

Focus Group Report

100 YOUNG EUROPEAN VOICES FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE





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Author: **Joe Boyle**

Editor-in-Chief: **Joe Litobarski**

Director: **Adam Nyman**

Project manager: **Alessandra Cardaci**

Project officer: **Axel Müller**

Design: **Dorothee Louis**

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Introduction

FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE



The challenge of climate change in particular feels immense. It can create a sense of powerlessness in individuals, who may feel insignificant compared to the vast scale of the problem facing our planet. This feeling can be particularly acute among young people, who will inherit the Earth that today's leaders are creating. At worst, disempowerment can lead to disengagement and despondency, with young people giving up on trying to solve the climate crisis as the solutions feel impossible to achieve.

Debating Europe is an initiative of the think-tank Friends of Europe, and is central to its work on co-designing a renewed social contract with citizens and other stakeholders; re-defining the obligations and responsibilities played by different actors within society, including citizens, the private sector, and governments.

Climate policies have to reinforce the social contract, supporting the EU's desire for a "just transition" into a more sustainable economy. Such policies are necessary and will deeply affect citizens' lives, and getting it wrong will provoke a backlash from citizens (as the gilets jaunes protests in France demonstrated). This is why we have asked young Europeans what future vision of society these policies should be helping to construct.

With the support of Coca-Cola, Debating Europe has engaged with 100 young people from across the continent in a conversation about climate change in order to build resilience and strengthen climate action. We have involved young Europeans through a series of focus groups, asking them to share their own thoughts and ideas about climate change and resilience. We have taken a solutions-based approach and worked together to co-imagine a more positive narrative that empowers and helps break through the barrier of eco-anxiety. We want to co-imagine with all stakeholders a different future for Europe, one that is both environmentally sustainable and socially just while still being innovative and economically dynamic. Over the coming months and years, we will help facilitate a dialogue on the roles of citizens, the private sector, and governments in building and sustaining that future. This report is one part of that ongoing dialogue.

Participants from these focus groups generated a set of ideas and recommendations displayed in this report. These are now being presented to stakeholders from Friends of Europe's network, including European Young Leaders (Friends of Europe's network of young inspiring leaders), industry leaders, and political representatives from all levels of government and from across the political spectrum for their reactions and follow-up.

METHODOLOGY

Focus groups have been conducted in summer 2022, with 100 young participants (aged 18-40) from across Europe.

The study involved participants recruited from Debating Europe's community of citizens, from 22 different European countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, United Kingdom, and Ukraine).

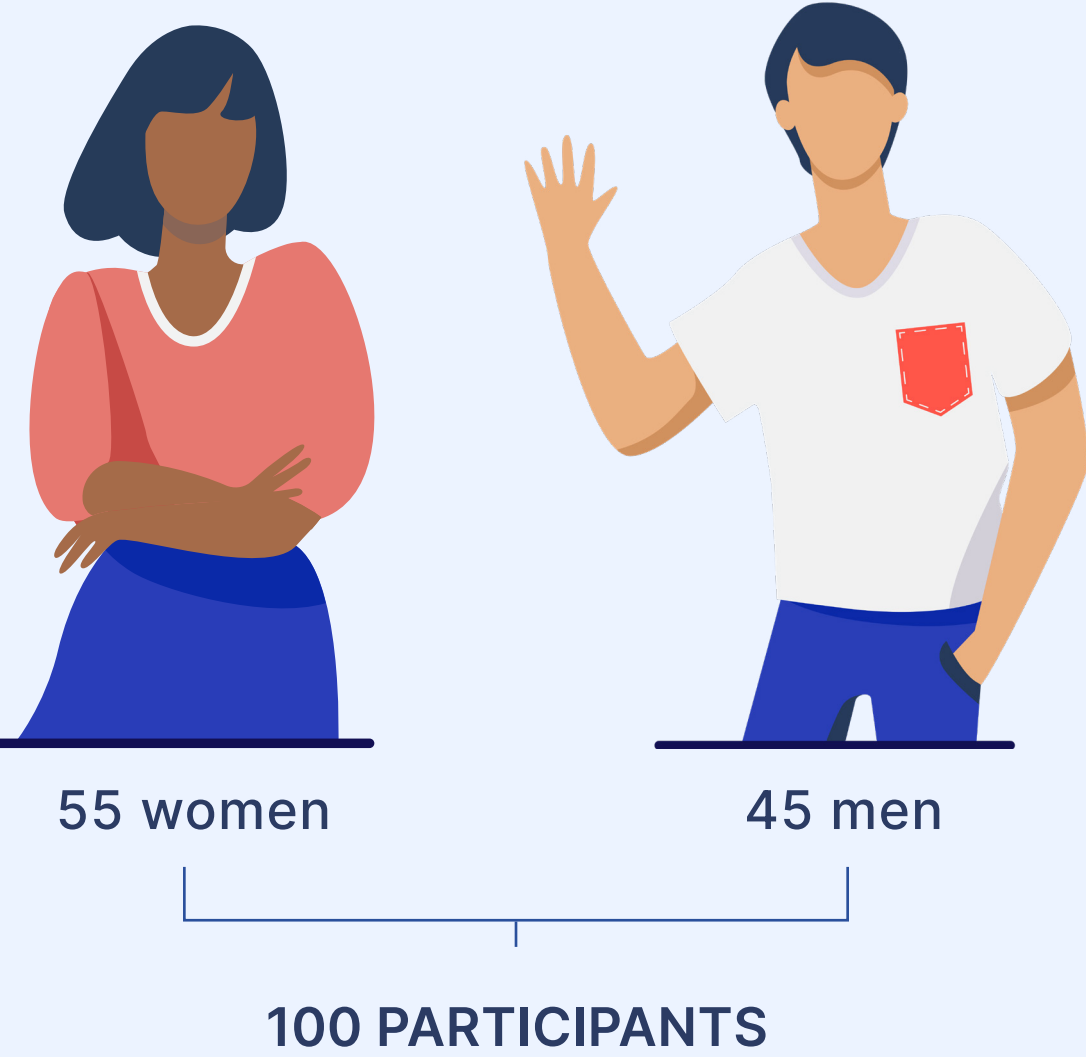
The focus groups were conducted virtually via Zoom and lasted for one hour. All focus groups were conducted in English. Participants were incentivised to participate

with vouchers or donations. Focus groups were led by an experienced moderator and ranged from 5 to 13 participants each. We aimed for a high level of homogeneity in terms of focus group composition so participants felt more comfortable sharing and expressing themselves. Therefore, we tended to group participants in focus groups according to gender and geographic region (Central & Eastern Europe, Northern Europe, Southern Europe, and Western Europe).



FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

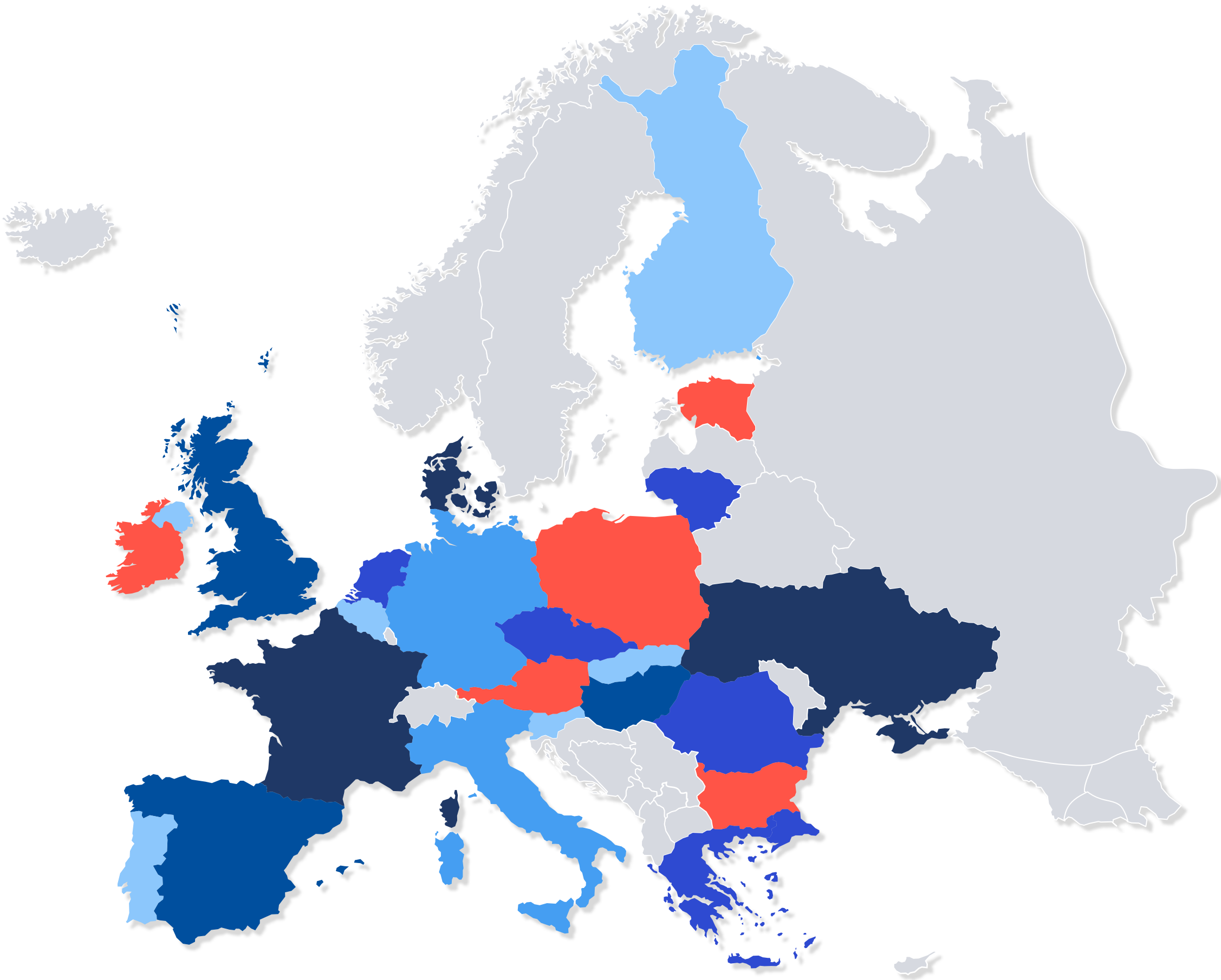
GENDER



Participants' perceived importance of environmental issues (scale from 1 - very unimportant - to 7 - very important)

7	55
6	26
5	13
4	4
3	0
2	1
1	1
Total	100

PARTICIPANTS' NATIONALITIES
→ 22



KEY FINDINGS

Europe is suffering its biggest land conflict since World War II, which is disrupting gas supplies and helping to exacerbate a crisis in energy policy. Sweltering summer temperatures are raising long-term concerns about the viability of the European way of life, as swathes of land burn in forest fires and droughts bring water shortages. The young people in our focus groups were keenly aware of the challenges the continent faces. They agreed on a lot of the problems but finding solutions proved more challenging. Some key patterns emerged in the discussions.

3

NARRATIVE MATTERS:

Participants felt we need a hopeful, optimistic narrative around climate change highlighting the co-benefits of ending fossil fuel use (such as cleaner air, more green spaces, and healthier bodies) rather than talk of “sacrificing” our comfort for the planet. Education in the classroom and in wider society was a popular theme of the focus groups. But rather than focusing on scientific predictions of calamity, several participants suggested the messaging should move away from preaching and should instead be much more fun. Focusing on solutions and practical activities like clearing waste from beaches were among the suggestions for achieving this.

1

RESTORE BALANCE WITH NATURE:

When asked to imagine their ideal societies of the future, many participants laid out a vision of urban spaces as greener and more local, yet with ultra-fast and reliable digital infrastructure providing global connectivity. They dreamed of more green spaces, more trees planted in cities, and of buildings with vegetation growing on rooftops and up walls. Getting more people to use bicycles or public transport was a popular opinion and there were plenty of proposals to make green energy more accessible through local installation of wind farms or solar panels.

4

TACKLING CLIMATE CHANGE MEANS BUILDING FAIRER SOCIETIES:

The young people in our focus groups pointed out that climate change was exacerbating inequality, and many felt that the poor were bearing an unfair burden. If we expect citizens, private sector and governments to work together, then any distribution of burden must be fair and socially sustainable. Specific ideas put forward in the focus groups included levying taxes on the worst polluters and providing economic support for individuals (particularly the most vulnerable) and incentives for companies to go green.

2

LIFESTYLE CHANGES FOR INDIVIDUALS, CULTURE CHANGES FOR COMPANIES AND GOVERNMENTS:

Threaded through the focus groups was a heated debate about the power and responsibility of the individual. Several participants argued passionately that going vegetarian and reducing plastic waste were two ways that people could significantly lower their personal carbon footprint and support societal change. Equally passionately, others argued that such gestures were futile on their own and large-scale transformation would come only if governments and large corporations fundamentally changed their ways.

5

CITIZENS, PRIVATE SECTOR AND GOVERNMENTS MUST WORK TOGETHER:

There was plenty of disagreement on the specific roles of individuals, governments and the private sector. But a consensus emerged around the idea that all three sections of society needed to work together for real change to happen. The main problem in all three groups, though, was apathy. The young participants contrasted the urgency and togetherness they had seen in the pandemic response with the inertia they saw in climate action. The ultimate message from the focus groups: governments should start legislating, companies should offer real ecological alternatives and individuals should get active.

In September 2022, Friends of Europe held its annual European Young Leaders (EYL40) seminar in Lisbon. This event gathered together promising young entrepreneurs, activists, politicians, artists and thought leaders in discussion about the future of Europe. The seminar considered the findings from the focus groups and built out some concrete proposals aimed at realising the visions laid out by the young Europeans. The ideas ranged from garnering the power of celebrities to widen the appeal of the climate message, to harnessing the power of international law to make “ecocide” a crime. Echoing the views of many in the focus groups, the EYL40 meeting accepted that Europe was uniquely placed to act, and that poorer nations should not be punished for the climate mess largely created by rich countries. With that in mind, the seminar proposed a climate pact between the European Union and the United States to fix any regulatory hurdles to getting in the way of greater cooperation.

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS IN DEPTH

HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE ENVISAGE A POSITIVE, SUSTAINABLE FUTURE?

We asked the 100 participants to describe their most optimistic visions of the environment of the future. Their ideas ranged from a return to the kind of climate they grew up with, to a fully realised technology-driven society where innovation is harnessed to create a greener, sustainable society. With forest fires raging across the continent and heat records being broken all summer, some of the participants admitted to deep pessimism and an inability to imagine a positive future. For others, the immediacy of the current crisis made them feel it was more vital than ever to come up with a positive vision.

NATURE AND HUMANITY FIND THE RIGHT BALANCE

The disorientating effects of climate change are at the forefront of young people's concerns. When asked to describe their ideal future, many of the young people in our focus groups turned to the past for inspiration.

Ricardo from Portugal said he would be happy with the climate how it was when he was young, with “stable seasons and temperatures that were bearable both in winter and summer, where I don’t have to worry if my country is going to burn completely over the summer or that maybe we’re going to have a flash flood”.

Chris from Britain summed up the feeling of many, saying the most optimistic view of the future he could muster was to keep things exactly as they are now. Even then, he said, we will still face the need of “adapting our own lifestyles and our own expectations... rather than the Earth adapting to us”.

“I would like to imagine a future for the environment and nature with the kind of balance that we used to have,” said Zsafia from Hungary. She said she had taken a walk in the forest recently and it had all been so dry. “We haven’t had any rain in so many days, so I’m pretty negative today.”

For Julio in Spain, the issue was also raw. “As I’m speaking now, very close to here a few houses burnt out,” he said, adding that he felt like “the whole of Europe is burning”. Just like Zsafia, his opinion on the future was clouded by the present. “If you asked me in winter, maybe I could imagine a future of more efficient cities in terms of environment and climate, and villages that can live and coexist with animals and nature.”

Philippine from France spoke of a similar feeling of the need to restore balance. “Harmony within human beings and with nature in general, animals and trees and flowers, whatever. To me, harmony means respect and learning how to cooperate with one another.”

“For me at least, a brilliant future would be easy access to green and lush areas,” said Shima from Spain. “If I step out of my house, I could easily reach that breathable clean air. And then being able to see the stars during the night.” She said these simple things had been lost, and humanity needed to restore its connections with nature.

Lemonia from Greece also talked of “restoring the relationship between the person and nature” and felt it

would involve boosting biodiversity in agriculture and in the countryside more generally. This, she said, would result in cleaner air and wider health benefits. “I would like to live in an environment where I can grow the things that I consume,” she said, “where I don’t have to stay in a city of millions if I want to have a job and access to basic healthcare and facilities”.

There were dissenting voices though, with Maria from Poland saying Europeans needed to shift away from visions of pastoral idylls. “What we have seen so far in the history of human species, nature does not really care whether we are alive or not,” she said. “Being in symbiosis with nature is for me a little bit of a blind way of securing our future.”

Maria reckoned people too often confuse what is good for the planet with what is good for humans. “I feel like we are not really identifying the enemy right. If it’s the survival of the planet Earth, then it probably would be better if we all die,” she said. “But if it’s survival of human species, then we need to be smarter and use technology to understand more how to avoid certain destructive aspects of nature.”

CITIES ARE GREENER AND SLOWER

Drilling down into the imaginary future, the young participants turned their attention to the day-to-day issues of modern living. Europe is largely urbanised and the process of shifting from the countryside to the city shows no sign of stopping.

Some of the most optimistic visions from the focus groups involved cities of the future. Clotilde from France said she was a passionate about the idea that cities did not have to be destructive. “We have great examples of cities being a lot more green than we expect them to be,” she said. “I think big very green city, not just in the colour but in the way it works and the way it evolves and it’s our environment would be a wonderful place to exchange in a very dynamic environment.”

Daniela from Germany declared herself highly optimistic that humanity has what it takes to innovate and find a way to fix global heating. “I believe that we need to find solutions, that’s undoubtedly the case, but I think we will in the end,” she said, putting her faith in technological advances.

Like other members of the focus groups, her immediate concern was with the urban environment we inhabit right now, calling for more greenery. “Trees lower the temperature in cities,” she said.

Cristina from Spain expanded on the idea of greening cities using Milan as a template. She flagged high-rise building projects in the Italian city that have lush greenery installed on every balcony. “What I’m picturing is cities in which the roof has grass and the buildings themselves have more greenery,” she said, adding that it would be easier to cope with the heat.

Mirjam from Estonia gave a slightly different spin on this idea, foregrounding the need for better infrastructure rather than a wholesale greening of cities. “Having grown up in the countryside and living now in a very green city, I have to have forest and trees near me,” she said, and that meant “good infrastructure to the outside of the city”.

“When I was in the Netherlands, I was just amazed at the infrastructure they have for bikes,” continued Mirjam. “It’s just so efficient and I wish cities are all around the world will adapt the system like that.”

Xavier from Belgium was also keen to focus on the need to encourage city dwellers to move around under their own steam rather than using cars or motorcycles. He suggested it would require a change in mindset. “All of these include changing our relationship with time, we have to be less keen on always getting everywhere faster,” he said. Instead, we should just be enjoying the

time it takes us to get from A to B.

His compatriot Robin also stressed that city dwellers needed to take more time for themselves. His idea was to have people spending less time at work. “Then actually you create more space for people to do low-impact activities or just take it easy,” he said. “You don’t have to rush anymore.” He said this would reduce the need for constant deliveries of food and other items, and encourage people to go to their local shops or grow their own food.



CLEAN ENERGY SUPPLIES ARE ABUNDANT

For other participants, energy is the key to unlocking the future of cities. With the war in Ukraine bringing Europe's reliance on Russian gas to the fore, many of the focus group participants stressed the urgent need to find new energy sources.

Federico from Italy felt it was necessary to put some wind turbines and other power-generation equipment on buildings in cities. "These kinds of solutions are a bit ugly but at the same time they would accelerate the green transition," he said.

Ivo from Bulgaria reckoned Europe could learn from projects already on the go in places where resources were scarce. "There's a lot to learn from the Middle East, especially Israel and some of the Arab countries, where they have artificial systems that make air less humid," he said. Ivo also flagged the urgency of finding a solution to water scarcity, saying he was impressed by desalination projects in the Netherlands.

Michele from Italy felt that self-sufficiency should be the goal. "My vision is strongly local," he said, envisaging a future where "every house might have a solar panel,

every bus stop can have solar panels". "If we get to the level in which every local community is able to almost be self-sufficient, I think that can lower costs of production and logistics," he said.

With the war in Ukraine fresh in everyone's minds, Shima from Spain focused on the idea of self-sufficiency on a national level rather than a local one. "If countries can get to the point of not being dependent on other countries for energy, then probably it is the idea we are looking for," she said. "Otherwise we are pulling energy from dictatorships."

And Ioannis from Greece followed a similar path, suggesting future sustainability could come from small changes to the way we live. "For example, we could grow our own food in our small gardens or balconies even produce our own electricity using solar panels on the rooftop," he said. "Maybe we could have some time to cook our own bread or produce our own cheese. I think that it will reduce production costs and the impact on the environment."

SOCIETIES ARE MORE EQUAL

From climate refugees fleeing uninhabitable parts of the world to the mega-rich buying up land in the most sought-after areas, the climate crisis is exacerbating inequality. Juan from Spain said the world had to act immediately and use wealth to help solve the climate crisis and social inequalities. "[My vision is] not only living in a good and healthy environment," he said, "but also having a society that is more equal and in which everyone lives in a more fair way".

Myrto from Greece made a similar point, directing her critique squarely at the rich. "We see a lot of pressure being put on the individual," she said. "You have people who try to use paper straws and limit their meat consumption and buy sustainable packaging. Then you have Kylie Jenner who uses her private jet for a 15-minute flight."

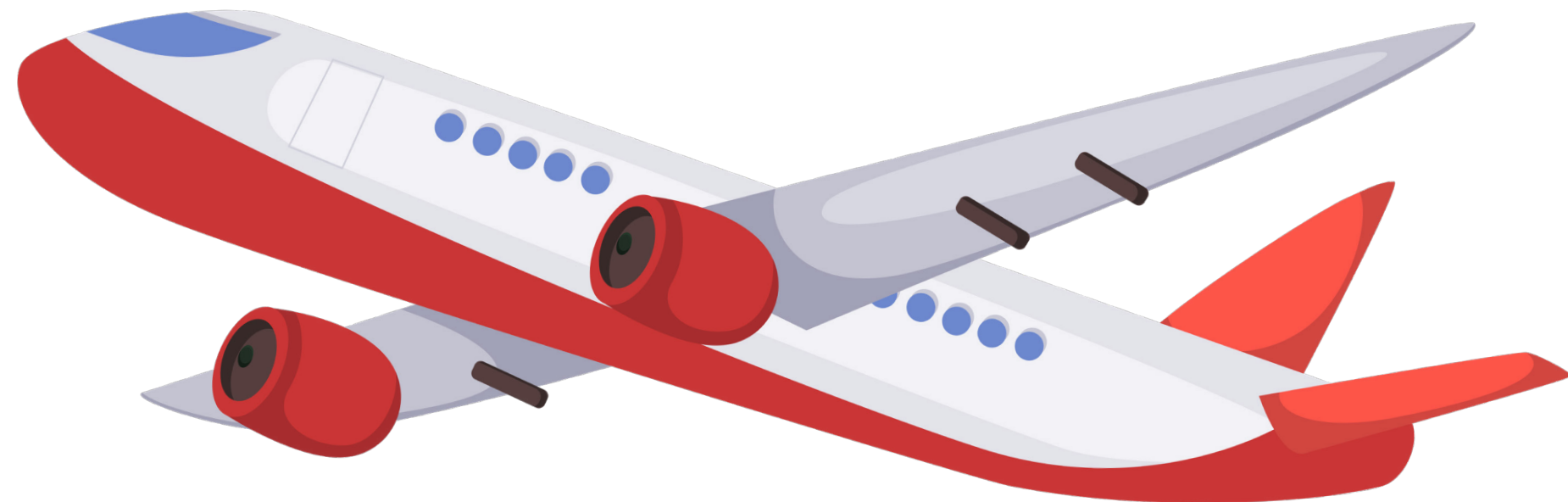
She said these were the inequalities that would need to be stamped out if the world is to overcome the climate crisis. "It's the rich that need to be held accountable for their

actions, because they are creating a lot more damage than the rest of us combined could ever do." Vassili from Greece said people from the rich world would need to consume less. "If you look around the world the vast majority of people do not consume enough, they do not have enough to consume," he said. "So it's very hard for us to say to them 'stop consuming', when they actually consume less than 10 percent of what we do."

Tackling the same issue from a different angle, Angelos from Greece felt that a future involving financial prosperity was the best chance to tackle climate change. "As soon as people are lifted out of poverty, they start to care more about the environment," he said.

WHAT ARE THE KEY STEPS WE NEED TO TAKE NOW?

With their greener futures imagined, the young participants turned their attention to the practical ways that Europe could create these more sustainable societies. Their ideas ranged from small-scale actions like reducing meat consumption, to macro solutions involving an overhaul of economic policies.



RAISE SMART TAXES FROM THE POLLUTERS

One of the most important tools available to governments is taxation, and the participants were largely in favour of using levies as a punitive measure to discourage carbon-intensive practices.

There was little point in just asking people to change their habits, Daniela from Germany argued. Instead, politicians should regulate. “Maybe by putting additional taxes on traditional forms of transport that emit a lot of CO₂,” she said. “And give more money to forms of transport that are CO₂ neutral.”

The theme cropped up a lot in the focus groups. For Alvaro from Spain, the most important thing was to make sure it was rich people who paid the levies. “Rich people consume the most, both in terms of meat and in terms of travelling,” he said, adding that big companies were often the most powerful forces that obstructed climate legislation.

Sophie from Belgium put less stress on who should pay the taxes, concentrating instead on how the money

should be spent. Governments should “use this income for specific environmental challenges, instead of just using it for the general government spending”, she said.

Tristan from France had another slightly different spin, suggesting the European Union could regulate to encourage these kinds of taxes. “I think that the leadership must be very strict and the European Union and also governments must do something to tax these companies,” he said.

Ultimately, though, taxes on everyday products were likely to be passed on to the customer, said Lauren from Britain. “At some point the pricing of products will catch up,” she said. “They’ll be taxed at a high rate, which means the cost will be passed on to the consumer and we simply won’t be able to buy like 10 pairs of jeans. We’ll just have to buy one pair of jeans and fix them, a bit more like how it was in the past.”

OFFER INCENTIVES TO CHANGE BEHAVIOUR

Several participants pointed out that right now the more environmentally friendly option was quite often the more expensive option. Cajoling manufacturers into finding cheaper ways to bring eco-friendly products to market was a popular idea.

Giuseppe from Italy used the example of electric cars being so much more expensive than cars that use petrol. “The government has to push companies to make better choices,” he said, adding that both products should be offered for roughly the same price. “Then we can start to ask ourselves if we can rely on society or not because at this moment everything depends on how much you earn.”

Lemonia said consumers in Greece found it “very expensive to make the right decisions for the environment and there’s a lot of guilt trapping the consumer into thinking we are responsible”. She said individuals should

not be made to feel guilty. Instead, there should be policies to make sure that eco-friendly products are accessible to everyone and not just the privileged.

Her countryman, Angelos, agreed and suggested incentives should be given to both the private sector and to individuals. “I would like to the government to give the correct incentives and then let the players play,” he said.

For Slovenian Gea, a fundamental change in the way we measure success is in order. “I think that we have to completely reject the idea of constant growth in GDP,” she said, referring to Global Domestic Product, the chief way that prosperity has been measured for decades. She said such measures put a bounty on increasing production with no regard for the environment.

IMPROVE TRANSPORT INFRASTRUCTURE

There was universal agreement that transport infrastructure is a vital part of the puzzle when it comes to creating an environmentally friendly future. Better public transport and better access for bicycles were both popular requests among focus group participants, but the details of their demands were very different depending on where they came from.

Alvaro from Spain said he had been hugely impressed with the transport network in the Netherlands, compared with his home country. “The quality of public transport really makes a difference,” he said, marvelling at the cycling infrastructure in the Netherlands.

Likewise, Julio from Spain also had praise for the way Northern Europe worked. “Brussels has made amazing changes,” he said. “It used to be much more car-oriented, now it’s bicycle friendly much more than ever before.”

But the situation in Southern Europe is more difficult, with the needs sometimes more fundamental. “I can do without the plastic bag, but if you tell me I need to walk instead of driving my car, I will have a problem,” he said. “I don’t believe I will vote for anyone who says you need to walk to your supermarket. It’s five kilometres away. I’m not going to walk. Give me an alternative!”





INVEST IN GREEN ENERGY

The war in Ukraine loomed large in discussions around energy policy. For most participants, the conflict sharpened the focus on replacing gas and coal with renewable energy. “We need massive investment in the green industry,” said Felix from Germany. “It should be much cheaper than the coal industry.”

But Felix summarised the view of many that politicians were not acting fast enough. “They are always one step behind. The economy is in the future and the politicians are in the in the past,” he said, adding that Europe needed to stop importing gas from Russia right now.

João from Portugal agreed and reckoned green energy needed to be sold better to the public and to the private sector. “You need to convince people that there are actually benefits in having a greener environment,” he said. “For example, for the private sector there are benefits on being greener. The price of energy right now, because of the war in Ukraine, is soaring. So if we had a greener society already, companies would be spending less money on energy.”

In eastern countries there was considerable support for societies to revisit nuclear power. András from Hungary, for example, worried that renewable energy could not meet the needs of the people. “I’m very much afraid that this whole Green New Deal process will be stopped. I’m thinking about this dilemma, and maybe we have to think about nuclear power again.”

Milan from Slovakia agreed that Europe had relied on fossil fuels for far too long. “It’s unsustainable,” he said, “I’m just curious to know what happened to all the nuclear ideas that we used to have”.

Matusz from Hungary also worried that Europe had missed the boat on energy transition: “If you think of how Europe is working with energy security today, because of the war we are returning to fossil fuel,” he said. “We should have already done the change to renewables,” he said, saying it was perhaps too late.

MAKE BETTER USE OF TECHNOLOGY

Less immediate but no less pressing was the desire expressed in the focus groups for technology to be harness for good. “Humanity is slowly turning the page,” said Federico from Italy. “We’re just like about to revolutionise everything in just a few years.” He said he was convinced that an invention on a par with the steam engine would come very shortly.

Czech Štěpán agreed that the future would be technology-heavy and pointed to current innovations around machines “that practically suck out the carbon dioxide from the from the air”. He said these machines would become better and cheaper in the future. “They are not realistic, for now, but in the future I’m sure that they could be.”

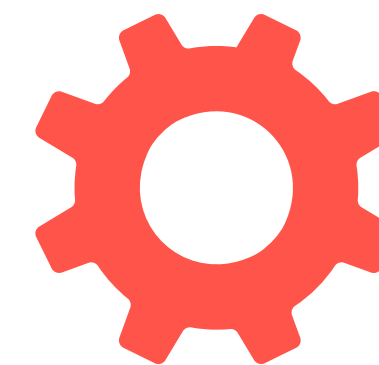
Similarly, Dorian pointed to claims made recently by American researchers that they had used artificial intelligence to design an enzyme capable of essentially eating plastic.

Seán from Ireland said he had been seduced into believing tech would save humanity by looking at the World Economic Forum’s Instagram feed. “They’re constantly promoting this vision of the future as being very pro-scientific,” he said. “Using enzymes to break down plastics in the oceans, and 3D printing houses in Africa. It does sort of incentivise you to think yeah this could be better.”

Bogdan from Romania and Briton Laura both focused on technological transformations in agriculture. “I imagine a world that is not so reliant on extensive farming that consumes a lot of water,” said Bogdan. “I’m talking here about vertical farming being the main philosophy for guiding in agriculture,” he said, referring to the practice of growing crops in vertically stacked containers to save on land use.

Laura said she could see “huge potential” in that kind of technology and added that the power of big data could also be harnessed “so that we can work out exactly how much water crops need at what time so that we use resources sparingly”.

Technology could also soon have a solution for the kind of thorny problem faced by Ana from Romania, who said she had taken 24 flights this year because of her job. “Those 20-something clients will still be there,” she said, “and my activities will still require a lot of travelling”. She said it was vital to find a more sustainable way of travelling. Briton Laura suggested the metaverse could help. “You don’t have to take 24 flights because you can have the kind of meetings that you want to have in a more immersive way [online],” she said.



WHO SHOULD LEAD THE CHANGE?

Once the vision is in place and the initiatives are set out, the thorniest question of all is who can lead the transition. Dividing the options into three broad groups – governments, companies and individuals – helped the participants to zoom in on the issues they found most crucial. There was widespread pessimism that governments or big corporations would lead the change without huge pressure from below. But governments were ultimately seen as the central actors with the most power.



TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS IS LOW

The question of who the participants trusted to act was bound up with who they felt was powerful enough. While many spoke in favour of citizen-led action, opinion was starkly divided over whether citizens could be trusted to do the right thing, or even that their actions would ultimately count for much. Even fewer trusted politicians or big corporations to act in a climate-friendly way without maximum pressure from citizens.

“I don’t trust the government or the corporations or maybe even the citizens to do what’s needed,” said Yordan from Bulgaria. “But I don’t necessarily blame them.” He pointed out that everything in modern life was so tightly interconnected it was difficult to disentangle. “There’s a profit incentive for companies, there’s an incentive for politicians to stay in place, and everything is designed in a way that favours short-term interest.”

“In the case of governments, there have been signals that the time to act is now,” said Anne from the Netherlands. “The signal is there in 2022 but it was also there in 2012 and then nothing happened. If the fact that the planet might perish in 20 years isn’t a good enough signal to do something, then I don’t know what is.”

Chris from Britain exemplified the despondent strain of thinking that permeated the focus groups, labelling pro-climate rhetoric from politicians as little more than a trend. “Realistically, no one in my mind cares too much – or doesn’t care enough – to make a real difference.”

“The only people I have trust in to drive change is the community,” said Antonia from Germany. “I hope that at some point the pressure will be enough for politicians to act.”

The big word in the debate was “if”. While few believed corporations would take meaningful action and few believed citizens had true power, the door seemed to be open to governments to prove themselves. If politicians started to act, Anne from the Netherlands said she would be willing to put some faith in them. Joana from Britain agreed: “If they made a genuine effort, and if I thought that it was one of their priorities, then I would believe in them to do something about it.”

GOVERNMENTS HAVE THE MOST LEVERS

Despite the pessimism, most participants felt that transformative change was not possible without governments. They were the central actors with the most power. “Governments have the best tool kit to combat climate change,” said Tomás from Portugal. “We can’t start expecting people to make more environmentally sound choices when they aren’t being pressured by their economic situation.”

“I definitely think that it should be a top-down approach,” agreed Anne from the Netherlands, who felt that changes at government level would create a cascading effect. “It should be initiated by politicians,” she said, then this would “spill over into companies and how they behave, and then also into education, to teach children from a young age how to live responsibly and sustainably”.

“We just need to start putting environmental considerations into everything we do on a political level,” said Antonia from Germany, who envisaged a kind of mainstreaming of climate concerns from local initiatives right through to international agreements. She contrasted this with the ideas spread by some politicians that individuals could take care of this process by themselves, calling that view “quite dangerous”.

Felix from Germany agreed that governments had “the biggest mechanism” for instituting change and it was up to politicians to pass regulations that corporations and individuals could then react to. “Citizens already do quite

a lot,” he said. “I think they can do more but the state must give them some guidelines.”

Julius from Lithuania said governments should go further than simply passing regulations. “To convince people, you need to present them with an ideal vision,” he said. “That’s where governments should step up and basically show us what the new environment looks like.” Governments could, for example, make the link more concrete between this new environment and the jobs it would bring to local communities. “Governments definitely like that, people will like that, so I’d say show that you are creating an additional economy,” he said.

Young people broadly felt that government actions with proper support could certainly change behaviour – no matter how unlikely it seems at the start. Marta from Poland said an example of a similar effort was the decision to ban smoking in public places. “It seemed impossible,” she said. “No one would follow it.” However, after a year nobody even thought about smoking in restaurants anymore. “It always seems impossible until it’s done, and this makes me feel more optimistic,” she concluded

Vassili from Greece had a different example to illustrate the same point – the decision to charge for single-use plastic bags. “Many people, and I’m one of them, now carry our own bags,” he said, accepting that it was a small initiative but arguing it had made a real change to people’s behaviour.



BIG CORPORATIONS NEED TO STEP UP

For all the talk of government actions changing the way individuals behave, several participants were more focused on the way private sector companies were acting.

For Maria from Poland, the logical conclusion of capitalism was that corporations were the only actors with the power, influence and trustworthiness to bring about real change. “It’s just a reflection of how we live our lives that we want the products that we want,” she said. “We want cheaper, we want better. Nobody is going to make a change within private sector if it’s not for money.” She argued that it was down to the individuals in these companies, and the consumers, to help change the way they function.

Zuzana from Slovakia agreed, calling it a “domino effect” where consumers push companies and governments to make laws and make big corporations take responsibility for what they produce. “Big corporations should take responsibility for their actions and make sure that they are responsible for the waste that is produced -- even from the end users,” she said.

Czech Štěpán said someone had to force corporations to act. “That’s the job of citizens,” he said, arguing that right now environmentally friendly products do not sell very well. Consumers had to vote with their wallets and start creating a demand, he said.

The focus groups were filled with discussions of cause and effect – do companies change their behaviour because of individuals, or is it the other way around? Italian Mariana chewed on this question a lot, particularly when she was deciding whether to make huge sacrifices like giving up meat and long showers, or just stick to the smaller ones like cycling a little bit more. “What would motivate me to engage more in taking these sacrifices is knowing that big polluters are taking equivalent sacrifices,” she said.

EUROPE CAN SET THE STANDARD

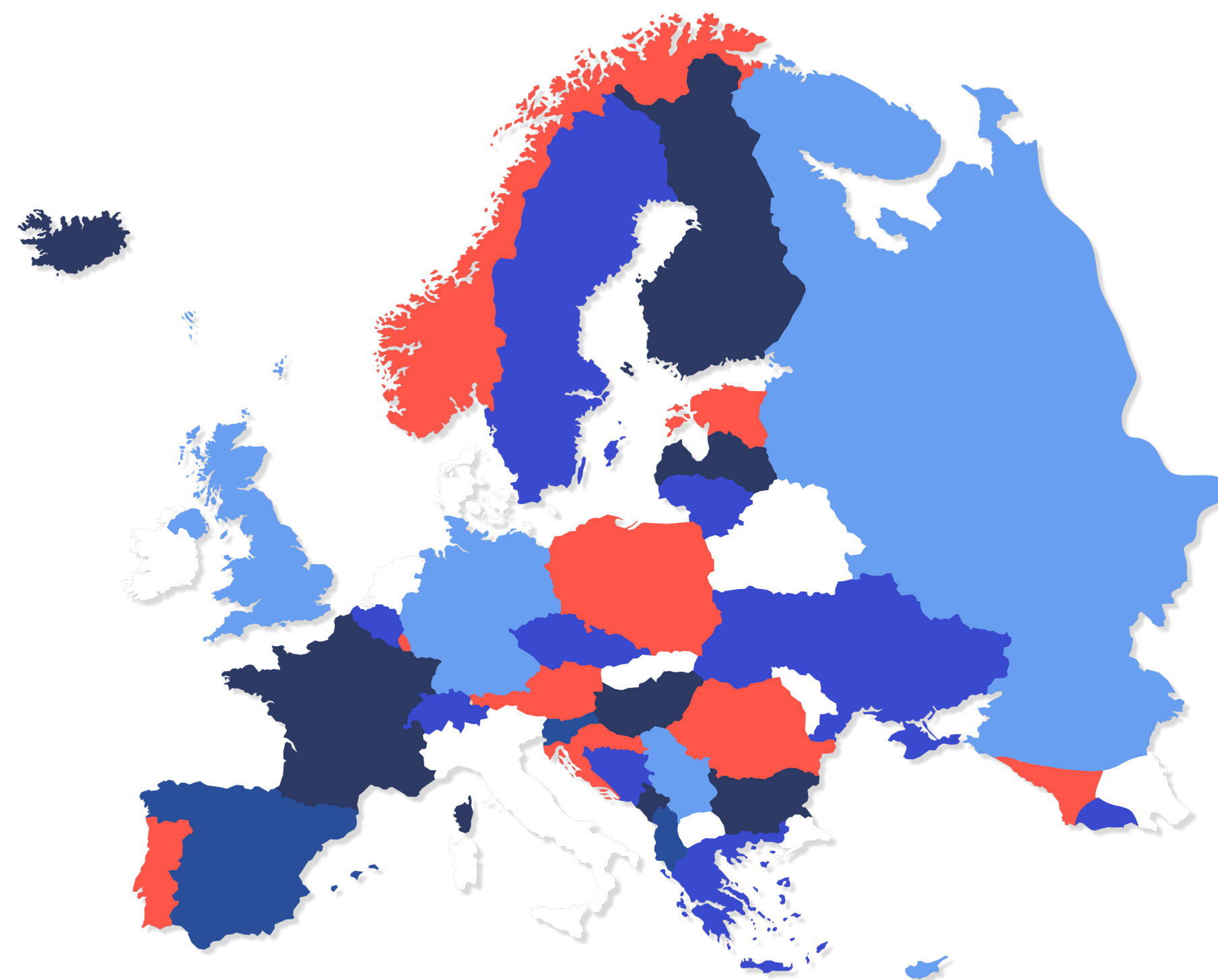
“Europe has to drive change,” said Karan from Spain, reflecting a popular opinion in the focus groups that came from an acceptance that Europe has the wealth, expertise and political organisation to push the issue globally.

But rather than believing Europe is somehow better than the rest, Karan highlighted that Europe had done more damage than most other parts of the world. “I think it’s not fair to put the pressure on places like Africa or Asia

or South America because we have been polluting for 300 or 400 years,” he said. Rather, the responsibility lies with the rich world to lead by example and change their ways, starting with super-wealthy individuals dropping their private jets.

Italian Giuseppe already sees the greening process making progress in Europe. “We in Europe are already acting quite well compared to other parts of the world,” he said. But he too understood that other parts of the world are poorer and face much harder choices.

While Karan admitted he was not sure whether it should be European governments or individuals that lead, Lithuanian Julius was clear that the EU had the right track record. “You can use GDPR as an example,” he said, referring to the EU’s mammoth data privacy regulation. “We set the rules and the world, basically because they want to deal with us, they have to agree to similar rules.”



HOW SHOULD DIFFERENT ACTORS WORK TOGETHER?

Every section of society has a role to play in the transition to a greener future. But finding a unity of purpose and improving interactions between different levels of society was seen as crucial. The focus groups felt that education, political lobbying, recycling and consumer habits were all areas where society could work together to push for change.

LOBBYING AND PROTESTING EMPOWERS INDIVIDUALS

“Since we are millions of citizens, I believe that it’s better to do something than to do nothing,” said Cristina from Spain. A strand of thought ran through several of the focus groups that, although major changes would ultimately come from the top, individuals had to play a part in shaping the transformation. What actions they could take and how these actions would influence governments and corporations sparked lively debate.

There were dozens of examples of citizens flexing their activism to create change. Slovenian Mojca explained how political lobbying had torpedoed a government effort to develop waterways in her country. The initiative would have led to people being charged for drinking water, which she said was against the constitution. “We had a really big outreach and there were some very active social groups,” she said. “They worked very hard and there was a referendum and almost everyone voted against this law.” For Mojca, this showed how passionate individuals could create change.

Fotios from Greece encouraged everyone to engage in political lobbying and get involved in EU policy dialogues. “I would wholeheartedly advise everyone to

apply to the ambassador, since it’s one of the best ways to express yourselves and make your voice heard,” he said.

For German Niels, the best way to spread the word was to take to the streets. He suggested older people should use the youth-led Fridays for Future climate demonstrations as an inspiration. “We have to go out onto the street and demonstrate for our planet,” he said, stressing that people in their twenties and thirties still had decades to live. They needed to make sure the planet survived even if just for their own self-interest.

Other participants felt that small community actions should not be underestimated, especially those that reduced the space between individual activism and the final decisions taken by those in power. Ingrid from Estonia said she discovered an Instagram group that allows followers to post evidence of damage to the local area and contact their local governments. “It’s kind of like climate justice on Instagram so it’s a very funny example of how social media can really be a positive example,” she said, adding that it was a good way of “not letting the government trample over the citizens”.

But Mauro from Spain felt there were limits to the lobbying power of individuals. “A positive vision of the environment has to come from citizens,” he said, changing their consumer behaviour to influence corporations. “That probably won’t be enough,” he said, “it probably will have to be complemented with government action”.

His countryman Juan also felt that individual influence was not enough, but he had a different solution. “I do believe a lot in the power of citizens, as people can organise,” he said. “I believe in the power of NGOs and civil society groups in putting pressure on both private companies and governments.”

And others were much more pessimistic about individuals having the will to push for change. “People will only vote for a party if this party doesn’t say your standard of living will decrease,” said Nicolai from Germany. He said Germans largely refused to tolerate things like gas prices increasing. They expected the government to insulate them from those price shocks. As such, there seemed little hope that Germans would make any major sacrifices to create a greener future.

GOING VEGETARIAN CAN CHANGE SOCIETIES

One of the easiest and most effective ways individuals can make a difference, according to several participants, is to go vegetarian. “I don’t have the time or the ability to shut down a factory that uses fossil fuels, I don’t have that capacity,” said Joana from Britain. “Maybe, on my own, not eating meat does not make as much impact as one factory not producing. But if everyone does it, then it changes the demand, which in turn changes what companies do.”

“With fast-food chains you can get vegan options right now,” said Muriel from Germany. “A few years ago, there was nothing. So you can see that if you have the demand, then the companies will change.” Alba from Spain strongly agreed that it was vital to stop eating meat. “It’s the single activity that brings down the CO2 emissions that you can do yourself,” he said. “This is a very simple and easy action that we can all take part in.”

Though her countryman Alvaro was equally as forthright in his disagreement. “I’ll be quick. No, I don’t think it will make any difference if I stopped eating meat,” he said. And he found an ally in Ivo from Bulgaria who

argued that sustainable consumption was a problem that required a macro solution, not just thinking on an individual level. “I want to eat as many steaks as I want in this life, but I want those steaks not to melt the icebergs,” he said.

Other participants also had broader ideas on food consumption, not just concerned with vegetarianism. Yago from Spain said society should return to the idea of eating only those products that were in season. “A hundred years ago, we just ate seasonal fruit,” he said. “Just avoiding some fruit some parts of the year can create a huge change.”

Mauro from Spain expanded that point to look at supply chain networks and question whether individuals should boycott entire ranges of products. “People go to the supermarket and expect to see bananas every single day,” he said, pointing out that the bananas in Spanish supermarkets often came from Costa Rica, meaning they had made a carbon-intensive journey across the Atlantic. He suggested we could live without products like this if we really wanted a low-emissions society.



EVERYONE AGREES TO REDUCE, RECYCLE, REUSE

One area where every section of society seemed to be on the same page was the centrality of reducing waste. Europeans are used to exhortations to recycle and reuse where possible. The young people in our focus groups were all aware and broadly approving of many initiatives already taken, either by themselves or in their communities.

Chloe from Finland summed up the majority opinion, painting a picture of an optimistic future where “single use plastics are gone and there’s a lot more use of second hand, rather than making new things”. She said this was her dream.

Several other participants flagged their own experiences, no matter how small, as the kind of actions that could do some good. “I think that everyone’s contribution can be important,” said Lucrezia from Italy. “For example, when I went to clean beaches with some friends of mine, there were many children who saw us cleaning and were intrigued. In the end they decided to help us. Individual change repeated over time can do something to solve the problem.”

Mariavittoria from Italy felt one of the key issues was reducing reliance on delivery services. “I had to buy some candies that are typical when we graduate and I couldn’t find them in a shop here,” she said, so she ordered online thinking it was more eco-friendly than driving to the next town. “But when the package arrived it was full of plastic

and the box was very big and inside there was such a small package that I thought: ‘Wow, that’s not great at all.’”

Bogdan from Romania said his small contribution was to continue wearing old clothes. “This tattered hoodie, I’ve had it since my first year in university, which was almost 20 years ago and I still wear today,” he said.



FIND AN ALTERNATIVE TO PROFIT MOTIVE

Private sector firms need to give dividends to shareholders and seek ever higher profit margins. Many of the participants pointed out that these motivations made it far less likely that companies would choose to follow an environmentally friendly path.

“I believe that the private sector alone would try to make profit out of it because that’s how the private sector tries to work,” said Daniela from Germany, saying it was up to politicians to regulate both the private sector and citizens.

Ivo from Bulgaria said the problem was not the profit motive. He said the private sector created wealth, and the money for environmental transformation efforts would necessarily come from companies. “The question here is how to incentivise the private sector to give them money for those things,” he said.

Alvaro from Spain strongly objected to Ivo’s point. “It is interesting that you’re putting all your optimism in the companies that created the problem in the first place,” he said. He labelled it an “interesting contradiction” that the entities that caused the problems were the ones we trusted to solve them.

Sibu from Poland dug further into Alvaro’s point, highlighting that a handful of companies were

responsible for most emissions globally. “I am truly certain that we have the resources, we have the power, we have the means and the economic needs to start making changes,” she said. “But then I think governments need to start holding corporations to account.”

“I believe all the solutions are there,” she added, “but I get a feeling that governments are hand-in-hand with corporations, so they are not really going for this”.

Carl from Belgium agreed with Sibu that corporations were largely responsible for pollution, but argued they also did a lot of good. “The next logical step if we want to achieve this sort of perfect world is to find smart ways to incentivise – not merely punish – corporations to take these kinds of positive steps like investing more into green energy,” he said.

He highlighted the “incredible power” that corporations have on the world economy, innovation, research and design. “Some of us at least saw the reports of the oil companies booking record profits this past month, so a very logical step would be to pump some of those profits into more sustainable, renewable sources of energy, instead of merely oil.”

EDUCATE YOUNGER AND OLDER GENERATIONS

Education is the key to instilling a greater understanding of the situation we face, according to many of the young Europeans we spoke to. Mariavittoria from Italy said there was no time given over to climate change or sustainability at her school. “We use some time to learn about Latin or ancient Greek – languages we don’t use anymore,” she said, suggesting that the time would have been better spent talking about sustainability or gender equality.

Zuzana from Slovakia agreed. “We should try to educate the kids in schools about using less resources and being more mindful,” she said, including about making better choices when shopping or using public transport rather than cars.

Others pointed out that this effort should not just be the responsibility of the state, but also of parents and the wider public. “It’s very important that parents make their children understand the issues,” said Catinca from Romania. “Starting with small steps, like: ‘Hey, we should put these bottles in the recycling bin, these things matter,’” she said. “Not only that the big boys out there need to do something, that it should be a shared effort.”

And a good deal of stress was placed on the type of education and messaging. Climate protection should not be a matter of preaching and threatening, instead the word should be spread with a sense of fun, according to Frenchman Tristan. “If there is more fun, maybe more people, more companies, more citizens will be engaged and then it’s possible it’s not too late,” he said.

“I feel like it’s the same as raising a child,” said Alina from Germany. If you tell people what to do all the time, it makes them afraid. It would be better to educate people in a “playful way” and stress the positives. “You’re not having something taken away. We’re trying to save our planet, or the country or whatever, and if you help us, we will all live in a happier environment.”

Estonian Ingrid agreed that “fun and creativity” were the keys to spreading the message. She said it “in some way masks the kind of climate crisis and the sense of doom”. She said community events like Friday night skate where people dress up just to have fun together were good examples. “The added bonus is that it’s promoting cycling, promoting a healthy lifestyle.”



TAKE A GLOBAL APPROACH

Whether from the perspective of nations, corporations or individuals, there was broad agreement that the best way to fight climate change and protect the environment was for everyone to work together across sectors and across national boundaries. The young participants were keenly aware that action in one continent or one country alone was not enough.

“When we look at the people all over the world, we are so many people and there’s just so few who care about climate change,” said Nadine from Germany, highlighting that people faced many other problems in their daily lives. “Many citizens may think: ‘I’m just one on this planet, so what can I do? What can I change?’ So we need to work together.”

Anne from the Netherlands pointed to the same problem for governments, saying they tended to use failures in other countries to justify their own inaction. She said it was common to hear the argument in her country: “Why should a country of 17 million do everything to be climate neutral in five years if, for example, Poland is still completely reliant on their coal factories?” She said action had to be taken on a global scale to make it meaningful.

And even near neighbours could have starkly different approaches. Slovakian Sarah said there was a huge difference between her country and neighbouring Austria. “At least in Austria the Green Party is in parliament,” she said. “But in Slovakia it’s not even a thing. No one brings up the climate aspect in parliament.” She argued that “global laws or policies” were the best way to fix the situation.

The contrasting experiences of countries were highlighted

by several people in the focus groups. Federico from Italy linked it to democratic development. “We live in democracies,” he said. “If you go to China, if you go to Myanmar or Iran, nobody cares about climate change, nobody cares about green transitions because they live in an autocracy.”

But even in democracies it was difficult to create a consensus, said Niels from Germany. He highlighted the so-called culture wars in the United States, where prominent politicians argue that climate change is not real. “The whole community is not talking in one voice,” he said, stressing the importance of unity to create a real force for change.

João from Portugal saw this unity of purpose in the pandemic response. “There was an epidemic and everyone was like: ‘Okay, we need to do something right now’. I just don’t see that with the climate.” He suggested people’s fears about the climate were not as immediate as they had been during the pandemic.

Angela from Belgium also felt that this sense of urgency was lacking. “There really needs to be a strong motivation collectively from all different sectors and from all different actors,” she said. “You really need everyone to be feeling this urgency and directing their attention.”

She felt that the catastrophic weather events hitting Europe might galvanise opinion. “Hopefully, as we’re seeing more of these facts of climate change, and I think we’ve seen it very clearly this year especially, this will make more actors more motivated to actually make drastic changes or large investments.”

EUROPEAN YOUNG LEADERS AMPLIFY CALLS FOR IMMEDIATE ACTION

In order to provide feedback and inject a range of perspectives into the focus group output, Debating Europe presented what our young participants had to say during Friends of Europe's annual European Young Leaders (EYL40) seminar in Lisbon from 8-10 September, 2022. The following is a summary of how the findings were received, and what EYL40 had to say in response.

The issue is not whether Europeans care about the threat of climate change but whether they are taking action to combat it, Jane Burston, Executive Director of the Clean Air Fund, told the European Young Leaders (EYL40) seminar. "The vast majority of the European population does care about climate change. Even now, in this energy crisis, it ranks among the top three concerns," she said.

But transforming that concern into action was the key. Among the solutions she put forward were better legislation, public figures coming forward as "champions" to explain the benefits of behavioural change and using citizens' assemblies to promote pro-climate policies.

Maria Santos, Project Manager and Policy Officer at Portuguese environmental campaign group ZERO, agreed that spreading the message was crucial. Activist organisations, she said, needed to stop preaching to the converted. "It's easy to say that everyone is really

engaged in the topic and knows about the urgency to act," she said. "But the true challenge and the real difficulty of the grassroots movement is to burst out of the bubble, to go to those sectors of society ... where this kind of information does not reach."

One way of reaching sceptics is explaining that social justice and climate action are two sides of the same coin, argued Tea Jarc, President of Slovene trade union Sindikat Mladi. "Both the climate movement and the trade union movement are saying that we need a just transition," she said, stressing that the green economy would bring benefits to everyone.

Several participants pointed out that countries in the developing world are the biggest victims of climate change and environmental pollution and needed help from richer countries. "Ninety percent of the plastic that goes to the ocean comes from areas of extreme poverty," said Gustavo Carona, an intensive care doctor and one of this year's European Young Leaders. "We talk about plastic, but we don't talk about poverty and wars."

Some Young Leaders suggested a greater use of economic sanctions and stricter international law against the worst polluters. "Why shouldn't we make destruction of our habitat a crime against humanity," asked Klen Jäärats, Director for EU Affairs at the Office of the Prime Minister of Estonia. "This is about life on Earth: it's not

just about the ecosystem, it's about us."

Some of the other main themes of the focus groups – harnessing technology and better urban planning – were considered in more depth at the EYL40. Angeliki Kapoglou from the European Space Agency (ESA) told delegates about cutting-edge technology that will enable space-based solar panels to beam electricity back down to Earth. "It sounds like science fiction, but these technologies have been demonstrated since the 1970s," she said.

Karen Burns of Fyma, an urban analytics start-up helping cities find data-based solutions, had her feet firmly on the ground, focusing on the central role of cities in the green transition. "One of the ways cities will become greener is through a radical rethink of the way we move around them," she said, pointing to electric bikes and scooters as potential game changers. Though she had a caveat. "They are currently taking away space from pedestrians," she said, "they must be taking away space from cars".

One of the central sessions at the seminar brought key players in the EU and US together. Both private and public sectors were represented, and both agreed that more cooperation was the best way forward. A key issue raised was how to achieve regulatory harmony across the EU and US. Rebecca Neff, Deputy Chief of

the Mission to the US Embassy in Lisbon, recommended using pre-existing structures, such as the EU-US Trade and Technology Council to spur climate innovation.

Neff argued that the EU and the US have the same market goals, but that regulatory principles differ across the Atlantic. "Let's think more about how we can put parliamentarians together with congressmen across the Atlantic," she said.

A fragmented EU financing structure has meant European climate innovators have lagged behind US counterparts in securing green financing. However, there are signs that is changing. "Billions of dollars have been put on the table on both sides of the Atlantic," said Laura Cozzi, chief energy modeller at the International Energy Agency, speaking to European Young Leaders at the seminar in Lisbon. "It will kickstart a new wave of clean energy investment," she said. "Never has there been such unity of purpose and unprecedented ambition."

CONCLUSION

The young people in our focus groups felt that the climate crisis was now far more visible than it had been just a few years ago. With forest fires, droughts and floods regularly hitting Europe, the challenge of finding solutions has left many in society, as well as in the focus groups, with a sense of powerlessness and even despair. Agreement over a way forward has eluded world leaders just as it eluded the young people in our focus groups.

The failure to agree was most evident with the question of leadership. Governments were the institutions most in the firing line. They were seen as having the most power to act, and the least excuse not to act. The participants expressed only slight hope that politicians would step up. Reflecting a deeper malaise with democratic systems, few participants believed governments listened to their citizens on climate issues. The more hopeful participants suggested politicians would change, but it would be a long-term process.

The private sector was, for good or bad, seen as purely motivated by profit. A strong theme in the focus groups

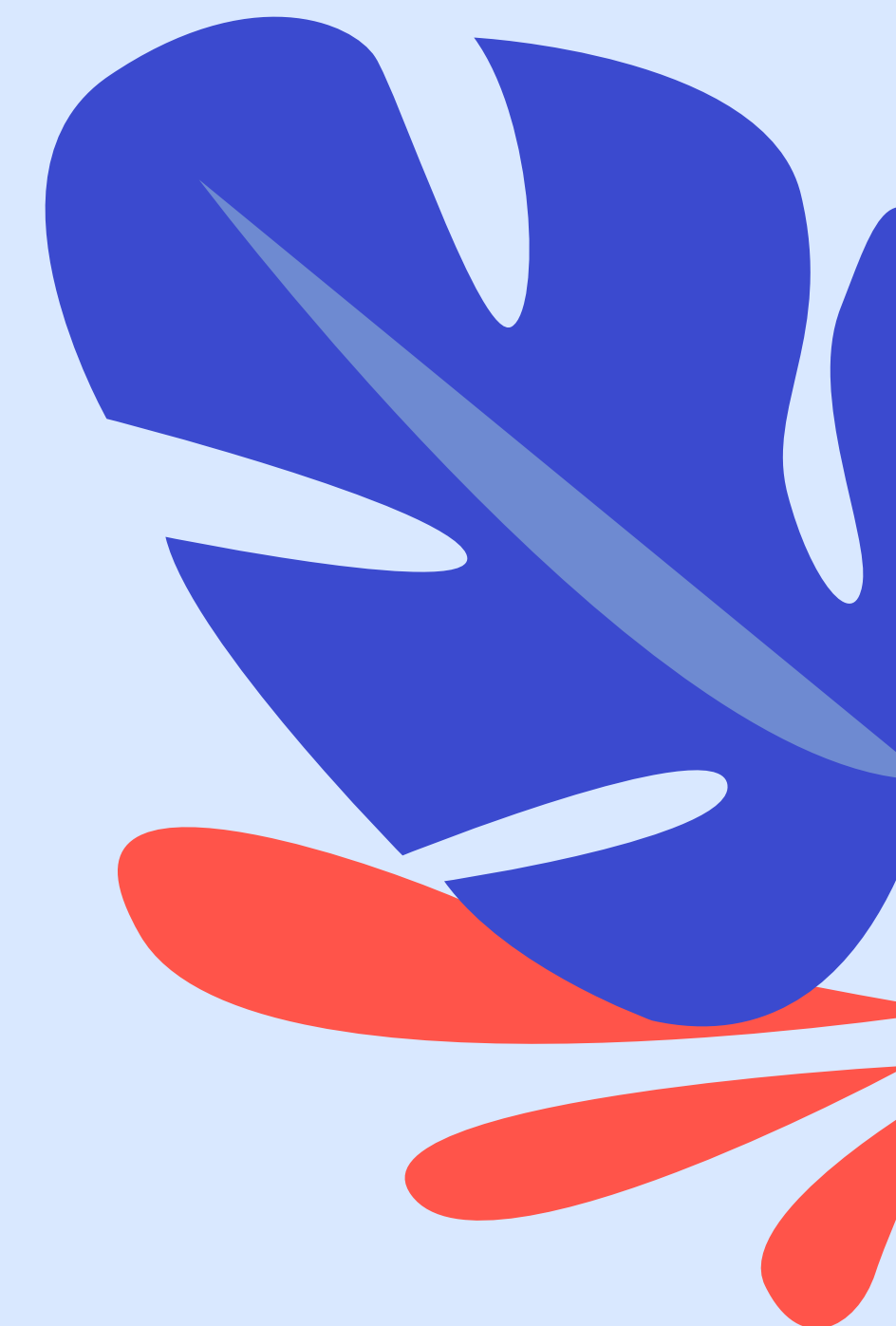
was the need for private companies to be cajoled by regulations, fines, taxes, consumer opinion or economic incentives to change their ways. Few participants felt private sector companies would lead a transition to a greener society without significant pressure from above and below.

The most complex role in the battle to create a sustainable future was left for individuals. The focus groups were split over whether individuals could lead a process of change. Several participants felt that concerted action by unified sections of the population was possibly the only way to create meaningful change. But just as many participants felt powerless, believing top-down measures were the only way forward.

While the focus group contributors struggled to frame concrete solutions, they shared a broad sense that a solution could be found. But only if all sections of society worked together and found a unity of purpose, as was the case in the pandemic. It will require a deep rethink in almost every field of life, from farming to urban planning,

from energy policy to taxation. But the young people we spoke to believe that it is still possible, and that Europe is uniquely positioned to deliver.

The European Young Leaders seminar pushed forward with discussions of practical ideas to realise the visions of young people around Europe. From futuristic plans to locate solar panels in space, to more grounded projects to ease urban transport, the EYL40 seminar provided plenty of concrete solutions to the problems highlighted in the focus groups. The European Young Leaders felt that the key focuses of policymakers should be forging closer ties with the United States, including an ambitious EU-US climate deal, offering more incentives for research and development, and helping poorer nations to overcome climate challenges.



ABOUT DEBATING EUROPE

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

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

Debating Europe was launched in 2011, and has taken a bottom-up approach from the beginning, with citizens very much in the driving seat of the debate, asking the questions they want answered and putting forward their opinions for politicians and thought-leaders from across the EU to react to.

Since launch, we've interviewed more than 3,000 policymakers and experts from across the political spectrum. Each has agreed to answer some of the

200,000 comments sent in to us from citizens online, including from over 271,000 followers on Facebook and Twitter.

In 2021, we launched Debating Africa, adopting the same approach and encouraging a pan-African debate on shared challenges such as climate change, security, trade and development. We believe international challenges require international dialogue, which is why both Debating Europe and Debating Africa frequently co-operate on joint projects to bring voices from both continents to the table with politicians and experts. Debating Europe is an initiative of Friends of Europe, the Brussels-based think tank for a more sustainable, inclusive and forward-looking Europe.

STATE OF
EUROPE

This focus group report will be formally presented at the 2022 State of Europe Festival of Politics and Ideas. This high-level event annually gathers 200+ influential figures from more than 40 countries to brainstorm on the future of Europe, identify out-of-the-box approaches to rising challenges, and collectively produce new recommendations for overcoming them. The State of Europe roundtable involves its high-level network, including European Young Leaders, in an interactive and inclusive brainstorm – a new way of working to generate new ideas for a new era.

