

# EUROPE IN ETERNAL EMERGENCY (?)

Young Europeans' Perspectives on the EU in Times of Crisis  
Ahead of the 2024 European Parliamentary Elections

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the granting authority the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.



Co-funded by the  
European Union

Author: [Axel Müller](#)

Director: [Adam Nyman](#)

Focus Group Facilitators: [Alessandra Cardaci](#), [Axel Müller](#), [Chahaiya Pilkington](#)

Editor: [Thandanani Mhlanga](#)

Designer: [Dorothee Louis](#)

© Friends of Europe 2022

# CONTENTS

## 1. Abstract

## 2. Introduction

## 3. Methodology

## 4. Findings

No Times of Change Without Times of Crisis?

No European Union Without European Identity?

No United Approach Without Unqualified Support?

No Positive Future Without a Positive Vision?

## 5. Summary

## 6. About Debating Europe

# 1. ABSTRACT

As the world finds itself in crisis mode, the European Union has been seriously put to the test. A test of its unity and its leaders as much as of its citizens. Among them, prominently, are youngsters who are suddenly faced with uncertainty and unprecedented events, be it a pandemic, a war on Europe's doorstep, or one of the many side-effects. To better understand young Europeans' feelings and perceptions in these times, Debating Europe spoke to 30 students aged 18-30 from 15 countries in a series of focus group discussions. We asked them how they assess the EU's performance in times of crisis and whether they feel hopeful for the Union's future. Ahead of the 2024 European Parliamentary elections, the young participants debated contested concepts of identity and unity and told us about their expectations from decision-makers. This report summarizes their perspectives.

# 2. INTRODUCTION

Headlines are gloomy these days. There is war in Ukraine. There is climate change. There is an energy crisis. There is inflation and there is economic recession. There is a pandemic that just won't go away. One could amend this list further as the world finds itself in times of multiple crises. All that impacts people differently based on their backgrounds and individual experiences. Yet it is beyond doubt that young people are affected exceptionally. Not only are they new to many challenges, but they will also have to live with the consequences of today's decisions for much longer than older generations.

At Debating Europe, therefore, we regularly invite young people from across the continent to share their views with us. We want to learn from youngsters and give their ideas and hopes as well as their worries and fears a platform. We learnt that these perceptions don't only matter greatly, but that they tend to diverge from those of established decision-makers. Our conversations with youngsters are thus in line with our strategic objectives to revitalize democracy and foster a new kind of leadership.

In late November 2022, we met a group of 30 young international students for a series of in-person mini focus groups, discussing the European Union in times of crisis. Through a set of questions, the participants – originating from 15 different countries spread all over the continent – critically assessed the current state of the Union, pointing out key themes to act upon for both leaders and citizens. This report summarizes their views.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

To give everyone a chance to voice their thoughts, participants were split into three groups of ten. The groups were led by experienced facilitators who based their questions on a common moderator guide.

Participants in the half hour-long discussions come from Italy, Greece, France, Germany, Poland, Finland, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Romania, Portugal, Czechia, Cyprus, Ireland, Hungary, and Albania. They are 18-30 years of age with a majority of female (19) over male (11) participants. All participants were enrolled in social science under- and postgraduate programs at Dutch universities (mostly in Maastricht) at the time of the discussions. This report quotes them using their first name and country of origin.

### 4. FINDINGS

#### NO TIMES OF CHANGE WITHOUT TIMES OF CRISIS?

In the lead to the actual discussions, participants were presented with four statements. They were asked to indicate spontaneously whether they would agree or disagree with these statements and then given a chance to elaborate.

“Whenever there is a crisis, the countries only see what is best for themselves

The first statement sparked a lively discussion right away as it read: *Times of crisis make the EU stronger*. Two thirds of the youngsters agreed with the statement while a minority (4 people) had other opinions. Six participants were undecided.

“I’m not so sure if a crisis strengthens the European Union,” said Mariah from the Netherlands to explain her indecisiveness. She added for consideration that events like the war in Ukraine have the potential to “shake up the whole ideology that is behind the EU.” Her compatriot Matthijs, one of the few to disagree, brought up the example of the Covid-19 pandemic which had him questioning how united the EU really is: “When it all started, there was very little aid from the EU countries and instead more inwards-looking.” Polish Eliza agreed, though she gave it a more positive ring: “For the future, maybe some countries see that other countries managed the Covid crisis better. So, ultimately, I think, it makes us get closer together, but probably it’s not seen during the crisis.” Zinovia (Greece) had no doubt: “I believe a crisis changes the European Union for the better.”

Sergi made his fellow discussants aware that “whenever there is a crisis, the countries only see what is best for themselves.” Coming from Albania himself, though, he was quick to add that “from the outside” it looked much better “to be in rather than out of the EU.” Czech Martin expressed nuance in his intervention: “When the crisis can be solved with money – like the financial crisis or the pandemic – then the EU gets stronger. But when the crisis is more about perceived security – like the migration crisis – it doesn’t strengthen the EU because it shows the differences, really a lot.” His thinking led him to raise questions: “What exactly does it mean that the EU gets stronger after a crisis? Does it mean narrowly that the EU gets more competences? Then probably yes. But if you try to measure if the EU is more united, then it’s much more blurry because, e.g., Southern states were very angry after the austerity measures.”

“ Since we say, ‘United in Diversity’ it seems a bit difficult to only have one person or opinion representing that all

Peter from Slovakia “would disagree that the current crisis strengthens the EU. But the EU is managing the crisis overall well.” Alexis from Cyprus had the same view, looking especially at the coronavirus pandemic: “Europe managed it better than the US and much better than Russia. And we see how it is going in China. I think when there are very big issues, there is actually a united front but when there are smaller questions, the whole thing tends to fall apart.” No matter if the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, or another challenge, Italian Manuel demanded that “an effort could be made to explain a little bit better what is going on. I believe if there was a way to explain steps, the EU could also increase its legitimacy to the people.”

These viewpoints were reflected in how the young people voted in the second statement, namely: *The EU must speak with one voice on the world stage*. 28 of the 30 participants instantly signalled agreement, with only one dissenting and another indecisive vote.

Cypriot Alexis and Greek Thanos explained why they were not on the side of the majority. “The EU means diversity. So, it’s very hard to just put one face or one picture to represent the EU,” said Alexis. Thanos was thinking along similar lines: “Since we say, ‘United in Diversity’ it seems a bit difficult to only have one person or opinion representing that all.” Winona from Germany, who had agreed to the sentence, assumed it to be “easy for the EU to reach unity when there is a threat from outside.” Key milestones of European integration, she explained, took place mostly due to “outside things happening and the need to bunch together, e.g., against the Eastern bloc.” What this means for the future, to Winona, “depends on how the EU defines itself, as a bloc against something or a group together for something within.”

The third statement – *The EU should punish member states that deviate from EU values and policies* – was met largely with agreement by 22 nodding faces. The remaining eight voters were split into unsureness and refusal of the claim (four each).

In their reasoning, many participants linked this question back to their initial statements,

stating that deviating policies and disagreement might emerge out of moments of crisis. "I think the European Union should do better to even avoid a crisis in the first place," stated Camilla (Italy). Constant reacting instead of decisive acting, she argued, would not help the EU's perception. Brussels would then be seen as "weaker and weaker." In another group, Manuel, also from Italy, agreed: "I think the European model is starting to show some cracks." He was convinced that the Union "should really focus on its internal structure, a big structural reform, especially in the treatment of the member states and the cooperation between them, before getting involved in international big disputes that the people don't even comprehend. Otherwise, it's just trying to do everything at the same time and eventually achieving less than expected." Greek Nefeli preferred to look at the bright side: "If they don't let the cracks get bigger, the future is not as dark as we picture it."

**“ I think we all feel as EU citizens. But if we have to choose between the EU and our nations, I think we choose our nations**

The fourth and last statement sparked the biggest conversation. 24 participants disagreed to *Most people I know feel pro-European, sometimes even more than their national identity*. Four people were on the fence, two agreed with the sentence.

French Esther kicked off the discussion with what turned out to summarize many participants' opinion: "I think we all feel as EU citizens. But if we have to choose between the EU and our nations, I think we choose our nations." Thanos supplemented this take arguing that "for people who don't study politics it's really hard to understand what the EU is. I think that is part of the reason why people don't really feel European." Sofia from France related the question of identity back to the previous point of cracks inside the Union: "Even within the EU, some member states are considered different to others. There is quite a division between them. If you are from one of those member states, it's really easy to feel disconnected, really easy to go back to your own nation." Italian Sara saw an additional reason for a lack of attachment to Brussels, which is not only geographically far away from many places in the EU but "seems really distant because the media doesn't cover it."

## **NO EUROPEAN UNION WITHOUT A EUROPEAN IDENTITY?**

One group in particular delved into a thorough discussion about European identity and its importance for practical politics. Referring to the controversial statement from the voting exercise, Anne (Germany) shared her personal experience: "If I would ask my friends in Maastricht, they would probably feel more European. Me as well. But if I look at friends and family at home that don't have such a strong connection to Europe like I do, sometimes, they are not even interested in the EU." Nefeli from Greece could relate with her biography: "I am a first-year student in Maastricht. It is the first time I am living outside Greece. So, I start to sense this European bubble, but I actually still feel more Greek. My family is pro-European, but still our identity is Greek." She went on to share her family's history with the group, concluding that "it has to do with taking it a step further, it has to do with generations." Winona agreed,

adding that she is “very aware” how the phenomenon of feeling more European than, in her case, German “is definitely due to a bubble.”

## “ We came just here from Maastricht yesterday. Just like this. No border checks. That just gives you so much freedom

Controversy came to the table as Slovak Peter admitted feeling “really confused. We keep repeating the word ‘European’, but we are not sure what it means.” He expanded: “Most people who say they are pro-European have a very narrow perception of what Europe is. I guess it would start somewhere in France and end somewhere in Germany. And my question is: What values are really enshrined in this Europe? What do we even mean by that?”

Mara from Romania tried to reply, saying that the EU for her represents “values that might not be so present at home: rule of law, freedom of speech, the way elections happen.” German Anne supported this take, addressing Peter directly: “You just have to look at the treaties. It says everything in the first few paragraphs. The value for democracy, the value for the rule of law, also the freedoms, especially the freedom of movement. We came just here from Maastricht yesterday. Just like this. No border checks. That just gives you so much freedom.” Sara from Italy, too, spoke of “values, especially democracy. We can feel these European values when we go outside of Europe.” French Sofia followed this thinking: “Europe is that we try to share the most important values, human rights, e.g. It’s not as perfect as it should be but that’s the core of the EU.”

## “ If some people feel that they are pro-European, they think from France to Germany

Peter insisted on his scrutiny, countering that “there is quite a difference between what is written in the treaties and what we are discussing. We are basically talking about a European identity which we should adopt. And we are comparing it to the national identities. Therefore, I think that the values such as the rule of law and democracy might not be essentially part of it. It’s more about how a person feels.” Coming back to his earlier point that “if some people feel that they are pro-European, they think from France to Germany,” he clarified that “I am pro-European, and I think from Portugal to, say, Belarus.” He then raised another question, directly addressing the elephant in the room: “How can we reconcile this when the perceptions are so different? I think that they are very different in the member states.”

Mara reacted: “When I say most of my friends feel more Romanian, I think they look more at the culture. But with more European, they mean more the political and societal side. And I feel like the whole European identity is very subjective. I don’t think there should be a checklist whether you feel like a European citizen or not. For you, European identity probably doesn’t mean the same thing it means for me. And that’s completely fine.”



Having listened to the interventions of her peers, Portuguese Rita pointed out that, to her mind, “there needs to be an identity to hold [the EU] together. We’ve seen it in the times of crisis now: There needs to be a common response. Because they want to be united to the outside world but then the cracks inside are very visible.” Aleksandra offered her perspective: “I am from Poland, and we are one of the cracks sometimes. When there is a crisis, we go towards the EU. But when nothing is happening, we’re sometimes like: ‘Oh, we don’t need the EU. These are just countries telling us what we should do. But we have our own identity.’ A lot of people, especially in older generations, definitely still feel more Polish than European.” The only national of a non-EU country in the group, Sergi from Albania, added that a European identity is “not just about actions. I feel an attachment to European values.”

“ I don’t think there should be a checklist whether you feel like a European citizen or not

#### NO UNITED APPROACH WITHOUT UNQUALIFIED SUPPORT?

The other two groups dug deeper into the question of European unity when asked what it personally meant for them and whether it would be enough for the EU to have open internal borders and a common currency. “There is a cultural exchange and also a connectivity. Some member states are completely contradictory but also they go together,” Italian Manuel submitted. For Alexis (Cyprus) European unity was synonymous to “safety and a common future.” For Daniel from Hungary, it meant “being able to settle anywhere and freely establish yourself.” Polish Eliza shared that “when I travel through the EU and I meet people I feel like we have something in common. It’s nice to have that feeling.” Ghislain challenged Eliza’s sentiment: “When friends from France travel to Germany or Austria, they still feel like they are in a completely different culture.” Asked what European unity means to him, Thanos (Greece) didn’t have to think long. “Diversity,” he answered.

“ When I travel through the EU and I meet people I feel like we have something in common. It’s nice to have that feeling.

Debating with her peers about how European unity might be strengthened, Eleonora from Italy took a moment to explain: “I think achieving European unity is really difficult. In comparison with the US, what we really miss in Europe is something in common. We have different languages, different histories, so many things that divide us. There was the attempt to establish Esperanto as a common language and it failed totally. Maybe we need to accept that we need time to establish an identity in the common sense of the word. The history of the EU is really short, not even a hundred years, so maybe we just need a bit of time.” Lina from Finland didn’t look to history but to visibility and overcoming the Brussels bubble in order to strengthen European unity. “Most of my friends back home don’t really know the workings of the EU,” she said and suggested more “information and education” as well as common EU citizenship to tackle the perceived lack of togetherness.

## “ Most of my friends back home don't really know the workings of the EU

Matthijs approved of this idea (“I think the EU needs more visibility”) and called for a pronouncedly positive narrative around the Union: “In the Netherlands, the view of the EU is usually quite negative. You don't really hear much about it. You only hear about it when it's not doing well. So, it's used to gain ground in Dutch politics.” He said most people in his country wouldn't know what they were gaining from the EU but instead carry the sentiment to “only spend” money on the Union. Winona (Germany) wished for the same but was held back by her scepticism: “It's up to the EU to change the narrative of the EU and basically market themselves better. I feel like that could already change quite a lot, but I don't see that happening in the next two years.”

Eliza brought her group conversation back to the point of generational divide, arguing to bring everyone on board for genuine unity: “I think youth is already quite aware of what the EU is doing. The older generation is more of a problem. Especially in Poland, the older generation is still remembering communism and they are afraid to open up. Maybe it would be nice to show them that more support for the European Union doesn't mean that their values are in danger. So they are also heard and it's not like something is taken away from them. I think that is important. That they understand that something is also given to them.”

## “ It's up to the EU to change the narrative of the EU and basically market themselves better

### NO POSITIVE FUTURE WITHOUT A POSITIVE VISION?

To round up the discussion participants were asked about their perspectives on Europe's future, not least in light of the 2024 European Parliamentary elections. In tackling this question, Hungarian Daniel stuck to Eliza's intergenerational thinking, though looking at youth: “The biggest change to come is this generational change. More and more young people are more engaged. This generation is finally growing up. We are the ones who finally reach voting age.” Ilona (Finland) seconded this, arguing she was sure “the young generation will shape the course of the EU” since young people know “how the EU works and how to actually engage with the EU.” Samuel from Ireland, in turn, was concerned about representation as he saw much more anger and disengagement outside “pro-EU environments.”

## “ The young generation will shape the course of the EU

Offering a more sobering perspective was Mara from Romania: “I want to be optimistic, but by looking at certain facts, it doesn't look like that.” With “certain facts” she meant “what is happening in Italy and Sweden with the far-right,” a concern echoed by others. Aleksandra also had a hard time hanging on to her optimism while “listening to the public debates in Poland and what people say and believe and what is said on national television is so Eurosceptic.”

Finnish Lina feared the challenge posed by rising nationalism, sentiments shared by Daniel from Hungary who said: "Further integration and further enlargement cannot happen at the same time. An even larger union means even more different perspectives and that it just won't be feasible to connect it even more."

Those who tried to give their feelings a more positive spin couldn't help but admit to a certain degree of concern too. Albanian Sergi said that, on the one hand, "most of the EU's problems will be solved. I think it's just a wave of populism that passes." On the other hand, "regarding the role of the EU on the global stage, I am more on the pessimistic side." Martin from the Czech Republic asked whether "there will be progress, e.g., implementing the recommendations of the Conference on the Future of Europe. I don't think they will be implemented." Calculated optimism had Rita (Portugal) conclude that "the near future looks better. My hope is that, as things are getting worse and worse and worse, the EU uses that as an impetus to do things better."

Some participants saw the solution for Europe's ills in decisive steps towards federalism, though they had a realistic view on it. "The EU should work on bringing member states closer together and creating an actual state. But I think it is probably impossible at least for the next 15 years because still the national identities are way too strong," said Manuel (Italy). French Sofia considered well-functioning European federalism "the perfect model" as much as she labelled it "a utopia. I think it will never happen."

**“ My hope is that, as things are getting worse and worse and worse, the EU uses that as an impetus to do things better**

Certainly, closer cooperation in select policy fields would be desirable, participants agreed. Camilla (Italy) called for better aligned youth and education policies and an EU-wide minimum wage. Both, she believed, would strengthen cohesion in the Union. Alexis (Cyprus) agreed on more education policy alignment, adding that concerted actions on health would do the EU good as well. Italian Federico, not sure about the feasibility of these proposals, pointed out that it was already "very difficult to find an agreement on issues." Thanos from Greece saw it as "a challenge to take into account the member states."

## 5. SUMMARY

The young people in our focus group discussions were united in their pro-European stance but had to acknowledge the manifold challenges that the European Union is facing. Some were unabatedly hopeful for the future, arguing that times of crisis would lead to an ever-closer and -stronger Union. Others feared that cracks within the EU would only exacerbate already existing developments of member states growing apart.

While there was overwhelming support for Europe to speak with one voice on the world stage, the way to achieving this was subject to debate. Some participants supported punishments for member states deviating from EU policies, others spoke out in favour of enlargement or further alignment in selected policy areas, particularly education. While the vast majority of youngsters saw the need for a European identity, defined through values, at the core of European unity, there was a controversy as to what this identity should or should not entail.

Looking squarely at the upcoming elections to the European Parliament, the students were conflicted. As much as all of them wanted to be optimistic, many felt unease given rising nationalism and anti-EU framing in some media outlets. Many had their hopes set on their generation of young people who have been champing at the bit to reach voting age at last. However great their motivation to take matters in their own hands was, they were keenly aware they wouldn't succeed without older generations and decision-makers on their side.

## 6. ABOUT DEBATING EUROPE

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

Debating Europe was launched in 2011 and has taken a bottom-up approach from the beginning, with 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 and beyond to react to.

Since launch, Debating Europe interviewed more than 3,000 policymakers and experts from across the political spectrum. Each has agreed to answer some of the 200,000 comments sent in from citizens online, including from over 271,000 followers on Facebook and Twitter. To ensure citizens' ideas and questions match up-to-date formats, focus group discussions are conducted regularly since 2019.

To move beyond the English-speaking bubble, the German platform Debating Europe/de came into being in 2017. In 2021, Debating Africa was launched, adopting the same approach and encouraging a pan-African debate on shared challenges such as climate change, security, trade, and development.

We at Debating Europe, Debating Europe/de, and Debating Africa believe international challenges require international dialogue, which is why we frequently co-operate on joint projects to bring voices from both continents to the table with politicians and experts.

Debating Europe is an initiative of Friends of Europe, the Brussels-based think tank for a more sustainable, inclusive, and forward-looking Europe.



 [info@debatingeurope.eu](mailto:info@debatingeurope.eu)

 [@debatingeurope](https://twitter.com/debatingeurope)

 [/company/debating-europe](https://www.linkedin.com/company/debating-europe)

 [www.debatingeurope.eu](http://www.debatingeurope.eu)