandemic has changed the way we live for good, particularly with the centrality of online interactions and the decline of pastimes like crowded discos. The key, they say, is how we adapt.

# Pandemic Response

1

Most of our young participants supported the initial lockdowns as a necessary response to the pandemic

2

As the pandemic measures have continued, young people feel their governments have been sending mixed messages

3

Leaders need to start planning for the next pandemic right now, with better cooperation and EU involvement

The pandemic first emerged in China in late 2019, provoking a dramatic response from the authorities. Images broadcast around the world showed deserted streets in the city of Wuhan, as workers in hazmat suits sprayed buildings and speakers bellowed out instructions to locals to stay in their homes.

Three months later, case numbers exploded in Italy. Drastic lockdowns followed. But any hope that a short, sharp shock would work as it had in China quickly dissipated. With little coordination at EU level, countries chose their own paths.

While young people felt their governments dealt with the initial crisis quite well, the lack of broader cooperation was a cause of anger.

## First lockdowns were well handled

Despite the obvious hardships of dealing with lockdowns, young people broadly agree with the necessity of introducing harsh measures to curb the spread of coronavirus. However, as the situation has continued, attitudes towards the restrictions have become more nuanced.

Typical of the attitude towards the early lockdowns is Yoannis, who says the Greek government handled the initial phase quite well. But then comes the criticism: “They didn’t invest in further enhancing the public health system. And that’s a huge minus.”

Similarly, Cristina says the Spanish government did a good job “more or less”. But there were shortcomings. “For instance, I think that the lockdown could have been implemented just a few days earlier,” she said. “Because we were seeing the situation in our neighbour Italy that they were already on lockdown. In Spain, everything was super normal... We could have saved a lot of lives.”

She too called for more investment in the health system and more attempts to protect against future pandemics.

## Messaging on restrictions needed to be clearer

The actions of leading politicians helped to sow confusion over the public health messages in several countries. David from Hungary said this was a particular problem with masks. “The politicians didn’t set an example,” he said. “Even members of the government and the prime minister, they were without the mask on the TV and on official pictures. People got confused.”

In neighbouring Austria, there were similar concerns. “In the beginning, it was said we will never ever have masks. Two weeks later, there were masks,” said Daniela. “Governments should have really said what is going on and what their information was because

it was clear that the pandemic will take months and years, maybe.”

In Portugal, the entire legal regime remains unclear to young people, with state of emergency laws having to be renewed regularly. “We really don’t know if we’ll have a continuation of the state of emergency until basically the day before if we’re lucky,” said Tomas.

Germans, too, have complaints. “The communication is there, but it’s still pretty confusing sometimes,” said Angelique. “There have been so many changes and all the federal states can decide for themselves which exact measures they want to take. So it does get confusing and also here people don’t really want this anymore, and they lose acceptance of the measures.”

**“We’re such a small country, and still we have so many different rules”**

*Sophie, Belgium*

But Belgium is the country that unites most of the young people who live there in perplexity. A profusion of rules and advice emanates from different layers of government, changing for each part of the country. “We’re such a small country, and still we have so many different rules,” said Sophie, lamenting the differing regimes between local and higher tiers. “Honestly, no one knows what’s going on, it’s very confusing,” said Marijke. “I’ve noticed a lot of Belgians don’t even try to understand the government anymore.”

## European Union missed an opportunity with its pandemic response

While national governments were praised in the beginning, with opinions becoming more negative as the pandemic has proceeded, attitudes towards the EU's initial response were largely critical. Young people feel the bloc failed to foster cooperation between states.

"As much as I want to find a benefit of the union, I cannot actually find a benefit on this pandemic response," said Adam, a Briton living in Belgium. "You have countries that are making different rules on border closures. The vaccine rollout again is different in each country."

Zita from the Netherlands agrees. "The pandemic was a great opportunity for Europe to show that it's a great union," she said. "We could have just closed down European borders, maybe. Then we would have been able to travel to Germany, or you know within Europe and then keep the economy going, if only the European economy."

The lack of dramatic action makes Zita and Adam believe the EU fluffed its lines on the biggest stage. Adam even goes as far as suggesting the EU's failings could be exploited by anti-EU parties in elections.

But Angelique from Germany is more forgiving. "From how the EU works, they don't have too much power on how the government's themselves and all the countries act," she said, concluding that the bloc did "pretty fine" working within the limits of its powers.

Jakob too was more positive, saying he felt privileged to be in a part of the world where vaccines are laid on and workers are compensated. "If you see in poorer countries, some people just have to break the corona rules. If they stop working there's no one paying for whatever they lose... We take hundreds of billions of euros into our hands, and distribute it across Europe. That's really great if you look at the European level."

## Sweden's laissez-faire approach leaves young people cold

Anastasia breezed through the first phases of the pandemic, but then things started to get serious when her mother became ill. She isolated herself in her home in Greece and began wearing masks indoors. This made her more aware of the differing approaches of European countries, particularly Sweden. The Nordic country took a much more liberal approach to imposing restrictions than most and suffered one of the most extreme outbreaks in Europe.

"Normally, I am very keen on their decisions. But regarding Covid, I think they have been very free and they didn't even have the mandatory mask wearing. I like this freedom, but at the same time, they left unprotected people that are at risk, who can die from Covid. So that makes me very angry."

She compares the Nordic country with the record of Greece and says "with surprise" that her home country this time reacted better.

Sweden's policies had a more immediate impact on Romanian Theodora. She had been studying there but left when countries began to close their borders. "There were so many so many infections and we were still going to school, but there were people with the virus in the [student] union," she said, adding that the situation was "frightening".

"I started to panic and I decided to go home," she said, adding that Romania was right to lockdown early. "We only had really only a few cases when it happened, compared to Sweden, which was crazy."

## Follow the science, not the economics

Kevin looks after his grandfather, so the lockdown in Belgium hit them both hard. They were unable to see each other but they accepted it because it was the only way to stop the pandemic. “Sometimes the governments I got the feeling that they got too lenient too fast,” he said. “I think for electoral gain and political reasons, more than actually following the science.”

Across southern Europe, the feeling is similar. “The lockdown measures were influenced and compromised by economic issues,” said Martin from Croatia. “Because our country is largely dependent on tourism, the measures were relaxed in the summer and that led to many problems in autumn and winter.”

Kevin from Belgium says following the numbers is the only way to get out of the situation. “People can say it’s hard for the hotels and restaurants and bars and I do agree,” he said. “I support fully all measures that can be taken to help companies and people that have it hard. But we’re talking about human lives here so let’s not kid around.”

However, Adam, who also lives in Belgium, called for a nuanced approach to the data. “It seems they only listen to the biologists but they don’t take into account the human factor or the social part, the wellbeing part,” he said. “There is a fine balance between Covid and how we can lower the figures and keep the figures low, but they don’t seem to make a good balance in Belgium at the moment.”

## EU countries should coordinate better

Nathalie is living in Britain and sometimes struggles with the fluctuating lockdowns. “I was talking with friends in Luxembourg and they can still go around to each other’s houses... I have not been in someone else’s home since September.”

Like many young Europeans, she has been frustrated by the lack of coordination between countries. How people in one European country can look on with envy as their neighbours enjoy all sorts of freedoms they no longer have.

“In Spain for the past one month I cannot leave the city and in Poland you can travel all around,” said Barbara. “I agree with the rules but I know that if the rules were equal in all of the countries, the mental situation would be different in those countries. “

Many young people pointed out the absurdity of the situation and suggested action at the EU level in case of future pandemics to thrash out a common approach.

## Vaccine policies need to be carefully thought out

With exhaustion at lockdowns and shutdowns having set in long ago, young people, like everyone else, are banking on the vaccine to bring this phase of the pandemic to an end. Belgian Kevin, who wants a vaccine as quickly as they become available, has a suggestion for governments. “I wouldn’t even be opposed to making it mandatory for everyone, because we’re talking about human lives,” he said.

Dusan disagrees. “I would support it, but there is a very low willingness of people in Slovakia to get vaccinated and there will be some backlash,” he said. He pointed out that forcing people to get vaccinated would increase the risk boosting the popularity of more extreme parties with links to anti-vaxxers. “If you don’t want to get vaccinated and you get Covid, you pay the bills for healthcare, I think that’s kind of the fairest, strongest incentive.”

For Matusz, the issue is one of priorities. He suggests taking an approach that gives working people the jabs first, rather than focusing on older and more vulnerable sections of society. “I think Israel was quite smart with starting to vaccinate the working population, because it was a relief not just for the economy, but for the general public,” he said. “Those people can go back to work sooner.”

## Citizens need to take responsibility too

However, several young people believe the onus is put too squarely on the government, and individuals get off too lightly. “People are not keeping their distance. Even though restaurants were supposed to be closed, they were open,” said Lea from the Czech Republic. “A lot of my classmates went out to an illegal party. So it is not just the government, but also the population.”

Artjoms agrees. He has been disturbed by stories of people in his native Latvia wandering around shops even after testing positive for Covid. “The people are

responsible for the result, not the government,” he said. “It was very clear, the rules were to just stay home as long as you can, don’t go outside... The problem is how people react to that.”

**“The people are responsible for the result, not the government,”**

*Artjoms, Latvia*

## Governments need to urgently plan for the next pandemic

Enthusiasm for lockdowns and other restrictions has waned as the pandemic has continued. Many young people regard further measures with trepidation and urge governments to think more strategically. “We need smart lockdown, so I mean that it should be organised and to think about which shop should be closed for this month and which should be open,” he said, pointing out that closing restaurants but allowing shopping centres to stay open was “stupid”.

David from Slovakia thinks smarter borders could provide an answer: “We already have some systems in place,” he said. “I could see that those systems could be used more efficiently... In Europe, there is a lot of movement, and I think there was one of the biggest reasons why it spread so fast.”

“Very short very tough lockdowns would have been better for me,” said Julie from Belgium. In neighbouring Germany, Maïke said she was fed up of the whole idea: “I would have wished for government who looks for alternatives and not only lockdown, lockdown, lockdown.”

For some young people, there is an unlikely source of inspiration for future measures. “Maybe this is a bit ironic, but more of a Chinese approach to it,”

suggested Belgian Sophie. “If there’s an apartment block with a few contaminations, that entire apartment block goes into lockdown, or an entire region or street. It is effective, but we’re not doing it effectively at the moment.”

Dan says there is no time like the present to plan for the next pandemic. “Right now, when people are still worried about being locked in their homes again, when they’re worried about the next pandemic, we have the opportunity to put things in place to say well ‘when it happens again, this is the plan’,” he said. “I do firmly believe that if we wait until after, when it’s back to business as usual, nobody will do anything.”

But one of the key initiatives for getting economies and people moving again is still a controversial one. Mikkel from Denmark says he is happy when imagines being able to travel again with vaccine passports, but then reality intervenes: “I think of the idea that, as a low priority person, half the population will have gotten vaccine passports and I won’t,” he said. Once half the population is covered, he says, governments may then slow down the vaccination efforts, “which scares the crap out of me”.



**When the first lockdowns were announced, many of our young participants felt it was the right thing to do. But they have grown frustrated with mixed messages from governments and a lack of coordination and the EU level. Some highlighted a lack of adherence to the rules among the population, but most felt it was up to governments to lead. Learning these lessons, the young people said, will be crucial for planning for the next pandemic.**

# Economic Support

1

Young people said they had relied on family and friends more than government support to get through the pandemic

2

Lack of solidarity among EU countries slowed the pace of interventions and dulled the impact of support measures

3

Economic packages should now target key sectors such as universities, schools and the arts

When governments ordered shutdowns of schools and businesses and confined their populations to their homes, it was clear there would be a huge economic impact. Each EU country launched its own schemes to compensate those affected, and the EU offered emergency funds to governments.

For many young people, the help offered by governments was simply not enough to justify submitting themselves to the bureaucratic processes.

## Support of families, institutions and employers has been invaluable

“Small companies will not be able to do it themselves because they will need accountancy and payrolls,” said Anton of the situation in Slovakia. One of his clients has just been forced to repay the aid because of a paperwork mistake. “They will probably end up on unemployment benefits,” he said.

“I had the feeling that it’s like filing for social security,” said Mark of the aid package on offer in Hungary. “There is so much bureaucracy with that, at least in Hungary, it’s also too little to rely on, so I thought that it’s not worth hassling with.” He said everyone in his friendship circle returned to what they could rely on most – their families and their parents’ homes.

Few young people had direct experience of receiving aid from their governments. Maria Vittoria, for example, was helped by her family. “I saved a lot of money because I wasn’t at my university. I spent more time with my family and they paid for me,” she said. “I used to be a tutor before the epidemic so students used to come to my house after school to revise. I turned my work online so I’m basically earning the same amount of money as before.”

## Earlier action could have prevented economic hardship

The need for economic assistance has been profound, with whole sectors forced to close for months at a time. But young people believe European countries could have avoided the economic crisis if they had taken firm action early — and stuck to it.

“China, Taiwan and New Zealand, are the perfect examples of countries that dealt with the problem in such a way that it didn’t get to this point where health or economic benefits were needed,” said Ivo, pointing to the drastic measures taken early in those

countries. His native Bulgaria reacted in the same way initially but then quickly opened up.

“There was a total lockdown for about one month in March, and everyone stayed at home, and I mean everyone,” he said. “There were even points of at the entrances of cities and villages where you couldn’t get in or get out without a valid reason. I think this was the right way to do it... Everything that came after that, and the lack of expertise on every level within the European Union, is appalling.”

Mikkel from Denmark agrees. “I would have loved to have seen that southern Europe didn’t need to bear such a huge burden of their service sector being demolished for the entire summer,” he said.

## Some sections of society suffer more than others

Mikkel is both a video game developer and a theatre worker. He has seen how the pandemic has laid waste to some sectors of the economy and left others completely untouched. “The video game industry does not require any economic stimulus because it turns out, people from home still play video games,” he said.

**“The video game industry does not require any economic stimulus because it turns out, people from home still play video games,”**

*Mikkel, Denmark*

“However, on the theatre side, we were supposed to do a piece of the festival, which no longer is [going ahead]. We’ve rescheduled now for 2022 and we’re just hoping that this time the calendar is going to be fine and that Covid-21 is not going to appear out of nowhere.”

But he lives in hope rather than expectation and believes the arts needs long term support.

Eimear believes the Irish government has failed to support freelancers. “The self-employed people have been completely left out to dry. They are not allowed to operate but they’re still being forced to pay their government levy, which is around 250 euros a month, which is a lot of money if you’re not making any and you’re not allowed to make any.”

**“The self-employed people have been completely left out to dry.”**

*Eimear, Ireland*

## **Lack of solidarity cost Europe dearly**

In the early days of the pandemic, with governments struggling to frame coherent policies as caseloads and deaths mounted, young people believe there was a distinct lack of solidarity among European governments. In their view, this dulled the impact of many of the measures and made it difficult to respond properly.

“There was no solidarity at all,” said Emily, pointing particularly to the north-south divide in Europe that left her home country Italy struggling to cope. She says this was a hangover from the 2008-2009 financial crisis, with the southern countries being seen as unreliable partners.

“The disorganised response and the distrust between member state governments has put us in a lot of trouble first on the immunology stage and then secondly and hugely on the economic stage,” said Mikkel. He said more drastic action should have been taken sooner. “Ireland suspended their border over foot and mouth disease so I’m sure we could have figured something out over what is really the worst thing that’s happened in this continent in the past half century.”

“The response from the European Union was, as always with every problem very delayed very expensive very protracted and what did it lead to,” asked Ivo. “Vaccine bottlenecks.” He said the EU’s response “was literally a tiny bit better than doing nothing”.

He called for proactive policy making instead of reactive, adding: “I would love if some legislative action was taken in order to prevent anything like this happening in the future, because if I see a Covid-21 or Covid-22, I’m seriously going to be considering starting to learn Chinese and emigrating.”

Marina from Spain is more forgiving, pointing out that the job of coordinating vaccinations over 27 different nations is no easy task. “We really need to have kind of an equality of access,” she said.

## **Schools and universities urgently need more support**

Young people are particularly concerned with the plight of educational institutions, suggesting that not only were they unfairly targeted with restrictions and shutdowns, but they were also left financially exposed.

“Schools and university have been closed for too long,” said Emily, highlight the plight of the institutions in Italy. She called for financial support for the institutions but also said parents and families should get more help with home-schooling to “find

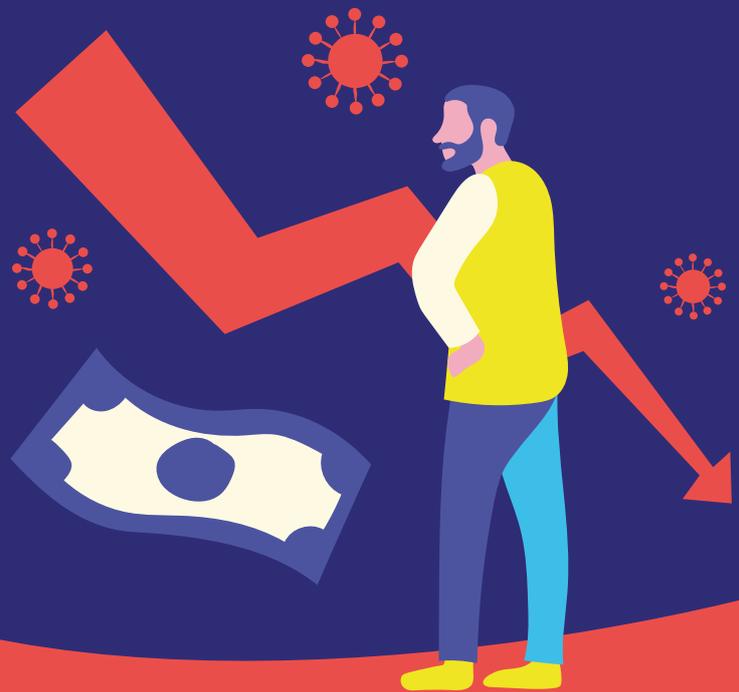
ways to let, especially children and students, have access to the Internet”, which she suggested was now a “basic need”.

**“Schools and university have been closed for too long,”**

*Emily, Italy*

Maria Vittoria said many of her peers had simply dropped out of university as they could not see a way to carry on studying. The idea of completing a master’s degree online did not appeal. There should be “more incentives to students, to universities and to schools in general to encourage people at university to continue to not stop to not give up,” she said.

Mikkel said he had looked closely and the data on infections and it was clear that workplaces were much bigger risks than schools and colleges. “I know which ones generate the GDP, but it does seem like there’s a significant burden put on the young, and it has been pretty devastating to see... It just seems a little bit unfair, the way the burden is structured now.”



The young people in our focus groups had little direct experience of receiving aid from their governments. Some felt the application process was too onerous, or that the amounts on offer were too small. They believe economic packages have largely failed to support a lot of the people that need it most, including freelance workers. The next round of policies, they say, should focus on helping universities and schools to recover and adapt.

# Green Recovery

1

Many young people supported dramatic action on climate and called for a huge push to get more people engaged

2

Europe's green recovery has positive aims, they said, but a change in attitudes and processes throughout Europe will be needed to make it successful

3

The EU needs to ensure the new funds are being distributed fairly and equally

Last May, when the first shocks of the pandemic were still raw and the devastating economic impact was not yet clear, the European Commission announced a slew of plans to transform the continent's economy. Billions of euros were earmarked for spending on making transport greener, cleaning up industries and renovating homes.

The goals were laudable, according to the young people we spoke to. But many are doubtful that they will be realised. And there is substantial concern that a recovery plan that comes from the central organ of the European Union cannot truly hear the voices of those at the peripheries.

## Recovery plans are not being widely discussed

Most of the young people we spoke to were only dimly aware of the idea of a green recovery. “It is basically just throwing money at us... tied in with the EU’s long term aims of a green new deal,” said Ross, suggesting it could relate to Artificial Intelligence and job creation.

He was not the only one to be hazy on the details, with Shirley suggesting that at least in Ireland the measures had provoked little discussion. “There’s absolutely no talk of the economic recovery,” she said. “So while the EU has done a good job in terms of creating this collaborative approach to economic recovery, the Irish response has been disappointing. There’s no talk of how that money is going to be channelled towards affected industries or demographics.”

Andras from Hungary explains that each nation filters the message through its domestic lens. In Hungary, the message is clear: “The government uses the EU as the picture of an enemy,” he said, and the recovery issue had become another political football in the government’s continuing battle against any scrutiny of domestic reforms under the EU’s rule of law mechanism.

In Italy, the debate over recovery was dominated by the idea that “as there is in every EU plan, there is going to be a lot of reporting” requirements, said Marcello. But he said the broad handling of the issue at European level had been positive: “From the very beginning of the pandemic, what I’ve seen is the Commission and von der Leyen saying ‘we are here, we are Europe, you’re going to get the money’.”

## Economic growth is incompatible with climate goals

Young people are keenly aware of the problems of trying to create a green recovery when economic growth remains the dominant goal. “It’s a good intention but it’s just greenwashing for me,” said Alessandra from Italy. “There is no greening, there is no sustainable anything if you still believe in growth.”

**“There is no greening, there is no sustainable anything if you still believe in growth.”**

*Alessandra, Italy*

“The European Union is all about growth... and build factories and produce useless stuff but they think that everyone everything will be green. I don’t think so. I’m really sceptical about this,” she added.

The theme recurs several times. “The main issue is just how we’re measuring build better because we’re still measuring it by GDP,” said Eimear. “Everyone has agreed that this is a terrible way to measure anything. It doesn’t measure happiness, doesn’t measure wellbeing, doesn’t measure climate commitment... It just measures how many billions white dudes have in their pockets.”

“The problem is not the approach and the mindset and the idea, the problem is how we measure it,” she concluded.

Angelos agrees, calling the economy and environment “conflicting priorities”. “You can’t have the best of both,” he said. “One damages the other. It’s good to keep pollution in check, but first of all, people need to have jobs.”

“Putting huge money into say investing in electric vehicles, that’s not going to have the same social benefits as investing in immediate job opportunities,” said Shirley. “A purely green recovery could be polarising. Of course, environmental sustainability will have long term benefits for all of us, but in the medium term that’s not necessarily going to pull people out of potentially covid induced poverty.”

Teresa from suggests the climate plan is “almost like a smokescreen” to stop people from thinking about the pandemic. She sees little connection between climate initiatives from on high and the reality on the ground. “In the case of Portugal, for example, the government hasn’t really done anything about the climate there’s no emphasis on the climate there’s no but at the same time Lisbon was selected as the green capital of Europe.”

## **A bigger debate is needed, with fewer dinosaurs at the table**

Some of these problems may be avoided, suggests Maria from Greece, if the debate is widened. “It would be better for us to try to understand the situation in each country,” she said. “We have the ability to talk with other people from other countries, this gives us bigger, broader perspectives.” She suggests this would take away some of the pessimism and bring about a united Europe.

The point strikes a chord with many young Europeans, particularly when talking about Europe’s longer-term future. Michael from Belgium called for a debate “no longer between politicians or professors only but one that everyone can participate in”. “Now, I see too much mutual misunderstanding for no reason,” he said.

Teresa from Portugal makes a similar point, calling for “non-traditional stakeholders” to be included in the debate, particularly regional representatives rather than just national and EU officials. “In the European Union, there is always the same circle of

the same people going after the same things and there’s never really space for new ideas and new thoughts to come in,” she said.

“We have a term in Portuguese for the people that have held on to their jobs for longer than they should. We call them dinosaurs. I think that Brussels is ruled by dinosaurs, and my vision for Europe and 10 to 20 years is definitely to take advantage of young minds and new people.”

## **A people-focused recovery would be best for Europe**

The pandemic has focused the minds of the European Commission on the green issue, but young Europeans worry that other aspects could be lost in the fallout. Shirley from Ireland says Europe should push for a “people-focused recovery”. She points out how the pandemic has revealed healthcare workers are underpaid, the gender divide is still huge and access to green spaces varies hugely.

“If we could solve some of those issues... I think this year of sitting at home would have been worth it. And I really, really hope people do take a renewed focus on these on these issues coming out of this and we don’t just go back to the way things were, because it wasn’t perfect.”

The question of priorities is vital for Europe’s future, suggests Paolo, urging the continent’s leaders to move away from the cosy relationship with corporations. “I hope that Europe will stand out as a model of a place where it’s not the market only that drives the economy, but there are other choices that can be made, political choices not driven by capital.”

## Southern countries are not (always) the bad guys

Young people from Europe's southern nations sometimes feel unfairly singled out for criticism, particularly about financial management. Alessandra suggests the poor performance of these countries is down to the structural failure of the European Union rather than inherent problems with their societies.

"We have created a union that is completely unbalanced, with the euro based on the Deutsch mark, a very strong currency that has nothing to do with the currencies that we had in Portugal, Italy and Greece," she said. "We've been seen as the bad guys just profiting from the EU but Italy was the third (biggest) industrial country in Europe before going into the European monetary union."

Teresa agrees that southern countries are seen as the bad guys but suggests there might be a good reason. "Portugal is one of the most corrupt countries in Europe so that makes sense," she said. "There aren't really guidelines as to how to spend the money and historically we're known for not making the best decisions and when it comes to getting EU money. The last time we got EU money it was to fund sunflower fields instead of giving jobs to people."

Angelos also sees the criticism of southern countries, at least partly, as a product of their own failings. "Usually in Greece it's a synonym for corruption, when you hear that we have a green plan it's a synonym for 'give us some money to do something with it, but, but we will not do something very efficient'."

It is not just Europe's southern countries that worry about how their governments will spend the money. "If you think about Hungary... how can someone build an authoritarian state in the middle of Europe," he asked. "It's not only the responsibility of the Hungarian government but it's also the responsibility of the EU, because EU funds were stolen by the Hungarian government and they built an autocracy from these funds and the EU did nothing about this."

In Belgium there are also concerns. Michael compares his country's green energy initiatives with the Dutch, suggesting that the Belgian authorities are happy to hack away at the countryside to create green energy. "For me, it has to be both or otherwise it will become a sort of luxurious thing for people in the city to have green energy, and then have parks around them, but at the same time destroy the nature in the back lands. That doesn't make sense to me."

## More support for the little guys

The spending must also flow from the centre to people who need it, regardless of their abilities in negotiating EU bureaucracy. "This influx of cash, it might go to a few people who are friendly with the government and know how to write to right proposals, but that's not going to benefit anybody really long term," said Eimear from Ireland.

If the focus of a green recovery is meant to be on local production over global supply chains, she said smaller firms should reap the rewards rather than big multinationals. "Your small, medium businesses are actually some of the better ways, they can make changes because they have more autonomy and they can do things the way that people want."

**"I think that they're going to have to put themselves front and centre of the social and economic recovery of ordinary people."**

*Shirley, Ireland*

And the messaging on this issue is crucial, says Shirley. “It’s up to the EU to really try and challenge narratives and say, well, no we’re actually working on behalf of the ordinary people. We’re not just creating this kind of bureaucracy and institution-based culture in Brussels that doesn’t impact individual people. I think that they’re going to have to put themselves front and centre of the social and economic recovery of ordinary people.”

## How we define sustainability is crucial

The old bogeymen that have stalked the EU for years cropped up again and again during these discussions: too much bureaucracy, overreliance on jargon, setting goals without registering achievements. Teresa is not alone when she calls the bloc’s climate aims “far-fetched”.

“Once again, the European Union has these amazing ideas that we’ll be carbon neutral in like 20 years,” she said. “It’s not going to happen. People need to be more realistic. When it comes to the this focus on sustainability and sustainable jobs and like who is going to define what is a sustainable job and what isn’t?”

She says the EU seems to be using sustainability as a “buzzword” to get people more invested in their plan: “But when you look at it, things are pretty much going to stay the same. I’m very, very doubtful that all those goals are going to be achieved.”

Alessandra has similar worries, particularly about the European Social Fund. “Money will be linked to green or sustainable jobs... but what is a sustainable job? The people who will define this will be defining what the money will be used for. But right now, the definition of this is really far removed from what we actually need.” She said the climate pact, overall, was “a disaster”.

## Reduce European reliance on imports

Away from the nitty gritty of European administration, young people feel that any European green initiative needs to focus on self-reliance. “I believe it’s really important that Europe reduces importing anything from anywhere outside,” said Angelos. “When they say green recovery, if this means creating and producing green technology ourselves, that’s hugely positive. If it means buying everything from China and just implementing it, that’s not as productive.”

**“When they say green recovery, if this means creating and producing green technology ourselves, that’s hugely positive .”**

*Eimear, Ireland*

China comes up again and again. “At the moment, China is overproducing for our needs,” said Michael. “If we can do it ourselves and profit from it and reduce the need for China, that’s very good. At the same time, shortening the supply chain is very green. That’s a double win.”

For Dan, self-reliance does not need to mean isolation. “I don’t see a reason why Europe can’t be a single organism that works together to produce most of what every country needs,” he said. “Not with the sense of closing ourselves off to the rest of the world, but with the idea of genuinely using everything that each country has to offer to improve their neighbours and vice versa.”



A green recovery was largely seen as a positive goal by the young people in our focus groups. But they were keen for it to be done in the right way. Spending must be transparent, its goals must be clearly defined, and the way success is measured must move away from purely economic metrics like GDP. Many young people were sceptical that the structures and processes of the European Union could deliver a full green recovery without fundamental reform.

# Conclusion

In the early stages of the pandemic, the young people in our focus groups were broadly positive about the reactions of their national governments. They supported the drastic lockdowns that came as the severity of the contagion became clear. Many suggested that the initial tough response should have been maintained longer or should have been even more draconian.

However, there was anger particularly from young people in southern Europe, about a perceived lack of solidarity between the south and the north. Some put the blame for this on the EU, some on the attitudes of national governments. Other young people, particularly from Greece and Italy, felt that the wariness shown by the north was

justified, given their past record of their governments.

As the pandemic has developed and governments have streamlined their responses, support for drastic measures has waned. Many young people questioned whether lockdowns and curfews should still be necessary at this stage. With the gift of hindsight, they see the severe measures taken by China as something of a role model.

Feeding into a sense of weariness with the pandemic is the perceived lack of economic support. None of the young people we spoke to had received support from their governments, despite the disruption to their lives. In western EU countries, it was felt that economic

recovery was not even a prominent talking point with the focus instead on the immediate restrictions. In eastern countries like Slovakia and Hungary, young people felt the help on offer was so small – and the bureaucratic hurdles so big – that it would not be worth even applying.

And while help from the EU was broadly well-received, young people felt that the bloc was better at setting long-term aims and framing values than it was at delivering concrete results. Few were aware of the details of the green recovery plan, and the aid to national governments was often framed in terms of the strings attached to it rather than the potential benefit.

For both national governments and the EU, the way they plan for the next crisis is vital to their long-term futures. Many of the young people said they must act fast and plan for the next pandemic. A proper plan to stop any future spread should be mixed with genuine support for affected people.

In all of this, one message was clear: young people feel that they have borne the brunt of the restrictions over the past year, but have received very little support from governments, financially or otherwise. If young people are to be kept onboard with the European project, those in positions of authority must make much more of an effort.



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