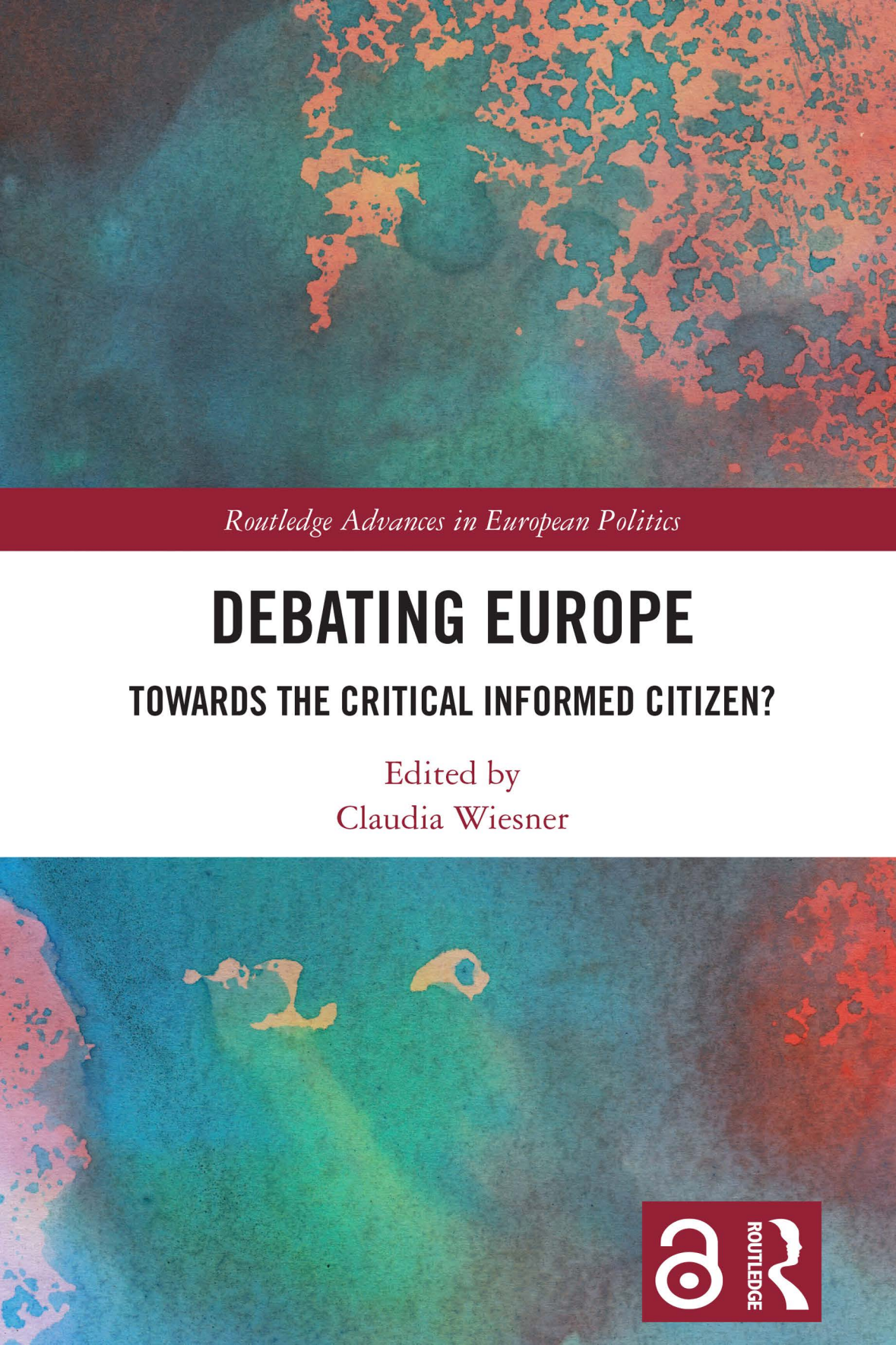




Routledge Advances in European Politics

DEBATING EUROPE

TOWARDS THE CRITICAL INFORMED CITIZEN?

Edited by
Claudia Wiesner



“No democracy without a demos, no demos without debates! Join Claudia Wiesner and the DebatEU team on a journey regarding what the quality of the debates between students in six European Member States tell us about the state of EU democracy. Supportive yet passively critical, openly utilitarian yet in demand for a more values-driven polity; an enlightening journey!”

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Debating Europe

This book examines how Europe and the European Union are debated, politicised, and contested in a group of key (future) actors of European integration.

Based on detailed focus group discussions with students in EU studies and the social sciences in six EU countries, the book presents the core results of the theoretical, conceptual, and empirical work of the Jean Monnet Network “Debating Europe” (www.debating-europe.de) that set out to study the gap between the EU and its citizens. The following chapters first theorise and conceptualise the gap, to then present the core empirical findings from the collective research. These findings show that students’ views on democracy in the EU are similar across the countries. Quite unexpectedly, students express strong claims to the EU, lining out a “Normative Power Europe 2.0” that is a global actor, defends democracy, and fights climate change. The EU is associated with values such as equality, freedom, and the rule of law. In particular, non-EU citizens see the EU as an ideal. Students make out several gaps: between citizens and EU institutions, among different member states, and among citizens. Finally, the results reveal the students as critical and informed, but passive EU citizens.

This book is of key interest to scholars and students of European studies and EU integration studies, social and political sciences, and international relations.

Claudia Wiesner is a professor of political science at Fulda University of Applied Sciences, Germany, an honorary professor at University College London, and adjunct professor at Jyväskylä University, Finland. She directs the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence “Europe in the World” and the “Point Alpha Research Institute” (PARI), is principal investigator in several international research projects, and has been a visiting fellow at various international research institutions.

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

CJEU	Court of Justice of the European Union
EC	European Commission
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
TEU	Treaty on European Union
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union

1 Introduction

The Puzzle of the Gap Between the EU and Its Citizens

Claudia Wiesner

Democracy and politics in the European Union's (EU's) multilevel system have been subject to public and academic controversies since the early days of integration. But since the financial crisis, which started in 2008, they have been especially challenged: Support for the EU has been decreasing during the peak of the financial crisis. While support rates afterwards have been increasing again, votes for populist, extremist, anti-EU, and anti-democrat parties and movements still are on the rise throughout the EU (see e.g. Macchiarelli et al. 2020), as was demonstrated again in the 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections (see later). Despite the activities of the EU and national institutions as well as intermediate institutions and actors to bring citizens closer to policymaking (see Chapter 3), researchers diagnose a distance between the EU and its citizens (Offe 2015). The EU has a legitimacy problem (Mair 2013). At the same time, the Europeanisation of politics and decision-making continues to impact and transform the national democratic systems of the member states (Wiesner 2019) and citizens' everyday life. While the EU thus continuously impacts the life of its citizens, EU criticism is on a continuous rise. There seems to be a gap between the EU and its citizens—but how does it look like exactly, and which factors mark it? The present book sets out to study this *puzzle of the gap between the EU and its citizens*.

The book is based on the work of the Jean Monnet Network “Debating Europe” that united researchers from Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, and Slovenia. The research set out from the puzzle that was just described. The project goal was to give conceptual and empirical flesh to the puzzle of the gap by learning about the reasons that make citizens critical or supportive of the EU. In order to find out how the gap is described by citizens themselves, we carried out 19 focus group discussions with students in EU Studies and the Social Sciences in the six participating countries.

1.1. The Puzzle of the Gap Between the EU and Its Citizens

The gap between the EU and its citizens is today empirically marked by increasing support for EU-critical parties, despite average trust rates in the EU. This statement sketches rather a *puzzle of the gap* than a gap itself. What are the

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reasons for increased EU criticism despite relatively stable numbers of EU support? How can we further study this gap, how is it to be conceptualised, and how is it to be judged from a normative-theoretical point of view? The reasons for a gap between the EU and its citizens, as will be discussed throughout the volume, are multifaceted. Answers to the questions named above require a look backwards in integration history and integration research, as well as on current empirical findings.

A first clue lies in integration history. As will be discussed in Chapter 2, European integration had been a political elite project since the beginning, i.e. it has been driven by national and EU political leaders (e.g. Palonen 2024; Robert 2021) rather than by bottom-up citizen movements. Nevertheless for a long time citizens silently supported the integration process in relatively high numbers in what has been baptised “permissive consensus” (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970, 41). The outcomes of the referenda on the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, which passed only narrowly in major member states such as France, are generally considered to mark the end of this silent support (see Chapter 2). Even though contestation of European integration existed before the Maastricht referenda (Hutter et al. 2016), it is true that the rates of support and trust in the EU were in general lower afterwards than before.

The financial crisis that began in 2008 represents another turning point in a development towards increased popular criticism of the EU. Support of the EU and trust in its institutions have been declining during the peak of the financial crisis (Armingeon and Guthmann 2014). Trust in the EU, which for many years had been significantly higher than trust in the member state institutions, fell disproportionately sharply. In spring 2012, it was only 31% on average in the EU (compared to 50% in spring 2008; Eurobarometer 2012, 13). Trust in national parliaments and governments fell less markedly, from 34% and 32%, respectively, in 2008 to 28% each in spring 2012. Citizens’ opinion of the EU also deteriorated markedly. In spring 2008, the EU still evoked a positive image among 48% of Eurobarometer respondents; in spring 2012, this was only the case for 31% (Eurobarometer 2012, 14). Trust in the EU then raised again after the end of the financial crisis in 2015 as the following overview in Figure 1.1 shows. In mid-2025, 50% of the EU citizens indicated they “tended to trust” the EU—but this also means that 50% did not trust it, or they “did not know” if they did.

Despite the increase in trust in the EU as well as national institutions after 2015, two trends in citizens’ attitudes and behaviour persisted. Votes for populist, extremist, anti-EU, and anti-democrat parties and movements have been continuously on the rise throughout the EU ever since 2008, despite the economic situation improving. In 2025, they are at a record high, as underlined by the results of the last EP elections. As Figure 1.2 indicates, almost 15% of the votes cast went to the EU-critical and right-wing extremist groups Patriots for Europe and Europe of Sovereign Nations. In addition, almost 11% of the votes cast went to the European Conservatives and Reformists, who are also rather EU-critical. All in all, roughly 25% of the votes cast in the last EP elections went to parties that are EU-critical in a very pronounced way.

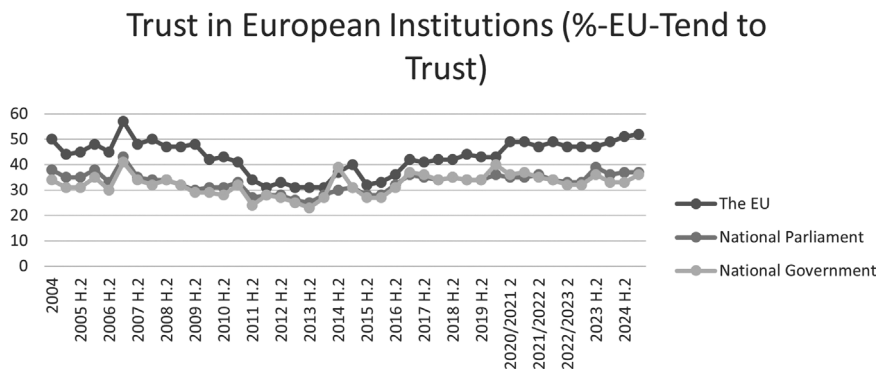


Figure 1.1 Trust in EU institutions

Source: European Union 2025, own representation.

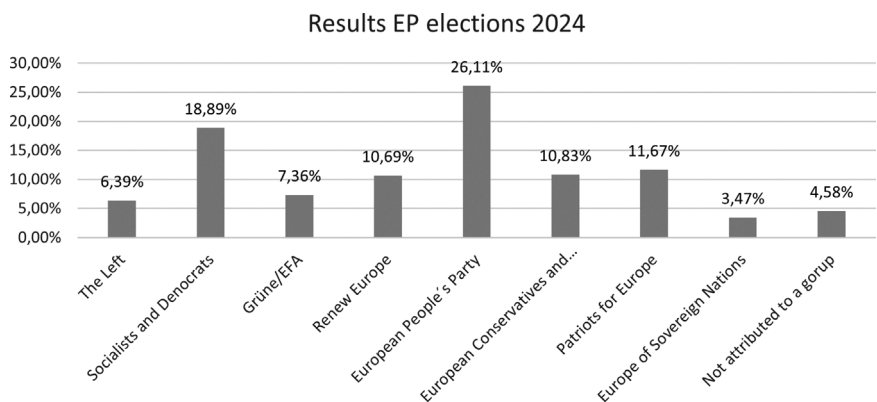


Figure 1.2 EP elections results 2024

Source: Statista Research Department 2025, own representation.

The situation in the member states is similar. In several of them right-wing populists or extremists participate in government. Often these parties are also critical of the EU.

This leads to a picture where trust in the EU after 2015 went back to where it was before the crisis, but parties and politicians putting forward pronounced EU criticism rose in electoral support. The gap between the EU and its citizens is thus today empirically marked by increasing support for EU-critical parties, despite average trust rates into the EU. This gap is, on one hand, a challenge for EU integration and EU policymaking, as it is linked to increasing EU contestation (see Chapter 2). But, as will be argued throughout the volume, it is on the other hand highly relevant from a more normatively and theoretically informed perspective.

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The gap, then, is visible in election results and opinion polls, but what are the reasons behind the raising criticism of the EU, and why does it occur when support rates are relatively stable? Possible reasons can be found in different strands of research.

For one, most EU critical parties are also right-wing extremist or right-wing populist. However, one is not to be equated with the other (see the following sections and Chapter 9). With regard to the conceptual and empirical links between populism and EU criticism, researchers face a need to differentiate. The case of Giorgia Meloni's government, for instance, underlines that it is important to have a close look at the details and to distinguish grey zones: while the government follows a right-wing populist agenda, it is clearly supportive of the EU. This indicates that the labellings of "Euroscepticism" and "Populism" should neither be applied in simplified dichotomies, nor should one be equated with the other (Chapters 2 and 9).

Second, the financial crisis seems to have served as a trigger for a decrease in EU support, as the previous numbers indicate, but the picture is very differentiated with regard to its effects. Quantitative data indicate crucial differences between countries. Greece, which was one of the member states where very positive opinions on the EU predominated among citizens, was hit particularly hard by austerity. Greece is now one of the member states in which support for and trust in the EU are lowest. So, the financial crisis seems to have severely changed the Greek's attitudes towards the EU. In Ireland, however, the picture is completely different. The country also had severe austerity programmes. But after the crisis was over, trust in and support of the EU rose again.

Another pathway for possible explanations of an increase in EU criticism is that it occurs in the context of an overall reduction of support of mainstream parties (e.g. Merkel 2023) and democratic systems, i.e. democratic deconsolidation (Foa and Mounk 2017). A general crisis of representative democracy has been diagnosed since the beginning of this century (Crouch 2004). The "hollowing out" of western democracy has been linked to European integration (Mair 2013), and the EU has even been discussed as a threat to democracy itself (e.g. Streeck 2014).

These arguments are not all to be discarded—indeed, as will be discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, a gap between the EU and its citizens has been built into the EU's institutional architecture since its beginnings. The EU mainly relied on intergovernmental integration for a long time. Until the first direct elections of the EP and the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the EU barely showed components of a political union and an active citizenry (Wiesner 2019: 85–161). In addition, it relied on a strongly expert-oriented model of governance that was marked by distrust into citizens for a long time (Chapter 2).

This distance between the EU and its citizens built into the EU's architecture seems to have been increasing at least for certain strands of the population since the financial crisis began. But still, the relations between support and trust rates, the successes of EU critical parties, and the consequences of the crisis are not clear—neither empirically, nor conceptually, nor historically. This is why "the gap" marks a research puzzle that grounds the argument of this volume.

The argument is also grounded in the insight that the methodologies that are mostly employed to study citizen perceptions of the EU can only explain part of the picture. The developments described earlier are mainly studied in quantitative surveys (see also Chapters 4 and 10). Quantitative findings indicate there is a gap, but do not tell us the reasons for the gap. This is because quantitative surveys come with a number of methodological constraints (see Chapters 2 and 6). The relevant academic debates are the ones on EU democratisation, Euroscepticism, EU politicisation, and populism (see Chapter 2). The state of the art in the academic debate in these fields is mostly based on methodologies that focus on the individual level of research subjects (surveys, opinion polls; see also Chapter 2). Moreover, studies usually have a closed design, i.e. in a survey, respondents answer to questionnaires with predefined sets of questions which are mostly based on existing assumptions in research. Hence surveys are often biased towards existing theories and concepts and use binaries, such as oppositions between “Eurosceptics” and “Europhiles” or “politicisation” and “integration”. As Gaxie et al. (2011) argue, in quantitative research the fundamental attitudes of normal citizens toward European integration thus remain poorly understood. The complexity of these attitudes is often underestimated, and the motives and reasons that shape citizens’ evaluations of the EU cannot be grasped. Quantitative approaches tend to oversimplify citizens’ attitudes, generalise responses and fail to capture subjective and different perceptions of citizens (see Chapters 2 and 5).

In short, this means that quantitative findings indicate *what* happens; in our case, they line out an increase in votes for EU-critical parties—but they do not deliver profound answers as to *how* and *why* this happens, i.e. with regard to the personal backgrounds, feelings, biographies, and motives that drive these developments. In order to grasp these more complex background reasons of citizens’ attitudes, it is necessary to discuss their personal reasons for being critical or supportive of the EU with them. In short, answers to the questions lined out earlier can be found when one discusses directly with citizens, asking after their perceptions of the EU. This was the goal of the project that is at the basis of this volume.

The Jean Monnet Network “Debating Europe” (DebatEU, 2020–2024) aimed at learning about the reasons behind *the puzzle of the gap* between the EU and its citizens. The primary goal was to find out about the “why” and “how” behind the “what” (Wiesner 2022) of the quantitative findings on the gap between the EU and its citizens. In order to learn about these, it is necessary to use qualitative and interpretative methodologies and an open research design as in the present study.

1.2. Debating Europe: The Project and Its Goals

The research carried out in the Jean Monnet Network “Debating Europe (DebatEU)” (2020–2024) has been funded by the European Commission in the framework of the Jean Monnet Actions/Erasmus+ “Debating Europe” (Grant No. 620428-EPP-1-2020-1-DE-EPPJMO-NETWORK). At the outset, the network started from the puzzle of the gap between the EU and its citizens that was just described. The aim was to understand the gap via debating the EU, i.e. using an

exploratory approach based on discussions with citizens, in order to grasp the citizens' feelings about the EU as well as the more complex background reasons of these feelings.

The work of the network was based on a specific conceptual as well as normative-theoretical understanding of debate (see in detail Chapter 2): it was conceptualised as a key democratic activity (on the following see Wiesner et al. 2017; Wiesner 2024). Debate is, first, a means to exchange positions, to discuss them, to elaborate on them, and to do so in a rules-based, peaceful, and often moderated way that most models of democracy include as a basic technique for the elaboration of collectively binding decisions. Debate, second, also is political activity and politicisation, i.e. debate includes to mark issues as subject to political action.

In both these functions, debate contributes to establish and strengthen a demos, i.e. an active democratic subject. The EU, as discussed at some length elsewhere (Wiesner 2014, 19–21; 31–42, 2019, 215–33, 2024, 5–7; 22–32), is in need of developing a stronger demos (see also Chapter 2), as democratic institutions and procedures need to be filled with life. Whether a republican, a communitarian, or a liberal model of democracy is at stake, it will always be based on both formalised rights and institutions as well as on democratic practice (Wiesner 2024, 1).

Following these considerations, “debating Europe” is one of the bases for a democratic Europe and a democratic EU: to debate, to be politically active, to feel heard, enhances citizens' trust in their abilities to use political discussions to influence the policymaking process. Debating the EU thus enhances the legitimacy of the EU as a polity, and it can strengthen citizens' trust in their ability to participate in political processes. By debating Europe in focus groups, events, conferences, social media, and publications, the network thus aimed at generating a dialogue and an enhanced understanding of the EU among citizens. The activities led to fruitful exchanges between academics, especially young researchers, students, citizens, civil society activists, and EU practitioners, i.e. EU officials, as well as EU and national politicians (<https://www.debating-europe.de/activities/>).

In accordance with the conceptual and normative-theoretical considerations just stated, the Jean Monnet Network “Debating Europe” (DebatEU) used debate as a methodology for

- spreading knowledge on EU to different target groups;
- gaining knowledge about citizens' opinions;
- integrating teaching and research activities;
- enhancing exchange between citizens, students, academics, and EU practitioners via conferences, events, a website, social media, and various publications.

The project had four main objectives (see www.debating-europe.de). The first one was “*Understanding*” and aimed at understanding citizens' reasons for being critical or supportive of the EU. This work package was the core of the project and contained the focus groups that took place in all participating countries and

were conducted by all network members. Originally planned with average citizens, the focus groups were finally carried out with students in EU Studies and the Social Sciences because of the pandemic restrictions (see Chapter 6) that severely restricted in-presence and on-site meetings until mid-2022. The choice of students, even if it was due to the necessities of these restrictions, however, proved to be a virtue and not a vice (see Section 1.4. and Chapter 6).

In accordance with our understanding of debate, the focus group research design (see Chapters 5 and 6) was set up in order to enable an open debate and to learn about the students' thoughts and feelings with regard to the gap. The purpose of debate in the network thus was twofold: Debating Europe with the students generated a dialogue, but also an enhanced understanding of their thoughts and perceptions about the EU. This allowed us to learn what reasons led the students to be critical or distanced from the EU but also why they supported it. An integrative and comparative assessment allowed for depicting different national backgrounds (see Chapter 7), a more nuanced assessment of the gap between the EU's elites and its citizens, and the ways to remedy it, as seen by students in EU Studies and Social Sciences (see Chapters 8 and 9).

The second objective, "*Learning*", regarded four aspects:

- a) The focus group discussions were partly carried out as teaching research seminars in order to include students into the process of research and knowledge production.
- b) MA and PhD students were actively integrated into the research activities.
- c) The focus group results were included into an online course on the EU that is now open to students.
- d) A yearly PhD training course was organised and open to PhD students in the network members' institutions.

The third objective was "*Networking*" via the regular meetings, conferences, workshops, and lectures. This objective aimed at connecting researchers, students, and citizens as well as stakeholders and EU actors in order to exchange their experiences and findings via the following tools and activities:

- a) An online platform was the basis for online exchanges among the network members, for uploading the interim results and the analyses.
- b) Regular project meetings took place at least eight times per year.
- c) Yearly conferences of the network created discussion within the academic community and practitioners.
- d) Citizens and stakeholders were invited to the conferences and participated in the events.
- e) Network members organised panels at the major conferences in the disciplines EU Studies and Political Science. Discussions there served at discussing interim results against the state of the art and connecting the project with the broader academic community.

The fourth objective was “*Communication*”. “Debating Europe” became the nucleus for a community of discussion on the EU where issues were debated critically and publicly via four channels:

- a) Network conferences and seminars;
- b) Panels at international conferences;
- c) International publications;
- d) Publications directed at EU actors and stakeholders.

1.3. Studying the Gap With an Open, Qualitative, and Inductive, International and Comparative Research Design

To study the gap between the EU and its citizens, as discussed earlier, means to study a puzzle that is of both academic and immediate political relevance. Our research aimed at filling in blanks in the state of the art of research via an open, inductive, qualitative, and interpretative research design that was theory driven, theory building, and internationally comparative (Chapter 6). The goal of the research was to give empirical and conceptual flesh to the puzzle of the gap—or more precisely: to theorise and conceptualise it, to describe its elements, and to understand how it is perceived. The focus group approach and the interpretative analysis in an open and learning research design (see Chapter 6) answered to these needs. Put simply, we discussed the reasons for being critical or supportive of the EU directly with the persons concerned. The advantage of focus groups is to get unfiltered answers and obtain information that was not asked for (see Chapters 8 and 9) and to be able to trace discursive interactions between participants (Chapter 5).

The research design was the outcome of a continuously reflected, learning research process: it was *open* in that it departed from the puzzle of the gap, with the aim to learn about its dimensions, perceptions, and driving factors. We then (see Chapters 2 and 6) developed the research heuristics. This means that we departed from a critical discussion of a) the state of the art in research and b) assumptions and concepts used in research on EU (de-)politicisation and Euroscepticism, to then c) develop our conceptual framework and heuristics (Chapter 2). In a first step the data collection was based on the research heuristics. The research design and the questionnaire were developed on this basis.

As will be discussed in Chapter 6 in detail, the research heuristics and the conceptual framework of the study were also decisive both in shaping and in continuously developing the research design and in analysing the results. Based on the proceeding of research, the heuristic framework was adapted in several steps. The design was thus *inductive* in that the emerging patterns of findings served at building typologies and theoretical considerations. It was *theory driven and theory building*, as researchers had considerable previous knowledge on the elements of the gap, theories, and concepts to understand the gap and focus group research in the area. This knowledge was used to build the research heuristics which was then refined in the further steps of the analysis. Proceeding of the research was moreover always based on the preliminary findings, a principle that is quite much in fit

with the approach of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In a second step the analysis was intertwined with the heuristics and its further development—this can be described as axial analysis. In a third step the conceptual framework was developed further on the basis of the results. Research thus in the end led to refining and building (new) theories and concepts alongside the empirical research process (see Chapters 6 and 9).

The research was *qualitative* in that focus groups were done, fully transcribed, and coded. The design was moreover *interpretative* as the focus group data were also subject to an interpretative analysis (Chapter 6). Finally, the research design was internationally comparative in that it was applied in six EU countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Slovenia) and 19 student focus group discussions. Findings were analysed comparatively by a team of 14 researchers in six countries (<https://www.debating-europe.de/network/>). In this, the project was a learning system with the regular project meetings being an essential element for both reflecting interim results and developing the research design further. The researchers all being specialists in the field turned this learning and discussion process into an essential element of the research (Chapter 6).

The project thus relied on a combination of inductive and exploratory research, using focus groups as a method of data collection, combining their coding with an interpretative analysis and with the development of new concepts (see Chapters 9 and 10). On this basis, we analysed how students described the gap, both for themselves and in general (Chapter 8).

1.4. Studying the Gap With Students

As said earlier, the core of the project consisted in discussions with a specific group of EU citizens: students in the Social Sciences and EU Studies. We had chosen them as participants, because the pandemic restrictions did not allow for the originally planned setting. But as also said earlier, this was a virtue rather than a vice. We organised three series of focus groups with students in the six participating countries and 19 in three years, with four to eight participants each. These focus groups were partly carried out in the framework of teaching research projects. Hence, part of the findings was analysed in cooperation with the students—of course only with students that did not participate in the focus groups themselves. The broad aim of the focus groups was to discuss their personal reasons for being critical or supportive of the EU with the students, to grasp how they perceived the gap, and how they described the future perspectives of politics and democracy in the EU (see in detail Chapter 6).

Discussing the EU with students in EU Studies and the Social Sciences presented a number of advantages and added values. First, in social-structural terms, students are a very well-informed group that gets a high number of benefits both from being EU citizens and from being students. Following findings from classical quantitative studies (e.g. Inglehart 1970), students would be expected to be Europhiles and EU supporters—and rather uncritical ones. Analysing student perceptions therefore allowed us to diagnose the perceptions, problems, and strengths of

the EU as they were named by a group of citizens that is well-informed about the EU, supposedly part of a pro-EU avant-garde, and key actors for future EU development. Second, the EU has explicitly shaped policies for students such as the Erasmus+ programme, so students are directly concerned by EU policies. Third, studying the perceptions of students in EU Studies and the Social Sciences allowed us to see whether education, experience with intra-European mobility, and knowledge on the EU were discussed as influencing their view on the EU. Fourth, the students' knowledge was an advantage with regard to data collection, as the students are not "overlooking the EU" like some citizens do (see Duchesne et al. 2013), but know exactly what they talk about when they talk about the EU.

The students thus are much closer to the EU than other citizens in terms of their knowledge and their professional future. Seen in social-structural terms, students should be placed in an intermediary sphere between EU elites and citizens. Our findings confirm this thesis. Indeed, as discussed in Section 8.2.1., the students systematically distinguished themselves from average citizens, especially with regard to their more advanced knowledge. They also were in their majority Europhile in that they showed a considerable generalised EU support and expressed a strong identification with the EU. However, our findings contradict assumptions based on the quantitative state of the art in a decisive respect: The students were neither uncritical nor did they feel closer to the EU than average citizens.

1.5. Studying the Gap in an Internationally Comparative Perspective

The research results moreover are based on an internationally comparative study in six EU member states. The country selection was particularly adequate for the task. The research was carried out in Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, and Slovenia, and hence in small, medium, and large member states; eastern, northern, central, and southern EU member states; founding member states; and states representing nearly all of the following enlargements rounds. These are good reasons to argue that our findings give general indicators with regard to the perceptions of the specific group of students in EU Studies and the Social Sciences: The students came from a representative set of member states, and altogether we carried out focus group discussions with approximately 120 students EU in six member states over a period of three years.

Our study stands out from other internationally comparative focus group studies in at least two respects. As was just discussed, we did focus groups with students in EU Studies and the Social Sciences instead of "average citizens", as is the case in most other studies. Moreover, few other studies previously used an internationally comparative focus group design that includes more than three countries (but see Mingardi et al. 2022; Egner et al. 2024). Usually, researchers include up to three countries in the comparison (e.g. Duchesne et al. 2013; Gaxie et al. 2011, see in detail Chapter 5). The corpus of material obtained in our project is thus unique.

The network's results, all in all, delivered well-based findings about the sources of contemporary EU criticism and the character of the gap between the EU and its

citizens as it is seen and defined by students, i.e. a relatively well-informed and Europhile citizen group.

1.6. The Book and Its Parts

The volume presents the core results of the theoretical, conceptual, and empirical work of the project. The next chapter entitled “Towards a Dynamic Understanding of Democracy in the EU: Politics, Politicisation, and Debate” develops the research heuristics. It lines out the crucial conceptual and normative-theoretical questions and reflections related to the puzzle of the gap in more detail, to then develop the conceptual, theoretical, and normative perspective of the research. The conceptual framework developed in Chapter 2 is the normative and conceptual basis of the research heuristics and the research design. It was intertwined and developed further with the proceeding of the analysis (Chapter 6). The chapter discusses, first, why the gap is an issue at all. Second, after a short recap of integration history, two strands in the debate will be lined out. The first one analyses the gap as a functional problem for European integration, and the second one as a normative-theoretical problem and lack of a demos. On this basis, the state of the art of the academic discussion in the fields of Euroscepticism, EU politicisation, and EU democratisation will be recapitulated and the conceptual reflections underlying the research heuristics will be explicated. The last section argues in favour of a dynamic model of democracy in the EU.

The third chapter “Rethinking EU Institutional Communication: Pathways to Democratic Legitimacy” focuses on the EU’s strategies to bridge the gap. It seeks to analyse the successes and failures of the EU’s institutional communication policy. Despite the increasing variety of the EU’s communication tools, from information portals to deliberative citizens’ panels, these often fail to reach a wider and diverse audience. By assessing their reach, inclusion, responsiveness, transparency, and impact, the chapter analyses the overall effectiveness of the EU’s communication strategies. Based on insights from the recent EU-led participatory experiments like the European Citizens’ Initiative and the Conference on the Future of Europe, the findings highlight a recurring discrepancy between strategic ambition and operational delivery. Institutional communication remains predominantly fragmented, technocratic, and not responsive enough to the opinions of the public. The chapter argues that closing this communication gap is essential to democratic renewal. Only a citizen-centred, co-creative process that is integrated into all tiers of EU multilevel governance can lead to the genuine and sustainable transformation of EU communication strategies.

The fourth chapter discusses the state of the art in research on “Young People, Students, and the EU: Critical Utilitarian Democrats” to identify what we know about student attitudes and behaviour towards the EU, the blind spots and hypotheses that remain to be explored, and the assessment that can be derived from relevant research in this field. As qualitative studies on student opinion per se are relatively scarce, the chapter has a broader focus and starts with young people’s views of the EU, to concentrate in the following parts on students’ more specific perceptions of

the EU, and to end with more particular cases of students who in their study programmes focus on the EU.

The fifth chapter discusses the state of the art in “Focus Group Research Design: Methodology, Standards, and Findings”, both in general and with regard to findings on the EU, and beginning with its origins in marketing to its wide application in EU Studies and the Social Sciences. It outlines the method’s advantages, such as the possibility to collect rich data through interaction in a short time, the empowerment of diverse voices, flexibility, and the generation of new ideas, as well as the limitations, including the moderators’ influence, the possibility of dominant voices shaping the discussion, and the difficulties in generalising the findings. The chapter also discusses methodological standards with regard to participant recruitment, questionnaire design, ethical considerations, and moderation. Findings from previous focus group research on the EU, EU (de-)politicisation, and European identity are then discussed. The chapter concludes by highlighting the lessons the practical experience in the project allows to draw for focus group research, namely the importance of context sensitive designs, skilled moderators, and adaptive strategies.

The sixth chapter “Studying Student Perceptions on the EU in an International Learning Interpretative and Comparative Research Design” describes the open, inductive, qualitative, and interpretative research design and the research process that was theory driven, theory building, and internationally comparative. The research design was *open* in that it departed from the puzzle of the gap, with the aim to conceptualise it and learn about its dimensions, perceptions, and driving factors. The design was *inductive* in that the emerging patterns of findings served at building typologies and theoretical considerations. It was *qualitative* as focus groups were conducted, fully transcribed, coded and, analysed. The design was moreover *interpretative* as the focus group data were also subject to an interpretative analysis. It was *theory driven and theory building*, as researchers had considerable previous knowledge on the elements of the gap, theories, and concepts to understand the gap and focus group research in the area. This knowledge was used to build the research heuristics which was then refined by and by in the further steps of the analysis. The research design was *internationally comparative* in that it was applied in six EU countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Slovenia) and 19 student focus group discussions. Findings were analysed in a comparative design by a team of 14 researchers in six countries.

The seventh chapter presents “Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, and Slovenia: The Cases and the Context”, i.e. the countries’ and political contexts during the time the focus groups were carried out. As mentioned, the focus groups took place in small, medium, and large member states; eastern, northern, central, and southern EU member states; founding member states; and states representing nearly all of the following enlargement rounds. The countries thus are rather different in terms of size, geographical location, and EU membership. In each country, the national political context influenced the focus group discussions, and some national differences were thematised. But similarities were considerable: All countries were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the War against Ukraine,

which both took place during the time of the research. Climate change and migration were also pertinent topics of public interest.

Chapter 8—“Students as EU Citizens: Critical, Informed, Engaged, and Passive”—contains the core of the findings from the collective research, i.e. a presentation and discussion of the focus group findings. Each focus group started with the participants selecting photos that represented the EU for them. The images on the photos ranged from an EU passport over EU institutions and politicians to migrants trying to enter the EU. The ten most frequently chosen images are presented first, along with the reasons for their selection. The chapter then summarises surprising similarities and only few differences in the student perceptions. Students’ views on democracy in the EU and its quality were very similar across the countries. A number of values (such as democracy, human rights, or the rule of law) were associated with the EU, and especially non-EU citizens described the EU as an ideal. We made out three crucial types of gaps in the EU: a democracy gap, gaps between member states, and gaps between citizens. Results overall reveal the students as critical and informed but rather passive EU citizens. Quite unexpectedly they expressed strong claims and expectancies to the EU and its normative core. Students also claimed the EU to become more of a global political actor that defends democracy and fights climate change. The students thus depicted an EU that is much more political and politicised than what EU Studies usually assume: For them, the EU is a service deliverer, but also an ideal, a worldwide actor, and a proponent and defender of peace, liberal values, and democracy. The EU appears thus as a highly a politicised and democratic “normative power Europe” (Manners 2002) that is globally active in a number of fields—a *Normative Power Europe 2.0*.

Chapter 9, “Critical Informed Passive Citizens of a Normative Power Europe 2.0”, reflects the findings and their lessons for the broader academic debate on democracy in the EU and politicisation of the EU, focusing on the conceptual and theoretical debate in the fields of EU politicisation, EU democratisation, Euroscepticism, and citizenship. It is first highlighted that and how especially the unexpected findings were the decisive and innovative ones. Second, it is illustrated how the students depicted a highly politicised detailed image of the EU as a “Normative Power Europe 2.0”, i.e. an EU that is a fully developed polity expected to be a democracy, have and defend the values as defined in article 2 Treaty on European Union (TEU), and is a full-fledged actor in the world. This indicates that EU politicisation also regards the character of the EU as a polity, not only certain policies and conflicts. Third, the gaps made out in the research are resumed—a democracy gap, conflicts between states, and gaps between citizens—and a fourth one is added: a politicisation gap that refers to the students’ passive attitude and self-perception. Fourth, on the basis of the findings conceptual reflections with regard to citizenship in the EU, politicisation, and Euroscepticism are put forward. The chapter concludes on two typologies: one of the student relations to the EU and one of democracy in the EU.

Chapter 10, “Young Citizens’ Visions of EU Democracy: A Research Outlook”, broadens the discussion by adding a survey analysis of the corresponding main trends of European citizens’ attitudes towards the EU which are brought down to

more specific patterns of the highly educated youth. This research outlook takes one step beyond the sheer magnitudes of EU attitudes to disentangle their multiplicity into more specific patterns according to conceptions of democracy and citizenship. The conceptions are further pinpointed by linking them to recurring themes of EU goals in the focus group discussions and responses of the youth and differentiating their utilitarian vs. solidary qualities to distinguish both value-related and national variations. The emerging attitudinal patterns come down to six distinct visions of EU democracy based on the dominating citizen perceptions of the EU as a provider of goods and values ranging from democratic principles to economic benefits and stability, mixed up with diverse issues such as security, equality, freedom, and inclusion.

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2 Towards a Dynamic Understanding of Democracy in the EU

Politics, Politicisation, and Debate

Claudia Wiesner

As said in Chapter 1, the research started with the *puzzle of the gap*. The gap between the European Union (EU) and its citizens is thematised in extant research, and quantitative findings give indicators for its existence, i.e. for a distance between the EU and its citizens: The gap is empirically marked by increasing support for EU-critical parties, despite average trust rates into the EU. However, the reasons behind these phenomena are not entirely clear. The primary goal of the project was to find out about the “why” and “how” behind the “what” (Wiesner 2022b) of these quantitative findings. The research aimed at giving conceptual and empirical flesh to the numbers. This meant that we wanted to both conceptualise the gap and find out about the perceptions, reflections, backgrounds, feelings, biographies, and motives, i.e. the complex background reasons, that drive citizens—and in our case students—to see the EU critically or to describe a gap. To put it simply, the idea was to ask the students directly and discuss their personal reasons for being critical or supportive of the EU with them.

This chapter aims at lining out the crucial conceptual and normative-theoretical questions and dimensions of the puzzle of the gap in more detail, to then develop the research heuristics. It discusses, first, why the gap is an issue at all. Second, after a short recap of integration history, two approaches to the gap will be presented. The first one analyses the gap as a functional problem for European integration, and the second one as a normative-theoretical problem and lack of a demos. On this basis, the normative-theoretical and conceptual reflections underlying the research heuristics will be explicated. The last section will argue in favour of a dynamic model of democracy in the EU. The conceptual framework developed in this chapter is the normative and conceptual basis of the research heuristics and the research design. It was intertwined and developed further within the analysis (Chapter 6).

2.1. Why Is the Gap an Issue?

First, a key question is why the gap is an issue at all. This question might seem naïve or uncritical, given the findings on EU-critical, right-wing populist, and right-wing extremist parties and their successes discussed in Chapter 1, but

especially with regard to the EU and the academic debate on democracy in the EU, it is quite justified. For parts of the European integration literature the gap is not an issue—because whether one judges the gap to be an issue depends on the basis of judgement.

It was not so long ago that a debate was going on whether the EU needed to be democratic at all and whether it would be sufficient if it was a “regulatory state” (Majone 1998). The integration-theoretical strand of liberal intergovernmentalism famously argued that the EU need not be democratic because it is organised between nation-states, which are democratic themselves (Moravcsik 2002; for a similar argument in a different theoretical context, the one of democracy, see Belamy 2019). However, such positions underplay the impact that the EU has on national democracies and the ensuing need for the EU to be democratic itself (see later and in detail Wiesner 2019, 281–301).

Besides positions that, for different reasons, do not deem the gap a matter of concern and emphasise the role of nation-state democracy instead, there are two more strands in the debate around the puzzle of the gap and its dimensions. Both approaches not only see a gap but also problematise it. However, their perspectives on the gap differ as according to their research methodology and normative-theoretical backgrounds.

- 1) One strand analyses the gap as a *functional problem* for European integration and the EU, as a lack of citizen support might put both in danger (see Section 2.3.). The debates centre around the concepts of Euroscepticism and, more recently, EU politicisation. In this strand of the debate, the gap is not thematised as such, but its dimensions are discussed, such as decreases in EU support and EU criticism. Dissatisfaction with the EU in this strand is primarily discussed as a fertile ground for anti-EU movements and parties and hence as a threat to European integration or even, in a more nuanced argumentation, as a threat to the EU.
- 2) In the other strand, the gap is directly thematised (see Section 2.4.). It is on one hand discussed as a *normative-theoretical problem* and on the other hand as an *empirical lack of a demos*. The latter is seen to be marked by a lack of common perceptions and values that make out a democratic identity, as well as a lack of possibilities for participation and active citizenship. As discussed in Chapter 1 and later, following this perspective, a democratic political system needs to be based on a demos, and its lack is considered to be a problem for the EU’s democracy in a normative-theoretical sense. The debates in this strand centre on the EU’s democratic deficit, demos-formation, democratic identity, and political activity.

The research heuristics of our project include both perspectives, arguing that the functional perspective and dimensions, such as EU support, EU identification, and trust in the EU, and the normative-theoretical one with its emphasis on EU identity, EU-related participation, and active EU citizenship are interrelated. A merely functional perspective on the EU neglects the fact that it is also a democratic political system—which it is in reality and not just in the wishful thinking of some

federalists, given its institutional construction and the representative democratic mechanisms it features.

Importantly, the conceptual link just described does not mean that the functional and the normative-theoretical dimensions of EU identity cause one another, neither on the collective nor on the individual level. As we will discuss at some length in Chapter 8, our project findings show on the contrary that various interrelations are possible. Functional as well as normatively connotated citizen perspectives on the EU may go together, or they may be separated from another in individual perceptions.

2.2. EU Integration as an Elite Project

The gap between the EU and its citizens, importantly, is closely related to European integration history. European unification had been an old utopia associated with features such as a more peaceful and democratic Europe (on the following see also Wiesner 2019, 85–96, 2024b). But when integration was finally initiated after the Second World War, it was shaped by a relatively small and elitist group. The goal of the EU's founding fathers was to obtain peace in Europe while keeping the system of nation-states, largely ignoring alternative concepts of a democratic federation of citizens (rather than states). Until today, European integration is shaped by the key conflict between two possible goals for European integration: a “realist” balance of power conception of sovereign nation-states under a common roof, and a democratic European federation, attributing a key role to EU citizens, being democratically governed, and aiming at reducing or abandoning the role of the nation-states (Wiesner 2014b, 2019, 85–96). The distance between the EU and its citizens is an outcome of the historical setting.

The EU's institutional system that thus developed over decades not only reflects a largely intergovernmental orientation but also a technocratic and elitist one. The governing structure of the EU since the beginning of integration relied very much on the European Commission (EC) as its core. The EC was not only destined to carry out the unification process and the EU's policies. It is also the so-called “Guardian of the Treaties”, i.e. the EC supervises that member states, legal entities, and individuals stay in accordance with the EU's treaties and apply EU law correctly. The EC until today is not only a bureaucracy but also an expert-driven body. This structure has contributed to the gap, as will be discussed in Chapter 3.

The EU thus appears as a benevolent technocracy. Expertise, bureaucracy, and technocracy have been characteristics of EU decision-making since the beginning of the integration process—and this is linked to a depoliticisation of the EU in that not only citizens were attributed a passive role but they also met with the elite's scepticism (Robert 2021). Two statesmen that were decisive in shaping the institutions of the future EU, Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman,

had a shared distrust of elected officials and, more broadly, of mechanisms of majority democracy [. . .]. This desire to shield Europe from the passion, folly and fluctuations of political will was strengthened and legitimised by the post-war context: while the European construction was appointed as the

guarantor of peace at the continental level, old national democracies were themselves perceived as potential threats. In addition to their inherent instability, they demonstrated, through their inability to contain the rise of nationalism and prevent the Second World War, the natural propensity of political discourses—and of those promoting them—to turn European citizens against one another.

(Robert 2021, 212–213)

This scepticism of majority democracy is linked to neoliberal and ordoliberal thinking, i.e. ideas developed by Hayek and Röpke and followers of German ordoliberalism:

There are many points of convergence: the criticism of the link between political representatives and their constituents, condemned to produce clientelist elected officials and public budget gravediggers; distrust of parliamentary democracy and of its natural propensity to fuel the division of the social fabric and the all-powerful state; maintained suspicion regarding the contradictory debate, which must be replaced with one best way identified by rational elites.

(Robert 2021, 213–214)

The EU accordingly was built on this strongly expert-oriented model of governance that was marked by distrust of citizens for a long time. In other words, the gap has been built into the EU's institutional architecture since its beginnings—and this structure has been perpetuated. Expert-driven decision-making has been used in the EU whenever crisis symptoms became visible (Wiesner 2019, 261–279) or when opposing interests made it difficult to tackle problems in the institutional triangle of EC, the Council and European Parliament (EP). Hence, the EU over the decades created a number of agencies that tackle key political problems, mostly with a doubtful democratic legitimation—Frontex would be the most prominent example, but there are others, such as the Troika during the financial crisis (Wiesner 2019, 261–279).

The Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) has been playing a key role in this setting, besides the EC. European integration has frequently been termed “integration through law”. This means that the laws that are made by the legislative bodies Council and EP are supervised by the EC and, in case of conflict, by the Court of Justice. International legal scholars agree that the CJEU is a court with a political agenda, and namely an agenda that defends a liberal interpretation of market and citizens' rights—the question is just whether the political agenda of the Court is judged positively, such as by Armin von Bogdandy (2022), who describes the history of EU law making and implementation as a top-down success story, or critically, such as by Dieter Grimm (2017), who criticises the Court for reducing the powers of the member states and the impact of their laws.

It is very interesting to look further at von Bogdandy's (2022) argument. He claims that the Court, based on EU laws, contributed to building a democratic EU

society and in particular to exporting emancipatory principles and civil liberties. In that context he judges the recent rule of law conflicts with Poland and Hungary as controversies in which the positive, emancipatory ideas of the EU are rightfully imposed top-down against autocratic tendencies. The outcome is judged in a normative way by von Bogdandy (2022). For him, the EU's values are the better ones, and in this perspective it is thus for the benefit and progress of EU citizens that the Court exported them.

Conversely, several authors have criticised the EU and its way of governing—by way of example I name here the arguments of Wolfgang Streeck (2014). He holds the EU responsible for a number of problems and even evils in with regard to economic governance and social security, since it contributed to reducing national democratic and social standards. In this context von Bogdandy's argument indicates the Janus-facedness of the EU. It is true that in terms of civil liberties the EU has brought decisive improvements—if one adheres to the idea that the promotion of civil liberties is an improvement, that is. As will be discussed in Chapter 8, most of the students in the focus group did so (see 8.6.3), but they also mentioned that there are positions different from this one that do not see civil liberties as necessary or as progress.

The rule of law conflicts with Hungary and Poland, accordingly, revolve also around the interpretation of civil rights. In these rule of law conflicts and also in standard EU law-making, the EU-induced civil liberties have been imposed largely top-down—in exactly the same way as the cutting down of national social and democratic standards went.

All in all, this means that the defence and broadening of liberal values in the EU not only went along with a tendency to mistrust citizens and to favour expert-driven and technocratic decision-making. Moreover, the improvements in terms of civil liberties came jointly with a strongly market-liberal way of negative integration (Scharpf 1999), which meant that social rights were reduced by EU legislation at the same time (Wiesner 2019, 249–260) that the civil liberties increased.

2.3. The Functional Strand: Criticism as Threat to the EU?

The history of elite-driven European integration is an important background for understanding the academic debates on the gap. To be in favour of European integration often implicitly meant to be in favour of this specific type of expert- and elite-driven integration. In this view, the gap is indeed either not seen as an issue or merely a functional problem, as is the case in the first strand of the academic debate on the gap.

In this strand, the concept of “permissive consensus” (see also later) is decisive. It was introduced in the 1970s by Lindberg and Scheingold (1970, 41) to explain citizens' attitudes towards European integration. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the figure of permissive consensus and the idea of it ending have been decisive for the academic debates on Euroscepticism and EU politicisation. The concept is based on the idea that citizens for decades silently accepted European integration without necessarily actively supporting it. With the referenda on the Maastricht Treaty it

became obvious that this silent support was less strong than supposed. Several researchers argued that the post-Maastricht era brought increasing citizen dissatisfaction with EU integration, which built a fertile ground for citizens critically discussing the EU and voting for EU-critical parties, and thus endangered the integration process (see the discussion in Kauppi et al. 2016; Kauppi 2018).

2.3.1 Populists and “Eurosceptics” as Enemies of the EU and Democracy?

There are two “isms” that are frequently related in the academic debate on increasing EU criticism, namely populism and Euroscepticism (see also Wiesner 2024a, 287–304). Both populist and EU-critical political actors are frequently discussed as proponents of polarisation, anti-EU or anti-system politicisation, or even of anti-democratic politicisation (see e.g. Müller 2016; Hooghe and Marks 2009). But there are by no means simple equations at stake in this. The grey zones are decisive. Populism, Euroscepticism, and criticism of representative democracy need to be disentangled theoretically, conceptually, and empirically (see also Chapter 9).

With regard to the concept of *populism*, a number of authors have underlined that populists cannot simply be classified as enemies of democracy (see e.g. Katsambekis 2022; Panizza and Stavrakakis 2020; Jörke and Selk 2017) and that, conversely, democratic politics generally needs some grain of populism (Panizza and Stavrakakis 2020), in the sense of politics taking citizens’ needs seriously. Moreover, it is important to take into account the background reasons and socioeconomic drivers behind populist votes and party alignments. Crises trigger populist reactions (Stavrakakis et al. 2018), and hence populist discourse is often linked to crisis situations and criticism of certain policies (see e.g. the contributions in Ostiguy et al. 2020). To sum up, populism is not per se antidemocratic, and moreover, not all populists are EU-critics, and vice-versa.

The debate around the concept of *Euroscepticism* has been intense in the last two decades (see e.g. Caiani and Guerra 2017; De Vries 2018; Leruth et al. 2018). The definition of Euroscepticism first used by Paul Taggart (1998, 366) targets a contingent or qualified opposition, as well as outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration. Szczerbiak (2008) distinguishes a binary of soft and hard Euroscepticism, the difference being defined as the one between a) concerns about one or a number of policy fields leading to the expression of a qualified opposition against the EU and b) a principled opposition against the EU and European integration.

These definitions were much discussed and developed further (Vasilopoulou 2018): Both Kopecký and Mudde (2002) and Fuchs et al. (2009) go beyond binaries. Based on David Easton’s (1965, 124–126) differentiation of specific and diffuse support, they distinguish different degrees of support of, and opposition to, the EU. Kopecký and Mudde (2002, 303) distinguish Euroenthusiasts, Europragmatists, Eurosceptics, and Eurorejects; Fuchs et al. (2009, 24–26) identify several dimensions of principled, generalised, and reasoned support. They define Euroscepticism as the term denoting the negative evaluations of the EU with regard to these three perspectives.

This discussion shows that “Euroscepticism is a contested concept” (Vasilopoulou 2018, 22). This is not least because “Euroscepticism” is a label that, in academic usage, covers both criticism of EU policies and principled opposition against the EU as a system. It is, however, decisive to separate both these notions, i.e. policy criticism and principled opposition against a system, conceptually and analytically. What is more, criticism of representative democracy has to be distinguished from the two others. Finally, EU criticism is a legitimate part of democratic debates.

Without dwelling further on the different definitions of Euroscepticism (for such a discussion see Vasilopoulou 2018 and the contributions in Caiani and Guerra 2017; De Vries 2018; Leruth et al. 2018), an important takeaway is that there are differences between a) a rejection of the EU on the whole, b) a rejection of EU policies, c) a criticism of EU policies, and d) different degrees of criticism or opposition.

Criticism as Democratic Right and Practice

Approaches that follow the functional perspective on the gap, as discussed earlier, show both a normative-theoretical and an empirical limitation, as they barely take participation and active citizenship into account—and, importantly, active citizens cannot be expected to be obeying citizens.

As was just said, criticism of policies and political institutions (and also criticism that is EU-related) first and foremost is a legitimate part of democratic political culture, even if it polarises, can at times be mingled to populist arguments, or classify as Eurosceptic. Any representative democracy must be based on the possibility to openly debate, criticise, and contest parliamentary and governmental decisions (Wiesner 2025). This means that criticism of both EU policies and the character of the EU as a polity is a legitimate part of democracy in the EU.

Moreover, simple criticism of an EU policy is not to be equated with an outright rejection of the EU. Political opposition against governmental policies—be they EU policies or national ones—has nothing to do with rejection of the representative system as a whole.

Hence the label “Eurosceptic” only makes sense if a movement or a person claims that a certain state should exit the EU, as it was the case in the Brexit referendum debate (Wiesner 2024a, 292–295). Moreover and importantly, EU criticism is by no means to be confused with a criticism of representative democracy as such or with populism—even if there may be arguments where the three, or two of them, go together. This speaks in favour of a more nuanced application of these concepts. Our findings support this claim (see Chapters 8 and 9).

2.3.2 *The Politicisation of European Integration*

Quite a broad set of literature on the politicisation of Europe/European integration has been written in recent years (for a discussion see Kauppi and Wiesner 2018; Wiesner 2022a, 2023). Most accounts refer to the process of European integration

and the effects politicisation has on it. Interestingly, the academic debate on EU politicisation has over time been marked by a visible conceptual-theoretical and methodological narrowing. The first contributions elaborate a dynamic model in which politicisation contributes to creating a political rather than merely economic union, while the more recent contributions rather focus on EU criticism and its negative effects on the integration process.

A Neofunctional Dynamic Model

Three classical neofunctionalist texts on the politicisation of integration by Schmitter (1969), Haas (1968) and Lindberg and Scheingold (1970) discuss what happens if citizens begin to discuss and criticise the integration process, i.e. when it is politicised. The texts hint at different pathways for politicisation (Wiesner 2022a, 2023).

The accounts by both Lindberg and Scheingold and Haas depict the process of European integration as being driven by political elites. They carry out the EU integration process, and citizens agree to it in “permissive consensus” (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970, 41). As discussed, permissive consensus is largely nourished by citizens’ ignorance and disinterest of the integration process, coupled with a silent acceptance. If citizens start to get interested into integration and/or support declines, “the opportunities for blocking [integration] are greater” (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970, 41).

Ernst Haas discusses rising economic dissatisfaction as a possible source of more demands for political integration—there might be “political opposition where none existed before” but also “*demands for more federal political action*” (Haas 1968, 13).

Finally, following Philippe Schmitter (1969), politicisation can have the effect to create a more political EU:

Politicization [. . .] refers initially to a process whereby the controversiality of joint decision making goes up. This in turn is likely to lead to a widening of the audience or clientele interested and active in integration. Somewhere along the line a manifest redefinition of mutual objectives will probably occur. The latter outcome, transcendence in this author’s terminology, may or may not involve a definitive, self-confessed shift from formerly economic to manifestly political goals.

(Schmitter 1969, 166)

In this perspective, more conflict and more debate about integration lead to an increase in audience, possibly a redefinition of integration objectives and more identification of the citizens, and hence an increase in support. This political process links to the normative-theoretical claim made earlier: If citizens do not support a policy, they can criticise, debate, and try to change it. Then, if more people participate in the political process, they might also identify more with the EU as a polity.

Towards Binaries

Different from such a dynamic perspective, the more contemporary texts in EU politicisation research tend to follow a teleological integration concept in which EU integration is conceptualised unidirectionally: it began, it is driven by elites, and it leads to an ever-closer integration (on the following see in detail Wiesner 2022a, 2023). In such an understanding, if EU integration becomes politicised, there might be more support for EU critical parties, opposition to the integration process, and, in the end, the end of integration or disintegration (e.g. Hooghe and Marks 2009). The basis of these arguments is not only an implicit teleological perspective on the integration process, which moves forward steadily, but also an almost binary distinction between supporters of integration and its critics, and a latent suspicion that EU politicisation could be dangerous for the integration process.

2.3.3. *On Binaries and Conceptual-Theoretical Shortcomings*

In sum, most contributions to the functional strand of the debate around the gap, which is also the mainstream strand of the extant research on Euroscepticism and EU politicisation, confirm the criticisms raised by qualitative researchers (see Chapters 1 and 5). They largely rely on a set of theories and assumptions that often assume explicitly or implicitly a teleological course of elite-driven European integration, coupled with the implicit normative judgement that this is a good thing. Several contributions also use binaries that are at least implicitly normatively loaded, such as Europhiles (good) and Eurocritics or Eurorejects (bad).

When it comes to the theoretical and conceptual bases, methods, and research design, many approaches in this strand of the debate are similarly structured. The bulk of the contributions in politicisation research lies on one theory of politics, the one by Schattschneider (1957; see e.g. Hutter et al. 2016).

With regard to methods and research design, like populism research and even more so Euroscepticism research, the more recent politicisation research strongly relies on quantitative methods with all the consequences (closed designs, questionnaires, etc.) discussed in Chapter 1. It also relies mostly on an understanding of politicisation and politics that regards politics as system, and more particularly, the classical political system (parties and institutions) or the international system (international institutions) and the mass media (see e.g. Hutter et al. 2016; Statham and Trenz 2013). Politicisation is, then and consequently, often researched with regard to parties and institutions that address voters and in dichotomies that ask for agents and their audience. Research items and methods concentrate on quantifications of indicators and measure the salience of an issue, the degree of controversy or actor involvement, or the politicisation within EU institutions (Wiesner 2021).

Accordingly, the functional strand of research around the gap does not fully cover the dynamic aspects of politicisation and democracy, neither normatively, nor conceptually, nor methodologically. As discussed earlier, broad normative conceptions of democracy and politicisation (see Section 2.4. later) also include

bottom-up citizen activity. Both are social processes marked by social practice and contingency, not causality-driven relations of cause and effect. To study them, as discussed, qualitative and interpretative research designs are needed.

2.4. The Normative-Theoretical Strand: Developing a Democratic Identity for the EU

The second strand of the debates around the gap, as said earlier, discusses it as both a *normative theoretical problem* and as an *empirical lack of a demos*.

2.4.1. The Democratic Deficit Debate, Demos-Formation, and Democratic Identity

In Political Science and EU Studies, the EU's democratic deficits have been intensely debated since the 1990s (for an overview see Føllesdal and Hix 2006; for a discussion of the more recent aspects of the democratic deficit see Wiesner 2019, 280–301).

One strand of the democratic deficit debate regards the question of whether the EU has, or can obtain, a proper democratic subject, a *demos*. A democratic EU—this is the core argument—requires a democratic subject, a *demos*, that identifies with the EU. It has been often argued that the EU population is a long way from being such a *demos* (e.g. Scharpf 1999). This is a decisive conceptual move: If there is no *demos* in the EU that democracy can legitimately be grounded on, on which basis should the representative institutions work? I have discussed the question of whether the EU can develop a full-fledged *demos* and whether it is on the way in this direction at length elsewhere (on the following see in detail Wiesner 2014a, 19–21; 31–42; 38–43, 2019, 215–233, 2020, 2024a, 5–7; 22–32). For the purposes of this chapter, I will now summarise the main questions and arguments.

Following Lincoln's (1863) well-known formula, democracy is government of, by, and for the people. This leads to distinguishing three decisive directions and components of the relations between citizens, their representatives, and government. The *input dimension* refers to the citizens and their rights and possibilities for participation and contestation, as well as the right to elect their representatives. *Throughput* refers to the representatives being accountable; the procedures of election and government in the representative system must be organised transparently and follow the rule of law, and possibly the ideal of the separation of powers (Schmidt 2013). The *output dimension* refers to the decisions taken by the representatives satisfying the majority of the represented.

It is the input dimension that is of utmost importance to the question of *demos* formation, as it entails a decisive normative interrelation between the practice of democracy and the development of a *demos*: Democracy—irrespective of whether it is based on a republican, a communitarian or a liberal model—must be based on formalised rights and institutions as well as on democratic practice—meaning participation, contestation, representation, and debate (see later). Democracy, as was claimed earlier, depends on an active *demos*. Democratic institutions and

procedures need to be filled with life by an active demos, a democratic subject (Wiesner 2024a, 1).

The democratic subject needs, at least to a minimum extent, a) to define itself as such (mutual recognition of the citizens or *demos* members) and b) to identify with the EU as a polity (for example, by identification and support). This self-definition and self-identification of a democratic subject can be termed democratic identity. Finally, c) the EU demos should be politically active in the EU as a polity.

2.4.2. *Politicisation and Debate as Democratisation*

Hence, a demos forms via democratic activity, but what exactly does this mean when concretely studied? To further clarify the conceptual and theoretical relations of demos-formation, I will now discuss the links between politicisation, debate, democracy, and demos-formation.

Democratic activity is one form of political activity—and this also means that there might always be political activities that are not democratic (Wiesner 2025). Politicisation, as will now be discussed, as well as debate, are also to be considered political activities. They, too, are not necessarily always democratic activities.

Politicisation as Activity

Politicisation in the research heuristics is conceptualised as political activity. This conceptualisation of politicisation departs from the idea that politics is an activity (see also Kauppi et al. 2016; Wiesner et al. 2017) and is grounded in Kari Palonen's (2003, 171) distinction of four sub-dimensions of politics—*politics*, *polity*, *politicisation*, and *politicking*. In this typology (see in detail Wiesner 2026), *politics* is an activity and *politicisation* is the (speech) act that marks an issue as subject to politics. *Polity* is the form that manifests as a result of successful politicisations, and *politicking* means the doing of politics, the action as such. *Policy*, finally, means a direction of politicking.

In my own work I have been developing Palonen's typology further in an understanding that is not fully in accordance with his. I understand politicisation, like politics, as an action, not an outcome. Politicisation, then, means to mark an issue as an object or a topic of political action. Importantly, the consequences of politicisation are contingent, i.e. we cannot know beforehand what will follow from it (Wiesner 2025). Politics as action and politicisation as a basic, or founding, act of politics, are closely related. Importantly, both politics and politicisation can take place virtually at any time, any place, and in any situation, and anything can be marked as political. This view is different from most mainstream approaches to politicisation that usually concentrate on the instances when the outcome of politicisation has already manifested itself, e.g. via an increased number of publications or mentions of a certain term in the media (salience; see later and Wiesner 2021).

As mentioned earlier, neither politics nor politicisation have to be necessarily democratic. Furthermore, the outcomes of both politics and politicisation are contingent. This means that politicisation and politics can be directed against the EU,

and they can also be directed against representative democracy, and again, one is not to be equated with the other. In any case, unintended outcomes might occur. Therefore and indeed, more political activity and more politicisation altogether might entail more EU-critical or more antidemocratic activity. Importantly, this cannot be excluded beforehand (Wiesner 2025). As famously put by Rosa Luxemburg (1972, 69), freedom needs to be the freedom of dissenters, too.

Debate, in this context and as claimed in Chapter 1, is to be understood as politicising and potentially democratising activity (on the following see Wiesner et al. 2017). To debate issues—whether on political agendas or others—means to have a civilised exchange of arguments, of pros and cons (Palonen 2019) that most models of democracy include as a basic technique of elaboration of collectively binding decisions. Debate is a means to exchange positions, to discuss them, to elaborate on them, and to do so in a rules-based, peaceful, and often moderated way. Debate hence relates to, and depends on, the capacities and actions that turn humans into social and political beings; their capacity to peacefully interact, communicate, and negotiate. In this function, debate contributes to establishing and strengthening a demos, as it is democratic activity in the sense discussed earlier. Debate also entails politicisation. Any issue that is debated is marked as a potentially contested and hence potentially political issue (Palonen 2003; Wiesner 2025). As discussed in Chapter 1 and earlier, in the research heuristics of the project, “debating Europe” is thus regarded as one of the potential bases for a democratic Europe and a democratic EU.

2.5. Research Heuristics: Towards a Dynamic Understanding of Democracy in the EU

Our research heuristics, against this backdrop, integrate both functional and more normatively loaded conceptions of democracy and the role of citizens. As discussed in Chapter 1 and earlier in this chapter, the gap between the EU and its citizens is not only regarded as a functional challenge for EU policymaking but also from a more normatively and theoretically informed perspective. This leads to a number of theoretical and conceptual choices that influenced the heuristics as discussed earlier.

With regard to *politics and politicisation*, the understanding of the project heuristics is that they are political activities, or actions. The outcomes of politicisation are always contingent. Research took on an open approach with regard to politicisation and its effects, asking first what is there to be found, before judging it.

With regard to the *relation of politicisation, debate, and democracy*, debate is regarded as a key democratic activity (Wiesner et al. 2017; Wiesner 2024a, 2025) because it is a civilised exchange of arguments, of pros and cons, that most models of democracy use for the elaboration of collectively binding decisions.

As *debate is also political activity*, any issue that is debated is a potentially political issue. Hence debate is directly linked to politicisation. While neither political activity nor political debate are per se always democratic, they are needed for democracy and democratisation, as democracy depends on an active demos.

In sum, the research heuristics and conceptual as well as normative-theoretical framework of the present study is therefore based on the normative-theoretical and conceptual assumptions that

- a) the gap is to be seen as both a normative-theoretical problem and an empirical lack of a demos,
- b) a demos can be formed by democratic activity,
- c) a demos is shaped in complex social processes,
- d) politicisation and debate can be democratic activity, but can also be antidemocratic, as the outcomes of politicisation and debate are contingent.

As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6, the research design was thus open, but theory-based, and it was also theory-building. Empirical research oriented itself on the heuristics that was developed earlier, building especially on the conceptualisations of debate and politicisation lined out earlier. The heuristics then, first, helped to structure the analysis and second, interpret the results (Chapter 8). Third, the results then led to summarising patterns and typologies (Chapter 9). Finally, in Chapter 10, the findings are linked back to a discussion of survey findings, which helps to further develop the typologies and enables a research outlook.

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3 Rethinking EU Institutional Communication

Pathways to Democratic Legitimacy

Igor Vidačak and Ana Matan

3.1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) has long struggled with a perceived disconnection between its institutions and its citizens. While the EU has gained considerable authority over economic, social, and political affairs across the continent, its decisions are often seen as distant, opaque, or technocratic (Meyer 1999; De Vreese 2007). This perceived gap, frequently referred to as the EU’s “communication deficit” or as part of the broader “democratic deficit”, continues to challenge the legitimacy of EU governance (Bee and Bozzini 2010; Bijsmans and Altides 2007; Smismans 2006). In this context, institutional communication plays a vital role not merely as a tool for information dissemination but also as a foundational mechanism for democratic engagement, transparency, and trust-building (Habermas 2001; Alemanno 2023).

As the EU has expanded and evolved, so too have the expectations of its citizens. Democratic legitimacy today cannot rest solely on formal representation via the European Parliament (EP) or member state governments. Instead, it increasingly depends on the ability of institutions to engage meaningfully with citizens, to explain their decisions, and to enable forms of participation beyond the electoral moment (Alemanno 2023). Communication policies are therefore not ancillary—they are central to the functioning of a responsive and accountable polity. This broader challenge was also reflected in student perceptions, as evident in the focus group discussion, where they repeatedly emphasised the need for more effective, inclusive, and targeted EU communication efforts, echoing concerns documented in other national cases and recurring in the comparative findings (see Chapter 8).

This chapter explores the extent to which the EU’s institutional communication policy helps bridge the gap between institutions and citizens. We argue that communication is a key mechanism for supporting democratic legitimacy, but the EU’s current strategies often fall short, lacking inclusiveness, accessibility, and responsiveness.

Despite various reform efforts and initiatives, institutional communication remains largely top-down and technocratic, reaching only a limited segment of the population and rarely fostering genuine dialogue or engagement (Meyer 1999; Bee and Bozzini 2010). Although a wide range of participatory instruments now

exist across EU institutions, many are underused, fragmented, or poorly integrated into actual policymaking processes, limiting their ability to foster meaningful engagement (Alemanno 2022). In this context, the communication gap is not only about missing information but also reflects broader tensions between politicisation, democratisation, and identity formation in the EU (Wiesner 2024).

To address these challenges, the chapter undertakes a critical assessment of the evolution, performance, and limitations of the EU's communication strategies. It draws on the findings from recent institutional developments such as the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE), as well as long-standing initiatives like the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) and structured dialogues with civil society (European Commission 2022; Demidov et al. 2023). In doing so, it integrates perspectives from public communication theory, democratic legitimacy, and participatory governance.

We aim to contribute to the ongoing academic debate by offering an integrated analytical framework based on five key performance criteria—reach, inclusion, responsiveness, transparency, and impact, allowing for a more structured evaluation of EU institutional communication. The chapter builds on earlier studies that focus either on normative claims or institutional narratives, but also attempts to bridge theory and practice by connecting concepts of democratic legitimacy and participatory governance with concrete institutional communication policy initiatives.

We start our analysis by outlining the nature of the communication gap and the structural and political factors that sustain it. After that, the EU's institutional communication strategies, their goals, instruments, and practices are examined in more detail. We then assess the effectiveness and limitations of these efforts before turning to more recent trends toward participatory and deliberative communication. The chapter concludes with policy recommendations aimed at enhancing the EU's capacity to engage citizens meaningfully and support democratic renewal.

3.2. Diagnosing the Communication Gap: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The perceived communication gap between the EU institutions and citizens has become a central theme in debates on the EU's democratic legitimacy. It is often framed as part of the “democratic deficit” concept, with its roots in the lack of sufficient mechanisms of political contestation at the EU level, executive dominance and weak parliamentary control over legislative agendas, persistently low turnout in European elections, and a decision-making rooted in technocratic consensus and not public debate or partisan competition (Føllesdal and Hix 2006). However, scholars increasingly acknowledge that much of this disconnection is rooted not only in institutional design but also in communicative practices—what the EU says, how it says it, and to whom.

The concept of a “European public sphere” has served as a foundational framework, emphasising the importance of visibility, contestation, and deliberation in supranational communication (Habermas 2001; Eriksen and Fossum 2002). While EU institutions have invested in communication platforms and deliberative tools, the development of a European public sphere remains constrained by structural, cultural, and media system barriers (Rivas-de-Roca and García-Gordillo 2021).

Despite some progress in digital engagement, national media logic and weak transnational discourse continue to fragment public debate across Europe.

We also rely on the insights of deliberative democratic theory, particularly the idea that democratic legitimacy is enhanced when decisions emerge from inclusive and reasoned public deliberation (Habermas 2001; Dryzek 2009). Within this normative tradition, institutional communication is not merely a tool of persuasion or policy diffusion but a critical mechanism for enabling citizen voice, debate, and reflexivity. Yet, as many critics have noted, EU communication remains largely unidirectional, bureaucratic, and top-down, often failing to support meaningful deliberative engagement with proper, substantial feedback to all participants (Van Brussel 2014; Alemanno 2022).

In parallel, the framework draws from Fritz Scharpf's (1999) distinction between input and output legitimacy, which helps clarify the dual function of communication in a multilevel polity: it should both reflect citizen preferences ("input") and demonstrate effectiveness and policy performance ("output"). While the EU has traditionally relied on output legitimacy, highlighting policy results, economic benefits, and functional integration, its communication often underplays participatory input and civic empowerment. Vivien Schmidt's (2013) notion of throughput legitimacy further enriches this perspective by emphasising the importance of the quality of governance processes themselves: transparency, inclusiveness, and accountability in decision-making. From this angle, strategic communication also plays a role in making institutional procedures more visible and comprehensible to citizens, thereby enhancing legitimacy beyond outcomes and participation alone.

Finally, the theoretical framework incorporates insights from the literature on participatory governance (Fung and Wright 2001), which underscores the value of institutional designs that foster collaboration between public institutions and citizens. From this perspective, communication policy is not a technical support function but a constitutive element of governance itself, shaping how citizens understand, access, and influence political decision-making. On the other hand, some authors caution against overly optimistic readings of participatory governance in the EU. For example, Kohler-Koch (2008) argues that much of the EU's participatory practice operates in a managerial mode where civil society actors are invited to consult but are often co-opted into technocratic processes rather than empowered as democratic interlocutors. This institutionalised participation risks weakening the link between EU institutions and citizens by favouring well-organised interest groups and marginalising less professionalised voices. In this way, rather than reducing the democratic deficit, participation can become a form of input legitimisation that substitutes symbolic inclusion for genuine responsiveness and public contestation. As Vivien Schmidt (2013) argues, democratic legitimacy cannot rest solely on input mechanisms but must also involve discursive processes that engage citizens meaningfully and allow for responsiveness. Similarly, Smismans (2006) cautions that participation may serve primarily as a technocratic validation tool, legitimising pre-formed decisions rather than enabling genuine empowerment or democratic accountability.

By integrating these theoretical lenses, the chapter situates EU institutional communication within broader debates on democratic innovation and legitimacy. It aims to assess not only how the EU informs its citizens but also whether and how

it creates conditions for meaningful engagement and co-creation of policy, particularly through mechanisms such as the ECI and the CoFE.

Research identifies several overlapping causes of the EU's communication gap. First, the EU's institutional architecture, being multilevel, consensus-based, and technocratic, limits its ability to deliver clear and compelling messages. As Meyer (1999) noted early on, the EU suffers from a "communication deficit" in part because its political messages are invisible or too complex for the average citizen to interpret. Second, communication often follows a top-down model focused on public relations rather than public engagement. Bee and Bozzini (2010) describe this as a "schizophrenic" approach in which the EU promises dialogue and participation but delivers strategic messaging largely aligned with its political agenda. Third, there is a structural asymmetry between institutional communication and media logic. Bijsmans and Altides (2007) show that national media rarely contextualise or explain EU initiatives in ways that connect to citizens' lived realities. Instead, EU politics appear sporadically in national discourse, filtered through domestic frames, and often in negative or crisis-driven contexts.

The gap manifests in several ways: low visibility of EU actors and processes in national public spheres, limited public awareness and understanding of institutional roles and decision-making procedures, and minimal citizen participation in EU consultations and initiatives like the ECI, as well as low trust in EU institutions.

EU institutions often remain invisible in national political debates. News coverage of the EU is irregular, highly dependent on national events, and frequently framed through a domestic political lens (Bijsmans and Altides 2007; De Vreese 2007). As a result, citizens rarely encounter EU institutions as relevant or accountable political actors. A recent comparative analysis of media coverage in Germany, Croatia, Belgium, and Greece reveals that reporting on EU affairs remains limited and is predominantly filtered through domestic political frames. The study finds that EU institutions are often portrayed as distant and technocratic, contributing to the persistent communication gap between Brussels and national publics, and reinforcing the perception of EU-level governance as being detached from everyday political discourse (Gioltzidou et al. 2023).

The EU's institutional complexity contributes significantly to the communication gap. Citizens often struggle to grasp who does what in the EU. Research shows that EU legislative processes, institutional roles, and political stakes remain opaque to the broader public (Bee and Bozzini, 2010). In addition, the EU's multi-level governance structure, spanning the European Commission (EC), EP, Council, agencies, and national governments, creates significant communicative fragmentation. Policymaking is diffused across multiple institutions and member states, creating confusion about accountability. Schlesinger (1999) and Meyer (1999) both argue that this complexity undermines accountability and coherence, complicating the task of strategic and visible communication.

Despite a wide array of tools, such as the ECI, public consultations, and citizens' panels, actual participation levels remain low and uneven. Alemanno (2022) notes that even where mechanisms exist, they are often underpublicised, procedurally complex, and disconnected from the policymaking cycle. According to Eurobarometer surveys, a substantial share of citizens report not understanding how the

EU works, even when they view it favourably. While trust in EU institutions has recently improved (European Commission 2024b), many citizens still perceive “Brussels” as technocratic and detached. This perception was echoed in our focus group discussions, where students, despite considering themselves well-informed, similarly described EU institutions as distant and overly technocratic.

Emotional resonance is lacking, and communication remains issue-driven and rationalistic, often neglecting narratives, symbols, and values that build belonging and connection (Moffitt 2016). As Michailidou (2008) observes, without emotional anchoring, institutional communication struggles to engage meaningfully. This is not related only to the quality of the provided information but also to its resonance with citizens, as they often feel that the content communicated by Brussels does not speak to their interests or needs. For example, Europe Direct officers interviewed by Bee (2010, 96) noted this disconnect, observing that citizens are interested in tangible topics like healthcare or environment, while institutional campaigns focus on strategic priorities such as treaties or enlargement. This lack of emotional resonance contributes to a wider sense of disconnect, which is often exploited by populist actors. As Caiani and Guerra (2017) observe, the EU’s depoliticised communication style is particularly vulnerable to populist framing, which makes Brussels perceived in the public as unaccountable and elitist, reinforcing feelings of alienation and mistrust among citizens.

An additional source of the communication gap is the EU institutions’ tendency toward depoliticisation, favouring technocratic, expert-driven discourse, obscuring conflicts and limiting citizens’ capacity to engage critically (Wiesner 2024). The EU often privileges expert-driven discourse, avoiding political conflict in favour of consensus. While this can be stabilising, it limits the visibility of debate and political alternatives. Wiesner (2024) and Bee and Bozzini (2010) both note that this depoliticised culture is ill-suited for engaging citizens in deliberation, particularly when values and identities are at stake.

Political communication is not only about facts but about emotions—fear, hope, pride, and outrage. Scholars such as Marcus (2000) and Moffitt (2016) highlight the importance of affect in building political commitment. EU communication, by contrast, often remains emotionally flat, missing opportunities to frame messages in ways that resonate with citizens’ lived experiences. Fearing accusations of propaganda or bias, the EC often avoids framing messages in politically resonant or provocative terms. This risk-averse approach, as Van Brussel (2014) points out, leads to one-directional, cautious communication that seeks acceptance rather than engagement. The EC’s reluctance to embrace politicised, deliberative communication stems from fears of losing control over the message or appearing partisan. This caution translates into low-risk, one-directional communication strategies focused on promotion, not dialogue (Bijsmans and Altides 2007; Bee and Bozzini 2010). As noted by Alemanno (2022), this institutionally driven communication enables very limited avenues for bottom-up citizen influence on policy priorities.

The implications of the communication gap are serious. When citizens do not see or understand the EU, they are less likely to trust it, participate in its processes, or view it as legitimate. Trust in the EU remains uneven, often contingent on national contexts and filtered through domestic politics. Limited communication

also exacerbates perceptions of “Brussels” as distant or unaccountable, reinforcing scepticism and disengagement (De Vreese 2007; Michailidou 2008). These dynamics were vividly reflected in our student discussions, where participants highlighted the same concerns about distance, opacity, and accountability in EU governance.

Although recent Eurobarometer surveys show higher trust in the EU compared to trust in national governments in most member states (European Commission 2024b), this trust is fragile and often rooted in pragmatic rather than affective or ideological attachments. Without efforts to improve visibility, inclusion, and responsiveness, this trust could easily erode, particularly in times of crisis or institutional failure.

Moreover, as Alemanno (2022) notes, symbolic participation without real influence and proper institutional responsiveness can be damaging. If citizens feel that their involvement in initiatives like the CoFE or online consultations does not affect actual policy, they may grow cynical or disengaged, which can have long-term negative consequences for democracy.

3.3. EU Institutional Communication Policy in Focus

The evolution of the EU’s institutional communication policy reflects a shift from unidirectional information campaigns toward more participatory and dialogic communication strategies. Historically, the EU’s early efforts were largely characterised by an “information policy,” aimed at explaining European integration and defending its benefits, often without meaningful interaction with citizens. Initiatives such as the Adonnino Report (1985) and the PRINCE programmes in the 1990s were indicative of this top-down approach (Van Brussel 2014).

A significant turning point came with the EC’s 2001 *White Paper on European Governance*, which called for stronger connections between institutions and citizens, recognising communication as essential for democratic legitimacy. Subsequent frameworks, including the *Action Plan to Improve Communicating Europe* (2005) and the establishment of the Directorate General for Communication (DG COMM), formalised communication as a distinctive policy (European Parliament 2024).

Yet, this rhetorical shift towards “two-way communication” was not always matched by practice. As Van Brussel (2014) notes, although the EC increasingly adopted the language of dialogue, its methods remained largely managerial and consensus-oriented, often treating engagement as instrumental rather than deliberative. In his comprehensive inventory of participatory mechanisms, Alemanno (2022) argues that while institutional rhetoric has embraced two-way dialogue, the procedural design of most instruments still favours symbolic consultation over actual co-creation or deliberation.

The architecture of EU communication policy involves several key actors and mechanisms. At the institutional level, the DG COMM leads strategy development, coordinates campaigns, and oversees the *Europe Direct* network, national representations, and spokesperson services. The EP, Council, and other institutions run complementary activities, though coordination remains a challenge (Schlesinger 1999).

Over time, the EU’s institutional communication strategy has evolved from a one-way promotion and explanation of policies to a more participatory and dialogic vision that emphasises transparency, citizen engagement, and democratic legitimacy. This rhetorical shift, evident in policy documents, organisational reforms, and

recent deliberative experiments, signals an institutional intent to “listen” rather than merely “tell”. However, the practical outcomes of this evolution remain contested.

The EU has progressively diversified its communication and participatory instruments in response to growing demands for transparency, legitimacy, and public trust. While digital platforms such as institutional web portals (e.g. Citizen Engagement Platform) and social media profiles serve to increase visibility and accessibility, their capacity to foster meaningful engagement remains limited. More participatory tools, such as public consultations via the “Have Your Say” portal, the ECI, and the European Citizens’ Panels, illustrate different logics of citizen involvement. These instruments vary in their degree of institutionalisation, deliberative quality, and policy impact. For example, the ECI offers a formal mechanism for citizen agenda-setting, but it is constrained by legal ambiguity and limited follow-up, raising questions about its transformative potential. Meanwhile, the recent introduction of deliberative panels signals a shift toward more inclusive formats, yet their institutional role is still to be established. A comparative overview of these tools in Table 3.1 reveals both the innovation and the persistent limitations of EU-level participatory governance.

Table 3.1 Critical overview of EU participatory and communication instruments

<i>Instrument</i>	<i>Core function</i>	<i>Innovation/specificity</i>	<i>Key limitations/critiques</i>
Web portals (e.g. <i>Citizen Engagement Platform</i>)	Provide multilingual, centralised access to EU information and services	Enhance transparency; act as an information hub	Predominantly top-down; minimal feedback loops; low capacity for active participation
Social media channels (<i>Instagram, Facebook, X, LinkedIn, etc.</i>)	Disseminate updates, promote engagement, counter disinformation	Real-time outreach; broad visibility; responsiveness	Fragmented audiences; algorithmic bias; low-quality interaction; exposure to disinformation
Central public consultation portal (<i>Have Your Say</i>)	Enable public and stakeholder input on policy proposals	Structured consultation mechanism; transparency in legislative drafting	Input often occurs late in policy cycle; lacks binding effect; consultation fatigue possible
European Citizens’ Initiative	Empower citizens to propose legislative action by collecting 1 million signatures from at least 7 MS	Only formal bottom-up legislative agenda-setting tool	Legal complexity; high signature threshold; limited political and legislative responsiveness
European Citizens’ Panels	Facilitate deliberative discussions among randomly selected EU citizens	Cross-national dialogue; structured mini-publics; focus on collective reasoning	Experimental in nature; unclear follow-up; no institutionalised link to legislative outcomes

Source: Authors, 2025.

While new digital instruments and platforms have expanded reach, they also risk exacerbating existing divides if not paired with proactive engagement strategies (Power 2010). Questions continue to persist about these tools' accessibility, inclusiveness, and impact on actual policy processes. Besides, the long-term integration of these communication tools into EU governance structures remains uncertain and depends on political will and institutional reform (Alemanno 2022).

The strategic goals of EU communication stress transparency, engagement, and the creation of a European public sphere. EC communication guidelines and strategic documents reiterate the ambition to listen to citizens, foster dialogue, and ensure coherence across EU messaging (European Commission 2020, 2024a). In practice, however, several inconsistencies persist. First, there is a persistent gap between strategic vision and operational delivery. As found in previous assessments (Van Brussel 2014; Bee and Bozzini 2010), campaigns are often fragmented across institutions, directorates, and member states, evaluation mechanisms remain weak, and performance indicators tend to focus more on output (number of engagements, reach) than outcome (quality of dialogue, policy influence). Second, although the EC acknowledges the importance of citizen trust and inclusiveness, communication tends to privilege certain narratives, particularly those that align with institutional self-presentation and strategic priorities (Schlesinger 1999). As a result, more critical or diverse citizen perspectives may be excluded or marginalised. Finally, accessibility remains a barrier. Many initiatives are not well known among the broader public, particularly in less connected or less engaged segments of society. Language complexity, limited media coverage, and insufficient linkage with national discourses reduce their potential impact.

These broader trends were also evident in national-level communication efforts during the EU's eastern enlargement. Croatia's pre-accession strategy, for example, prioritised information dissemination over genuine engagement, despite institutional efforts to create national EU forums and foster debate. As Samardžija and Vidačak (2008) show, political will and stakeholder engagement were crucial but underutilised components of that strategy, especially when it comes to stronger involvement of academic institutions and civil society organisations, which have proven to be effective intermediaries in translating complex EU policies into accessible public narratives during Croatia's EU accession process (Samardžija and Vidačak 2008). As candidate countries often mirror EU trends and practices, the lessons learned from the implementation of the EU-level communication policy have broader implications for the success of communication campaigns in the wider enlargement region.

3.4. Assessing the Effectiveness and Limitations of EU Communication Strategies

The assessment of the effectiveness of the EU's institutional communication strategies, understood as a set of policies and practices aimed at informing, engaging,

and involving citizens in EU governance, is guided by the understanding that communication is not an end in itself, but a critical instrument for supporting democratic legitimacy in a multilevel political system. To guide this assessment, the chapter proposes an analytical framework for evaluating the EU's institutional communication, based on five dimensions (*5D framework*). This framework draws conceptually on theories of democratic legitimacy (Scharpf 1999), deliberative democracy (Habermas 2001; Dryzek 2009), and participatory governance (Fung and Wright 2001), but operationalises these insights through five interrelated dimensions: *Reach*, *Inclusion*, *Responsiveness*, *Transparency*, and *Impact*. Together, these dimensions reflect the procedural and outcome-oriented expectations of democratic communication in a multilevel polity. Table 3.2 presents the criteria and their empirical relevance in the EU context.

Table 3.2 The 5D framework for evaluating the effectiveness of the EU's institutional communication

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>General indicators</i>	<i>Illustrative examples</i>
Reach	Extent to which communication efforts inform and engage audiences across member states and societal groups	Geographic coverage, language accessibility, digital presence, campaign visibility	Multilingual websites (Your Europe), social media outreach campaigns
Inclusion	Degree to which underrepresented groups are actively targeted and enabled to participate	Demographic diversity in engagement, youth/minority outreach, tailored formats	Conference on the Future of Europe, youth dialogues, local forums
Responsiveness	Extent to which citizen input is acknowledged, responded to, and shapes institutional processes	Feedback loops, institutional uptake, public tracking of input use	Post-consultation summaries, ECI follow-up communications
Transparency	Clarity, openness, and accessibility of institutional communication and decision-making.	Availability of legislative documents, clear messaging, access to lobbying registers	Have Your Say portal, EU Transparency Register
Impact	Measurable influence of communication on trust, participation, and legitimacy	Eurobarometer trends, consultation participation rates, perception surveys	Trust levels in EU vs. national governments (European Commission 2024b)

Source: Authors, 2025

Over the past two decades, the EU has taken significant steps toward modernising and professionalising its institutional communication. A key area of advancement has been the outreach through digital tools. Legislative proposals, consultation outcomes, and policy documents are now made publicly available online in all official EU languages. Platforms such as “Your Europe” and “Have Your Say” provide user-friendly access to regulatory processes and feedback mechanisms. Every year, the EC conducts hundreds of consultations through its central consultation platform “Have Your Say”, with a large number of contributors, including positive outliers such as the public consultation on “summertime arrangements”, which received approximately 4.6 million replies (European Court of Auditors 2019). The development of these platforms has contributed to improved formal transparency and enabled more open decision-making structures. However, based on the Eurobarometer survey, 53% of EU citizens feel well-informed about the EU, with significant variation across countries, with over 70% in Ireland vs. under 40% in Bulgaria (European Commission 2024b). Stephenson (2023) notes that despite procedural improvements under the Better Regulation agenda, consultations are often dominated by organised interest groups, while citizen input remains marginal. Complex language and technocratic framing make it difficult for lay citizens to engage meaningfully. Our focus group findings confirm this pattern: Even students who considered themselves well-informed rarely mentioned these tools, revealing limited awareness of the participatory possibilities available at the EU level. To improve throughput legitimacy, Stephenson (2023) argues that consultation processes should be simplified, communication made clearer, and visible feedback mechanisms established to show how input shapes decisions.

Institutional communication has increasingly embraced digital formats, with a strong presence on social media platforms and multimedia channels. For example, as of May 2025, the EC’s LinkedIn account has over 2.2 million followers, X over 1.8 million followers, and Instagram over 1 million followers, indicating a strong digital outreach. The EU has successfully diversified its communication beyond print and official press releases, adopting more visual, informal, and interactive styles to engage younger and digitally literate audiences. These efforts are complemented by the work of the DG COMM, which coordinates campaigns and ensures multilingual dissemination across member states.

Perhaps the most innovative developments have occurred in the fields of inclusion and participatory engagement. The ECI symbolically acknowledges citizens’ agenda-setting role in EU policymaking. Based on ECI Forum statistics (2025), between 2012 and 2025, the ECI facilitated 11 successful initiatives, amassing a total of 14,244,721 verified signatures across EU member states. Germany led with over 4.48 million signatures, followed by Italy (1.91 million) and Hungary (1.52 million). Despite these successes, the overall impact remains limited, as many initiatives struggle to translate citizen support into concrete legislative outcomes (Greenwood 2019). The CoFE, launched in 2021, offered a transnational deliberative space that brought together randomly selected citizens from across the EU to discuss major policy challenges. The CoFE facilitated 6,465 events across all 27 EU member states, engaging over 652,000 participants. Additionally, its

multilingual online platform attracted 5 million visitors, with 52,346 active contributors submitting 17,671 ideas and 21,877 comments.

Yet, the real challenge lies in implementation. While both the ECI and the CoFE generated visibility and participation, their long-term credibility depends on whether citizen proposals are meaningfully integrated into legislative agendas and policy cycles. At present, follow-up remains uneven: Successful ECIs have often been met with limited legislative action, and many recommendations from the CoFE were only selectively taken up by EU institutions. Without systematic mechanisms to monitor, translate, and institutionalise these outcomes, participatory innovations risk being perceived as symbolic exercises, fuelling public frustration and further distrust in EU institutions (Maurice 2022).

European Citizens' Panels marked a novel attempt to institutionalise deliberative practices at the supranational level, moving beyond conventional consultations (European Commission 2022), but with a long way to go towards institutional recognition and full integration into the policymaking procedures (Demidov et al. 2023). Nonetheless, these achievements coexist with persistent and interlinked challenges. Despite improvements in transparency, the complexity of EU policy documents, legal jargon, and technocratic discourse still pose considerable barriers to genuine understanding and civic empowerment. Institutional communication often fails to provide meaningful context or narrative coherence, particularly in policy areas dominated by interinstitutional legislative negotiations.

In terms of outreach and visibility, fragmentation continues to undermine strategic coherence. Communication responsibilities are dispersed across various EU bodies, agencies, and member state authorities, often resulting in overlapping messages and diluted branding. As Bee and Bozzini (2010) and Schlesinger (1999) have argued, this disjointed landscape makes it difficult for citizens to identify with a unified EU voice and weakens the effectiveness of public campaigns.

Inclusion also remains a structural challenge. While the CoFE and related initiatives made progress in demographic and geographic representativeness, broader engagement mechanisms such as the ECI or online consultations tend to attract a narrow segment of the population, typically urban, educated, and digitally active citizens. Procedural complexity, digital divides, and low levels of awareness among marginalised communities reduce the potential of these instruments to achieve equitable participation (Alemanno 2022).

Perhaps the most critical limitation lies in responsiveness. Despite growing attention to consultation and dialogue, the EU still lacks systematic and institutionalised feedback loops that demonstrate how citizen input influences policy. As Van Brussel (2014) noted, there is often "dialogue about dialogue," without substantive incorporation of citizens' views into legislative outcomes. The absence of formal obligations to respond to or act on participatory outputs weakens the legitimacy of such mechanisms, fosters scepticism and disengagement among participants, and reinforces the perception that institutional listening is optional rather than integral to policymaking (Alemanno 2022; Power 2010). Caiani and Guerra (2017) argue that symbolic participation gestures, especially when not followed by institutional uptake, may further entrench anti-EU sentiment and empower populist narratives.

Transparency presents a similar dilemma. Platforms such as the “Have Your Say” portal and the EU Transparency Register have increased formal openness by facilitating access to legislative and lobbying data. Yet policy documents often remain complex and technocratic, while key decision-making arenas like trilogues continue to operate largely behind closed doors (Del Monte 2025; Wiesner 2019). As a result, transparency is frequently treated as a compliance exercise rather than a communicative tool for citizen empowerment (Kluger Dionigi and Koop 2017; Curtin and Leino 2017).

Although recent Eurobarometer surveys show that trust in EU institutions has risen and now frequently exceeds trust in national governments, particularly in countries facing domestic governance crises, this trust is often contingent and vulnerable (European Commission 2024b). Without institutional responsiveness and policy follow-through, symbolic gestures of engagement risk eroding public confidence rather than reinforcing it.

In sum, the EU’s communication strategy has evolved significantly in its transparency, digital reach, and experimentation with deliberative formats. However, it remains constrained by managerial logic, institutional inertia, and limited responsiveness. For communication to serve as a genuine tool of democratic legitimacy, it requires moving beyond dissemination to co-creation, anchored in openness, equity, and reciprocal accountability.

3.5. Rethinking Communication: Toward Meaningful Citizen Engagement

In recent years, EU institutions have begun to recognise that communication cannot be reduced to dissemination alone. Simply informing citizens, no matter how clearly or frequently, is insufficient to address deeper legitimacy concerns. Instead, communication is increasingly conceptualised as a two-way process, requiring dialogue, deliberation, and responsiveness. This shift is reflected in the EU’s evolving discourse, which now embraces concepts such as active listening, citizen-centred governance, and co-creation (Van Brussel 2014; Alemanno 2022).

However, this rhetorical transformation has not always translated into practice. Many participatory instruments still function more as consultation mechanisms than as channels for genuine deliberation or influence. Most EU citizen engagement tools, from online consultations to the ECI, remain weakly institutionalised and procedurally constrained. While the CoFE and its associated citizens’ panels marked a significant step toward deliberative experimentation, their long-term integration into policymaking processes remains uncertain (Alemanno 2022).

The normative aspiration toward deliberative democracy, where citizens not only express opinions but debate, revise, and co-develop ideas, is thus still far from fully realised in EU institutional communication. Meaningful dialogue requires mechanisms that can ensure transparency, guarantee feedback loops, and create trust that citizen voices will be heard and valued. While digitalisation has transformed the potential landscape of EU communication, the promise of digital engagement remains only partially fulfilled. Participation on social media often favours already

informed or mobilised citizens, leaving behind those who are digitally excluded or disengaged. The institutional tone remains cautious and one-directional, with limited interaction or follow-up. As already pointed out, EU communicative space often reflects elite-driven dynamics, and digital formats, despite their interactivity, do not automatically dismantle this structural asymmetry.

Several interrelated barriers continue to hinder the shift from dissemination to engagement. Institutional culture remains one of the most persistent obstacles. EU institutions have historically operated in a consensus-driven, technocratic mode, often risk-averse and reluctant to embrace politicisation. This culture has shaped communication strategies that favour control, coherence, and reputation management over pluralism and deliberation (Bee and Bozzini 2010; Wiesner 2024). Besides, resource constraints also limit the institutional capacity for participatory engagement. High-quality citizen engagement, particularly in deliberative formats, requires planning, facilitation, interpretation, and feedback mechanisms. These are resource-intensive activities that are not always prioritised in EU communication budgets or personnel strategies (Van Brussel 2014). In addition, citizen fatigue is a growing concern. With rising political polarisation, disinformation, and technocratic complexity, citizens may feel overwhelmed or sceptical about participating in institutional initiatives. Past experiences of symbolic participation, where input was collected but not reflected in policy, further reduce motivation. Our findings also highlight another barrier: Even well-informed EU studies students were largely unaware of many existing communication initiatives. Sophisticated platforms have limited value if their existence and purpose are not effectively communicated.

Finally, the information overload contributes to this fatigue. The EU produces an enormous volume of documentation, data, and messaging across multiple languages and platforms. Without clear curation and narrative framing, even well-intentioned communication can appear fragmented and inaccessible. Together, these barriers point to a fundamental challenge: Rethinking communication not simply as a technical function but as a democratic commitment. Participatory communication requires not only new tools but also new institutional mindsets, ones that treat citizen input as a source of knowledge, legitimacy, and innovation rather than as a reputational risk.

In response to growing contestation, some scholars advocate for a more emotionally attuned and politicised form of EU communication. Caiani and Guerra (2017) suggest that rather than shying away from conflictual discourse, the EU should frame communication around values and narratives that connect with citizens' lived experiences and counter populist simplifications.

3.6. Concluding Remarks

This chapter has examined the EU's institutional communication policy through the lens of democratic legitimacy and citizen engagement. It explored the persistent communication gap between EU institutions and citizens, traced the evolution of communication strategies, and assessed their achievements and limitations. Drawing on recent research, institutional practice, and participatory experiments, the

analysis suggests that while communicative reach and transparency have expanded, the capacity for inclusive, responsive, and impactful dialogue remains limited.

Several key patterns emerge. First, the communication gap is not merely technical but deeply embedded in institutional complexity, technocratic culture, and a historically top-down communication model. Second, despite a proliferation of instruments, such as digital platforms, public consultations, and deliberative formats, these often lack visibility, coordination, and integration into decision-making processes. Third, the normative shift from information provision to participation remains incomplete, and initiatives like the CoFE highlight both potential and limitations in shaping institutional outcomes.

Over the past two decades, strategic communication reforms have introduced greater transparency and a more participatory approach, yet implementation has been uneven and often symbolic. Rather than a technical upgrade, this evolution foregrounds deeper questions about the role of communication in EU governance. Institutional discourse oscillates between informing, engaging, and co-governing, without consistently articulating its communicative purpose. Without more clarity in this regard, strategies risk fragmentation.

A recurrent tension lies in the reliance on standardised messaging, often inattentive to the diversity of media environments, cultural contexts, and civic expectations across member states. Enhancing communicative relevance may depend less on outreach volume than on tailored, context-sensitive engagement.

Equally important is the issue of feedback and institutional responsiveness. Participatory mechanisms continue to suffer from limited follow-up, unclear influence on policy, and opaque decision chains. While input collection has improved, mechanisms for demonstrating how citizen contributions shape policy remain underdeveloped, which weakens trust and accountability.

These gaps are not solely procedural but reflect broader institutional tendencies. Communication remains largely centralised, often detached from policymaking units, and underpinned by a managerial, rather than deliberative ethos. The early integration of participatory design and reflexive evaluation into policy cycles appears uneven across institutions. While the EP communicates in a more political and citizen-oriented manner, the EC dominates in infrastructure and reach. Harnessing the strengths of both could lay the foundation for a more coherent EU communication strategy.

More broadly, addressing the communication gap entails institutional reflexivity and multilevel cooperation, not simply technical reform. In an era marked by disinformation, political fragmentation, and volatile trust, the ability of EU institutions to foster dialogic and participatory communication becomes increasingly consequential. Rather than viewing communication as a functional tool of persuasion, it emerges as a constitutive element of democratic governance. If EU communication is to contribute meaningfully to democratic legitimacy, it must be embedded more structurally within the EU's political and institutional frameworks, less as a promotional practice and more as a site of civic engagement, contestation, and co-creation.

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4 Young People, Students, and the EU

Critical Utilitarian Democrats

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Claims about the “legitimacy crisis” of the European Union (EU) have often been linked to economic crises, such as the recession in 2007 followed by austerity policies, and the rise of extremist, anti-EU, or anti-democratic parties and movements. Despite the regained high level of trust for the EU recorded in Eurobarometer polls (52% in 2025) in the wake of the current turmoil in international politics, more qualitative questions about the EU’s legitimacy remain to be explored.

In this project (DebatEU), conducted in six EU countries, our aim was to understand the reasons young citizens provide for criticising, or distancing themselves from or, conversely, supporting the EU, by discussing Europe in focus groups composed of students. In addition to the practical constraints of holding discussion groups in public forums during the pandemic, there are three reasons for our choice to focus on students: Firstly, students constitute a population on which, as we will return to, there are still few qualitative studies on attitudes towards Europe, with the exception of research on the “effects” of the Erasmus+ programme. Secondly, this is a population for which the EU has designed specific policies, notably the well-known Erasmus+, with the aim, among other things, of promoting positive/favourable attitudes towards European integration and thus enhancing the future legitimacy of the EU. Thirdly, this is a population with characteristics that allow us to test two hypotheses often debated in European studies: A positive attitude towards the EU and its institutions is positively correlated with (a) the level of education and (b) the experience of intra-European mobility.

4.1. Young People and the EU

Research on public opinion and political attitudes in Europe highlights a long-standing interest in understanding how citizens perceive and respond to various political events and crises. This interest dates back to functionalists such as Deutsch (1953), who explored the dynamics of public opinion in relation to European events such as referendums and treaty ratifications. These studies often focus on the concerns of EU institutions and political actors, as noted by Aldrin (2010).

Recent publications, including a comprehensive review of the studies by Mercenier (2019a) for the Institut national pour la jeunesse et l’éducation Populaire

(INJEP) as a main reference to this chapter, highlight the state of “crisis” that has persisted within the EU for some decades (Mégie and Vauchez 2014). This “permanent crisis” comprises a series of economic, migratory, and legitimacy crises that have shaped public opinion and political behaviour across Europe. These crises have continuously influenced the political landscape, highlighting the challenges faced by the EU and its member states in responding to the concerns and attitudes of their citizens.

In terms of political attitudes and practices, what has often been termed the “politicisation” of the EU (see the discussion in Chapter 2) has become an important issue in the wake of the rise of Eurosceptic parties in 23 of the 28 member states and their electoral victories in countries such as France, the United Kingdom, and Denmark, which were joined in 2024 by Italy, Austria, and Poland. Parallel to this trend, there has been an increase in voter abstention, although this was reversed in the most recent European Parliament (EP) elections in 2019 and 2024.

However, a growing number of citizens continue to express indifference or ambivalence towards the EU in a broader context of declining trust in political institutions, including national ones (Van Ingelgom 2014; Delmotte et al. 2017). While several countries show increased trust in the EU compared to national institutions, overall trust has remained low in recent decades. According to a European Commission (EC) report (European Commission 2018, 5), 42% of respondents across the EU said they had “some confidence” in the EU, compared to 35% for national institutions such as parliaments and governments. The Winter 2025 Eurobarometer even recorded the highest level of Europeans believing that their country benefits from EU membership (74%) since the question was first asked in 1983, with young citizens (aged 15–24) showing the highest approval rating (82%) (European Parliament 2025a). In a similar vein, the Spring 2025 Eurobarometer revealed that 52% of Europeans trust the EU and the EC (the highest level of trust since 2007), with young citizens again showing the highest level of trust (57%). In comparison, national governments and parliaments currently inspire less trust than the European institutions (37% overall trust for national parliaments in member states) (European Parliament 2025b).

More specific surveys of young Europeans in 2022–2024 differentiated by high/low levels of education will be examined in more detail in Chapter 10 from a comparative perspective on the six member states participating in DebatEU. Mistrust of political institutions in general is part of a broader dissatisfaction with national political bodies, exacerbated by economic and financial crises (Armingeon and Ceka 2013). Many citizens feel that political authorities, both at EU and national level, are powerless and that the political system does not work effectively. This perception is also the result of depoliticisation strategies on the part of elected representatives who no longer assume or explain the political dimension of their choices, contenting themselves with justifying their decisions as inevitable (Mair 2013; Robert 2021).

4.1.1. *Young People and Their Attitudes and Behaviour Towards the EU*

An analysis of trends in youth political participation in the EU reveals a complex landscape. There was a notable overall increase in voter turnout in the 2019 EP elections (51%) compared to previous elections (43% in 2009 and 2014), which was maintained in the 2024 European elections (51%). However, overall youth engagement in the EP elections has remained low, particularly when compared to older age groups (36% of under-25-year-olds voted in 2024, compared to 42% in 2019 and 28% in 2014).

This low level of electoral participation among young people can be linked to more general trends since the end of the last decade. Several studies point to young people expressing a feeling of powerlessness and political passivity—this has also been a major finding among students of our focus groups, as will be discussed in Chapters 8 and 9—with some researchers attributing low turnout to apathy (Dahl et al. 2017, 285) in the face of an increasingly specialised political sphere, which according to many young people imposes its decisions on citizens (Marsh et al. 2007; O’Toole et al. 2003). Others, however, argue that young people are engaging in politics in more diverse ways, e.g. through demonstrations, petitions (Dalton and Kuechler 1990; Manin 1996), or online activism (Kahne and Bowyer 2018). Accordingly, young people have assumably taken a critical stance against traditional, hierarchical institutions in the wake of “postmodern shifts” towards individual autonomy along with post-materialist priorities questioning political authority (Inglehart 1999, 239–240) and adopted more diverse repertoires of “bricolage politics” challenging established political structures (Zilliacus 2022, 155–159, 166–170). Young people thus tend to reject conventional political commitments, preferring short-term, cause- and goal-oriented actions with a personal social media spin (Zilliacus 2022, 166–170; Knoll et al. 2018; Strömbäck et al. 2018).

This disruption of traditional forms of authority goes hand in hand with the individualisation of the political repertoires through increasingly digital means in online spaces (Ohme 2019; Taylor-Smith and Smith, 2019). As Mercenier (2019a) points out, this renewal of forms of political engagement and participation patterns among younger generations highlights that their apathy is a “myth” (Cammaerts et al. 2013), instead underlining the diversity of options available to “critical citizens” (Mercenier 2019a, 37) for selecting their own level of involvement. These attentive and responsive citizens are often well-informed about very specific issues that lead them to engage on their own personal terms (Amnå and Ekman 2013), based on their capacity for action in a given situation and their reflections through values rather than relying on normative contexts of formal rules and rhetoric (Zilliacus 2022, 167–171). As will be discussed in Chapters 8, 9, and 10, the students who participated in our focus groups match this typology.

Importantly, the more tenacious character of young citizens’ political repertoire does not prevent them from maintaining a positive view of democracy as a political system, although they are critical of its dysfunctions. According to Roudet’s study (2014) based on the European Values Survey, nine out of ten young Europeans consider democracy to be the best form of government, while simultaneously being

dissatisfied with how it works in national and European contexts. Furthermore, most studies show that young citizens trust the EU more than older generations, although this relationship varies according to national contexts and seems to be more clearly observable in countries that have recently joined the EU. As Belot (2014, 15), however, shows based on a quantitative analysis, age appears to be “a mediator of other effects, such as level of education, relationship to the nation and cultural liberalism” and “at the European level, [this] effect of age on the level of fears about European integration disappears once these variables are taken into account.”

Thus, young people’s European political identity is diverse and complex. With regard to the EU, this identity is shaped both by the way in which the EU presents itself—the narratives through which it communicates—and by personal experiences (Bouza Garcia 2017; De Vries 2020; Beaudonnet et al. 2023), which adds to the ambivalent nature of young people’s relationship with European integration. Overall, young people’s political engagement is constantly evolving, characterised by a mixture of critical withdrawal, differentiated forms of participation and a nuanced understanding of European identity, even if this is coloured by national perspectives, as illustrated by Belot (2000) comparing young people in France and the United Kingdom. Identifying as European thus covers a wide range of positions. Medrano’s (2003) qualitative study of Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom in the late 1990s shows that respondents’ identification as European can relate to very different meanings. This is also the hypothesis put forward by Bruter (2003), who further emphasises the importance of distinguishing between individuals’ relationship with Europe, which he considers to be a “cultural” dimension, and their relationship with the EU institutions, which he describes as a civic dimension (Bruter 2003). The survey conducted by Weill (2010) as part of a project aimed at understanding Europeans’ “ordinary relationships” with Europe (Gaxie et al. 2011) echoes this work: It shows how young people from working-class neighbourhoods can identify with Europe, e.g. as a space for sporting competitions (e.g. the European Football Championships), while at the same time distancing themselves from EU institutions. Finally, for the youngest, as for the whole population, national and European identities are far from being opposed; they coexist and reinforce each other (Michel and Robert, 2010). However, identification with Europe may also be referred to as a process fuelled by school learning and more abstract content than national identification, which is internalised from early childhood, particularly within the family (Throssell 2015).

4.1.2. What Are the Determinants of Attitudes Towards the EU?

What are the effective variables behind the effects of age? And how do these variables explain the variations observed among “young people” in terms of their political behaviour and their relationship with Europe? As the sociology of youth reminds us, one of the challenges of research on this subject is to differentiate between a biological age effect (linked to the life cycle) and a cohort effect (linked

to generations of individuals sharing the experience of a specific historical period). Research on young people's relationship with Europe is no exception, as shown, e.g. by Down and Wilson (2017) and Belot (2014). The hypothesis regarding a biological age effect is that young people are more favourable towards the EU because they are more adept at utilising the opportunities it offers. This is particularly true of mobility (Beaudonnet et al. 2023): As we will see in Chapter 8, many young people mention the importance of their Erasmus+ stay, their first trips to another EU country, or even their experience of crossing the border as "European citizens" as a formative experience in their relationship with Europe. The cohort effect, on the other hand, emphasises the socialisation of young people during periods marked by unique events or a particular "climate" that shaped their attitude towards the EU. Researchers such as Inglehart (1990) observed an inter-generational shift among young people growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, who supported the EU as a post-materialist project. Rekker (2018) argues that today's young people are more familiar with the EU and globalisation and perceive the EU as a stabilising force. During the Brexit debate, British young people tended to favour remaining in the EU, unless they were influenced by strong familial Euroscepticism. More recently, at the time of our focus groups (see Chapters 8 and 9), the shared experience of the War against Ukraine and the differing concerns it raised among respondents of different nationalities also seem to have played a role in shaping attitudes towards the EU and its "protective" role in this type of context (see also Taylor et al. 2023).

However, focus group studies conducted by Huyst (2008) among young Flemish people highlight the very limited influence of EU policies in the identification processes observed, despite their recognition of the advantages of the EU. Focus group studies conducted with citizens in Dublin, London, Vienna, and Berlin by Hurrelmann et al. (2015) reach similar conclusions: While young people recognise the usefulness of the single currency and free movement within the EU, these advantages are often dissociated from the EU as an institution (cited by Mercenier 2019a, 47). Nevertheless, the positive correlation between knowledge of the EU and a strong European identity has been confirmed by various studies, such as the classic studies by Inglehart (1990) and related survey research conducted, e.g. by Verhaegen and Hooghe (2015), even if they concluded that this educational effect remained limited. Surveys conducted in schools in Belgium, France, Germany, and England (Agirdag et al. 2011, 2012; Faas 2007) consider that the persistence of a national framework in school textbooks explains the limited influence of school socialisation in the construction of a European identity. Finally, socialisation and family transmission play a role in shaping attitudes towards the EU. Surveys conducted in Great Britain and France (Belot 2000) and Belgium (Quintelier et al. 2014) confirm the transmission and persistence of family attitudes favourable or unfavourable to European integration among younger generations.

Additional factors influencing relations with the EU include socio-economic status (Foster and Frieden 2021) and level of education (Hakhverdian et al. 2013), as well as national identity and perceptions of the role of the member states in the EU. Surveys conducted in Belgian primary schools by Agirdag et al. (2011, 2012)

showed that European sentiment was correlated with family affluence, while European identity was weaker among children from non-European immigrant families. According to Medrano and Gutiérrez (2001), European and national identification are not contradictory, but rather intertwined. The idea that a sense of belonging to a state strengthens European identity is corroborated by studies by Throssell (2015) and Weill (2010), even if national identity seems more important and less abstract. Research by Belot (2000) highlights divergent attitudes among young French and British people depending on the perceived role of their country within the EU: Young French people had a positive view of France's leading role in the EU, while young British people were more divided, assuming that the UK's role had been weakened by the EU. The local context and the representations of the EU that circulate within it also play a role in shaping perceptions of the EU, as shown by the group study conducted by Scalise (2015) among young Italians, including their parents and teachers (Mercenier 2019a, 45–47).

Intra-European geographical mobility, which is at the heart of the Erasmus+ programme, is supposed to foster support for the EU, in line with Deutsch's transactional theory (1953). However, this type of mobility, which depends on socio-economic resources, can be associated with perceptions of increased competition between workers of different member states and social dumping. This is demonstrated by the survey conducted by Beaudonnet et al. (2023): Focusing on the discourse of free movement as a means of legitimising the EU, the authors observe that it gives rise to contrasting views depending on whether the citizens expressing their opinions have been able to benefit from intra-European mobility, with young people often appearing as the “winners” of free movement thanks to their ability to travel and study in different member states. Furthermore, as Mercenier (2019a, 50) points out, Favell's (2008) qualitative study of middle- and upper-class Europeans living outside their member states of origin, i.e. in London, Brussels, and Amsterdam, shows that individuals are not particularly supportive of the EU in terms of their mobility, but rather see it as a means of leading a “more individualistic and denationalised” life (Favell 2010, 194). Again, these findings match our focus group findings, which underline that students who have profited from mobility and free travel are aware of this being an explicit utilitarian benefit of the EU.

Finally, numerous studies have been conducted on the impact of EU policies, communication, and functioning as such on citizens' sense of belonging and identification with the EU. Research by Dupuy and Van Ingelgom (2014), e.g. confirms that public policies at EU level, with the exception of agricultural policy, can legitimise the authorities that formulate and implement them. This highlights the variation in legitimising impact between different policy areas ranging from social to foreign policy with highly specialised expertise restricting public participation in the policy debate (Gaxie et al. 2011). More recently, Beaudonnet et al. (2023) examined the impact of official discourse legitimising the EU, which clearly influences citizens' discourse, but in different ways depending on nationality and socio-economic status, with the discourse sometimes being nuanced or even contested.

4.2. Students and the EU

4.2.1. *Should Students Be Distinguished From “Young People”?*

The extreme heterogeneity of the “young people” category and the multiplicity of relationships with the EU prompted us to work on more specific populations, which could also be compared between the teams and countries participating in DebatEU. The relevance of youth as a variable is complex due to the diversity of socio-economic characteristics and the concrete situations faced by young people. Focusing specifically on students can help reduce this heterogeneity by distinguishing between different generations, including variations in primary/secondary socialisation, and social situations, such as students versus young workers or the unemployed. This allows for an exploration of the specificities of students’ relationship with the EU, as they are a priori particularly sensitive to the achievements of the EU and to European identity due to their involvement in intellectual training and European mobility, notably through programmes such as Erasmus+.

The Erasmus+ programme, which has expanded considerably since the late 1980s, offers a unique opportunity to examine the effects of intra-European mobility on young intellectuals. However, according to Mercenier (2019a, 49–51), studies on this subject have yielded mixed results: Some indicate an increase in students’ identification as Europeans following their Erasmus+ exchange (Mitchell 2015), while others suggest no significant change in their European identity (Van Mol 2019). This lack of consistent results, which is disappointing from the point of view of legitimising the various European institutional actors involved (Duchesne et al. 2013), may be linked to the ultimately limited interaction of Erasmus+ students with students from the host country or their peers from other member states during exchanges (Wilson 2011). However, research conducted by Siklodi (2015) through focus groups shows that students who experience mobility consider it essential to feeling European, with many believing that only those who travel are truly European. This perspective suggests that intra-European mobility strengthens ties between socially privileged individuals rather than promoting ties between all Europeans. For more disadvantaged groups, this type of mobility can indeed be perceived as intra-European competition and a factor weakening national frameworks (Damay and Mercenier 2016). Qualitative studies on student opinions, such as those by Mercenier (2019b), highlight the varied effects of youth on relations with the EU and European identity, offering a nuanced understanding of these dynamics.

Students in our focus groups were much less ambivalent in their view of the Erasmus+ programme than these findings suggest. Erasmus+ was generally discussed very favourably by the students and not only highlighted as a great policy success but as an identity-building activity and asset of the EU.

4.2.2. *Students Enrolled in Specialised EU MA Programmes*

In the context of DebatEU, most focus group participants were students specifically involved in EU-related MA programmes geared towards European professions.

Their situation raises some relevant questions. Are students who have chosen EU affairs as a career well-informed about the EU? Do they express strong support for EU institutions and European integration? Do they see themselves more clearly than other students as vectors of a European identity? What are the effects of university studies on European sentiments? As a general finding (see Chapter 8) we found that the students were very self-reflective with regard to their expertise in EU affairs.

Michon's study (2019) examines a specific group of French students pursuing a career in "European affairs" that is similar to the population in many of our focus groups. Using qualitative and quantitative methods, the research explores the social conditions that influence students' career choices in favour of "European affairs". Michon's work within political sociology draws on the theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Daniel Gaxie, who emphasise the role of social factors in the formation of social practices and perceptions (see Kauppi 2005). Rather than the prestigious College of Europe in Bruges or Natolin, which lead to the most important positions in the space formed by what Georgakakis and Rowell (2013) call the "Eurocracy", the study focused on students enrolled in EU-specialised MA programmes at French universities and political institutes, such as the one in Strasbourg. These programmes generally lead to "second-tier positions" within the Eurocracy, often as "auxiliaries" or peripheral figures in this field (Michon 2019, 157). Despite this, graduates frequently obtain positions within European institutions—such as the EC or as assistants to Members of the European Parliament (MEPs)—as well as in lobbying organisations or national and local bodies linked to European politics. This research provides valuable insights into the relationship between this small group of French students and the broader social construct constituting Europe and its institutions.

The study by Michon (2019) examines the characteristics and social dynamics of students enrolled in EU-oriented MA programmes, highlighting their specificity in relation to other students. These students often display a certain elitism due to their more privileged educational background and international experiences, such as dual nationality, language skills, and international mobility thanks to family investments or programmes such as Erasmus+. Michon identifies three groups within this student population based on their social background, educational background, and international capital. The first group, "those who are socially climbing", generally come from modest backgrounds and less prestigious universities. The second group, "good students", come from more privileged social backgrounds and are more likely to attend prestigious political studies institutes ("Instituts d'Études Politiques" (IEPs) such as Sciences Po in Paris). The third group, "the internationalised", has significant international capital, often inherited from their families and early socialisation (Michon 2019, 178–180). These students are then characterised by their attachment to the EU, which stems from their social advantages and internationalisation, allowing them social, academic, and geographical mobility. MA programmes in "European affairs" offer prestige, multidisciplinary learning, and professional courses leading to high-status jobs in international settings. Due to their middle-class background and/or social aspirations, these students tend to

appreciate cultural and cosmopolitan eclecticism, political moderation, and the importance of compromise in the European context (Michon 2019, 157). The results of our focus groups (see Chapter 8) are in accordance with these findings.

However, Michon's survey also reveals that students' attitudes towards the EU and its institutions are more complex than expected. While the students are interested in international spaces, an EU-related professional vocation often emerges later in their educational path, motivated by the need to specialise at MA level in order to obtain a valued job. These students are therefore not solely attracted to the EU as such but also to the broader and socially distinctive international space that it represents. Despite their willingness to engage in social and spatial mobility and their openness to diverse experiences, the EU affairs students thus have a mixed relationship with European integration. Many do not express strong pro-European convictions, but rather instrumental support that reveals utilitarian characteristics in their relationship with the EU. They may appreciate certain aspects of the EU, but also question issues such as free market competition and disparities in social policy (Michon 2019, 71). In short,

utilitarian attitudes towards the EU are dominant. Like the civil servants described by Max Weber, some students seem inclined to work according to impersonal rules, without passion, hatred, love or enthusiasm.

(Michon 2019, 71–72)

In this sense, we are now a long way from the professional environment of the early decades of the European communities, where loyalty based on identity (Gravier 2003) was taken for granted among Eurocrats (Georgakakis 1999).

Unlike these early architects, who were deeply committed to European integration, Michon (2019) shows that today's students see Europe more as a career opportunity than as an ideological commitment. Their choice to pursue a European career is influenced by their professional aspirations and their social background, often from internationally minded middle classes. His study thus highlights an intriguing change in the motivations and relationships of those pursuing a career in the European institutions. While a strong "European vocation" has traditionally been considered a key factor for those entering the Eurocratic sphere, recent analyses suggest that personal skills and competences are becoming increasingly important in recruitment processes, reflecting a transformation in the dynamics of the European political space (Georgakakis 2010, 2017). For Michon (2019, 158), this change may offer a sociological perspective on the EU crisis, suggesting that its roots may lie in the social processes that influence the trajectories of those involved in the construction of Europe. Furthermore, his study echoes a normalisation of relations with Europe, moving away from extreme positions of support or opposition to the EU. This change reflects a broader trend in which ordinary interactions with Europe are less imbued with passionate or identity-based engagement, paving the way for more ordinary and pragmatic engagement.

Michon's study does not extend to an international comparison, leaving open questions about the impact of national socialisation in terms of educational and

university systems that vary from country to country. Moreover, exploring these aspects may provide a better understanding of how national contexts influence the attractiveness of European careers and the integration of diverse career paths within the European framework. This requires empirical research to assess the contested validity of homogeneous national frameworks (Gaxie et al. 2011) and to explore the interaction between national contexts and European career paths, both at the level of educational institutions and political contexts. These challenges constitute the objective of the research within DebatEU presented here.

Again, the finding that students predominantly show a utilitarian EU identification is similar to what we found in our focus group study. Many of the participants showed a strong and detailed utilitarian EU identification, emphasising free movement, the EU passport, or the Euro currency as reasons for their EU support. However, as discussed in Chapter 8 and in particular in Sections 8.3. and 8.4. at least a considerable portion of the students showed a strong normative orientation in their EU identification, i.e. they described a detailed picture of how and why the EU stands for democracy as a normative principle interconnected to the EU fundamental values as described in article 2 of the Treaty on European Union. The specific national patterns in such orientations are investigated in more detail through our survey analysis in Chapter 10 of utilitarian vs. solidary EU goals among highly educated youth with respect to conceptions of citizenship and EU democracy.

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5 Focus Group Research Design

Methodology, Standards, and Findings

Zhylien Kaja and Claudia Wiesner

In the following, we will present an overview on history, standards, potential, and limitations of focus group research. We will also detail previous findings of focus group research on the EU and European integration. The chapter concludes with the lessons our research indicates for focus group research in general. The research design and proceeding of our study will be explained in detail in Chapter 6.

5.1. Focus Groups

Focus groups were originally developed as a marketing research tool, but their versatility and effectiveness have led to their adoption in various fields, including the Social Sciences (Almutrafi 2019). The concept of focus groups was first introduced by market researcher Robert Merton and sociologist Paul F. Lazarsfeld. In 1941, Merton's unplanned collaboration with Lazarsfeld on radio research led to the development of the "focused interview", a method for studying audience responses to radio programmes by analysing their reactions and conducting follow-up interviews to understand their reasoning. The focused interview was further refined and adapted for different research projects. It became a valuable tool for gaining insight into the complex experiences and motivations of different groups of people (Merton 1987).

In the 1980s, there was a growing interest in the Social Sciences in understanding people's attitudes, behaviours, and communication patterns, especially by demographers and communication researchers. This led to an increased recognition of focus groups as a research method (Morgan 1997). Focus groups have the advantages that a) researchers can collect data in less time compared to other methods and b) they enable to move away from the essentialist approach to opinions (Krueger and Casey 2014; Wilkinson 1998) applied by quantitative researchers. Focus groups have since become increasingly used in Political Science, Public Health, Marketing, Education, and many other disciplines (Morgan 1997).

Different authors have defined focus groups in various ways. All these definitions emphasise that focus groups are guided discussions that capitalise on group interaction in order to generate qualitative data (see Kitzing 1995; Morgan 1996;

Krueger and Casey 2014; Stewart and Shamdasani 2014). In this line of thought, Morgan (1996, 130) defines focus groups as

a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher.

The term “focus” in focus groups is significant: It indicates that the group discussion revolves around a specific and well-defined topic of research interest (Boddy 2005). Therefore, it is important that researchers clearly define their research objectives (Almutrafi 2019). According to Hennink (2014, 16), the focus group method can be used when the researchers would like to

- explore topics about which little is known [. . .],
- explain specific behaviors or beliefs and the circumstances in which they occur [. . .]
- gain diversity of experiences and perspectives on the study topic [. . .]
- understand context, culture, or social norms surrounding the research issues [. . .],
- understand group processes.

It is the discussion among the participants, i.e. the interaction, that allows to gain insights into participants’ thoughts, beliefs, experiences, and perspectives on the topic given, since in a discussion they explain their deeper reflections in the matter. As Stewart and Shamdasani (2014, 10–11) argue

Focus groups, by definition, are an exercise in group dynamics, and the conduct of a group—as well as the interpretation of results obtained from focus groups—must be understood within the context of group interaction.

The interaction in the group discussion can be enhanced by the moderator who sets the tone and facilitates the discussion (van Ingelgom 2020).

5.2. Advantages and Limitations of Focus Groups

Focus groups present the following advantages:

- Focus groups deliver rich data in a short amount of time because they allow participants to share their insights, perspectives, and experiences, and this happens on the same day for all of them (Grudens-Schuck et al. 2004; Morgan 1996). Focus groups facilitate the expression of ideas or insights that might not be expressed in an interview (Kitzinger 1994).
- Focus group dynamics are essential for producing data. Participants in focus groups discuss their own insights and experiences by interacting among themselves, unlike in other methods. As a result of this interaction, diverse opinions

and thoughts are shared, which allows researchers to observe and analyse the dynamics of agreement and disagreement among participants (Morgan 1996).

- Focus groups encourage the empowerment of not feel comfortable with solo interviews as well as those who initially might believe they have nothing to contribute or say (Kitzinger 1995). This is achieved by the involvement of participants in a collaborative discussion with other participants and with the researchers (Race et al. 1994; Kitzinger 1995). Focus groups thus can enable the inclusion of voices and groups which before were not included in traditional research methods (Morgan 1995; Clark et al. 2003).
- Focus groups generate new ideas, suggestions, and solutions. Interaction and discussion among participants can be a valuable source of new insights, which researchers did not think of before and that might impact the research project (Almutrafi 2019; Morgan 1996). As will be discussed in Chapters 6, 8 and 9, these unexpected findings were especially important in our project.
- Focus groups are flexible. The moderator follows the lead questionnaire, but at the same time she/he gives space to participants to express their insights on topics that they think might be important (Bertrand et al. 1992). Furthermore, focus groups lead to knowledge production about different topics, which might not be familiar to all participants (Kitzinger 1995).

Focus groups come with certain limitations as well:

- Focus groups are more open than other, especially quantitative methods. Therefore, researchers have less control over the data gathering (Almutrafi 2019).
- Participants' contributions to a discussion may sometimes be influenced by the "group effect", or opinions that are more widely shared (Powell and Single 1996).
- It is difficult to generalise focus group findings to a whole population due to the small number of participants involved, which varies between four and ten (Almutrafi 2019).
- The range of topics that can be researched with effectiveness in groups is limited because group interaction requires mutual self-disclosure. However, some topics will be unacceptable for discussion among certain categories of participants (Morgan 1996).
- The discussion in the focus group can be dominated by some participants, leaving others in the shadow. This may also discourage participants who lack communication skills or have a special need to participate in the discussion. Therefore, careful planning and a skilled moderator are needed (DeCarlo 2018; Sagoe 2015).

5.3. Focus Group Research Design

Focus group methods literature indicates a number of research standards and techniques with regard to participants, questionnaires, moderation, and ethical standards for focus groups. As will be discussed in Chapter 6, we followed them in many, but not all, respects.

5.3.1 Recruitment Strategies and Sample Size Considerations

In conducting focus groups, the selection of participants is vital, since their interactions will have a direct impact on the quality of the material. It is also decisive to consider participants' characteristics—such as education level, age, and background—and ensure they are a relevant population for the research topic.

There are different views on how the group should be composed. Most researchers recommend aiming for homogeneity within groups to leverage shared experiences, as participants with similar characteristics, such as age, gender, or background, may feel more comfortable sharing their perspectives (Krueger and Casey 2014). Some authors suggest selecting participants based on their ability to provide insights and information about the research topic. By having previous information or experience, it is easier for them to articulate their insights on a relevant topic (Krueger and Casey 2014). The students that participated in the focus groups met these criteria (see Chapter 6).

One aspect to consider is whether some participants might dominate the discussion. The inclusion of an extremely dominant participant in a group may lead to results that do not reflect the experiences and perspectives of the entire group and may hinder the participation of more reserved group members in discussions (Vogt et al. 2004). Social homogeneity of the focus group can minimise domination (van Ingelgom 2020).

In addition, it is often recommended that focus groups be composed of individuals who did not know each other previously so that pre-existing relationships and certain assumptions or expectations associated with them do not influence disclosure (Almutrafi 2019; Morgan 1997; Powell and Single 1996).

As opposed to these positions, Kitzinger (1995) argues that heterogeneous groups might be interesting for the research as well. By heterogeneous she means “to bring together a diverse group (for example, from a range of professions)” (Kitzinger 1995, 300). These groups encourage participants to consider viewpoints outside their own, leading to deeper engagement with the research topic and gaining different insights.

The number of focus groups to be conducted depends on the purpose of the research project and the participants selected. Morgan (1997) recommends three to four focus groups with each participant type in case there are differences. It is imperative that the data collected from each type of participant is sufficient for deducing patterns and themes across groups (Morgan 1995; Krueger and Casey 2014).

The number of participants in a focus group can vary. Some researchers recommend six to no more than ten people (Howard et al. 1989), others four to eight participants (Kitzinger 1995). van Ingelgom (2020) argues that the research discipline plays a role in deciding how many participants will be in a group. In any case, the focus group must be large enough to facilitate discussion, yet not such big that some members cannot express their perspectives (Krueger and Casey 2014).

With regard to our focus group participants, we related to most of these recommendations. As discussed in Chapter 6, we opted for students in EU Studies and

the Social Sciences as participants. Researchers therefore recruited students from their courses to participate in the focus groups. Accordingly, the focus groups in our research were homogeneous in terms of age (between 22 and 30), social status (students), and knowledge. The number of participants in our focus groups varied between four and eight.

5.3.2 *Questionnaire, Moderation, Group Interaction, and Ethical Considerations*

Focus groups require a lead questionnaire or interview guide, because they

are not natural events, but [. . .] arranged and controlled in advance.

(Almutrafi 2019, 236)

Questions should be tailored in such a way as to trigger a discussion that will deliver answers to the research aim. There are three types of questions (Nagle and Williams 2013):

- 1) Open-ended questions—Since the focus group aims to promote discussion, yes/no questions are less appropriate and may limit interaction and discussion.
- 2) Prompt questions—Questions that can facilitate discussion if there is no good answer to the initial question.
- 3) Probing questions—Questions designed to explore a topic more deeply.

In our project we relied on a questionnaire that used these types of questions. It will be explained in detail in Chapter 6.

Selecting the right moderator for a focus group is significant for the success of the focus group (on the following see Almutrafi 2019; Kitzinger and Farquhar 1999; Morgan 1995, 1996; Nagle and Williams 2013; Gibbs 1997; Smithson 2000; Sim and Waterfield 2019; van Ingelgom 2020). A moderator

- facilitates discussion and allows participants to express their insights. In contrast, a poor moderator tends to dominate the discussion, does not encourage participation, or enables the conversation to deviate from its intended purpose.
- uses the questionnaire to maintain a balance between the researchers' focus and the group's discussion.
- ensures that no participant dominates the discussion and that everyone has a chance to speak.
- should remain unbiased and neutral, avoiding approval, or personal views that might affect participants' opinions.
- should listen carefully and be prepared to intervene when discussion stagnates, asking questions such as: "Several of you have mentioned X. What are the others' thoughts on this?"
- should neither close off potential insights nor push the conversation too far.
- should establish eye contact with both active and less vocal participants to, encourage them to become involved.

- should let participants lead the discussion and not interrupt them while they are speaking.
- should assess good communication skills and not use jargon that is not understandable by the participants.
- should not be judgmental and should treat all participants equally.

The role of the moderator also depends on the structure of the focus group conducted. In a “more structured” group the moderator imposes the researcher’s interests, i.e. the questions in the questionnaire. The moderator thus has a higher degree of control by a) asking questions and controlling what topics should be discussed and b) ensuring that everyone participates in the discussion. In a “less structured” group participants are allowed to speak as much or as little as they want, and the group can pursue its interests (Morgan 1996).

Several ethical considerations are decisive in conducting focus groups (Almutrafi 2019; Bloor 2002; Powell and Single 1996; Sim and Waterfield 2019) that we followed:

- Participation was voluntary, with no pressure, and participants could withdraw from the focus group at any time without consequences (Sagoe 2015).
- Researchers obtained participants’ consent before they joined the focus group discussion. Participants were informed about the purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits of the research (Almutrafi 2019; Bloor 2002; Sagoe 2015)
- The data gathered was anonymised and confidentiality between researchers and participants was ensured. Moreover, the project aimed at confidentiality on the part of participants to keep what they heard in the focus group to themselves (Almutrafi 2019; Sagoe 2015; Sim and Waterfield 2019).

5.4. Focus Group Research in the Field of European Integration

EU research since the 1990s started to focus more closely on citizen’s attitudes towards the EU.

Duchesne et al. (2013) identify the referenda on the Maastricht Treaty ratification in the 1990s as a turning point. This pivotal event laid the foundation for research to become more interested in citizens’ emotional connection to European politics. In the late 1990s, the concept “European identity” gained importance and the first qualitative studies were done. When in 2005, the French and Dutch referenda on the Constitutional Treaty came out with “No” victories (Wiesner 2024), research increasingly started to focus on the views of certain citizen groups on the EU, as well as the growing polarisation of public opinion towards European integration. This period was characterised by the dominance of the “Euroscepticism” concept (Duchesne et al. 2013). Initially, research on citizens’ views on the EU remained predominantly quantitative. However, in the context of the Euroscepticism debate several researchers also started to use focus groups (Antonsich 2008; Duchesne et al. 2010; van Ingelgom 2014; Huyst 2008).

As discussed in Chapter 1, the turn to focus groups can be explained with a frustration with quantitative methods and their shortcomings. Gaxie et al. (2011)

thus criticise quantitative approaches for oversimplifying citizens' attitudes, generalising responses and failing to capture subjective and different perceptions of citizens. They argue that in the literature citizens' fundamental attitudes towards European integration remain poorly understood and the complexity and motives behind evaluations often are underestimated.

This dissatisfaction led to the Concorde research project in 2005, which aimed to understand fundamental attitudes of normal citizens towards the EU through qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and focus groups. Gaxie et al (2011) hypothesised that citizens' attitudes are diverse, going beyond just a simple pro- / anti-EU narrative. Factors such as familiarity with politics, the limited coverage of EU issues in media, education, social position, national context, and gender, as well as daily experiences with the EU can shape attitudes. To test these ideas, 42 focus groups were held in Strasbourg and later in Paris (2006–2009).

This study was one of several focus group studies carried out since the 2000s. The core results from a selection of comparative focus group studies that emerged from this methodological development will now be presented. They show a number of similarities to our findings.

Huyst (2008) conducted six focus groups in six Flemish schools with young people aged 17 to 19. Her goal was to study if and how European citizens feel connected to the EU. She found a lack of strong European identity. However, in certain situations and contexts the pupils identified as Europeans, for instance when traveling within the EU, when interacting with non-Europeans and also in relation to the power they ascribed to the EU—our findings (see in particular Sections 8.5.4. and 8.6.) provided similar results:

the pupils who see the EU as something big and powerful and the ones who pride the EU for its cooperative nature, are the ones claiming to have the highest level of sense of belonging.

(Huyst 2008, 297)

Pupils often expressed a cultural interpretation of what it means to be European. Furthermore, they expressed that different identities can coexist, although European identity appeared to be the weaker one. There were some factors that contributed to this weak sense of European identity. Many respondents struggled with what “being European” really meant. In addition, the lack of knowledge, as well as the distant, abstract nature of the EU made the process of identity formation more difficult. Lastly, for some of the pupils, benefits of the EU (Euro, Schengen) were taken for granted and no longer explicitly associated with the EU (Huyst 2008). In this respect, our findings are different (see Section 8.2.).

Antonsich (2008) conducted 16 focus groups in Italy, Finland, the UK, and France (four focus groups per country) with young people aged 18 to 26 to find out about their attachment to Europe. However, the majority of participants connected Europe to the EU, which led him to use the term *EUrope*. Based on the results, he argues that the attachment to *EUrope* varies among individuals. He summarises three ideal-typical patterns or narratives behind EU attachment:

Cultural-national, i.e. based on shared history, culture, or sovereignty concerns. Individuals may feel attached to EUrope if they perceive a commonality of these cultural referents or see the uniqueness of European culture in its diversity of national and regional cultures (“unity in diversity”).

Cultural-transnational, i.e. anchored in universal values like democracy and human rights. Individuals who identify with these cosmopolitan or transnational values may feel a sense of attachment to Europe as a symbol or champion of these principles.

Functional-utilitarian: Attachment in this context is less about emotional identification and more about a rational appraisal of benefits such as personal advantages (e.g. ease of travel, common currency) or societal benefits (e.g. enhanced economic competitiveness on the global market, solutions to national issues). This creates a political belonging based on self-interest, highlighting EUrope’s post-national character, where legitimacy derives from a multiplicity of identities and political structures. This finding is in fit with our results (see Chapters 8 and 9).

(De-)Politicisation as Key Topic of Focus Groups Studies

Duchesne et al. (2010) conducted focus groups in three countries (France, United Kingdom, and French-speaking Belgium) with citizens of different social backgrounds such as working class, employees, and executives and later with activists. Their findings show that within each nation-state, citizens have different views on European integration. Moreover, they underline that national frameworks play a significant role in the way citizens perceive Europe. They also describe “euroin-difference”, i.e. the fact that many people just are not interested into the EU (see also van Ingelgom 2014) and underline that citizen engagement with the European project is affected by social status, political knowledge, and political involvement.

Therefore, the focus groups by Duchesne et al. which were initially designed to analyse participants’ attitudes towards European integration, unexpectedly turned into a “test of politicisation” for participants. Using the same dataset, Duchesne (2017) states that the study affirms existing distrust towards politicians and disaffection regarding politics among citizens. Participants rarely mentioned political parties or actors, and when they did, they often associated them with media/show-business or corruption and selfishness. Secondly, the research demonstrated that this disaffection is not necessarily due to incompetence or a lack of information. Participants showed that they kept themselves informed about the ongoing issues in the world and their understanding of globalisation was not simplistic. This finding is in fit with our results (see Section 8.8. and Chapter 9).

van Ingelgom (2014) collaborated in the project with Duchesne et al. and also used the same data. In her analysis, she develops a typology of citizens’ indifference, ranging from fatalism over indecision to detachment. On this basis, van Ingelgom also argues that attitudes cannot be reduced only to “Euroscepticists” and “Europhiles”, but research should also concentrate on citizens who are indifferent and ambivalent about EU integration.

Mingardi et al. (2022) present findings from twelve focus groups (two focus groups per country) in six European countries (Germany, Greece, Poland, Italy, Spain, and France) conducted with 91 adult citizens on the topics of a) key international challenges and the EU's response, b) the War against Ukraine, and c) citizens' views on their country's role in EU-related crises. While participants generally recognised the EU's potential and the need for collective action on global security challenges and conflicts, opinions on the EU's specific roles—particularly concerning military intervention and sanctions—varied significantly. National priorities in foreign policy issues significantly shaped views such as, for instance, Greeks favouring a European army in case of a confrontation with Turkey, while Poles viewed NATO as sufficient. In addition, historical contexts significantly shaped these perceptions. The results also highlight limited awareness regarding foreign policy issues not prominently featured in the media such as the Kosovo-Serbia conflict, the Iran nuclear deal, or the Libya conflict, despite their importance for EU security.

Beaudonnet et al. (2022) present results from 21 focus groups held in France, Belgium, Portugal, and Italy with 95 Europeans, starting with students, and later including pensioners, white collar workers, young professionals, and unemployed youth. They aimed at exploring how citizens discuss the EU, the cleavages shaping their attitudes, and the mechanisms of (de-)politicisation at the individual level. The researchers found out that emotions played an essential role in politicisation of the EU. Debates on issues such Brexit and the EU's future triggered emotional reactions ranging from unease to anger, and from affection to rejection. Therefore, citizens' emotional attachment to the EU seems to shape their views and perspectives. Another result is that citizens relied on institutional narratives about European integration during their discussions, such as the peace narrative and the free movement narrative. However, they also (re-)interpreted and reshaped these narratives through the lenses of their personal or national experiences. This is in fit with our findings (see Section 8.2.)

Another finding from the study is that mistrust in political parties can prevent citizens from embracing alternative visions of the EU proposed by political elites. When exposed to polarised parties' statements and policy proposals, citizens often disengage or do not accept these narratives. Their willingness to embrace these ideas mostly depends on the trust level they have in democracy and political parties. The study finds that widespread mistrust, coupled with citizens' attribution of negative characteristics to political parties, significantly hinders the acceptance of alternative narratives (Beaudonnet et al. 2022).

Alt (2023) conducted 18 focus groups on economic topics, with soccer players in Germany, Poland, and France in 2018–2019. He found that European citizens are capable to understand even complex economic issues, and that they also can discuss these in his judgement, this makes EU democracy “look more healthy” (Alt 2023, 2).

Focus groups were also used by Egner et al. (2024) to shed light on the understanding of solidarity, reciprocity, and fairness of EU citizens. The researchers also

explored how cohesion in the EU can be achieved. The 27 focus groups (three per country) brought together citizens from different social milieus and were conducted in Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, Greece, Portugal, Spain, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovakia. Findings suggest that Europeans are generally willing to act in solidarity, but the context matters. Unconditional support was shown in cases of natural disasters, and there was a consensus that the EU should establish the proper mechanisms for providing aid. However, a conditional solidarity was expressed when human decisions contributed to crisis, such as the financial crisis. The discussions revealed stereotypes and distrust among citizens from different EU member states, particularly between citizens from wealthier northern countries and southern European countries that were seen as economically weaker. In regard of social policies, the participants highlighted a scepticism towards EU-level solutions, arguing that social issues are best addressed at the national level. In this matter, the EU was seen more as a source of support and advice, rather than a body that should structure social policies (Egner et al. 2024).

5.5. Lessons Learned

All in all, the research design in our project was very much a learning system, as will be explained in detail in Chapter 6. After three years of conducting focus groups across six countries with an international research team, we can resume the following lessons for focus group research.

- The research design needs to be tailor-made for the purpose

The most important lesson is that there is no one-size-fits-all method in focus group research. The research design needs to be adapted to the respective research question and research design in each case.

- Moderators are crucial

Conducting focus groups across different national and institutional contexts revealed that moderator-participants dynamics are crucial to fostering open and meaningful discussions. Given the critical role of the moderator, we ensured that network members familiar with the project's aims moderated the focus groups.

In order to enhance group interaction our moderators actively engaged with the students. While some trigger questions were previously formulated in the questionnaire, moderators also adapted to the discussion flow and asked questions that emerged spontaneously during the discussions. This approach not only helped to align the discussions with the project's objectives but also fostered a more inclusive and dynamic interaction among students.

Furthermore, we noticed variations depending on cultural, institutional, and relational settings: In Germany, a pre-test revealed that even without any intentional display of hierarchy, the presence of a professor was enough to make

students hesitant to express themselves. The fear of being evaluated by the professor limited the openness of the discussion. Recognising this dynamic in the pre-test allowed the team to adapt by selecting a moderator that was closer to the students in academic status, i.e. a PhD student, creating in this way a more peer-to-peer dynamic. Similarly, in Bulgaria, age proximity and the non-professorial status of the moderator encouraged participants to engage in the discussion and share their insights.

In contrast, the focus groups conducted in Finland and France experienced fewer barriers related to moderator authority. In Finland, a generally horizontal academic culture and an informal moderation style helped students to quickly engage in the discussion. In France, creating an informal atmosphere—through sharing a meal before the session—helped participants move beyond the traditional classroom dynamic.

This means that it is important to consider the relational dynamics between moderators and participants, including also specific national traditions. Pre-tests can help uncover these “hidden” relational barriers, while informal settings and peer-like moderators can help create open discussion spaces.

In some focus groups, moderators brought their own reflections or comments into the discussion. Although this was acknowledged and intended to trigger conversation, it is recommendable that moderators should remain moderators and avoid becoming participants. Any comment can affect the research by unintentionally introducing bias. Furthermore, this shift of focus from participants’ views to the moderator’s perspective can lead to an overemphasis on certain topics.

- Dominant voices and knowledge differences

Senior or more confident students often pushed their insights forward, thus leading the discussion for extended periods. This dominance can lead to a skewed representation of insights. Such imbalances highlight the importance of good moderation, who should recognise and moderate dominant voices. Moderators can redirect the conversation, ask questions, and encourage participants who are quieter. It is also suggested to consider creating focus groups with participants at similar academic levels to ensure more balanced discussions and perspectives.

- Plan B is always needed

Some participants did not show up on the day of the scheduled focus groups. Even though a clear communication plan was applied to inform and remind participants, no-shows happened. These no-shows sometimes led to delays of the sessions as moderators tried to reach out to the absent participants or find replacement at a very short notice. It is therefore suggested to always have a Plan B in order to be able to manage no-shows. This might involve establishing a pool of standby participants who can be contacted on a short notice to ensure that the sessions proceed as planned.

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6 Studying Student Perceptions on the EU in an International Learning Interpretative and Comparative Research Design

Claudia Wiesner

The research departed from the puzzle of the gap between the EU and its citizens described in Chapter 1 and the heuristics developed in Chapter 2. It aimed to help fill in blanks in existing research with regard to the personal backgrounds, feelings, biographies, and motives that drive citizens, and students in particular, to be critical or supportive of the EU. As discussed, the primary goal of the research was to find out about the reasons, i.e. the “why” and “how” behind the “what” (Wiesner 2022), of quantitative findings that indicate EU criticism to exist. While surveys and election results only show *that* people view the EU critically, researchers can ask them *why* and *how* they do so only in an open discussion. We thus departed from the thesis that in order to find out about the “why” and “how” of the gap, it is necessary to discuss students’ personal reasons for being critical or supportive of the EU or seeing a gap, directly with them. In this, as described in Chapter 2, we regarded debate as democratic activity and as politicisation.

In Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 we have discussed the puzzle of the gap (Chapter 1) and the relevant concepts and theories to study it, i.e. EU democratisation, EU politicisation, and Euroscepticism, and the research heuristics (Chapter 2). Furthermore the EU’s strategies to communicate with its citizens have been presented (Chapter 3), as well as students’ attitudes on the EU (Chapter 4), and finally focus group research in general and on the EU in particular (Chapter 5).

6.1. Research Design

The present chapter illustrates our research design and the learning research process of the internationally comparative study. As discussed in Chapter 1, we developed an open, inductive, qualitative, and interpretative research design that was theory-driven, theory-building, and internationally comparative. These six terms describe crucial pillars of the research design. It was

- 1) *Open*, i.e. it departed from the puzzle of the gap, with the aim to learn about its dimensions, perceptions, and driving factors. In order to do so, the project was organised as a work in progress and a learning system. It started with a research heuristics (Chapter 2) that was adapted and refined in the course of the research as according to the findings and the patterns they allowed to line out (Glaser and

Strauss 1967; Kelle and Kluge 1999). The discussions in the focus groups were based on a questionnaire, but the debates were not limited to these questions. The focus groups created communicative space that allowed for the open debate we had aimed for. This open process led to a number of unexpected findings with regard to the students' EU perceptions (see Chapters 8 and 9).

- 2) *Inductive*, i.e. following the open research design and the emerging patterns of findings, we built typologies and made theoretical considerations (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Kelle and Kluge 1999).
- 3) *Qualitative*, i.e. focus groups were conducted and fully transcribed, thus delivering qualitative data. The focus group transcripts were analysed in two inter-related steps, i.e. via an interpretative analysis that was complemented by systematic and inductive coding.
- 4) *Interpretative*, as the focus group transcripts were predominantly subject to an interpretative analysis in order to obtain the results the project aimed at from the beginning: learning about students' reasons to be critical or supportive of the EU.
- 5) *Theory-driven and theory-building*: The research did not, as in a classical grounded theory approach, start from an imagined zero. Researchers had considerable previous knowledge (Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5) on the elements of the gap, theories and concepts to understand it, and focus group research in the area. This knowledge was used in the first steps to build the research heuristics which was then refined by and by in the further steps of the analysis—it did not, like in quantitative research, lead to building a closed research design.
- 6) *Internationally comparative*: The research design was based on focus group discussions with students in EU Studies and the Social Sciences in six EU countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Slovenia). They participated in 19 focus group discussions (3 or 4 per country) that were conducted over a period of three years (2021–2024). Findings were analysed in a comparative design by a team of altogether 14 researchers in six countries (<https://www.debating-europe.de/network/>). To do so with an open, interpretative, and inductive approach required continuous reflection and fine-tuning of the research. This process is documented in the protocols of the project meetings and will be described in the next sections. The protocols will be quoted referring to the dates of the project meetings.

The openness and theoretical grounding of the project concretely means that the continuous development of the research design was an integral part of the research process. The openness is further underlined by the choice to do focus groups with students as a means to trace understandings of the EU as well as its politicisation and democratisation. Focus groups (see Chapter 5) are a processual method themselves. They allow to get unfiltered answers to open questions—as is discussed later and in Chapter 8, they also lead to unexpected findings that are not explicitly asked for, which was very important in our study. Focus groups also allow to trace discursive interactions between participants. Last not least, focus group discussions represent debates in the sense of the project, which links the choice of focus

groups to the normative assumptions lined out in Chapters 1 and 2 and later: A civilised debate is considered as democratic practice. This means we aimed at observing the students in democratic action—i.e. not only when they debated the EU but also when they practiced a democratic activity and when they reflected on their role as citizens. This choice allowed to analyse not only perceptions of the gap, but also politicisation and democratisation processes “live”.

Following the aim of openness, our analysis was interpretative and inductive. To resume, it had three parts that were linked to one another: a) the continuous discussion and reflection in the project team of 14 international researchers which are also all experts in the field, b) data collection in focus groups, transcribing and coding of the transcripts, and c) interpretative analysis of the transcripts.

6.1.1. *Studying Students*

As mentioned in Chapter 1, discussing the EU with students in the Social Sciences and EU Studies presents a number of advantages and added values. First, it means that we discussed with a group of citizens that is relatively well-informed about the EU and, as according to the classical quantitative studies, supposedly Europhile (e.g. Inglehart 1970). Seen in social-structural terms, students should be placed in an intermediary sphere between EU elites and citizens. They represent citizens, but a very well-informed group of citizens that benefits from advantages, both because they possess EU citizenship and because they are students. However, students are also a group on which there are still few survey findings concerning attitudes towards the EU, except for research on the “effects” of the Erasmus+ program (see Chapter 4). The students thus can be seen as an EU avant-garde and also as future EU elites since they are prepared for leading positions in Europe in general, and some will choose a career path in direct relation to the EU.

Students, second, are precisely a group for which the EU has targeted specific policies, including the Erasmus+ program, in the hope, among other things, that it will promote positive/favourable attitudes to European integration and thus consolidate EU legitimacy.

Third, students are a social group whose characteristics make it possible to explore two hypotheses often debated in EU studies: A positive attitude towards the EU and even its institutions would be positively correlated with the level of education, which is high for students, and with experience of intra-European mobility, which is frequent among students. We added to this set of experiences a third one, as we discussed the EU with students that are educated in EU studies, i.e. who had an expert knowledge of the EU. Our students thus were much closer to the EU than average citizens in terms of their knowledge and in terms of their professional future even though, as Chapter 8 shows throughout, they only partly did see themselves as such.

Fourth, the choice of students presents an advantage in terms of data retrieval. The literature on EU perceptions indicates that often citizens are rather overlooking the EU than rejecting it (e.g. Duchesne et al. 2013), and that EU representations are manifold and context dependent (e.g. Gaxie et al. 2011). Our students present the

advantage that for them the EU is something that is relatively precise and that they understand very well. In other words, while our students indicated a lack of knowledge, on the whole they had a quite precise vision of what they talked about when they talked about the EU. The fact that they were so well-informed thus allowed the researchers to gain a rich set of well-grounded and well-informed detail findings.

In addition, our groups were selected in such a way as to include both EU citizens and non-EU citizens which allowed for additional insights. Most students were EU citizens and reflected on the advantages linked to their EU citizenship in a very informed way. Several focus groups also included exchange students both from different EU member states and also non-EU citizens. This led to EU citizens exchanging their impressions of intra-EU mobility and different EU member states, and to the non-EU citizens indicating an outside view on the EU that proved particularly informing (see Section 8.5.).

The focus on students, finally, also means that the project goes beyond the state of the art of existing research with regard to participant selection. Both quantitative findings and other focus group studies tend to concentrate on “average citizens” or a representative sample of citizens (see Chapter 5), whereas our project aimed at future EU elites who have a different view on the EU and a different degree of knowledge.

In sum, the students in the study indeed represent a special group of EU citizens. Students, seen from an outside social structural perspective, represent (a future) EU elite. Students also are rather “Anywheres” than “Somewheres (Goodhart 2017), i.e. they are rather oriented to a cosmopolitan and mobile lifestyle and liberal values, and they distinguish themselves from more rural and conservative populations (see also Section 8.7.3. and Chapters 4 and 10). Students, seen with their own eyes, however, just know more than other citizens.

6.1.2. An Internationally Comparative Interpretative Research Across Six Countries

Another decisive difference of our study compared to most other focus group research projects is that the focus groups were conducted, coordinated and analysed across six different countries. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 5, most other studies include up to three countries in the comparison (e.g. Duchesne et al. 2013; Gaxie et al. 2011), and only a few studies include more (Mingardi et al. 2022; Egner et al. 2024). The corpus of material obtained in our project is thus unique, as very few studies have analysed more than three countries, and no other study has specifically been relying on students as participants of focus groups.

Our study also goes very far with regard to the potential representativity of the results. The country selection included Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, and Slovenia, and hence, we discussed with students in small, medium, and large member states; eastern, northern, central, and southern EU member states; and also founding member states and states representing nearly all of the following enlargements rounds. Our focus groups also allowed to learn about their different national backgrounds and perspectives and additionally included the

perspectives of non-EU citizens. Altogether we carried out focus group discussions with approximately 120 students in six EU member states over a period of three years. This means that the findings have a high representativity for the whole of the EU, because they are based on a comparative study in a representative selection of EU countries—with the disclaimer that this representativity extends to the specific group of students in EU Studies and the Social Sciences as particularly well-informed and critical citizens.

In this, the internationally comparative research design and team was both a challenge and an asset. As previously discussed, the project involved 14 researchers, among them four Germans, two Bulgarians, two Croatians, two Finns, two French, and two Slovenians (<https://www.debating-europe.de/network/>). To develop an open, inductive and interpretative research design in such a broad international group was a challenge and required a sophisticated logistics.

A project coordinator handled the groundwork of coordination, meetings, and protocols, while the partners ran focus groups in their countries. Every six weeks we held online project meetings, which were complemented by emails, phone calls, individual Zoom calls, and a mailing list. The meetings aimed at discussing the research process as it developed. Protocols of the project meetings document this. Those protocols are referenced later with the dates of the meeting.

The key steps of the research design—selection of focus group participants, lead questionnaire, analysis, and key patterns of the results—were discussed and developed jointly in the team. This was a huge effort in joint thinking and deliberation. The regular project meetings served at intensely discussing and preparing the next steps. The overall amount of work was huge. The transcripts of the focus group discussions assembled to hundreds of pages, and there was also an additional bureaucracy that came with the funding and project management as such. The German group directed the project and, in cases decided upon in the whole team, took on a leading function (such as in the coding).

With regard to the results, the team had a lengthy discussion on how to put them down in writing. One obvious way would have been to write a country chapter for each participating member state. The team members opted against this structure after the ongoing analysis showed decisive cross-country similarities, rather than national differences. Therefore, Chapter 8 is based on this finding and structured according to the patterns that resulted from the inductive analysis of the focus groups. Differences between countries are explicitly named.

In order to account for the fact that the countries nevertheless have different histories and national backgrounds, the team chose to write country context sections (see Chapter 7). The national contexts also influenced the project discussions about the research results in numerous ways. In particular, they proved to be important when it came to codes and how to interpret and apply them, when it came to interpreting utterances and their background, and when it came to summarising the results. It became obvious, for instance, that a Bulgarian and a German researcher did not necessarily have a 100% identical understanding on how to define the EU's values, as there are different national traditions in this respect—and this means that results were also influenced by the researchers' respective national backgrounds. It

also became obvious that, in order to understand certain student utterances, knowledge of the national context was necessary. As will be discussed later, we came to the conclusion that the differences were rather a resource than a problem, and included them into the analysis. This is why the three parts of the analysis were decisive—continuous reflection in the project team; data collection, transcription, and coding; and interpretative analysis via close reading and noting down patterns (see later in detail).

In addition, the project nominated an academic advisory board consisting of a number of senior researchers and experts in focus group research (<https://www.debating-europe.de/network/scientific-advisory-board/>). The advisory board gave crucial input at key points in the development of the research process. Furthermore, the interim findings were discussed at international conferences and in project workshops (<https://www.debating-europe.de/activities/>).

In sum, we can conclude that research organisation in our project worked out very well. This was mainly because the partners all worked towards a common goal and kept the discipline. The project relied on an intrinsic motivation and a genuine interest in the topic.

6.1.3. *Relating Concepts and Methods*

In alignment with the open, theory-based, and theory-building research design, the project built on the research heuristics developed in Chapter 2. In turn it aimed to develop the relevant concepts and theories further on the basis of the results (see Chapter 9).

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, the gap between the EU and its citizens is not only relevant as a functional challenge for EU policymaking but also from a more normatively and theoretically informed perspective. This leading thesis led to a number of theoretical and conceptual choices that influenced the heuristics, as was explained in Chapters 1 and 2.

With regard to *politics and politicisation*, the understanding of the project heuristics is that they are political activities or actions. The outcomes of politicisation are always contingent. Research took on an open approach with regard to politicisation and its effects, asking first what is there to be found before judging it.

With regard to the *relation of politicisation, debate and democracy*, debate was regarded as a key democratic activity (Wiesner et al. 2017; Wiesner 2024, 2025) because it is a civilised exchange of arguments, of pros and cons that most models of democracy use for the elaboration of collectively binding decisions.

As *debate is also political activity*, any issue that is debated is a potentially political issue. Hence debate is directly linked to politicisation (see Chapter 2). While neither political activity nor political debate are per se always democratic, they are needed for democracy and democratisation, as democracy depends on an active demos.

All in all, the research heuristics was based on a conception of democracy and the role of the citizen that *integrates both the functional and the more normatively loaded conception of a demos as democratically active citizens*.

The research heuristics, as summarised in Section 2.5., was based on the normative-theoretical and conceptual assumptions that

- a) the gap is to be seen as both a normative-theoretical problem and an empirical lack of a demos,
- b) a demos can be formed by democratic activity,
- c) a demos is shaped in complex social processes.
- d) politicisation and debate can be democratic activities, but can also be antidemocratic, as the outcomes of politicisation and debate are contingent,

6.1.4. An Open Research Process

In the continuous discussion and development of the research process, we started out from the puzzle of the gap and then concretised the approach first with regard to the focus group questionnaire and structure (first and second project year), second with regard to the research heuristics, and third with regard to analysis and coding (second to fourth year). Before we could do so, the project had to become a learning system in dealing with the pandemic. This challenge required an overhaul of the research design. In sum, the project had four phases (see Table 6.1).

Table 6.1 Phases of the research

<i>Phase</i>	<i>Steps of the research</i>
Year 1: Autumn 2020–2021	Adapting to the pandemic, first events, selection of focus group participants, preliminary questionnaire and proceeding for focus groups, continuous development of heuristics.
Year 2: Autumn 2021–2022	Finalising questionnaire, final setup of focus groups, first round of focus groups, first steps of inductive coding and analysis, continuous development of heuristics.
Year 3: Autumn 2022– autumn 2023	Coding and interpretative analysis of focus groups, second round of focus groups, continuous development of heuristics.
Year 4: Autumn 2023—autumn 2024	Last round of focus groups, final phase of coding, final phase of interpretative analysis and synthesis, typologies and patterns, continuous development of heuristics.

Source: Own representation.

The details of this research process will be described in the later sections.

6.2. The First Year: Tackling the Challenge of the Pandemic

A couple of decisions had to be taken as the project started in the first year of the pandemic, i.e. in autumn 2020. This entailed an immediate problem: The measures

implemented to combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus presented an insurmountable hurdle to the core of the project. Since March 2020, all participating universities had switched all teaching, discussions, and conferences to online formats. Experiences showed that virtual teaching and virtual discussion events and conferences can convey content, but not provide for a lively debate. Online discussions are much more rigid and structured, and much less spontaneous, than in-person discussions, especially as the partly informal character is lost online.

As said earlier, the Jean Monnet Network “Debating Europe” was based on the idea that a fruitful and lively debate about the EU democratises the EU and brings it closer to its citizens. We had planned to discuss with citizens in a lively conversation—in debate, in fact—the reasons why they are critical or supportive of the EU and how they describe a gap. This open research design was developed in order to provide insights that cannot be obtained from closed research designs. Debate was the fundamental method of the project—and a lively debate in this form can only take place in person.

Focus groups build in particular on the social exchange that develops between the persons present, with sympathies, emotional vibrations and the atmosphere in the room playing an important role. It is precisely this that can build bridges between groups at different hierarchical levels and different educational backgrounds. Therefore, citizen focus groups could not be conducted under the conditions of the COVID-19 measures: it had become impossible to gather citizens in one room for a focus group for two years. We therefore postponed focus groups, hoping to be able to start in fall 2021. However, this meant that we had to postpone the start of the core of the three-year research by one year. Accordingly, we applied to the European Commission (EC) for an extension of the project, which was approved.

During the first year, all other project activities were switched to take place online, such as the kick-off conference and a PhD course. In the project’s international (online) kick-off conference on 20 and 21 May 2021, we discussed the guiding questions of the project—what do citizens think about democracy and the EU, and for what reasons do they generally view the EU and democracy critically?—with international researchers and EU actors.

In the first year, we also discussed how to rearrange our focus groups in order to be able to carry them out in the pandemic. While citizens could not be gathered in a room in presence until late in 2022, students could. They continued to attend universities with all the necessary precautions, so we would be able to organise the focus groups in the universities and with students. Consequently, the research team changed the research design and targeted the focus groups at students in EU Studies and the Social Sciences. The shift to studying students thus had initially been driven by practical necessities, but it soon became apparent that it was a virtue rather than a vice (see Section 6.1.1.).

Planning of focus groups began in the first year, in May 2021 (Protocol 21 May 2021). Given the fact that students could return to campus, we planned for a test run focus group onsite in autumn 2021 in Fulda. We determined we would do the pretest, apply the preliminary proceeding and questionnaire, and then develop the design further.

6.3. The Second Year: Getting the Research Started

The bulk of the organisation of the focus groups happened in year two. At the beginning of the year, decisions were taken with regard to the selection of participants, proceeding, questionnaire, and moderation (Protocol 20 September 2021). These were further refined in the research process.

6.3.1. *Recruitment of Participants*

We decided (Protocol 20 September 2021) that we would recruit MA students in EU Studies (first or second year)—this criterion was then in practice expanded to include students in the Social Sciences and BA and PhD students, too. We aimed at six to eight persons per focus group and discussions of approximately 1.5 to 2 hours. Focus groups should be conducted either in English or in the local language and translated for the analysis. We wanted to avoid any gender bias and recruit similar numbers of male and female students. We assumed that the perspectives of exchange students would be different from nationals' perceptions (this assumption proved to be correct, see Section 8.5.). In the first round of focus groups, we thus aimed at including nationals of the respective participating countries and then to recruit subsequently also exchange students.

We were able to meet most of these criteria. Throughout the project, the focus groups were relatively homogeneous in terms of age and social status. The participants overall showed a similar structure, many MA students and in addition few BA and PhD students. In fit with our selection criteria, participants were mostly students in EU Studies or the Social Sciences. As planned, in all countries we obtained a mix of nationals and internationals. Most internationals were Erasmus+ students. In almost all countries we also included non-EU citizens. Students were recruited via the network members in each country (Protocol 20 June 2022), who selected participants from their own classes. In some cases, such as in Germany, participants in the initial focus group received “Thank-you” vouchers.

In selecting the participants we followed most of the recommendations put forward in the focus group research methods literature (Chapter 5): the number of participants in our focus groups varied between four and eight. While we had originally aimed for a minimum of six participants, research practice showed that this range allowed a comfortable and manageable discussion environment, allowing for diverse viewpoints, while maintaining a setting where everyone could contribute meaningfully. We observed that familiarity among participants, such as between classmates, lead to a more open and comfortable discussion.

In October 2021 we scheduled the pre-test to take place in Fulda in person on 23 November 2021 (Protocol 25 October 2021). The preliminary questionnaire and setup would be used and tested. The pre-test focus groups would be both streamed to the team members and video recorded. On 24 November 2021 the research team would do a debriefing of the pre-test experience. The next focus groups, to be conducted in presence, were scheduled between December 2021 and June 2022.

6.3.2. Proceeding of the Focus Groups

We invested a lot of work into designing the proceeding of the focus groups. Early on, we discussed how to best trigger discussion and came up with the idea to use photos that had symbolic character for the EU (Protocol 20 September 2021). Possible images discussed were the European Parliament's (EP's) building (EU institutions), a tractor in a field (EU agricultural politics), barbed wire of major frontier (migration politics), Ursula von der Leyen (EU actors), passport (citizenship), fighter jet (military), and sports (cultural identification). Accordingly, a selection of 50 photos was assembled, to which the project partners each contributed. These images would be presented to the students at the beginning of each focus group. Students would be asked to choose the one that they thought represented the EU best. On this basis, the idea was to let the discussion flow and to intervene with directive questions if it slowed down. This approach was tried in the pre-test focus group and proved effective in both triggering some initial thoughts and perceptions about the EU and encouraging participants to express themselves. For example, some participants would choose a picture of a passport or the EP building, but others would choose a photo of migrants. This already triggered a discussion.

We also decided to include a second trigger at a later stage in the focus groups by showing a list of EU policies and topics that comprised (see the questionnaire in the next section) the common market, common agricultural policy, migration/the situation in the Mediterranean, climate change, EU structural funds, Erasmus+, Euro currency, banking union, austerity, European Central Bank, EP, Council, EC, free movement/EU passport/EU citizenship, defence/military/security, and something else (what + why).

We then asked the participants to choose one topic that they found a) the most important, b) the most polarised, c) they felt could be influenced best by them, d) they felt could best be influenced by the EU, and then explain why they made this choice.

After the pre-test, the team discussed the lessons to be learned (Protocol 24 November 2021). We decided that the proceeding would remain the same as in the pre-test with slight changes and additions. First, at the end of the photo selection, a discussion of each other's choices was added (in Section 8.1. the ten photos that were chosen the most often by the students and the reasons given are presented). Second, after the ranking session on EU policies, another discussion on each other's choices was added.

The research heuristics was in continuous development, as was the questionnaire. We did debriefings and had intense discussions after the first round of focus groups in each country. On this basis we developed the questionnaire further. In preparation of the second round of focus groups, the questionnaire was streamlined. In November 2022 we agreed on a final questionnaire and a preliminary code book (Protocol 20 November 2022).

All focus groups were audio recorded. The recordings were transcribed, and those conducted in a native language of a country were translated into English with DeepL. All project members had access to all transcripts.

6.3.3 *The Questionnaire*

The focus group questionnaire (see Table 6.2) integrated the three categories of questions lined out in Chapter 5:

1. Open-ended questions
2. Prompt questions
3. Probing questions

The moderator started with the picture discussion and then encouraged the discussion by asking or introducing questions based on the questionnaire. The questions aimed to explore students' perceptions of democracy, citizen participation, and their influence at the EU level. The moderators thus prompted discussions on key policy areas, the EU's presence in daily life, identification with EU citizenship, perceptions of transparency and member state relations, and whether the students saw themselves as actors that had an influence on the EU. Furthermore, students were asked to indicate the most important as well as the most politicised policy areas as a second trigger. These questions also aimed at analysing processes and issues of politicisation and depoliticisation. The questionnaire concluded with forward-looking questions designed to elicit policy recommendations and reflections on the future challenges and opportunities facing the EU.

Table 6.2 Lead questionnaire

Welcome

Ethics explanation

Present selection of photos

I Entry questions

- *Start with a photo, ask them to choose one (or two) among ca. 50 photos and say which one represents best the EU—why?*
- *Debate photo selection among group—what do you think of the others photo selection? Do you agree with what they said they the photos indicate about the EU?*

II Politicisation/depoliticisation

- *As EU citizens, where and how do you inform yourself about the EU?/How do you inform yourself about current EU-events and procedures?*
- *What do you think of first when you think of the EU?*
- *Do you feel concerned for the EU?*
- *In your opinion, is it easy to understand who decides in the EU (who makes what decision)?*
- *In your opinion, is it easy to identify the political preferences of the institutions, the political orientation of the decisions that are taken in Brussels?*
- *Do you identify as EU citizen? What does it mean? Is it different to identify as German/French, etc.?*

III Citizens' influence on the EU

- *Do you consider that you have any influence on the EU as a citizen?*
 - *Do you feel listened to?*
 - *How much do you think that your own interests are represented by the EU?*
 - *Do you believe that you can change the EU?*
 - *Did you take notice of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE)?*
-

(Continued)

Table 6.2 (Continued)

IV Democracy

- What do you think about democracy in the EU?
- How would you propose to increase participation of citizens in the EU?
- How transparent is the EU?
- How do you think does the EU treat its member states?

V List of EU policies

(no ranking, just choosing one—putting them on PowerPoint, on the blackboard, then give some reflection time. Then every participant states his/her preferences and this is recorded)

1. The common market
2. Common agricultural policy
3. Migration/The situation in the Mediterranean
4. Climate change
5. EU structural funds
6. Erasmus+
7. Money: Euro currency, banking union, austerity, European Central Bank
8. Institutions: EP, Council, EC
9. Free travel/EU passport/EU citizenship
10. Defence/military/security
11. Something else (what + why)

Question from moderator:

1. Which topic do you find the most important? (chose one)
2. Which topic do you find the most polarised? (chose one)
3. Which topic do you feel can be influenced best by you? (chose one)
4. Which topic do you feel can be influenced best by the EU? (chose one)
5. (1–4) Why is that?

VI Everyday presence of EU and policy fields of the EU

- How present is the EU in your everyday life?/Which significance does the EU have in your daily life?/How do you experience the EU in your daily life?/Where do you get in touch with the EU? (note: similar questions, ask one of them or combine them)
- What shall the EU do for its citizens?
- Where do you see disadvantages/advantages of the EU?
- Which problems do you see in the EU?

VII Closure

Future—please give policy recommendations

- What do you think about the future of the EU? (positive/negative)
- What chances and challenges do you see with regard to the EU?
- How can democracy in the EU be improved?

Source: Own representation.

6.3.4. Moderation

One goal of the research was to make sure that the discursive situation was as neutral and uninfluenced as possible (see Chapter 5). We employed a number of techniques to make students feel secure so that they were incited to talk about their “gut feelings” about the EU.

We followed the ethical considerations lined out in Chapter 5. Our focus groups began with moderators seeking permission to record discussions, assuring participants that their identities would remain anonymous. Those recordings were solely

for data collection. Sessions were held in large, quiet university rooms with coffee and snacks provided to foster a relaxed, non-academic atmosphere. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we adhered to all health protocols, including pre-testing participants a day prior to ensure a safe and healthy environment.

The moderators then followed the goals for the focus groups developed in the team (Protocol 20 September 2021): We aimed at exploring the feelings and attitudes rather than the knowledge of the participants, avoiding technical questions, appealing to intuition, and avoiding expert discussions. As discussed in Chapter 5, this was not always easy, as some students tended to put forward their expert knowledge.

6.4. The Third and Fourth Year: Finalising Focus Groups and Analysis

In the third and fourth year, 19 regular focus groups (not counting the pre-test and some additional focus groups that have not become part of the analysis) were conducted, transcribed, and analysed (see Table 6.3).

Table 6.3 Conducted focus groups

<i>Team that conducted the focus groups</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Original language</i>	<i>Number of participants</i>	<i>Context/ Notes</i>
Slovenia	2022	May 2022	MA Political Sciences: Policy Analysis and Public Administration from Slovenia (one from candidate country)	Slovenian	6	Post-War and post national elections
Slovenia	2023	May 2023	MA Political Sciences, Slovenians	Slovenian	4	Nothing particular
Slovenia	2024	May 2024	International, MA European Studies, Political Sciences, Erasmus+	English	8	Nothing particular
Germany	2022	January 2022	International, mixed, MA EU Studies, PhD, others	English	6	Pandemic Pre-War

(Continued)

Table 6.3 (Continued)

<i>Team that conducted the focus groups</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Original language</i>	<i>Number of participants</i>	<i>Context/ Notes</i>
Germany	2023	January 2023	German students, MA European Studies	English	6	Post-War
Germany	2024	January 2024	German and international students		7	Pre-EP elections
France	2021	December 2021	French nationals, fifth-year MA EU Affairs	French	6	Pre-War Next pandemic crisis
France	2022	December 2022	French nationals plus foreign students, fifth-year MA EU Affairs	French	7	Before presidential election
France	2023	December 2023	French nationals students, fifth-year MA EU Affairs	French	5	Pre-EP elections
Croatia	2022	March 2022	Croatian nationals, MA Political Science (attending courses on European public policy)	Croatian	8	Post-War against Ukraine
Croatia	2023	May 2023	Croatian nationals, MA Political Science, (attending courses on European public policy)	Croatian	6	Post-War against Ukraine
Croatia	2024	January 2024	Croatian nationals and Erasmus+ Students (in English)	English	7	Pre-EP elections

(Continued)

Table 6.3 (Continued)

<i>Team that conducted the focus groups</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Original language</i>	<i>Number of participants</i>	<i>Context/ Notes</i>
Finland	2022	October 2022	Third year BA course political opinion, Finnish-Swedish	English	4	Pandemic Recovery, Post-War
Finland	2023	May 2023	MA course, Political Challenges of Europe, Internation-als	English	4	Post-War, Post National elections
Finland	2023	November	Second- and third-year BA students Swedish-speaking Finns	English	5	Prior to presidential election
Finland	2024	April 2024	Third year BA course political opinion, Finnish-Swedish	English	5	Post-War, Post National elections
Bulgaria	2022	June 2022	Bulgarian Nationals, advances BA students, one MA student	Bulgarian	6	War against Ukraine, Political instability
Bulgaria	2023	April 2023	Bulgarian students in Political Science—mixed group—three BA, one MA, two PhD, gender balanced	Bulgarian	6	War against Ukraine, political instability
Bulgaria	2024	November 2023	Planned to include Erasmus+ students	English	7	Local elections

Source: Own representation.

6.5. An Inductive, Qualitative, and Interpretative Analysis

A discussion on how to interpret the findings had begun in the project's second year. We discussed (Protocol 20 September 2021) that we would aim at mental narratives, perceptions, debates and stories, feelings, and identification put forward by the students. The comparative perspective would come in by comparing the perceptions and topics students in different countries discussed. We also wanted to see whether participants regarded key EU policy areas as politicised, e.g. the common market. Topicality was expected to increase the perception of a topic as politicised. The analysis was based on transcripts from the 19 audio-recorded focus groups, which had been translated into English using DeepL when necessary. In analysing our focus groups we relied on an inductive and interpretative analysis that we combined with a qualitative analysis of the transcripts.

6.5.1. *First Steps of Analysis: Close Reading, Notes, and Inductive Coding*

As a first step of analysis, the team was reading the transcripts to get familiar with the material, gain a better understanding of students' views, note first impressions and insights, and identify key themes mentioned. Researchers used an inductive and interpretative approach. They tried to let the text speak to them, rather than expect to find something specific.

After the second round of focus groups, we developed a preliminary coding system inductively, i.e. by a preliminary coding of the first German focus group (Protocol 11 March 2022). The transcript was thoroughly analysed by going through the text line by line. The goal was to identify key concepts, ideas, and patterns directly from the data. Descriptive codes that captured the essence of the content were assigned to these segments. After the completion of this open coding, the identified codes were grouped, searching for similarities, relationships and patterns among codes. Codes that represented similar ideas were grouped together into broader categories. Subcategories were created where necessary to represent more nuanced or specific aspects of the data. The preliminary coding system thus developed was then applied by all teams to their focus group transcripts (Protocol 9 May 2022).

Coding was inductive from the beginning, i.e. the coding system was further developed in working with the material and within the coding process itself. The goal of the analysis was not only to work with the codes but also to develop and discuss the codes, compare the findings and discuss differences and similarities, search for aspects not mentioned in the focus groups, and draw conclusions on what was missing and what was surprising. The state of the art in research and the heuristics were used as theoretical and conceptual background for the analysis and the development of the code book. Preliminary findings were put in relation to both. To keep track of their impressions and notes, researchers kept a logbook.

Team members discussed in the next meeting (Protocol 20 June 2022) that coding is a way to mark the decisive arguments, patterns, motifs or schemes in a text; develop categories; and systematise the finding relating to the categories. If software is used in this, it is the tool that forces the researcher to be systematic

regarding the data. Researchers agreed to also adhere to the principle of a veto power of the sources (Koselleck 2010) in the coding, i.e. to approach the transcripts openly and accept if some codes would appear much less than presupposed, and to add any new codes found to the preliminary code book.

6.5.2. *Differences as a Resource*

Already in the first discussion on the coding experiences (Protocol 9 May 2022), we found that differences between the students' perceptions and positions were less pronounced than similarities. It was, for instance, already obvious that notions of politicisation, even though they were explicitly asked for, were seldom mentioned and hence rarely coded. However, we also found a decisive issue with regard to the coding: The country specific backgrounds were different in such ways that small variations in the usage of codes appeared. In September 2022 it became obvious that the codings did not fully match between all teams. Even if there were only a few variations, it proved impossible to obtain full intercoder reliability because the team members interpreted some codes differently (Protocol 28 September 2022). The team worked on this challenge in the following six months until March 2023.

In September 2022, two ways to deal with these differences were discussed (Protocol 28 September 2022). One was to continue with a core code book and allow for some national differences, the other was to integrate the differences into one encompassing code book. The team decided to first try core codes. Each partner should name core codes which would then be assembled.

On this basis, in the next project meeting (Protocol 7 November 2022) new core codes were defined—some of them had been named by all team members, a few others had been named by most. The discussion on this basis addressed the following issues:

- 1) It was unclear how to interpret the codes. Should something be coded because of the literal sense or because of the underlying sense? Therefore, a full-fledged code book with explanations for the codes was developed.
- 2) The intercoder reliability still was an issue. The team thus concluded that each partner should apply the code system to the same transcript, i.e. the Fulda transcript as it did not need to be translated because the discussion took place in English.
- 3) Flexible national subcodes could be chosen by each national partner.

On this basis, a final code book was assembled between November 2022 and January 2023. In this stage, explanations of the codes identified in the previous step were added. This involved clearly defining each code and subcode, specifying what they encompassed and how they related to one another. Doing so ensured that each category had a distinct, well-understood purpose and that the data within each category was consistently organised. In the project meeting in January 2023 (Protocol 9 January 2023) this finalised code book was approved.

However, the project meeting in February 2023 revealed the persistent issue that teams were interpreting some codes differently (Protocol 27 February 2023).

Researchers thus agreed to note their problems and insecurities with applying the code system as well as suggestions, theses, impressions, etc., on further interpretation, and to summarise differences in the coding.

The slight differences in code interpretation and between the codings were discussed in the team and with the advisory board. In a longer project workshop (Protocol 29 March 2023) the team finally concluded that the differences were a resource rather than a problem for analysis. The differences were taken as points of departure for the interpretative analysis, rather than aiming at intercoder-reliability in a strict sense. Instead, we based our interpretative, qualitative, and internationally comparative analysis on the common understanding of the research aims and question and the ongoing discussion in the team.

The team furthermore decided to still support focus group interpretation and analysis with a structured coding. In order to guarantee that this coding was systematic and without internal variations and differences, it was finally decided that the German team would code all focus groups (Protocol 11 January 2024). Coding was done with the help of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, in our case MAXQDA. Coding still proceeded in an inductive way as discussed earlier.

Importantly, the coding in this project thus does not represent a qualitative text analysis in itself, but supports an interpretative analysis of patterns and types. The results of the coding became one pillar of the interpretative analysis—the others were the close reading of the transcripts, the interpretative analysis of patterns, the discussions in the team, and the research heuristics.

6.5.3. Interpretative Analysis: Patterns, Narratives, and Surprising Findings

In parallel to the coding by the Fulda team, the focus group transcripts were thus subject to an interpretative analysis. Importantly, this part of the analysis recurred to the transcripts itself, not to the codings and the codes. It was carried out independently of them. The aim was to discern the most dominant patterns, motifs, and themes in the focus group discussions in order to develop patterns of differences and similarities and overarching themes of the focus groups.

Proceeding here followed the principles of an interpretative analysis. The transcripts were read, and a logbook and notes were kept in order to note down themes and motifs that were often repeated, the ways they were expressed, and similarities and differences that became apparent. This part of the analysis aimed especially at unexpected and surprising findings and motifs that had not been asked for and also at what was not said in the focus group discussions.

In such an inductive and interpretative analysis, researchers always need to be ready to be surprised and take into account unexpected findings and patterns. When Koselleck (2010) convincingly speaks of the veto power of the sources, in our case we had to take into account the veto power of the students asked after the gap. Concretely, the students did not in all respects confirm our expectancies, for instance with regard to politicisation which was only a marginal topic. Reading the transcripts confirmed that students were very reluctant to discuss any aspect

that could be related to politicisation, even if they were explicitly asked for it. Conversely, a few motifs and patterns were apparent in all focus groups that had not been expected. While we had explicitly asked after students' perceptions of the gap, the EU, democracy in the EU, the EU's policy areas, and EU politicisation, students went much further and described a perception in which the EU is not only a democratic system that needs improvement, but also a community of values (Section 8.4.), an ideal (Section 8.5.), and an actor in the world (Section 8.6.). This underlined namely (see in detail Chapter 9) that:

- 1) The students had a very complex and complete picture of what they regarded as satisfactory democracy. It includes most classical elements of liberal representative democracy, but had some additions (e.g. values) and emphases (e.g. the importance of input legitimacy).
- 2) Non-EU citizens showed a much more idealised picture of the EU than EU citizens.
- 3) Most students had strong and explicit expectancies as to what the EU should do and how it should perform, in Europe and in the world.
- 4) With regard to what was missing, most obvious was the lack of active politicisation.
- 5) This led us to develop the type of critical informed, but passive citizen which fits most of the students.
- 6) The critical informed passive citizen as a prototype on one hand shows a strong orientation on democracy and its normative principles and values. On the other hand, it has a strong utilitarian orientation.

This interpretative part of the analysis thus led to a structure of patterns of student perceptions that was discussed and finalised in an online workshop with the project team on 14 May 2025. The patterns thus developed became the headlines for what is now presented in Chapter 8. On this basis, we used the coded quotes from the focus groups to illustrate and document the patterns we found (see Chapter 8). The findings were further refined and discussed in one more project meeting (4 July 2024) and in the concluding conference (19 and 20 September 2024).

The results of the coding matched the patterns that had been found in the interpretative analysis very well; there were no contradictions and no areas that were lacking. Interestingly it was the other way round: The interpretative analysis had not only underlined what the coding showed, it had moreover indicated meta-patterns that had not been immediately discernible in the coding. This underlines an important characteristic of coding and an important difference to interpretative analyses. Coding is obviously based on smaller parts of the text such as sentences or, at the utmost, paragraphs. It is not a tool that allows to grasp overarching motifs, narratives and arguments that are expressed in texts or transcripts. These can be deducted only if the researcher analyses chains of arguments and relations of utterances and statements in a broader perspective. This also includes context knowledge and the interpretation of the aims of an utterance.

Our analysis thus combined principles of rhetorical analyses, discourse analyses and conceptual history (Wiesner et al. 2017, 67–81; Wiesner 2022). What was just said, together with the outcomes of our analysis, therefore speaks in favour of not recurring only to coding and classical qualitative text analyses but also to interpretative analyses when studying focus group or interview data.

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7 Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, and Slovenia

The Cases and the Context

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The following sections present the political context in the six case countries at the time of the focus groups.

7.1. Bulgaria

Kaloyan Velchev

In Bulgaria three focus groups were held between June 2022 and January 2024, involving a range of young critical informed citizens. The participants were mainly MA and BA students in Political Science and European Studies at Sofia University and PhD students. The first two focus groups were composed entirely of participants from Bulgaria and the last one included Erasmus+ students from France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Georgia as well.

7.1.1. Bulgaria in June 2022: After GERB

The first focus group was held on 6 June 2022 with Bulgarian students only. It had six participants aged between 21 and 27. Among them, three students were doing a BA degree in Political Science at Sofia University, one was a MA student in European Studies, and two were MA students in Political Management. In terms of political affiliation, none of the students were members of a political party. Two of them worked in the media, all were politically active and engaged through the Political Science Student Club at Sofia University as well as other activities. All of them had voted in the last national elections, five in the 2019 European elections. One of the participants was not 18 years old at that time (young people shared their activity during the elections in the informal part of the conversation before the focus group started).

In June 2022, during the first focus group, Bulgaria was in a new political situation after twelve years under Boyko Borissov's centre-right ("Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria" [GERB]) rule (Dzhambazova 2021). Boyko

Borissov's party governed the country in different coalition configurations in the period 2009–2021. During this period, GERB leader Boyko Borissov accumulated serious public discontent due to suspicions of corruption and control of the judiciary. Furthermore, a large protest wave against the third Borisov cabinet in 2020 had led to the emergence of new political parties that entered parliament and finally managed to form a coalition government after three general elections within a year (Kotkamp 2021). The new prime minister Kiril Petkov's cabinet was a four-party coalition, which included

- the newly-emerged liberal formation “We Continue the Change” (which won the last pre-term elections in 2021),
- the pre-election alliance “Democratic Bulgaria”, composed of green, liberal, and right-wing formations, united around their programme for judicial reform,
- “There Is Such People”—a populist formation of the popular showman Slavi Trifonov, which also gained popularity during the protests,
- and the ex-communist party Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), which lost more than half of its voters as a result of the cycle of early elections.

However, after three runs of general elections in 2021, Bulgaria's party system became fragmented and polarised, which created conditions for lasting political instability. It is the increased fragmentation that necessitates the formation of an unnatural coalition between socialists, liberals, conservatives and moderate nationalists, whose intersection is to provide an alternative to the 12-year rule of GERB.

The War against Ukraine had further affected the stability of the ruling coalition, as one of the parties in the coalition, the BSP, had come out strongly against providing military aid to Ukraine. The non-partisan president Rumen Radev, backed by BSP (S&D affiliated) during 2016 and 2021 presidential elections, had also opposed the policy of aid to Ukraine, thus the conflict in Ukraine had had severe domestic political effects for Bulgaria. After the strong public support for Ukraine at the beginning of the War, by June 2022 (Alpha Research 2022) this support was already shrinking. The topic of support for Ukraine had also become highly politicised, and the related debates led to increased government instability. The issue of energy dependence on Russia was also high on the agenda of Bulgarian society. Frightened by inflation, public opinion in Bulgaria began to turn against the suspension of gas supplies from Russia, which led to a sharp decline in the popularity of the Petkov cabinet. In June 2022, when the first focus group was held, the opposition was already discussing tabling a no-confidence motion against the Petkov cabinet. Ultimately, the no-confidence vote was successful (it was the first successful vote of no-confidence in Bulgarian history) and the country headed towards its fourth general election in just over a year.

Even though the War against Ukraine was a dominant topic at the time, surprisingly the participants in the first focus group focused less on the War against Ukraine than those in the next two focus groups, in which Ukraine was a central topic. Participants were much more engaged with domestic political events, thus

focusing on the European Union (EU) as a stabilising factor for the country and for the Bulgarian democracy in an increasingly uncertain national and international context. The EU was perceived as an ally of Bulgarian citizens in their quest for a better democracy.

7.1.2. Bulgaria in June 2023: Political Crisis

The second focus group took place on 1 June 2023. Six critical informed young citizens from Bulgaria took part in the discussion. Among them, three students were doing a BA degree in Political Science at Sofia University, one was a MA student in European Studies, one was a MA student in Women's and Gender History (who had already obtained a BA degree in Political Sciences at Sofia University), and one was a PhD candidate in Political Science. The participants were aged between 20 and 27. None of the students were affiliated with any political party; however, most of them were an active part of a Political Science Student Club at Sofia University. Five out of six had voted in the last general elections, and four out of six in the last EU elections. Two of the participants were not 18 years old at that time (young people shared their activity during the elections in the informal part of the conversation before the focus group started).

In June 2023, while conducting the second focus group, the political crisis in Bulgaria had entered a new phase. The country held its fifth general pre-term election in two years. Between June 2022 and June 2023, Bulgaria was governed entirely by caretaker cabinets appointed by President Radev. In Bulgaria, when parliament fails to form a government, the president dissolves parliament and appoints a caretaker cabinet (Article 99, Paragraph 5 of the Constitution). However, for the interim period, the president can appoint and dismiss the PM and the entire cabinet without any other actor's intervention (Kolarova and Spirova 2019). Using his powers, Radev tried to renegotiate Russian gas supplies from Gazprom and refused 200 million from the United States for arms for Ukraine thus changing the direction of Bulgaria's official foreign policy (Dzhambazova and Roussi 2023).

The ongoing debate on the War against Ukraine had become even more salient and polarising. The issue of the War was high on the public agenda, and it also was the key topic in the political confrontation between the political parties. Despite the divided public opinion in Bulgaria, the participants in the focus group categorically pointed to the Russian aggression in Ukraine as the main challenge for the EU. The issue of the Union's security was central to the second focus group.

7.1.3. Bulgaria in January 2024: Finally a Government

The third focus group took place on 10 January 2024. It was composed of seven participants aged between 24 to 29. Among them, four were MA Erasmus+ students from Germany, Netherlands, France, and Georgia; one was a MA student in European Studies; one was a MA student in the International Erasmus+ MA programme in European Politics and Society Václav Havel; and one was a PhD candidate in Political Science. None of the students were affiliated with any political party.

In January 2024, when the third focus group was held, Bulgaria finally found itself with a regular government. After the sixth general election in two years, the main political opponents, GERB and We Continue the Change-Democratic Bulgaria, formed a grand coalition to reduce tensions in the country. The cabinet was supposed to be on a rotational basis. The prime minister's post was first occupied by Nikolay Denkov from We Continue the Change—Democratic Bulgaria and after nine months Maria Gabriel from GERB was to take over the prime minister's post. However, the Denkov cabinet proved to be very unpopular. The political tension was not reduced and there were conflicts between the governing parties on a daily basis. Despite the daily clashes between the party leaders in the coalition and the low satisfaction with Denkov's cabinet, the government managed to defend key foreign policy positions such as the renewal of aid to Ukraine. In this sense, the ongoing debate on the War against Ukraine continued to polarise the Bulgarian society.

A few months before the third focus group, the Gaza War had started. Despite the widespread impact of the war in the West, this issue never became a matter of political contestation in Bulgaria. Although protests in support of Palestine were organised, they failed to gain public support. These tendencies were reflected in the third focus group held in Bulgaria on 10 January 2024. The War against Ukraine was once again the main topic of interest for the focus group participants and discussed as a problem for Bulgaria's national security. Against this backdrop, the EU's defence and security were again highlighted as key priorities for the Union, sharing the hope that the EU would become a credible geopolitical actor (see Chapter 8).

7.2. Croatia

Igor Vidačak and Ana Matan

The three Croatian focus groups, conducted respectively in March 2022, May 2023, and January 2024, took place during periods of significant global and regional turbulence, marked by overlapping crises: the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the beginning and evolution of Russia's War against Ukraine, energy insecurity, and rising inflation across Europe. This chapter situates the students' perceptions of the EU within Croatia's national and European political contexts and explores how geopolitical tensions, democratic challenges, and socio-economic pressures framed their views.

The first focus group comprised eight Croatian students enrolled in either journalism or political science programs at the Faculty of Political Science in Zagreb who had taken EU-related courses. The second focus group was also composed of either journalism or political science students taking EU-related courses, but since the focus group took place at the end of the semester, the six students from the second group were more knowledgeable about the working of the EU than the first one. The third group included eight students, both Croatian and international, with either Erasmus+ experience or other EU-related experience, who were

also attending EU-related courses at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb. The international students came from Germany, Spain, Ukraine, and Vietnam. Generally speaking, the students participating in the Croatian focus groups were more interested, more knowledgeable and more involved with the EU than an average Croatian student.

7.2.1. *Croatia in March 2022: Crisis Overlap and Democratic Anxiety*

The first focus group was conducted in the immediate aftermath of two major disruptive events. Firstly, the COVID-19 pandemic was only beginning to retreat. Though the most restrictive measures had been lifted, the public discourse was still saturated with debates about the EU's crisis management capacity, vaccine policy, and freedom of movement, as symbolised by the EU Digital COVID Certificate. Secondly, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 marked a geopolitical breakpoint. This event shocked the Croatian public and reinforced a narrative of vulnerability shared across post-Yugoslav countries, particularly those with painful memories of war and incomplete processes of democratic consolidation.

From a domestic standpoint, Croatia remained under the leadership of the centre-right Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), which had been in power for most of the past two decades. However, despite nominal EU alignment, several political and civil society voices criticised the government's non-transparent governance style (GONG 2022), limited civic participation, and the erosion of democratic standards (European Commission 2022). This was accompanied by broader concerns about the role of civil society, judicial independence, and corruption in EU member states, themes that found resonance in students' assessments of EU democracy and legitimacy.

In this setting, the EU was simultaneously perceived as a source of security and as a distant technocratic actor. Several participants framed the EU's normative claims, especially those regarding liberal democratic values, as hypocritical, citing its inaction towards illiberal tendencies in countries such as Hungary or Poland. The image of Ursula von der Leyen shaking hands with Viktor Orbán was emblematic in the first focus group discussion. Students questioned the EU's credibility, pointing to its inability or unwillingness to sanction internal democratic backsliding. These critiques were linked to broader perceptions of power asymmetry between "core" and "peripheral" EU members, a theme that often appeared in the Croatian focus groups (see Chapter 8).

7.2.2. *Politicisation Through Crisis: Security, Identity, and Distrust*

The War against Ukraine served as a catalyst for politicisation among participants. Students interpreted the War not just as a foreign policy issue but as an existential threat, connecting it to Croatia's own security and the future of Europe. In their view, the EU's struggle to speak with one voice and its slow, veto-dominated decision-making processes undermined its role as a credible geopolitical actor.

This reinforced a perception of Croatia as a “small state” unable to shape or defend its interests within the EU framework, particularly regarding defence and foreign policy (Kotarski and Šelo-Šabić 2024; Knezović and Esteves Lopes 2018).

Nevertheless, participants also acknowledged the EU’s tangible benefits. The freedom of movement and access to Erasmus+ were highlighted as key experiences of “Europeaness.” Yet even these successes were framed in a cautious tone, often accompanied by references to inequality between students from wealthier versus poorer regions, or between core and peripheral member states. Such discussions indicated a complex, ambivalent identification with the EU: emotionally distant, yet pragmatically accepted.

The pandemic also shaped students’ views of EU citizenship and democracy. The EU Digital COVID Certificate was cited both as an efficient technological solution and as a symbol of exclusion and coercion (see also Section 8.1.). Students critical of vaccine mandates and mobility restrictions framed these policies as inconsistent with the EU’s liberal-democratic principles. This shows how public health governance became a trigger for deeper reflections on rights, power, and transparency within the EU.

7.2.3. Croatia in May 2023: Normalisation of Crisis and Strategic Disillusionment

By the time of the second focus group in May 2023, the War against Ukraine had become a chronic background condition. While it continued to animate EU policy debates, the sense of urgency had lessened. Croatia had, in the meantime, joined the Schengen Area and adopted the euro (1 January 2023), representing two major milestones in its European integration. However, rather than fuelling enthusiasm, these events were met with political fatigue and scepticism among students, especially given the still ongoing challenges regarding the rule of law, media freedom, and civil society engagement in policymaking (European Commission 2023).

This period also saw increasing criticism of the EU’s handling of multiple policy areas. Rising energy prices, food inflation, and stagnant wages eroded public trust in institutions at both the national and EU levels. Students expressed doubts about the effectiveness of the EU Green Deal, which they saw as overly idealistic and selectively implemented. They believed that the burden of transformation disproportionately fell on ordinary citizens, while large corporate actors and powerful member states continued to dominate the agenda with little accountability.

7.2.4. Croatia in January 2024: Approaching European Parliament Elections and the Rise of the Far Right

The third focus group was conducted at the beginning of a super-election year in Croatia. The parliamentary elections were expected to be held in April 2024, the European Parliament (EP) elections in June 2024 and the first round of presidential elections in December 2024. The snap elections in Germany had also been scheduled for February 2024, and the rise of the far right both in Croatia and the EU was

an important part of the context of the focus group. The third focus group, which included international students, introduced comparative perspectives into the conversation. Non-Croatian participants contributed alternative assessments of EU legitimacy and solidarity, especially in the context of migration and civil rights (see especially Section 8.5.). These discussions illuminated the structural differences in how EU policies are experienced across member states and revealed shared frustrations with bureaucracy, limited civic participation, and elite dominance.

Several participants raised concerns about the normalisation of far-right discourse and the fragility of democratic norms across the EU. German and Croatian students referenced recent mass protests against fascism and expressed fear that populist movements are leveraging crises such as inflation and migration to undermine liberal democratic values.

In all three groups, the topic of EU democracy surfaced as a central concern. Many students voiced support for the general idea of European integration but criticised its technocratic nature and the democratic deficit (see Chapter 8). The EP was perceived as weak, and major decisions were seen to be shaped by intergovernmental bargaining rather than by citizen deliberation or parliamentary processes. Some students explicitly described the 2024 European elections as a “make-or-break” moment for the future of the EU, with concerns that further gains by nationalist parties could irreversibly shift the Union’s normative trajectory.

This was especially evident in students’ remarks about the limited visibility of civil society actors, non-transparent lobbying practices, and a lack of bottom-up mechanisms for influence. Several participants also cited the growing influence of multinational corporations as a threat to democratic accountability, particularly in climate policy, where they believed corporate agendas outweighed citizen concerns.

7.2.5. *Between Identification and Disillusionment*

The notion of European identity was explored extensively in all sessions. While students generally expressed attachment to the EU as a space of opportunity, especially for education and mobility, this identity was conditional and context-specific. Participants differentiated between practical benefits and emotional belonging. The duality of “Croatian and European” identity was present in most narratives, often framed as situational rather than permanent. As one student noted, European identity “comes out in times of crisis,” particularly when national states appear too weak to act alone.

Depoliticisation tendencies were also evident. Some students expressed apathy, arguing that the EU functions as a distant bureaucracy removed from citizens’ lives. Others invoked a resigned pragmatism, saying that while problems exist, there are few realistic alternatives. The EU was often described in “There Is No Alternative” terms, especially in relation to Croatia’s geopolitical positioning and economic dependency on EU funds. This aligns with the theoretical framework used across the focus groups, which conceptualises depoliticisation as a process of naturalisation and closure to political alternatives.

7.2.6. Conclusion: Politicisation Without Mobilisation?

The Croatian focus groups suggest a nuanced, layered form of politicisation among students (see in detail Section 8.7.): informed, critical, and emotionally distanced. While participants of focus groups clearly engage with European issues, especially on security, climate, democracy, and identity, they do so from a position of scepticism rather than fervent commitment (Butković and Šelo-Šabić 2023). Their criticism is directed not only at the EU level but also at domestic political actors who fail to articulate and defend national interests effectively in Brussels (Vidačak 2023).

The focus groups took place during a time of “permanent crisis,” where pandemic governance blended into war, and war into economic stress. These conditions created fertile ground for political questioning but limited the possibility of collective mobilisation. Students articulated political views, but rarely mentioned avenues for practical engagement, such as youth organisations, EU consultations, or transnational activism.

Notably, participants were aware of formal participatory mechanisms, such as the EU Citizens’ Initiative, “Have Your Say” portal, and petitions, but viewed them as opaque, under-promoted, or ineffective. In contrast to the other five focus groups (see Chapter 8), awareness of the “Have Your Say” portal surfaced only in Croatia, highlighting both the uneven visibility of participatory tools and the limits of their perceived effectiveness. Even students well-versed in EU affairs described their influence as filtered through layers of institutional complexity, elite control, and limited public awareness.

In this sense, politicisation appears fragmented and individualised. The gap between political awareness and participatory agency remains wide. What emerges is a generation of students who critically observe European politics but struggle to find meaningful entry points for influence. The EU is recognised as both indispensable and insufficient, a dual image that mirrors the broader Croatian experience of European integration.

7.3. Finland

Kim O.K. Zilliacus and Niilo Kauppi

Four focus groups were held in Helsinki, Finland, between October 2022 and May 2024. The focus groups consisted of four or five students from the University of Helsinki (UH). Two included BA students (focus groups one and three) from the undergraduate course, KSV-SF206 Political Opinion (Swedish School of Social Science, UH), while the other two constituted MA students (focus groups two and four) from the graduate course, MSV-SF308 Political Challenges of Europe (Swedish School of Social Science/Faculty of Social Sciences, UH).

In general, participants did not often broach the specific contexts surrounding the focus groups sessions. Rather, participants more consistently responded to the photographs they were shown and questions they were asked. However, indirectly, contextual factors likely manifested themselves in the discussions. For

example, participants in focus groups one and three, which consisted solely of Swedish-speaking Finnish undergraduates (i.e. Finnish nationals), tended to maintain largely favourable views of the EU, particularly on account of the security it provides. Although the students showed no signs of anxiety or pronounced security concerns, this recurrent articulation may have occurred on account of contextual factors relating to Russia's ongoing War against Ukraine.¹ In contrast, focus groups two and four consisting of international graduate students tended to understand prompts through their own national lenses. In addition, participants in focus groups two and four delved into several other issues, such as the definition of democracy and the role of transparency in EU governance, which were less thematic for the Finnish focus groups one and three.

7.3.1. *Finland in October 2022: After Joining NATO*

The first focus group took place in October 2022. The group consisted of second and third-year undergraduate students aged 22 to 23 years. Two female and two male students participated with two of them majoring in Political Science, one in Social Psychology, and one in both Legal Studies and Political Science.

This session took place in the aftermath of Finland's decision to join NATO. Along with Sweden, Finland announced its intention to apply for NATO membership in May 2022. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led to a significant and abrupt change in Finland's entrenched doctrine of military non-alignment. This ended a foreign policy tradition in Finland dating back to 1948 (Kansikas 2019). As EU partners with close ties to NATO, Finland and Sweden stopped identifying as "neutral" after the Cold War; furthermore, both countries had, especially after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, enhanced bilateral cooperation with NATO in several ways (Saxi 2022). Nonetheless, they remained officially and strategically non-aligned until Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022. Indeed, even in the months prior to Finland's decision to activate its NATO membership option, the government did not outwardly signal the intention of changing course (Koskimaa and Raunio 2025). Various factors, however, such as a sea change in public opinion (Forsberg 2023) and the policy positions of many among a new generation of Finnish MPs (Fittante 2023), eventuated in Finland shifting its foreign and security policies. Though the process was complicated and delayed by Hungary and Turkey, by July 2022, all 30 members of NATO had signed off on accession protocols and endorsed both Finland's and Sweden's bids. Nonetheless, Finland's membership would not become official until April 2023.

Despite the relative novelty and historical significance of Finland's decision to apply for NATO membership, this topic did not prove particularly central in the discussion. However, students did articulate some security concerns, which likely were related to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In this way, the participants expressed generally favourable views of Finland's involvement in the EU, perceiving it to include key security benefits. Among several other themes discussed, Finland's size and geopolitical positioning, according to several participants, made its relationship to the EU especially important.

7.3.2. *Finland in May 2023: Aftermath of the Parliamentary Elections*

The second focus group took place in May 2023. The group consisted of four international MA students—two first-year, one second-year, and one fourth-year. Participants came from Switzerland, Germany, France, and Bangladesh. Two female and two male students were aged 24 to 25 years and one 44 years differing significantly from all other participants.

Focus group two took place in the immediate aftermath of Finland's Parliamentary elections in April 2023. The Social Democratic Party (SDP), which had received the largest share of votes in 2019, came in third (19.95%); the conservative, centre-right party, National Coalition came in first (20.82%); and the populist right-wing Finns Party came in second (20.06%). The National Coalition's success related, in part, to their targeted approach to economic measures intended to reduce Finland's debt, which had grown under the left-green government of outgoing SDP Prime Minister Sanna Marin. At the time of the second focus group, plans to form a coalition government were causing controversy and debate in Finland (Jakobson and Peltoniemi 2024), which partly related to the presence of the Finns Party in the coalition government. The party, which has been characterised as right-wing populist, radical right, and far right (Kestilä-Kekkonen and Söderlund 2014; Patana 2020), had run on an anti-immigrant platform (Arter 2024). While the Finns Party has toned down its rhetoric since the 2010s, their success in the 2023 elections further established the presence of right-wing populism within Finland's (as with Europe's) political mainstream (Bale and Kaltwasser 2021; Brown et al. 2023). Ultimately, in the summer of 2023 (i.e. shortly after the second focus group), a new government coalition, consisting of the National Coalition Party, the Finns Party, the Swedish People's Party, and the Christian Democrats, was formed. This conservative coalition would create strange political bedfellows in Finland—or, as David Arter notes—make an “unhappy marriage” (2024).

Still, at the time of the second focus group, debates about which parties would participate in the government were ongoing. This context did not consistently occur as explicit themes in the discussion, and the non-Finnish international participants spent less time making sense of the EU-related themes through that specific regional optic. Rather, other countries, particularly those from which the participants came (Bangladesh, France Germany, and Switzerland), featured more prominently in the discussion than did Finland. On a more topical level, though, the participants took particular interest, among other themes, in the notion of democracy in the EU—i.e. what it means and how it is implemented (see Section 8.3.).

7.3.3. *Finland in November 2023: Prior to the Presidential Election*

The third focus group took place took place in November 2023. As with the first focus group, this group consisted of second and third-year students who were Swedish-speaking Finnish undergraduates aged 22 to 23 years. Distinct from the other focus groups, focus group three included five (rather than four) participants, i.e. three female and two male students. Four of these students were majoring in Political Science and one in Legal Studies.

By late 2023, Finland was getting ready to vote in the Presidential election taking place in January 2024, which was the first one since Finland had become a NATO member. This election cycle proved a politically dynamic and fluid moment in Finland with topics of central concern including security and border-related issues.² In particular, candidates often broached issues related to closing the border with Russia as well as citizenship and migration questions for Russian nationals. On the international level, too, the escalated conflict between Israel and Hamas had been going on for over a month, but despite the prevalence of this surrounding political context, participants in the third focus group did not make direct reference to these events in their responses.

As with the first focus group, references to Finnish politics—and the role of Finland in the EU—featured consistently in this session. Students discussed the theme of Finland’s small size relative to the EU. Concerns regarding security connected to the ongoing War against Ukraine continued to occur in participants’ responses to the discussion. Also, by this time, some students were incorporating Finland’s newly established status as a NATO member into their comments.

7.3.4. *Finland in May 2024: Prior to the EP Elections*

The fourth focus group took place in May 2024. The graduate students participating came from the Netherlands, Austria, and Finland (two Swedish-speaking Finns). The two female and two male students were aged 24 to 25 years with two of them being first-year and two second-year students.

The fourth focus group took place during the build up to the 2024 EP election held in June of that year—i.e. approximately one month after the focus group had convened. This was also the first election since several other events, which had deeply influenced EU politics in the previous years, such as Brexit, COVID-19, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and the conflict in Gaza (Mudde 2024). Other topics of central concern in the EP election related to the economy, climate change, immigration, and enlargement (particularly regarding Ukraine).

In Finland, the role of security continued to feature as a central concern before the election. In a report on security expectations in the 2024 EP election, the authors identified security and defence policy to be critical for Finnish voters (Amadae et al. 2024, 36). As such, concerns regarding security resulting from Russia’s ongoing War against Ukraine continued to feature centrally in national discourse regarding the EP election. While the election did not feature thematically, participants did discuss at length the complexity and transparency of the EU as well as the treatment of different member states—notably, whether member states are treated equally.

7.4. France

Willy Beauvallet and Cécile Robert

The French focus groups were conducted in December 2021 (seven participants), 2022 (eight participants), and 2023 (five participants). The groups comprised

mainly MA 2–level students, specialised and professionally oriented on the EU; in the 2022 group two students in MA 2 came from outside the EU (Russia, Ecuador). The focus groups were hosted by teachers after the end of the semester’s classes, with a meal offered to the students in attendance. The duration was two hours each.

7.4.1. *France in December 2021: In the Final Stages of the Pandemic and Prior to the 2022 Elections*

The first focus group took place in December 2021, with seven participants from Sciences-Po Lyon’s MA in European Affairs. The national context was marked by four main issues.

Firstly, the COVID-19 crisis was in an intermediate situation. While a relative degree of control allowed a certain return to normal with the generalisation of vaccination, a new wave arrived in Europe in November, with host of restrictions. After the 2020 academic year, the start of 2021 had confirmed the resumption of on-site student activities, even if the reality of the crisis and the memory of the constraints deployed in previous months remained vivid (distance, disinfectant liquid, constant attention, waves of vaccinations, etc.). However, the arrival of a new wave of the epidemic and its attendant restrictions were heightening social tensions, especially in French overseas territories with protests against vaccines.

Second, concerning the political and electoral context, legislative and, above all, presidential elections loomed in May 2022. In November and December 2021, Eric Zemmour’s ultra-right candidacy gained momentum, attracting a growing number of voters and executives from the “classic” right, with an electoral discourse focused on denouncing the threats posed by immigration and Islam to national and European identities (“great replacement”), a few months after controversial political initiatives by the parliamentary and governmental majority, such as the bill to combat “separatism”, aimed primarily at Muslim populations. At the opposite end of the political spectrum, Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s La France Insoumise was imposing its leadership on the entire left, with a (social-democratic) socialist party unable to recover from the hegemony exercised by President Macron’s camp over the political centre since 2017.

Third, in this respect, the migratory crisis in Europe was directly linked to the struggles and competition specific to the French political arena. In 2021, the dramas unfolding on the doorstep of intransigent Poland dominated the news and shaped the context. The refusal to accept the thousands of refugees from Central Asia and the Middle East fleeing wars in which Westerners and Europeans were directly involved became a determining factor in the context of the focus group exchanges.

Fourth, added to this was the fact that global warming and the ecological transition were (and since are) constantly on the political agenda. The COP 26 meeting in November 2021 marked an agreement between European countries to reduce greenhouse gases by 45% by 2030, compared with 2010 levels, with a view to achieving carbon neutrality by 2050. Rich countries pledged to pay developing countries the \$100 billion promised in Copenhagen by 2025. But vulnerable

countries (such as the Maldives, threatened by flooding) failed to obtain a new fund financed by the industrialised countries responsible for global warming.

7.4.2. *France in December 2022: New Geopolitical Realities*

The second focus group took place at the very beginning of December 2022, with eight participants from Sciences Po Lyon's European Affairs MA programme (five students), Lyon 2's *Métiers du Politique* MA programme (one student) and two foreign students from Sciences Po Lyon's MA programme. The context was very different from the first.

Geopolitical news had definitively replaced health news. While the management of the COVID crisis had returned to normal, the Russian invasion of Ukraine had introduced a triple dynamic. It radically altered the electoral front. The conciliatory declarations of ultra-right-wing candidate Eric Zemmour towards Russia as well as his choices of campaign topics (rejection of immigration and Muslims, etc.) led to him suddenly becoming marginal (Michel and Brouard 2024). His electoral momentum quickly stalled, ending up at 7% in the polls. This confirmed the central position of Marine Le Pen's *Rassemblement National* on the far right (Jacquet-Vaillant 2023). Although President Macron in April 2022 again won the second round of the presidential election against her, his party, now called "Renaissance" (in reference to the EP's *Renew* group), failed to win an absolute majority in the ensuing legislative elections in June 2022. While Jean Luc Mélenchon's party now formed the main left-wing group in the National Assembly, Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne was forced to govern by means of the 49.3 constitutional law (ensuring passage of a bill without a majority unless the government is censured) undermining her credibility in the political arena.

Despite the Sharm el-Sheikh Climate Change Conference (COP27) in Egypt and record-breaking temperatures (October was the hottest month on record), the geopolitical situation and the all-out mobilisation to isolate Russia pushed environmental issues into the background. While the end of Russian oil and gas supplies put renewable energies at the centre of geopolitical attention, port terminals for American shale oil and gas were taking centre stage, along with promises of massive investment in the arms industry and military equipment.

Finally, on the economic front, the War against Ukraine and the economic blockade of Russia were amplifying the inflation generated by the post-COVID-19 economic recovery and the destruction of supply chains due to the persistent crisis in China. Electricity costs were soaring in line with those of gas, leading to criticism of the European electricity market and, more broadly, European policies to liberalise services. Putting large sections of the population under pressure, the inflationary shock forced the government to introduce various measures to support purchasing power (energy price shields, index point increases for civil servants, etc.), which increased the pressure on public finances against a backdrop of a continuous reduction in the fiscal and social pressure on high salaries, companies and capital income (the supply-side policy initiated under the Hollande governments and amplified under the Macron governments). As a result,

social inequalities in France were rising sharply, fuelling a variety of social and political tensions.

7.4.3. *France in December 2023: The Israel-Gaza War*

The third focus group, in December 2023, comprised five participants from the same backgrounds as in the previous ones. It took place in a context marked by an amplification of the phenomena and trajectories described earlier.

While the War against Ukraine continued to dominate the news and the political discourse, it was now superimposed by the explosion of violence in the Middle East, following the massacres committed by various Palestinian organisations from the Gaza Strip in Israel on 7 October—in the context of increasing Israeli colonisation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem and the political marginalisation of Palestinian actors on the regional scene—and the ensuing Israeli mass killing and destructions in Gaza, which was qualified by many observers (Bartov and Rafaëlle 2025) and institutions as genocidal, in particular South Africa, which referred the matter to the International Court of Justice in an unprecedented procedure (International Court of Justice 2024) and, later, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

At the political level, the very high political and social tensions generated by these events in October and November led to new government initiatives in the field of religious identity, with the banning from secondary schools of the abaya, a traditional oriental garment suddenly reputed to show ostensible belonging to the Muslim religion, in September 2023.

The prospect of the new electoral deadline of the European elections, scheduled for June 2024, was stirring up political circles. There was the risk of a further weakening of the presidential camp in France and a new rise in power, in France as well as in Europe altogether, of the extreme right. While the extreme right was generally considered a threat, its central players, both national and European, finally seemed to be able to agree with the moderate right—as shown by the Italian case and the French case after the legislative elections of July 2024. The latter led to a right-wing government based on a non-aggression pact with the elected representatives of the Rassemblement National, as this was perceived as a lesser evil by Macron's party in the face of the neo-Keynesian ambitions of the surprise coalition of left-wing parties (Nouveau Front Populaire).

7.5. Germany

Zhylien Kaja and Claudia Wiesner

In Germany three focus groups were conducted that mainly comprised MA students from the programme Intercultural Communication and European Studies (ICEUS). Two of the focus groups consisted of international students, i.e. mixed nationalities including EU citizens and non-EU citizens, while one focus group consisted only of German nationals.

7.5.1. *Germany in January 2022: The Final Stages of the Pandemic and a New Political Landscape*

The first focus group, an international one, took place on 25 January 2022 and consisted of six participants aged between 24 and 32. Nationalities of the students were diverse including Greek, German, Hungarian, and Tunisian students. Among them, four were ICEUS MA students and two were PhD candidates in European Integration. In terms of political affiliation, five out of six students were not members of any political party, while one of them was doing an internship and was affiliated with the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Additionally, three students were active in university student associations such as United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and Amnesty International clubs. Furthermore, five of the students had voted in the last European elections. Because of the pandemic, participants of the focus group were required to wear a FFP2 mask and undergo COVID-19 testing before joining the focus group. The focus group was held in a large seminar room, which ensured a safe distance, and no other attendees were present in the room.

In January 2022, while conducting the first focus group, Germany found itself in a new political landscape after sixteen years under Angela Merkel's governance. A national parliamentary election had taken place in autumn 2021, and a new coalition government had taken office afterwards, the so-called "Traffic Light coalition", comprising the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Green Party, and the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP). Following the elections' results, the SPD head candidate Olaf Scholz had become the new chancellor, replacing the former chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU).

Furthermore, the country was still under strict COVID-19 measures due to the ongoing global pandemic. These measures were implemented to ensure public health safety, as well as to hinder the spread of the virus. Economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic was a significant point of action for the new government. However, even though COVID-19 was a global pandemic, Germany experienced different protests against the COVID-19 measures at the time. These protests were often related to the so-called "Querdenker" movement, which attracted conspiracy theorists, right-wing extremists, and average citizens alike.

Additionally, the topic of climate change had had significant political attention and impact during the 2021 national election campaign and then also after the new government was formed. There had been devastating floods that had struck Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia in July 2021 (Angenendt and Kinski 2022), and this fuelled the debate along with the political impact of the "Fridays for Future" movement. The Russian attack against Ukraine had not taken place yet in January 2022.

The focus group discussions revealed similar concerns as in the other countries (see earlier sections, later in this chapter, and Chapter 8): During the focus group discussions, both climate change and COVID-19 were raised as issues of concern. Climate change was emphasised as the most urgent issue for most of participants not only in principle but also in existential terms. COVID-19 emerged as a topic highlighting societal and political polarisation particularly around vaccination and

freedom of movement and as an unprecedented situation for all. In addition, the focus group revealed a shared perception of the EU as a complex and often opaque system, contributing to a sense of disconnection and limited influence among citizens. Participants expressed an appreciation for tangible benefits of the EU such as free travel, Erasmus+ and the common market, but also a frustration with the democratic deficit, weak communication, and lack of transparency from EU institutions. Migration was highlighted as the most polarised topic both within member states and in the EU and used as manipulative tool in political discourse by different actors. Ultimately, participants called for stronger integration built on trust, clearer communication, and reforms that bring EU institutions closer to its citizens.

7.5.2. *Germany in January 2023: The Impact of the War against Ukraine*

The second focus group took place on 17 January 2023. This focus group consisted of six German nationals, students aged between 22 and 27. None of the students were affiliated with any political party; however, some were contributing in university student associations. Four out of six students had voted in the last EP elections.

While conducting the second focus group, the national political context in Germany was strongly affected by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The War had been ongoing for almost a year in 2023, casting doubts on key elements of German national identity, particularly the belief in "Change through Trade" and peaceful cooperation within NATO and EU (Wiesner 2024). Russia had been an important trading partner for Germany before the War, and now Germany had to realise that this did not guarantee peace. Chancellor Olaf Scholz in one of his speeches thus referred to the War against Ukraine as a "Zeitenwende" (turning point).

The War redirected the focus of German public debates on security and defence policies in the country, which according to Scholz were essential for the protection of freedom and democracy. The German parliament decided only a few days after the invasion to invest an additional 100 billion euros into its military, a historically unprecedented move. Furthermore, as a sign of support for Ukraine, Germany welcomed a number of refugees fleeing the War against Ukraine and provided both humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine.

Like in other states, the invasion also had had an impact on the German economy due to its reliance on energy and intermediate goods from both Russia and Ukraine. In response to the War, the EU had imposed economic sanctions on Russia. Consequently, the sanctions led to a reduction in the supply of Russian natural gas, on which Germany was dependent. As a result, the country faced a rise of energy and fuel prices, as well as higher inflation and disrupted supply chains. Therefore, the German government implemented various measures to support citizens and companies, including subsidies and financial aid packages.

The ongoing war also became a topic of polarisation among citizens. Since the beginning of the War, German political opinion had been split when it came to delivery of weapons to Ukraine. On the one hand, the War was one of the main concerns of many citizens in the country, which showed their solidarity with Ukrainians by

protesting against Putin. On the other hand, a lot of citizens protested against delivering more weapons to Ukraine, commending instead for negotiations with Putin in order to reach a ceasefire (Connolly 2023). Directly at the onset of the War, the government decided to send “1,000 anti-tank weapons and 500 Stinger anti-aircraft defence systems to Ukraine”, thereby breaking a historic policy of not delivering weapons to conflict zone (Herszenhorn et al. 2022).

In this line of thought, in the focus group participants highlighted security and the War as a concern in terms of instability and uncertainty affecting EU citizens. However, while the focus group participants acknowledged the War and it was present in the discussion, it did not emerge as the central focus. Instead, it was discussed more as a structural background issue—recognised as a serious situation, yet overshadowed by other concerns that were perceived as more urgent and immediate. For instance, climate change was vocalised as the most urgent long-term challenge, while migration was highlighted as the most polarising and politically sensitive topic, which also sparked reflections on human rights, EU values, and security (see Chapter 8). This marked a decisive difference with other focus groups.

7.5.3. *Germany in January 2024: Security, Defence, and Refugees*

The third focus group took place on 16 January 2024. This focus group consisted of seven international students aged between 22 and 34. The nationalities of participants varied and included Germans, Russians, Indians, Spaniards, and Thai. One out of the seven students was associated with a political party, namely the CDU party, while two of them were associated with NGOs and civil society organisations. Among the EU citizens, only two had cast their vote in the last European elections, while the others had not.

While conducting the third focus group, the national context in Germany was still significantly impacted by the War against Ukraine. In this focus group, finally, security and defence were highlighted as most pressing policy challenges. The ongoing War was directly referenced as a backdrop that heightened awareness of the EU’s security vulnerabilities. Participants expressed concern over the EU’s capacity to protect itself without relying on external alliances like NATO, or on United States’s support. Participants also discussed the idea of establishing a European military as a symbol of the EU’s autonomy in defence matter. In addition, in the focus group discussions non-traditional security threats were also highlighted, such as a) cybersecurity (including references to EU-India disagreements), b) health security (linking COVID-19 responses to EU-wide defence planning), and c) migration and its perceived connection to border security. In this focus group, again almost all participants considered migration as the most polarising issue as they saw it as touching on fundamental tensions within the EU: national sovereignty vs. EU solidarity, security vs. humanitarian duty, and values vs. *Realpolitik*.

The background to this discussion was that Ukrainian refugees had become the largest group of foreign nationals in the country. The government extended its exceptional policies in order to allow people fleeing the War against Ukraine to reside in Germany. In addition, they were allowed to work and access social

protection (Human Rights Watch 2024). This increasingly became a topic of public discussion.

Inflation remained a serious issue, discussed also in the focus group. As a consequence of inflation and a difficult economic situation, the country faced different protests. For example, as the government decided in an overnight session to cut the subsidies for diesel fuel used in agriculture and eliminate an exemption from car tax for farm vehicles, farmers' protests followed in many cities and regions. These protests were the most intense farmers' protests Germany had seen in decades.

7.6. Slovenia

Meta Novak and Damjan Lajh

7.6.1. *Broader Context of the Focus Group Discussions: Slovenia and the EU*

The context of the Slovenian focus groups, first needs to be understood against the backdrop of the Slovenian integration history in the EU. Slovenia joined the EU on 1 May 2004. However, the relationship between Slovenia and EU is even longer. Already before independence in the 1991 Slovenia started to turn towards the EU, and after the independence membership in the EU became a general goal of political elite and a national project (Krašovec and Lajh 2009). In this regard the EU is perceived by Slovenes as something stable and rational but also distant. The reasons for Slovenia joining the EU were at first security and economic development. The only goal was to be part of the EU. After joining the EU, Slovenia wanted to become part of the Schengen area and adopt the Euro currency. Both was achieved in the beginning of 2007. The last goal was taking over the presidency of the Council of the EU as the first newer member state, and that happened in 2008 (Krašovec and Lajh 2009). With these goals achieved it is no longer clear what is the role of Slovenia in the EU and what Slovenians would like to strive for.

This passive posture and passive politics towards EU was also present during the Slovenian presidency to the Council of the EU—Slovenia could have taken advantage of its position, but did not decide to do so (Klemenčič 2007; Fink-Hafner and Lajh 2008). Passivity is noticeable among Slovenian politicians and state officials when it comes to EU issues and citizens (Lajh and Novak 2024), which is also reflected in low turnout at European elections (28.35% in 2004; 28.37% in 2009; 24.55% in 2014; 28.89% in 2019; and 41.60% in 2024; Državna volilna komisija 2024). The highest Slovenian voter turnout at European elections was obtained in 2024. However, the European elections in 2024 in Slovenia were organised on the same day as three consultative referendums (on euthanasia, preferential voting and legalising cannabis) that marked the election campaign and election debate and significantly contributed to higher voter turnout (Novak and Lajh 2025). The passive position of Slovenian policymakers is evident from Slovenia rarely having an opinion in the EU policymaking process and predominantly supporting the initiatives of the European Commission (EC) without reservation (Svetličič 2024). Often, this is

a consequence of absence of political strategy on the EU. An additional problem is the lack of staff at ministries that would be in charge of European Affairs and could contribute more also to the content of policy proposals (Lajh 2012). Along with this, Slovenian representatives in EU institutions (Council of the EU, EP, and EC) are often evaluated as being among the most passive ones.

Although the trust in EU was above average during the first period of membership, it declined with financial crises in 2008 but remained above or around EU average (during the migration crises it was at EU average; Krašovec and Lajh 2020). During the last years we can observe a decline of trust below EU average in some timepoints. Nevertheless, the trust in national political institutions such as political parties is still well lower (Lajh and Novak 2024). Along with that we can also observe absence of strong Euroscepticism. During the accession stage it was expressed only by the Slovenian national party. Later some newer parties expressed some Euroscepticism (Krašovec and Deželan 2014), but this was usually not the issue on which parties would gain new voters. Even the existent Euroscepticism was not an expression of non-membership but rather a consideration of membership in the EU.

However, over the years the relationship between Slovenia and the EU has become more politicised, but this politicisation remains limited and has not provoked opposition or any threat to the very idea of European integration (Lajh and Novak 2024). At the same time Slovenian citizens feel close to the EU and express European identity regardless of their left or right political preference (Uhan and Hafner-Fink 2024).

7.6.2. *The Focus Group Discussions*

The three focus groups in Slovenia were conducted between 2022 and 2024. All three focus groups were conducted with MA level students at the Faculty of Social Sciences University of Ljubljana that all attended the course EU Public Policies. All students were around 23 years of age. The focus groups were organised approximately the same time of the year, the second half of the spring semester which meant two things: a) participating students expressed general interest in the EU and b) participating students had a good level of knowledge about functioning of the EU.

The focus groups were moderated by a project team member who is a member of teaching staff at the university but was not involved in the teaching or grading the course on EU Public Policies in frame of which the focus groups were organised. Students thus felt more relaxed. At the beginning of each focus group it was additionally stressed that we are not interested in their knowledge, only in their opinions and that there are no wrong answers (see also the discussion on the German focus groups in Chapter 5). All participants, students, and the moderator sat in a circle around a table at the same level, which gave a feeling that all participants were equal among each other. Participants also received refreshments such as a hot beverage and croissants that made the atmosphere more relaxed. All focus groups were organised in the mornings.

Generally, with regard to the context of all other focus groups we can say that they took place after the COVID-19 pandemic, which had had a specific impact on youth as schools in Slovenia were closed in spring 2020 and almost the whole school year of 2020–2021. This had an effect mostly on social competences of youth.

7.6.3. Slovenia in May 2022: Post-Pandemic and Post-Election

The first focus group was conducted on 18 May 2022 with students from first years MA study programme Political Science—Comparative Public Policies and Administration. This was a mixed-gender focus group with six participants (three female, three male), and the conversation took place in the Slovenian language. The majority of the students were from Slovenia, and one was from a European candidate country, Serbia. As far as we know, none of the participating students was affiliated with political parties but one was active member of the students' association which is a representative organisation for students in Slovenia.

The context of the first focus group was marked by major national and global events. Prior to the organisation of the first focus group Slovenian national parliamentary elections took place (24 April 2022). These elections had the highest voter turnout after 1996 with 70.79% of voters attending the elections. During the same period presidential elections in France (10 and 24 April) took place, and the War against Ukraine was already ongoing since February 2022. Both of these two international events were present in national Slovenian media, and there was special media attention and discussion about the future of the EU. To some extent this was reflected also in the focus group discussion.

7.6.4. Slovenia in April 2023: Wildfires and EU Assistance

The second focus group was organised on 20 April 2023 with students from first years MA study programme Political Science—Comparative Public Policies and Administration. All four participants were female, and the discussion took place in the Slovenian language. As far as we knew, none of the students were affiliated with a political party. The second focus group took place after the largest wildfire in Slovenia that lasted more than 14 days in July 2022 and during which Slovenia used the assistance of firefighting aircrafts under the EU assistance mechanism. Due to the caused damage, Slovenia also requested financial assistance from the EU Solidarity Fund. Although this was not directly mentioned in the focus group discussion, one of the students pointed out assistance from EU Solidarity Funds after a damaging earthquake in neighbouring Croatia.

7.6.5. Slovenia in April 2024: High Media Salience of EU Issues

The third focus group was organised on 18 April 2024 with students from different MA study programmes such as International Relations, European Studies, Political Science—Comparative Public Policies, and Administration and Erasmus+

students. The discussion took place in English since participating students came from Slovenia (three participants); other EU member states: Poland; EU candidate countries: Albania and North Macedonia; and other countries: Russia and China. There were eight participants and the group was mixed gender (six female and two male). As far as we know, none of the participating students was affiliated with political parties.

Slovenia joined EU on 1 May 2004, which means that when conducting our third focus groups, awareness of 20 years of membership in the EU was already present among the informed public and the media. The last focus group also happened after the initiation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (in October 2023) and after the historically devastating floods in Slovenia in the summer 2023, which caused enormous damage and in the event of which Slovenia turned to the EU for financial assistance. It was organised also before the elections to the EP in June 2024, which increased the presence of European issues in Slovenian media, although EU topics are usually marginal to national issues even during European election campaigns (Krašovec and Lajh 2010). However, only elections to the EP were directly discussed in focus group, and this not only in relation towards elections in 2024 but also in historical perspective.

7.6.6. *In Conclusion*

The general tendencies lined out in Section 7.6.1. were reflected also in the focus groups with students (see in detail Chapter 8). The majority of students were supportive of the EU, felt European, recognised opportunities especially for youth such as Erasmus+ exchange and possibilities to travel with European passport, and did not see an exit from Europe as an option. The feeling of concern over the future of Europe was expressed mostly in relation towards the bigger EU member states and the German-French train in the EU. Namely, students expressed concern over the rise of populism in founding member states. While the MA-level students taking a course on the EU Public Policies were aware of the opportunity structures for young people in the EU, they also recognised their powerlessness and smallness when it came to their voice being heard, the relevance of small Slovenia in the EU, the number of MEPs from Slovenia in a large EP, and the importance of their vote in the European elections.

Notes

- 1 Existing survey data highlight Finns' support for the EU and NATO in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine (see Amadae et al. 2024).
- 2 Considering that the third focus group consisted of five Swedish-speaking Finnish undergraduates, it may warrant mentioning that, although in this presidential election the Swedish People's Party did not put forward a candidate, three of the nine who ran self-identified as Swedish-speaking (bilingual) Finns. They included the winning candidate (winner not yet known during focus group three) Alexander Stubb (National Coalition), Li Andersson (Left Alliance), and Hjalles Harkimo (Movement Now).

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8 Students as EU Citizens

Critical, Informed, Engaged, and Passive

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As explained in Chapter 5, in total 19 focus groups were conducted and analysed in the six countries from 2021 to 2024. This means that the following findings are based on discussions of more than 120 students in Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, and Slovenia. These students represent a wide range of nationalities, including both European and non-EU ones. Despite these variations, and despite the long timeframe, the focus groups revealed much more similarities than differences in the students' statements and the topics that were raised.

In the following quotes it is obvious how much the students use the word “European” when strictly speaking they refer to the European Union (EU). The EU, as was discussed in Chapter 1, is of course not identical to Europe, but that does not stop the students from speaking as if it were. The fact that several European states are not EU members interestingly does not get noticed in these statements.

8.1. Picturing Europe

As discussed in Chapter 5, all 19 focus groups started by showing a series of EU-related pictures to the students in order to trigger the discussion. The researchers selected these images from freely accessible public databases. The students had a selection choice of more than 50 pictures. They were asked to choose one or two pictures that, in their opinions, represented the EU best. In our comprehensive review of all focus groups, we identified only 26 images which were chosen by the participating students. The pictures that were not selected depicted subjects such as tourism, vegetables in supermarkets, judges, cow statues symbolising farmers' protests, and a Brexit poster. At least during the time of the focus groups, these topics and images thus apparently were not considered as representing the EU or topics of discussion among the students.

In the following we describe the ten most frequently chosen pictures and discuss the reasons students provided for their selections. Due to difficulties in obtaining the copyrights, some pictures had to be left out. These were replaced by images showing similar content.

8.1.2. The Most Frequently Chosen Pictures

It needs to be emphasised that in their explanations, students often said they did not associate the EU with only one image. One student even said with regard to choosing a picture:

I think it's [. . .] not one image that represents the European Union. And I think actually, that's the point, the European Union is so big and so full of differences, that it's hard to only choose one picture.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 34)

Table 8.1 (below) provides an overview of the selected pictures and the number and country of the focus groups each picture was chosen in at least once. The ten pictures that were chosen most often are marked in bold in Table 8.1 and shown below.

8.1.3. Passport to the European Union

Figure 8.1 presents a fictional passport of the European Union. It is notable that a) the passport is blue, unlike the real EU passport which is Bordeaux coloured, and b) it is named “Passport to the European Union” instead of “Passport of the European Union”, emphasising that this passport is an entry ticket to the EU.



Figure 8.1 Passport to the EU

Source: © Zhylien Kaja.

This photo is a reproduction of the photo that was originally used in the focus group.

Table 8.1 Frequency of images chosen: S (Slovenia); C (Croatia); F (Finland); B (Bulgaria); Fr (France); G (Germany)

Picture	S1	S2	S3	C1	C2	C3	F1	F2	F3	B1	B2	B3	Fr1	Fr2	Fr3	G1	G2	G3
EU passport	1		1			2	1	2	2	1	1	1		1	1		1	1
ERASMUS	1	1	1			1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1	3
Division at the airport	1	1	1	1	1	1						1		1		2	2	1
European Parliament	1	2	1	1	1	1					1		1	1		1		1
Migrants	1	1	1		1							1	2	2			1	2
European Council	1			1		1	2		1	1		1		1				1
Climate protest	1	2	1		1						1						1	
EU Digital COVID Certificate		1			1	1								1				1
Orbán/Von der Leyen		1			1					1				1	1			
Von der Leyen	1		1	1										1		1		
EURO										1		1	1	1				
EU explanation			1		1								1	1				
Austerity														1		1		1
Macron				1	1											1		
ECJ						1						1	1					
CAP		2	1									1						
Merkel/Sarkozy		1	1											1				
Protest Ukraine											1	1						
Aircraft												1				1		

(Continued)

Table 8.1 (Continued)

Picture	S1	S2	S3	C1	C2	C3	F1	F2	F3	B1	B2	B3	Fr1	Fr2	Fr3	G1	G2	G3
Tour of Babel/EP			1										1	1				
Windmill			1											1				
Peace symbol			1										1					
Book											1							
EUROVISION												1						
Translation		1																
Trucks waiting at the border										1								

The students chose the picture of the passport to the EU for several overarching reasons.

The Passport and Freedom of Movement

The passport to the EU was chosen as a symbol of free movement in all EU member states without the need for visa or complex border checks. The students in our focus groups belong to a generation that did not experience border controls—except during the exceptional circumstances of the lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic. This freedom to move effortlessly within the EU avoids a lot of bureaucratic processes and is a tangible everyday benefit.

As we here can talk a lot about democracy, rights, freedom and values, but in the end, if we come out of this bubble, which there is nothing wrong with, on a more everyday basis I chose this passport as a symbol of freedom of movement, which is perhaps the thing that is most directly felt by European citizens, whether in Bulgaria or in any member state.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 37)

Symbol of the EU

Free movement as enabled by the EU passport not only significantly affects citizens' everyday life, it is also a symbol for the EU:

I would think if you were to ask like the every-man on the street they would probably mention the free movement within Europe to be like one of the most, like probably the first things that come to mind when you ask someone about the EU.

(Finland, 1st FG, Pos. 15)

Equality of EU Citizens

Students also emphasised that the passport stands for equality between EU citizens:

You can just travel free. And you are all equal. So there's a system that protects you, and, they don't discriminate you because you are from another country.

(Croatia, 3rd FG, Pos. 17)

Distinction Between EU Citizens and Non-EU Citizens

Students highlighted the contrast between EU citizens and people from non-EU countries:

[...] within the EU that is a great opportunity but outside the EU the passport also causes a lot of problems, so it has—it has this fifty-fifty like this both good and bad kind of thing because those who do not have it would like to have it and there's a lot of problems in terms of migration and human rights comes into it, and asylum comes into it so, for me it encompasses all of the EU's like boons and problematic sides.

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 15)

8.1.4. Erasmus+

Figure 8.2 depicts young individuals holding banners relating to the EU programme “Erasmus” (today “Erasmus+”). Established in 1987, Erasmus+ aims to promote closer collaboration between higher education institutions and universities across Europe. The programme supports transnational cooperation and mobility in education, training, youth and sport in Europe with over 15 million participants to date (European Commission 2024d). Erasmus+ programmes provide different opportunities for cultural exchanges and educational experiences, enabling students to connect with new peers from diverse cultures, and gain enriching experiences.



Figure 8.2 Group photo of the participants in the flag parade organised by the Erasmus Student Network (ESN)

Source: © European Union, 2024, licensed under CC BY 4.0 / Claudio Centonze.

This photo represents similar contents as the photo that was originally used in the focus group.

The Erasmus+ picture was selected among students for several reasons, which are summarised in the following (see also Sections 8.2.9. and 8.9.3.).

a) Erasmus+ Is a Personal Experience and Has Positive Impact

Many students in the focus groups had participated in Erasmus+ programmes. Most students considered the opportunities and experiences related to Erasmus+ to be significant for their personal development, since their participation did not only enrich their academic background but also broadened their understanding of different cultural contexts:

I am given the opportunity to participate in this type of programmes for education, for cultural exchange and this type of personal development. This is what I associate the European Union with the most. The opportunity to meet people from other countries, to have cultural exchanges.

(Bulgaria, 1st FG, Pos. 25)

b) Erasmus+ Creates the Sense of Belonging to a Community

Students acknowledged that Erasmus+ was a great opportunity to come together with peers from other European countries, sharing the same insights, problems and perspectives on various matters. Through conversations, exchanging experiences, and spending time together, they developed the feeling of belonging to a community with common interests. This is in fit with research findings of Allen et al. (2021), who proclaim that one of the key components from which the sense of belonging emerges is opportunities. The Erasmus+ programme provides these opportunities for students and hence serves as catalysts for developing a sense of belonging.

The Erasmus picture yeah [...] in my perception there is still a strong feeling of belonging and connectedness between people from different countries, and I would say above all, between young people from different EU countries.

(Germany 3rd FG, Pos. 39)

c) Erasmus+ Is a Symbol for the Younger EU Generation

The students also described Erasmus+ as a symbol for the younger EU generation, with a direct and particular significance for young people.

[...] it seems to me that this is a project that is closest to the current generation, I mean, to my generation, to the student population, but also one of the most positive projects. It seems to me that it is one of the most positive projects of the EU, even though maybe the whole of the EU does not connect at the level of education in terms of unification, it is a kind of a thing that we are just working together on.

(Slovenia, 1st FG, Pos. 35)

A student in France considered Erasmus+ as

[. . .] one of the big projects that it [the EU] is known for.
(France, 1st FG, Pos. 4)

d) Erasmus+ Creates Equality

The students said that the Erasmus+ programme offers equal opportunities, enabling everyone to benefit from cultural and educational exchange:

And also this one is Erasmus programme [. . .] facilitates education for all European citizens.
(Germany, 3rd FG, Pos. 28)

This identification with the EU and Erasmus+ is exactly what the EU wants to achieve with the programme. Consequently, Erasmus+ can be considered a clear policy success (see in detail Section 8.2.9.).

8.1.5. Division at the Airport

Figure 8.3 depicts a sign at an airport indicating two different passageways—one for EU passport holders and another for non-EU passport holders.



Figure 8.3 Passport control entrance area for EU and other passport holders at Prague Airport, Czech Republic

Source: © Marius Karp/Shutterstock.com

The main reasons for students choosing this picture are similar to the ones for the passport image (see also Section 8.5.2.).

a) EU Citizenship as a Privilege

As already mentioned, the students considered holding an EU citizenship a privilege that comes with various benefits, one of them free movement without the necessity to queue for passport control:

I think many people when they think about the European Union, they think about freedom to travel within the European Union, or at least within Schengen about passports or visa. I think that is one of the great advantages people associate with the European Union, especially young people who don't know how it was before.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 6)

b) The Division Between EU and Non-EU Citizens

The division at the airport highlights again the division between the EU and non-EU citizens mentioned previously:

For me, this represents the EU because the EU gives us the advantage that you do not need a visa to go to Germany, for example, or to go to other countries in the European Union; whereas people coming from non-EU countries have a little more to do before they get to countries that are in the EU or from countries that are not in the EU.

(Slovenia, 1st FG, Pos. 38)

c) Community

In addition, being in possession of EU citizenship enforces a sense of community among citizens in the EU member states:

I would add that being a European citizen, it's also like an advantage. So, it's all, all like being united. Being you know, united as an association.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 22)

One student described an "otherisation" of non-EU citizens, since the procedures they have to go through before entering the EU distinguish them as non-EU citizens, i.e. as "Others" in comparison to the EU-European citizens "Us":

I also chose the customs—or yes picture just because I know that with the EU passport it's usually easier within the EU but I think there is also kind of this sense of otherisation if you don't have that passport so you have to go through a different process.

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 7)

8.1.6. European Parliament

Figure 8.4 shows the European Parliament (EP) plenary chamber in Brussels.



Figure 8.4 View of the EP plenary from the podium

Source: © European Union, 2021, licensed under CC BY 4.0 / Xavier Lejeune.

This photo represents the same contents as the photo that was originally used in the focus group.

The main reasons students chose this picture are as follows (see also Sections 8.3.3. and 8.3.4.).

a) EP as a Symbol of Democracy and Representation

The EP is the only directly elected body of the EU. Citizens of all EU member states vote every five years to select their representatives to the EP. All 725 Members of the EP (MEPs) meet for plenary sessions in the buildings in Strasbourg and Brussels. The EP is the first chamber of legislation of the EU; the Council that unites the representatives of EU governments is the second. In addition, EP and Council have to agree on the annual EU budget. The EP exercises also supervisory power, notably by overseeing the work of the European Commission (EC).

For the students, the fact that the EP is directly elected turns it into a strong symbol of political representation. Furthermore, students recognised the EP's significance in decision-making processes, reflecting its crucial role in the EU's overall functioning (see Section 8.3.). As a result, the EP was seen as the most democratic

EU body (see Section 8.3.3.). Therefore, students also believed that the EP should hold more power than other institutions:

I chose the European Parliament building because I actually think that it is probably the most important European institution and on the other hand, it also underlines the institutionality of the EU and the need for strong foundations. At the same time, it is the institution that should be, in most cases, close to the citizens. Members of Parliament are elected directly by citizens.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 12)

Another student emphasised:

I think that this is one of the institutions of the European Union which is the most important, the European Parliament, and there are various officials here who are discussing various things. I mean, these are the representatives of the national member states, and they are the ones who are elected by us citizens, who represent us.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 23)

b) Complexity and Criticism—and the Positive Role of the EP

Students criticised the low turnout in EP elections and perceived a lack of competencies of the EP (see Sections 8.3.3. and 8.7.1). Moreover, they criticised it as part of the EU's institutional system, which they considered overall as being too distant from the citizens and overly complex. The EP was evaluated positively in this:

[. . .] even though sometimes there is some issues with how much rights the European Parliament has and everything. I still think that is very much like the basis at the core of the European Union.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 12)

8.1.7. Migrants

Two images in the study depicted migrants on boats, in camps, or at border crossings, trying to enter the EU. In all the countries, students named migration as the most controversial topic in the EU (see Section 8.8.2.). Students also highlighted that migration has become a topic of debate in various member states and among political actors (see Sections 8.2.8., 8.7.2., and 8.8.2.). Many students said that far-right parties use the topic of migration to polarise society, framing it as a threat to national identity and security, and amplifying fears and prejudices (see also Section 8.2.8.). The explanations for selecting the pictures reflect why the topic was considered controversial and also how the students saw it.

Migrant pictures were selected by students for the following reasons.



Figure 8.5 Migrants rescued in the port by the Guardia di Finanza and Coast Guard

Source: © Tricani Alessio/Shutterstock.com.

Figure 8.5 represents the same content as the ones originally used.

a) Symbol of “Fortress Europe”

To prevent non-EU citizens without a visa from immigrating, the EU has set up strict border controls, leading to the establishment of what a student termed “Fortress Europe”:

[I chose] the picture with many people in a boat in the ocean and I chose that because this picture for me represents the issues we also have in the European Union and the hard border restrictions that, yeah, are a part of the EU as well.
(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 11)

Other students emphasised that migration has highlighted the division between those inside and outside the EU:

It is really this “fortress” side, where we have all our assets, which we keep for ourselves, and which we do not necessarily share with others, but with certain others that we choose on very specific criteria of professional competence, or certain geographical origins, too.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 8)

b) Value Conflicts

Most students discussed the EU's migration policy as being in conflict with the EU's values as according to article 2 Treaty on European Union (TEU; European Union 2016), human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity, and equality between women and men (on the value discussion see in detail Section 8.4.).

A student explained his/her choice of picture:

I would say that the EU definitely needs a solution and they're working on problems for so so long and I mean the first step would be of letting the people die in the sea. I think that's so, like, when you talk about the European Union and all the values it's just not understandable for me why you can't find a simple solution to that.

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 155)

c) The EU's Benefits

The EU's benefits (see Section 8.2.3.) were also raised in connection to the controversial topic of migration. The EU was seen as an attractive goal for migration:

[. . .] there are, let us say, a lot of migrants trying to get out of their own country, less developed and poorer countries to join the European Union, and I think that, for them, the European Union represents a real straw in the craw.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 16)

d) The Humanitarian Perspective

Students acknowledged the challenges migrants face and the risks they take to enter the EU in their pursuit, and that they leave their countries in search for a better future in the EU:

[. . .] I have drawn a parallel with the picture of the Côte d'Azur where the sun is shining, where people are sunbathing [. . .] and again from the other side we see a large escaping ship that comes from Africa and with which there may be some [. . .] consequences.

(Slovenia, 1st FG, Pos. 51)

As will be discussed in Section 8.4.4., the students criticised the situation in the Mediterranean as a contradiction to the humanist values that the EU, or "Europe" as they said, is supposed to promote.

e) The EU's Obligations

Another student emphasised the EU's moral duties:

I believe that the European project, in any case, is not the problem, but the achievement of Europe is a paradox. It is an antithesis between those who are inside and those who are outside. We choose who we let in, and we violently push out, and we violently delegate the policies that are the heart of European construction at the base, it seems to me. I think that these are people that we often count in figures or statistics, but who all have extremely particular stories that have gone through [. . .] they have left home for years for very specific reasons, and if we are proud to be Europeans, and if Europe is proud of its achievements, it should find the humility to share them.

(France 2nd FG, Pos. 20)

8.1.8. The European Council

Figure 8.6 shows a scene in the venue where heads of state and government or ministers from all EU member states meet to discuss and make decisions. Importantly, the picture shows the European Council, consisting of the heads of state and government, which defines the EU's general direction but does not legislate. The Council of the EU, or Council of Ministers, unites the ministers from each member state that are responsible for a policy field. The Council of the EU is a co-legislator together with the EP.



Figure 8.6 Meeting of European Council ministers

Source: © European Union, 2017, licensed under CC BY 4.0 / Etienne Ansotte.

This photo represents the same contents as the photo that was originally used in the focus group.

The European Council picture was chosen by the students in order to highlight both its strengths and complexities.

a) Symbol of Collaboration and Unity

The picture shows representatives of all member states at work in the European Council. Many students chose the picture because they considered it as a symbol of collaboration and unity between 27 different member states:

I have chosen this picture simply because there are indeed representatives from everywhere and common interests, common values, things that are going to be implemented, respectively, in each of the member states of the European Union.

(Bulgaria, 1st FG, Pos. 32)

One student linked unity and compromises:

This is about unity [. . .]. Decisions are more likely to be compromised, as there are so many countries with so many attitudes and with so many political settings and in the end the decisions should be taken for everyone.

(Germany, 3rd FG, Pos. 41)

b) Balancing National Interests

For the students, the European Council exemplified the EU's efforts to balance different national interests:

For me, this represents the EU in the sense that it is about the integration of the member states that are included in the European Union and the member states also have a say in the decision-making of the European Union itself.

(Slovenia, 1st FG, Pos. 38)

c) An All-Too-Powerful Player

Students also expressed critical views on the European Council (see Sections 8.3.3. and 8.7.2.):

The European Council today represents 80% of the European agenda. And I think that the climate objectives need to be freed from this European Council, which is in fact directed by 27 individual agendas that are not necessarily motivated by ecology.

(France 2nd FG, Pos. 30)

d) A Symbol of Political Complexity and Bureaucracy

For some students, the European Council image indicated the general distance between the representatives of the member states and the EU citizens (see Section 8.7.1.):

I think that, even in Croatia, the European Union is experienced by the general public exactly in this way, a group of bureaucrats sitting behind a round table, discussing certain types of reforms, key policies, types of education and so on, which have to be implemented by all the member states. But that the general public pays too much attention to these kinds of meetings.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 27)

8.1.9. Climate Protests

Two images were originally shown in the focus groups. The first one, which is not shown here, showed a protester wearing a globe-shaped headpiece, holding a sign that read “HELP”. The second picture (Figure 8.7) depicts a group of people protesting and holding a sign stating “THERE IS NO PLAN(ET) B”. As will be discussed in the following and in Section 8.6., students had a clear expectancy for the EU to combat climate change. Climate policy indeed is a field in which the EU has been quite active: In order to combat climate change the EU launched the Green Deal in 2019. Through this initiative the EU aims to reduce emissions 55% by 2030 and become a climate-neutral continent by 2050 (European Parliament 2022). The students evaluated these activities positively.



Figure 8.7 Youth strike for climate march Friday for Future

Source: © MikeDotta/Shutterstock.com.

The reasons why the students chose the pictures of climate protests are as follows.

a) EU as an Actor

According to students, climate change is a global concern. They considered the EU as a significant actor in addressing the climate change challenges, particularly through its environmental regulations. The students thus expressed a clear claim towards the EU (see 8.6.4.):

I chose it [the picture] because I am aware that whatever happens in the EU can have far-reaching consequences in another part of the world and, of course, the other way around as well.

(Slovenia, 1st FG, Pos. 47)

b) A Positive Judgement of EU Climate Policy and a Differentiated Approach

Students appreciated the EU's unity in addressing global challenges like climate change, considering it as a positive example of collaboration, in stark contrast to their critical assessments of the EU's migration policy:

I think that this unity of the EU is for me like what makes the EU, the EU and also especially regarding climate change because to fight climate change we have to work all together, and I think the EU is pretty good in trying to do that.

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 13)

Students' views diverged from this positive statement not only with regard to migration (see Section 8.4.4.) but also when critically evaluating transparency and democracy (see Section 8.3.). In sum, climate change thus stands out as a policy field in which both the EU and its capacity to act were evaluated positively by the students. This indicates that the students as critical informed citizens (see Chapter 9) differentiate their judgement on the EU: In policy fields that are estimated as well organised and well-functioning, the EU is evaluated more positively than in fields and aspects that are evaluated more critically.

c) Criticism of EU Climate Policy

Despite the overall rather positive assessment of EU climate policy, some students expressed scepticism, pointing at a perceived conflict between environmental regulations and economic interests. The students spoke of "companies", but did not specify which "companies" they were referring to:

[. . .] when you need realistic action, it will continue to be offered in a way that will protect the companies that bring the greatest economic benefit,

regardless of the environment. I do not think that the voice of the citizens of the European Union, who are obliged to accept some of the regulations that the Union imposes, is being heard sufficiently here.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 13)

8.1.10. EU Digital COVID Certificate

Figure 8.8 shows a person holding a smartphone displaying an EU Digital COVID Certificate, introduced on 1 July 2021, to enable safe movement within the EU during the COVID-19 pandemic by providing proof of vaccination, recovery, or a negative test result. By 30 June 2023, 2.3 billion certificates had been issued (European Commission 2023).



Figure 8.8 EU Digital COVID Certificate—Scanning system at the airport

Source: © European Union, 2021, licensed under CC BY 4.0 / Christophe Licoppe.

The picture was selected by students for the following reasons.

a) *Sign of Solidarity and Unity*

Students acknowledged that in the COVID-19 pandemic, member states united to collectively address the pandemic and support citizens. This was seen as a strong example of solidarity and unity. Students praised the collective efforts in vaccine

procurement, establishing support systems, and implementing the EU Digital COVID Certificate to ensure equal health advantages and ease travel across member states:

I think it was a great proof of European solidarity at the level of the 27 member states to buy vaccines together, to try to set up short-time work in many European countries.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 23)

b) COVID-19 Measures Impact Everyday Life Negatively

Some students selected the picture to express their criticism. They highlighted that the requirement to show the EU Digital COVID Certificate to enter everyday places like shops, gyms and restaurants, significantly impacted their life:

The topic of the day; if we are vaccinated or not and this is not only troubling our everyday lives, we cannot enter some places, but also our friendships, the places we belong, we don't belong anymore if we are not vaccinated.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 129)

c) COVID-19 Measures Create Inequalities

Some students said that COVID-19 measures created inequalities and discrimination between unvaccinated and vaccinated citizens, perceiving this as a contradiction with the EU's liberal democratic values. Such arguments indicate a misconception of the facts, as the EU was not directly responsible for these policies. They were designed and implemented by the member states as according to their national legislation. The national COVID-19 regimes differed. In the member state Sweden, for instance, COVID-19 measures were very liberal and non-restrictive. The EU was only responsible for coordinating the EU Digital COVID Certificate. This means that it was not the EU that restricted access to shops or intervened in daily life. Nevertheless, some students associated the negative aspects of the pandemic with the EU:

The European Union's bodies have put in a discriminatory position the citizens who have not refused to take the vaccine and this has gone from restricting the use of it in shops to wandering around the country.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 15)

Such views suggest that some students attributed competencies to the EU that it does not possess and overestimated the EU's power. It also underlines that the separation of tasks between member states and EU is not easy to understand.

8.1.II. Ursula von der Leyen and Victor Orbán

Figure 8.9 shows Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the EC, and Victor Orbán, the prime minister of Hungary, shaking hands. At the time the photo was taken, the

EU was in a lengthy rule of law conflict with Hungary (see Section 8.6.3.), and the Hungarian share of the COVID-19 recovery fund had been frozen for some months due to the 2021 Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation. The 2021 Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation enables the EC to withhold EU funds from a member state if violations of rule of law principles threaten or risk jeopardising the sound management of the EU's budget or the protection of its financial interests. The EC had decided to release the money in December 2023. The EP then filed a complaint with the Court of Justice against the EC.



Figure 8.9 Handshake between Viktor Orbán, on the left, and Ursula von der Leyen

Source: © European Union, 2019, licensed under CC BY 4.0 / Jennifer Jacquemart.

The main reasons why students selected the picture were as follows.

a) Internal Division

Several students chose this picture in order to highlight internal divisions within the EU (see Sections 8.4.3. and 8.7.2.). They described Orbán as a political figure who prioritises national interests and challenges the EU's efforts to reconcile different national interests, political systems, and values. In the students' perceptions, these divisions hinder the EU from being a united entity with common goals:

Orbán, for better or worse, actually shows the set of things that divide the EU.
(Bulgaria, 1st FG, Pos. 22–23)

b) A Symbol of the EU's Flaws

Students criticised Hungary's violations of fundamental rights and the rule of law. They also were critical of its repeated use of vetoes especially in the case of decisions on sanctions against Russia—Hungary has repeatedly vetoed EU collective actions. The students perceived Orbán's capacity to intervene in these ways as a sign of the EU's weakness:

In this context, we can say how the EU is too weak politically, or recent cases are how Hungary is reluctantly refusing to pursue a common, stable policy in the context of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, where it is repeatedly giving vetoes, and not giving a mandate, to send aid to Ukraine, of one kind or another.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 10)

c) EU's Efforts for Cooperation

Some students saw the picture as a sign of EU's efforts to cooperate for maintaining unity and solidarity among diverse member states. However, they also criticised the EU for releasing funds for Hungary despite rule-of-law concerns, attributing this to Orbán's leverage:

We have seen that the EU is going to release the funds for the Hungarian recovery plan despite the lack of progress on the rule of law, simply because one man can say: "Well, otherwise nothing will happen in the EU until you give me my money."

(France, 3rd FG, Pos. 49)

8.1.12. Ursula von der Leyen

Figure 8.10 shows the president of the EC, Ursula von der Leyen, in office since 2019. The EP elected von der Leyen as the president of the EC for a five-year term in a secret ballot in July 2019 (European External Action Service 2019). In 2024, von der Leyen was re-elected for her second term as the president of the EC.

a) The Image of the EU

Students perceived Ursula von der Leyen as a prominent and recognisable representative of the EU and the woman at the head of the EU. The EU flag in the background reinforced the association:

Ursula von der Leyen today is what Angela Merkel once was, a kind of key woman at the head of Europe.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 42)



Figure 8.10 Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission

Source: © European Union, 2022, licensed under CC BY 4.0 / Claudio Centonze.

This photo represents the same contents as the photo that was originally used in the focus group.

Another student said that von der Leyen was

[. . .] a representative of the institutions from the European Union [. . .]
and also especially because of the flag, the background, that is very
European.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 32–33)

b) The Image of “Eurocracy”

While some students saw von der Leyen as a key figure of the EU in a rather positive way, some others perceived her in a rather negative way, namely as an image of the EU’s institutional framework and bureaucracy, which were evaluated critically:

She is to me the face of this “eurocracy” that influences our lives every day,
but that we don’t necessarily see.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 36)

8.1.13. Student Images of the EU: Concluding Discussion

In sum, the selected pictures can be grouped into four main themes (see Table 8.2):

Table 8.2 Students' perceptions of the EU: key themes

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Benefits	This category underlines the utilitarian perspective on the EU. It includes images that depict direct benefits from the EU that positively impact students' lives.	EU passport, Erasmus+, EU Digital COVID Certificate (ambivalent)
Institutions	This category includes images of EU institutions whose decisions impact citizens' lives.	European Parliament, European Council
Political figures	This category includes images of key political figures of the EU and the controversies the students associate with them.	Von der Leyen, Orbán
Highly politicised and contested policies	This category includes images that represent concerns or disappointments with EU actions or expectations for the EU to be more active in the future or to act differently.	Migration, climate change

It is noteworthy that the students' concrete experiences seem to have shaped their perceptions. This is most visible when it comes to the EU's benefits. Students emphasised the EU's benefits in a utilitarian sense and based on their experience (passport, free movement, Erasmus+). Also all of the EU's policies, whether evaluated rather positively (combating climate change, Erasmus+), in an ambivalent way (EU Digital COVID Certificate), or rather negatively (migration, "Fortress Europe"), were discussed as according to the students' concrete experiences. The institutions (EP and Council), similarly, were discussed according to how and whether they impact people.

The explanations for the picture choices discussed earlier moreover underline that the students perceived key personalities of the EU as representants of the EU, ideas the EU stands for and of the way it works, whether in conflict (incorporated by Orbán) or in compromise (incorporated by Ursula von der Leyen).

However, while the students were generally very EU-supportive and acknowledged and appreciated the tangible benefits of EU policies, they also voiced a critical stance, particularly regarding issues like bureaucracy, complexity, and migration. They also underlined that in some policy areas such as climate change the EU should exert stronger influence. This suggests that the students view the EU not just as a provider of benefits but also as a potential actor regarding global challenges (see also Sections 8.6. and 8.8.).

All in all, the selected pictures thus depict a relationship with the EU that is characterised by both appreciation and critical engagement. This suggests that the students are critical informed citizens (see Chapter 9), who are aware of different policies, institutions, and political figures in the EU. However, as discussed in Section 8.8, this supportive and critical stance towards the EU does not necessarily translate into active political engagement on the students' part. Despite their critical awareness, they often only perceived the EU as an influential actor and struggled to see themselves as impactful in shaping EU policies. Section 8.8. further explores this dynamic, highlighting how even critical informed students tend to adopt a passive stance in political engagement, indicating a disconnect between their awareness of EU issues and their perceived ability to influence EU decision-making processes.

8.2. Surprising Similarities and a Few Differences

As said earlier, the focus groups revealed much more similarities than differences in the students' statements. Moreover, the results indicate a number of topics that researchers expected and that were explicitly introduced by the focus group moderators—mainly this goes for the whole field of democracy in the EU, as well as the issues, topics, and dynamics of politicisation. But in addition, a number of unexpected topics and patterns turned up. These were mentioned by almost all students in almost all focus groups but had not been explicitly introduced. More concretely, for the students the EU represents the values of article 2 of the TEU (see Section 8.3.; European Union 2016) and the EU shall be an actor in times of war and climate change (see Section 8.6.). In addition, non-EU students depicted a specific view from the outside in which the EU appears very much as an ideal for a democratic and value-oriented polity (see Section 8.5.). Accordingly, we can conclude that these topics and motifs are highly important in the students' perception of the EU and their views.

These findings were unexpected in their clarity. In some areas that were especially introduced, such as politicisation, the students did not have a clear opinion—as opposed to this they presented a clear image of what the EU should do and stand for in terms of such an abstract thing as values and policy goals. It is also noticeable that inside and outside perspectives on the EU differed, but complemented each other. These findings will be discussed in detail later.

8.2.1. *We the Students Versus Them the People*

A first similarity is that the students indeed proved to be a specific social group, not only with regard to their education level but also with regard to both their self-reflection and their attitude on the EU. A self-reflexive view was evident across all countries—but it was not only self-reflexive, it also entailed a bias of knowledge and a gap. The students clearly distinguished between “we” as students versus the ordinary people or ordinary citizens. Students described themselves as possessing

more knowledge about and interest in the EU because of their status as students in EU Studies, such as in this quote:

[. . .] it's true that we are interested in it [EU], because we are doing a MA degree on Europe.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 416)

Vice-versa, this implies that other people have less interest in the EU. In the same focus group another student even spoke of a "bias":

[. . .] this is where we are biased because as students of European affairs, we go looking for information on the European media.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 384)

Some students were addressed by friends or family as experts:

[. . .] they'll see something and they'll think of me and they'll ask me: "Oh did you see this?" And then I'll kind of look into it if I haven't heard about it.

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 45)

Students also emphasised that the knowledge gap they perceived between students and ordinary citizens might indicate a danger:

[. . .] you need a two-year MA programme to understand governance in the European Union. So how do ordinary people who don't study the European Union, how should they understand? So I think that's really concerning when you look at their view on the European Union. Because this probably shapes their opinion about the European Union, because it's just so complicated.

(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 85–87)

It has to be noted that the focus groups were not uniform in their level of knowledge. Differences in qualification and knowledge were visible in the discussions, namely between students of BA and MA programmes. In addition, the French focus group students showed to have deeper knowledge in comparison to the other students. Their individual contributions were often longer and more complex.

8.2.2. *Generalised EU Supporters: With a Critical Approach and a Passive Attitude*

The second similarity across all focus groups is that the students' views on the EU were in general rather positive—but marked by what can be termed a top-down perspective on EU politics and democracy. Students focused a lot on what EU institutions did, which participatory instruments the EU offered, what the media reported, or how education was structured—instead of discussing political activity or individual engagement. This finding marked almost all student statements on EU democracy and politicisation.

The students participating in the focus groups were, as supposed, mainly EU supporters, with only few expressing anti-EU sentiments. This may partly be due to the fact that the focus group participants were mostly selected among students in EU Studies and the Social Sciences, whose choice of study programme would normally relate with a higher interest in the EU in general and a positive rather than an adversarial attitude. Moreover, students of EU Studies are exposed to a pro-European context in the sense that EU Studies traditionally has a generally supportive approach to the EU and its representatives. Some students explicitly mentioned their stance:

I'm very pro-EU I would say but with this discussion I found that I was critical of quite many parts and in quite a big way. And that I was sitting here thinking like: "Oh is everybody thinking that I'm like very anti-[EU]." I don't think like any of us are.

(Finland, 3rd FG, Pos. 764–769)

Even students that were foreigners in the country of their focus groups described themselves as being pro-EU but passive (see also Section 8.5. later):

In my case, it's really funny, because I'm not even a European citizen. So, every time, being a bit of an advocate—I'm not sure if this word exists, but we'll use it—"the defender" of the European Union.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 115)

Despite the general pro-EU orientation, most students criticised certain parts, policies, procedures or situations in the EU:

I mean, I can't imagine Europe without a European Union. So I think that's a good thing and I hope that it will stay as stable as it is even though we have those problems.

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 225)

This view describes the general tendency of most of the students that participated in the focus groups. Moreover, they deemed reforms and changes of the EU necessary (see Section 8.9.) and were not always optimistic about the future of the EU. In all this, students were rather passive, i.e. they did not describe themselves as political actors towards the EU:

I think that if we would want to, we have all the information available. But what we are missing is like the engagement of like the people not being involved with political jobs.

(Slovenia, 3rd FG, Pos. 100)

In sum, we thus came to the conclusion that the students are *critical informed citizens* (see Chapter 9). Despite their knowledge about the EU and its processes, must be critical informed, but passive citizens nearly all focus groups conveyed a feeling

of powerlessness and passivity regarding students’ role in the EU. The students generally did not see themselves as actors in any respect except for the fact that they participated in elections. This finding highlights a crucial disconnect between their highly developed understanding of the EU, its institutions and processes, and their perceived inability to have an influence. As a result, students expected the EU to take action in various policy areas to address their concerns (see Section 8.6.), but individual actions by students themselves were seldom mentioned.

8.2.3. *What Does the EU Stand for? The Core Policies and Outputs*

A third similarity is that across the six countries and the three years of project duration, similar policies were associated with the EU. In the focus groups, students were asked to name and discuss the most important and most polarised policies of the EU. They quite apparently were oriented towards concrete policy outputs. The common market, the common currency, Erasmus+, the EU passport, EU citizenship and free movement, along with climate change (see later) were usually named as the EU’s most important policy fields and also, in the picture selection, as the EU’s representations (see Section 8.1.). Except for climate change, these policies are also the ones put forward by the EU authorities themselves, who have advertised them to the citizens since decades as being its core competencies (European Union 2025). It is interesting that the students did as the EU intended: They mentally linked these concrete and output-oriented “selling points” to the EU, naming them as the most important policy fields. This means that they followed the EU’s policies and outputs and regarded those areas in which they appreciated the EU’s policy outputs as most important.

As will be discussed later, there also were numerous similarities with regard to the topics and policy fields that were seen as the most polarised (see also Section 8.8.), namely migration and climate change. As opposed to the policy fields just named, these stand for areas in which the EU was seen as delivering an unsatisfying policy output by the students. Table 8.3 summarises the students’ perception of key EU policies.

Table 8.3 Key EU policies and students’ perceptions

<i>Policy area</i>	<i>Perception</i>
Common market and common currency	Seen as fundamental EU achievements.
Free movement and EU passport	Highly valued in daily life.
EU funding	Recognised for infrastructure and academic projects.
Migration and climate change	Most polarised topics, requiring EU intervention. Viewed as divisive among citizens and member states.
European defence and army	Mixed views: Some support, others fear militarisation.

The Bread and Butter: Common Market and Common Currency

The policy fields named “most important” by the students most often are what can be termed the “bread and butter” of the EU: the common market and the common currency. These were demarcated as basic and defining elements of the EU, and as key in everyday life. In every single focus group, the EU was discussed as a common market at least once:

Well, my reasoning is rather that really the common market is the foundation of the Union, I really cannot imagine the EU without a common market in any way, I do not think it can exist and that is why I have written it.

(Bulgaria, 1st FG, Pos. 153)

The same goes for the common EU currency, the Euro:

The fact of having the Euro as a currency and paying in Euros in France, Italy or elsewhere. It’s also very present in everyday life.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 315)

The common currency also was depicted as a marker of identification with the EU:

How I feel to be part of it [the EU] when I look in my wallet and see the euro inside, [. . .]

(Slovenia, 2nd FG, Pos. 71)

The New Basics: Free Movement and Passport

In a similar way, what can be termed the “new basics” of the EU were frequently named: free movement and the EU passport were raised in all countries and focus groups and often highlighted as being most present in everyday life:

I live in an area where I have two national borders within a ten-minute drive. [. . .] I just go on the Italian side because it’s closer and I don’t even think of stopping or pulling out my ID and just showing it to somebody.

(Slovenia, 1st FG, Pos. 129)

The following statement indicates that the EU is in general quite much seen as a cohesive and inclusive entity for its citizens, because it offers the same benefits across different member states, such as free movement:

I travel a lot, I choose to travel, but it is actually easier when I do not have to wait at the border for one and a half hours, as [. . .] for example, at the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is [. . .] some, let us say, mini-benefits for all of us, which means quite a lot in our daily lives.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 117)

EU Funding

Another cornerstone of the EU's output-oriented policies was equally emphasised in all focus groups: EU funding. A student from Bulgaria explained that in his/her city EU funding is very visible as there are

[. . .] a lot of renovations, new gardens, parks, landscaping, the station is also being renovated at the moment, so the citizens are living better.

(Bulgaria, 1st FG, Pos. 208)

The EU funding signs were depicted as everyday EU experience:

But perhaps the most important thing on a daily basis is when we see that some projects are co-financed by EU funds, for example our faculty is co-financed, and this is also the case in Zagreb and elsewhere.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 115)

A specific funding programme of the EU, Erasmus+, was also regarded as being visible in daily life (see in detail Section 8.1.9.).

Tangible Benefits

The themes of the common market, common currency, free movement, EU passport, and EU funding thus are concretely tangible in the students' everyday life and impact how easy or hard life is for them. As will be discussed in Section 8.5.2., it is especially the question whether students possess an EU passport and profit from free movement or not that is decisive in this respect.

This indicates that a concrete and positively experienced policy output, a feeling that "things work", creates identification with the EU. This finding is in fit with results from previous research (Royuela and López-Bazo 2020; Spannring et al. 2008): People identify with the EU (or any other political body) when they have positive experiences that are immediately relevant for their daily lives.

In addition, our results indicate that these positive experiences also lead students to regard the respective policy fields as the most important. This speaks in favour of the success of an "utilitarian Europe", i.e. the students appreciated and highlighted most those policies they profit from most, or that they deemed as most important for their everyday life. As said earlier, this perception also hints at an apparent success of the EU's activities for marketing the EU and its achievements to its citizens, as the students named the policy fields as representative for the EU that for a long time were cornerstones of branding the EU by the EU authorities: the common market, the common currency, free movement, and EU citizenship. However, this marketing is not perceived as being sufficient by the students (see Sections 8.7.1. and 8.9.2.). In sum, and as will be discussed in detail in Chapter 9, the students showed a markedly utilitarian perspective on the EU which makes them output-oriented to an extent that they appear rather as policy consumers than as citizens.

8.2.4. *From Peace as Founding Myth to European Defence*

Another important topic raised in almost all focus groups refers to a founding myth of the EU: the safeguarding of peace. Peace was, on one hand, discussed with a positive reference to the past, and on the other hand, it received a future-oriented connotation in the discussion about European defence policy and a European army.

The past-oriented reference to the founding myth—the EU being built on the principle of peace and prevention of war—was visible in many statements. Several students referenced the EU's historical origins, noting that peace was a driving force behind European integration, particularly following the Second World War.

You know war is war. [. . .] EU was also funded on the principle to stop war within Europe.

(Finland, 3rd FG, Pos. 512–514)

Two students explained why they chose a picture representing a dove of peace in the picture choice:

I have chosen the colour of peace, because it was the origin of the European project and we tend to forget it, especially the political projects that want to get France out of the European Union, or at least the other countries in the European Union.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 16)

I chose a picture of a white dove to represent peace. I think that is the principle of the European Union in the first place, to preserve and promote peace.

(Slovenia, 2nd FG, Pos. 13)

Enhancing peace was described as a necessity accomplished with the integration process:

EU actually is not just an institution, there are political motives behind it [. . .] like after the Second World War there was a need of like peace.

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 74)

Another student explained that peace through economic integration worked well in the EU:

I think that, in fact, at the beginning, it was a bet on peace and it is a bet that has been rather successful. The initial principle, peace and even peace through economic exchanges, is something that works quite well.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 35)

The students saw the EU largely as a successful guarantor of peace:

[The EU is] the greatest guarantor of peace [. . .] for the last I do not know how many 60–70 years.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 204)

The European Union is the most successful project for peace and freedom in the history of mankind. The European Union is what makes us part of the free world on this planet.

(Bulgaria, 1st FG, Pos. 73)

However, there were a few contrasting views. Some students highlighted NATO's role in ensuring peace, especially through military power, arguing that the EU lacks the military capacity to maintain peace independently:

[The EU] itself has neither the army nor any power to fight against anyone who is not in NATO.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 220)

A few French students even questioned whether the EU's economic policies, such as austerity, sometimes undermined its peace-building efforts:

Certainly, for some people, what it provides is precisely this freedom of movement between countries, no longer having the mark of the border, etc., but for others it will mean austerity, social dumping.

(France, 3rd FG, Pos. 21)

The general orientation to the founding myth, despite such reservations, appeared as a key characteristic the students associated with the EU. The fact that the students supported a key founding myth of the EU fits with their overall good reception of the EU's key policies. But they belong to a generation that did not experience war until the War against Ukraine began. It is therefore interesting to note that the students not only supported the founding myth, but also expected the EU to become a strong actor to ensure stability and conflict resolution in Europe and the world (see Section 8.6.).

Our findings thus indicate that the past-oriented perception of peace as a founding trait of the EU more recently has been complemented by a clear expectation for the EU to safeguard peace in the future. The students seem to extrapolate a future-oriented obligation from the founding myth of the EU as a guarantor of peace, claiming support for Ukraine and discussing a European army (see also Section 8.6.1.):

Europe has always had a role to play on its own territory and internationally to contribute to this peace, so there is always a notion that Europe is

supposed to be working for peace, or at least that's the vocation it gave itself when it created the EU.

(France, 3rd FG, Pos. 48)

Our findings moreover indicate that it is the War against Ukraine, and the fact that peace is concretely threatened, that turned the founding myth into a goal having a concrete importance for the present and the future, and a mission for the EU to act.

What I want to see is a united union [. . .] united against like Russian aggression and stands out for like European values.

(Finland, 3rd FG, Pos. 679–682)

The EU's engagement in favour of Ukraine was, however, not uniformly welcomed but discussed in terms of a potentially lingering shift of EU values because

[. . .] the initial identity of European Union was more like a peace project, a lot of liberal ideas. But now more and more rhetoric, I would say, is more focused on realist ideas and more geopolitical, geopolitical rhetoric. And, I'm worried, that, this identity as a liberal, as a peace project will, turn into a more real-politic rhetoric.

(Croatia, 3rd FG, Pos. 71)

In all countries, students discussed a European army (see later and Section 8.2.12.) and the topics of security, defence and military in a general sense:

So I think defence is a serious focus that we need to pay attention to.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 188)

Defence was raised in relation to possible wars:

[. . .] most important is we are like about starting a war, so for me it's important military, security and everything.

(Slovenia, 3rd FG, Pos. 177)

Defence and security policy were, however, not always positively evaluated. In some focus groups they were named among the most polarised policy fields:

And, most polarised, I think, defence, military and security, if we talk about member states and member states have completely different stances on the question of whether there should be European army, whether it should be or not, whether they like, should look up to the USA, for example, or they should, have their own way, as the EU.

(Croatia, 3rd FG, Pos. 131)

Accordingly, the question whether the EU should set up an army was not only discussed controversially, but it was also one of the few topics in which differences showed in the students' statements (see Section 8.2.12.).

8.2.5. *The Hardware: The EU Institutions*

The EU's institutions were mentioned in all focus groups and countries—and they also were chosen in the picture selections as representing the EU. The European Parliament especially, but also the European Council, the Council and the European Commission were discussed (see in detail in Section 8.3.3.).

The students frequently discussed the interplay among the EU institutions in decision-making, as well as the complexity and intransparency connected to the institutions:

To be honest, I don't know, because I'm going through all the options like institutions. Then who is going to influence the European Parliament, the Council and Commission when these are the three institutions who take the decisions? So who is going to take the decision for whom? I don't know.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 150)

Regarding the checks and balances in the EU, students judged them rather positively:

I think the different institutions act like checks-and-balances on each other so that's how I like to understand it.

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 32)

[. . .] the system of checks and balances [. . .] is just a guarantee that one institution cannot go to extremes because there's always another institution that has to like supervise this institution and, and the previous institution is responsible for that one. So I think it's a very good system.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 58)

As a general finding, it needs to be highlighted that the students expected the EU to act, to fulfil its commitments across different policies, and they appreciated when the EU does so. They wanted the EU to be an actor (see Section 8.6.), and they saw the EU's institutions as the decision-making bodies that initiate and carry out this action:

EU institutions [. . .] is where the decisions are made and it goes from there.

(Bulgaria, 1st FG, Pos. 155)

8.2.6. *Germany and France as "Engines"*

Students also mentioned differences between the EU member states (see Section 8.7.2.), and they discussed Germany and France as the most influential

member states in the EU with regard to their populations, their economic weight, and their military powers. This image of the students is again in fit with a long-standing narrative on European integration. Both countries are often described as being the “engine of European integration” and are maintaining close diplomatic relations based on the Elysée Treaty signed in 1963. The students’ often underlined that they perceived power imbalances in the EU and saw especially France and Germany as dominating, and the smaller member states following.

Some students clearly attributed the lead in the EU to Germany and France:

It’s only like France and Germany and Belgium who make all the decisions [. . .]. But this is kind of logical, no? Because they’re the biggest country, like shouldn’t they be allowed to have the most impact, you know? [. . .] It’s not that they’re actually the ones who have the most power that’s the issue, it’s the issue that they’re not really speaking up about it, they’re not being honest about it.

(Finland, 1st FG, Pos. 364–367)

France and Germany were even directly equated with the EU:

In the end, France and Germany are a kind of Europe.

(France, 3rd FG, Pos. 32)

Germany and France were also attributed higher influence and a more prominent role than other member states in almost all focus groups. Several students discussed their importance in terms of hierarchies:

Germany and France are dominating the administration of the European Union.

(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 106)

One factor in favour of attributing powers to Germany and France was the population size. Some students discussed the voting rules of the qualified majority in the Council, where 55% of member states, representing at least 65% of the EU population have to vote in favour of a motion to pass.

Countries with more people like Germany and France have more power sometimes like the smaller countries. [. . .] I think they tried to tackle the bigger states, that they have more power. I would say, Germany and France have the most power just because they have the most money but I think when it comes to voting, the voices are pretty much the same.

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 137)

The issue of French and German dominance was mostly raised by students that did not reside in either in Germany or France—only a few French and German students

did so. One student emphasised that bigger populations lead to bigger influence in EU institutions:

Germany and France have a lot to say, also in the European Parliament and the ECB so that is kind of a power play obviously. So it really feels that they have more say but also the votes are like fixed to the population so if a country has more population they have well I think that is kind of right so yeah.

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 139)

Criticisms of the role of larger countries often came from students from smaller and southern member states:

Maybe it's just inevitable that some countries are more influential by virtue of also contributing more, or it just seems to be another token of the same coin that if you contributed more then, inevitably, you're going to want more? I am not sure if that's possible to be countered.

(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 109)

One student criticised the impact of EP elections compared to the other bodies in the EU's institutional system referring to the power of Germany and France:

[. . .] it seems to me that it looks democratic just on the surface, it looks nice, here's your chance to vote, but then here we see some representatives who are a little bit higher up, and we don't know how much influence we have exactly next to that, and these more powerful countries, it seems to me that, I don't know, Germany, France, that they have a lot more influence than we do.

(Slovenia, 2nd FG, Pos. 94)

Germany and France were also put in opposition:

Given that the European Union was originally a Franco-German construction [. . .] unfortunately I find that the German framework has taken precedence over the French framework.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 146)

The French and German dominance was also attributed to economic factors and monetary policy—and not always evaluated positively:

So, first of all, I see the European Union as, let us say, an economic union, which is the main engine here for Germany and France to develop the other member states and the countries that will potentially re-join, that will join the European Union.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 82)

Another student said that decisions in the financial crisis had been imposed by Germany and France:

It seems to be imposed, especially on the southern countries, if we talk about 2007, etc., where there is this idea of a bank that makes very top-down decisions, and the southern countries: too bad if you don't agree, it's the same thing anyway, we decide, we France-Germany, and you'll see what happens.
(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 33)

This quote somewhat equates Germany and France, respectively their governments, with the Troika, consisting of the European Central Bank, International Monetary Fund, and EC.

The perception of the power differences was also in some cases extended to geopolitical questions. In a Finnish focus group, students discussed France and its military powers, comparing it to Estonia:

France is much bigger [than Estonia], they have a lot more people.
(Finland, 1st FG, Pos. 566)

Another student emphasised the availability of nuclear weapons:

And then France has nukes so, so nobody would attack them.
(Finland, 1st FG, Pos. 574)

Another student mentioned the Minsk peace negotiations in 2014 and that Germany and France had had a leading role there:

Well, I think in foreign policy, I think France and Germany are taking the European mantel sort of [. . .] They, for example the Minsk agreement with [. . .]/ultimately about the Ukraine situation it was France and Germany negotiating of the EU's/at the table and I think they are driving, France and Germany driving the big sort of points in the EU forward.
(Finland, 3rd FG, Pos. 498–500)

8.2.7. *National Identity Before European Identity?*

Another issue students discussed was whether and to what extent they felt European. While most students strongly did so, associating well-defined values to their European identities (see Section 8.4.), they also stated that they primarily would identify with their nation-state and only in a secondary manner with the EU.

I've accepted dual identity when it comes to national European identity. I think I have both. But I would also say that my German identity is more dominant. Because when I present myself, for example, I would introduce myself, I would say like: "I'm from Germany", and not: "I'm from Europe."
(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 147–149)

One student even said he/she felt more German than European:

I feel definitely more, just more German than European, just because I think, of course, Germany is something more that I'm more tied to than the European Union.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 174)

Other students also explained that their national identity was their first marker of identification:

[. . .] we are first and foremost citizens of the Republic of Croatia, but we are also citizens of the European Union, and that is why we have our own country.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 81)

Besides the national identity, local identities were also names as a source of identification:

[. . .] some parts of Croatia, such as Istria, Dubrovnik and the islands, still have a local identity, and I think that identity is still very important. [. . .] I think that Istrians will be able to say for themselves that they are first and foremost Istrians, and secondly Croats, and secondly citizens of the European Union.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 326)

One student even discussed whether he/she would be ready to die for the EU:

And, in my opinion, the strongest identity is the one that you are really willing to leave your family for, leave your house and go die for. And I ask myself the question—if, God forbid, I don't want such a thing to happen, I'm not some kind of militarist. God forbid, if we were called to go die for the EU, what is it that would make me go. And I won't go to die for the good standard of living, forget it. I will not go to die for these buildings [shows pictures of the EP and other European institutions]. I will not die for European bureaucrats. The only thing I can bring myself to die for is a future of some collective idea that will create.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 155)

8.2.8. *The Most Politicised and Controversial Topics: Migration and Climate Change*

As stated earlier, clear similarities showed with regard to the topics and policy fields that students regarded as the most polarised. It is notable that when students discussed the level of polarisation, they mostly described it in a passive and receptive way, i.e. they discussed politicisation and polarisation in the sense of “we think it is most polarised because”, rather than describing themselves as active “we polarise or politicise” (see in detail Section 8.8.).

Migration was named as the most polarised topic and policy field across all countries (see also Section 8.1. and 8.8.). Asked about the “most polarised” policy field, one student said:

I would immediately say migration. I think that is the most divisive issue because the two camps are just at the two extremes.

(Bulgaria, 1st FG, Pos. 165)

This perception was shared throughout the countries:

Most polarised, I do agree. It's migration. I think, that's one of the reasons why there are many protest in different countries.

(Croatia, 3rd FG, Pos. 127)

The third quote also explains that and why migration counts as “most polarised”:

[. . .] migration obviously because, first of all within the EU there are a lot of different opinions on how we should deal with [. . .] migration and not only within the EU but within the member countries themselves we have a lot of different opinions on how we should deal with it.

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 256)

Climate change was the second topic described as “most polarised”:

The topic I found the most polarised, I would say, climate change because, there is a lot of talk about the climate change and the, I don't know, the electric cars that we should ban diesel motors.

(Croatia, 3rd FG, Pos. 133)

In addition, climate change was often mentioned as one of the “most important” policy fields:

[. . .] like most important definitely I think is climate change, I think that it's still something that has to stay on the agenda everywhere because it's so umm trans sectional like goes through like every single policies from economic policies to social policies and everything else, so climate change I think.

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 254)

Students sometimes linked migration and climate change:

I think climate change is really important one just because it's something that's really urgent and it's gonna to stick with us for a while so it's important to find solutions on that right now and I think it's also connects somehow to migration because it will also just become more because of climate change.

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 153)

8.2.9. The Topics That Can Best and Least Be Influenced

Students were asked which topics they thought could best be influenced by themselves—and also the ones they thought could least be influenced. Table 8.4 shows the findings.

Table 8.4 Students' perceptions of their own influence on policy areas

<i>Policy area</i>	<i>Perceived influence</i>	<i>Reasons</i>
Climate change	High	Influence through individual behaviour (e.g. transport choices, recycling, avoiding fast fashion). Students see themselves as having agency but mostly on an individual level rather than collective political action.
Erasmus+	High	Influence through participation and feedback (e.g. surveys, direct involvement).
Monetary policies	Low	Seen as highly technical and controlled by experts rather than citizens. Some students do not see a need for more democratic influence in this field.

The Best to Be Influenced: Climate and Erasmus+

Most students across different focus groups found climate change easy to influence, because they saw a possibility to influence it via individual behaviour:

I would say on a very personal level the climate change. Not that I can say, I can change the climate, but I can, for sure, change my behaviour, and then know, that I do really have an impact, because of the studies online and when you calculate your things what you can really change.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 137)

They emphasised that they have an individual capacity to act:

The topic, that can be influenced best by me, is the climate change, I would also say because I can choose to, I don't know, take a train, not a car. I can choose to recycle. I can choose not to buy fast fashion every month. I can change my life to help the environment in other ways.

(Croatia, 3rd FG, Pos. 133)

This means that interestingly the students saw climate change as a policy area in which they feel their personal choices can make a difference. They ascribed themselves agency—finally, and different from almost all other policy fields and

almost all other possible means of influencing the EU. Tellingly, this influence does not extend to imagining that students could act collectively or bring about a change of climate policy. The capacity for action is not described in political terms, i.e. not in terms of achieving collective decisions or changes on a larger scale. It remains purely individual, referring—again—to consumer choices and individual behaviour.

However, the fact that students also claimed the EU to become an actor against climate change (see Section 8.6.4.) indicates that they recognise the necessity of collective action, coordinated policies, and regulations to achieve a meaningful progress. In this, the students ascribed a clear and positively connoted role to the EU, but also a clear expectancy: they want the EU to combat climate change. This claim also relates to the fact that not all students estimated their individual influence on the climate as high enough:

I would say that one person cannot make a difference to climate change, [. . .] the EU could have the biggest impact on climate change in that we could make some regulations that all countries would then have to follow and it's easier than each country individually making some regulation.

(Slovenia, 2nd FG, Pos. 134)

One student said the EU could fund local projects to prevent climate and emphasised the EU should produce expertise:

Or just even helping, like giving out recommendations, like gathering experts, like what should be done in each country, kind of like giving guidance. Doesn't even need to be like decision, like hard decisions, it could just be suggestions, I guess.

(Finland, 1st FG, Pos. 153–157)

Erasmus+ is the second policy field the students named as one that can best be influenced by them. Interestingly, similar to climate change, students see their influence mostly on the level of their individual actions:

I think Erasmus is quite easy to influence on our level [. . .] Helsinki is very open to dialogue and always ask for student opinions to be honest and Erasmus is the easiest thing we can influence.

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 265)

With regard to the ways in which the students' influence on Erasmus+ was realised, questionnaires or surveys were one option named, another was the participation itself:

[. . .] because of our proximity with these structures and kind of like being almost in the Erasmus process right now.

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 278)

Another factor was that participation numbers were assumed to influence the future programme structure:

Me, as a student, I can most probably have an influence on future of Erasmus program, because depending on how many students will apply, it will form and shape also the next budget and all the decision-making.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 136)

The orientation on participant numbers is, again, in fit with the EU's policies for Erasmus+ project coordinators which rely strongly on impact counted in numbers of participants.

These statements indicate that the students have a thorough and deep knowledge of the practicalities of the Erasmus+ programme. They also strengthen the impression that students see themselves rather as policy consumers than as active citizens with regard to the “policy product” Erasmus+. Political activities, e.g. demonstrating, voting, being active in a political party, in contrast were not regarded as necessary to be influential on Erasmus+ by the students.

The Field Least to Be Influenced: Monetary Policy

In contrary to climate change and Erasmus+, monetary policy was perceived as the policy field with the least potential for individual influence:

[. . .] we cannot do anything about this sector, about European currency or anything like that—unless we become experts and we go to these banks and become like we work for them and we influence the decisions there.

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 275)

Such a view reveals a clear contrast to the one discussed at the beginning of this section. The common currency was clearly seen as a key policy field and an important policy outcome by students in all countries, and hence as part of “utilitarian Europe”. However, it was also seen as the policy field that could least be influenced by the citizens themselves.

The students' perception of currency policy thus speaks in favour of our diagnosis of the students as critical informed EU citizens, since their perception is in fit with the real power (im)balances of the EU system. Their perception also fits with diagnoses of democratic and legitimacy deficits in the common economic and fiscal EU policies (see Collignon 2010; Högenauer and Howarth 2019; Wiesner 2021) that underline little influence of the directly legitimised democratic bodies in the matter, namely national parliaments and the EP. It also fits with citizens' perceptions during and after the financial crisis that underline trust into the EU has been shrinking in relation to austerity policies (Armingeon et al. 2016). Nevertheless, at least some students did not perceive their lack of influence in monetary policy as problematic—they did not see it as a field that needs to be democratically organised:

Economic policies, moreover, do not have any democratic coherence at all [decision-making in economic matters] is a mechanism that does not have to be so democratic.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 191)

8.2.10. Education

The overarching topic of education on the EU was mentioned by almost all focus groups participants. As will be discussed in detail in Section 8.9.3., overall they claimed that the EU must be more present in school and secondary education, on all levels from primary school to older generations. The also saw this as a remedy for the EU's distance to its citizens (see Section 8.9.3.).

Students talked about their own experiences in school where the EU was often not a topic of discussion, as it was integrated in the curriculum only to a small extent or not at all.

The students emphasised that most young people do not learn about the EU in school:

I learned about the European Union in high school, but I know of some of my friends, many of them said we didn't talk about it in school.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 66)

Some students had been educated on the EU in schools, but mentioned this as an exception:

I probably wouldn't have known so much myself in primary school if I hadn't been one of those, what were we, gifted ones who then went to a camp with our professor. There was none of that in primary education.

(Slovenia, 2nd FG, Pos. 106)

This lack of EU topics in school curricula was problematised:

But I also think that it's kind of like a citizen education problem, that we in schools, in all the schools across Europe, we don't have enough citizen education.

(Croatia, 3rd FG, Pos. 44)

Lack of education on the EU was also held responsible for a general "lack of interest in Europe":

I think that there is indeed a lack of interest in Europe, it is very complicated to understand it, but if there is no political education, it is not possible.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 33)

Furthermore, students said it was necessary to extend EU education beyond just primary, secondary and higher levels, making it accessible to a broader audience across different generations and professions:

I think this like idea of like having citizen education maybe you need to, then teach them also how to be civically active right now.

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 402)

The focus group participants were very optimistic about the possible effects of intensified EU education. They expressed their hope that more EU-specific education could lead to greater citizen involvement:

[. . .] we got to make the people more willing to be involved in, you know, citizen participation, and law participation and this kind of education.

(Slovenia, 3rd FG, Pos. 102)

The students (see also Section 8.9.3.) expressed the belief that education will incite citizens to become politically active and participate in EP elections:

[. . .] it involves education on the fact of informing people on the modalities of the European elections and making them want to participate through knowledge of the European Union [by informing] people more about what the European Union is, [. . .] the desire to participate in the votes will come by itself, in a natural way.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 111)

More EU education on the EU was finally depicted as a way to improve democracy altogether (see also Section 8.3.):

And maybe, maybe it would be a good thing in strengthening democracy, would be to actually think of better ways to educate and better resources, not just in like primary school and high school, but also for adults, as well!

(Helsinki, 1st FG, Pos. 334)

Consumer Citizens

The students showed a strikingly clear belief in the benefits of education. This emphasis on education indicates a high level of trust and a belief in state capacities and concretely the capacity to educate citizens. Students moreover clearly linked this policy field to the EU. This is surprising, since education is one of the policy fields that the EU does not have powers in. Education is a national competence. And why should the nation-states necessarily put EU education on the forefront of their school curricula?

The students' vision of how to educate (future) EU citizens underlines how they perceive EU democracy: in a top-down perspective. In such a view, the authorities

are deemed responsible for educating citizens and thus for laying the basis for democracy and EU support, but not the citizens themselves. Citizens are in return not primarily seen as citizens in the sense of *citoyens*, i.e. not as politically active members of a polity, but as policy consumers with expectancies (see Chapter 9).

This perspective matches with three other core findings of our study. The first finding is the distinction described earlier: Students did not describe themselves as needing more education, but “the citizens”. This means that they did consider themselves as sufficiently educated, different from the ordinary citizens. This sets up a clear knowledge hierarchy.

Second, throughout the focus groups, the students rarely uttered a notion of actively *doing politics*. They remained strangely passive. If they considered a topic as politicised or polarised, where the polarisation came from was not expressed, and it was never described as the result of a student action (see Section 8.8.). When they expected changes, they expected them to come from the EU or the nation-state, rather than through their own initiatives. They did not mention actions such as founding a non-governmental organisation (NGO), joining a political party, or demonstrating as pathways to influence changes. Likewise, if the students were critical of a policy, they expected the EU or the nation-state to change it, but did not reflect on organising protests themselves.

As said earlier, this approach has more in common with the service-oriented expectations of customers or consumers than with the political mind of the well-informed critical EU citizen that the students are as well.

The third finding in fit with this mentality is the students’ expectancy of the EU to be a (global) actor. As will be discussed in detail in Section 8.6., the students did not see themselves as actors, but expected the EU to act (on their behalf) and carry out the policies they wished for.

8.2.II. Media Coverage

The claims for changes in EU media coverage are in fit with this rather passive orientation of the students. Media coverage of the EU was mostly discussed as insufficient, and as a key factor creating a lack of information of ordinary citizens. Ultimately, the students saw a lack of media coverage as causing a lack of EU support. They explained a rather simplified model of media effects.

Accordingly, the students agreed that there should be more EU reporting:

I think the EU citizens should be, like better informed about what the EU are doing.

(Finland, 3rd FG, Pos. 362–364)

Students asked for concrete measures:

[. . .] it should be given much more prominence or at least every daily media should maybe have a “European Union” section in its columns, I don’t know.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 399)

Students also claimed for better information and more simple explanations—in line with the abovementioned claim for better education:

We don't know who said what, we don't know which institution, and in fact nothing is done to try to popularise this. We assume that people are supposed to know, or that it is not interesting. In both cases, it is not possible, because people need to be explained in a simpler way.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 78)

As will be discussed in Section 8.9. in more detail, the students had difficulties to nail down what exactly the EU should do to do better:

[. . .] things are very complicated and precise [. . .] they are not explained in a sufficiently understandable way not only to the ordinary citizen but to people in general to our students it is difficult to follow things, what is left if you are not so familiar with a matter. I am still thinking about the solutions and I what comes to my mind is to also improve the way of communication between institutions and citizens. Things should be presented more clearly and in a way that is both understood but also engaging. That is to say, both to explain what is being done and why it is important to me.

(Bulgaria, 1st FG, Pos. 112)

To inform themselves about the EU the students mostly used social media networks such as TikTok, Instagram, or X. They mentioned following profiles from news outlets, European institutions, or MEPs from their home countries. They were also reading news online using various national and sometimes European news outlets. This underscores that young people experience politics and the EU markedly through social media:

The European Union is very active on social networks. There are, of course, all sorts of authorities and all sorts of official bodies, both within the European Union and in all the member states.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 33)

In consequence, the students mentioned generational differences (see in detail Section 8.7.3.):

And I think the fruit is generational. I think that maybe the older generations need to be informed in some way, they are not so much on social networks, while the younger generations can get more information through that.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 314)

8.2.12. *Differences*

Differences in the EU perceptions and the topics discussed were much less visible in the focus group data than similarities. The few differences to be found

concerned, on one hand, the issue of whether the EU should set up an army. On the other hand, some topics were only discussed in certain focus groups or certain member states.

A European Army

A potential European army was discussed in some focus groups, but students were undecided in this respect. For instance, in the first German focus group a student said with regard to the question whether there should be a European army to protect the borders:

I really don't have an answer for that.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 110)

Likewise, in Slovenia one student asked:

So I'm really interested in either having an army or having a common response to a Russian invasion?

and another student answered:

I wasn't really looking at it here at all—the army, but even if I had been, I would have thought of the army of each individual nation state.

(Slovenia, 2nd FG, Pos. 145–146)

A Bulgarian student stated:

In my view, we need to deepen European integration and to arrive at a common European army.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 192)

A Croatian student was quite critical:

President Macron has recalled the formation of the European army. I believe that such an army would definitely be able not only to secure the growth of the European Union, but also to hold it back economically.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 128)

The most extensive and controversial debate on a European army occurred in the French focus groups. One student opposed the idea, highlighting that

[. . .] when you talk about a European army, it just makes me [. . .] I think: "Wow, we're going to build empires again!"

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 172)

Others supported a defence-oriented army which would strengthen the EU's role in a polarised world:

A defence army, not a conquest army, which is super important—I am thinking of Putin opposite—in fact, just a security army, but this is the least important aspect, for me.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 188)

A third student argued for a “disposable” European army:

I strongly believe in a European army, which is not an army of conquest, which is a disposable army.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 192–194)

Corruption

Corruption was a topic that was only discussed in a few focus groups. In one Croatian focus group it was discussed in detail. Students found that in Croatia there is a lot of corruption:

Croatia has so much corruption and nepotism, and some things from the past regime that make it impossible for it to work, that in a way it will stabilise itself for another ten years, for sure.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 97)

The students discussed possibilities to deal with corruption. One idea was to speak about it in schools and integrate it into education. This underlines again that the students support the idea that education can serve as a catalyst for enhancing democracy.

This is a question of introducing a subject at school that will teach young people about politics, economics, all the really important segments of life, so that they can rationally make decisions when a certain situation arises.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 107)

In this, the EU was mostly depicted as a positive counter image—with the exception of the recent EU corruption scandals:

And I think that there has been a perception so far that the EU is the emblem of transparency compared to, for example, the Bulgarian reality. That there is no corruption, it is all very complicated, but it is complicated precisely so that there is no corruption. But the recent corruption scandals that have developed, I think, hit at that perception.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 118)

Enlargement

Enlargement was discussed differently and also with sometimes opposing opinions. Students named differences in the structures of the member states and cultural differences between Eastern and Western Europe (see Sections 8.4. and 8.7.2.). They also emphasised challenges such as varying religious backgrounds, historical ties to Russia, and differing levels of integration within the EU. For instance, the influence of Russia in Eastern European countries was seen as a potential obstacle to deeper EU integration, raising concerns about future challenges related to enlargement. One point was to emphasise cultural differences:

There is a Hungarian, a Czech, a Romanian, a Bulgarian, let us say an Orthodox sentiment, as well as a Serbian, they are Russian brothers. They are united, and Viktor Orbán is the leader here.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 202)

Students discussed EU enlargement in terms of geopolitical interests:

So yeah, of course, there's some topics that for sure will be issues in the future such as whether we need better integration, or we need enlargement, how to keep the Eastern European countries stick to the EU and not having this Russian influence taking over.

(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 248–250)

Other students highlighted competing geopolitical interests:

And also with the enlargement which is also very important to like, also to take a grip on the countries which are willing to enter the EU now because also other interests are competing, for example, in Western Balkans. And, the European Union should ensure that it is still a preferable option there. It is also important, I think, for the future not to lose the world's position.

(Croatia, 3rd FG, Pos. 154)

Some students viewed further EU enlargement as a strain on the EU's financial, institutional, and political stability. Scepticism was expressed about the readiness of countries like Serbia and Bosnia to join, citing political instability and unresolved conflicts:

Why is it that the EU should be extended to one Ukraine, one Serbia, one Bosnia and Herzegovina? I believe that this would be an attempt to put pressure on the European Union, financial, bureaucratic, institutional and political. So from that perspective, for some further development, I think that there is a need to expand, and there is a need to look inwards.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 129)

One student regarded an enlargement to Serbia and Bosnia as unlikely:

I do not think that Serbia wants to go to the European Union and I also think that there would be more unrest, and Serbia and Bosnia are very unstable countries, especially Bosnia, the contact of the three nations, I do not know what that would look like.

(Slovenia, 2nd FG, Pos. 56–57)

The students' perspectives on EU enlargement altogether underline again that they are critical informed citizens, engaging with complex geopolitical and institutional issues. Their concerns about a) the influence of external actors such as Russia, China, and Turkey in the countries that aim to become part of the EU; b) the potential financial and institutional challenges for the EU due to the enlargement; and c) the instability of prospective new member states indicate a nuanced understanding of the challenges which revolve around a possible future enlargement. This reflects their awareness of both the strategic importance and the practical implications of expanding the EU.

8.3. Democracy in the EU: Views and Judgement

Democracy was a key topic in the focus groups, and one that was triggered by the moderators in various ways, as it was in the centre of the research interest. Without having explicitly asked for it, the focus groups added an interesting focus in this respect. They not only discussed democracy in the EU but also the concept of democracy and its meanings, i.e. how the concept of democracy should be understood.

The students' statements and judgements depict a normatively oriented understanding of democracy and indicate that the students spoke about liberal democracy when they said "democracy". From this general conceptual level they moved forward to the practical level, discussing how democracy is practised and how it is valued in the member states and the EU. Moreover, students discussed the EU's democratic quality and deficits, as well as its efforts to become more democratic and involve citizens more.

All in all, the students judged (liberal) democracy positively—both (liberal) democracy in general and as a concept and as practised in the EU. Interestingly, the conceptual and institutional level were often directly linked, i.e. the EU was often directly associated with democracy and democratisation. The students also saw the EU as a polity that should defend and enhance democracy, both internally, i.e. within the EU and with regard to the member states, and in its external democracy promotion activities (see Section 8.6.3.).

Critical arguments centred on the ways democracy is practised in the EU and their shortcomings. The concept of liberal democracy as such was not criticised.

Table 8.5 presents the topics and themes students associate with democracy in the EU.

Table 8.5 Students' perceptions of democracy in the EU

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Key perceptions</i>
In general	The EU as representative democracy: The EU was seen as a representative democracy because it has elections and it "works rather well". versus The EU as too complex and untransparent: The EU was seen as too complex and untransparent, and this impacts its democratic quality negatively.
Institutions	The EP as the most democratic institution: The EP was seen as the most democratic institution because of its direct election. The EP's powers were seen as limited, especially with regard to legal initiative. Council and EC were seen as less democratic due to their indirect legitimation. Power imbalances between the EP, Council, and EC were perceived and seen as impacting the EU's democratic quality negatively.
Multilevel democracy	The tension between federalist and intergovernmental principles: The Council was seen as prioritising national interests, EP and EC as taking on a more supranational view. A reluctance of member states to transfer more power to the EU was perceived. Students claimed for deeper federal integration.
Elections	Head candidates: Students claimed for a more direct and transparent link between EP elections and EC president selection. They criticised that successful head candidates were not elected EC president. Distribution of mandates: The degressive distribution of mandates was criticised, as larger countries such as Germany and France were seen as more powerful. Second-order elections: EP elections were still largely seen as "second-order elections" focused more on national issues rather than the EU. EP elections were also seen as an opportunity for citizens to protest against national governments. National elections were seen as more important.
Role of citizens	Low citizen influence in the EU decision-making processes was perceived. Voting was seen as the only way to have an impact in EU politics, but as insufficient to increase active participation. Citizens were perceived as passive, lacking knowledge, information or interest in EU politics. Active involvement, education, and self-interest were seen as necessary for democratic participation.
Instruments	The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) was seen as a tool serving citizen participation. The ECI process was, however, perceived as difficult to engage with or unlikely to result in meaningful change.

8.3.1. *Democracy as an Ideal—and in Reality*

First, (liberal) democracy was discussed as an ideal and a principle in the focus groups:

I think democracy is an ideal. So it's not really a standard that we have, but it's something that can never really, truly be reached. And you can measure if it's like closer to the ideal or far away.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 56)

Quite often (see also Section 8.5.) liberal democracy was set in direct connection to the EU:

The agenda is, rightly, the European way of life. However, liberal democracy is not promoted as such, but as a European way of life, a European way of life, a European way of life. In a camouflaged way, so to speak, it is rightly trying to extend the power and influence of the European Union in the world.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 26)

Students also showed a nuanced understanding of what the concept of democracy means. They stated that liberal democracy is changeable, complex, happens on multiple levels, and requires certain conditions.

So in my personal opinion, I think the EU, some countries more than others, are closer to those ideals. But I think there is always the case, that it's more like a fluid thing. It's not static, so it changes every day through every decision, every court decision, every political decision. There's always like, it's in motion. [. . .] So yeah, it's an ongoing process. And I think it's not just for the EU, but for every country. And once again, it's a very complex thing. So I think it's on multilevel. It's in personal choices, decisions, it's institutional level, it's governments working with each other on the international level.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 56)

This quote hints at that both the complexity and the multilevel nature of democracy in the EU is well perceived by the students.

Furthermore, students were not only aware that there are different understandings and definitions of democracy, but that democracy is a contested concept in academia as well:

If you go to the literature about democratisation and the extent to which certain countries are democratic I think particular authors or particular scholars would say yes this is democratic because the index that he used or she used it would be highly successful but the same another scholar dealing with the

same the same countries and using other index will argue that this is not really democratic so it's really a very relative.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 52)

The students were very conscious of the procedural character of liberal democracy emphasising, for example:

I believe, getting into this whole bureaucratic system it takes a lot of time and even when you do get a lot in to this, which we have been saying, the process of changing things within the EU takes a lot of time.

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 159)

Students also said there might be costs of democratic processes:

[. . .] of course it's bad if it takes a lot of time and in the end like the policy does not represent anyone's opinion and it's just been taking a lot of time to go through the administrative process that it has to go through, so there is this like danger of like time being, if it's completely inefficient yet bad.

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 160)

8.3.2. *The EU as an Ideal or as a Polity Full of Democratic Deficits?*

The EU as a democracy was discussed in controversial ways. The EU was on one hand described as democratic or even as incorporating an ideal of liberal democracy, mainly because of the regular EP elections and the fact that it is based on the core principles of liberal democracy, the rule of law, and a fair representation. On the other hand, the EU was described as distant, untransparent, and not democratic enough. Democracy in the EU was also discussed as unsatisfactory, and legitimacy problems were mentioned.

Elections, Representation, and Liberal Democracy

Some of the following quotes illustrate the arguments for the perspective that emphasises the EU as representing liberal democratic ideas, especially in comparison to other countries or regions in the world (see also Section 8.5.).

[The EU] rests on the foundations of liberal democracy, law, equality [. . .] because of its ideology, its agenda of liberal democracy for the rest of the world.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 15)

Elections were seen as one main criterion for the EU to be democratic:

I think, EU it's a democracy, in that way. You can vote in the EU elections, everybody can, you can vote who is sent to represent and then all the issues are voted on.

(Finland, 1st FG, Pos. 273)

EP elections were discussed as fair and open:

[. . .] you have a kind of fair, open democratic process when the people vote.
[. . .] Okay in every country it's different [. . .] but still through representatives I think it's kind of clear and fair.

(Germany, 3rd FG, Pos. 138)

Representation in the EP was judged to be balanced:

The European Parliament works this way that all countries are represented, even the smallest one, in kind of share quantity and the decisions are also taken not by just simple majority but progressive majority and I think it's kind of fair.

(Germany, 3rd FG, Pos. 159)

Distance, Complexity, and Power Relations

Other students argued that the EU was not democratic enough, mainly criticising distance, complexity, intransparency, and the effects of power relations (see in detail Section 8.7.1.). As opposed to such arguments, another take on the EU's democratic deficit was to argue that the EU does not need to be democratic. Democracy and elections in the member states were seen as sufficient for democratic legitimisation:

[. . .] it is obvious that we do not need one such institution as is made up of national democracies to function as a democracy. It does not have to have a democratic impetus [. . .] if the European Union went into even greater democratisation, I think that there would be even less consensus and that it would be even more difficult to reach decisions.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 169)

All in all, the students' judgements of the EU's quality of democracy quite apparently depended on the standard used: When the standard is (only) the core of liberal democracy, i.e. elections, representations, and liberal values, the EU scored well. When the standard is higher and includes also balanced power relations, high input legitimacy, a balanced representation of social groups, and a high level of transparency and accountability, the EU scored less well.

8.3.3. *Democracy in the EU Decision-Making Process*

The features of the EU decision-making process were discussed in a differentiated way: The students compared the democratic potential of the EU institutions, with a critical view especially on the EP's powers. Bureaucracy and technocracy were criticised. In addition, the culture of compromise that is practised in the EU, i.e. the ways political decisions are negotiated especially in the Council, who decides in unanimity in most cases, was criticised as depoliticising. The culture of compromise was also found in the trilogues between Council, EC, and EP that take place

before law projects get into public voting in the EP (see Section 8.8.3. for more details and students' statement).

The EP as the Most Democratic Institution—And a Criticism of Council and EC

The EP was generally described as the most democratic EU institution because it is elected directly by the EU citizens (see also Section 8.1.):

[. . .] the European Parliament is the most democratic of the European institutions, because it has been directly elected since 1979, if I'm not mistaken. This is precisely why I think that it is the place of democracy, in a way, even if we often talk about the problems of democratic deficit within the institutions. With this instrument, with this institution, there are nevertheless statements and positions taken by the representatives of European citizens, and this is very important!

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 12)

But there were also more critical views of the EP:

We have been reminded that only in this European Parliament do we have representatives at all, and that it is quite open to question whether they represent the interests of the citizens of the Republic of Croatia and, indeed, of the citizens of the European Union.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 86)

One student mentioned a lack of powers of the EP:

In practice, as these are not truly European elections and as the Parliament does not really have the role that it would have in a parliamentary system, this is not what will be the most important. It is the Commission that has its agenda and therefore, it is not the elections that will make it possible to change things.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 274)

The perception of the EP's powers as limited led students to criticise the quality of democracy in the EU:

It's not a real democracy, there is a deficit of democracy and it starts from the parliament because I a European I am given the right to vote but at the same time the parliament that I am directly choosing as a European citizen does not have the power I wish it would have.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 48)

These quotes underline that several students still saw the EP as democratically deficient and lacking powers, even after the Lisbon Treaty reforms. These upgraded the previous Co-Decision-Procedure to the Ordinary Legislative Procedure, in which

the EP and the Council decided jointly on law proposals. The Lisbon Treaty made more than 40 new policy areas subject to this procedure, added more policy areas to the Consent Procedure and provided the EP with similar rights to the Council in budgetary matters.

But the students still perceived a lack of competencies of the EP, in particular because they said that it lacks the competence for legal initiatives. However, as according to article 225 Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), the EP has an indirect right to legal initiatives, i.e. it can incite the EC to make a law proposal, but not directly propose laws (European Parliament 2024)—even if only the EC possesses the immediate and direct competence to legal initiatives. This means that the students on the one hand have a point: The EP does not have a full-fledged right to legislative initiative. On the other hand, they downplay the EP's *de facto* right to initiative and hence the competencies the EP possesses in reality. Such misperceptions of the real existing power relations in the EU were rather frequent, as will be discussed later. One student hence concluded that

[. . .] the Commission has more power to suggest a new legislation and then after the Parliament and the Council are checking this.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 48)

The students' strong desire for the EP to hold more powers might suggest, as noted in Section 8.1., a preference for institutions possessing a direct legitimation through direct elections.

Students emphasised throughout the focus groups that the EP consists of directly elected politicians, whereas EC and Council are more indirectly legitimised—as is usual for executive bodies in a system of balance of powers. Nevertheless, many students adopted a critical perspective on Council and EC and judged the EP as the directly legitimised body to be more legitimate. Such views led the students to claim Council and EC to be neither representative nor democratic:

[. . .] the European Parliament passes various resolutions, other decisions, but in fact the main policy of the European Union is decided by other institutions, as you well know, and they do not seem to be nearly as representative and democratic as, for example, the European Parliament.

(Bulgaria, 1st FG, Pos. 88)

Compared to the EC and the Council the EP was thus generally perceived as not possessing enough rights and/or powers:

[. . .] some institutions have more power than others, that there are more things that happen in the Council of Ministers in terms of decisions [which is] democratic flaw.

(France, 3rd FG, Pos. 107)

The following quote underlines that the perception of what is a legitimate institution is strongly, or solely, linked to the fact that it is elected:

[. . .] you can't vote for Ursula von der Leyen for example, the head of the European Commission.

(Germany, 3rd FG, Pos. 138)

The roles of EC and Council in the law-making processes were criticised because they are not directly elected:

[. . .] we just vote for the one institution that needs the help of the other one that is not directly elected to pass any laws and the only one institution that can actually propose laws is also not directly elected.

(Slovenia, 3rd FG, Pos. 141)

Students described it as a problem that institutions that are not directly elected have influence on decision-making at all:

[. . .] we can only elect the members of the parliament but not from the Commission or from the Council of Ministers. Especially the Council of Ministers has a lot of influence on the decision-making and the legislative.

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 121)

These statements not only reflect perceived differences in political powers. They also show a bias that does not correspond to the idea of checks and balances. In any national liberal democratic system, there will be directly elected bodies and indirectly legitimised or non-majoritarian bodies, and there will be a legislative, an executive, and a judicative. Among these three only the legislative will be directly elected. The EU shows a similar repartition in its institutional system. In the case of the EU, the students problematised that EC and Council are not directly elected—but these have executive function and, hence, according to the classical repartition of legislative, executive, and judicative, should not be elected, but instead appointed or approved by Parliament, just as it is the case of the EC. This means that the students use a standard for the EU that they do not use with regard to the nation-states.

In light of the students' capacity and knowledge in the matter and despite the fact that they discussed the EU institutional system at some length in their classes, this criticism is surprising because it marks a critical perception that for one misses the institutional reality of a multilevel system in which the Council represents the government members of the member states, and second, it leaves out the fact that the EC is approved in a vote by the EP. In other words, even the MA students, who are experts in the subject, may not fully grasp the complexity of the EU institutional system.

Multilevel Democracy Creates Democratic Flaws

The students also discussed the EU's multilevel character and the ongoing tension between federalism and intergovernmentalism. They linked this discussion to their

criticism of the indirectly legitimised institutions EC and Council, and to their preference for the directly legitimised EP:

You just have to look at where the Commission comes from, it is basically a will of the States, the appointment of the Commissioners and the Commissioners do not constitute a real government and yet they have the legislative initiative. But it is not a real government, they do not come from the Parliament, even if of course the Parliament is involved in the appointment of the Commissioners, it remains the member states.

However, the student added that

[. . .] as long as the states do not have the real political will to really move towards something more federalist and therefore to accept to let go of their sovereignty a little, then there will be these brakes that will persist in the institutional system for all the internal policies of the European Union.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 83)

This quote hints at the ongoing controversies in the EU and in academia on the future paths for EU integration. The underlying question that the students touched upon is whether the member states want to collaborate more or less and thereby provide the EU with more or less competencies:

I think that there is like a bit of an issue that is like the classic issue of the EU between federalism or like more like more supranational, and [. . .] more like I feel like a system that is more democratic is more federal.

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 197)

Students pointed out conflicts of interest between the institutions because of the differences of supranational and intergovernmental orientations:

[. . .] the Council represents the nations, right? The nation states and everything. So I believe that the nation concerns and comforts as the European as a whole. But when it comes to the Parliament or the EU Commission, I would believe that they would see the Europe as a whole more than something that represents the nation itself.

(Germany, 3rd FG, Pos. 170)

This quote indicates a distinction between the Council's focus on national interests and the EP's and the EC's supranational perspective on European interests.

8.3.4. *Input Legitimacy*

The students strongly supported the importance of input legitimacy and hence emphasised the function of EP elections and the powers of the EP. Moreover, they

discussed a number of details with regard to the EP and the election process—namely the function of head candidates, the distribution of mandates, and the question to what extent EP elections are national by-elections.

Head Candidates

The students were largely critical of the handling of the head candidates process, especially since in 2019 none of the head candidates had become EC president. Instead of European People's Party's (EPP) head candidate Manfred Weber, Ursula von der Leyen (also EPP) had been proposed by the European Council and later approved by the EP.

[. . .] the candidates who are in charge of elections to the European Parliament have not become the European Commission's predecessors.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 47)

This led students to question the consequences for the balance of powers in the EU:

Ursula von der Leyen was appointed by Parliament by just a few votes. If the Parliament had said no at that time, the institutional balance might have been upset, and in that case the European elections had a real European dimension [but it is] executive that draws up the texts.

(France, 3rd FG, Pos. 113)

Students' criticism is grounded in the standards they expect democracy in the EU to keep. They desired a high impact of input legitimacy and elections and broad competencies for the directly elected EP. Students also claimed a more direct and transparent link between EP elections and the selection of the EC president. This indicates a desire for a greater transparency and accountability in the EU's democratic processes.

Distribution of Mandates

The students also discussed whether EP elections are representative or not, engaging in a critical discussion of the different sizes of member states and whether this leads to an inequality of the vote. The EU system of a degressive distribution of votes leads to MEPs from smaller member states representing less citizens than MEPs from larger member states. The weight of votes from smaller member states thus is relatively bigger, which was seen critically by some students. Interestingly, in this discussion, students tended to agree, even if they came from both smaller and bigger member states. The nationality does not seem to have impacted their views.

I think also, the sort of stabilising features with the big and small countries is sort of directed to wrong paths. Finland has a much larger proportion of

representation in the European Parliament. We should have around six MEPs and we have 13 and Germany would, should do to 90 million people living in Germany they should have a lot more than 96, but the stabilisation is made in the parliament.

(Finland, 3rd FG, Pos. 532–534)

Seat allocation in the EP was also seen in a positive light by students from smaller countries:

Also this seat allocation, that seems to me to be so much an indication that Slovenia also has a voice, proportional to its size and that, but we are not going to beat Germany in the vote now, but we have a say.

(Slovenia, 2nd FG, Pos. 96)

Students defended the imbalances in representation throughout the focus groups:

I think that this model of representative democracy, which is a fruit of the European Union, is the best possible one, because I think that a one-member-one-vote democracy would definitely kill off the biggest countries, and that the biggest deficit would be in Croatia itself, as one of the smaller members.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 191).

Moreover, many students regarded the larger member states as still being more powerful than smaller ones (see Sections 8.2.6. and 8.7.2.) despite the EP voting system of a degressive distribution of votes:

I know that in certain situations certain countries have more power than others, certain member states just based on their population. So I think that's kind of where my mind went to. Germany is definitely going to have more of a voice than Malta, for example. So I think that's kind of where my head was. There's not an equal presentation in that sense in certain parts.

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 120)

Second-Order Elections?

Another point of criticism was the hierarchy of elections in Europe. The following statements indicate that the students perceived EP elections as less important in comparison to national ones, and as very much nationally oriented. The fact that EP elections are held as according to different national voting procedures and use national candidate lists was criticised quite much. Students argued that this reduced the impact and meaning of EP elections, and moreover it opened the opportunity for them to become an occasion for protest votes. All this links to the debate on “second-order” elections in academia, which is a traditional criticism (Reif and

Schmitt 1997; see the discussion in Wiesner 2023), i.e. mainly concern national questions instead of EU policy issues.

One student emphasised the EP elections as an occasion for protest against the national governments:

[. . .] generally the European elections are an opportunity for citizens to challenge national power.

(France, 3rd FG, Pos. 48)

Some students questioned the importance of EP elections and compared them to national elections:

So, if you think back, at the last election, that was like a really big thing, it was covered. There was a lot of media coverage and I think that was just there was media coverage for the European Parliament election, but it was less than national elections.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 66)

Students also assumed that citizens would prefer participating in national elections:

I think that many people do not see the importance of the European Union, the matters in which it is competent. As a result, they will favour a national election such as the Presidential election because it is the symbol of the heads of state, it is this kind of thing whereas many decisions are taken at European level.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 35)

Another student compared voter turnouts in national and EP elections:

But when it comes to the EU, especially for Slovenia, we can witness very low participation rates. So, we have around 25, 28 % of people taking part at these elections. [. . .] participation at the national elections is usually higher right, it might not be very high. [. . .] but if we compare it to the participation at EU elections, the difference is enormous.

(Slovenia, 3rd FG, Pos. 140)

One student said that in terms of citizen influence (on the policy impact), the French presidential elections were more important than EP elections:

[. . .] if I want to have any influence on the European Union, in fact it's in the presidential elections in France that I have to go and vote.

(France, 3rd FG, Pos. 113)

Such arguments on a perceived lower importance of EP elections were often linked to a perceived tension. The parties running for the EP elections were

perceived to be mainly putting forward national topics and positions instead of EU-related ones:

The debates always revolved solely around the national positions of the parties running in the European elections.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 130)

This alleged national orientation was discussed as negative for the EU:

When the political offer is made by people who have national interests or a national program, this does not help Europe.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 140)

8.3.5. *Citizen Participation and Citizen Influence*

The students were explicitly asked whether they thought to have an influence on the EU. In general, they expressed the feeling that citizen influence was low, and they equally estimated their individual influence as being low. Importantly, they felt both to be limited not only in the EU, but in representative democracy in general. Most students argued that the only way they could have an influence on the EU was through voting.

I mean, for the election at least to have some influence because you just you can decide somewhat in the majorities, and that also leads to the direction. But like from my personal opinion, I myself feel it's not that big of an influence, but that I think it's always the case with representative democracy.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 74)

In this line of thought, another student also estimated his/her own influence as rather low:

[. . .] the only feeling I have that I can influence it is usually the European elections, first of all, and secondly, with the mentality that I'm basically going to go round the ballot box at the national level, I mean also the policy that the party I'm voting for is advocating at the level of the EU, or at the level of the European Parliament, and I'm going to go round the ballot box at the EU level.

(Slovenia, 1st FG, Pos. 81)

One student criticised elections altogether as being insufficient to increase citizen participation:

I'm quite critical of voting as it is practiced today. You know, we put in people's heads that the most important thing is to go and vote when there is an election and then the rest of the time, you wait for the next election,

that's the idea. I find this quite problematic, because it doesn't encourage participation and European feeling on a daily basis because therefore we only express ourselves when there is an election. [. . .] We see a lack of interest today, but we will not solve it today. If we see a lack of interest today and we take measures to improve political interest, it will be seen tomorrow, because there is always a generation, so information is very important.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 140)

The feeling of having little influence was linked to a criticism of the way the EU's institutions are set up:

[. . .] the vast majority of the bodies in the European Union and their members are appointed, and for the European Parliament, we are running in an equal parliamentary election, and I think that one vote of one citizen really counts for very little here.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 50)

These quotes hint to an overall impression that was further strengthened by the perceptions of politicisation (see Section 8.8.): The students estimated their influence on political processes and representative democracy in general and at the EU and the national level in particular as very low. This is linked to them seeing themselves as passive citizens only or mainly.

Citizens' Passivity Versus Their Need to Be Active

The students thus implicitly positioned themselves as relatively powerless and de facto not very active. Interestingly, as discussed earlier this goes along with a criticism of citizens in general not being active and interested enough in European politics and elections. In other words: Students described themselves as not having possibilities to influence EU politics—but criticise “the citizens”, i.e. apparently other or average citizens, for not being active and interested enough.

The point is that perhaps citizens do not care enough and do not participate enough even in the elections to the European Parliament to prove that. To prove to ourselves that this Union is democratic.

(Bulgaria, 1st FG, Pos. 85)

In this line of thought, another student criticised citizen passivity:

People who don't vote don't care and have no desire to exercise any control [. . .] apathy is a refusal to exercise power and you consent to be subject to that power.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 111, 113)

Several students, as discussed, expressed that citizens are not informed enough:

I do not think that the citizens are aware of the way in which decisions are made, nor how they are made.

(Croatia, 2nd, Pos. 49)

Citizens' lack of interest was attributed to the negative image of the EU:

[. . .] we are not able to convince people that it is important, and to tell them that Brussels is something other than a scapegoat that will make sure that you have less food in your fridge at the end of the month.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 106)

Several statements show that the focus group participants regarded "EU citizens" in general as responsible for claiming their democratic rights. Since the students regularly spoke of "Us" when they spoke about citizen political activity, they included themselves. Statements raised the need for citizens to deal actively with EU politics, gather information themselves, and learn about the EU system—instead of relying on having all the information delivered without any self-effort:

At a given moment, I believe that it is also up to us, as citizens, to invest ourselves in these democratic processes, whatever they may be, by possibly participating in movements that will, for example, finalise the European construction.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 75)

I think it's up to the individual because it is a democracy after all and it's kind of up to us to educate ourselves and inform ourselves.

(Bulgaria, 1st FG, Pos. 158)

Students highlighted the necessity of active involvement, personal responsibility, and self-interest in European politics and democratic processes, because the elected representatives

[. . .] are not obliged to ring us on the phone and say: "Today, this happened."

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 120)

While the students, on the one hand, thus positioned themselves as rather passive, on the other hand, they had a clear opinion on political passivity as such: It was judged critically and seen as a problem for democracy in the EU. So "citizens" need to become more active in the eyes of the students—but the students did not see themselves as actors because they esteemed not to have enough influence.

This apparent contradiction leads to two possible interpretations. The first one is that the students mean themselves when they claim more information and more political activity, i.e. that they address their own rather passive position in an

implicit self-criticism. Students refer to passive citizens saying “Us”. The other interpretation relates to the distinction of students and “ordinary citizens” (see also Section 8.2.). In this perception, the students have a clear view of citizens in general and do not see themselves as “ordinary citizens”. At least implicitly, as stated in some quotes earlier, they see a difference of knowledge and information and claim for more information and political activity of “ordinary citizens”. This implies a tacit distinction of students as informed citizens and “ordinary citizens” as uninformed, i.e. a distinction along the lines of education and social status. However, why students then come to the conclusion that “ordinary citizens” need to become more active rather than the well-informed students is unclear. Maybe this is because students vote in EP elections and other “ordinary” citizens don’t?

European Citizens’ Initiative

The students intensely discussed the European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI). An ECI can concern any topic that is relevant for the EU. It must be registered online by the EC. After that, it must be signed (supported) by at least 1 million people in different member states, with national thresholds that correspond to the number of the MEPs elected in each member state, multiplied by the total number of MEPs in at least seven EU countries. Signatures can be collected within a time limit of 12 months. After the decisive date, the collected statements of support have to be verified by national authorities. The next step is submitting the initiative, together with the information on the support and funding received for it to the EC. Within one month a meeting with representatives of the EC will be conducted to explain details. Within three months a public hearing at the EP is to be held and the EP can optionally hold a debate in a full (plenary) session. Within six months from then, the EC will communicate in all official EU languages what action it will propose in response to the initiative (if any) and the reasons for taking (or not taking) action. Importantly, the EC is not obliged to propose legislation (explanation taken from European Union 2024a, 2024b).

In most of the focus group the ECI came up at least once. Some students regarded the ECI quite positively:

So, there is the part that I can influence, there is the part that I can you know be like a citizen of the EU. SO, I can do, I can sign these citizen initiatives, I can contact the politician who’s [sic] close. I can, I can do something about some things.

(Finland, 1st FG, Pos. 531)

Other focus group participants were more pessimistic about the use and potentials of the ECI:

Even this citizens’ initiative, I have to say I have never even one, I have never made a recommendation on their website so, because I have, and here I can admit that I have a bit of an attitude or a mentality that it will probably be

read but then it will be handed over in a drawer. I admit I could be wrong, but this feeling persists inside me.

(Slovenia, 1st FG, Pos. 81)

The strict conditions for an ECI were seen critically:

[. . .] on a very superficial level that makes me feel like yes the EU listens to you, but it only listens to you if like one million people want to say the same thing about you, so for example if I am just half a million people having this one problem and demanding change on this, my opinion is it not valid [. . .] so it does listen but I think it is very hard to get your voice across and I would not know what the solution for this is.

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 159)

Another student found the ECI to be

[. . .] a good idea on paper, but very badly put into practice [. . .]. We ask European citizens to respect the conditions aimed at creating the idea of a European involvement, you have to be from several States, as if there was a European feeling, whereas we do not have this requirement at all on the part of European leaders.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 140)

These quotes underline the perceived distance between EU elites and citizens (see Section 8.7.).

Students also criticised the fact that the EC can decide what consequences to draw from an ECI, as explained before, and that an accepted ECI does not necessarily have a significant impact:

If and when you occupy a million citizens who have signed something that is of great importance to them, the European Commission can block it at any moment, as it does at the same time. There are only a small number of successful European building initiatives, and the successful ones that have passed are, in reality, unbeatable, because they are the kind of policies that do not have a significant impact on anyone's life, so definitely from this side, as a builder, I do not feel represented.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 59)

In the context of the ECI discussion, the students again explicitly hinted at the responsibility of citizens. They underlined the need to make use of the ECI and participate actively in European politics:

[. . .] in principle, the European Union as such is not to blame as such, but it's a problem of people not seeing the opportunity and maybe even these mechanisms that are there, they are not being used at all. Maybe everyone

thinks that they will not even be taken into account, but maybe if they were used en masse, maybe the European Union would also see that there is some interest, that maybe they would rather also look at these application forms through citizens' initiatives.

(Slovenia 1st FG, Pos. 109)

On the whole, as said earlier, students thus had a strong normative ideal of what active citizens should do: engage, be active, inform themselves, and use the possibilities for participation that there are. It remains an open question why this strong ideal does not transform in student political engagement but instead goes along with a feeling of passivity and powerlessness.

8.4. EU Values as European Values: Meanings and Ascriptions

As said earlier, the focus group discussions raised aspects that had not been explicitly asked for or expected. The first aspect is the importance the students ascribed to a number of normatively connoted values. Even though there was no question specifically focused on EU values, students themselves actively evoked them. They talked about values and value-oriented concepts, as well as about characteristics of the EU polity that, for them, enhance these values.

Importantly, the students quite much equated Europe and the EU. The following statements underline strongly that the label "European" is mostly used in direct connection with, or synonymously to, the concept "EU". This links to a finding discussed in Section 8.2., namely that the EU has been quite successful to sell itself to the students. Not only were the EU achievements such as free movement and core policies such as the common currency or Erasmus+ taken for granted by the students, they also expressed a high identification with the EU and could define and did defend the EU's values as they are expressed in the treaties.

Since the students overall identified quite strongly with the clearly depicted catalogue of EU values, they critically discussed that not all countries—the students here did not make a distinction between the governments and the citizens of those countries—adhere to these values. Values thus also appeared as contested and as a source of disunity in the EU. Based on their defence of the EU's values, the students took positions with regard to several contested issues. Namely, they described value conflicts with regard to migration (see later Section 8.4.4.), rule of law conflicts (see Section 8.6.3.), and the War against Ukraine (see Section 8.6.2.).

8.4.1. The Classical Liberal Values—With Some Additions

The values referred to were mostly the classical liberal values: *tolerance, freedom, personal development, (liberal) democracy, humanism, peace, rights of individuals* (and concretely LGBTQ rights and rights of the elderly), and the *rule of law*. It seems that the students associate the EU exactly with the values it claims to stand for—the liberal ones.

In line with the EU motto of “unity in diversity”, the students also emphasised value-oriented concepts that can be associated with of the goal to uniting cultural differences, such as *cultural exchange*, *empathy*, and *inclusivity*. These might be interpreted as a new generation of liberal values. They were mentioned positively by most students, but at times also critically discussed. Several students also mentioned more republican values such as *solidarity*, *subsidiarity*, *equality*, and a *feeling of community, togetherness, or cohesion*.

When set in relation to the EU’s values as lined out in article 2 TEU it thus becomes obvious that most of them are named in the focus groups:

The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the member states in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.

(European Union 2016, 17)

One decisive concept was not explicitly mentioned in the focus groups, though—*human dignity*. Moreover, in addition to the values listed in article 2 TEU, the students highlighted output-oriented concepts (see also Section 8.6.). Some of these refer to liberal values, such as *free movement* and *free market*. Others are more materially oriented, such as *standards of living*. And finally the students mentioned values that refer to processes of understanding and finding compromises, such as *collaboration*, *cooperation*, *deliberation*, and *culture of compromise* (often in a critical understanding see Section 8.2. and 8.7.). Both the mention of the *common market* and *free movement*—two core traits of the EU, as discussed in Section 8.2.3.—and the emphasis on *collaboration* and *compromise* can be interpreted as further signs of a generalised EU identification. All in all, the fact that the students thus regularly referred actively and positively to these values underlines the fact that they see the EU as a value-based community and indeed as a “normative power” (Manners 2002).

8.4.2. *The EU as an Incorporation of Values*

Most of these values and concepts were positively described, but without necessarily making distinctions. They seem to represent a unified catalogue of European values for the students:

[. . .] for me all the values that are associated (with the EU) are very close to my heart. [. . .] We may be looking for a common solution solidarity in achieving it, so I rather think of abstract things like solidarity, freedom, understanding, empathy, tolerance. This is what is most important to me personally.

(Bulgaria, 1st FG, Pos. 25, 62)

Several students described the values as defining traits of the EU and as a unifying factor. The values and concepts named earlier were described as part and defining characteristic of a European identity, or for Europeanness altogether. Some even identified them as something that distinguishes the EU from the rest of the world. Interestingly these views were shared by non-EU students, too (see Section 8.5.).

I think there is really a European way of life, a European culture, common grounds which are very numerous and that it is really easy and pleasant to talk with these European fellow citizens and even to live with them.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 364)

Another student also emphasised that Europeans were united by similarities with regard to language and culture:

[. . .] when two people in the same country can disagree on what it means even to be French or be Swiss you know like we do not have to agree but there is still something that links us, like language, values, culture, region—that is the old way again the 18th century way.

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 131)

A number of other students described values as a source of European identity:

[. . .] whether you're European depends on how you behave—your values and so on—rather than having seen and measured yourself say.

(Bulgaria, 1st FG, Pos. 149–150)

Another student explained a dual identity:

You integrate into society, we are Slovenians, but on the other hand we are also Europeans. Maybe it is right, even though it may sound harsh, that we follow some common norms and goals, because, after all, we live here.

(Slovenia, 1st FG, Pos. 65)

Yet another student described the EU as “value-setter”:

But also I think, for us, kind of value mind-set, which is related to what they EU does just in general. That they are dealing with the climate crisis that they are dealing with gender pay gap of, equalising genders. And they are dealing with matters of, security and, defence and military. The role of the EU is also is a bit as a kind of value setter.

(Croatia, 3rd FG, Pos. 135)

The EU's values, accordingly, were broadly described as a source for identification. One student in this made allegations to a difference between “Somewheres”,

i.e. cosmopolitan Pro-Europeans and “Anywheres”, i.e. locally rooted people (see Section 8.7.3.):

I would say yes, I feel like a European citizen and in truth I feel like one the most when I am not in Sofia. When I have to defend this conviction in front of other people.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 161)

Despite their large agreement on EU values and their role for identification, the students discussed the idea of a specific European culture and/or European identity in differentiated ways. Some students claimed the need for a European culture:

I associate it with a European culture and I think that it should be developed and in general an autonomous European culture should be created even from the global homogenised culture that comes in this case from the other centre of influence America.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 18)

Others contradicted this claim:

[. . .] for me Europe is really first and foremost a civilisation that has given rise to several cultures, so in the diversity of these cultures different European countries have joined forces to evolve together and build things politically. But we mustn't move towards a European culture, a European people [. . .] for me that's the wrong approach, because that would already be uprooting people even more, and therefore disconnecting the locus of power even further towards something supranational.

(France, 3rd FG, Pos. 101)

The values named earlier, as was said in the beginning, were usually termed “European” and directly related to the EU, which equates the EU and Europe. In more recent member states, they were given a clear future-oriented connotation (Koselleck 2010)—students described them as goals, and they said they represented the EU as an ideal (see Section 8.5.).

I think that in the course of all this, our little democratic Croatian proletariat has come up with one idea: what do we want? We want the West, we want Western values, we want European values and values and institutions and policies, and we want to go in that direction, and I think that is the only future. [. . .] I think that we all want to be the builders of this Europe, [. . .] I think that we need to build up a good picture of Europe if we want this to be our future, a future that we can, in the end, live with, or not for the next ten years, but for the next ten years, not for the next year at the very least.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 95)

The students also critically discussed whether there is an opposition between a value-oriented attachment to the EU and identification with it, and an EU support that is solely based on output. They were concerned that people do not adhere to the EU not because of the values but because of utilitarian motifs, as the following quote underlines:

I would say that here we are rather taking advantage of the technical, logistical advantages of what the EU gives us without recognising and choosing the values and ideas behind the EU as a political body.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 41)

8.4.3. *Unity in Diversity?*

The conceptual cluster of “unity in diversity” was subject to discussions and different opinions. “Unity in diversity” is the EU’s official slogan for indicating that despite differences in languages, regions, cultures, and values, the EU shall be united. The students took this concept up. Some did so in positive ways, discussing heterogeneity as a source for unity in diversity; some were rather critical and problematised a lack of unity (in terms of values).

One camp of students thus discussed “unity in diversity” as a strength of the EU:

[. . .] 27 different countries, different mentalities, different cultures [. . .] can show how much it can function at a higher level.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 91)

The students also discussed how differences were positively integrated by the EU and related to the need of all member states agreeing to a certain set of values for the whole EU:

I think sort of, I hope the European Union address the interests that are common within the European Union and not sort of one set of, well, if the European Union goes in for one set of values I think it should be values that all the member states can agree with.

(Finland, 3rd FG, Pos. 277)

Diversity was seen as leading to complementing each other:

Our European unity lies in the fact that we have different languages, and that’s great, because it means we’re different, we’re in total diversity. It’s this diversity that means we complement each other, we bring different opinions to the table, and we manage to communicate. [. . .] it would have been a lot less fun if we all had the same ideas, and all the same opinions, all the same languages.

(France, 3rd FG, Pos. 48)

Another student put unity in relation to integration:

[. . .] for me, the European Union is basically about the integration of the different countries and people into one common entity. Not an entity but we could say unit.
(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 24)

Students also emphasised difficulties in obtaining unity:

It's so hard to find one thing because there is such a diversity between countries that there would be something for everyone.
(Slovenia, 2nd FG, Pos. 167)

Another camp did not believe in unity in diversity. These students emphasised disagreements and controversies:

I feel concerned for the EU in some ways there is this unity and there is this chaos within the unity like we are obviously we came a far away from the 1940's, and now we have this conflictual dialogue instead of everybody pulling out their guns and shooting at each other, but it still could be improved in many ways.
(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 128)

Another student said the idea of "unity in diversity" was deceiving the citizens:

I think that the motto of the European Union is to be united in diversity, and I think that is a great irony, because the European Union [. . .] has recently lost the ability to bring about some modern trends, modern agendas and ideologies. [. . .] This is an economic union that primarily needs to go ahead and that all these member states need to maintain in their constitution, and I think that the people are aware of this and that few of us, when we hear about the European Union, think of such nice ideas, of equality and non-discrimination. I think that people are being deceived by posters, by campaigns that are constantly being conducted, or which I suspect have the effect of deceiving people.
(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 20)

One student claimed it should not be a goal to achieve a common European culture:

Europe is really first and foremost a civilisation that has given rise to several cultures, so in the diversity of these cultures different European countries have joined forces to evolve together and build things politically. But we mustn't move towards a European culture, a European people [. . .] for me that's the wrong approach, because that would already be uprooting people even more, and therefore disconnecting the locus of power even further towards something supranational.
(France, 3rd FG, Pos. 101)

Another student even said that a forced unification would enhance Euroscepticism:

Euroscepticism comes from the fact that you want to homogenise 27 countries, A and B all start becoming European in the same way, I think that gives rise to Euroscepticism.

(Bulgaria, 1st FG, Pos. 102)

One student referred to potential EU enlargements, hinting at the fact that they could lead to an even greater disunity:

I find this diversity quite problematic. And half the time you want to involve countries that are even more diverse, when we don't have enough already.

(Slovenia, 2nd FG, Pos. 183)

8.4.4. *Value Conflicts: Migration*

The topic that was seen as the most politicised and most controversial (see Sections 8.1., 8.2., and 8.8.)—migration—also raised several discussions about EU values. Many students regarded the way the EU and its member states deal with migration as a questioning of EU values. They critically discussed the EU's border management and termed the EU as “fortress Europe”. In particular, the students argued that the EU's migration policies question or even contradict the values laid out in article 2 TEU.

It has to be noted that this argument reveals a strong and specific interpretation of the EU's values by the students—and an interpretation which is much stronger than the interpretations of the European Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights. The question whether and to what extent the EU's migration policies and border regime are in legal conflict to the values of article 2 TEU has been a legal issue, and several decisions of both the European Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights have not come to the conclusion that there is a breach of values (Branko 2023; Dembour 2021; European Union 2016). This means that students have their own interpretation of the meaning of article 2 TEU that may differ from what the courts decided.

The other relationship with values is the migratory crisis, which confronts Europe with its values, with this reality of the 21st century, which raises questions about the policy to be adopted in relation to these humanist values that Europe is supposed to promote. [. . .] We should not allow ourselves to be tempted by this desire to close in on ourselves in order to escape from something, well, from a result that is ultimately a global responsibility.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 16, 181)

Students specifically referred to the contradiction between the EU's proclaimed values and the ongoing tragedies in the Mediterranean:

[. . .] we display values of welcome, of wanting to be a leader in human rights in the world, and I believe that at the moment there must be some who are drowning in the Mediterranean.

(France 1st FG, Pos. 177)

Some students also perceived a mismatch between the treatment of Ukrainian refugees and refugees fleeing via the Mediterranean. They criticised that for the EU and its member states with regard to Ukrainian refugees a quick reaction was possible, while they failed to address the humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean. Many students named this as a value conflict, or even as discrimination or racism:

I am only happy with the world, perhaps, for the one that is the most controversial, the migrant one. When it comes to the last wave of migrants from Ukraine, all the member states here have brought in immigrants from Ukraine, there has been no ambiguity. So, again, the question is whether there is any question of racism or discrimination against people from the Middle East.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 103)

Several students emphasised that Ukrainians were treated better in the EU than other immigrants. One student related this to their religion:

[It is] clear that Ukrainians are better received because Europe is based on a Judeo-Christian civilisation and because Ukrainian immigrants are closer to Europe than, for example, Syrians.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 105)

Despite the majority of the students thus defending a pro-migration stance and criticising the EU's migration policies, some students also mentioned problems resulting from migration into the EU:

In reality, the European policy of integrating refugees, mainly from the Middle East and North Africa with a different culture, has failed miserably. [. . .] Because the principles of Europe, the ideas of Europe, I believe, are not Christian, but secular, common human, humanistic. Whereas in these cultures, predominantly Muslim cultures, unfortunately we see a tendency towards closed-mindedness. That is, they themselves do not want integration. Not respecting European values and ideals, trying to impose their own.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 235)

Questions about the correct level of tolerance were also raised in this context:

What is divisive is precisely the principle of how to treat refugees. Should we be tolerant towards them, or should we say: "No you came here, we have these values, please respect them."

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 237)

One student mentioned migration as enhancing threats to national cultures:

But I think that there are some countries that are losing their own nation like this and, it's like mixing. For example, in Croatia, there are lot of people moving out and a lot of immigration come inside. And I think that Croatia is kind of losing their own, like a nationality. And I'm kind of worried about that. And it's my, my only one, concern.

(Croatia 3rd FG, Pos. 61)

Another student mentioned that migration can raise fear:

[. . .] when you go outside not everyone looks the same anymore and I think a lot of people have a fear of that and that leads to the racist ideologies.

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 173)

8.5. Europe From the Outside: The EU as Ideal?

A finding that had only been partly expected prior to the study was related to the differences between the views of EU citizens and non-EU citizens. While EU perceptions do not differ that much as according to nationalities of EU citizens, the question whether a person is an EU citizen or not matters a lot. Not only did we find different views from an outside perspective and an inside one. We also found differences between EU perceptions of EU residents and those of non-EU residents.

We discovered this because many international students participated in the focus groups. They can be divided into two subgroups: a) students from other EU countries, e.g. Italians studying in Germany, or b) non-EU citizens, that is, students without EU citizenship (also called "third country nationals"), e.g. US citizens studying in France.

Especially the perspectives of non-EU citizens were highly interesting. They provided what can be termed an outside perspective on the EU in the sense that they do live in the EU, but are not EU citizens and do not benefit from EU citizenship rights. Depending on which country a student comes from and what the related visa status is, the conditions and restrictions for working and traveling within the EU can be demanding. In most cases, the non-EU students had not been born and raised in the EU, but moved there for to study, i.e. relatively recently.

In analysing their statements, several similar patterns arise. Notably, compared to the statements of EU citizens, non-EU citizens described the EU more as an ideal, something they aspire to be part of. This was evident both in a normative sense because the EU was seen as a role model in terms of democratic quality by several students from third countries, and in a utilitarian sense because they would like to benefit from the advantages EU citizens enjoy.

The following resumes both statements by non-EU citizens and by EU citizens residing in another EU country.

8.5.1. *The EU as a Democracy*

To start with, the non-EU citizens described the EU as democratic more clearly and unequivocally than the EU citizens did (see also Section 8.3.). They also compared democracy in the EU to the situation in countries outside of the EU and judged, the EU rather positively in this context. One student concluded that the EU as a whole was more democratic than many other regions or states:

Compared to other regions I know? Yes. Totally. As long as people have the right to vote, as long as the elections are free. As long as people and the parliaments agree on fair and free elections, I think that's at least democratic compared to other regions.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 54)

The following quote comes from a student that apparently had lived outside the EU and then became a European resident. The contact with the EU and his/her life there made him/her realise that without a direct experience the EU can be idealised more easily:

As non-Europeans, maybe we tend to idealise the European Union. That's what I'm experiencing now as a European resident.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 115)

The following statement indicates that the idealisation of the EU by non-EU citizens might relate to the fact that the non-EU students come from countries where democratic practices are not as developed as in the EU:

[. . .] when you look from the outside EU looks very democratic, like from a non-European perspective when you compare it to the middle eastern countries it's definitely much more democratic.

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 193)

These statements indicate that the fact to be resident in the EU, i.e. the concrete experience with the EU's everyday reality, changes the perception of students. Students that are EU residents, i.e. that live in the EU, seem to take on more of an inside perspective on the EU. Such an inside perspective also seems to allow a more differentiated view, distinguishing the different EU member states rather than seeing "Europe" as one monolith.

8.5.2. *EU Passport and EU Citizenship*

As described in Section 8.1., the pictures of the European passport and of the border controls to the EU were among those chosen the most often by the focus group participants. The EU passport was also addressed as a key issue by non-EU citizens. Some described their concrete experiences following from not having an EU

passport, others mentioned the passport as a marker of distinction between Europeans and non-EU citizens.

Yeah, that the EU is like, like a community and, keeps other nationalities, and form of passports out and, that there are no advantages for every nation. So, if you are in the community, you can have them, but it it's not that every country has the same advantages and benefits of it.

(Croatia, 3rd FG, Pos. 11)

The passport also works as a marker of distinction once access into the EU is achieved:

I'm saying is just like if you are not a European citizen [. . .], you will struggle a lot to find work in European Union because it goes with your visa and it goes with these things that are all related to your passport, are all related to your papers. So you know like it's a symbol of like um level playing field within the European Union, but it's also a symbol of exclusion for like everybody else that doesn't have the European Union—like European passport, coming from a different continent, from a different country it's not like—even Turkey you know.

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 39–42)

Moreover, the possession of different passports creates additional distinctions upon entry into the EU. Students did not reflect on the reasons behind different visa regulations, but they were very conscious of the challenges faced by individuals from countries that are subject to stricter visa requirements and immigration controls.

When you come from the United States, it is much easier to enter the EU than if you come from any African country.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 8)

As discussed in Section 8.1., these views fit with the ones by EU citizens: Not only the non-EU students but also the students with an EU citizenship saw it as a privilege to be an EU citizen, and the EU citizens also saw a clear divide between EU citizens and non-EU citizens.

8.5.3. *The Quest for EU Membership and EU Benefits*

The perspective on the EU as an ideal was often linked to a quest for EU membership. This becomes evident in the quote by a Georgian national who said that the vast majority of Georgians supported EU membership:

[. . .] it's not even really a debate in Georgia like they were very much on board.

(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 251)

Given the Georgian government's legal initiatives against EU-based NGOs in the first half of 2024 and the related wave of demonstrations, this statement seems a bit too optimistic—however, it underlines the students' *feeling* that in Georgia a vast majority of citizens supports EU membership.

The student furthermore stressed that the EU enthusiasm in Georgia was

[. . .] in stark contrast to a lot of people or states that have the privilege of being in the EU, like the UK, and they're fed up with it, so to say, or at least disillusioned with the EU.

(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 251)

This quote hints at a perception mentioned earlier: People that lived in the EU for a long time or that are born as EU citizens are either getting used to the EU and its benefits, or obtain a more realist picture that makes the EU lose attraction.

The non-EU citizens also shared the utilitarian view on the EU to the extent that they found access to the EU's benefits attractive. Two characteristics of the EU that were named as benefits by EU citizens (see Sections 8.2. and 8.4.), the common market and free movement, were also described as benefit by non-EU citizens. A non-EU citizen thus highlighted the opportunities connected to free movement in the Schengen area, which is largest free travel area in the world:

[. . .] also you can not only limit it to the one country, you can go to another country. Like one of my friends receive a scholarship where she can study one semester in Germany, another in Switzerland or another country. And I think this is possible only because of this Schengen visa or the Europe as one representation to all the world. It's not just because of the Germany or France or the French? Yeah. So Europe, European Union represents itself as the unity to the world. And I think it's really important to represent as the strongest union to the world. It's really important.

(Germany, 3rd FG, Pos. 34)

8.5.4. *Europeanness and Non-Europeanness*

A final aspect that appeared in many focus groups is Europeanness, i.e. the distinction and definition of specific cultural or value-oriented characteristics that were seen or interpreted as "European" (see Section 8.4.). Europeanness was often expressed in comparison to non-Europeanness. Concretely, students felt or realised Europeanness when they were in contact with non-Europeans or when travelling, both inside and outside the EU.

A Finnish student, coming from a non-EU country, said:

[. . .] maybe if you stay in your little European country throughout like all your life you don't realise all these connections and you are like focusing more on the differences, between you know Germans and French when like overall it's not that much different.

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 100)

This quote underlines a key aspect of the findings: Upon thinking and based on their experiences with travelling, the students, with or without EU citizenship, perceived the EU quite much as united. An EU citizen said they

[. . .] started feeling more like European in the last few years when I started traveling more around the European Union.

(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 146)

A student from Finland with Turkish background had the same impression about EU citizens travelling to Turkey:

[. . .] if they are all within the limits of the EU everybody obviously chooses their own nationality because when you say: “Well I’m European,” it does not really clarify that much for any of us it—you could be from any country.

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 128)

This means that students start to realise the unity and sameness of the EU, the Europeanness, when they leave their country of origin and travel, either inside the EU or outside of it.

In sum, the feeling of “being European” seems to intensify while abroad, and this seems to relate to two processes of realisation. Inside the EU students seem to realise how similar the EU member states are to one another, how united the EU appears, and they also realise how much EU citizens benefit from being an EU citizen (if they are one) because they can travel freely.

If EU citizens are outside of the EU, their increasing feeling of Europeanness can be attributed to the experience of being in a non-EU environment, which apparently makes them even more strongly aware of the EU’s benefits that sometimes they had taken for granted previously—such as free roaming, the use of the same currency, or free movement without long queues at the borders. When students find themselves in a non-EU context, these benefits seem to work as a reminder of their European identity and the privileges associated with it. Upon reflection, students also are aware of the fact that otherwise they tend to take these benefits for granted. This means, once more, that the feeling of Europeanness when in contact with an outside perspective is quite much related to concrete benefits, i.e. to output or utilitarian aspects of EU citizenship.

However, this mechanism is not uniform for all students. To conclude, there are also students who did not particularly sense their Europeanness when they were abroad:

[. . .] from the outside I never had that feeling of being seen as European [. . .] when I was living in Australia that is how the American’s would describe themselves, where are you from, I’m from Oregon, I’m from Texas, and we were like we do not care that you are from America.

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 143–145)

8.6. The EU as a Global Actor in Times of War and Climate Change

Another finding that was not explicitly asked for but can be derived from analysis of all focus groups of all countries is that almost all students claimed for the EU to become a stronger global actor and an agenda-setter in a worldwide scale. This means that the students extrapolated from what the EU does today mainly inside Europe to what it should do in the future: defend and apply its policies, successes, activities, and values in the world. The claim for the EU to become a global actor was, on one hand, expressed in a general sense, on the other hand it was oriented to different concrete policy areas.

The specific areas of global politics the students expected the EU to take action in directly refer to narratives and policy fields that the students either identified with or deemed as important, and in which they attribute a capacity to act to the EU. The students named the following issues:

- 1) Some students emphasised the EU as a guarantor of peace, and this led them to claim that the EU should become more of a geopolitical actor, defending peace and its values in the world.
- 2) Regarding Russia and the War against Ukraine, all students saw the EU in charge, but differences in their opinions became visible.
- 3) The EU was also called to defend its values internally in the rule of law conflicts, and putting them forward externally with regard to democracy promotion (see also 8.4.).
- 4) The students uniformly claimed for EU to act against climate change, namely stating it should work towards setting up new rules, laws, and guidelines in the world.

The expectancy for the EU to become an agenda setter is expressed in a general sense in these quotes:

I mean, strategic goals are set and so on by everybody, and as citizens and member states and so on we move in that direction sometimes slowly sluggishly with delays with peripheries and so on, but ultimately the European Union sets the ultimate goals and that we all aspire to.

(Bulgaria, 1st FG, Pos. 41)

Students emphasised the EU's capacity to act:

[. . .] even though there is much going on in the world today, I think, the EU is capable of solving many problems just because of this unity, because we have so many different opinions then we can like get the best out of it, which suits everyone.

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 56)

In the following the areas this refers to will be analysed in detail. The quotes indicate that the wish for EU action went along with the students' rather passive approach:

They expected the EU “to do something” instead of proclaiming calls for action for themselves or stating their own potential for change and political involvement.

8.6.1. *The EU as a Guarantor of Peace—and Geopolitical Actor*

As said earlier (see Section 8.2.4.), in most focus groups the EU was discussed as a guarantor of peace, which marks the students’ positive reception of an EU founding myth. As discussed, some students extended this mission into the future and claimed the EU to become

[. . .] more of a geopolitical player when it comes to crisis prevention, to peacekeeping [and to develop] its global security policy [. . .] even further [. . .] being part of a more autonomous action while keeping the cooperation, the partnership that actually exists at the moment.

(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 41)

These claims were discussed in relation to two topics: the EU’s general geopolitical influence and its actions in the War against Ukraine (see later Section 8.6.2.). Some students already saw the EU as an important geopolitical actor and big global player; others claimed the EU has to do more, should gain more power and influence, and act in more unified fashion.

The first group of arguments is reflected in the following quotes. They reflect different dimensions of what the EU’s power is attributed to, beginning with economic power:

[. . .] I think the EU is still the largest, I think, as a whole, they have the largest GDP in the world or the second largest, and they’re still a very powerful bloc, politically and economically in the world.

(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 251)

The EU’s geopolitical impact was directly linked to its economic performance:

[. . .] the influence of the European Union is spreading, especially through economy, through trade, through the euro, through everything. [. . .] this is the very real impact of the European Union.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 38)

The emphasis of economic power was complemented by referring to hierarchies in the world:

I feel like it [the EU] plays a big role in maintaining the hierarchy in the world.

(Finland, 1st FG, Pos. 203)

The EU was also attributed leadership:

The EU has potential and is already a global leader in certain segments.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 375)

The EU was described as a geopolitical player in different other ways, i.e. by its foreign policy and military means, but via research, innovation, and technology as well:

Yeah, we've heard a lot about the EU being a geopolitical player but this could happen not only via foreign policy and military means but also through research, innovation and technological tools.

(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 52)

In addition, students said the EU should act when there is a crisis or decisive geopolitical events. One student emphasised that this triggers EU identity:

Yes, it seems to me that when this crisis comes, then this identification with the European Union grows. When nothing is happening it's like "Ah!", and then when it is, then the European Union will solve the problem.

(Slovenia, 2nd FG, Pos. 123)

These statements indicate a rather positive judgement of the EU's performance as a global geopolitical actor so far. However, there were some criticisms, too.

One student said that the EU should act more on its own and not depend on other countries or their actions in world politics:

So me, my expectations from the EU, is that it should have more independent politics. Not being so much dependent on other actions overseas and to make decisions in their own interests.

(Germany, 3rd FG, Pos. 113)

Some students pointed out that the EU needed more consensus among its member states in order to be better equipped to address crises and strengthen its global position. They perceived a need for the EU to speak with one voice and avoid displaying internal conflicts:

Unfortunately, what the European Union needs to do, in my opinion, is to make an effort to stand up for itself, so that when there are no major differences on certain important issues [...] there is a greater consensus, which means that it will be easier for it to overcome the crises that are sure to come. [...] So that there can be a positive picture, or, on the contrary, in the face of these crises, the European Union can be stronger and can be more successful on the global stage.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 379)

Furthermore, there was a shared concern that internal divisions often prevent the EU from presenting a unified front, which in turn creates confusion on the international stage:

[...] we are internally fighting each other so we haven't been able to get one voice.

(Finland, 1st FG, Pos. 205)

The perceived disunity was described as a challenge for the EU:

[. . .] it's hard to find something that everyone agrees on [. . .] and if the EU doesn't like put its foot down in certain like situations, it can be a challenge in the future.

(Finland, 3rd FG, Pos. 674–676)

One student explained that the EU was not perceived and treated as a single and united actor in world politics:

When we look at the American Prime Minister, we see that he is once again talking to the British Prime Minister, the French Prime Minister and the German Chancellor. So that, on a certain geopolitical map, the European Union can definitely be said not to be a homogeneous country.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 118)

Another student in the same focus group thus claimed for the EU to become a power in a new supranational framework—instead of being fragmented:

[. . .] there should be a supranational framework and the European Union should finally become a power so that it can be a very important player in all geopolitical affairs, because a very fragmented Union does not have the capacity to be a key player, so that it can block something on its own or order a certain course that is more responsible to it.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 371)

One student emphasised that disunity weakens the EU in the face of states like the United States, China, and Russia:

The problem is this: At the moment, the United States, China and Russia keep showing their muscles and if we, the European Union, stop working together, if we turn in on ourselves, if we do like the British, we will be eaten up.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 210–211)

Many students issued concrete claims for the EU to become a more important geopolitical player. One position was that the EU needed to invest into the military:

Europe needs to be stronger, Europe needs to invest more in its defence, Europe needs to be ready to repel aggression, which I hope is the case, but I have no information as to whether we are currently able to do so.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 18)

Another position was to rely also on economic warfare, besides military power:

Everyone tells me that if we have to defend ourselves, we have to be sovereign, and in order to be sovereign in a world where everyone is arming themselves, it would perhaps be intelligent not just to get out the white flags,

but to ask the question of economic warfare and cyber warfare, in particular. Because we are 20 years behind. [...] We are talking about a European army, but in fact our respective national armies are sinking, we know that too. [...] I think we have a lot of potential, and it's time! The problem with Europe is that we have tried to create for peace through the economic tool, and we have neglected everything else, at least the Navy.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 192)

There were also negative expressions that emphasised the EU's limits, rather than goals. One student said the EU was not strong enough in a global perspective:

The EU is pretty lame in its foreign and global policy.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 212)

Another student emphasised that the EU as a global power should not become too dominant:

I think the EU [...] is already like a global player. I still see a global player in the future, but I think the way of acting or behaving and as well as yeah connecting with other continents or other countries. It should be more emphatically or more elaborated.

(Germany, 3rd FG, Pos. 317–318)

One more quote criticises interventions in general:

I would say not to participate in conflicts, military conflicts that has nothing to do with them directly. [...] It's going to make the situation even worse. Not to support one side, only one side and try to be more diplomatic and find ways how to settle conflict instead of just selling, giving credits and making it even worse, hard to resolve at the end.

(Germany, 3rd FG, Pos. 313)

8.6.2. *The War against Ukraine*

The focus groups were conducted in 2022, 2023, and 2024, after the start of the War against Ukraine and during the time it escalated. The War against Ukraine was mentioned in almost all focus groups at one point with particular attention given to the EU's current and potential future role regarding Russia and Ukraine. Some focus group participants judged the EU's actions against Russia and in support of Ukraine as rather positive, strong, or sufficient.

The students approved of the EU's engagement in favour of Ukraine, even though they would have appreciated a more united stand:

[...] it's much better to have the EU talk about it rather than not talk about it.

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 52)

The students were approving of the EU, but naming its limits, too:

[. . .] it's good to know that we do have like an entity that is kind of in charge of addressing these topics [and] it's good to know that you have people in place and institutions in place that are actively trying to work on those things or figure out solutions on what the EU can do.

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 54)

Other focus group participants shared the concern that the EU should engage with regard to the War against Ukraine but had a rather critical view of the EU's performance and resources. The critical view regarded the EU's military capacities, for one:

We don't have the manpower, the manpower reserve, I'm talking about military power, we don't have it.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 210).

Students also emphasised that the lack of agreement among member states with regard to Ukraine:

The one thing that is clear to me is that the European Union does not have a unique, united and certain policy, as was shown in the case of Russian aggression against Ukraine, where the individual member states act in their own way and in their own way and do not have the right kind of thinking. They do not have the same mind-set as the one in Brussels.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 54)

Another student discussed that the EU should have acted earlier:

And act too late as well! Because like the thing in Ukraine, they could have done something about it way, way before and then now they're only doing something and it's like full on war. Like [. . .] how far do we need to go for the EU to actually step in and do something? Like, I feel like that's kind of like an issue, because [. . .] they're so careful. [. . .] Especially since they sort of want to market themselves as if you are part of the EU, you stand for these values. But then, de facto, when it comes to questions about those values they sort of standstill and don't do anything.

(Finland, 1st FG, Pos. 476–487)

8.6.3. *Promotion of Values and Democracy*

The students claimed the EU should actively promote its values (see Section 8.4.) to defend and enhance democracy in various respects, namely internally with regard to rule of law conflicts and externally in democracy promotion. Their statements show concrete expectancies and clear judgements. On one hand, students discussed

ways to sanction democratic backsliding and rule of law breaches and claimed for EU action in this respect. They saw a need for the EU to act more rigidly. This is in fit with the students overall supporting the EU, its values, and political principles (see Section 8.4.). On the other hand, they claimed the EU must uphold its values when it comes to enlargement, applying clear criteria.

Internal Defence of Values and Democracy: The Rule of Law

Several students stressed problems for the EU in defending its democratic values internally. They critically discussed that not all countries—the students here did not make a distinction between the governments and the citizens of those countries—adhere to the EU’s values, and they discussed differences in democratic quality and practice of the member states. The drive towards democratic backsliding and authoritarian tendencies in some EU member states—the students explicitly named Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia—was critically discussed in all focus groups, as were the related rule of law conflicts. Values and democracy then also appeared as contested and as a source of disunity in the EU.

[. . .] there are many conservative parties, views, people in general who do not support European values [which is] an expression of some ideologies that many people do not approve of.

(Bulgaria, 1st FG, Pos. 178)

I also think that the EU is democratic but not all the countries that are in the EU follow the views of a democracy, in my opinion.

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 123)

Viktor Orbán was often criticised for his way to breach EU laws and regulations continuously:

[Orbán is the] opposition within the EU that prevents it from being the EU that it is advertised to be.

(Bulgaria, 1st FG, Pos. 22)

[. . .] we know very well that in Hungary, Orbán has vetoed a lot of proposals, that they are not the same values, they are not the same.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 23)

What becomes obvious by these quotes is that Orbán personifies an “Other” opposed to European values, while the rest of the EU and its values were perceived as “Us” by the students. This “Us” is concretely represented by a majority in the Council, the EC, and the EP. Opposition to these values for the students was also represented by the former polish PiS government.¹ One student commented on his/her choice of a picture:

And so the second image I took [. . .] is about the mobilisations of Poles after the judicial reform in Poland, which took place a few years ago. Here we can

see the images of Kaczyński and Putin, who are somewhat represented under the model of Hitler. [. . .] So we see that here, it is above all the dimension of values, and once again the democratic dimension that is put forward, when Polish citizens demand that the EU be much more demanding—excuse me for this—with regard to the Polish power: democratic dimension and dimension of values.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 12)

Students in general claimed the EU should act more rigidly against rule of law breaches:

If, in fact, the European Union were to claim that only liberal democracy is the way to go, it would sanction those countries, or it would not like it at all.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 23)

This quote hints at article 7 TEU, which allows for the possibility of suspending EU membership rights if a member states acts against principles defined in article 2 TEU (European Union 2016).

Many students deemed the EU's current measures against rule of law breaches to be neither sufficient nor appropriate. They also expressed a need for more severe financial sanctions:

It seems to me that the European Union also does not have appropriate measures in this case, when there are democratic deficits in countries, for example Hungary and the Poles have been exposed lately and there should be some measures, some warnings that for example you are no longer getting funding, aid and things like that. Obviously, we have seen that these are not sufficient measures, so I am a little concerned about that as well. I think the European Union needs to change something about that.

(Slovenia, 2nd FG, Pos. 59)

Another student claimed for improvement of the EU's capacity to act:

The EU should challenge itself to be more able to deal with such countries, to make sure that the situation improves and that they do not leave the European Union.

(Slovenia, 2nd FG, Pos. 182)

One student claimed a variety of more efficient sanctions (such as freezing funds) against member states not acting in line with EU decisions, regulations or values:

So that countries have different sanctions, more severe sanctions. I mean, because there are some sanctions, but they are more than obviously not enough. [. . .] As far as I know the EU has certain sanctions, for example that it won't help financially, that it will freeze funds for I don't know how many months for countries, but I would make these sanctions even more severe, so

that countries are really forced to change something, because I don't think it's so much that they can't, as that they don't want to.

(Slovenia, 2nd FG, Pos. 185–187)

As one possible solution, a stop of EU funding was raised—this is more far-reaching than just economic sanctions, as they have been already applied against Hungary:

[. . .] so I think one way if they want to be like strong of democracy, would be that they would actually like stop the funding to these countries. [. . .] For like if you want the money, you have to live up to the standards, that you signed when you became a part of the EU.

(Finland, 1st FG, Pos. 281–283)

The EU's values and the rule of law conflicts were related to one specific area of rights in particular: The EU was described as representing LGBTQ+ rights in the focus groups. The EU's support for LGBTQ+ rights was described almost enthusiastically, deriving a mission that extends to countries in which LGBTQ+ rights are not very well developed:

I would say that the European Union gives hope to many people, like for example the LGBTQI+ community in countries like Poland.

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 95)

The same student, however, mentioned limits of the EU's capacities in this respect:

But it's still a very hard process to like, in that situations we also do feel as if the EU is not as powerful as you would wish that the EU is. So yeah, both sides, I would say.

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 95)

Students problematised that neither all EU member state governments, nor all EU citizens, would defend these rights:

For example, I talk about homophobia, about the third gender, about such values that do not appeal to everyone and there is a lot of scepticism about them specifically. Because for example there are also a lot of these Erasmus trainings, that's what we are talking about tolerance, about solidarity, about togetherness, however at the same time there is some hypocrisy, from that point of view.

(Bulgaria, 1st FG, Pos. 183–184)

Taken together, these statements indicate that the students are aware of the challenges of maintaining the rule of law and also of the underlying power conflicts and ideological conflict lines related to the rule of law conflicts with Poland and especially Hungary. The discussion illustrates the students' concerns for upholding the EU's values and that they mostly regard these values as their own. The students

regard the EU's values as valid in general for all member states, and claim fairness and effectiveness in upholding them.

External Defence of Values and Democracy: Enlargement and EU Democracy Promotion

The second domain in which the students expected the EU to promote its values was external. The focus group participants in general argued that the EU should defend its values in the world (see in detail Sections 8.4. and 8.6.). This concretely refers to external democracy promotion and also to EU enlargement. Students judged the EU's activities in these fields rather positively, and they claimed the EU must uphold its values in both enlargement and external democracy promotion.

With regard to enlargement students thus discussed that accession candidates had to adhere to the Copenhagen Criteria which include

[. . .] stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities; a functioning market economy and the ability to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU; the ability to take on the obligations of membership, including the capacity to effectively implement the rules, standards and policies that make up the body of EU law (the 'acquis'), and adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union.

(EUR-Lex 2025)

The following quote calls for strictness with regard to keeping up with the EU's criteria for accession:

[It is] a good thing when a new country wants to join the EU is very strict about the democratic values of the country.

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 122)

One student pointed out that not all states did fully adhere to all the criteria when joining the EU:

I think there were many eyes closed on certain issues and in my opinion it still goes on. [. . .] Some of them [countries] are like, if you don't solve them right now, it's fine, you can solve them in the next five years but you can join already.

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 127)

With regard to external democracy promotion, several students depicted the EU as vehicle of democratisation in a worldwide perspective. Some of them believed that the EU could be more active:

But in a sense, we will thus make the union be able to speak with a louder voice, with a more solid voice. And, actually, work on the global stage defending democracy, in a sense better, or supposedly better.

(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 115)

The same student added later:

[. . .] I think that maybe most of us here believe that the European Union would be a force for good, like a force for [. . .] promoting democratic norms and values across the world. And it would do it, in my opinion, quite strongly by having a louder voice on the global stage. A more unified voice.

(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 117)

Students named several reasons why the EU should promote democracy in the world:

So, we need to promote democracy, because democracies do not fight each other, because with democracy, we can achieve a sort of economic development and growth, because democracy is a universal value, etc., etc.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 28)

This quote hints at the finding that democracies do not fight each other (Merkel 2023, 89–116). Again the view that the EU should enhance democracy in the world was expressed in a critical perspective, too:

I don't think the EU has done enough for global democracy.

(Finland, 1st FG, Pos. 201)

These findings together indicate that students identify quite much with the way the EU represents democracy beyond its own borders. Many students regarded the EU as a global actor and as a force for good. However, this view did not remain entirely without questioning. One student asked as to what extent the EU could be controlling development countries by providing them with loans related to political criteria:

Money can't be deciding like what kind of values you have. I can't like, here give you 100 €, but you have to have this opinion though.

(Finland, 1st FG, Pos. 643–661)

8.6.4. *The EU as a Global Leader in Combating Climate Change*

Some students claimed the EU needed to create new standards, both inside the EU and worldwide. Climate change was a main concern for the students in this respect. The students saw many opportunities, but also a number of challenges.

Climate change is a global issue, not only for the European Union.

(Germany, 3rd FG, Pos. 180)

One student said climate change should be a top priority for the EU:

I think that is the most important thing that the EU should act on right now.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 98)

Students transported the expectancy that the EU should take on a leading role in combating climate change:

[. . .] the EU is a really important player in this game. Maybe it is leading the way or whatever you want to call it.

(Slovenia, 2nd FG, Pos. 39)

Students emphasised that the EU has the necessary capacities to lead international cooperation against climate change:

I think, since we have this like great machinery for many different countries to actually work together, I think that would be a very good place to start taking action-taking steps towards helping to end or at least slow down climate change.

(Finland, 1st FG, Pos. 148)

Climate change and migration were often connected:

There will be more migrants due to climate change [. . .] climate change is going to be the biggest humanitarian crisis [. . .] all the problems will become worse for the European Union.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 119–123)

Students said that different countries have different resources to combat climate change, and hence the EU was decisive in global climate policy:

It [the EU's energy and climate strategy] all sounds great and, on paper, it looks great for the whole of the European Union and for the rest of the world, because, as the European Union, it should be, or should have been, a forerunner of some kind of green transformation.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 18)

The focus group participants thus pointed to the necessity of cooperation, both inside the EU and internationally:

Yeah I agree with that [climate change mentioned by another student] also climate change for me because it affects us also in the future especially the younger generation so the EU needs to work together to kind of solve that.

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 154)

The advantages of international cooperation were pointed out several times:

I think that coordinated action by a bloc that weighs a lot in the world economy, such as the European Union, can eventually bring about a change in the path of mass destruction in which we find ourselves.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 187–188)

Students claimed for EU unity and global cooperation in combating climate change:

And on climate change, this is THE issue where we really should all agree, otherwise we will die. In terms of the stakes, it's not bad at all! And we can't agree. That's what [student name]—I think it's you—said earlier: “If there is one subject on which governments should stop fighting and should all agree to think in terms of the European level, it's climate change.” Because, in addition, there are countries that have fewer resources to develop this or that energy technology, but we can help them, we can implement all the same energies. We know how to do it, we know how to get there. [. . .] We are all going to be in the same boat. We will have to agree at some point. This is really the subject where I think we can reach a consensus, and a good consensus, not a consensus of the lesser evil.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 188)

However, some students stressed that differing interests and commitments among EU member states block consensus, particularly in areas like climate change. This problem was raised repeatedly:

I think that this is perhaps also one of the points where there is the most division, in the sense that not everyone agrees on how to solve the civilisational survival test of our time.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 187–188)

While expressing a desire for more concrete steps, the student admitted to not having specific ideas on how they themselves could further address the climate change issue. This situation repeatedly emerged: Students claimed the EU to take more actions, without acknowledging their own potential to act, thus seeing the responsibility as solely lying with the EU. One way the students saw the EU could act is its capacity to create rules:

[. . .] the Union has the possibility to pass laws in the countries and therefore, to set rules to counter global warming, well climate change in general.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 225).

8.7. Gaps and Power Relations: Citizens, Elites, and Member States

The primary goal of the research has been to study the puzzle of the gap between the EU and its citizens. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, the project's general aim was to learn about the students' perception of the gap between the EU and its citizens and their reasons for being critical or supportive of the EU. Concretely we wanted to learn which reasons are given and the backgrounds and the narratives that explain the gap. Again, the focus groups delivered findings that were not

previously assumed. In the 19 focus group discussions, the students did not only identify one gap between the EU and its citizens—this is the original gap we were after—and then specified as the “democracy gap” (see later in Section 8.7.1.). They also named other gaps: They described differences and power hierarchies in the EU system and between member states and their populations and gaps between EU citizens. All these gaps were mostly perceived as having a negative effect for the EU, its democracy, its citizens, and European culture and identity. However, some students saw positive aspects, too.

8.7.1. The Democracy Gap Between EU Institutions and EU Citizens

The “democracy gap” between EU institutions and citizens was hence the one assumed at the outset of the project, and the focus groups delivered a rich set of findings that illustrate how it was perceived and described by the students. In Section 8.3. we already discussed how students perceived democracy in the EU and its quality. The following will now line out in detail what kind of democracy gap the students perceived between the EU and its citizens. Findings indicate that for the students the democracy gap is characterised by three dimensions, namely a) the cluster of intransparency, complexity, and a feeling of distance; b) the cluster of elite influence, lobbying, and the “Brussels Bubble”; and c) the cluster of a lack of information and media coverage.

Intransparency

A first aspect of the democracy gap is the cluster of a lack of transparency, complexity, and a feeling of distance. In all focus groups, the EU was described as untransparent. The following statement indicates a general feeling of intransparency and insecurity about who influences which decisions at EU level:

[. . .] the way I see EU transparency is like a dirty glass. It is transparent in theory, but does everyone have the tools to clean the glass and see what is on the other side? And does everyone have to do that? Not everybody has time for that sort of thing. Who are the ones who have to clean our glass?

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 119)

This quote indicates not only a feeling of intransparency with regard to the EU institutions, it also indicates intransparency about who is responsible for obtaining more transparency. The EU institutional system appears blurred altogether.

Insufficient transparency was also connected to the perceived lack of citizens’ interest in the EU:

I think there is no such thing as transparent enough. There should be more and more mechanisms for opening up to citizens, but not everyone is interested.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 111)

Several students criticised “behind closed door” processes:

[. . .] the discussion does not always really happen in a room where everything is being recorded, that is the truth of politics, there is a lot of things going under the table, there is a lot of things going in the backward hall when nobody is listening to you, nobody is recording.

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 195)

[. . .] at European level, maybe that's where things happen, often on the sly, often in offices [. . .] there is always what is displayed, and then afterwards we go and do the negotiations in the corridors, and there can be other speeches. So democracy is still [. . .] it's OK to say that it's unsatisfactory.

(France, 3rd FG, Pos. 94)

Comitology, i.e. the EU's system of committees preparing decisions such as the Committee of permanent representants to the Council (COREPER), was discussed as being opposed to transparency and ultimately to democracy:

I think we really are in a very, very imperfect democracy. On the one hand, we have the perception that things are completely transparent, there are lots of websites, lots of consultations, there's the transparency register, [. . .] there's video broadcasting of committees, etc. On the other hand, we know that the core of the issues are decided either in comitology, or, well, there's a lot of informal lobbying, so it's quite ambiguous, it's almost contradictory from this point of view.

(France, 3rd FG, Pos. 96)

Other students saw transparency problems with regard to the inter-institutional relations between Council, EC, and EP:

I don't think that is transparent enough. Decision-making in that level, I mean, like, it has been behind closed doors in I'm not sure which institutions.

(Germany, 3rd FG, Pos. 170)

Distance

Many students described the EU as being too distant in practical terms:

But the distance between the centre of the European Union—Brussels—and the other member states is too great for it to be able to follow some democratic principles, such as voting on the Internet or putting up signs that could be passed by MEPs.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 61)

One student attributed the feeling of distance to the EU's size:

I doubt that any of us, at least I know for myself, have any direct feeling that I am contributing to some development of the EU, which is normal, because it is such a large structure. But I doubt that, in my opinion, the average citizen

of the European Union can have a major impact on the EU itself, apart from these mechanisms such as the citizens' initiative and, say, the elections to the European Parliament, which do help, but only to a certain extent.

(Slovenia, 1st FG, Pos. 80)

In addition, the decisions taken by the EU were perceived as taking a long time to have an impact:

[The EU] is not the most distant apparatus that we have nothing to do with, but [. . .] in fact, it takes time to have any impact on our lives.

(Slovenia, 1st FG, Pos. 67)

Students in this respect said they did not experience the EU on an everyday basis:

[. . .] we do not feel [the EU] in-person every-day, and there are also things like geopolitical, like more macro and geopolitical changes.

(Slovenia, 3rd FG, Pos. 56)

This perceived lack of everyday experience was not present, however, when it came to discussing the EU passport and free movement. Students emphasised their concrete positive experiences in this respect (Section 8.2.3.). Moreover, students named a mental distance to the EU's institutions. For instance, MEPs were perceived as being distant:

[. . .] there's often this sense of a disconnect, that they are not actual people [but] it could depend on the person's affiliation of how accessible they maybe are [some MEPs might be] very approachable and just like a real human.

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 89)

All in all, it does not seem clear what makes MEPs seem accessible or distant—it does not seem that the students tried, but they just assumed MEPs were not accessible.

Despite these sentiments, some students challenged the idea that the EU is distant. One student emphasised MEPs not to be different from national Members of the Parliaments:

I really don't agree with [the] view that there's a distance between national representatives and citizens, and that you're equating the two. Because MEPs are based in their constituencies, they have a territorial base.

(France, 3rd FG, Pos. 35)

Another student argued that national governments are also distant from citizens. This suggests that perceptions of distance may not be exclusive to the EU but part of a broader perception and criticism of political representation:

Personally, I still have a bit of trouble with the idea of saying that the European Union is distant from the people, even if it's true, because the nation

states, without going into detail, are also distant from the people. The leap in representativeness is enormous.

(France, 3rd FG, Pos. 34)

One student said that people do perceive the EU differently:

People feel like: “No, the EU is fine, I don’t really care too much about it.”
Other people feel like: “The EU does whatever, influences my life and it’s just controlling and it’s just getting into my personal life, and I don’t want it.”

(Finland, 1st FG, Pos. 513)

Interestingly the EU’s output and the related benefits that the students clearly saw and appreciated (see Sections 8.2. and 8.6.) were not perceived as remedying this feeling of distance:

I think this is also the vibe of the European Union, that it seems very far away, even though we are living the benefits every day, but because we were born into it, I mean, we don’t remember the time that it wasn’t it.

(Slovenia, 3rd FG, Pos. 39)

Complexity

The students also perceived the EU as being very complicated and complex:

I think it is very hard and it is not transparent enough and for the people who do not have a background, they can be lost. I think this is the main reason why the EU is so complex I would say. It is the most visible one.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 38)

The participants underlined in all focus groups that

[. . .] the decision-making process of the union is extremely complicated.

(Finland, 3rd FG, Pos. 377)

They found the EU to be complex even in comparison to national political systems:

[. . .] the political system of your own country is complex, but then also having this even more complex system, the supranational system of the EU.

(Croatia, 3rd FG, Pos. 46)

Moreover, students underlined that the EU’s institutional system was confusing—in these or similar words:

[. . .] that not so many people can navigate themselves in what is European Commission, how it is different from the Council of Ministers, from the European

Council and so on. And, I think that is why, I think that political complexity is really one of the most descriptive ideas and things of the European Union.

(Croatia, 3rd FG, Pos. 19)

Distance and Complexity as Problems for Democracy

Distance and complexity of the EU were often named as aspects that impact EU democracy negatively and make the EU difficult to grasp for the citizens:

I am quite critical of the institutional functioning because I find it far too complex and this variable geometry is incomprehensible to most European citizens.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 19)

Representation and voting are always much more distant at European level.

(France, 3rd FG, Pos. 108)

Another quote claims that citizens are often unaware how and by whom decisions in the EU are made, or that they have problems to understand decision-making processes in the EU:

I think that it is still the case that people of all backgrounds and above cannot recognise where decisions could potentially be made, not where they will be made, and not just to think about where a decision could be made. I think that it is this structure of the European Union that brings this confusion to people's minds.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 44)

These arguments hint at the students' self-perception as better-informed EU citizens, and their distinction from the "ordinary citizens" that was discussed in Section 8.2.

The criticism expressed in the arguments earlier is very profound: The EU is criticised for a lack of transparency, comitology and bureaucracy, informality, and distance to the citizens. These are also classical criticisms in the academic "democratic deficit" debate (for an overview see, e.g. Føllesdal and Hix 2006). The students, asked about the EU's democratic deficit, thus often clearly named it²:

Yes, there is [a] democratic deficit, but it is not really that relevant, actually. Because what is the other option? The other option is purely intergovernmental bargaining. And then we have the same problem.

(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 122)

The "Brussels Bubble"

Quite often distance was expressed towards the "Brussels Bubble":

So, there is a big distance between the EU citizens and then Brussels.
(Finland, 3rd FG, Pos. 130)

Students mentioned “Brussels” to be a space of its own:

[. . .] the European Union is in that sense somewhat in its own balloon in Brussels.
(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 39)

The expression of “Brussels Bubble” had been well received by the students:

[. . .] there is in fact always this impression that Brussels is in a bubble.
(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 80)

The “Bubble” was described as taking newly elected MEPs away from formal life:

I think then they get elected and go to Brussels and sort of stay in the Brussels Bubble.
(Finland, 3rd FG, Pos. 221)

The “Brussels Bubble” was moreover directly connected to the EU’s complexity:

In fact, there’s a real sense of “It’s still a bubble, again”, and with lots of heads, lots of nooks and crannies in the bubble, you don’t know who’s in charge. [. . .] It’s very difficult to know who’s in charge.
(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 106)

Lobbying

The “Brussels Bubble” was not simply described as distant, but it was also related to two other problems the students discussed. They critically mentioned lobbying in the EU, as well as the influence of what they indistinctly termed “elites”. Their statements show a perception of EU decision-making as being strongly influenced by lobbies, and by elites who are not taking citizens’ needs sufficiently into account, or who are not sufficiently legitimised:

We do not know what is happening here, but they are literally coming out with a decision, and the question is how transparent this lobbying process is, and again I think it is about the exact way in which the decision is made, about the exact policy that is being decided, and whether the EU is not, in my opinion, too transparent.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 355)

Furthermore, students argued that lobbying sometimes can contribute to the intransparency of decision-making processes:

But, then there is also an element to it, that is the lobby side of it. The, the diplomacy and the, kind of behind the scenes, that I can't really speak on, because I feel like it is there, but it's not transparent, that part. I just know we do discuss it. Like, there is something that people kind of hint, there being like this issue of it, but then it never [. . .] it's not, you know, talked about openly.

(Finland, 1st FG, Pos. 531)

Some students said that big companies headquartered in EU member states might influence EU policies to serve their own interests:

He who pays the piper orders the music. [. . .] It is logical that the bosses of the BMW and Mercedes concerns should draw up a policy which will be in the interests of their company and which will bring them dividends.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 85)

As opposed to such critical views, a French student stated that criticism of lobbying in Brussels was overdone:

There is something interesting, at the level of the general public, which is that people are all aware that there is a lot of representation of private interests in Brussels, and that there is a lot of [. . .] "demonisation" of the representation of large companies in Brussels [. . .] without taking into account the aspect of "the Commission does this, the Commission does that", and this will directly affect the citizens.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 108)

Elite Influence

The criticism of lobbying and the "Brussels Bubble" was complemented by a feeling that distant "elites" steer the EU—this term was not specified but, upon reading the statements, refers to leading EU politicians and EU bureaucrats, and hence once more to the "Brussels Bubble" (see earlier).

[. . .] the EU is like this, this elite group of countries and people sitting around a table, doing their thing and it's just—their making decisions that affect the lives of people.

(Finland, 1st FG, Pos. 59)

A criticism of "elites" was expressed in a very pronounced way by a French student studying abroad:

In France, we do not know what we are angry about but we [are] just angry because we do not know how to express it and the elite is like: "But let us tell you how to express it with our own words and our own views."

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 203)

One student commented a photo showing Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy:

But there is also this idea that Europe is being created without the citizens. After that, I'm extrapolating a lot from the photo, but it's a Europe that's decided by the elites, who are certainly elected but not elected for that. I don't think many people voted for Sarkozy because they wanted the Lisbon Treaty.
(France, 3rd FG, Pos. 33)

"Elites" were perceived as reinstalling or reproducing themselves:

[. . .] it's also protection mechanism for themselves [. . .] they have been technocrats forever from like generation and generation, they were noble before and now they are there.
(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 214–216)

Lastly experts or elites were seen as taking political decisions because the areas concerned were too complex for citizens (see also Section 8.8.):

But also security is a very highly discussed topic and the common market is probably, a lot of people are not caring about common market policy, like because it's too technical in many aspects. It's very elite project—so the decisions in this area are left to experts.
(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 231)

A Lack of Information and Communication by the EU

The students discussed the EU's communication activities a great deal. In general, they perceived a lack of accessible information about the EU. One aspect of this criticism was related to the quality and accessibility of information available on the EU websites. Websites were, on one hand, discussed as a possible remedy to intransparency:

I think if you want to inform yourself about the transparency of the EU, like who, which, legislation is right now, on which phase they are and everything you are able to. [. . .] And there are many other websites where you can check about the legislative phases and which MEP is like visiting who and if you know this websites, you can see what they [are] doing right now.
(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 133)

On the other hand, students complained that the EU's websites were not known well enough:

[. . .] the problem is, that I've only learned about this websites like a few weeks ago in a seminar, so I didn't know that they exist, before. So that should be more like in the public.
(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 133–134)

Students claimed that citizens being unaware of available information needed to search actively:

If you're interested in the things that are happening, you'll get them straight away. It doesn't offer itself. But if you want to find something you will get it from the minutes of the sessions, everything, everything, everything.

(Slovenia, 2nd FG, Pos. 110)

The public information available on the EU's websites in the view of some students hence does not remedy intransparency, and the access to information was judged to be unequal:

Information is only accessible to an elite, and is very dependent on cultural, social and economic capital. It doesn't shock me at all that this is the case in the European Union, which is not at the heart of this. I think it's more a general observation.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 93)

All in all, students were split in their view on EU websites. Information provided by the EU institutions' websites was regarded as being too complex:

[. . .] they are quite well supplied, but they are far too complex and technical for the average citizen, and the Commission's site is changed every year. [. . .] There are things that we want to find, but we can't find them because it has changed, it's not practical at all. It's not accessible to everyone.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 427)

Another student said the websites were well-designed and easy to navigate:

I think in the last years the EC and the EP have quite nice and easy websites where you can especially [. . .] there is a news room section where you get information directly with video, with pictures, with everything you need, so at least for me that is the main source.

(Bulgaria, 1st FG, Pos. 215)

The finding that EU websites are too complex is supported by a report from the EC. It describes that not all EU citizens have the necessary skills to access digital information:

44.5% of the EU population has insufficient skills to participate in the digital economy and society. [. . .] This divide does not only exist between rich and poor but between different age groups as well; the Millennial generation, also known as Generation Y and Net Generation view technology as a functional necessity, not a modern convenience.

(European Commission 2020)

National Media and the EU

Many students moreover felt that EU affairs were rarely covered in mainstream media, making it difficult for the general public to stay informed. They largely attributed this to the fact that media reporting on the EU are often national:

I watch a number of news items on HRT in the current session and I think that in the past three days I have not managed to buy up perhaps three relevant pieces of information about the European Union, so that people who are informed in a very classical way by radio, television, newspapers and portals do not get this information.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 320)

Some students expressed frustration over the absence of detailed reporting on the EU decision-making processes in the national media, questioning whether they cover such topics in depth:

I feel like, just thinking about our general media I guess, do they ever cover that? Have you ever read something that actually covers that part of the process? Because I can't think of anything.

(Finland, 1st FG, Pos. 383)

French students were particularly critical of their national media's EU coverage, describing it as limited, confusing, and often inaccurate:

[. . .] the national media, whether it's newspapers or TV news, for example, have nothing on the European Union, they confuse the European Council, the Council of the Union, and so on. So it's too difficult to get information.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 66)

National media were perceived to perform better with regard to EU reporting in some member states than in others:

In terms of information, I find that they make an effort to inform Spanish citizens about what is happening in Europe, much more than in France. In France, it's limited.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 437)

One student thus spoke about reading and comparing various newspapers of different countries, thereby receiving different views and opinions:

In fact, it's through the foreign press and through the confrontation of foreign presses—when we have the chance to do so and around the table, there are many of us, but in real life, there are not many of us in France who speak something other than French, let's be honest. The confrontation of

the German press, Euronews or der Spiegel which means that we have two points of view of Europe on two countries that are driving forces in the construction of the European Union.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 78)

Another student described European media as an alternative to national media, but said these were neither available nor widely read:

As far as the press is concerned, there is very little visibility of the European press in truth, or you have to know them beforehand. The national press is very visible, but it doesn't talk much about the European Union and the European press is not very visible, so I think that very few people will read it.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 427)

Some students also said that national media reports on the EU had a mostly national focus instead of doing actual EU reporting from a European perspective:

[We are only informed] with the national component, only with what was happening in the Union, but according to each country, and with a rather Franco-centric perspective.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 75)

Because the media coverage always says, you know: "And Finland did this", and the Finnish perspective and "Finland". [. . .] So, it's always giving us like: "Why did Finland do this." But for some of us, I'm not saying everyone is like this—definitely not. But I kind of feel like I'm more interested in like the EU as a whole and not just like the Finnish perspective on it. [. . .] So, I'm interested in knowing what the decision was and how it will affect the world.

(Finland, 1st FG, Pos. 380–382)

The EU as a Scapegoat

In line with these criticisms of national media reporting, students said the EU was used as a scapegoat in reporting. This was seen as a strategy used by journalists to enhance the news value of their reports.

[. . .] we blame Brussels for everything, it's the perfect scapegoat.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 80)

They also indicated that the EU was charged with all possible problems:

European Union, yes it is a complex thing but has been charged all the problems that happen at local level.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 40)

The students also said that the EU was blamed for things it was not responsible for:

[. . .] the European Union is a victim of two things. On the one hand, the political behaviour of certain national leaders who hit out at it when something goes wrong, but when something goes right, it is thanks to them.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 61)

The mostly negative EU reporting was found to have various negative consequences for the EU:

[. . .] what reaches you through the information channels that you are used to are actually only negatives, and this transparency is being used in some way that is not beneficial for the EU. If you want to get someone to like you, you have to sit down and tell them you like me, you win this and you win that, not, well, you get to eat grasshoppers, for example.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 125–126)

Students also saw misinformation as being on the rise in the past few years:

[. . .] misinformation is quite becoming quite an issue on social media.

(Finland, 3rd FG, Pos. 411)

This was seen as “misleading” citizens:

I think there is, at least in Bulgaria, a lot of fake information, propaganda, and a lot of people just don’t believe the media, or they believe what they read and they are not sure what is objective and what is not. Accordingly, they are misled.

(Bulgaria, 1st FG, Pos. 98)

Students thus showed a high level of reflection of media information, but also scepticism towards media in general.

I am very sceptical of the current news. Whether something’s going to come out that they’re going to feed us lizards or whatever. That’s why I draw my conclusions later.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 66)

The EU Has a Communication Problem

In sum, students felt that EU-related information was difficult to access, contributing to a sense of disconnect between citizens and European institutions. The previously mentioned criticism led the students not only to diagnosing a communication

problem of the EU but also to criticise the EU once more for its performance with regard to communication:

[. . .] the European Union is quite bad at motivating their decisions to the public.

(Finland, 3rd FG, Pos. 124)

The following quote highlights how a lack of communication leads to misperceiving even the EU's strengths and successful policies:

Yes, we can say that a citizen can have an impact on the Green Deal, but we still need to know that there is a Green Deal in the pipeline! These are two huge problems. We don't know, and many people don't necessarily know, what is going on, and what's more, we don't know how it's happening, and we don't know how to intervene in it. It's really about communication that nothing works and at no level, at least for the general public.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 109)

The students saw missing efforts by the EU:

[. . .] the European Union does not necessarily make the effort to try to inform people and to make itself more available to the populations and also to make itself perhaps more interesting.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 59)

The EU was thus called to do more and better in order to explain EU institutions, processes, and policies:

Here, maybe, the problem of communication intervenes because the previous question that 1) that things are very complicated and precise and 2) that they are not explained in a sufficiently understandable way not only to the ordinary citizen but to people in general. [. . .] I am still thinking about the solutions and what comes to my mind is to also improve the way of communication between institutions and citizens. Things should be presented more clearly and in a way that is both understood but also engaging. That is to say, both to explain what is being done and why it is important to me.

(Bulgaria, 1st FG, Pos. 112)

One student claimed that EU communication was not fit to reach younger generations (see also later on the generational gap):

[. . .] the EU does not have a communication approach to young people. It just does not speak their language. It doesn't know what are the things that grab the attention of a young person.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 246)

But the EU's communication efforts were not seen altogether negatively by the students. Some said they had improved recently:

In the last few years, and even in the last few years and a few months since the fall of the Ukraine, I think that the themes of the European Union, and the European Union itself, are appearing much more frequently in the news, and that it is taking centre stage more and more often.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 32)

All in all, expectancies towards EU information seemed to be different. Some students wanted it to be delivered ready to use, and if this did not happen they were dissatisfied. Students who were ready to be active and gather information themselves were more satisfied.

A Problem of Citizen Knowledge and Education?

Education was discussed frequently across all focus groups. Besides the deficits in information on the EU, students also perceived a lack of education on EU politics and topics as being influential in increasing the gap between the EU and its citizens. Students claimed education on the EU to be insufficient, criticising both national school systems as well as broader educational initiatives including adults (see Sections 8.2.10. and 8.9.3.).

The focus group participants highlighted that even their knowledge as students in EU Studies and the Social Sciences was not necessarily enough to understand the complex EU politics and decision-making processes, which indicates the perceived enormity of the lack in education.

Several statements connect a perceived lack of education and a lack of citizen involvement. One student said that a lack of education was responsible for a lack of political action of the students (see Section 8.8.):

We don't really know too much about all the options we would actually have to make some sort of influence or make some sort of change within it. And we're studying the topic.

(Finland, 1st FG, Pos. 318–319)

The perceived lack of education, according to this statement, thus leads to a lack of knowledge both on the functioning of the EU but also on possibilities of participation and influence (as explained in Section 8.2.). The students said that both knowledge and possibilities of participation would be needed in order to become politically active:

I think that if we want to push people to get involved, they need to understand what they are getting involved in and why it is in their interest to get involved.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 130)

Students repeatedly claimed for more EU related education:

Maybe we should attack this [political education] at the root and say that compulsory school education should already include political education and European education. I imagine that would help a lot.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 33)

This underlines the students' focus on and emphasis of top-down pathways to improve the EU's democratic quality and remedy the democracy gap. As will be discussed in more detail in Section 8.9., the remedies that they saw mostly regard education and communication, as well as the institutional system in general and the EP in particular. Citizen activities, as visible throughout the findings, did not come in the first instance.

8.7.2. *Gaps Between Member States and Their Populations*

In all member states, the focus group discussions revealed the perception of conflicts, disagreements, different interests or even gaps between member states, and/or between the populations of member states. Notably, disunity of the EU member states was often raised as a problem. Students also mentioned differences between the smaller and bigger member states of the EU (see Section 8.2.6.), different interests, and different economic powers of the member states.

Unity or Disunity Between the Member States

As was already said, students mentioned unity or disunity between member states at various points in the focus group discussions. While one camp defended the concept of unity in diversity, another camp put unity in opposition to diversity (see in detail Section 8.4.3.). Students also discussed disunity with regard to culture and values. They referred to different political visions or ideas and traditions in the EU (see also later on the difference between centre and periphery). One student said disunity was getting stronger:

I think that's one of the problems that we're seeing more and more in Europe, that up until now we've sometimes had cultural oppositions, but now we're getting into cultural antagonisms.

(France, 3rd FG, Pos. 53)

Students perceived a division between the western and eastern parts of the EU regarding the values they uphold and support, particularly on issues like LGBTQ+ rights and abortion, as previously discussed. In a Bulgarian focus group one student said:

Western Europe is always seen as some kind of ideal, not as part of the EU, as a community that we are part of. The idea of the West is a bit diluted in

smaller towns. It remains something distant, something utopian, somehow [. . .] an unrealistic idea.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 152)

Other students saw such differences between southern and northern member states. A French student said that the northern countries:

[. . .] have a truly legitimist vision of politics. That is to say that the person in government governs, and that what he or she says is either agreed or disagreed with, and we'll see after the next elections, we'll sort it out. But right now, we're following. In any case, we are making sure that it works.

He/She argued that the vision of politics was different in southern member states:

In France and in the countries of Southern Europe, it's not like that at all.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 149)

Different Interests

Students also emphasised different interests of member states. These were seen as leading to difficulties in joint decision-making:

Especially, when you try to make regulations that need to fit several different countries and their several different traditions and histories, and whatnot. Obviously, that will cause problems.

(Finland, 1st FG, Pos. 164)

Migration policy, which the students saw as the most controversial and most politicised policy field, is a case in point. A student from Croatia pointed to the disunity in this field and the conflicting interests among the member states from the south and from the north:

Or I would say that the policy that is causing the highest levels of concern outside the European Union is migration policy, and the situation in the Mediterranean is why you have countries which are southern member states and which are evenly conditioned by the migrant wave, such as Greece, Italy, Spain, and Croatia. Naturally, these countries are experiencing pressure at their borders. They do not know how to resist and they are aware that they will be hit by the European Union, so it is their role to protect the European Union's borders. But you have the Scandinavian member states, who will say that you must leave everything alone, because it is a matter of promoting people's rights on one side, and on the other side it will be a matter of securing and controlling the EU's borders.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 97)

The students also discussed to the fact that the EP has two seats, in Strasbourg and in Brussels, and that France's government since a long time refuses to think about moving it to Brussels completely:

I think that [decisions taken unanimously] goes ahead with the stubbornness of some countries, for example France with the European Parliament in Strasbourg. Not sure if we need it and yeah. There are issues that can't be broken just because one country is against it so that's very difficult I would say.
(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 104)

This also refers to the fact that in policy areas where decisions are taken with unanimity in the Council, one opposing member acts as a veto player and can block the whole process.

Finally, students said that member states have to follow EU rules even if they go against their interests:

European Union is seen as problematic and like stopping Germany from protecting its borders when it comes to migration.
(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 187–189)

Three Finnish students talked about Denmark, Sweden, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland not having adopted the euro. They (wrongly) claimed:

But for example, several other countries, for example Sweden hasn't joined the euro or hasn't changed the euro despite it being mandatory for them to do so, but EU can't do anything about it.
(Finland, 3rd FG, Pos. 475)

The case of the monetary union is an interesting one in this respect. While it reveals indeed different interests of some member states such as Sweden and Denmark, who did not want to introduce the euro, other countries were not able to introduce the euro because they did not fulfil the convergence criteria. So clearly, the euro introduction was not mandatory as the students claimed, but a) upon condition and b) with an opt-out version. This opt-out, indeed, was enabled by an agreement that related to different interests of those states that did not want to introduce the euro.

Small Countries Versus Big Countries

The students discussed a number of perceived power imbalances between the member states. They especially referred to differences between small and big member states and the economic power of the member states.

The focus groups revealed the perception that the larger member states, and especially Germany and France, set the direction in the EU, while the smaller ones need to follow their lead. Germany and France were described as almost hegemonic powers inside the EU. This perspective links to the discussion on the multilevel EU

and the different weights of the nation-states (Sections 8.2.6. and 8.3.). The feeling that smaller states have less influence in the EU was expressed in a more pronounced way in the focus groups taking place in the smaller and southern European member states. In a Croatian focus group one student said:

[. . .] that the smaller and weaker member states, which are in a very difficult economic position, demographically and so on, will in some way have to follow the policies of the big ones.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 52)

Another Croatian student said his/her country had only little influence in the EU:

As [. . .] one of the smaller members of the European Union, both in terms of population and surface area, I do not think that we can do much by speaking honestly. Yes, we can suggest certain things, or else we are not big enough, not economically viable enough, to influence certain key policies that will take place across the European continent.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 118)

As these quotes indicate, students living in smaller member states had a perception of the weight of their country as small. They showed a sense of marginalisation, defined their countries often as a kind of periphery and as being without influence, which was sometimes seen as source of conflict.

The smaller, newer EU member states, were moreover described as being further away from EU politics, such as by a Croatian student:

I think that this picture describes the European Union well, certainly in countries like Croatia, Bulgaria, Romania and so on, which do not have any idea that they are close to Europe, that it is still far away for them, certainly Brussels and some high politics.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 27)

The power imbalances were often commented as more or less natural. A Slovenian student said:

I think that any kind of alliance of countries, to some extent there is one pair of these countries that have this leading role, it seems to me that it's like everywhere, there's one that has the main voice, and then it's like this, and then the others are like that, depending on who you are.

(Slovenia, 2nd FG, Pos. 117)

A student from Bulgaria said:

I will say that migration is the most important question when it comes to the upcoming European elections getting even more precise, definitely. Even in

Bulgaria. But definitely in the Netherlands, Germany, France, in Italy, like the big players.

(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 196)

This quote shows nuances of perceptions of “strength”: Germany, France, and Italy are the EU member states with the largest population, while the Netherlands ranks seventh in terms of population size—but the Netherlands are economically strong.

One discussion point was that member states were not treated equally by the EU:

[. . .] how does the EU treat its member states? It really depends on which member state it is treating, I think it is obviously treating them very lawfully and the way it should but sometimes it also feels like, well, you should do what the central European countries are doing and maybe just stick to that.

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 195)

This quote refers to alleged power relations and, again, to the fact that certain member states—here “the central European ones”—were perceived as being more influential than others.

Students also differentiated member states that need the EU and others. A Bulgarian student remarked:

And I think on the whole, however, whether you look at it politically, economically, each individual member state is much better off in the EU rather than apart from it. That is definitely true for smaller states, Germany and France maybe can, you know, stand for themselves and not have much in the way of that.

(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 251)

8.7.3. *Gaps Between Citizens*

Although students sometimes referred to “the citizens” in the focus group, in the discussion of citizens several differentiations became visible. First, as said in Section 8.2., students distinguished between themselves and the “ordinary citizens”; second, they perceived differences among generations; and third, they talked about winners and losers of integration as well as about centre and periphery when discussing citizens.

Students Versus Ordinary Citizens

The first dimension was already explained in detail in Section 8.2. Across all focus groups, the students distinguished themselves from “ordinary citizens” who were generally perceived as knowing less and/or not enough about the EU, and as being victims of the high complexity of EU decision-making. Education was then

regarded as a remedy to rise citizens' knowledge. The following statements illustrate this perceived gap:

But like if I had to imagine myself being a layperson who didn't have a course in the EU, every time somebody would say European Parliament, European Commission, it would be all the same for me. So I think that's mostly due to the courses I had here.

(Croatia, 3rd FG, Pos. 59)

But even though the expressed made this clear divide between themselves and ordinary citizens, they diagnosed they were not able to understand the details of EU decision-making and EU politics:

[. . .] if you were to walk out and ask just any man on the street sort of explain in like a simple way how decisions are made in the EU and how influence work in the EU, they would probably not be able to give you an answer. I mean, we've been studying this and I cannot say I still understand it completely fully.

(Finland, 1st FG, Pos. 261)

Many quotes referred to the confusion that the students felt—emphasising that “ordinary citizens” would feel it even more strongly:

So I would mention the “Rat-Salat” [Council-Salat] as Germans call it as far as I know, because you have the Council of Europe, European Council and the Council of the EU and even me as a student of European studies, who is supposed to know the difference, I am also struggling. So, I can imagine how much, like ordinary people struggle who do not know anything about the EU.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 38)

One student explicitly mentioned “uneducated people”:

I think that these are some interactive methods, aren't they just older, first of all we have others, I can't say uneducated people, but there are a lot of educated people who they had access only to a certain scanty literature in which it is quite difficult to explain even to us.

(Slovenia, 1st FG, Pos. 99)

A Generational Gap

Second, a generational gap was addressed with regard to media preferences, access to information, social media, and digitalisation, as well as differences and misunderstandings between older and younger people because of different values, attitudes, experiences, behaviour, or opinions. Students also described differences in

the level of participation in European elections and the perceived representation of interests in EU decision-making.

First, some students hinted at differences in attitudes, ideas, or beliefs that showed between older and younger citizens (see also Section 8.4.).

Most often it happens when I go to my grandparents' village and I have to explain the choices I am making. That is when I feel most strongly that I belong to the European community. Because there I do not have support for the ideas I believe in, but I know that in the European community I can find people who believe in what I believe in.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 161)

This statement refers to what is often termed the distinction of “Somewheres” and “Anywheres” (Goodhart 2017), i.e. people that are locally rooted and an international, often younger, urban cosmopolitan group. The student followed this distinction when he/she clearly distinguished between the villager's ideas, which he/she deemed non-European, and the ideas of like-minded people that he/she can find “in the European community”.

Some students perceived older generations as having been decisive in the EU for some time, as elitist, and as mostly conservative. The statements express a clear resentment:

I think it's very political and you have some more conservative historians you know all of the [rancid?] ones you know. [. . .] And this old generation is [. . .] in power and they are very elitist.

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 398–402)

Perceived differences in attitudes of younger and older generations were also linked to differences in concrete experiences with the EU since younger generations do Erasmus+ which enables positive experiences as previously discussed (see Section 8.2.9.). This implies that older citizens do not have these experiences:

But this generation, [. . .] those who have gone to Erasmus, I think that they are the young people who have that one pro-European sentiment and that they should look at things more carefully than people who may have stayed within the borders of their own country and do not have too big of an aspiration, Europe may be a distraction for them.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 134)

It should be noted that Erasmus+ not only allows for participation of younger people (pupils, students, etc.) but also offers programs and financial support for adults, e.g. further education and training opportunities for staff or mobility for sports coaches and other sport staff (see Erasmus+ 2025). However, in the focus groups, such opportunities for older citizens were not mentioned.

The students also discussed generational differences in political participation. The older generations scored better in this respect, i.e. they were perceived to participate to a higher extent. Students thought that older generations participated more in protests:

I feel like a lot of the times especially older generations are like, yeah, I don't know, are like: "Oh there is a protest going on for this, and there is another protest going on for that." I feel this is actually pretty amazing, that you can exercise this right to like publicly show your opinion all over Europe.

(Slovenia, 3rd FG, Pos. 58)

The students also saw older generations participating more, especially in elections:

I think mostly young people usually don't vote as much as older people do.
(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 251)

The difference was attributed to young people having less interest in elections:

[. . .] young people in our age group are not necessarily interested in voting, so it is even more complicated to vote for the European Union.
(France, 1st FG, Pos. 57)

The feeling of powerlessness (see in detail Section 8.8.) that the students repeatedly emphasised was also linked to a lack of interest of young people in elections:

I would say a lot of young people don't vote, because they have the feeling that they can't change anything, or that they don't have any influence on the EU, so, I would say that's a reason. And I mean, I don't know exactly, but I would say more older people vote than younger people, so that's my view of generational conflict.

(Germany, 3rd FG, Pos. 150)

The students just quoted apparently believed that younger people do vote less in both national and European elections and explained this with a lack of interest or the feeling of not having an influence (see Section 8.3.). Election survey data clearly show such a difference for the federal elections in Germany: Voter turnout raises with a higher age (Demografieportal 2025). Since they participate in elections to a higher extent, older generations have a higher weight in the composition of parliaments and hence a greater impact on decisions that also affect the younger generations, e.g. climate policy. As will be discussed in Section 8.8., these statements indicate a strange ambivalence. On one hand, students discussed older generations as being more influential and participating more; on the other hand, they explained their relative passivity with the feeling that they cannot change things

anyway. Nevertheless, students criticised that they perceived the older generation to have a higher political impact:

I can just speak for myself, but sometimes I have the feeling that they are listening more to the older generations than to the younger ones. Just because like they are more represented in numbers kind of.

(Germany, 3rd FG, Pos. 54)

One student provided the example of farmer protests in Germany:

Like after the farmers protests, there were kind of immediate reactions. And young people go on the streets and, demonstrate for climate and everything. And it's taking a long time until something concrete happens and they try to change political rules.

(Germany, 3rd FG, Pos. 59)

The last aspect of the generational gap concerns the access to information and the use of media, especially social media.

I do not think if you are specifically looking for something very, very concrete about the EU you do not really go on the websites and especially with our generation the problem is always that you stick to social media, and whatever is being published on the EU social media is the information you get on it.

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 128)

Students emphasised that younger generations get their information on social media, while older generations are not sufficiently informed because they do not use social media as much and often do not consume news on television either:

I think we are the generation of the social networks.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 299)

As opposed to this, older generations were seen as referring to classical channels:

[. . .] they are constrained to watch the daily newspaper and the television, and most of them get their information from it, while we are just a few clicks away on the index and we see what von der Leyen or Macron has to say today, and so on.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 316)

These statements hint at social media thought to be quicker and easier to access. Citizens more than 40 years old are assumed to only read newspapers and watch television, and therefore thought to be less informed:

But I think that people are, in my opinion, more informed about the European Union than they used to be. Old people definitely only do that or watch TV or

read the news, and the news is not always objective. It is on the basis of this that they can form some of their own thinking, which is not their thinking at all, but that of young people.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 318)

Interestingly, these statements indicate a thoroughly positive view of social media—the whole set of critical arguments against their effects (see e.g. Sunstein 2006; Flew and Iosifidis 2019; Jungherr et al. 2019; Schroeder 2019) such as the creation of bubbles and part publics, the spread of fake news, and the dominance of profit-oriented companies with a low respect of individual rights and data protection (GAGFA—Google, Apple, Facebook, etc.) were not mentioned. Moreover, “older generations” (without age specification) were uniformly perceived as lacking social media literacy, without internal differentiations. The arguments in favour of social media could hence have been turned around by problematising that younger generations mainly rely on social media and that this represents a problem for democracy, given these flaws that social media present.

Centre-Periphery

A third gap between EU citizens mentioned is the one between the centre and periphery. It was mentioned more often in the eastern member states.

On the one hand there is the division between Eastern and Western Europe, and on the other hand we also have that in these eastern countries we have a lot of educated people who are Europhiles, so to speak. But the poorer people, all this is more distant for them, they don't understand it. So the division I think is two-layered.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 56)

This quote hints at two aspects: the division between East and West and the division between the wealthier and poorer citizens, the latter being interpreted to be more distant and less informed about the EU.

This was complemented by the idea of a higher importance of bigger cities which are mostly situated in western European countries:

[. . .] the big capitals in the EU are the people who have the biggest share of the pie and therefore they can tell where the ship is going.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 85)

This was seen as leading to differences regarding a European identity:

When I'm in Sofia, I feel European, in other cities-no. Which I think goes back to the social bubble theme again, the local one, the apathy, which is also backed up by the remoteness [. . .] there the Bulgarian life is felt, let's say,

national, whereas here the image I have of a European way of life is being reinforced.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 145, 147)

This quote points also at the alleged distance to “Brussels”, but also at a distance to the capital. Both was perceived as leading to more nationalism in contrast to Europeanism in Sofia.

I would personally add to what you say that the mentality in Bulgaria is divided into two—Sofia is somehow more liberal, while the smaller towns are more traditional, more patriarchal and there this view of the EU and the West is different.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 152)

The centre-periphery gap was, once more, related to the access to education and information:

I lived in a very small town where I think something like having these workshops probably wouldn't be as accessible and also kind of reaching the smaller towns because even based on a campaign posters and what people say a lot of times people in smaller regions depending on where you from also vote more groups that maybe anti EU and just because they don't have the information or it's not really given to them.

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 143)

8.8. Student Depoliticisation: Passive Critical Citizens

A key concern in the focus group research was to understand whether, how, and to what extent the students perceived the EU and its policies as politicised or rather depoliticised and to what extent they regarded themselves as politicising agents and/or actors. Several questions in the lead questionnaire for all focus group discussions were explicitly designed to address the field of politicisation and political action. The findings underline, however, that politicisation, whether perceived as an action, as salience of certain topics, or as contestation, appeared relatively rarely and only as a rather vague concept in most focus groups. The students not only had a narrow understanding of what politicisation means, referring to it mostly in terms of “polarisation”. Moreover, when they discussed “politicisation”, they mostly framed it as related or even confined to elections, or, at the utmost, the ECI.

It has been discussed several times in the earlier sections that the findings indicate the students to be rather passive: They approached both the EU and their national politics with strong and relatively clear expectations, but almost in the attitude of clients who expect a service. They rarely expressed their own role as one of active citizens. Even though they were reflecting themselves as better educated than average citizens and having more knowledge (see Section 8.2.), they reflected

neither themselves as political actors nor their possibilities to influence the EU or their passivity as such.

As was discussed in Section 8.3., the students claimed that the democratic quality of the EU needs improvement and that especially citizen activity and participation in the EU lack quality and intensity. They criticised these aspects frequently. However, they rarely referred to themselves in this context, and these reflections did not change their rather passive stance.

The students largely explained their passivity with their feelings of a lack of influence on the EU, a lack of knowledge, the distance they experience, and the other components of what was discussed as democracy gap earlier such as distance, the “Bubble”, complexity, and intransparency. This overall passive attitude resulted in a specific approach to the remedies the students claimed for the EU’s democratic deficits (see Section 8.9.): Again, they issued expectancies “to the above”, i.e. to the EU, its politicians, national politicians, educational systems, and “the media”. These expectations included the claim that the EU was responsible for changing its institutional system in order to strengthen directly legitimised bodies such as the EP, to improve its public relations in order to become more visible in the (social) media, and also the member states for changing their education system.

8.8.1. *Students as Passive Critical Citizens*

Passivity, as mentioned repeatedly earlier, was a predominant characteristic in both the students’ statements and their self-perception. They expressed a general feeling not to be represented in the EU, not to think they could change something, and not to have an influence on the EU. This perception has already been discussed in Section 8.3. and will only be briefly illustrated here.

A Feeling of Powerlessness

The following quote underlines a feeling of powerlessness:

I’m just a student, and I don’t think that I can change anything in the EU. It’s my opinion.

(Croatia, 3rd FG, Pos. 84)

Students often did not see any way of influencing the EU:

[I do] not see any way in which I can influence EU policy, except through these elections to the European Parliament, which are totally abstract to me.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 60)

The EU was moreover described as being “out of reach”:

We’re sort of, we’re getting into the process a bit too late. So, it looks like oh well, it’s completely out of our reach, we can’t really do anything about it.

(Finland, 1st FG, Pos. 355)

Furthermore, each one's own influence or impact was seen as too small to even try to do something:

And also, the fact that, even though you do the work and you do want to change something It's gonna be like minimum changes. I am not saying they don't have a big effect but overall, yeah, the wheel is gonna role if you are there or not. And for a lot of people, like also for me, I don't wanna do the job, that doesn't, it doesn't matter who does it, just it so it's done.

(Slovenia, 3rd FG, Pos. 125)

No One Will Ever Listen

All these statements show that students are barely aware of their own potential to politicise the EU or to even participate in another way than by voting in the European elections or maybe signing an ECI (see Section 8.3.). Overall, a feeling of frustration and powerlessness in the sense of “no one will ever listen” became visible in the expressions of the focus group participants.

I also agree that the citizens by law have possibilities to be listened to, and I the thing we can do is like protest but that is like literally nothing to some people. Some political parties just like ignore them. Probably they will, like, do some changes, but the possibilities are really small. And I don't think we are being really listened to.

(Croatia, 3rd FG, Pos. 78)

It would be understandable that non-EU citizens feel this way, as their legal status as foreigner deprives them of most political rights EU citizens possess. Nevertheless, the following quote from a non-EU citizen student underlines that as opposed to the general passivity, they mention the possibility of political action, e.g. by protesting:

We have like no influence. I mean, no direct, no legal influence. Maybe some of us being foreigners here in this land we could also go to some protests for or against something we could also we could we could kind of support other people who has rights here.

(Germany, 3rd FG, Pos. 105)

Views that emphasised students' possibilities for political action were rare among the EU citizens—as was discussed in Section 8.7.3. earlier, the students even expressed that participation of all sorts was more a thing of older generations. However, there were some of these reflections.

One student spoke about the importance of protests and classical political channels:

I think that I agree that protests are necessary, but they have to be combined with the official means of influence [. . .] if everybody thinks just in

individual terms: “Oh, I’m just a drop in the ocean”, then obviously nothing can happen. But like, if we realise that we have to act like together, then yeah, I think that we can have an influence.

(Croatia, 3rd FG, Pos. 91)

The next quote indicates that one student did not think they have a decisive individual influence, but that they saw collective action as possible and as possibly influential:

Just to go back to the beginning for a moment when the question was asked whether we can expect, whether we can change the EU. Quite briefly as individuals, I think we cannot. It is absurd at the moment, but it seems to me important that through collective action and coming together that this thing happens, because then we cannot be skipped over or skimmed over.

(Bulgaria, 1st FG, Pos. 79)

Another student mentioned petitions:

I would say I feel that I have some influence when I write, when I sign petitions, I would say. So that is a moment where I would say yeah, I maybe can change something if a lot of people do it then politicians will listen.

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 84)

Political groups were also highlighted as a possibility to become politically active with some reservations:

I think that citizens are well behind. The only way for citizens to get involved is through associations, through political groups, but it’s still quite difficult to have a say, because the European Union is still perceived as quite remote, so the heart of citizen representation, well the average citizen who isn’t necessarily very Europeanised or politicised, is the local or national sphere.

(France, 3rd FG, Pos. 103)

When possibilities for political action were mentioned, students often added relativisations and emphasised limits:

I always have the option to protest for anything and I could try to get elected, and I will vote in June and stuff. So, I do have the possibility to do more than voting, but I mean, it’s hard, so, and I am lazy, so you know.

(Slovenia, 3rd FG, Pos. 118)

As in the quote earlier, the next quote emphasises a lack of motivation to use existing means of participation:

Yeah, we do have options mechanism, but the motivation to actually use those is actually low.

(Slovenia, 3rd FG, Pos. 119)

This hints at students being conscious of their being passive but do not see the necessity to make an effort, and do not have the motivation to do something.

Formal possibilities for participation were also opposed to a perceived reality:

The possibility is there. In reality, it is not really there, because there are very few organised citizens' groups that really influence Europe's decisions. It is quite paradoxical in an attempt at representative democracy that even through periodic votes, citizens do not manage to translate their interests into policy.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 118)

One student stressed the need to be a politician or gather a majority in order to change something in the EU:

I also think it's difficult to make changes by yourself because unanimity decides, the majority decides. If you really want to change something you need to get into European politics, become an MEP or really get the majority of people behind you. But as you all said its difficult because the member states need to have the same opinion.

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 106)

Lack of Political Knowledge

Several students argued that to understand the EU, knowledge on political processes is needed and that this kind of knowledge is also necessary to politicise an issue. The students also felt that they lack this knowledge:

I also think that I'm not quite sure I know how to politicise myself, because the subject doesn't really speak to me.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 121)

With regard to the procedures citizens can use, one student spoke of a lack of knowledge:

The problem is that you have to know that the procedure exists, and the vast majority of citizens are not aware of any of the provisions that allow them to express an opinion on a subject.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 109)

In a Finnish focus group, four students discussed intensely how to politicise and influence the EU:

Do you know what door to knock on? Do you know where the doors are? Do you know what your next steps would be to try and influence? What would you try and go about it if you were to try and influence them in a certain way?

Other students suggested to use Google or contact one of the Finnish representatives directly. The second suggestion was immediately contradicted by another student:

Would you dare to do? Have you ever contacted a politician?

The answer was:

No, I haven't, but I would not see a problem with that. [Laughter] No, not if it's an issue I would really, really care about.

The four students concluded:

I think contacting the Finnish representatives, one of them or all of them, would be the first step and then maybe the most natural way to do it.

And I think this first contact would really affect the question, like, if they answer and say: "Hey, good point!", then you'd be like: "Hey, I have power!" But if they like leave you on read or something [. . .] it's like okay .

(Finland, 1st FG, Pos. 448–462)

This discussion indicates how unsure the students were about pathways, means, and procedures for political action. Even after they saw a pathway, i.e. contacting a politician, they described themselves as dependent on the politician's reaction: They could either support them in their endeavour or stop it before it really began.

Exception of Climate Change

As discussed in Section 8.2.9., the only policy field in which the students stressed the possibility of having individual influence was climate change—but not in the sense of political action. They rather mentioned individual behaviour that can help combat climate change, such as using one's own grocery bag, being on a vegan diet, recycling, or waste management. Such actions were not linked to politicisation (even though they potentially can be). Individual decisions can, however, remain invisible in (EU) politics and among other citizens. This reduces the individual influence to the students only reducing their own carbon footprint:

Of all these issues, I have absolutely no control over anything, as an individual, except my behaviour towards climate change.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 234)

Passive Critical Citizens

As stated throughout this section, the students all in all show a strangely passive approach related to their feelings of a lack of influence and knowledge on how

to take political action: They want *the EU* to become an actor (see Section 8.6.), but they do not see themselves as actors. They mention problems but want *the EU* to solve them. As already discussed in Section 8.6. the EU in this is seen as an abstract entity and the students' frequent demand "The EU shall do . . ." reminds of clients or customers rather than citizens. At the same time, students remained conscious that there are limits to the EU's capacities, diverging interests, and internal conflicts, very much in line with the criticisms discussed in the sections earlier.

This approach is underlined by the following statement with regard to the process of changing the regulations for migration in 2024:

I mean, I don't believe it's like, there's nothing to do about it. [. . .] You know, if it shall be solved, it shall be solved by political means. So I do expect the European Union to do something about it, but I doubt it, in a sense.

(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 202)

This quote indicates that the student well perceived the details and political process underway to change the EU's migration policy; however, they did not really take a stand on it but just expected the EU to solve the issue somehow. It is not even clear whether the student was critical of the EU's policy change or not.

Some students expressed the hope that problem pressure would lead the EU to change:

I'm not sure as a single person that I can change the European Union, but and I hope that the European Union itself has so much problems in it that it has to change on its own.

(Croatia, 3rd FG, Pos. 87)

8.8.2. *What Concerns the Students?*

Politicisation was thus mainly thematised in the focus groups because it was especially asked for—the lead questionnaires contained a set of four questions in this respect. The focus group moderator named the following policy areas:

1. The common market
2. The common agricultural policy
3. Migration/the situation in the Mediterranean
4. Climate change
5. EU structural funds
6. Erasmus+
7. Money: Euro currency, banking union, austerity, the European Central Bank
8. Institutions: EP, Council, EC
9. Free travel/EU passport/EU citizenship
10. Defence/military/security

They were shown on a blackboard or PowerPoint. Afterwards, students were asked to simply rank them as according to the following four questions:

1. Which topic do you find the most important? (chose one)
2. Which topic do you find the most polarised? (chose one)
3. Which topic do you feel can be influenced best by you? (chose one)
4. Which topic do you feel can be influenced best by the EU? (chose one)

As discussed in Section 8.2., the outcome showed strong similarities across all focus group countries. Climate change and migration were seen as the “most polarised topics” by most participants of the focus groups. This describes an alleged politicisation (“I think this is contested”), but, as said earlier, it does not necessarily entail an active politicisation in the sense that the students debate the topic themselves or act in the matter.

Migration

Migration was clearly described as the most polarised topic by the students, but again, in a rather passive and descriptive way in which the actors are others, mainly “politicians”, “parties”, “countries” or “leaders”. The discussion reveals quite pronounced opinions, however, with regard to the political dynamics at stake:

[. . .] migration might be the most polarising by far [it is] a kind of a powerful topic, to exploit by European leaders on both sides to exploit to be fair. It creates division lines, it gives EU leaders tools to kind of enhance their kind of political ideology to like feed into like certain groups to exploit it so I think that creates tension.

(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 185)

Politicisation of migration was linked to polarised opinions and contestation of topics—again without a clear mention of the actors:

Because there are people from both sides and they both speak loudly to polarised people for it or against it.

(Germany, 3rd FG, Pos. 197)

The students also pointed out that especially right-wing parties are using migration as a polarising topic:

[. . .] the right parties are always like viewing migration as something really bad that we cannot take people.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 126)

Right-wing parties were described as profiting from this usage of the topic:

[. . .] it is the biggest thing in the hands of the right-wing and that is how they get to power because they show things that are not really functioning in a country and they always combine it with this issue of migration even though that is not the case, most of those things were not functioning before the migrants arrived.

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 256)

Students saw the politicisation of migration as not being confined to a certain member state or the EU but as being visible worldwide and as being actively triggered to reach specific aims:

On the European and international level migration is also a weapon, as a check and balance system. I will give you an example Italy is providing the North African countries with huge funding to eradicate legal migration, and actually North African countries are using that money for other purposes, to be honest. Turkey is also using the issue of migration. So, they are keeping repeatedly threatening the EU of letting thousands of illegal migrants to enter the EU.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 131)

The polarising of migration was discussed in moralising categories:

[. . .] there are a lot of bad politicians who scare with migration and there are others who take advantage of migrants.

(Bulgaria, 1st FG, Pos. 176)

Students also tried to understand the related political dynamics. One point was that there was a left-right distinction at stake:

[Migration is] a subject that still divides the left and the right on the most basic level, but on which perhaps not many people can agree.

(Slovenia, 1st FG, Pos. 119)

The following quote indicates the perception that mainstream parties have begun to engage with the topic of migration as well:

Migration is the most important question when it comes to the upcoming European elections [in 2024].

(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 196)

The polarisation of migration was related to the topic being broadly relevant:

It's relevant to many countries, if not for all in the European Union.

(Germany, 3rd FG, Pos. 197)

The following quote indicates that migration is a topic that almost everyone has an opinion on and can say something about:

[Migration] was a topic for the far right for a long time and now that's the topic for everyone.

(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 193)

The politicisation of migration was also attributed to citizens' diverging opinions:

This is an issue that has been on the minds of the EU and its citizens for a very long time, and people are still divided on it. No substantial solution to the conflict between the people has been found to date, or at least I have not witnessed it, because I continue to see only different opinions.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 228)

Finally, students also emphasised that some member states were polarising the debate on migration:

[. . .] because now you have countries within the union, you know Italy, which is saying we are not gonna except any refugees, we are just gonna sort of let this be everyone else's problem cause of that point it is sort of, it does become, you know, other countries' problem.

(Finland, 3rd FG, Pos. 177)

This was related to diverging interests:

But regarding migration so it's difficult also for the EU to make common rules because they want to divide the migrants equally, like proportionally but then there are countries like Poland that says we want zero immigrants, so how do you like compromise with that?

(Finland, 3rd FG, Pos. 566)

As discussed in Section 8.4.4., the students were very critical of the EU's migration policy, largely seeing it as being in contradiction with the EU's values. Accordingly, they had claims (once more) on reshaping migration policy:

One member state is showing the same way, another member state has different policies, and I think it is a mistake to aim for the European Union in some way to have some kind of common migration policy, agreed when it is agreed. So that we do not repeat the sins of 2015/2016.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 261)

The following quote contains a recommendation for solving problems that lead to migration and combating the causes of migration. It is also somewhat aligned with

the “fortress Europe” approach, as the student recommends keeping the people out of the EU:

European Union should be much more focused on helping member states to stabilise the situation outside their own countries, and possibly to keep people out, and not to create policies that will suppress migration at the rate it is happening, certainly in Croatia.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 84)

Climate Change

Besides migration, climate change was the second topic the students named as being “most polarised”. As discussed in Sections 8.2.8. and 8.6.4., the discussion about climate change was often connected to the one on migration.

I was sort of trying to think about whether migration or climate change is more sort of polarised. But it’s hard cause they are also so intertwined. Climate change sort of causes more migration, especially from the South to the North.

(Finland, 3rd FG, Pos. 576–578)

Climate change was also discussed as polarising:

I would say climate change is probably most problematic and polarising for Bulgaria. I mean, there is a huge topic right now about the closing of coal mines. So this has also become a problem of national politics. So I will say it’s one of the most dividing topics, at least for the Bulgarian case.

(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 186)

Another Bulgarian student stated:

So I am going to make a smooth transition to one other topic that has been displaced by the hot-button issues, but is itself quite hot-button-namely climate change.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 218)

Climate change was also described as an issue that mobilises people:

Well, I mean climate change, joining some civic groups, constant celebrations, performances, orders to people, trying to make it clear to people that organic tomatoes are better than conventional tomatoes, that we need to sort out the waste, but in places we see ourselves that we can also say that there is a stream of people, parties and groups who are hearing these trends of climate change. [. . .] So people are starting to take an interest in this, and I think that it is possible for us, as young people, to believe in it.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 278)

Several students gave explanations on why the topics of migration and climate change were so polarised. One student emphasised media salience and apparent simplifications in the media as a possible explanation for topics becoming polarised:

I feel with climate change and migration, they're quite visible on the news and in sort of local politics and regional politics and in the member countries and so, I feel like those are things that people very easily form quick opinions on. I guess they get very simplified also sort of in specially in regional politics. Well in Finland we have political parties that, you know, they have very simple sort of/what is this like agenda/sort of ideologies about for example migration and climate change. [. . .] I think, a lot easier to simplify to people who maybe don't understand.

(Finland, 3rd FG, Pos. 582)

In alignment with their passive stance, the pathways of politicisation that the students' statements indicated were mostly top-down oriented and referred mainly to communication activities and media salience.

COVID-19

A third topic that was mentioned as being politicised or polarising was COVID-19. During the first round of focus groups, the pandemic was nearing its end, and thus was frequently discussed.

[COVID-19] really splits the society and there is like lot of like hate against each other.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 127)

This refers to the fact that during the pandemic, controversies around COVID-19 measures were frequent and deeply anchored in the German society. Another student in the same focus group related this to uncertainty connected with COVID-19:

[. . .] we average people didn't know what will happen, in the same way, the politicians, of course were not prepared, and they made maybe some mistakes or some bad decisions, because they just didn't know what will happen later, which is, I think, quite understandable in this situation, because it was a big chaos and it still is a chaos. It is also understandable that these mistakes or steps made people furious or polarised the society.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 130)

The student thus tried to explain societal polarisation as a reaction of citizens against three types of political decisions, namely a) decisions in favour of unpopular measures, b) decisions in favour of measures that people did not understand, and c) decisions that led to mistakes. According to the student all these decisions

intensify social tensions and generate conflicts within the society. Interestingly, this student clearly situated him/herself as part of the “average people”.

8.8.3. *Politicisation, Polarisation, and Depoliticisation*

All in all, students rather saw an increasing polarisation than a politicisation in the EU.

And also in light of the upcoming elections [EP elections in 2024] this is really maybe a kind of turning point, because I think the society becomes quite polarised also because of the economic situation, and because of this/ this polarisation really it is very important that many people should go to vote. Because, if not, like their interests will be basically represented by those who voted and others will be kind of disregarded. And this will lead to even more polarisation. And so in this sense, it's really a turning point.

(Croatia, 3rd FG, Pos. 152)

The next quote depicts an increase in polarisation:

I feel like nowadays we are seeing a trend that more and more topics are becoming polarised.

(Finland, 3rd FG, Pos. 584)

The following quote speaks of politicisation, but describes polarisation:

[...] one other problem is the general political discourse in Europe that has no homogeneity, because of politicisation, and securitisation on a lot of topics.

(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 247)

Depoliticisation

The French students stood out since they especially discussed the concept of depoliticisation. They found several indicators of depoliticisation on the EU level, judging unanimity (in the Council decision-making), consensus, and the culture of compromise rather negatively in this respect.

But there are a lot of things that will either not be debated, or will never get to the plenary stage, or will be defeated just before because it's actually too political, in terms of the current form of the Union. It's just not possible for it to go through.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 127)

Too much consensus was seen as leading to depoliticisation because of the lack of debates or because debates on potentially conflicting issues are stopped before they can become politicised at all. The EU itself was thus not regarded as being much

politicised by the French students. This becomes visible by their critical discussion of the necessity to compromise and reach agreements among member states (see also Section 8.3.):

So, I think that in fact it's above all a compromised democracy, in the sense that it's a democracy that we have to share with others, the other member states have to agree on the subject for it to work.

(France, 3rd FG, Pos. 107)

On what was said about compromise, I think that not everything can be thrown away in a culture of compromise, because it's the basis of democracy, it's reconciling the different interests, etc. The problem is to reconcile interests without dividing them.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 135)

In contradiction to this statement, other French students defended compromises:

[. . .] we are together, we are united, but sometimes some people want to move forward more quickly than others, and so some put up a wall rather than try to negotiate. And that's perhaps one of the flaws that this image evokes for me, which is that yes, there's a façade of "We're united, we agree, we compromise".

(France, 3rd FG, Pos. 53)

[It is] the culture of compromise [that] makes European politics so charming, and which is the beating heart of this policy, and which also allows the European Union to move forward sometimes, during European summits where, behind closed doors, we have these discussions, I think, which are vehement, but on which we reach this compromise.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 157)

This statement includes both the need for diverging opinions and debates and the need to find a compromise and consensus in the end.

French students also raised a lack of cleavages, i.e. visible political conflict lines, in the EP:

This is not at all peculiar to our culture, and, if I may be subjective, I think our culture is very good, in the sense that I believe in cleavage. Cleavage, if it is framed and allows all opinions and ideologies to be fully developed and expressed in public, is very healthy for democracy.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 132)

These statements from the French students show that they deem a political debate with different opinions to be necessary for a democratically process also on the European level.

The French students also established a connection between transparency and politicisation:

We don't know who governs, again, and as a result, we don't know who is politicised, who is for what, and what is going on the Union.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 127)

The EU was described as depoliticised:

[...] the functioning of the European Union is very depoliticised for technical issues. That's how it is, there are issues that are depoliticised by saying: "This is the way it is. This is the right way to do it and there is no alternative." [...] The European Union, the European institutions and the European project are a great machine on the move, which is very difficult to stop or to drive, which is going in a very neo-liberal direction.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 118)

Polarisation or Depoliticisation

To conclude, the students rarely discussed politicisation explicitly—neither as a concept nor with regard to effects and actions of politicisation. When they approached the topic, they mostly referred to polarisation, and more particularly party politics and media salience.

It is notably surprising that the students equate polarisation with politicisation: Politicisation, even in its the most common sense, refers to the fact that an issue is thematised as political or controversial (see Chapter 2). In contrast, polarisation refers to something different, namely, the situation in a society, the split of political camps, cleavage lines, and the harshness and confrontational character of debates and controversies in this society, and most often the fact that political extremes dominate instead of the centre. The current situation in the United States or France, for instance, would be regarded as polarised societies, while climate change or migration would count as politicised topics.

It remains an open question for future research what this confusion of the two concepts indicates. Does it hint at the fact that the students see politicisation as such critically or even judge it as a danger for social cohesion in a similar way as polarisation? Does it simply mean that the students interpret politicisation, debate, and controversy immediately as politicisation, without seeing shades of grey and nuances? Is just a matter of a lack of fine-grained usage of concepts? Or does it mean that they do not see the positive potential of debate?

In some specific focus group discussions, and mainly in the French focus groups, the students also claimed more debate and controversies and controversial opinions in order to better reflect divergent interests, contested topics, and the significance of these issues for a large number of people and/or countries. The positive and integrative function that debate can have—which was at the outset of the research—was hence taken up mainly by the French students. They were the most interested in politicisation and debate as normative conditions for EU democracy.

When it comes to the actors of politicisation-as-polarisation, the lack that was already discussed several times earlier became apparent: Citizens in general and students in particular were rarely mentioned, but instead member states, politicians, and political parties. Only a few students also mentioned citizens and their debates in the context of politicisation in an understanding in which feelings of dissatisfaction among citizens and of unpopular decisions were seen as contributing to politicisation.

8.9. Remedying the Democracy Gap: Suggestions

In the focus group the students made a number of recommendations on how to remedy the democracy gap. The students' suggestions can be clustered into the following main aspects in Table 8.6.

Table 8.6 Students' suggestions for improving the EU

<i>Decision-making</i>	<i>Information</i>	<i>Education</i>
Clarify and streamline decision-making processes to make them more efficient, faster, transparent, and less complex	Improve information and transparency in and of the institutions	Improve education by adding EU politics to the national curricula and providing more learning opportunities on the EU
Give a higher value to input legitimacy and increase competencies of the EP, e.g. a full right of legal initiative	Undertake top-down activities with regard to media and social media in order to better inform citizens	Change certain EU policies
–	Enhance participation and voting	–

These recommendations concerned pathways and possibilities to improve democracy and governance in the EU in general, the further development of the EU, and tasks and policies that the EU should tackle in the future. In a general sense, the students' recommendations were again very much marked by a top-down perspective in which they claimed the EU to act, politicians to act, or just "action". They issued also abstract claims for e.g. "more citizen participation". Again, the recommendations showed very few references to the students as actors themselves. Some of the fields mentioned earlier were already discussed in the previous chapters, the remaining ones will be presented in the following.

8.9.1. *Decision-Making and Competencies of EU Institutions*

Students gave a number of recommendations with regard to the EU's institutions, decision-making processes, and competencies. Suggestions mainly concerned ways to improve efficiency, representation, participation, information, and transparency.

These recommendations, however, stayed rather general. Students rarely went into detail or formulated concrete tasks. For instance, one student stressed that

[it should become] easier for the EU to speak in one voice when it comes to making decisions.

(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 226)

This claim is quite unspecific, but links to the importance several students placed on unity and the need to overcome national interests in various policy areas.

Power to the EP

Many students claimed reforms to grant more power to the EP—often in quite unspecific ways:

I think that like the tendency towards like for example more democratic actions in the European Parliament and more like power the European Parliament is a very good like move towards like more democracy I think at the EU level.

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 197)

I mean, I think the European Parliament should be able to do more actually. I mean, there is a, I mean there is a deficit definitely. And I think that more things, than just the members of parliament should be elected.

(Slovenia, 3rd FG, Pos. 141)

The following quote claims the right to legal initiatives for the EP—a right that it possess already in an indirect way (see in detail Section 8.3.3):

I think one big step to enhance democracy, in the EU, is one of the drafts that they have, the EU, they are planning to give legislative initiative to the European Parliament. It could be a big step to enhance democracy, because the European Commission is the one, the big one drafting the new legislation. So I would say if the European Parliament is doing this, democracy will be even more functioning in the EU. Even the legitimacy of what they call co-legislator will actually.

(Croatia, 3rd FG, Pos. 101)

Such improvements of the EP's powers are often proposed and discussed not only in academia (see for example Shackleton 2017), but also in the media and among NGOs or institutions. However, as discussed at some length in Section 8.3.3., since the EP's first direct election in 1979 and most recently with the Treaty of Lisbon, the EP obtained more and more powers (Grau i Segú 2019; Tiilikainen and Wiesner 2016; Wiesner 2019). In particular, the Lisbon Treaty changes upgraded

the previous Co-Decision-Procedure to the Ordinary Legislative Procedure, in which the EP and the Council decide jointly on law proposals. Moreover, as said earlier (see Section 8.3.3.), according to article 225 TFEU, the EP has an indirect right to legal initiatives in that it can incite the EC to make a law proposal, even if only the EC possesses the immediate and direct competence to legal initiatives.

Nevertheless, many students still saw the EP as lacking powers. This means that the students are not fully aware of the competencies the EP possesses in reality. It seems like the more recent changes in the EP's power have not been fully perceived by the students. This could indicate a lack of awareness and information of students about the changes—or the resistance of prejudices on the EU's institutions. It could also hint at another EU communication deficit, this time concerning the powers in the EU institutional system. Such misperceptions of the real existing power relations in the EU were rather frequent.

As already discussed in Sections 8.3. and 8.8., the French students in particular suggested far-reaching changes of the EU that would often require fundamental treaty changes and therefore appear difficult to implement. Many of them revolved around giving more powers to the EP. One student suggested turning the EU into a parliamentary system:

For me, the Commission must be a real government coming from a parliament.
(France, 1st FG, Pos. 35)

This would require a treaty change, which would require unanimity in the Council in its favour, plus eventual referenda in certain member states. These obstacles to a treaty change were not discussed as such, but it was suggested that the EP become responsible for treaties, i.e. to make it

[. . .] the only one to draft treaties, or to draft a constitution, for example [the EP should] become sovereign in order to have a real democracy, and to say that the vote that counts would be that vote, and less the national vote.
(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 203)

The following student agreed:

Afterwards, yes, the states must delegate, and the idea that the EP should really deal with the treaties and that it should be in charge. The EP should be almost a constituent body, which would be really good, but the EP should stop its spirit of compromise and be more cleaving, because otherwise we could have revised treaties, certainly, but they would have the same head, because it would be the economic EPPs who would work together and who would do the same thing as we have today.
(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 210)

A number of other proposals of the focus group participants aimed at improving representative democratic processes in the EP. One student argued for creating real pan-European parties:

Maybe also a feeling that a transnational, even pan-European political party. [. . .] on behalf of all Europeans [. . .] which can represent an idea, an approach—this is my point of view—of profound reform of the European institutions and the treaties. There would be this legitimacy to say: “We are a European party to be able to make this institutional transformation.”

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 148–150)

Political groups in the EP that associate along party lines were seen as enhancing democracy:

So, I think they already like by default already broke it up. So, they are like in a group in the Parliament. The Conservative, Nationalists and then they have free market Liberals and then the Socialist and the Greens so that all people all representative from the countries already choose one group. So, in a way that’s more democratic.

(Finland, 1st FG, Pos. 200)

As said earlier (Section 8.2.1.), the French students were the most pronounced when it came to EU reforms. In the first French focus group, a student who had previously advocated for EU reform emphasised the necessity of deeper integration:

But if we want to go further, necessarily, for me, we must also, as a consequence, go further in integration and in construction. We cannot go further in policies if we do not go further in the institutional model, finally.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 61)

Another French student claimed the EU to

[. . .] move towards a more federal integration [because] the mixture of the intergovernmental and the supranational is not, in my opinion, a very good thing. I think that we need a profound reform.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 35)

Expanding on this idea, the student proposed a more centralised EU governance structure:

In my opinion, there could very well be a supranational European Union that would manage all the policies of this approach, and alongside this, a Council of heads of state and government that would no longer have any influence on the internal European Union part and would deal exclusively with the only policy that could remain under the intergovernmental logic.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 83)

This is in line with the proposal of moving towards federal integration and restructuring the whole EU, as well as adding competencies to the EU that are currently

under member states' sovereignty. As explained earlier, this would require a treaty change.

8.9.2. *Top-Down Activities: Informing the Citizens*

As previously discussed, students mentioned that the EU's complexity requires knowledge of both citizens and the journalists, to be able to understand the EU and explain it to the general public (see Section 8.2.). This need was addressed by the following recommendations. Various student proposals underlined that citizens should be better informed about the EU and it should become more visible in daily life. The students also highlighted the need for giving a more positive tone and focus to reporting on the EU topics. Once more, they argued in favour of top-down pathways, using e.g. television, newspapers, and social media.

Interestingly, as will be discussed in more detail later, many of the activities the students recommended are already carried out, such as video recordings of sessions of certain EU institutions or a presence of the EU's institutions on social media. Similar to the competencies of the EP many students did not know about these.

Top-Down Transparency

As previously discussed, students also claimed more transparency and information about EU policies and EU decision-making of the EU, because this would also help citizens to understand the decision-making processes better. A concrete proposal how to improve transparency was

[. . .] to enforce the strictest possible system of transparency, so that there is constant surveillance of the executive, which is really the one that has taken power, that has imposed itself as the heart of public policy-making in Europe.

The same student then concretised his/her recommendation by proposing video transmission of sessions of the EU institutions:

The first step would be to systematise video retransmissions. It's not complicated, you just have to buy the equipment, and then you have to have a team of experts, or rather a team of technicians who prepare the transcripts, and have a website that works.

(France, 3rd FG, Pos. 108)

Such video transmissions, however, are already available from the EP that streams, for example, parliamentary sessions and press conference live on its websites and provides recordings afterwards. The Council also streams public sessions and press conferences and provides recordings of these, as well as the EC that provides live-streams online. The student mentioned neither of these. This means though that all or most of the public sessions of the EU's institutions are already streamed, which leaves the possibilities for increasing streaming to be rather small. Informal

negotiations will of course never be streamed, as this would counteract the principle of informality, and hence, negotiations “behind closed doors” will not become public in any way. In order to remedy this problem and to obtain more transparency, another change would be necessary, namely to discuss and decide about laws and policies in the public sessions rather than in informal negotiations such as trilogue (Wiesner 2019).

Resources and Information

The students also claimed an improvement of resources of information.

One student said that more information would increase participation in EP elections:

So, so many people don't know about it. And like the number of people that are voting in the European Union, European elections are very, very low. So also like increasing those numbers with education and work and PR and advertising and stuff.

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 234)

This quote does leave out other possible reasons for a low turnout apart from information.

Focus group participants also proposed introducing specific EU-related sections in classical media:

I would love for maybe once a day or once week you could have like a special segment for EU news.

(Finland, 3rd FG, Pos. 396)

The French students were particularly pronounced in this claim:

There should be an insert, I don't know, on public service television, at prime time, for five minutes about “How legislation works in Europe, how the ordinary legislative procedure works”, etc.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 80)

These claims were sometimes linked to criticism of media coverage of EU topics:

So, as was said before, I get information through social networks through the media and I cannot believe that HRT does not like anything on this issue or very much, so that is why they post reports on television, in the centre of the news, or on the radio, in a radio programme which is perhaps less empty, but purely informative, the EU has a minute in the morning which gives out the most important story of the day, and this is something that can be felt in tomorrow's news.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 39)

Again, the EU columns are already happening in certain media, such as German local newspapers. Of course, EU media coverage could be broadened by introducing new media formats and/or increasing the coverage of EU topics—but again, the actors, i.e. the persons who would decide about this, remain unclear.

Moreover, media freedom is a high value and part of the constitutions in most EU member states, and moreover, not all media are public. This means that it is the journalists and/or the owners of media companies that decide about the topics they report upon. If one wants to increase EU coverage, these actors have to be won for the case. The students did not mention this, which aligns with their unspecific approach to hierarchies and power relations linked to political processes: The idea, again, is that “someone would need to change this” without reflecting who has the power or the competence to do so.

The finding that students do not fully understand the importance of media freedom is emphasised by the following quote that calls for more positive reporting on the EU. Students mentioned the need to promote positive news on the EU when providing information on the EU and reporting on the EU. They perceived EU news as predominantly negative, with the EU often being used as a scapegoat (see Section 8.7.1.). This led some students to blame media in an outright way:

I think a major problem for the EU is and will be the media, because the media only tells about the bad things that are happening. So all these fears and all this anger that certain people have about the EU is just getting bigger and they all always see like: “OK, my fear is confirmed.”

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 222)

This statement underlines, in connection to the discussion in Section 8.6.1. and the conclusion earlier, a limited understanding of the role of media in democracies. If media report negatively about the EU, it is not only because they are not well-informed, even if this might be—or might not be—a reason. Media are free to report as they chose, and so media reporting depends on the journalists’ decisions. In other cases, media reporting might be influenced by media owners that indicate the political direction of the media. In any case, education campaigns in order to change media reporting can only try to reach these decision-makers. The idea to influence or direct reporting is one that counteracts the classical idea of freedom of the press. This especially counts for public media who have the duty to report in a balanced way rather than promoting only one political position.

EU Visibility

Another recommendation was to make the EU’s funding and hence the EU more visible. One student discussed the funding of festivals. The student talked about the organisation and/or financial support of a Škis market [music festival of student associations] by the EU in every member state because this

[. . .] would raise awareness among the young people, the young people would get to know each other, it would be fun first and foremost, but sub-consciously you would also take something away from it. If nothing else an EU T-shirt.

(Slovenia, 2nd FG, Pos. 168)

Students also claimed EU funding needed to become more visible. Once more, they argued for something that already takes place: funding signs:

If the European Union is going to fund a park in your local community, or is going to co-fund a park, and it is pointed out that this work has also been done because of the existence of the European Union, then perhaps the average citizen will probably be more aware of that than if you put up a sign on which all the information about the European Union can be written, [. . .] it should probably also be highlighting some of these positive aspects that really every citizen, every member of the local community, who will like, I don't know, a park or a new playground or something that everybody can relate to, but is happy with.

(Slovenia, 1st FG, Pos. 95)

Once more, the principle that the student describes already exists: Any EU-funded project, be it a park or a research project, has a clear obligation to showcase and publicise the EU funding. This means that there are already strict rules on publicity for EU funding that include adding the EU logo and a statement on receiving funds including the exact programme or number of the EU grant. However, these disclosures are often rather small and at the bottom of a publication or a sign. Maybe disclosures that are better visible could be helpful, as this would allow citizens to see tangible projects—such as bridges, improved infrastructure, better parks—that frequently enhance their daily lives.

Social Media

Social media, which most of the focus group participants used to inform themselves, was emphasised in all focus groups and by most of the students. Students said that enhancing EU social media communication would entail to open and use more channels to provide information and communicate with the citizens than just the established media, e.g. TV, newspaper. The EU institutions' social media channels were regarded as performing relatively well, but being biased:

I have been following the accounts of the Commission and the Parliament on Twitter and that, although it is extremely biased, because it is directly the institutions, it does provide some information.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 66)

Intensifying the EU's social media activities was thus regarded as necessary, especially for reaching younger people:

[. . .] I don't know exactly, but I would say more older people vote that younger people. [. . .] And how could they change that? Maybe that the EU tries to invest more in social media and try to connect more younger people and maybe it's not that effective.

(Germany, 3rd FG, Pos. 150)

Various students proposed to use platforms and channels such as Instagram and Facebook or other platforms such as X (Twitter), YouTube, or TikTok:

I would maybe add some more social media like Facebook, Instagram from some European institutions, it brings young people so much closer.

(Slovenia, 2nd FG, Pos. 47)

However, both the EU institutions as well as a number of MEPs are already present on these channels (with the exception of TikTok, being excluded, because it does not confirm to EU data protection and information standards) and partly followed by the students. Again, this was not present to all students.

The question, then, is rather how to optimise the social media presence. One student argued for the EU's social media presence to become less official:

And more straightforwardness from the maybe social media part from the European Parliament, European Commission. [. . .] I see they go live on Instagram, but it's very official. There should be a directness and to the goal to be communicated immediately. Not with many words, but to the point straightforward.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 181)

Another student proposed putting younger people in charge of communication tasks:

The thing that's easiest and quickest to get done is to have the people in charge of communication just be young people who know how to do this thing. Because now the communication is on Instagram, the communication is on TikTok, you need a very quick presentation of the information.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 246)

Several students thus claimed the use of easily accessible, low-threshold, and simple formats and language to convey EU information and get to the point without detours. Some students recommended the use of memes:

Alternative sources give much firmer information, stays with you much longer than any TV. I can get something very concise from TV, people don't

believe them, whereas you get a meme with a big strong dog and a small dog and one says EU good or EU bad and you are left with some impression that works on a subconscious level much stronger than reading a 400-page regulation.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 71)

Memes were discussed as simple means of conveying simple messages:

I wanted to say that it happens to me very often to miss some sensational news. And coming across some meme, I think what is it, the first time I hear. And I open it up and start digging. And actually memes act kind of like a reminder—go and check, which is often the equivalent of clickbait headlines—but it’s useful.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 80)

Because of the high complexity of the EU that was pointed out by the students so often, this could pose a challenge. On one hand, students claimed simple messages, on the other hand, oversimplification would lead to giving less rather than more and better information. However, using memes as an entry point to capture interest and then providing more detailed information could be a possible solution.

8.9.3. Education

As was discussed in Section 8.2.10., the claim for more and better EU-oriented education figured very prominently in the focus groups, despite the fact that education is one of the policy fields that the EU does not have competencies in, except for the Erasmus+ programmes. As such, the EU can only “support the development of quality national school education systems and promote collaboration on issues of shared concern” (European Commission 2024a). It does so, for example, by providing recommendations, such as the Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, or by organising conferences, e.g. the conference on learning approaches and environments in school education (European Commission 2024b, 2024c).

This means that students’ claims with regard to education concern national policies and competencies. One student vaguely said that:

[. . .] it would be really important not to only focus on the national system, but also in the European system and also start educating students from high school about it.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 66)

It is, however, by no means sure that nation-states will have an interest in supporting EU-related education—but the students did not discuss the role of nation-states in their claims regarding education.

The claim for “more and better EU education”, as was discussed in Section 8.2.10., is also again in fit with the passive, almost consumerist attitude and their orientation to top-down approaches in order to remedy democracy that was shown by the students: Again, some actors “above” (in that case the nation-states) are called to improve a policy (in this case education). The students also show an almost naïve belief in the effects of education. Their statements imply that citizens, journalists, or even politicians will understand the EU if it is only explained better, in short, if there is better EU publicity. This neglects that fact that citizens, journalists, or politicians can simply be critical of the EU as it is, or of concrete EU policies—in which case, education would not be a remedy.

The claims for more EU-oriented education also remained mostly unspecific. The following quote transports the assumption that people would understand the EU’s benefits if they were only systematically educated:

I think a lot of people don’t know the benefits they have because of the EU. Maybe that’s why they are kind of against it, but they don’t know enough, so education would be helpful.

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 61)

EU education was called to be necessary in primary schools:

[. . .] I don’t know if we were taught anything about the European Union in primary school, but it would have been very important, wouldn’t it, because we are part of the European Union.

(Slovenia, 2nd FG, Pos. 105)

The following recommendation is quite specific:

[. . .] the introduction of at least some lessons perhaps devoted to the European Union in secondary and primary schools helps to make you aware that there are structures and to a certain extent also importance.

(Slovenia, 1st FG, Pos. 95)

Another student pointed to the need to educate the older generation:

It would be good to think about some projects to involve older people or to inform them about what the European Union is all about. Although maybe in the years when we became a member of the EU these older people were younger and maybe they did get some information about the EU then, it’s just that the EU itself has changed since 2004 and I don’t think there are any new things that people know.

(Slovenia, 1st FG, Pos. 97)

These quotes highlight that the students not only regarded the improvement of education in school and for younger generations by teaching EU politics

and explaining how the EU and its decision-making processes work as necessary. They also called to aim at educating older generations and keeping them up to date with changes that have been made over the years, e.g. in EU treaties.

Again, the French students made quite specific recommendations. They claimed, for instance, the EU to become part of the curricula of compulsory education (see Section 8.7.1.). Another suggestion was a TV series:

We could make a Europe course on this didactic model of the Arte videos “The underside of the maps” of all Europe, because it is super important and we want to popularise it to children. I’m sure they really like it.

(France, 2nd FG, Pos. 170)

The students were extremely positive, if not enthusiastic, about the possible effects of EU-related education. They assumed a positive interrelation between education and participation in elections (see Section 8.2.10.). This connection between education and voting was broadly emphasised:

I would also say that you should try to be or transparent and be more informative so that maybe in the future the children will learn in school about the EU and the decision-making and maybe then in the future, more people will vote.

(Germany, 3rd FG, Pos. 336)

Education was also seen as a means to make people understand the importance of the EU:

And a little more emphasis in educational institutions, in schools, to teach children more in schools, I don’t know at grade level, to mention it to them, to make them feel that it’s important, too.

(Slovenia, 2nd FG, Pos. 105)

One student saw a necessity to educate people on the

[. . .] process of building initiatives, of how they are run.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 134)

This highlights a perceived need to inform the citizens about their options for participation and to become active in EU politics. Another student mentioned the need for

[. . .] examples of good practice of copying other countries and working in this direction [not only educating citizens] exclusively through learning, not necessarily by having a book read and learn.

(Croatia, 1st FG, Pos. 175)

8.9.4. *Increasing Democratic Participation*

The students also gave a number of recommendations on how democratic participation in the EU could be improved. On one hand, they indicated concrete measures; on the other hand, they referred to building identity and trust. As discussed in Section 8.3., the students argued that the citizens' self-responsibility in the EU was insufficient because people did not feel sufficiently concerned:

People aren't going to feel like they have anything to do with this entity, so why would you need it?

(Germany, 2nd FG, Pos. 225)

Students also gave comments and recommendations on how to improve identification with the EU. One student argued that a European identity or a feeling of belonging could raise interest in the EU:

[. . .] with some awareness that we are Europeans, that you feel part of something, then it's a bit easier.

(Slovenia, 2nd FG, Pos. 104)

One student claimed it was necessary to rebuild trust—again a without specification on how this should happen:

But the problem that I see is that there is no will anymore to Europe and there's a mistrust and there must be this trust. It kind of it has to come back somehow in order to have more initiatives and people being involved in that.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 74)

Citizen Self-Responsibility

One core issue that the students mentioned was citizen responsibility. Many proposals in this respect have been discussed in Sections 8.2.11. and 8.7.1. They regard media literacy and a reflected usage of media. Several students said that gathering EU information and trying to understand them was an active process that required, once more, knowledge. Students often claimed that even if the EU information or reporting is there, it has to be actively chosen and read or viewed to have an impact. Citizens' self-responsibility was seen as vital for such an active process of informing oneself.

The citizens' responsibility was not seen as ending with elections but found to go further, e.g. through monitoring what the elected representatives, in this case the MEPs, are doing:

[. . .] when we have given our vote, this trust that we have transferred to our elected representatives, we should still make sure that they do not make a mistake.

(Bulgaria, 2nd FG, Pos. 120)

Other approaches mentioned to increase participation were openness and cultural exchange:

Well, us as citizens probably engage more openly in these kinds of cultural exchange.

(Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 216)

[. . .] if you could go like every so months like in another country and kind of like exchange with the people there and then people coming. [. . .] I think this idea of like having more common infrastructure, more common identity by getting people to chat to each other and to be closer to one another.

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 313)

Once more, all in all, the students had few concrete suggestions. A student who pointed to the need to make older people aware of and interested in the EU had

[. . .] no idea other than to tell my grandmother why we have the European Union, because it's one of those roads that our mayor made, it's co-funded by the EU, because they have a logo up on the signboard, it's not something informative.

(Slovenia, 1st FG, Pos. 97)

Such a lack of ideas or concrete recommendations was often visible in the focus groups. While students could identify deficits and problems, they frequently lacked solutions or believed that the EU should find a solution (see Section 8.6.).

Citizen Participation

Students also discussed possible means to increase citizen participation (see also Section 8.3.). One student, once more, stated that the possibilities for participation should be better known:

I think promoting the existing ways of participation, because I feel like a lot of people don't know about the ways of participation. Yeah. The monetary ways as well. How the NGOs can participate, how common people can participate and how do they see Europe and how and why don't they see direct European values?

(Croatia, 3rd FG, Pos. 150)

Another student said:

I think that, education from the very young age should start and, and encouraging, active citizenship, not just on the EU level, but also civic groups, NGOs [and] such.

(Croatia, 3rd FG, Pos. 166)

Once more, this student did not specify who is going to build these groups and how they would be funded. However, with regard to civil society activities, it makes little sense to just speak of encouragement alone—it is precisely the citizens themselves that need to build civil society organisations and to be active in them in order to, as Putnam (1993) said, make democracy work.

One student highlighted similarly that the EU institutions and the citizens should

[. . .] together create a new structure in the mid [for example with] NGOs in our mid structure that help the communication between the two sides, organisations, companies, etc.

(Germany, 1st FG, Pos. 82)

This hints at establishing more intermediate structures between the EU institutions, national governments and citizens to facilitate communication and participation.

Furthermore, EP elections should have

European constituencies, so that the elected representatives who run for office can be legitimate in relation to their territory.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 148)

Compulsory Voting

A recommendation that was more controversially discussed among the students was to introduce mandatory or compulsory voting:

[. . .] if we want the citizens of the European Union to participate fully in the deliberations of all the bodies of the European Union, from the Commission to various committees and so on, we can introduce compulsory voting.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 86)

For now, voting in European elections is compulsory in Belgium (not for persons ages 16 and 17), Bulgaria, Luxembourg, Cyprus, and Greece.

Compulsory voting was seen as against the law in some countries:

Perhaps what my colleague said, the obligation to vote cannot be introduced because it is a violation of the law, or perhaps some referendum or some way of letting the citizens know that they do have a role to play in all this.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 127)

Students were not always in favour of compulsory voting:

I know that in Brazil it's also compulsory to vote, and personally I'm [pretty?] against the compulsory voting system, so I think that for the EU that would be a complicated like wrong things, too.

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 222)

Referenda

Apart from voting in the European elections, students mentioned referenda on the EU level in which citizens can get involved directly and take decisions themselves:

[. . .] the EU can still do something for the citizens, perhaps even a larger number of referendums or some initiatives where citizens could get involved, both in terms of themselves and in terms of introductions for the citizens and in terms of some social, perhaps economic, issues and questions, and especially economic issues.

(Croatia, 2nd FG, Pos. 115)

Already, just through their vote, that they feel that they have more power. I don't know if federalism is the only solution to make it work better, but if we have the possibility of a referendum, it would be part of this process of a unified European people because if there is a referendum, it is because there is a people who vote.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 138)

Both these statements indicate the idea that citizens would feel to have more influence if they would have a means to vote on EU policy decisions in referenda.

Students also claimed improvements for the ECI (see in detail Section 8.3.):

[. . .] you have to feel European in order to feel like: "Okay I'm going to go in different European country to make them sign this initiative that is about my local concerns." So you have to create kind of like, like consent have to be more general and more like spread throughout Europe for the initiatives to be useful at a European supranational level, so I do not know maybe if there was like this different levels of more regional, state level and then European level, you could get like also different kind of initiatives at these different levels and all under the EU banner that could be interesting.

(Finland, 2nd FG, Pos. 197)

Another student said that the ECI (see Section 8.3.) should become binding:

There is one thing I forgot about the ECI. For me, I think that it has to be absolutely binding. It doesn't make sense to get involved, as a citizen, in a European initiative, to go through the whole process, only to be stopped at the end, it's not possible, it doesn't make sense.

(France, 1st FG, Pos. 152)

As the earlier sections indicate, the findings provided by the focus groups were very rich and detailed and, indeed, allow for a very nuanced picture of the students' perceptions. In the Chapter 9, they will be condensed and discussed with regard to the consequences for the development of concepts, theories, and ideal types.

Notes

- 1 At the time of the first two rounds of focus groups, Poland was governed by the PiS who pushed democratic backsliding in the country and was involved in a number of rule of law conflicts with the EU.
- 2 The interviewer had previously said: “Let it put it bluntly—is there [a] democratic deficit, according to you, within the EU?” (Bulgaria, 3rd FG, Pos. 120–121).

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9 Critical Informed Passive Citizens of a Normative Power Europe 2.0

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As was discussed in Chapter 6, our analysis had three broad parts: 1) the continuous discussion and reflection in the project team of 14 international researchers, 2) data collection in focus groups and transcribing and coding of the transcripts, and 3) interpretative analysis of the transcripts. The reflection and the interpretative part delivered the most crucial and most unexpected findings. In particular they underlined motifs and patterns that were apparent in all focus groups but had not been expected prior to the research.

9.1. Going for the Unexpected

The research delivered six particularly telling unexpected findings:

- 1) The students had a very complex and complete picture of what they regard as satisfactory democracy. This picture, on one hand, included most classical elements of liberal representative democracy; on the other hand, it had some additions and different emphases: For the students, a full catalogue of values, including the newest generation of freedom and equality rights, was part of their ideal of democracy. They particularly emphasised the input dimension of democracy which led them to an extremely positive evaluation of the European Parliament (EP) and almost a disdain for the indirectly legitimised European Union (EU) institutions, e.g. European Commission (EC) and Council. This negative evaluation was rooted in the fact that EC and Council are not directly elected.
- 2) Non-EU citizens showed a much more idealised picture of the EU than EU citizens. Many described it as a goal to profit from the EU's benefits and the rights of EU citizens. Moreover, they also described the EU as a normative power in the world.
- 3) Most students had strong and explicit expectancies as to what the EU should do and how it should perform. This means that not only the input dimension of democracy, but also the output dimension was important to them. Their expectancies in this respect can be summarised as lining out an ideal of a "Normative Power Europe 2.0". The EU was clearly expected to actively defend and spread its values, not only in the EU itself, but also in the world—to make the world a

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better and more peaceful place, but also in order to obtain a decisive geopolitical importance and stand against Russia.

- 4) With regard to what was missing, i.e. what was mentioned barely or not at all in the focus group discussions, the lack of active politicisation was most obvious. We had begun the research expecting to find a pronounced politicisation especially among the student population. What we found was a very nuanced picture in which politicisation in general was described in passive terms and the students rarely appeared as actors themselves. While they named policy fields such as migration as highly politicised, the actors and actions politicising it were always others: parties, other citizens, the media. Conversely, the students described a general feeling of helplessness, in which they did not see many possibilities for their own political action.
- 5) This led us to develop the prototype of “*critical informed passive citizen*”, which fits most of the students: on the one hand, they are well-informed but critical in that they are mostly, as expected, EU supporters; however, they put forward a nuanced and well-reflected criticism of certain EU policies and certain aspects of the EU’s system. This confirmed a key thesis of our heuristics lined out in Chapter 2: criticism and debate are core democratic practices. On the other hand, politicisation for the students very clearly was not an activity they engaged in, in whichever respect—they did not mention protests, participation, or any other type of politicising activity; they only said that they voted in EP elections.
- 6) The critical informed passive citizen as a prototype on one hand thus has a strong orientation on democracy and its normative principles and values. On the other hand, it has a strong utilitarian orientation, i.e. it identifies with the EU because the EU provides benefits such as free movement. In a second step, both the normative and the utilitarian orientation match in the expectancy that the EU must be a global actor for the good.

9.2. Mental Images of the EU

The earlier findings that were just discussed indicate some decisive mental images that the students cherished about the EU. Several others were raised in the focus groups. Many among them had been expected by researchers and were explicitly introduced by the focus group moderators. Mainly this goes for the whole field of democracy in the EU (Section 8.3.). The students clearly saw the EU as democratic, even if they were critical of some aspects, and they also saw a democracy gap between the EU and its citizens that they described in nuanced ways (Section 8.6.). As was just said, findings also showed several unexpected dimensions. For the students the EU represents the values of article 2 Treaty on European (TEU) (Section 8.3.), and it shall be an actor in times of war and climate change (Section 8.5.). Moreover, non-EU students depicted a specific view from the outside in which the EU appears very much as an ideal for a democratic and value-oriented polity (Section 8.4.).

As discussed in Chapter 8, the students often used the word “European” when they referred to the EU. Despite the EU not being identical to Europe, students spoke as if it were. The fact that several European states are not EU members interestingly did not get noticed. The EU, for the students, was mostly equated with “Europe”.

9.2.1. *Picturing the EU*

In the picture selection students emphasised the utilitarian perspective on the EU and the EU’s benefits. This is why they selected the pictures of a passport, a picture symbolising free movement, and an Erasmus+ picture. In the picture discussions, the EU’s policies, whether judged positively (combating climate change, Erasmus+), ambivalently (COVID-19 certificate), or rather negatively (migration, “Fortress Europe”), were discussed as according to the students’ concrete experiences. The institutions (EP and Council), similarly, were discussed as according to how and whether they impacted people. The picture discussions revealed in addition that students perceived key personalities of the EU as its representants, both in terms of the classical sense of a representant (incorporated by Ursula von der Leyen) and also in the sense of representing intra-EU conflicts (incorporated by Orbán). As discussed in Section 8.1., the selected pictures also indicate that the students’ relation with the EU is marked by both identification and criticism.

9.2.2. *Policies*

Across the six countries and over the three years of project duration, similar policies were associated with the EU. These were oriented towards concrete policy output: the common market, the common currency, Erasmus+, the EU passport, EU citizenship, and free movement, along with climate change, were usually named. As discussed, except for climate change, these policies are the ones put forward by the EU authorities themselves, who have advertised them to the citizens since decades as being core EU competencies. The students thus did as the EU intended: they mentally linked these concrete and output-oriented “selling points” to the EU. However, results also show that the students deemed the EU’s marketing efforts not to be sufficient (see Sections 8.2.11. and 8.9.2.).

Moreover, the policy fields just mentioned are also concretely tangible in the students’ everyday life and have an impact on how easy or hard life is for them. This underlines the finding that a concrete and positively experienced policy output that is immediately relevant for citizens’ daily lives, such as crossing borders freely or participating in Erasmus+, creates identification with the EU (Schmidberger 1998; Mitchell 2015).

In addition, our results indicate that such positive experiences also led students to regard the respective policy fields as the most important. This speaks in favour of the success of a “utilitarian Europe”. The EU was in general seen as a cohesive and inclusive entity for its citizens, offering the same benefits across member states.

As discussed, the topics and policy fields that were seen as the most polarised (Section 8.8.) were also similar across focus groups, namely migration and climate change. As opposed to the policy fields that were just named they were discussed as fields where the EU's performance was not satisfying (climate change, Section 8.6.4.) or problematic from a normative point of view (migration, Section 8.4.4.).

9.2.3. *Inside and Outside the EU*

Another unexpected finding related to the different perspectives of EU citizens and non-EU citizens. Non-EU citizens provided an outside perspective on the EU in the sense that they lived in the EU, but they were not EU citizens and did not benefit from EU citizenship rights. Most non-EU students in our study had not been born and raised in the EU, but moved there for study, i.e. relatively recently.

Analysing the statements of the non-EU citizens, several similar patterns arose that show decisive differences to the statements of the EU citizens. Notably, compared to the statements of the EU citizens, the non-EU citizens described the EU more as an ideal, something they aspired to be part of—both in a normative sense, because the EU was described as a role model in terms of democratic quality by several students from third countries, and in a utilitarian sense, because they would like to benefit from the advantages EU citizens enjoy. Free movement was explicitly mentioned in this respect. Altogether, non-EU citizens described the EU as democratic more clearly and unequivocally than EU citizens. They often compared democracy in the EU and in countries outside of the EU (often their home countries), mainly judging the EU as being more democratic than many other regions or states.

Interestingly, duration of residency and the concrete experience with the EU's everyday reality changed the students' perception. Students that became EU residents tended to take on more of an inside perspective on the EU that also allowed a more differentiated view. In particular, the perspective changed from seeing "Europe" as one monolith to distinguishing different EU member states. Conversely, the feeling of "being European" seemed to intensify when EU citizens were abroad. Students who stayed abroad inside the EU, i.e. in other member states than their home countries, expressed how similar the member states were to one another, how united the EU appeared, and how much EU citizens benefited from free movement. EU citizens that stayed outside of the EU described an increasing feeling of Europeanness. The non-EU environment apparently made them more strongly aware of the EU's benefits such as free roaming, the use of the same currency, or free movement. The memory of such benefits seemed to work as a reminder of European identity and the privileges associated with it in non-European contexts. Upon reflection, students mentioned that otherwise they took these benefits for granted.

These findings indicate that the EU, when states or individuals have entered it, changes "from dream to reality" in citizens' perceptions. This indicates that the more the EU becomes a concrete and everyday experience, the more it is also seen

as normal with all its weaknesses, and the strengths tend to be lost out of sight. Also the negative aspects of EU membership seem to get into view then, such as a loss of national sovereignty.

9.3. Normative Power Europe 2.0

Another unexpected finding was that almost all students called for the EU to become a stronger global actor and an agenda-setter in a worldwide scale. This was summarised in the prototype of “Normative Power Europe 2.0”. The claim for the EU to become a global actor was on one hand expressed in a general sense; on the other hand it was oriented to different concrete policy areas, referring to narratives and policies that the students either identified with or deemed as important and in which they attributed a capacity to act to the EU:

- 1) The mental image of the EU as a guarantor of peace led to the claim that the EU should become more of a geopolitical actor, defending peace and its values in the world.
- 2) Regarding Russia and the War against Ukraine, all students saw the EU in charge, but had different opinions on the EU’s actions and capacities.
- 3) The EU was also called to defend its values internally in rule of law conflicts and externally with regard to democracy promotion.
- 4) The students uniformly called for the EU to act against climate change, stating it should work towards setting up new rules, laws, and guidelines.

The focus group students thus described a detailed picture of the EU as normative power with regard to peace, democracy, and values. They also derived clear claims from this perspective and argued that the EU should promote its values and goals more actively in the world. This means that the students have a deeply politicised image of the EU, in which they see EU as a democracy, an ideal, a service deliverer, and full-fledged political agent on a worldwide scale. The EU appears as a “Normative Power Europe 2.0” which not only proclaims and defends norms but also delivers the matching services, and furthermore is expected to defend its values and rules and further establish them in the world. This wish for EU action goes along with the students’ rather passive approach: The students expect the EU “to do something” instead of proclaiming calls for action for themselves or stating their own potential for change and political involvement.

As discussed in Section 8.2.4., an important topic in almost all focus groups was the reference to a founding myth of the EU, the safeguarding of *peace*. Peace was both discussed with a positive reference to the past and with a future-oriented connotation in relation to European defence policy and a European army. Our findings indicate that it is the War against Ukraine, and the fact that peace is concretely threatened, that turned the founding myth into a goal and a mission for the EU to act in the present. The students belong to a generation that did not experience war until the War against Ukraine began. It is thus notable that by now they not only actively support the founding myth, but also expect the EU to ensure stability and

peace in Europe and the world (see Section 8.5.). Our findings thus indicate that the students extrapolate a future-oriented obligation from the founding myth of the EU as a guarantor of peace.

As discussed in Section 8.6., this led many students to claim the EU must become a more active *geopolitical player* that defends peace in the world and stands up against Russia. The ways to obtain this goal were discussed in differentiated and sometimes controversial ways. Some students emphasised the EU must use its economic capacities. Others argued in favour of a European army, and again others against. Several students problematised the EU's perceived disunity in foreign policy and claimed it to act more united.

As already stated throughout the earlier chapters and sections, *democracy* was a key topic in the focus groups. Students not only discussed democracy in the EU but also the concept of democracy and its meanings. Their statements and judgements demonstrate a normatively oriented understanding of democracy in which input legitimacy was particularly emphasised. On this basis, the students claimed the EU to defend and enhance democracy, both internally and externally (see Section 8.6.3.). This claim was issued in close connection to the EU's values.

The clear definition of *EU values* was another dimension that had not been explicitly asked for but was raised actively by the students. They expressed a high identification with the EU's values named in article 2 TEU: *tolerance, freedom, personal development, (liberal) democracy, humanism, peace, rights of individuals (and concretely LGBTQ rights and rights of the elderly), and the rule of law*. Students also emphasised *cultural exchange, empathy, and inclusivity*, which might be interpreted as a new generation of liberal values. Several students also mentioned more republican values such as *solidarity, subsidiarity, equality, and a feeling of community, togetherness, or cohesion*. One decisive concept raised in article 2 TEU was not explicitly mentioned—*human dignity*. The students also highlighted output-oriented concepts such as *free movement, free market, and standards of living*. Finally, the students mentioned values that refer to processes of understanding and finding compromises: *collaboration, cooperation, deliberation and culture of compromise* (often in a critical understanding, see Section 8.3.3.).

The students regularly referring actively and positively to these values underline that they see the EU as a value-based community. The values listed in the treaties are taken for granted and found worthwhile to be defended. The students' support for and identification with the EU, its values, and its political principles led them to claim the EU should actively promote its values (see Section 8.6.3.) to defend and enhance democracy internally with regard to rule of law conflicts and externally in democracy promotion. This led students to critically discuss several contested issues. Namely, they described value conflicts with regard to migration (Section 8.4.4.) and the rule of law conflicts (Section 8.6.3.). Their statements show concrete expectancies and clear judgements.

Several students stressed problems for the EU in defending its democratic values internally. The drive towards democratic backsliding and authoritarian tendencies in some EU member states, and the related rule of law conflicts, were critically discussed in all focus groups. The discussions indicate that the students

were aware of the challenges of maintaining the rule of law, the underlying power conflicts, and the ideological conflict lines, but they also saw a need for the EU to act more severely against democratic backsliding and rule of law breaches. Tellingly, rule of law conflicts were judged as conflicts around the joint European values the students strongly identified with. Opposition to these values for the students was represented especially by Viktor Orbán, who was described as an “Other” opposed to European values, while the rest of the EU and its values were perceived as an “Us” represented by a majority in the Council, the EC and the EP. In other words, those institutions that were criticised for not being sufficiently legitimised and distant still were perceived as personifying the EU’s values. Externally, students claimed the EU must uphold its values when it comes to enlargement, applying clear criteria.

The EU’s migration policy was strongly criticised. Many students regarded the way the EU and its member states deal with migration as a questioning or even as a contradiction to the article 2 TEU values and claimed a more human and welcoming approach to migrants.

Last but not least, some students claimed the EU needed to create new standards, both inside the EU and worldwide. Climate change was a main topic in which the students saw a need for EU leadership. They emphasised the EU’s potential, underlining that the EU was built on international cooperation and in this respect could be a role model and a key actor in combating climate change. The EU was also described as being able to set up and defend rules, and this capacity was called to be extended on the field of climate change.

9.4. The Gap(s) and the Remedies

The project’s general aim, as discussed more broadly in Chapters 1 and 2, was to learn about the students’ perception of the gap between the EU and its citizens and to find out concretely which reasons were given for the gap and which backgrounds and narratives explain and illustrate it. Again, the focus group delivered findings that had not been previously expected. In the 19 focus groups, the students indeed identified a gap between the EU and its citizens—this is the original gap we were after, which is here specified as the “democracy gap” (see Section 8.7.1.). They also named other gaps concerning power hierarchies in the EU system and between member states and their populations, and gaps between EU citizens. All these gaps were mostly perceived as having a negative effect on the EU, its democracy, its citizens, European culture, and identity.

9.4.1. The Democracy Gap

The “democracy gap” between EU institutions and citizens was the one assumed at the outset of the project. In Section 8.3. we discussed that for the students the democracy gap was characterised by three dimensions, namely a) intransparency, complexity, and a feeling of distance; b) elite influence, lobbying, and the “Brussels Bubble”; and c) a lack of information and media coverage (see Table 9.1).

Table 9.1 The democracy gap between EU institutions and citizens

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Observations</i>
Intransparency	Perceived lack of clarity in decision-making processes	“The EU is like a dirty glass: transparent in theory but blurred in reality” (Bulgaria)
Lobbying and elite influence	Concerns over private interests dominating EU policies	Lobbying seen as shadowy and undemocratic, especially in economic sectors
Distance and “Brussels Bubble”	Emotional and geographical detachment between citizens and EU institutions	Perception of EU elites being disconnected from everyday citizens
Complexity	Challenges in understanding EU governance	Students feeling overwhelmed by the EU’s bureaucratic structure
Lack of information	Limited awareness of EU activities and decision-making	Citizens being unaware of available resources, relying on passive information flows

Source: Own representation

Students made a number of recommendations in order to remedy the democracy gap: They discussed ways to improve efficiency, representation, participation, information, and transparency in the EU’s institutions. Many called for granting more powers to the EP. While these processual recommendations stayed rather general, the students’ claims for more transparency, communication, and education were very pronounced. As discussed, they said the EU’s complexity required knowledge in order to be able to understand it. In order to spread this knowledge, they argued in favour of top-down pathways, using education and the media. They underlined the need to better inform citizens about the EU and make it more visible in daily life. Students also said that EU reporting needed to obtain a more positive tone. These findings are in fit with the problems discussed in Chapter 3—the EU’s communication activities fail to fully reach the citizens. They are also in fit with the conclusion drawn there, namely that closing the communication gap is essential to democratic renewal and that this requires a citizen-centred, co-creative process that is integrated into all tiers of EU multilevel governance.

However, as discussed, many of the activities the students recommended already take place, such as publicly available video recordings of sessions of certain EU institutions or a presence of the EU’s institutions on social media. Similar to the competencies of the EP several students did not know about these.

All in all, the remedies the students suggested for the EU’s democratic deficits are in accordance with their overall passive attitude. Students strongly tended to issue expectancies “to the above”, i.e. to the EU, its politicians, national politicians, educational systems, and “the media”. These included the claim that the EU was responsible for changing its institutional system, strengthening the directly legitimised EP, and improving its public relations in order to become more visible. Expectations were also implicitly expressed to the member states without

mentioning them—they were called to change their education systems to include EU affairs in the school curricula (see Table 9.2). In sum, most of the earlier recommendations focus once again on top-down pathways rather than bottom-up pathways of citizens acting and taking the initiative.

Table 9.2 Remedies to the “democracy gap”

<i>Area of improvement</i>	<i>Student suggestions</i>
Education	More EU-focused school curricula
Media and communication	Better EU news coverage and accessibility
Transparency and decision-making	Simplify processes and improve citizen engagement
Youth and civic participation	Encourage political action beyond voting

Source: Own representation

9.4.2. Conflicts Between States and Gaps Between Citizens

In all member states, the focus group discussions revealed the perception of conflicts, disagreements, different interests, or even *gaps between member states and/or their populations* (see Table 9.3). Notably, disunity of the EU member states was often raised as a problem, in particular when it came to the EU’s external policies. Students also mentioned differences between the smaller and bigger member states of the EU (see Section 8.7.2.), different interests, and different economic powers of the member states. They discussed Germany and France as the most influential member states in the EU with regard to their populations, their economic weight, and their military powers. This image of the students is again in fit with a long-standing narrative on European integration. Both countries are often described as being the “engine of European integration”.

Table 9.3 Conflicts of interest and power relations in the EU system

<i>Conflict type</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Observations</i>	<i>Key actors involved</i>
Between member states	Different interests causing tensions	Smaller states seen as marginalised compared to powerhouses like Germany and France	Germany, France, smaller member states
Sovereignty vs. integration	Tension between national autonomy and EU integration	Concerns over loss of sovereignty in areas like economic policy	National governments, EU policymakers
Influence of external powers	External actors impacting internal EU dynamics	Mention of Russia’s influence and economic dependencies	Russia, external stakeholders

Source: Own representation

Although students sometimes referred to “the citizens” in the focus group, citizens were discussed in a differentiated way: Students distinguished between themselves and “ordinary citizens”, and they mentioned differences among generations, winners and losers of integration, and centres and peripheries (see Table 9.4).

Table 9.4 Gaps between EU citizens

<i>Gap type</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Observations</i>	<i>Key actors involved</i>
Students vs. ordinary citizens	Students feel more informed but still disconnected from EU politics	Students distinguish themselves from “ordinary citizens” regarding EU knowledge	Students, general public
Generational gap	Differences in political engagement and EU perceptions among age groups	Younger generations more EU-positive but less politically active	Youth, older generations
Winners vs. losers of integration	Perceptions of unequal benefits from EU integration	Some regions and groups feel left behind by EU economic policies	Regional populations, policymakers

Source: Own representation

9.4.3. *A Politicisation Gap*

The findings indicate a gap that we had neither anticipated nor conceptualised prior to the study: a *politicisation gap*. A key concern in the focus group research was to understand whether, how, and to what extent the students perceived the EU and its policies as politicised or rather depoliticised, and to what extent they regarded themselves as politicising agents and/or actors. Several questions in the lead questionnaire were explicitly designed to address this field. As discussed in Section 8.8., however, politicisation appeared relatively rarely and only as a rather vague concept in most focus groups—no matter whether it was perceived as action, salience of certain topics, or contestation. Students thus not only showed a narrow understanding of politicisation, referring to it mostly in terms of “polarisation”. When discussing “politicisation”, they mostly framed it as related or even confined to elections, or, at the utmost, the European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI).

Once more, this indicates the students’ relation to politics and the EU as being rather passive: While they express strong and relatively clear expectations to the

EU and their national governments, they almost have an attitude of clients who expect a service. Neither did they perceive themselves as political actors, nor did they see considerable possibilities to influence the EU. As was discussed in Section 8.3., the students claimed the democratic quality of the EU to need improvement and especially citizen activity and participation in the EU to be lacking quality and intensity. But they rarely referred to themselves in this context, and if they did, they were not willing to change their rather passive stance. In order to explain their passivity, students mentioned the components of the democracy gap: their feelings of a lack of influence on the EU, a lack of knowledge, the distance to the EU.

The students' perception of polarisation, conversely, was relatively pronounced. But again, when they discussed polarisation, they mostly described it in a passive and receptive way, i.e. they discussed it in the sense of "we think it is most polarised because", rather than describing themselves as active "we polarise or politicise" (see in detail Section 8.8.3.).

Some interesting findings came out with regard to the policy fields that were discussed as most polarised across all countries, migration and climate change. Interestingly the students saw climate change as a policy area in which they felt they could make a difference and hence ascribed themselves agency—finally, and different from almost all other policy fields. However, their capacity for action was not described in terms of collective action but on an individual level, referring for instance to consumer choices. Action on a larger scale was again referred to the EU who was called to become an actor against climate change (Section 8.6.4.). This indicates that students recognise the necessity of collective decisions, coordinated policies and regulations and ascribe a clear and positively connoted role to the EU in this, but do not see a role for themselves in these collective processes.

Finally, there are some contradictions between what the students considered to be politicised policy areas and the importance this policy field has in the EU's system. In particular, the highly controversial policy field of migration is not strongly integrated or communitarised, yet students considered it as core EU policy area. They did not systematically distinguish between communitarised policy fields and not communitarised policy fields.

As opposed to this, the bread-and-butter areas such as the common market and free movement, which are also governed by the EU's institutions, not only run relatively smoothly, but also relatively silently, i.e. without much controversy. To put it in provocative terms: The more technocratic a policy field is structured, the more smoothly it is run, the less controversy can be depicted, and the less politicised it is—irrespective of its budget or policy impact.

9.5. Politicisation, Euroscepticism, Citizenship: Advancing the Conceptual Debate

With regard to advancing the conceptual debate begun in Chapter 2, the following can be summarised: The student perspective on *EU politicisation* is passive; they do not see themselves as political actors except for participating in EP elections.

Conversely, the students have a deeply politicised image of the EU, marking out politicised policy fields (migration, climate), and seeing the EU as full-fledged political agent.

With regard to *Euroscepticism*, findings underline that the concept needs refinement as already discussed in Chapter 2. The students are indeed a special group, systematically distinguishing themselves from average citizens, especially with regard to their more advanced knowledge (Section 8.2.1.). They also are in their majority Europhiles, showing a considerable generalised EU support, and expressing a strong identification with the EU. However, our findings contradict the quantitative state of the art in a decisive respect: The students are neither uncritical nor do they feel closer to the EU than average citizens.

With regard to *citizenship*, it has to be noted that the students are critical and informed, but rather passive. In spite of their knowledge about the EU, nearly all focus groups conveyed a feeling of powerlessness and passivity regarding students' own role. As discussed throughout the volume, students show, on one hand, a utilitarian approach to EU citizenship: It benefits them. On the other hand, they idealise the EU: The EU represents strong ideals, democracy, values etc., and is expected to enact these values in the world, but this leads students to expect the EU to deliver, rather than themselves to act.

9.5.1. *Politicisation*

The students thus politicise the EU in a specific way, i.e. by ascribing a clearly defined, normatively loaded, and ambitious set of meanings and goals to the EU. This invites to rethink existing conceptions of EU politicisation: It not only concerns issues, (temporary) salience, or political actions—it also concerns the character and the impact of the EU as polity and the EU's political agency.

Students thus have a picture of the EU that is far beyond what the state of the art assumes: it is not a picture of a “regulatory state” (Majone 1998); neither is it a picture of a depoliticised technocracy. On the contrary, the students depict an EU that is a fully developed polity, and they depict all the expectations that citizens can have to a polity: it is a democracy, it stands for democracy, it has clearly defined values, it is asked to defend them and put them forward, and moreover, its policies are seen as basis for further claims to become a full-fledged actor in the world. The students thus describe the idea of a strongly value oriented *Normative Power Europe 2.0*, almost a utopia. This is a picture of a supranational polity that is democratic (but not yet enough), represents values, and is a global player. They also problematise contradictions to this ideal such as with regard to migration.

Normative Power Europe 2.0 is both value- and output-oriented. It includes the EU's values as well as the output-oriented policies highly estimated by the students, i.e. free movement, the common market, or the common currency. It also concerns the idea of the EU as a global actor. In all this the EU is expected to deliver beneficial policies, values, and democracy. Importantly, this means that the

students' view of the EU—but not of themselves—is highly politicised. These findings go decisively beyond the state of the art (but see Arens et al. 2025) in which EU politicisation is usually only or mainly discussed with regard to certain policies and conflicts. In addition to these aspects, EU politicisation needs to be conceptualised as politicisation of the EU as a polity.

Despite these strong claims to the EU, and in sum, the picture of the students' politicisation is one of passive critical citizens that do not see themselves as agents of politicisation but have a deeply political and politicised image of the EU and strongly politicised expectations.

9.5.2. *Euroscepticism*

The focus on students, as expected, is particularly interesting in terms of the findings, as the students are indeed very well-informed. Their EU criticism is therefore always reflected and balanced—it is neither simplifying, nor do the students use black-and-white comparisons or positions. However, the students are not what the concept “Europhiles” implicitly or openly assumes: uncritical EU supporters. They represent the position of *critical informed citizens* and *critical informed Europhiles*. Because they strongly support the EU, they have high expectations on the EU that it does not fully meet (yet), and they are explicitly critical of the EU not meeting their high standards.

The findings thus indicate that basic assumptions of key categories of the Euroscepticism concept should be rethought. To be Europhile does not mean to be uncritical, and to be well-informed does not mean to support—on the contrary, being well-informed and Europhile in the case of our students led to them being critical, but rather in the sense of critical friends, i.e. in terms of a constructive EU criticism.

The finding that the students are critical informed citizens is decisive and describes the pathway to refining the concept of Euroscepticism: Legitimate criticism of a polity and its policies is part of the normal democratic life in any representative democracy. This means that legitimate criticism of the EU and its policies is part of the EU if it wants to be a legitimate democracy. Critical informed citizens should thus be welcome, as they help democratising the EU. In that sense, the question is whether and when the concept of Euroscepticism makes sense at all. As discussed in Chapter 1 and in more detail elsewhere (Wiesner 2024, 292–295), the concept seems only useful if the EU as a polity is put in question or an EU exit is claimed, i.e. in the cases that used to be labelled “principled Euroscepticism”.

9.5.3. *Students as Citizens*

As shown in Section 8.2.1., a pattern that came out with unexpected clarity, emphasis, and frequency is that the students are a specific social group not only with regard to their education level and knowledge about the EU, but also with

regard to their self-reflection. They distinguish between “we” as students and the average or ordinary citizens. They also describe themselves as possessing more knowledge about and interest in the EU in this comparison. Conversely, as discussed throughout the earlier chapters and sections, students position themselves as relatively powerless and not very politically active. They judge not only their individual influence as being low and limited to voting for the EP, but also citizen influence in general, both in the EU and in representative democracy in general. At the same time, they criticise “citizens” in general for not being active and interested enough in EU affairs. This finding highlights a crucial disconnect between students’ highly developed understanding of the EU, its institutions and processes, and their perceived inability to have an influence. Conversely, they have clearly pronounced and quite concrete expectations as to what the EU is expected to do and deliver. As a result, students expect the EU to take action in various policy areas to address their concerns (see Section 8.6.), but individual actions by themselves are seldom mentioned.

What does this mean for the idea of citizenship the students practice and represent? Following Rousseau’s famous distinction (Rousseau 2012, 22), are they only *bourgeois* that profit from the freedoms and rights the EU offers, rather than active *citoyens*? Or are they also *citoyens* in that they think the EU to be a democracy? Or are they rather not *citoyens* because they barely think it is their task to shape democracy in the EU?

Apparently, the students position themselves as rather passive but at the same time express a critical judgement on political passivity as such: It is seen as a problem for democracy in the EU. This apparent contradiction leads to two possible interpretations, as discussed in Section 8.3.5. One is an implicit self-criticism in which the students mean themselves when claiming more political activity—they speak of “Us” in several quotes. The other interpretation implies a tacit distinction along the lines of education and social status, framing students as informed citizens and “ordinary citizens” as uninformed. However, why should “ordinary citizens” need to become more active, rather than the well-informed students? Do the students expect something from “citizens” that they do not expect from themselves? In any case, students thus put forward a strong normative ideal of what active citizens should do: engage, be active, inform themselves, and use the possibilities for participation that there are. It remains an open question why this strong ideal does not transform into student political engagement, but instead goes along with a feeling of passivity and powerlessness.

Finally, most students are EU citizens and reflect on their EU citizenship (and the advantages linked to it) in a very informed way. They also discuss whether and to what extent they feel European. While most students strongly do so, they also state that they primarily identify with their nation-state and in a secondary manner with the EU. This speaks in favour of a multilevel identification with the EU. Table 9.5 describes the dimensions related to students being passive critical citizens.

Table 9.5 Students as passive critical citizens

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Observations</i>
Political action	Limited self-identification as political actors	Students view themselves as clients rather than active citizens
Perception of political participation	Citizen participation in general seen as important, but it should be enhanced top-down	Narrow understanding of participation (elections, ECI)
Perception of politicisation	Passive and narrow understanding, often equated with polarisation	“Others” are seen as politicising actors (e.g. parties, politicians)
Passive observers	Students observe rather than engage in politicisation Students expect top-down changes from EU institutions	Passive stance, with strong expectations but limited self-reflection as agents of change

Source: Own representation

9.6. Typologies of Student Perceptions and EU Conceptions

To conclude, our students indeed are, as supposed, a social group who is a pro-EU avant-garde, and hence consists of key actors for EU development. All in all, the students apparently accept the EU’s success stories, i.e. the policies and successes marketed by the EU. They not only praise Erasmus+, the common market, and free movement but also the article 2 TEU values. Students identify more with the EU than we would have supposed before the study and—despite their passive orientation—in this respect, they are truly the EU’s future elites.

On the basis of the findings, several types of EU-related perspectives harboured by the students can be categorised (see Table 9.6). They represent subtypes to the prototype we made out, the critical informed passive citizen. Importantly, these subtypes are not mutually exclusive but can be combined.

Table 9.6 Typology of student relations to the EU

<i>Type</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>
Prototype: The critical informed but passive citizen	• Generally supports the EU. • Is well-informed. • Is critical in details but constructive. • Has a passive attitude.
With its subtypes	
1. The critical informed citizen	• Generally supports the EU but sees a need for reform. • Criticises specific policies and processes. • Has solid knowledge about the EU.

(Continued)

Table 9.6 (Continued)

<i>Type</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>
2. The passive citizen	• Feels powerless to bring about change. • Expects the EU to take action but rarely engages actively.
3. The utilitarian European	• Values the EU mainly for its practical benefits (e.g. Erasmus+, free movement, the common currency). • Sees the EU more as a “service provider” rather than a political project. • Identifies with the EU as long as it offers personal advantages.
4. The EU democracy sceptic	• Criticises the EU for its lack of transparency, bureaucracy, distance, and democratic deficits. • Believes that the EU is not or does not need to be a real democracy. • Considers national democracies to be more important than the EU.
5. The engaged EU supporter	• Views the EU as a central political project. • Supports reforms to make the EU more democratic and stronger. • Advocates for greater citizen participation.
6. The EU visionary	• Sees the EU as an ideal and utopia. • Links values to the EU. • Wants the EU to be a benevolent superpower (Normative Power Europe 2.0).
7. The national-oriented	• Primarily identifies with national identity and sees EU identity as secondary. • Views the EU as a complement to national politics rather than a superior entity. • Is sceptical about deeper integration.
8. The global-oriented European	• Sees the EU as a geopolitical player and wants it to have more global influence. • Expects the EU to take a leadership role in global issues like climate change. • Believes in the EU as a community of values with international impact.

Source: Own representation

Table 9.7, finally, presents the typical perceptions of the EU as a democracy put forward by the students. They represent subtypes to the prototype we made out, Normative Power Europe 2.0. The subtypes underline that democracy is seen in different connotations and perspectives, ranging from utilitarian to value-oriented. Again, the subtypes do not represent either-or types, but can be put forward in different combinations.

Table 9.7 Visions of EU as a democracy

Prototype: The EU as Normative Power Europe 2.0 With its subtypes	The EU is seen as representing democracy, article 2 TEU values, peace, and a number of utilitarian benefits. It is expected to defend democracy, values, peace, democracy, and the climate in the world.
1. EU as service deliverer	The EU is expected to deliver a good life, utilitarian benefits, and economic advantages.
2. EU as a global player	The EU is expected to deliver a) as a normative power: stop climate change, keep up European values, freedom and democracy, make the world a better place. b) as a geopolitical power: develop military power and strategic autonomy, defend its interests also in economic terms, stand up against Russia.
3. EU as ideal democracy	The EU is seen either as an ideal of democracy one aims to adhere to (from the outside) or as the best developed example of supranational democracy despite some flaws (from the inside).
4. EU as community of values	The EU is a community of values that citizens identify with (from the inside) and want to belong to (from the outside). In conjunction with the perception of the EU as a Normative Power Europe 2.0 (2.a earlier) it is expected to defend these values.

Source: Own representation

In Chapter 10, these typologies will be further discussed and complemented on the basis of a thorough analysis of the quantitative findings in the field.

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10 Young Citizens' Visions of EU Democracy

A Research Outlook

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10.1. Conceptions of Democracy in the EU

Democracy in the European Union (EU) has been a central theme in all 18 focus group discussions held in the six member states within this project (DebatEU). Given the prominence of the democratic principles in the Treaty on European Union (TEU; Title II, Provisions on democratic principles) and the proclaimed commitment to the value of democracy, this should not surprise. Democracy as an ideal form of government was embraced by all participants in the focus groups, reflecting pro-democracy attitudes widely shared both among total populations and the youth (see Section 8.3.). These findings of qualitative data are in line with quantitative ones. As Wuttke et al. (2022) concluded based on survey responses in 18 European democracies (1981–2018):

The overall trend suggests stronger support for democracy in the vast majority of European societies, from an already high level.

(Wuttke et al. 2022)

Recent surveys confirm these conclusions—e.g. in 2020 most EU citizens (57%) regarded living in a democracy as extremely important, and a further 30% declared that this is quite important for them (see Figure 10.1). Youth (aged 16–29) in the six member states displayed high support for democracy, while general populations had even higher democratic aspirations (World Values Survey [WVS] 2022). Among the six member states, only Bulgaria's youth scored higher on democratic support than the total population, which is confirmed by other survey data (Smilov et al. 2022). This trend was also shared by, e.g. Spanish and Dutch youth displaying the strongest preference for democracy (Wuttke et al. 2022).

The generally high levels of support for democracy may seem to contradict the alarmist picture of eroding democratic commitments put forward a decade ago by some democracy scholars. For example, Foa and Mounk (2016) and Foa et al. (2020) traced signs of deconsolidation of commitment to democracy in value surveys even in the most advanced democratic states. Citizens in developed democracies, these scholars argued, express the lowest levels of satisfaction since the polling began, not just with their democratic governments and other representative

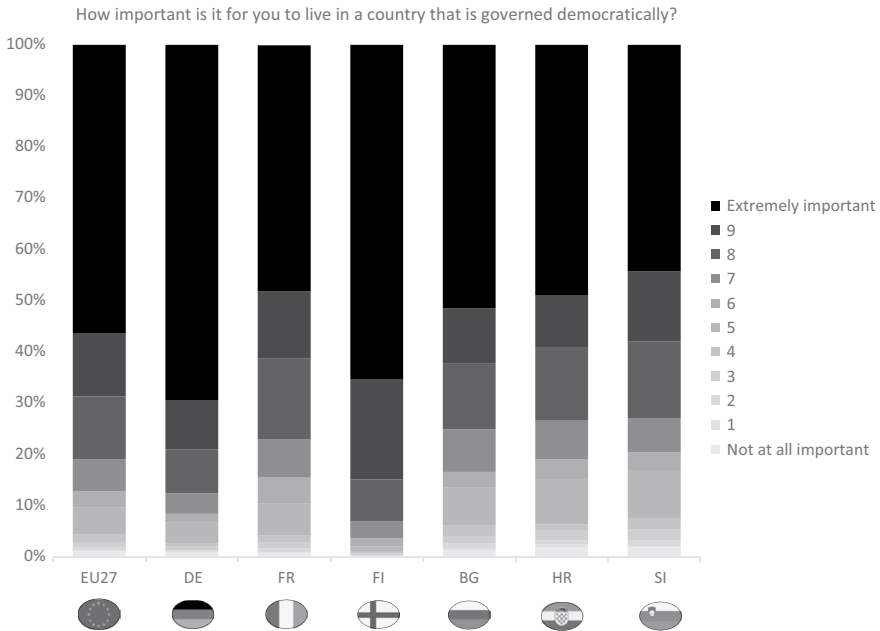


Figure 10.1 Importance to live in a democratically governed country in the EU

Note: Six Member States and EU27 2020 ($N = 37,055$, total populations).

Source: Data from European Social Survey (ESS) 2020.

institutions such as political parties and parliaments but also towards the democratic system in general. Other scholars have contested either the existence of such a trend of backsliding on democratic values or its universal scope (Alexander and Welzel 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Voeten 2016; Zilinsky 2019; Welzel et al. 2022). The contradiction diminishes if considering the alarmist position building on the low levels of *satisfaction* with *how democracy works*, while more optimistic accounts are based on general *support* for democracy as an ideal or preferable political regime.

Our findings, as discussed in Chapters 8 and 9, give clear support to the value of such a distinction. The focus group students demonstrated generalised support and detailed knowledge about principles and ideals of representative democracy but were critical of the current performance and output of democracy in general, and especially at the EU level. As the following sections will show, this finding of the focus groups is supported by numerous findings based on a broad range of surveys.

10.1.1. Evaluating How Democracy Works

Within DebatEU, we have studied whether well-informed students see a “gap” between the EU and its citizens or whether they perceive a “democratic deficit” in

EU politics. A closer look at the levels of satisfaction with how democracy works and how they compare to the general support for democracy may provide a valuable background for further insights. It has been argued that perceptions of a democratic deficit increase with the considerable, and further growing, mismatch between general support for democracy, on the one hand, and low satisfaction with how it works, on the other. Recalling that Norris (2011, 5) defined and studied “democratic deficits” as resulting from the widening “gap between democratic aspirations and satisfaction”, it is crucial to distinguish citizens’ evaluations of democracy from their normative views on democracy (Ferrín and Kriesi 2016; Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert 2020; Wuttke et al. 2022). Indeed, looking at available data, we find a considerable mismatch between general support for democracy and evaluations of how democracy works—both at the EU and the national level. Wherever the mismatch is the greatest, perceptions of a growing “democratic deficit” may be expected to be most pronounced.

A further complication of the mismatch between democratic aspirations and satisfaction concerns citizens having widely diverging conceptions of democracy, according to which they may, or may not be, satisfied with a particular democratic performance. Research has long shown that citizens, often generally defined as “democrats” in contemporary democracies, come in a variety of stripes with “liberal-democrats” being a minority category among them (Schedler and Sarsfield 2007). Recent studies have further demonstrated that citizens with predominantly “populist” attitudes are disaffected democrats (Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert 2020)—i.e. they value democracy highly, yet find its performance wanting. Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel (2018) have also found that populist party supporters across Europe not only share high levels of populist attitudes but are also generally dissatisfied with democracy. Even more alarmingly, it has been demonstrated that “the widespread support for democracy coexists in some countries with the persistent absence of democracy itself”, a phenomenon observed in countries where majorities understand democracy in ambiguous ways, with “authoritarian” notions of the meaning of democracy overshadowing liberal ones (Kirsch and Welzel 2019). A closer focus on the “disaffected democrats” (if not the “confused democrats” who mix authoritarian with democratic regimes) is warranted as they may have a particular sensitivity towards democratic deficits as in finding faults within some of the institutional features of the liberal model of democracy, though not with democratic principles as such (Zaslove and Meijers 2024). A recent empirical study of attitudes towards democracy and participation of European youth has established a further link between disaffected democrats, critical informed citizens, and the youths’ conceptions of democracy:

Young people stand out as critical actors engaging with democracy in ways that are poorly captured through standard liberal-democratic lenses.

(Grassi et al. 2024, 599)

And furthermore, “young people’s critical views of democracy rarely translate into apathy for democracy” (Grassi et al. 2024, 599). We have observed similar distinctions in the views expressed by some focus group participants—i.e. criticism of

democratic performance was not coupled with disengagement. Even if some participants expressed positions that may warrant classifying them as “passive critical citizens” (mostly in the German and French focus groups), the Bulgarian, Finnish, Slovenian, and Croatian students, although critical of the performance of EU institutions, were ready to look for alternative forms of democratic engagement going beyond the representative liberal democratic script.

10.1.2. Digging Deeper Into EU Citizens' Conceptions of Democracy

As indicated earlier, the views of EU citizens on the actual meaning of democracy may be quite divergent, and even if the institutional features of the liberal democratic model are found faulty this does not encompass democratic principles per se. The detailed analysis of the focus group discussions on democracy (Chapter 8, in particular Sections 8.3. and 8.4) concluded that participants share a liberal conception of democracy—when speaking of democracy, they meant liberal democracy in particular.

It is worthwhile to dig a bit deeper into the EU citizens' conceptions of democracy as it may shed further light on some of the important issues that were raised in the focus group discussions—i.e. the alleged “democratic deficit” of the EU, the phenomenon of the “gap” between the EU and its citizens, the issues of depoliticisation and “compromise” democracy vs. politicisation, and the more extreme polarisation as threats to democracy both at the national and EU level grow. Accordingly, we may still ask how EU citizens, and particularly the youths of the six countries covered by DebatEU, understand democracy more concretely and indeed conceptually.

Recent research shows not only that citizens have widely diverging conceptions of democracy but that depending on their views on democracy, they may be more or less prone to support populist right-wing, including Eurosceptic, political projects (Wegscheider et al. 2023; Zaslove and Meijers 2024). When in power, these parties tend to erode democracy and its liberal components in particular, such as the rule of law, freedom of the press, and human rights. “Populist citizens” may, in addition to being just “dissatisfied democrats” (Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert 2020), embrace conceptions that favour both more majoritarian and more direct forms of democracy, which deviate from the proclaimed EU commitment to representative democracy and limited government, i.e. to the liberal conception of democracy. Depending on their conceptions of democracy, “critical citizens” (Norris 1999) may perceive both the “gap” and the “democratic deficit”, which they are particularly sensitive to (Norris 2011, 5), differently to “dissatisfied democrats”. Furthermore, those with a liberal conception of democracy are less sensitive to “democratic deficits” than those with more egalitarian views favouring direct democracy, or those holding majoritarian conceptions. Consequently, Van der Brug et al. (2021) conclude that

supporters of liberal principles of democracy tend to be more supportive of the EU, while supporters of more direct forms of citizen influence are more Eurosceptic.

(Van der Brug et al. 2021, 537)

Hence, support for the EU is related to multiple preferences for specific models of democracy.

The alarmist view that young Europeans are less supportive of democracy and more dissatisfied with its performance than older generations, or earlier generations of youth, is not supported by more specific data analysis. On the contrary, Zilinsky (2019, 2) states that “young people are generally more satisfied with democracy than older citizens”. This is well demonstrated in the European Social Survey (ESS) (2017) showing that youths are uniformly more satisfied with how democracy works compared to all other age groups. Moreover, satisfaction with democracy has increased among Europeans of all ages since its lowest point in 2007–2010, although this does not apply universally to all member states. The higher level of satisfaction with democratic performance related to both education and political interest/participation (Inglehart 1977, 1990) corresponds to the widely shared commitment to the liberal-democratic conception observed in the focus groups.

According to the model of Wegscheider et al. (2023), indicators for different conceptions of democracy can be divided into liberal democracy, egalitarian democracy, direct democracy and authoritarianism. European Social Survey (ESS) (2020) data confirmed the hypothesis that the liberal conception of democracy was shared most widely, which applied to all six member states in focus. Returning to a more distinct interpretation of Norris’ point of departure that democracy as an “essentially contested” concept has different meanings in different contexts (Norris 2011), Berglund et al. (2009) links the analysis of EU citizens’ attitudes towards democracy with corresponding views of welfare defining the preferred form and contents of democracy according to two “normative” models of democracy:

liberal and socialist democracy—correspond to well-known conceptions of the state in the theoretical discussion; the liberal *Rechtstaat* and the liberal welfare state, on the hand, and the all-embracing paternalistic welfare state on the other, that is, a state that goes to great lengths to eliminate social inequality among its citizens.

(Berglund et al. 2009, 153)

The liberal model of representative, pluralist democracy is accordingly juxtaposed to the direct forms of participatory, egalitarian democracy.

The geographical distribution of democratic perceptions among EU citizens confirmed Berglund et al.’s (2009) “socialisation assumption” of Western/Northern/Continental Europe favouring the liberal model of democracy emphasising more individual responsibilities to provide for themselves while Central and Eastern European (CEE) citizens preferred the government to take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for. Considering the six member states in focus, the French, Finnish, West German, and Croatian citizens scored above the EU average support for individual responsibilities in the liberal notion of welfare in the World Values Study waves of 1999–2002, whereas citizens of all other CEE-countries (including East Germany but excluding Croatia and Romania) emphasised the state as a provider (Berglund et al. 2009, 153–155). However, this pattern was reversed with the majority of post-communist citizens scoring higher

than the EU average when it came to preferred degrees of state intervention and free competition, leading to the conclusion of post-communist citizens having “a somewhat ambiguous attitude towards the role of the state: the state as a provider is accepted, but the state as supervisor is rejected” (Berglund et al. 2009, 155).

10.1.3. *Citizenship Regimes*

A key finding of our focus group analysis was that the students overall showed a strong utilitarian connection to the EU that emphasised its benefits. An argumentation that was less dominant emphasised ideas of active or republican citizenship. These findings speak to a typology of different citizenship regimes related to distinct state-citizen relationships (Janmaat and Green 2022). This offers a further complementing framework for distinguishing democratic conceptions of EU citizens. These ideal types—liberal, republican, conservative, social-democratic, and post-communist “citizenship regimes”—are characterised by various civic dispositions according to scores of state involvement, public engagement, civic and political participation, ethno-racial tolerance, civic equality, social and institutional trust, and patriotism (Janmaat and Green 2022, 1352–1355; see Table 10.1). Janmaat’s and Greene’s (2022) use of the European Social Survey (2017; waves

Table 10.1 Civic dispositions in five citizenship regimes in Europe

<i>Components</i>	English-speaking countries	Latin countries in Western Europe	German- and Dutch-speaking countries	Nordic countries	Former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe
	<i>Liberal regime</i>	<i>Republican regime</i>	<i>Conservative regime</i>	<i>Social-democratic regime</i>	<i>Post-communist regime</i>
State involvement	-	+	+	+	0
Public engagement	0	+	0	+	-
Civic participation	+	-	+	+	-
Political participation	-	+	0	+	-
Ethno-racial tolerance	+	+	-	+	-
Civic equality	0	+	-	+	-
Social trust	0	-	0	+	-
Institutional trust	0	+	0	+	-
Patriotism	0	+	-	0	+

Source: Data from Janmaat and Green 2022, 1355.

Note: The hypothesised scores on a specific component relative to those of other clusters are either + (high) or – (low) or 0 (no particular expectation).

of 1990–2017) demonstrates a stark contrast in the civic dispositions of the post-communist (Bulgaria, Croatia, and Slovenia in DebatEU) and the Nordic social-democratic regime (Finland), where no single overlap appeared. The Nordic mindset exhibits strong civic dispositions towards most of the applied components but no particular attachment to patriotism, while the post-communist mindset exhibits negative dispositions to all corresponding civic values except for the positive correlation with patriotic attitudes. Interestingly, the social-democratic citizen mindset exemplifies all the aspects of active citizenship that the literature relates to the republican model of citizenship, which in fact to a lesser extent are exhibited by the civic dispositions in the countries usually associated with the republican regime that would be represented by France in DebatEU (Janmaat and Greene 2022).

10.2. Perceptions of Democratic Performance and Legitimacy

The performance of EU institutions is often argued to be a source of discontent with the EU. Citizens tend to have high expectations in diverse policy areas regardless of whether they are included in the competences of the EU. Our focus group analysis shows that even well-informed European students expect more from the EU in the field of education, civic education in particular, regardless of these being outside its reach. The distinction between different types of EU legitimacy—“input”, “output” (Scharpf 1999), and “throughput” (Schmidt 2013) may shed some light on how EU citizens evaluate the democratic performance of the EU. Different evaluations of EU legitimacy depend on the applied standards—do we measure the *input*, i.e. citizen participation in the EU decision-making process, or do we rather evaluate the *output*, i.e. whether policies are responsive to citizen preferences and expectations, or the throughput as in “[. . .] the quality of governance processes, as judged by the accountability of the policy-makers and the transparency, inclusiveness and openness of governance processes” (Schmidt 2013, 3).

The majority of focus group participants seemed to use mostly an *output* standard for EU legitimacy and were in general quite content with the performance of the EU in some policy areas yet expected even more EU delivery. This prompted the claim in Chapter 8 that some focus group participants preferred “utilitarian Europe” and exhibited attitudes of consumers rather than citizens. Simultaneously, many focus group discussions were centred on “democratic deficits” with students expressing frustration that they have little influence, let alone control, over decision-making in the EU. This frustration may be accounted for if we adopt an *input* account of democratic legitimacy, where performance of EU institutions is evaluated not in terms of what policies and other *outputs* EU institutions deliver, but in terms of how sensitive, i.e. *responsive*, EU decision-making is to *inputs* from EU citizens.

Thus, a closer look at the divergent views on EU performance is warranted here as some of these views may be at odds with each other. Of course, this is not a problem in itself since the focus group discussions did not necessarily aim at reaching a consensus. Yet the analysis of a perceived “democratic deficit” and the “gap” could benefit from making these tensions more explicit. One tension already mentioned earlier was between the considerable satisfaction with EU performance—prevalent among youths as “consumers” of EU policies—and perceptions of a growing “democratic deficit”. This tension suggests that European youths may in fact have

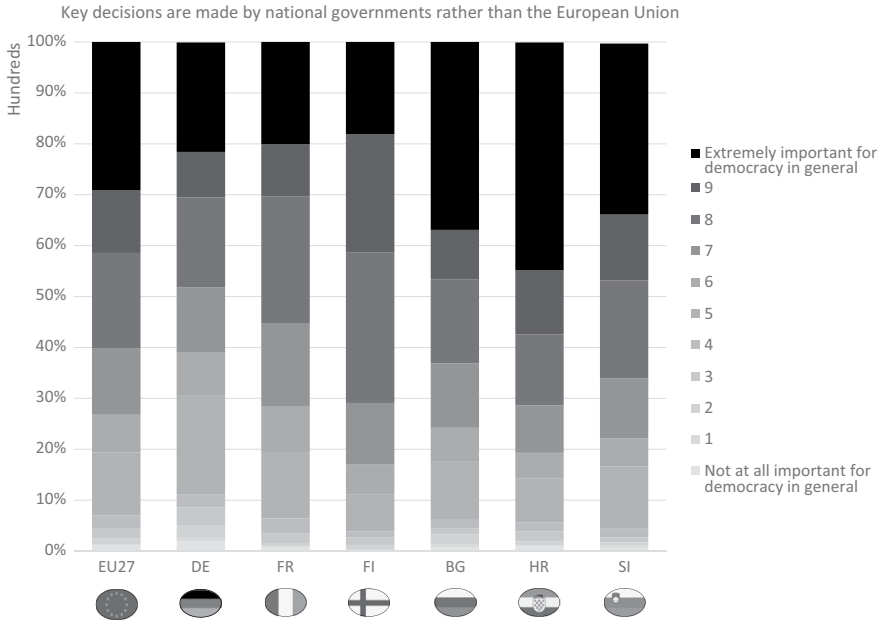


Figure 10.2 Importance for democracy of key decisions being made by national governments rather than the EU

Source: Data from European Social Survey (ESS) 2020.

Note: Six Member States and EU27 2020 ($N = 37\,055$, total populations).

political attitudes of *active* EU citizens rather than be *passive consumers* of policies produced top-down by well-performing EU institutions. The combination of Eurobarometer data on how satisfied EU citizens are with the performance of EU institutions and whether they perceive a growing “democratic deficit” of the EU institutions confirm the observations made during the focus group discussions. A reported 47% of all EU citizens were very or somewhat satisfied in 2023 with the way democracy works in their countries (see Figure 10.9, Appendix), while younger EU citizens (aged 16–30 years) were more optimistic with 59% of them being very or rather satisfied in 2025 with the way democracy works in their countries (see Figure 10.10, Q9_1, Appendix). The youths’ satisfaction with democracy in the EU is even higher (65%) (see Figure 10.10, Q9_2, Appendix) than corresponding satisfaction regarding their own states (59%). Despite this generally high satisfaction of young people with democracy, our focus group participants expressed a number of concrete criticisms about EU democracy. This interesting distinction of critical notions within the overly positive satisfaction of democracy is discussed further in the light of Figure 10.7 with respect to differences between national trends.

The EU27 average pointed to a total of 87% of citizens who consider living in a democratically governed country to be important to varying positive degrees (57% extremely important) in 2020 (see Figure 10.1). Within the six member states in focus, Finns stood out as appreciating living in a democratic country the most (85% responded very or extremely important), with the Germans (79%) also

scoring higher than the EU27 average (69%). The other four member states scored slightly below the EU average, with Slovenians having the lowest corresponding score (58%) for this type of democracy measure. Although satisfaction with European democracy is on average higher than satisfaction with how democracy works in one's nation-state, citizens from the three CEE states are more likely to consider that it's extremely important for democracy that key decisions are made by their respective national governments rather than the EU (ca. 40%), while the corresponding national preferences are lower in Germany, France, and Finland (ca. 20%) than the EU27 average (ca. 30%) (see Figure 10.2). The lower corresponding scores for Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Croatia (in ascending order) could possibly be explained by the perception of low input legitimacy of the EU—i.e. national institutions feeling “closer” than the EU institutions and thus at least still appearing more “accessible” for exercising influence by citizens of these newer and more peripheral member states than especially Germany and France.

10.2.1. *Young Citizens' Views of EU Democracy in Six Member States*

So far, we have covered various aspects of democratic conceptions at the level of total populations. Using the citizenship regime typology by Janmaat and Green (2022) as a relevant point of departure, we next specify the attitudinal dispositions towards the EU of the six national youth populations. Our focus lies on the youths' preferences for *utility* vs. *solidarity goals* following *political agency* at both a *personal* and *institutional* level of EU perceptions. Before a more detailed analysis of the policy items considered to represent the EU most accurately by the youth, we present some more general contextual predispositions and national differentiation of youth opinions. The Eurobarometer survey in focus covers young Europeans' (aged 16–30) views on EU challenges and priorities (European Commission 2025).

According to Table 10.2, the policy items that represented the EU the best for all young EU citizens are “peace and stability” (30%); “democracy, rule of law, and justice” (29%); and “respect for human rights/solidarity between EU countries” (26%). These survey findings match our focus group findings.

The highest scores are given by the Finnish highly educated (HiEd) respondents for “democracy, rule of law and justice” (39%), whereas the lowest score by Bulgarian lower educated (LoEd) youth for “peace and stability” (9%). Thus, the six member states were divided into those whose HiEd respondents followed the main preferences of the EU27 (Germany and Finland), those that prioritised alternative preferences to those of the EU27 (Bulgaria and Croatia), and those (France and Slovenia) that favoured other policy items, i.e. “cultural integrity” in France and “economic cooperation and property” in Slovenia. The value of “social inclusion”, a key element of Social Europe launched in the 1990s by the former French president of the European Commission Jacques Delors, is not in the picture of established EU values in 2025 for the HiEd youth.

This 2025 Eurobarometer survey demonstrates that the views on the EU and democracy are closely entangled with our main variables of age and education. The

Table 10.2 Young EU citizens' selections of policy items representing the EU the best

Q4 In your opinion, which of the following represent the EU the best? Please select up to three answers.													
	EU27	Germany		France		Finland		Bulgaria		Croatia		Slovenia	
<i>Current level of education or training</i>	<i>Lo/HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>
Peace and stability %	30	33	35	28	29	26	24	9	22	20	28	25	32
Democracy, rule of law, and justice %	29	32	36	29	23	30	39	23	25	29	29	29	28
Respect for human rights %	26	27	29	25	34	21	30	19	27	19	21	19	27
Solidarity between EU countries %	26	25	29	26	28	17	25	25	21	17	26	18	29
Economic cooperation and prosperity %	24	22	23	19	23	22	28	22	27	27	30	25	33
Cultural diversity %	23	22	26	23	36	18	20	13	21	21	27	25	25
Protection of climate and the environment %	18	20	18	23	19	25	30	19	18	20	20	17	21
Innovation and progress %	17	11	17	21	13	17	14	12	19	18	23	18	18
Youth empowerment and education %	16	19	11	16	16	29	21	23	33	19	31	24	25
Social inclusion %	13	10	12	14	16	23	23	12	16	18	19	18	21
Base (current students aged 16–30): TOTAL	25933	279	370	292	289	364	283	407	241	340	309	317	306

Note: European youth, low/high levels of education in six Member States and EU27 2025 (N = 25,933, populations aged 16–30 years).

Source: Data from European Commission 2025.

Table 10.3 Young EU citizens' selections of most important principles of democracy in the EU

Q10 Democracy is based on a number of principles, several of which are shown below. Which ones, if any, do you find most important? Please select up to three answers.													
	EU27	Germany		France		Finland		Bulgaria		Croatia		Slovenia	
<i>Current level of education or training</i>	<i>Lo/HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>
Respect for human rights %	38	42	43	29	43	25	32	18	38	21	34	24	37
Freedom to voice your opinion, including by demonstrating %	33	27	33	34	30	24	28	26	31	24	33	30	33
Equality and non-discrimination %	27	24	24	29	30	26	31	17	22	20	30	18	29
Right to privacy and data protection %	23	26	25	21	18	27	27	21	20	22	24	30	28
Right to stand as a candidate and vote in free elections %	23	25	26	20	20	26	28	15	14	19	24	21	25
Rule of law, upheld by an independent judiciary %	23	26	26	23	23	26	28	21	23	19	27	24	29
Transparency and accountability of public institutions %	21	21	16	22	22	24	24	14	23	25	35	24	24
Active participation in decision-making %	19	21	23	17	16	23	24	17	24	28	29	19	24
Free and independent press %	19	15	20	19	24	16	19	9	21	15	17	19	21
Freedom of religion or belief %	18	19	19	25	25	12	14	17	16	18	17	17	15
Base (current students aged 16–30): TOTAL	25933	279	370	292	289	364	283	407	241	340	309	317	306

Note: European youth, low/high levels of education in six Member States and EU27 2025 ($N = 25,933$, populations aged 16–30 years).

Source: Data from European Commission 2025.

principles that the young citizens across the EU associate most with democracy are “respect for human rights” (38%), “freedom to voice one’s opinion, incl. by demonstrating” (33%), and “equality and non-discrimination” (27%) (see Table 10.3). Again, these survey results match our focus group findings.

There is a considerable “gap” in the understanding of democracy among the youths depending on their level of education, especially in the post-communist member states: While “respect for human rights” is considered as top principles of democracy (equal to the EU27-average of 38%) among the HiEd youth, the LoEd are much less enthusiastic with just 18% of LoEd youth in Bulgaria, 21% in Croatia, and 24% in Slovenia holding this view. The survey also covered “procedure-oriented” conceptions of democracy (Lu and Chu 2021) such as transparency and accountability of public institutions (receiving 21% EU-wide support) and rule of law and independent judiciary (23%). Interestingly, while in some CEE countries there was a mismatch between LoEd and HiEd youth (in Bulgaria 14–23% considered transparency important), in others there was no such mismatch (Slovenia 24%), or support for this principle was much higher than the EU27-average (Croatia 35% among HiEd).

10.2.2. Differentiating Youth Attitudes on Democracy in the EU

To explore the youth perceptions of EU democracy more specifically, the main patterns of EU dispositions and democratic conceptions among HiEd youths in each of the six member states are summed up in Figure 10.3. This overview is focused on relevant Eurobarometer questions on main aspects of *agency* and *goals* in relation to key themes of democratic and EU policy issues. The highest-scoring national youth populations for the included theme items are placed at the edge of the circle as illustrated by the large flags, while the smaller flags display lower scores that still fulfil the criteria of exceeding the EU27 average score of the whole age group. The small flags are positioned towards the middle of the circle in the order that the mean national scores exceed the EU average. If a corresponding score is equal to or lesser than the EU207 average, which stands as a comparative baseline for considering scores to be high/medium/low in a general EU context, the member state is not included; e.g. the theme of “security/defence guarantees” received above-average support only in Finland (highest score) and France. The tables of Eurobarometer results used as theme data in Figure 10.3 are available in Table 10.4 (survey questions Q3–Q15; see Appendix), and the scores of each theme and corresponding question items are displayed in Table 10.5 (see Appendix).

The theme items around the circle in Figure 10.3 are distributed onto *four main fields* according to how they relate to “individual vs. institutional” *agency* (Y-axis) and “utility vs. solidarity” *goals* (X-axis). Both axes are relevant to the previously discussed democratic conceptions: The utilitarian/solidary divide involves citizens’ expectations of political, economic or social rewards, i.e. “utility”, on the one hand, and their support for democratic principles as such, i.e. “solidarity”, on the other. This classic cleavage is between self-serving utilities and selfless solidarities including others beyond the maximisation of one’s self-interest turning “us vs.

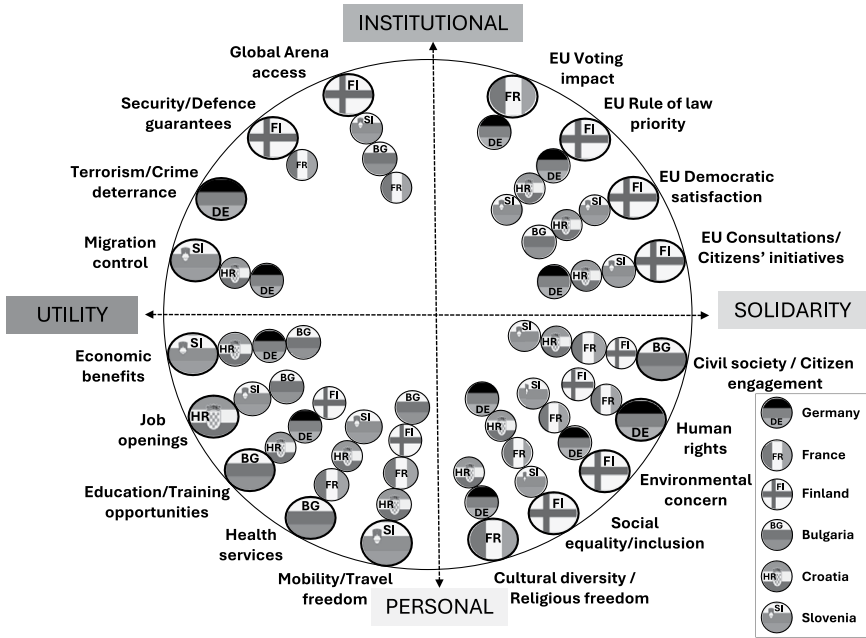


Figure 10.3 Overview of highly educated EU citizens' attitudes towards the EU

Source: Data from European Commission (2025).

Note: The attitudes towards the EU are positioned according to preferences of (Y) *personal* vs. *institutional* agency and (X) *utility* vs. *solidarity* goals among highly educated youth in six Member States. See Tables 10.4 and 10.5 in the Appendix for the average scores and details of the question items. All Member States 2025 ($N = 25\,933$, populations aged 16–20 years).

them” into “us together” sharing mutual support to collectively achieve overarching *goals* (Laitinen and Pessi 2014, 1–2). While the latter broader *goals* encompass *post-materialist* concerns for a more inclusive and just society (e.g. items “cultural diversity”, “social equality/inclusion” and “environmental concern”), the instrumental *goals* of utility are centred around *material* demands of “benefits”, “opportunities” and “services” to the gain of individual citizens. However, both types of *goals* on the X-axis are tied to “personal” values and attitudes, which on the Y-axis can be realised by means of more “individually” or “institutionally” driven *agency*. Citizens’ preferences for specific goals also have consequences for the ways and levels they are realised at. Whereas “utility-based” *goals* centring around issues of e.g. “migration control”, “terrorism/crime deterrence” or “security/defence guarantees” require the *institutional* efficacy of sharp-shooting execution power, “solidarity-based” *goals* are more dependent on the democratic qualities of “institutional” *agency*. From an EU perspective, some of the key democratic criteria involve the functioning of “citizens’ initiatives”, electoral legitimacy as in “voting impact”, and priorities of e.g. the “rule of law”, which are crucial for establishing a

genuinely citizen-based “institutional” *agency* for “solidarity”-driven *goals*, while “utility”-driven ones are more dependent on consumer-based efficacy delivering EU benefits.

In other words, the structure of Figure 10.3 reflects key aspects of classic political dynamics including the well-entrenched Inglehartian value cleavage (Inglehart 1977) of *material* priorities regarding the quantity of economic rewards and physical security being challenged by *post-materialist* concerns driven by active “civil society engagement” (Inglehart 1977; Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Zilliacus 2022, 152–154). The significance of access to higher education as emphasised in Inglehart’s concept of *cognitive mobilisation* constitutes an integral part of this inter-generational value shift with heightened levels of education, cognitive abilities, and information access enhancing political participation and more issue-oriented engagement beyond traditional party ties (Inglehart 1977, 1990; see Section 4.1.1. for further details on young citizens’ diversified participative repertoire). These quality-of-life issues are indeed interrelated with the distinct value type of *universalism* in contrast to *security* values, as defined by Schwartz’s theory of basic values (Schwartz 2012, 2014). *Universalism* values are based on appreciation and tolerance of all kinds of people, including nature, while *security* values underline safety and stability of society and the self (Schwartz 2012; Reinl et al. 2023, 567). Furthermore, the soft-core *universalism* values are correlated with high support for EU integration and identity contrary to more hard-core *security* values, which have proven to have a decreasing effect on EU-wide social solidarity (Reinl et al. 2023, 574, 577–578). Accordingly, the “utility” vs. “solidarity” axis follows the assumptions of several studies (Carl et al. 2019; Saari and Pessi 2014; Uitto and Saloranta 2010) referring *universalism* values to caring for large segments of society, including transnational forms of “solidarity” in contrast to targeted individual policies aimed at more specific interests limited to the instrumental “utility” of one’s in-group (Reinl et al. 2023, 569).

Moreover, the Inglehartian interconnectedness between *material* utilities and *post-materialist* solidarity as a complementary pair of often overlapping preferences, rather than being one-dimensional contradictory poles on a simple continuum (Inglehart and Welzel 2005), constitutes further relevant points of analytical departure. Accordingly, the liberal qualities of social competition are not necessarily counterproductive as the stepping stones to social solidarity. In fact, Saari and Pessi (2014) point to national populations with more resources and higher competitiveness in terms of enjoying high employment levels, a well-functioning welfare state, and mutual trust of the ability of public authorities among citizens who thus are able to afford higher levels of solidarity as in supportive attitudes to helping others (Saari and Pessi 2014, 257). In a comparative study of EU citizens’ willingness to mutual help, those with the greatest concern for helping others had a high degree of social competitiveness as in a well-balanced mixture of welfare, employment, and gender equality (Saari and Pessi 2014, 258). The strong correlation between high social competitiveness and willingness to help was most apparent in the developed welfare states of Denmark, Finland, Sweden, and the Netherlands (Saari and Pessi 2014, 258–261). This contrast to all other member states emphasises an interesting

point of equilibrium between individually driven responsibilities and institutionally delivered social security, which seem to co-exist in the Nordic model catering for the combination of liberal, individual values and universal welfare properties. These further insights into the potential effects of the Nordic model distinguish it from the general West/East division on the all-embracing state delivery of social services that Berglund et al. (2009, 155) found in the welfare preferences of most CEE member states in contrast to western member states.

Regarding more specific perceptions of democracy, the X-axis of “utility” vs. “solidarity” includes the tension of citizens’ priorities between democracy delivering desired *political goods* or essential liberal *democratic principles*. This differentiation between *instrumental* and *intrinsic* values of democracy has been raised as a key factor by, e.g. Lu and Chu (2021) in distinguishing citizens’ democratic conceptions in terms of “benefit-seekers” seeking short-term material benefits through public policies driving prosperity, order and security as opposed to “principle-holders” favouring democratic norms and procedures of liberties, rights, and popular sovereignty as *goals* in themselves (Lu and Chu 2021, 117–118). Furthermore, Lu and Chu (2022) extend this dichotomy to encompass support for illiberal “delivery-oriented” vis-à-vis liberal “procedure-oriented” conceptions of democracy (Welzel 2023, 771). Preferences for instant governance output of *instrumental gains* at the expense of holding onto *democratic principles* subsequently provide authoritarian-populist manoeuvring space for political actors to set aside democratic procedures in order to drive *material* power agendas based on short-term popular demand (Lu and Chu 2021, 117–118). With relevance to our study, support for such “delivery-oriented” *goals* are curtailed by higher levels of education and political interest that raise the bar for trading immediate *material* utilities for broader democratic considerations (Welzel 2023, 771).

Proportions of “principle-holders” rises with socioeconomic development following a similar logic as adopting *post-materialist* values being enabled by materially secure early socialisation (Inglehart 1977; Lu and Chu 2022; Welzel 2023, 771). Accordingly, the conflict dimension constituting *goals* of utility vs. solidarity on the X-axis could be framed as “governance utility” vs. “democratic solidarity”. Democratic desires of citizens are indeed complex and often context-ridden processes, which can be measured in multiple ways (Ulbricht 2018, 1418). In cross-national studies on democratic goals and conceptions, Ulbricht recommends listening to what people say about democracy in addition to using common measurement scales (Ulbricht 2018, 1418–1421). This corresponds to our study of youth attitudes towards the EU, where the analysis of broader survey trends supplements the more specific qualitatively oriented focus group discussions.

Following up on more specific interpretations of the placement of national youth populations in Figure 10.3, the values of *universalism* are placed in the lower right quadrant of the field distinguished by personal *agency* and *goals* of solidarity (see Figure 10.4). The often personally reflected experiences on issues of “cultural diversity/religious freedom” are popular markers among especially the French youth who score well above both the German and Croatian youths who are

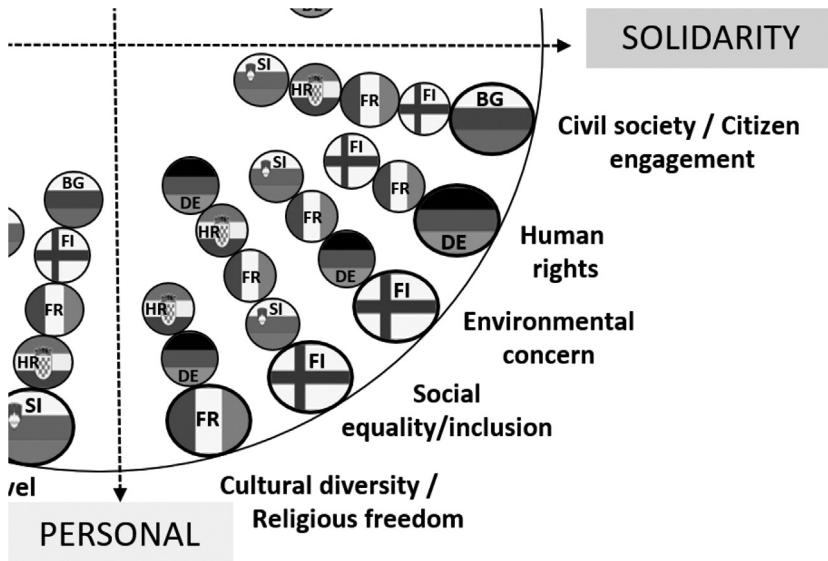


Figure 10.4 Preferences by personal agency and solidarity goals

Source: Data from European Commission 2025.

Note: See Figure 10.3 for complete overview.

just above the EU27-mean score while the other three countries fall below it (see Table 10.5, Quadrant 1, Appendix). As for “social equality/inclusion”, the Finnish youths score well above the others, which corresponds to established beliefs within the “universal welfare state” (Esping-Andersen 1990) of the Nordic countries that usually top the lists of positive attitudes on social equality. While this classic expression of social solidarity includes the established institutional guarding of personal space, “environmental concern” equally involves personal preferences and behaviour mixed with setting up institutional levers to ensure environmental harmony. Finnish youths again distinguish themselves as the most consistently environmentally aware, although the German and French also score above the EU27-average with the Slovenian youth scoring just above it—an exception among CEE member states generally being less supportive of issues on the solidarity spectrum (see e.g. Jaanmat and Green 2022, 1361). Slovenia as an exception is also noted by Berglund et al. (2009, 145) with regard to being the only CEE country scoring very high in 2007 along with all other western member states on the Human Development Index (UNDP 2025), which includes quality-of-life and knowledge measures in addition to standards of living. In a similar vein Slovenia had the highest CEE scores in 1988–2002 on Schwartz’s (2014, 556) *universalism* value of “harmony” covering support for e.g. “environmental protection”, “unity of nature”, “world of beauty”, and “world at peace”.

Commitment to *universalism* of German and French youth is exhibited regarding “human rights” distinguishing them as a highly scoring cluster compared to the other four countries including Finland, which still scores above average on human rights. The Finnish high scores on two of four *universalism* items marks them as Nordic proponents of “egalitarian democracy” according to the democratic conceptions of Wegscheider et al. (2023, 1247). On a more elaborate and up-to-date global scale of the “world cultural map” of Inglehart and Welzel (2005), these geographical patterns persist in 2023 with the Nordic countries (joined by the Netherlands) topping the *post-materialist* values of “self-expression” and quality-of-life issues concerning the environment, gender equality and demands for more participatory decision-making vis-à-vis the values of survival and security (World Values Study 2023). Corresponding to these trends, Germany is increasingly positioned towards the “self-expressive” end and scores well above France that still remains at the high end of western Continental Europe, while Slovenia accordingly has moved closer to the West than all other CEE countries such as Croatia and especially Bulgaria scoring far lower on the “survival vs. self-expression values”, although as high as Slovenia, Germany, and Finland on “traditional vs. secular values” (World Values Study 2023).

The self-expression values and quality-of-life issues were indeed dominant in the focus groups with the most prominent issues being climate change, migration and cultural diversity (see Section 8.2.8.). Climate change issues were perceived as the most influenceable solidarity goal at the level of personal agency, while it also was held as a prime target for the EU to combat at the global level (see Section 8.6.4.) by means of firm institutional agency. Migration was seen as the most polarised issue across the six member states with the students pointing to EU’s border management as a contradiction to European values of human solidarity that they strongly supported (see Section 8.4.4.). Issues related to the EU slogan of “unity in diversity” were equally discussed in affirmative undertones by most discussants with respect to cultural inclusion and social equality (see Section 8.4.3.) encompassing specifically LGBTQ+ rights as well as calling for further strengthening of liberal values in general (see Section 8.4.1.).

The divide between dispositions of “universal solidarity” vis-à-vis “utilitarian rewards” can be found in the quadrant distinguished by personal *agency* and *goals* of utility (see Figure 10.5). Youths in Slovenia, Croatia, and France strongly support “mobility/travel freedom” associated with EU membership, and the Finns and Bulgarians are well above the EU27-average, while the Germans score well below the average. The German youths’ reliance on the EU for “health services” is equally weak with only the Finns showing no interest at all for health guarantees at EU level, which may be explained by the abundance of welfare services in the Nordic universal model (Esping-Andersen 1990) providing an established mixture of social and economic security. This stands in contrast to the three CEE member states where Bulgarian youths are the keenest on EU health services, but also the French score relatively high, together with Croatians, while Slovenian youth only just surpass the EU27 average. Bulgarian youths are equally most supportive of EU-provided “education/training opportunities” followed closely by Croatians,

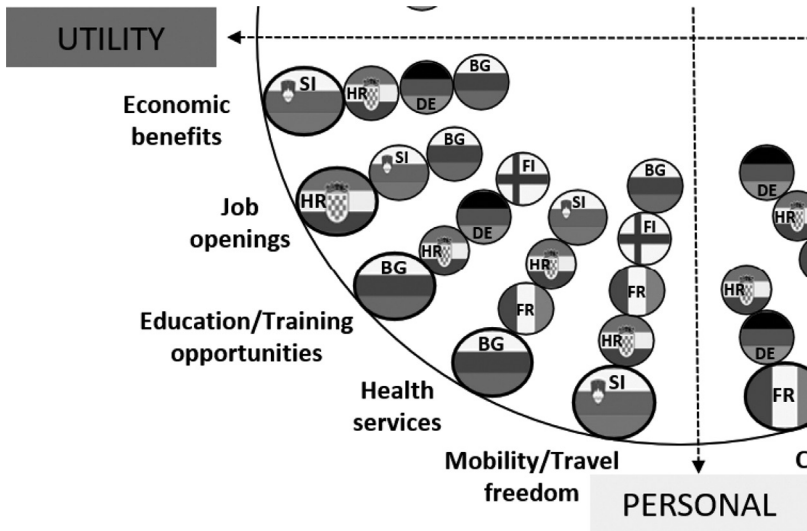


Figure 10.5 Preferences by personal agency and utility goals

Source: Data from European Commission 2025.

Note: See Figure 10.3 for complete overview.

while Germans and Finns score well above the average, although they are less keen similarly to the French and Slovenian youth. The opportunities of “job openings” on the EU market clearly attract Croatian and Slovenian youth, while these interests of Bulgarian youths equal the EU27 average, and the German, Finnish, and French ones fall just below the EU mean. This division between more and less established member states could at least partly be explained by the more lucrative job markets in the latter three member states, whereas harmonising job and training opportunities has not yet been as integrated into the CEE countries. When it comes to more direct “economic benefits” brought by EU membership, they are highly supported by Slovenian and Croatian youths, while the Germans as the European “economic locomotive” score just above the EU27 average, the French just below, and the Finns don’t count on economic benefits at all.

EU benefits proved attractive in the focus group discussions with a focus on the common market/currency and free movement. Interestingly, the popular education/training opportunities of the Erasmus+ programme were mentioned as the second policy field after climate change that the students felt they could influence at a personal level. In contrast, monetary policy was considered the policy field least open to influence, which some students did not perceive as a problem echoing their role as policy consumers rather than politically active citizens (see Section 8.5.3.). However, all students emphasised their belief in the EU providing education about the EU to foster more interest and democratic participation in the EU regardless of

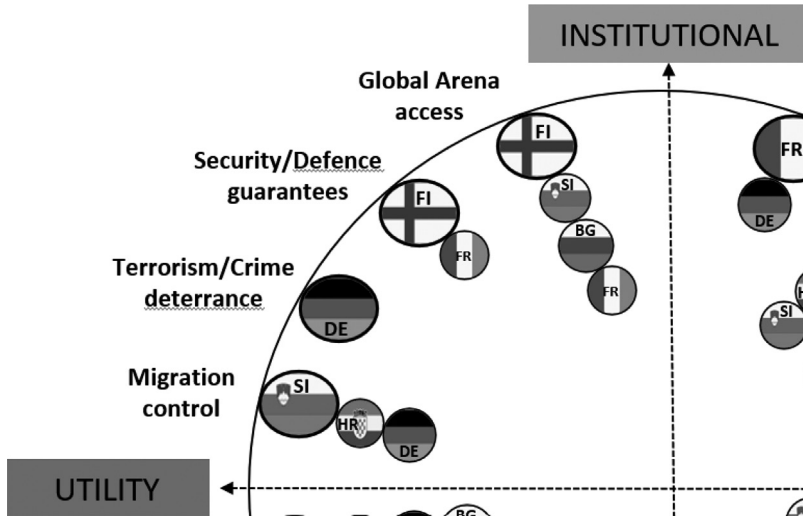


Figure 10.6 Preferences by institutional agency and utility goals

Source: Data from European Commission 2025.

Note: See Figure 10.3 for complete overview.

education being a national competence (see Sections 8.2.10. and 8.9.3.). Accordingly, the students assumed a hierarchical view of EU authorities directing citizen education as a basis for EU democracy and institutional solidarity rather than as primarily a utility good that the citizens could add to their political repertoires as individual actors exercising active citizenship agency (see Section 8.5.1.).

Personal utility *goals* are valued more highly by the youths in the three post-communist countries, while the rest are more supportive of solidarity *goals* — especially the Finnish as well as the French low utility preferences for economic rewards extend to no support for “migration control” in the quadrant of institutional utility *goals* (see Figure 10.6). In a similar vein, only the Germans exceed the EU27 average for “terrorism/crime deterrence” preferences. These consistent non-utility preferences of the Finns, however, are turned on their head when it comes to “security/defence guarantees”, which are a prime EU-related concern of the Finnish youth. Considering the over 1,000-kilometre-long border with Russia as an ever-present key factor dominating the Finnish geopolitical strategies including its military readiness, this can be considered a geographical reality making waves in any attitudinal surveys that concern security rather than a solely value-based preference of utility above solidarity. Correspondingly, the Finnish by far strongest emphasis on “global arena access” can be explained by the contextual factors of geopolitical concerns, driving Finland’s recent joining of NATO in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which also featured in the Finnish focus group discussions on EU security benefits (see Section 7.3.1.).

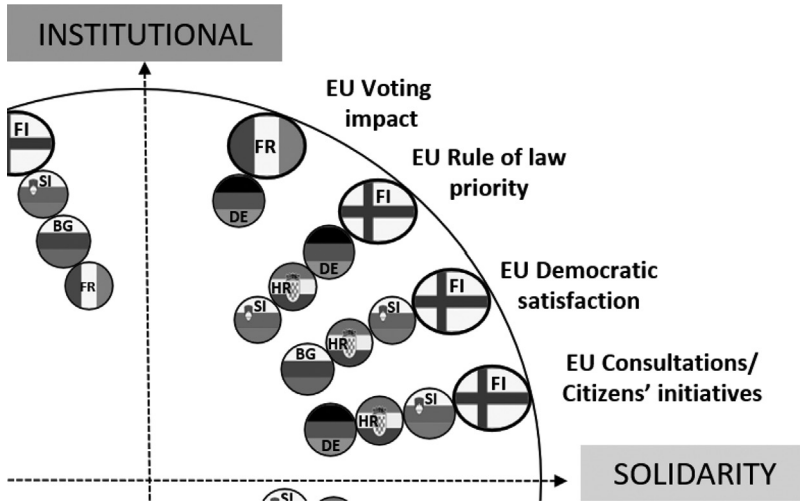


Figure 10.7 Preferences by institutional agency and solidarity goals

Source: Data from European Commission 2025.

Note: See Figure 10.3 for complete overview.

The emphasis of the EU as a geopolitical player on a global arena providing security and peace guarantees to its member states was shared among all focus groups and constituted a major similarity between them (see Section 8.6.1.). These views as well as expectations of the EU were made with reference to its general geopolitical influence and actions to support Ukraine against the Russian invasion, which were mentioned at some point in almost all focus groups (see Section 8.6.2.). While similarities were much more dominant than differences between the focus groups, the questions of whether to build a European army and the extent of EU enlargement stirred some opposing opinions regarding the EU's geopolitical role. Contextual factors such as cultural differences between Eastern and Western Europe and structural differences between member states were emphasised by the students reflecting their critical engagement in relation to these kind of complex, global issues (see Section 8.2.12.).

In the solidarity-oriented half of Figure 10.3 at the corresponding high end of institutional *agency* (see Figure 10.7), the support for “EU Voting impact” is held up solely by the French and German youth. The disregard of voting impact in the European Parliament (EP) by the other four countries can also largely reflect contextual realities rather than value-related dynamics when considering the number of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) in each of the six nations (i.e. 96/720 seats for Germany, 81 France, 17 Bulgaria, 15 Finland, 12 Croatia, and 9 Slovenia in the 2024 EP election). The realistic electoral power of the two largest member states does strengthen their citizens' closeness to the EU corridors

of power, which are felt in various attitudinal dispositions regarding respondents' experiences on the classic cleavage of centric vs. peripheral placement that also featured in the focus group discussions. Considering this stark contrast of closeness to EU power between Germany and France in relation to the other four nations, it is rather intriguing that the two powerhouses are absent from the row of nations standing in line for "EU Democratic satisfaction" with scores well below the EU27 average. On the other hand, proximity to power may also give more insights and space for more critical perspectives of what is going on in the corridors of power compared to perhaps more idealistic visions in the periphery.

The most peripheral EU visions of the non-EU citizens taking part in the focus groups were indeed most positively attuned to EU democracy, especially when comparing it to states/regions outside the EU (see Section 8.5.1.). When it comes to voting impact in the EP, participants from both smaller and bigger member states largely agreed with the degressive distribution of votes even if some students were critical of the weighting of votes being favourable to smaller members (see Section 8.3.4.). Significantly, imbalances in representation were indeed justified by all focus groups regardless of nationality and state size even if the political and economic power of Germany and France clearly was distinguished (see Sections 8.2.6. and 8.7.2.). In a similar vein democratic values adhering to "EU Rule of priority" were defended throughout the focus groups both regarding internal control of rule of law conflicts and external promotion of democracy. Critical demands for more rigid EU control of deviance from democratic principles were voiced in all focus groups involving explicit mentioning of democratic backsliding in Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, including its negative impact on EU unity (see Section 8.6.3.). Satisfaction with the quality of EU democracy was indeed high when focusing on the structural standards of the core of liberal democracy with fair electoral representation and the rule of law, while more meticulous qualitative standards regarding power relations, transparency, accountability, and input legitimacy were met more critically (see Section 8.5.1.). Accordingly, the students expressed strong expectations for a raise of democratic quality and participatory intensity of the EU, but this was rather to be delivered from above by EU institutions, politicians, education and media rather than actively driven by themselves whereby they remained passive, although critical, lacking pathways for political action as EU citizens (see Section 8.3.2.).

When it comes to overall levels of broader national differences not explicitly detected in the small samples of the focus groups, survey data in this context of "EU democratic satisfaction" point to HiEd youth in France and Germany constituting the most dissatisfied category of young citizens with the way democracy works in the entire EU (see Figure 10.10, Q9_2, Appendix). Moreover, this position at the most critical end of EU democratic satisfaction applies to the entire category of 16- to 30-year-olds of the German and French populations, which is stretched even further down for the HiEd youth compared to LoEd with especially the French HiEd scoring the lowest on satisfaction with EU democracy. This stands in contrast to the four smaller nations being profoundly more satisfied with the democratic working of the EU, which especially applies to their younger populations highlighting

the contrasting implications of age as a reversed critical layer to EU satisfaction in Germany and France. The biggest contrast by far is found in the Finnish HiEd youth topping the list of satisfaction with EU democracy, which also is the only national category to have a higher satisfaction rate among the HiEd compared to LoEd youth. This positive view of the democratic reach of EU institutions by Finnish youths is rather notable considering, e.g. their limited portion of EP impact, which underlines the extremely pragmatic vision of EU democracy from the view of a small nation in the northern outskirts. Furthermore, the highest trust of EU institutions in Finland among the total populations of member states is equally amplified in the Finnish youth, and especially the HiEd end, by far topping the item “EU rule-of-law priority” as the characteristic that best represents the EU. The Finns also top scores for supporting the joining of “EU consultations/citizens’ initiatives” followed closely by Slovenian and Croatian corresponding scores with the German, and especially French, youth being less enthusiastic about these kinds of EU institutional arrangements.

However, “civil society/citizen engagement” on the more personal dimension of political *agency* is not as vibrant in Finland and France as in all three CEE countries. This exception is a significant break from the expectations of the “post-communist citizenship regime” (Janmaat and Green 2022), which assumed negative levels of “civic participation” and “public spiritedness/engagement” (Janmaat and Green 2022, 1355). This may reflect an aversion for grand “state involvement” in post-communist nations, traumatised by the intrusive socialist state of their past. These systemic factors commonly referred to by authors in the field underlie Janmaat’s and Green’s (2022) mapping of civic dispositions:

Scholars have argued that the roots of ethnic nationalism and illiberalism lie in the communist period [. . .], with communist rule seen as having destroyed civil society and as having created an atomistic society composed of individuals distrustful of both state institutions and fellow citizens [. . .] In this environment, ethnic and family loyalties prevailed as these were the only bonds people could rely upon to counter feelings of alienation and isolation.
(Janmaat and Green 2022, 1354)

The post-communist regime is afflicted, these authors contend, with “relatively low levels of tolerance, civic equality, public engagement, social and institutional trust, and civic and political participation with relatively high levels of patriotism” (Janmaat and Green 2022, 1354). The latter feature of patriotism may reflect the East/West divide of total populations in CEE-countries markedly exceeding the EU27 average for preferring key decisions to be made by national governments rather than the EU in contrast to corresponding national preferences in Germany, France and Finland being distinctly lower (see Figure 10.2). However, the main assumptions of negative scores in CEE countries on all these civic dispositions (Janmaat and Green 2022, 1354) must be viewed with caution.

More recent surveys of EU youth deviate from previous rather pessimistic conclusions on the post-communist scepticism of civil engagement. The trends here

show that young citizens in post-communist states are keener, compared to older member states, to take part in EU-related (rather than institutionally EU-initiated) civic activities such as citizens' panels, debates, and assemblies along with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and communal participation patterns. Further evidence of this breaking away from older post-communist patterns is found in the scores on "social equality/inclusion", as in the keys to civic equality, where Slovenian and Croatian youths are similar to the French, which exceed the German scores just above the EU27 average (for score details, see Table 10.5, Quadrant 4, Appendix).

These variations confirm the conclusions of previous analyses of survey results for the total population of each nation. This is especially so in the Finnish case, where the "social-democratic regime" falls in line with "civic equality", "social trust", and "state (read EU) involvement" (Janmaat and Green 2022, 1355; Janoski 1998; Delhey and Newton 2005; Green and Janmaat 2011). The social-democratic regime received the strongest confirmation by the data analysis of Janmaat and Green (2022, 1360–1364), fully in line with our results. This equally applies to the conception of "egalitarian democracy" (Wegscheider et al. 2023) and its key feature of social and economic equality, which matches the Finnish version of the "social-democratic mindset" (Janmaat and Green 2022). In fact, the Nordic countries constitute the clearest distinguishable cluster of nations to measure conformity with the "citizenship regimes" (Janmaat and Green 2022, 1361). The only items in our Eurobarometer survey analysis that did not match the "social-democratic regime" in the Finnish case were the expected high support for "ethnic diversity/religious freedom", which partly can be traced to the ethnically homogenous population demographics of Finland becoming diversified only within the last two decades in contrast to its Nordic neighbours (Berglund et al. 2009, 115–118), not to mention the established diversity of e.g. Germany and France (Favell 1998). Furthermore, the assumption of positive Nordic scores for "ethno-racial tolerance" is not supported by earlier surveys such as the Eurobarometer 2008 (Berglund et al. 2009, 159), with the Nordic countries scoring below the EU average in attitudes towards immigrants in comparison to especially Germany, Slovenia, and Bulgaria who score well above the EU mean in contradiction with the expectations of "patriotism" in the "conservative" and "post-communist" citizenship regimes. These points of departures would be in line with the Finnish scores on "cultural diversity" falling behind the EU27 average and the other member states in focus (see Figure 10.3 and Table 10.5, Quadrant 1, Appendix).

"Civil society/citizen engagement" at a more personal community level were highly supported by the Finns, which aligns well with Finnish openness to complement representative mechanisms with citizen involvement in e.g. "deliberative" practices involving interpersonal *agency*, while public engagement at a more institutional EU level also was confirmed. However, this bingo-like matching of baseline values and democratic conceptions with observed EU attitudes in the Finnish case is very far from the much less straightforward deviance of the French expected representation of the "republican regime" and the similar German defection from the expectations of the "conservative regime". These deviant results for the German and French youth require some further clarification in the light of the defined

points of departure for these two regimes. The premises of the German conservative regime vis-à-vis the French republican regime have the following relevant distinctions for interpreting the attitudinal dispositions of each national population:

The republican regime puts the unity of the state and supporting of values tied to the republic at the centre of the state-citizen relations, the bonds of which are more vertical than horizontal with the civil society being seen as a possible threat to confidence in the state (Janmaat and Green 2022, 1353; Favell 1998). Civic initiatives are regarded as citizen duties, rather than rights per se, to keep the people engaged in public affairs and the government incorrupt, while public education should foster a combination of political tolerance and commitment to the common good and civic equality along with loyalty towards the state (Janmaat and Green 2022, 1353; Dagger 2002; Hoskins et al. 2015). Accordingly, Janmaat and Green (2022) expect the French to display

relatively high levels of political participation, engagement with public affairs, patriotism, tolerance and institutional trust and high levels of support for the principle of equality before the law [...] combined with relatively low levels of civic participation and social trust.

(Janmaat and Green 2022, 1353)

As a contrast, the conservative regime upholds a semi-public status for professional organisations, the church, and unions, which includes legitimate consultation rights with the state as part and parcel of its strong involvement in social affairs in line with corporatist structures and hierarchical representation (Janmaat and Green 2022, 1353; Janoski 1998; Esping-Andersen 1990). Due to these partly exclusionary identities of intermediary organisations intertwined with the strongly supported state and historically prevalent traditions as well as domination by “Christian Democracy”, civic equality is assumed to be less developed (Green and Janmaat 2011; Janmaat and Green 2022, 1353–1354). The ethno-cultural conception of national identity includes exclusionary properties, but nationalist fervour has been suppressed in the aftermath of the Second World War (Janmaat and Green 2022, 1353). Therefore, Janmaat and Green (2022, 1354) expect

German and Dutch speaking countries to combine relatively high levels of civic participation and strong support for state involvement with relatively shallow support for civic equality and relatively low levels of ethno-racial tolerance and patriotism.

When it comes to correlating these conceptual regime expectations with the survey trends, the citizenship regime types representing Germany and France were as hard to confirm in the European Values Study (EVS) (2022) data used by Janmaat and Green (2022, 1356) as in the Eurobarometer survey on European youth in 2025 (European Commission 2025). Regarding the republican regime, the expected attitudinal profile was confirmed only partly with relatively low levels of civic participation and higher scores for ethnic tolerance and state involvement, while patterns of other components varied over time (Janmaat and Green 2022, 1360–1361). This

picture corresponds to the French height of youth support for solidarity *goals* being directed to “cultural diversity/religious freedom”, “human rights” and the electoral duties of “EU voting impact” as well as correspondingly low scores for “civil society/citizen engagement” compared to the other five youth populations. Other items displaying high French support were “health services” and “security/defence guarantees” of the utility *goals*, which indeed can be related to centralised, state-led policies in France that could be translatable to the EU context of our data on highly educated youth.

Regarding the matching of attitudinal dispositions in Germany to the conservative regime, it proved even more cumbersome to confirm its initial substance regarding especially the observed high support of civic equality and ethnic tolerance, which were contrary to Janmaat and Green’s expectations (2022, 1354). In a similar vein, the German youth was distinguished by high support for “cultural diversity/religious freedom” as well as “human rights” just as the French youth, while also displaying high levels of “environmental concern” echoing the legacy of the German environmental movement constituting the European vanguard for the breakthrough of green politics in the 1980s (cf. Müller-Rommel 1989). The strong tradition of the German *Rechtsstaat* may also reflect the support of corresponding “rights”, while it certainly shines through in the high German support for “EU rule of law priority” along with traditional safeguards of electoral systems in the item “EU voting impact” shared with French youth. On the German absence regarding utility *goal* items, which as such underlines the German leaning towards transnational solidarity, there are two notable exceptions: One concerns the only positive score on “terrorism/crime deterrence” of the six member states in focus, which may echo the presence of terrorist acts at various points in the German political context since the early 1970s. However, the respective absence of the French youths’ support for terrorism deterrence is notable considering even more widespread violent political unrest during recurrent protest waves in the French main cities (Chamorel 2019). The item “migration control” also gathers some support among German youths along with especially Slovenian as well as Croatian sympathies, which may be related to limited “ethnic tolerance” that, however, is offset in the German case by strong support for both cultural and religious diversity. The items “security/defence guarantees” and “global arena access” totally lack support of German youths, which is an interesting point considering that the presence of at least some German sympathies apply to most other items actively supported by French, and partly Finnish, youths clustering on similar attitudinal dispositions.

10.3. Concluding Points: Six Visions of EU Democracy

Our findings in this chapter are summarised in terms of six visions of EU democracy. Adding insights from survey data discussed here, we further develop the types in Section 9.6. The visions constitute various types of “unions” aligned with young Europeans’ attitudes towards the EU (Tables 10.4 and 10.5, and Figures 10.3 and 10.8) along established value scales with matching key topics and terms of the focus group discussions (see Chapter 8).

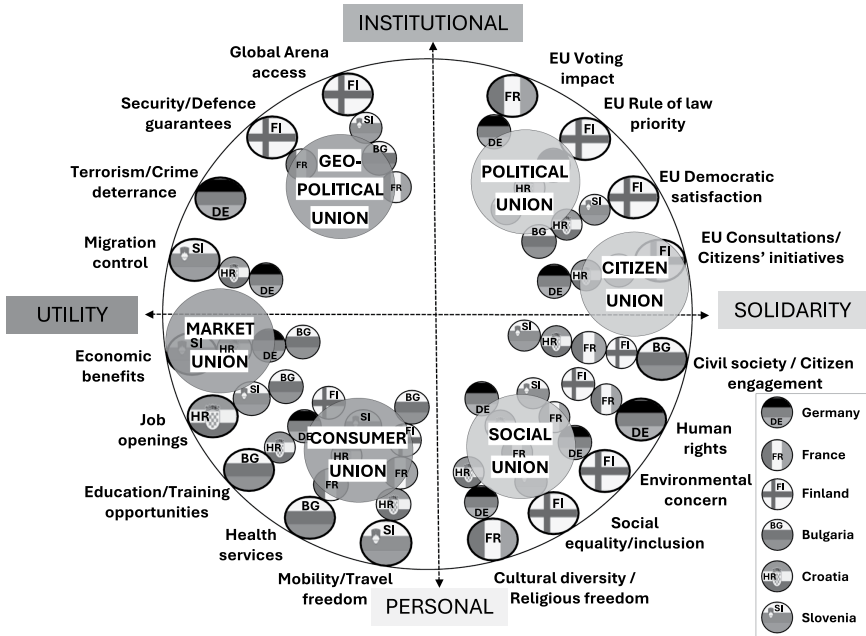


Figure 10.8 Overview of six visions of EU democracy in relation to highly educated young Europeans' attitudes towards the EU

Source: Data from European Commission 2025.

Note: See Figure 10.3 for overview of attitude towards the EU among highly educated youth in six Member States according to (X) *personal* vs. *institutional* agency and (Y) *utility* vs. *solidarity* goals (populations aged 16–30 years).

The EU as Consumer Union (Personal-Utility Vision: Benefit Provisions)

In this instrumentalist vision of the EU as a provider of immediate benefits, the EU is not about a long-term partnership of mutual benefits, but rather a transaction source of rewards to individual benefit-seekers, be it individual citizens or nations. If the cost-benefit balance turns negative, the transactional partnerships can be exchanged or terminated to optimise *utility* returns. In this utilitarian vision of consumerist interests, the procedural coordination of the common good or shared principles of transnational *goals* are of subordinate importance to tangible benefits here and now. The popularity of such personal-utility benefits (see lower left quadrant of Figures 10.3 and 10.8) shows in the Eurobarometer surveys regarding especially the popularity of “freedom to travel” (39%; see Table 10.4, Q5) and “access to study programmes such as Erasmus” (30%). The stances on corresponding topics proved popular during the focus group discussions and moreover the idea of collective action by active EU citizens was overwhelmed by predominating consumer choices at the personal level (see Sections 8.2.3., 8.2.8., 8.2.10., 8.5.1., 8.5.3., and 8.9.3.) confirming support for this vision of the EU as primarily a *consumer union*.

The EU as Market Union (Personal/Institutional-Utility Vision: Economic Stability)

In this equally instrumentalist vision of the EU, the focus is lifted towards longer-term institutional commitment to *utility* (see left edge of Figures 10.3 and 10.8), although limited to the economic sphere. The dominant material *goals* are achieved through a combination of private initiatives enhanced by public arrangements to ensure common market stability as the prime goal of EU integration limited to economic targets. The Eurobarometer surveys showed that the largest share of young Europeans saw the EU as a pathway to improve “job opportunities and economic stability” (34%; see Table 10.4, Q14). These preferences were supported by focus groups invariably stressing the common market/currency as the bedrock of the EU and its most useful selling components (see Sections 8.2.3. and 8.8.2.). Especially the more critical discussants questioning the quality of EU democracy saw little use in deepened integration beyond the output-oriented *market union*.

The EU as Geopolitical Union (Institutional-Utility Vision: Powerplay Security)

This vision of institutional guarding of security is increasingly emphasised under current international instability, which rounds up support for firm leadership and effective decision-making to enhance EU dominance in the powerplay around the main issues of EU borders, control and guarantees of a secure future in a changing world (see upper left quadrant of Figures 10.3 and 10.8). The Eurobarometer surveys display young Europeans placing “security and defence” as the most important priority area of the EU (31%; see Table 10.4, Q7) along with a stronger role in “promoting global peace and security” as the second most preferred option for changes in the EU by 2030 (28%; see Table 10.4, Q14). These issues of global pressure to enforce a united EU-front also became prominent topics in the focus groups, often linked to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, (see Sections 8.2.4., 8.2.12., 8.6.1. and 8.6.2.) featuring a common high priority to ensure an empowered *geopolitical union*.

The EU as Political Union (Institutional-Solidarity Vision: Representative Procedures)

Regarding more solidarity-driven conceptions of the EU tied to trust in democratic institutions (see upper right quadrant of Figures 10.3 and 10.8), priorities of power rule shift towards more universal attachments of common codes and principles as a community of shared values. The EU is perceived as the “city on the hill”, which is supposed to set a positive example for the rest of the world by means of well-functioning and fair representative procedures enhancing democratic priorities to the satisfaction of EU citizens. This vision involves the deepening of political integration including federalist features, and support for the “rule-of-law-and-justice” representing the EU in the best way (29%; see Table 10.4, Q4) as well as “commitment to democracy” being regarded as the main strength of the EU (25%;

see Table 10.4, Q3). These ascriptions of functional representative EU democracy were actively supported and conceptualised during the focus group discussions including demands for handling deviations from democratic principles in member states (see Sections 8.2.6., 8.3.4., 8.5.1., 8.6.3., and 8.7.2.). Students also expected improved democratic quality from the EU by means of e.g. education “from above”, though their grasping of their own pathways as active EU citizens remained limited (see Sections 8.2.10., 8.3.2., and 8.9.3.). The strong reliance on representative procedures confirmed well-established visions of the EU as a *political union*.

The EU as Citizen Union (Personal/Institutional-Solidarity Vision: Deliberative Principles)

This solidary vision of EU citizenship encompassing both personal and institutional *agency* (see right edge of Figures 10.3 and 10.8) falls more into *horizontal* European *integration* rather than the federally institutionalised *vertical integration* of the political union of representative democracy. Whereas the procedural structures of the latter vision are firmer and more centralised, the deliberative principles of e.g. interpersonal citizen input cater for a wider range of participative engagement with several decentralised channels of policy influence. This broadening of platforms for political participation are main elements of the kind of support by the relatively large portion of European youth who prioritise their active involvement in EU decision-making as desired changes to be developed by 2030 (20%, see Table 10.4, Q14) and as important democratic principles of the EU (19%, see Table 10.4, Q10). In a similar vein, many focus group discussants gave several recommendations on how democratic participation in the EU could be improved and intensified by means of e.g. social media and citizen self-responsibility (see Sections 8.2.11., 8.7.1., and 8.9.4.). These participatory initiatives correspond to finding more inclusive and direct ways to reach beyond a *consumer union* and actively take part in the EU as a *citizen union*.

The EU as Social Union (Personal-Solidarity Vision: Universal Equality)

In this highly egalitarian conception of EU democracy, the agenda setting revolves around a more personal initiative rallying for a multitude of *post-materialist* issues linked to values of *universalism* and transnational solidarity (see lower right quadrant of Figures 10.3 and 10.8). The civil engagement for social equality as a key issue, as well as principle, is partly driven by more spontaneous citizen mobilisation sensitive to institutional “interference”, while addressing inequalities often includes both institutional reform and horizontal initiatives “from below”. For example, solutions to common inequality issues (exclusion, rights, etc.) require both institutional functionality and an active civil society mobilising individuals into public engagement. The Eurobarometer surveys confirm that young Europeans find “inequalities (social and economic)” as main challenges for the EU (26%; see Table 10.4, Q6) and prioritise “greater focus on social equality and inclusion” to be developed in the EU by 2030 (22%; see Table 10.4, Q14). Youth in EU27 consider

“stronger climate action and environmental protection” to be the third most important changes to be expected in the EU by 2030 (26%; see Table 10.4, Q14), and “respect for human rights” is regarded the most important principle for democracy in general (38%; see Table 10.4, Q10). The focus groups equally bring forth universal, global issues of migration and climate change combined with specific issues of e.g. LGBTQ+ rights and social equality as key questions of concern and polarisation (see Sections 8.2.8., 8.4.1., 8.4.3., 8.4.4., and 8.6.4.). These student perceptions emphasise the weight of cultural diversity, environmental concern, and human rights as part and parcel of their expectations of EU democracy to live up to this vision of the EU as a *social union*.

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Appendix

Table 10.4 Young Europeans' attitudes on key themes of EU democracy

	Q3 In your opinion, which of the following do you think are the main strengths of the EU? Please select up to three answers.													
Theme in Figure 10.3.	Question item	EU27	Germany		France		Finland		Bulgaria		Croatia		Slovenia	
	<i>Current level of education/training</i>	<i>Lo/HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>
Mobility/travel freedom	The freedom of movement in the EU %	32	17	19	37	44	29	35	13	32	22	43	28	51
	The good relationships and solidarity between the EU's member states %	28	30	35	26	30	25	34	24	34	26	28	28	26
	The EU's commitment to democracy and fundamental values %	25	28	33	16	21	29	37	21	14	18	22	22	23
Economic benefits	The EU's trade power and competitiveness %	23	21	28	23	29	19	21	19	20	25	26	18	29
	The standard of living of EU citizens %	23	27	32	22	20	20	24	16	22	18	25	25	34
Environmental concern	The EU's commitment to protecting the climate and the environment %	22	22	27	22	20	30	28	21	21	22	22	23	21
	The EU's position in the world %	22	21	21	23	26	20	23	8	20	19	25	15	25
	The EU's investment in regions, agriculture, and other areas %	17	15	11	21	18	24	21	21	29	23	28	23	20
Job openings	The EU's capacity to create jobs %	16	22	19	12	15	17	15	16	25	25	24	22	23
	The EU's innovation and research %	16	18	13	20	17	13	18	18	19	15	20	18	15
	Base (current students aged 16–30): TOTAL	25933	279	370	292	289	364	283	407	241	340	309	317	306

(Continued)

Table 10.4 (Continued)

	Q4 In your opinion, which of the following represent the EU the best? Please select up to three answers.													
Theme in Figure 10.3.	Question item	EU27	Germany		France		Finland		Bulgaria		Croatia		Slovenia	
	<i>Current level of education/training</i>	<i>Lo/HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>
	Peace and stability %	30	33	35	28	29	26	24	9	22	20	28	25	32
EU rule of law priority	Democracy, rule of law and justice %	29	32	36	29	23	30	39	23	25	29	29	29	28
Human rights	Respect for human rights %	26	27	29	25	34	21	30	19	27	19	21	19	27
	Solidarity between EU countries %	26	25	29	26	28	17	25	25	21	17	26	18	29
	Economic cooperation and prosperity %	24	22	23	19	23	22	28	22	27	27	30	25	33
Cultural diversity	Cultural diversity %	23	22	26	23	36	18	20	13	21	21	27	25	25
Environmental concern	Protection of climate and the environment %	18	20	18	23	19	25	30	19	18	20	20	17	21
	Innovation and progress %	17	11	17	21	13	17	14	12	19	18	23	18	18
Education/ training opportunities	Youth empowerment and education %	16	19	11	16	16	29	21	23	33	19	31	24	25
Social equality/ inclusion	Social inclusion %	13	10	12	14	16	23	23	12	16	18	19	18	21
	Base (current students aged 16–30): TOTAL	25933	279	370	292	289	364	283	407	241	340	309	317	306

(Continued)

Table 10.4 (Continued)

	Q5 What does being part of the EU mean to you personally? Please select up to three answers.													
Theme in Figure 10.3.	Question item	EU27	Germany		France		Finland		Bulgaria		Croatia		Slovenia	
	<i>Current level of education/training</i>	<i>Lo/HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>
Mobility/travel freedom	Freedom to travel and explore other EU countries %	39	37	41	31	44	31	35	24	40	27	44	28	38
Education/training opportunities	Access to programmes and support for young people (e.g. Erasmus+, DiscoverEU, the European Solidarity Corps, EURES, etc.) %	30	22	21	38	30	32	34	33	39	39	46	39	42
Job openings	Opportunities for work, study, and training across the EU %	28	30	32	24	25	34	33	18	24	26	41	29	41
	A solid protection of my rights and freedoms %	23	25	25	21	19	20	27	17	17	15	15	21	26
Environmental concern	A safe and secure environment %	22	28	30	15	17	19	30	9	12	18	21	21	29
	Access to high standards of living and social protection %	20	17	24	20	24	22	22	16	21	26	24	22	27
	Economic stability and benefits %	20	23	26	24	24	23	18	15	22	15	18	12	19
Global arena access	Being part of a united effort to deal with global challenges %	17	14	12	20	18	26	25	23	18	17	17	21	18
	A sense of shared identity and values %	16	23	17	18	23	18	20	16	20	25	22	20	19
	Base (current students aged 16–30): TOTAL	25933	279	370	292	289	364	283	407	241	340	309	317	306

(Continued)

Table 10.4 (Continued)

	Q6 Which of the following do you think are the current main challenges the EU is facing? Please select up to three answers.													
Theme in Figure 10.3.	Question item	EU27	Germany		France		Finland		Bulgaria		Croatia		Slovenia	
	<i>Current level of education/training</i>	<i>Lo/HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>
	Conflicts, instability and erosion of democratic values in the world %	32	34	36	31	35	39	53	23	32	23	34	31	36
Economic benefits	The cost of living %	32	29	32	37	33	20	22	14	35	20	38	22	37
Migration control	Irregular migration %	29	27	30	26	29	10	11	10	26	21	37	21	43
Terrorism/ crime deterrence	Terrorism and organised crime %	29	35	34	28	26	28	24	16	21	16	24	19	29
Environmental concern	Environmental issues and climate change %	28	26	29	25	33	31	34	17	27	24	23	25	25
	Inequalities (social, economic) %	26	28	27	29	29	29	26	16	22	26	35	21	23
	Disinformation and information manipulation %	21	19	25	20	19	16	26	25	27	19	23	24	23
	Impact of digital technologies on society %	15	16	10	16	14	21	20	19	18	25	24	18	14
	Unfair competition from other countries %	15	14	15	17	17	19	16	16	13	25	22	26	20
	Declining competitiveness %	12	7	13	15	11	12	15	16	17	12	10	13	18
	Base (current students aged 16–30): TOTAL	25933	279	370	292	289	364	283	407	241	340	309	317	306

(Continued)

Table 10.4 (Continued)

	Q7 Which of the following areas do you think the EU should address as a priority? Please select up to three answers.													
Theme in Figure 10.3.	Question item	EU27	Germany		France		Finland		Bulgaria		Croatia		Slovenia	
	<i>Current level of education/training</i>	<i>Lo/HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>
Security/defence guarantees	Security and defence %	31	27	31	29	38	27	38	14	25	17	28	26	30
Environmental concern	Environment and climate change %	27	26	27	26	36	28	30	18	31	22	23	22	25
Health services	Public health %	27	23	25	28	33	26	21	16	34	23	30	22	29
Migration control	Irregular migration %	26	24	27	17	23	15	14	16	19	20	33	22	38
	Jobs and social equality %	26	34	28	25	23	23	20	23	31	20	36	22	30
	Economy and public finances %	24	19	20	22	24	22	31	19	24	20	24	16	22
Education/training opportunities	Education and training %	23	30	29	29	26	22	23	12	30	19	27	22	19
EU rule of law priority	Democracy and rule of law %	20	26	25	19	13	23	30	23	16	17	25	20	21
	Energy %	18	17	19	21	18	18	17	15	16	17	20	21	19
	Research and innovation %	14	12	11	14	15	17	18	13	13	15	15	19	19
	Digital transformation %	11	14	15	13	9	10	13	7	7	19	14	15	17
	Base (current students aged 16–30): TOTAL	25933	279	370	292	289	364	283	407	241	340	309	317	306

(Continued)

Table 10.4 (Continued)

	Q9 On the whole, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way democracy works in . . .													
Theme in Figure 10.3.	Question item	EU27	Germany		France		Finland		Bulgaria		Croatia		Slovenia	
	<i>Current level of education/training</i>	<i>Lo/HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>
	(YOUR COUNTRY) Very satisfied %	17	17	12	21	12	29	41	42	28	43	24	39	25
	(YOUR COUNTRY) Rather satisfied %	42	41	47	45	44	53	46	43	32	39	31	42	46
	(YOUR COUNTRY) Rather dissatisfied %	26	30	29	23	29	15	9	12	23	11	30	15	19
	(YOUR COUNTRY) Very dissatisfied %	12	10	10	9	13	2	2	3	12	6	13	3	7
EU democratic satisfaction	The EU Very satisfied %	15	14	11	17	6	22	30	39	20	38	21	38	26
	The EU Rather satisfied %	50	46	52	54	52	57	56	48	49	48	49	48	47
	The EU Rather dissatisfied %	22	31	29	21	26	11	10	10	19	9	20	11	19
	The EU Very dissatisfied %	7	6	5	5	6	5	2	2	7	4	6	2	4
	Base (current students aged 16–30): TOTAL	25933	279	370	292	289	364	283	407	241	340	309	317	306

(Continued)

Table 10.4 (Continued)

	Q10 Democracy is based on a number of principles, several of which are shown below. Which ones, if any, do you find most important? Please select up to three answers.													
Theme in Figure 10.3.	Question item	EU27	Germany		France		Finland		Bulgaria		Croatia		Slovenia	
	<i>Current level of education/training</i>	<i>Lo/HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>
Human rights	Respect for human rights %	38	42	43	29	43	25	32	18	38	21	34	24	37
	Freedom to voice your opinion, including by demonstrating %	33	27	33	34	30	24	28	26	31	24	33	30	33
Social equality/ inclusion	Equality and non-discrimination %	27	24	24	29	30	26	31	17	22	20	30	18	29
	Right to privacy and data protection %	23	26	25	21	18	27	27	21	20	22	24	30	28
	Right to stand as a candidate and vote in free elections %	23	25	26	20	20	26	28	15	14	19	24	21	25
EU rule of law priority	Rule of law, upheld by an independent judiciary %	23	26	26	23	23	26	28	21	23	19	27	24	29
	Transparency and accountability of public institutions %	21	21	16	22	22	24	24	14	23	25	35	24	24
	Active participation in decision-making %	19	21	23	17	16	23	24	17	24	28	29	19	24
	Free and independent press %	19	15	20	19	24	16	19	9	21	15	17	19	21
Cultural diversity	Freedom of religion or belief %	18	19	19	25	25	12	14	17	16	18	17	17	15
	Base (current students aged 16–30): TOTAL	25933	279	370	292	289	364	283	407	241	340	309	317	306

(Continued)

Table 10.4 (Continued)

	Q12 Which of the following do you think are the best ways of ensuring your voice is heard by decision-makers at EU level? Please select up to three answers.													
Theme in Figure 10.3.	Question item	EU27	Germany		France		Finland		Bulgaria		Croatia		Slovenia	
	<i>Current level of education/training</i>	<i>Lo/HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>
EU voting impact	Voting in (European or national) elections %	44	43	50	43	55	33	41	18	35	25	43	25	44
	Joining a demonstration or going on a strike %	23	26	26	26	25	19	16	18	20	25	31	20	24
	Joining or supporting political organisations (e.g. political parties or trade unions) %	22	26	28	22	23	23	26	34	22	30	28	25	23
	Signing a petition %	22	23	23	22	23	19	24	12	21	15	32	16	28
Civil society engagement	Engaging in civil society activities (NGOs, citizens' initiatives, etc.) %	21	15	19	25	25	25	27	33	29	25	23	23	22
	Taking part in events such as citizens' panels, debates, citizens' assemblies, etc. %	21	19	18	23	22	24	21	30	26	28	32	28	30
	Sharing your views on social media platforms %	19	23	21	20	21	25	19	20	18	22	22	26	20
EU consultations/citizens' initiatives	Taking part in online discussions or consultations (e.g. EU consultations) %	18	19	19	20	17	22	26	24	16	25	22	25	24
EU consultations/citizens' initiatives	Joining a European Citizens' Initiative %	17	19	18	16	16	18	23	16	19	15	18	17	19
	Base (current students aged 16–30): TOTAL	25933	279	370	292	289	364	283	407	241	340	309	317	306

(Continued)

Table 10.4 (Continued)

	Q14 What changes would you like to see in the EU by the end of 2030? Please select up to three answers.													
Theme in Figure 10.3.	Question item	EU27	Germany		France		Finland		Bulgaria		Croatia		Slovenia	
	<i>Current level of education/training</i>	<i>Lo/HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>
Job openings	Improved job opportunities and economic stability %	34	31	31	28	26	26	33	14	32	27	49	28	42
Security/defence guarantees	A stronger role for the EU in promoting global peace and security %	28	32	31	26	25	28	34	19	29	25	29	30	33
Environmental concern	Stronger climate action and environmental protection %	26	24	32	26	34	23	30	18	26	24	26	21	29
Human rights	Strengthened policies on human rights and democracy %	24	29	31	24	26	25	23	21	20	17	26	18	19
Social equality/inclusion	Greater focus on social equality and inclusion %	22	27	23	18	22	27	35	18	21	22	22	18	28
Education/training opportunities	More accessible high-quality education and training %	22	22	25	23	22	17	18	15	31	23	27	25	18
	Increased involvement of young people in EU decisions %	20	18	18	19	18	24	25	21	29	22	35	29	31
	More investments in technology and innovation %	20	19	22	18	22	18	18	13	18	22	20	15	23
	Enhanced digital security and data privacy %	19	18	22	22	19	17	19	20	22	20	20	24	22
	An enlarged EU %	11	14	9	12	9	12	12	6	7	14	8	11	13
	Base (current students aged 16–30): TOTAL	25933	279	370	292	289	364	283	407	241	340	309	317	306

(Continued)

Table 10.4 (Continued)

	Q15 In which of the following areas should the EU invest more resources to support young people? Please select up to three answers.													
Theme in Figure 10.3.	Question item	EU27	Germany		France		Finland		Bulgaria		Croatia		Slovenia	
	<i>Current level of education/training</i>	<i>Lo/HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>
Economic benefits	Affordable housing and cost of living %	38	45	40	28	35	29	38	17	36	27	50	28	52
Education/training opportunities	Education and training, skills development %	29	28	35	28	25	24	36	21	36	27	32	26	28
	Mental health and well-being %	28	28	32	23	29	28	32	8	16	21	25	18	27
Health services	Health and healthcare access %	27	24	24	22	30	21	22	19	39	25	28	30	26
Job openings	Youth employment %	27	19	19	27	30	23	21	11	24	19	41	23	34
Environmental concern	Climate and environment protection %	21	19	28	25	26	15	23	21	20	11	19	17	19
	Participation of young people in politics and decision-making %	18	21	18	18	13	25	21	31	24	29	26	24	20
Social equality/inclusion	Social equality and inclusion %	18	22	21	18	20	19	22	17	20	16	20	15	19
Environmental concern	Clean mobility and sustainable transportation %	17	22	19	17	20	20	19	8	11	17	12	16	16
Mobility/travel freedom	Cultural exchanges among Europeans %	15	18	14	23	14	21	19	17	16	17	18	22	17
	Base (current students aged 16–30): TOTAL	25933	279	370	292	289	364	283	407	241	340	309	317	306

Note: All Member States 2025 (N = 25,933, populations aged 16–30 years).

Source: Data from European Commission 2025.

Table 10.5 Content/scores of key themes/questions on EU democracy summarised in Figure 10.3

Quadrant 1 of Figure 10.3. (lower right quadrant) Content of Figures 10.3 and 10.4.: Preferences distinguished by <i>personal agency</i> and <i>solidarity</i> goals Scores for each theme, question and item used in <i>Figures 10.3 and 10.4</i> of EU perceptions (EU27, Germany, France, Finland, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Slovenia in 2025) See wording of selected survey questions and all question items in <i>Table 10.4</i> .														
Theme/Survey question	Question item	EU27	Germany		France		Finland		Bulgaria		Croatia		Slovenia	
	<i>Current level of education/training</i>	<i>Lo/HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>
Civil society engagement/Q12	Engaging in civil society activities (NGOs, citizens' initiatives, etc.) %	21	15	19	25	25	25	27	33	29	25	23	23	22
	TOTAL Theme %	21		19		25		27		29		23		22
Human rights/Q4	Respect for human rights %	26	27	29	25	34	21	30	19	27	19	21	19	27
Human rights/Q14	Strengthened policies on human rights and democracy %	24	29	31	24	26	25	23	21	20	17	26	18	19
Human rights/Q10	Respect for human rights %	38	42	43	29	43	25	32	18	38	21	34	24	37
	TOTAL Theme %	29.3		34.3		34.3		28.3		28.3		27.0		27.7

(Continued)

Table 10.5 (Continued)

Theme/Survey question	Question item	EU27	Germany		France		Finland		Bulgaria		Croatia		Slovenia	
	<i>Current level of education/training</i>	<i>Lo/HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>
Environmental concern/Q3	The EU's commitment to protecting the climate and the environment %	22	22	27	22	20	30	28	21	21	22	22	23	21
Environmental concern/Q4	Protection of climate and the environment %	18	20	18	23	19	25	30	19	18	20	20	17	21
Environmental concern/Q5	A safe and secure environment %	22	28	30	15	17	19	30	9	12	18	21	21	29
Environmental concern/Q6	Environmental issues and climate change %	28	26	29	25	33	31	34	17	27	24	23	25	25
Environmental concern/Q7	Environment and climate change %	27	26	27	26	36	28	30	18	31	22	23	22	25
Environmental concern/Q15	Climate and environment protection %	21	19	28	25	26	15	23	21	20	11	19	17	19
Environmental concern/Q14	Stronger climate action and environmental protection %	26	24	32	26	34	23	30	18	26	24	26	21	29
Environmental concern/Q15	Clean mobility and sustainable transportation %	17	22	19	17	20	20	19	8	11	17	12	16	16
	TOTAL Theme %	22.6		26.3		25.6		28.0		20.8		20.8		23.1

(Continued)

Table 10.5 (Continued)

Quadrant 1 of Figure 10.3. (lower right quadrant) Content of Figures 10.3 and 10.4.: Preferences distinguished by <i>personal agency</i> and <i>solidarity</i> goals Scores for each theme, question and item used in <i>Figures 10.3 and 10.4</i> of EU perceptions (EU27, Germany, France, Finland, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Slovenia in 2025) See wording of selected survey questions and all question items in <i>Table 10.4</i> .														
Theme/Survey question	Question item	EU27	Germany		France		Finland		Bulgaria		Croatia		Slovenia	
	<i>Current level of education/training</i>	<i>Lo/HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>
Social equality/inclusion/Q4	Social inclusion %	13	10	12	14	16	23	23	12	16	18	19	18	21
Social equality/inclusion/Q15	Social equality and inclusion %	18	22	21	18	20	19	22	17	20	16	20	15	19
Social equality/inclusion/Q14	Greater focus on social equality and inclusion %	22	27	23	18	22	27	35	18	21	22	22	18	28
Social equality/inclusion/Q10	Equality and non-discrimination %	27	24	24	29	30	26	31	17	22	20	30	18	29
	TOTAL Theme %	20.0		20.0		22.0		27.8		19.8		22.8		24.3
Cultural diversity/Q4	Cultural diversity %	23	22	26	23	36	18	20	13	21	21	27	25	25
Cultural diversity/Q10	Freedom of religion or belief %	18	19	19	25	25	12	14	17	16	18	17	17	15
	TOTAL Theme %	20.5		22.5		30.5		17		18.5		22		20

(Continued)

Table 10.5 (Continued)

Quadrant 2 of Figure 10.3. (lower left quadrant) Content of Figures 10.3 and 10.5.: Preferences distinguished by <i>personal agency</i> and <i>utility</i> goals Scores for each theme, question, and item used in <i>Figures 10.3 and 10.5</i> of EU perceptions (EU27, Germany, France, Finland, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Slovenia in 2025) See wording of selected survey questions and all question items in <i>Table 10.4</i> .														
Theme/Survey question	Question item	EU27	Germany		France		Finland		Bulgaria		Croatia		Slovenia	
	<i>Current level of education/training</i>	<i>Lo/HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>
Mobility/travel freedom/Q3	The freedom of movement in the EU %	32	17	19	37	44	29	35	13	32	22	43	28	51
Mobility/travel freedom/Q5	Freedom to travel and explore other EU countries %	39	37	41	31	44	31	35	24	40	27	44	28	38
Mobility/travel freedom/Q15	Cultural exchanges among Europeans %	15	18	14	23	14	21	19	17	16	17	18	22	17
	TOTAL Theme %	28.7		24.7		34.0		29.7		29.3		35.0		35.3
Health services/Q7	Public health %	27	23	25	28	33	26	21	16	34	23	30	22	29
Health services/Q15	Health and healthcare access %	27	24	24	22	30	21	22	19	39	25	28	30	26
	TOTAL Theme %	27		24.5		31.5		21.5		36.5		29		27.5

(Continued)

Table 10.5 (Continued)

Theme/Survey question	Question item	EU27	Germany		France		Finland		Bulgaria		Croatia		Slovenia	
	<i>Current level of education/training</i>	<i>Lo/HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>
Education/training opportunities/ Q4	Youth empowerment and education %	16	19	11	16	16	29	21	23	33	19	31	24	25
Education/training opportunities/ Q7	Education and training %	23	30	29	29	26	22	23	12	30	19	27	22	19
Education/training opportunities/ Q15	Education and training, skills development %	29	28	35	28	25	24	36	21	36	27	32	26	28
Education/training opportunities/ Q14	More accessible high-quality education and training %	22	22	25	23	22	17	18	15	31	23	27	25	18
Education/training opportunities/ Q5	Access to programmes and support for young people (e.g. Erasmus+, DiscoverEU, the European Solidarity Corps, EURES etc.) %	30	22	21	38	30	32	34	33	39	39	46	39	42
	TOTAL Theme %	24		24.2		23.8		26.4		33.8		32.6		26.4

(Continued)

Table 10.5 (Continued)

Quadrant 2 of Figure 10.3. (lower left quadrant) Content of Figures 10.3 and 10.5.: Preferences distinguished by <i>personal agency</i> and <i>utility</i> goals Scores for each theme, question, and item used in <i>Figures 10.3 and 10.5</i> of EU perceptions (EU27, Germany, France, Finland, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Slovenia in 2025) See wording of selected survey questions and all question items in <i>Table 10.4</i>.														
Theme/Survey question	Question item	EU27	Germany		France		Finland		Bulgaria		Croatia		Slovenia	
	<i>Current level of education/training</i>	<i>Lo/HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>
Job openings/Q3	The EU's capacity to create jobs %	16	22	19	12	15	17	15	16	25	25	24	22	23
Job openings/Q5	Opportunities for work, study and training across the EU %	28	30	32	24	25	34	33	18	24	26	41	29	41
Job openings/Q15	Youth employment %	27	19	19	27	30	23	21	11	24	19	41	23	34
Job openings/Q14	Improved job opportunities and economic stability %	34	31	31	28	26	26	33	14	32	27	49	28	42
	TOTAL Theme %	26.3		25.3		24.0		25.5		26.3		38.8		35.0
Economic benefits/Q6	The cost of living %	32	29	32	37	33	20	22	14	35	20	38	22	37
Economic benefits/Q15	Affordable housing and cost of living %	38	45	40	28	35	29	38	17	36	27	50	28	52
Economic benefits/Q3	The EU's trade power and competitiveness %	23	21	28	23	29	19	21	19	20	25	26	18	29
	TOTAL Theme %	31.0		33.3		32.3		27.0		30.3		38.0		39.3

(Continued)

Table 10.5 (Continued)

Quadrant 3 of Figure 10.3. (upper left quadrant) Content of Figures 10.3 and 10.6.: Preferences distinguished by <i>institutional agency</i> and <i>utility goals</i> Scores for each theme, question and item used in <i>Figures 10.3/6</i> of EU perceptions (EU27, Germany, France, Finland, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Slovenia in 2025) See wording of selected survey questions and all question items in <i>Table 10.4</i> .														
Theme/Survey question	Question item	EU27	Germany		France		Finland		Bulgaria		Croatia		Slovenia	
	<i>Current level of education/training</i>	<i>Lo/HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>
Migration control/ Q7	Irregular migration %	26	24	27	17	23	15	14	16	19	20	33	22	38
Migration control Q6	Irregular migration %	29	27	30	26	29	10	11	10	26	21	37	21	43
	TOTAL Theme %	27.5		28.5		26		12.5		22.5		35		40.5
Terrorism/crime deterrence Q6	Terrorism and organised crime %	29	35	34	28	26	28	24	16	21	16	24	19	29
	TOTAL Theme %	29		34		26		24		21		24		29
Security/defence guarantees Q7	Security and defence %	31	27	31	29	38	27	38	14	25	17	28	26	30
Security/defence guarantees Q14	A stronger role for the EU in promoting global peace and security %	28	32	31	26	25	28	34	19	29	25	29	30	33
	TOTAL Theme %	29.5		31		31.5		36		27		28.5		31.5

(Continued)

Table 10.5 (Continued)

Theme/survey question	Question item	EU27	Germany		France		Finland		Bulgaria		Croatia		Slovenia	
	<i>Current level of education/training</i>	<i>Lo/HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>
Global arena access/Q5	Being part of a united effort to deal with global challenges %	17	14	12	20	18	26	25	23	18	17	17	21	18
	TOTAL Theme %	17		12		18		25		18		17		18

Quadrant 4 of *Figure 10.3*. (upper right quadrant)

Content of *Figures 10.3 and 10.7*.: Preferences distinguished by *institutional agency* and *solidarity goals*

Scores for each theme, question and item used in *Figures 10.3/7* of EU perceptions (EU27, Germany, France, Finland, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Slovenia in 2025)

See wording of selected survey questions and all question items in *Table 10.4*.

EU voting impact/Q12	Voting in (European or national) elections %	44	43	50	43	55	33	41	18	35	25	43	25	44
	TOTAL Theme %	44		50		55		41		35		43		44
EU rule of law priority/Q4	Democracy, rule of law and justice %	29	32	36	29	23	30	39	23	25	29	29	29	28
EU rule of law priority/Q7	Democracy and rule of law %	20	26	25	19	13	23	30	23	16	17	25	20	21
EU rule of law priority/Q10	Rule of law, upheld by an independent judiciary %	23	26	26	23	23	26	28	21	23	19	27	24	29
	TOTAL Theme %	24.0		29.0		19.7		32.3		21.3		27.0		26.0

(Continued)

Table 10.5 (Continued)

Theme/survey question	Question item	EU27	Germany		France		Finland		Bulgaria		Croatia		Slovenia	
	<i>Current level of education/training</i>	<i>Lo/HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>	<i>LoEd</i>	<i>HiEd</i>
EU democratic satisfaction/Q9	The EU Very satisfied %	15	14	11	17	6	22	30	39	20	38	21	38	26
	TOTAL Theme %	15		11		6		30		20		21		26
EU consultations/citizens' initiatives/Q12	Taking part in online discussions or consultations (e.g. EU consultations) %	18	19	19	20	17	22	26	24	16	25	22	25	24
EU consultations/citizens' initiatives/Q12	Joining a European Citizens' Initiative %	17	19	18	16	16	18	23	16	19	15	18	17	19
	TOTAL Theme %	17.5		18.5		16.5		24.5		17.5		20		21.5

Source: Data from European Commission 2025

Note: All Member States 2025 (N = 25,933, populations aged 16–30 years).

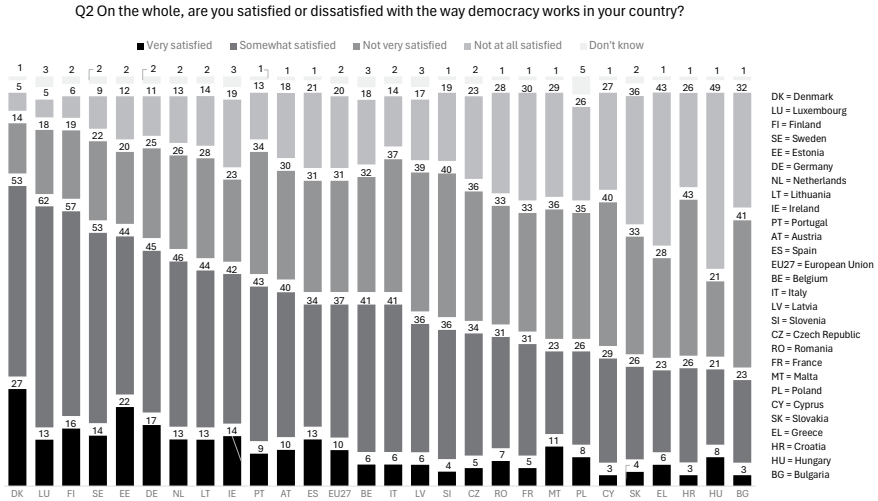


Figure 10.9 EU citizens' satisfaction with how democracy works in one's own country

Note: All Member States in 2023 (N = 25 600, total populations).

Source: European Commission 2023.

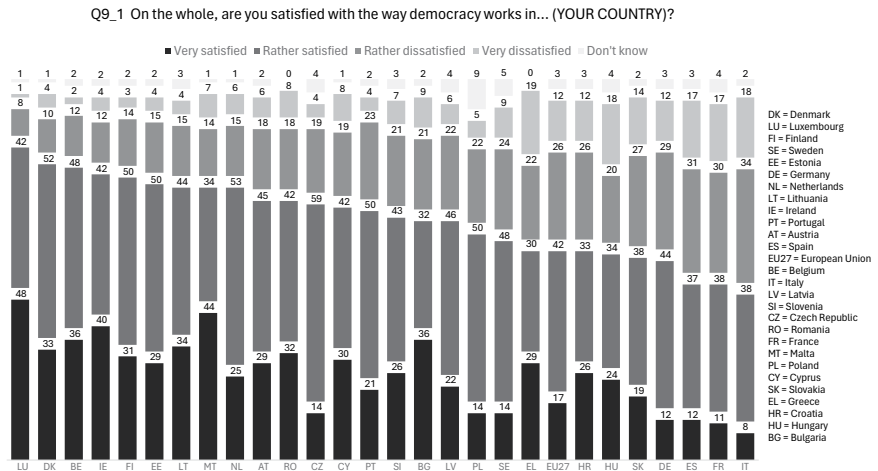
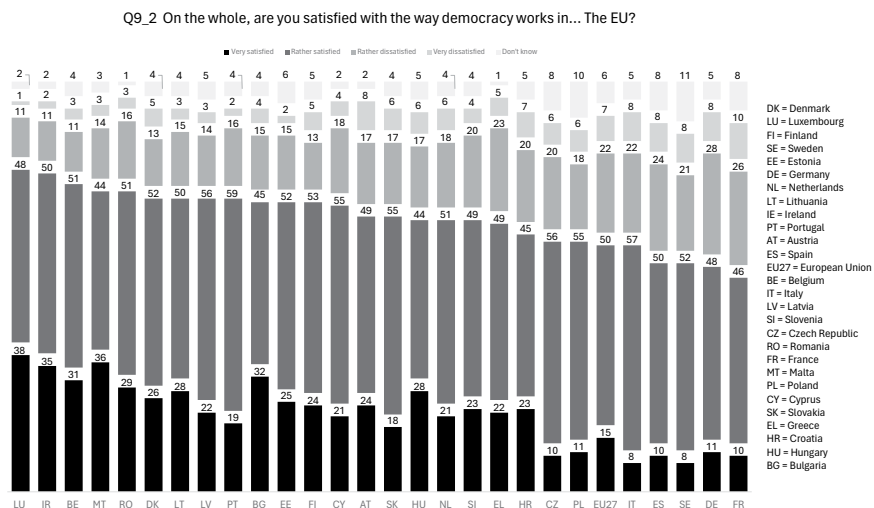


Figure 10.10 Young EU citizens' satisfaction with how democracy works in one's own country and the EU Author Query: Please provide part labels "a, b, c" descriptions.

Note: All Member States in 2025 (N=25 933, populations aged 16-30 years).

Source: European Commission (2025a)



Q9 On the whole, are you satisfied with the way democracy works...? (% Total 'Satisfied')		
	Your country	The EU
EU27	59	65
Gender		
Male	63	67
Female	56	63
Age		
16-18	64	69
19-24	60	67
25-30	56	61
Current level of education or training (young people still in education)		
Secondary education or lower	68	71
Post-secondary education or higher	60	68

Figure 10.10 (Continued)

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