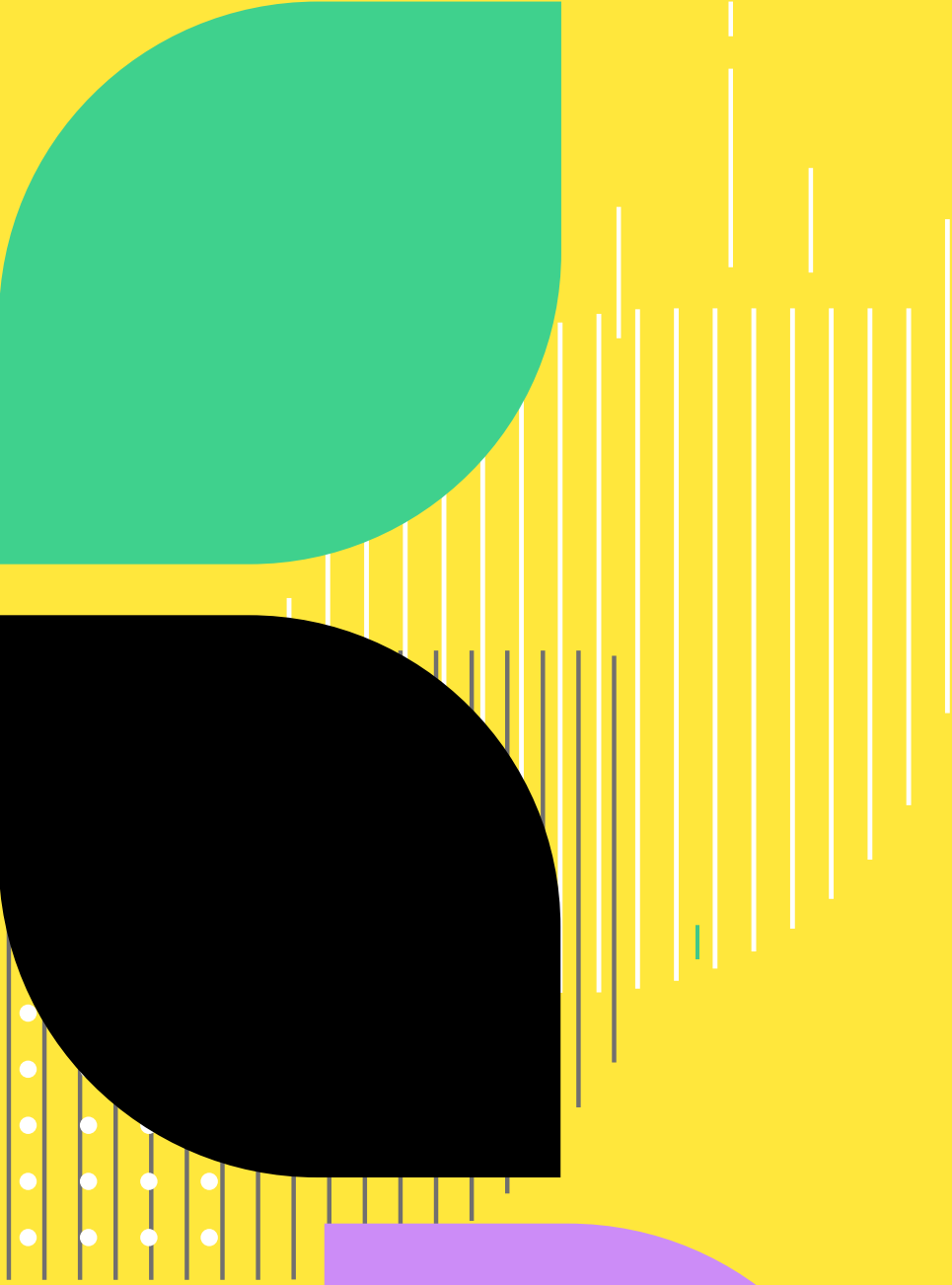
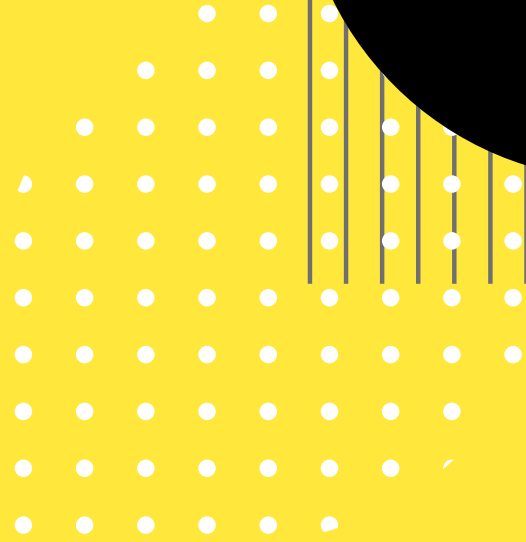
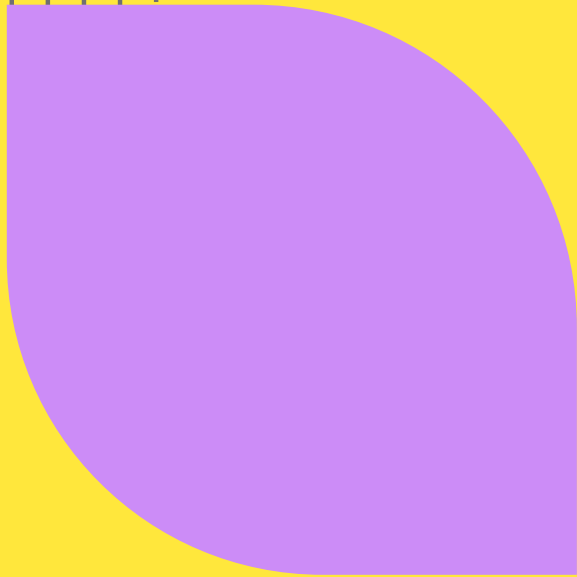
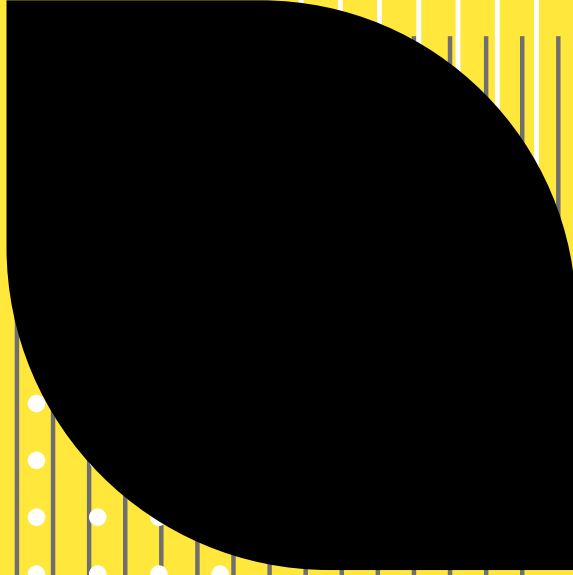
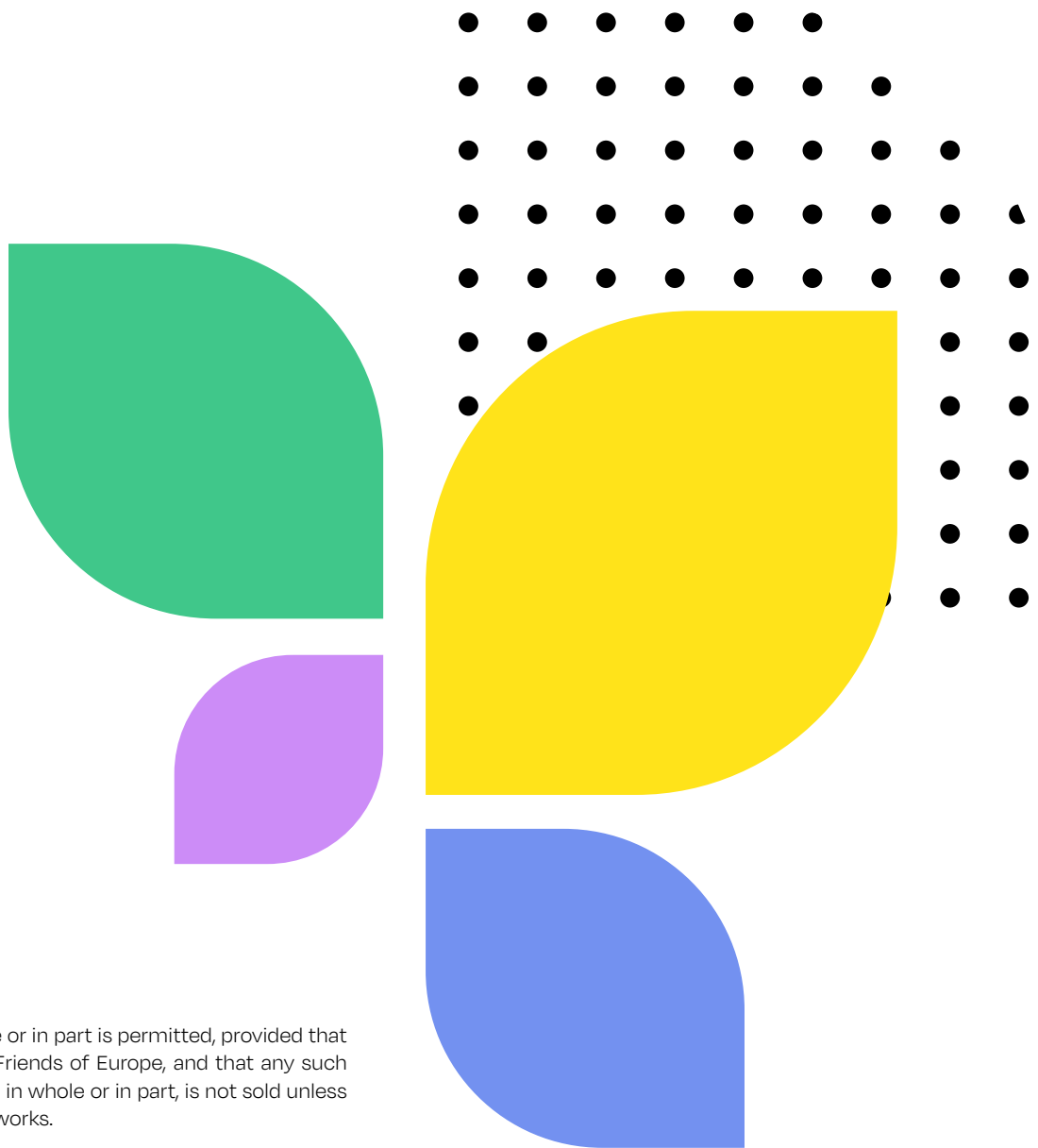


2024 VOICES



Citizens
speak up!



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Foreword

Europe's current social contract was designed in a postwar era for a vastly different reality.

Mounting challenges and crises ranging from climate change to automation and economic downturns, digital threats and the rapid spread of (mis)information, have brought societal concerns, confusion and frustrations to a breaking point in the new millennium. Widening social inequalities have left **citizens feeling excluded, disenfranchised and cynical** as they perceive that **politicians don't listen** to them and **lack the will to act on solutions**.

The moment is ripe to renew Europe's social contract in a way which promotes the equitable representation, meaningful engagement and fair inclusion of all citizens. As the primary stakeholders in this arrangement, **citizens must be both the starting and ending points for its development**.

This reflects the core objective of Debating Europe, the citizen engagement unit of Friends of Europe. We're committed to harnessing the collective intelligence of citizens via focus groups to develop and refine policy ideas that truly reflect their aspirations, creating a more inclusive, sustainable, and forward-thinking Europe.

Our report '*2024 Voices – Citizens Speak Up!*' draws on insights from 2024 citizens across 7 European countries – Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, and Sweden – revealing what citizens feel and think about the challenges facing Europe. It is not merely a collection of opinions, but the cornerstone of a unique journey that will continue to 2030 and beyond, **underpinning Friends of Europe's work to design a Renewed Social Contract for Europe that promotes fairness, ensures no one is left behind, and actively listens to citizens**.

Adam Nyman
Director, Debating Europe



Executive summary



One goal, multiple perspectives

Throughout the study we focused on four themes: **supporting the green transition, fostering inclusive and sustainable growth, making democracy work for all, and strengthening safety and resilience**. They were the focal points of discussion not only because they were among **the most pressing issues currently facing Europe**, but also because of **the frequency with which they intersected**. Whether through political apathy leading to climate inaction or a deteriorating global security situation bringing about financial inflation, many of the findings in this research did not fit neatly in any one box, demanding to be processed holistically. In today's world, economic growth goes hand-in-hand with sustainability, and whole-of-society resilience must be accompanied by strong democracies.

Solutions should be regarded in a similar manner, with **progress in one area expected to yield results across several others**. Some proposals, like the need to better value and remunerate essential service workers in education, health and science, for example, are seen by participants as means of creating **ripple effects that positively affect all aspects of life**. Others, like investing in more robust cybersecurity systems, are crucial in protecting democracies, economies and critical infrastructure from shocks or interference.

Across the project, we examined **how technology is perceived** by citizens across the main areas of focus. As the world becomes increasingly dependent on technology for its everyday workings, it is necessary to think of it not only as a tool for work, communication and entertainment, but also as deeply embedded in every aspect of life.

Importantly, the research also measured the **levels of trust placed by citizens in different actors** – the European Union, national and local governments, international organisations, civil society, private sector, and in some instances also the media and the police. **Identifying the institutions most trusted to tackle different issues** is key to transforming a litany of concerns and proposed solutions into actual vehicles for social change.

Key findings

SUPPORTING THE GREEN TRANSITION

Climate change is a source of considerable anxiety among citizens, often described as **“the greatest challenge of our times”**. Citizens stressed the need to make up for lost time, following decades of indecisive action. Rather than being defined by winners and losers, climate change is perceived as being an **all-encompassing challenge** which affects everyone. However, **“glocal” socio-economic inequality** was brought forward as a complicating factor in the ability of communities and individuals to reduce emissions or deal with the effects of climate change.

Solutions preferred in response to the climate crisis such as **taxing the big polluters** and **curbing overconsumption** prove that citizens want to see big changes made at both the industrial and personal consumption levels. **Young people** taking part in the study were considerably more in favour of taxing polluters than people over the age of 30, signalling a **potential long-term shift in priorities**. Featuring heavily in discussions, **public transport** was identified by all study participants as an area which **should be prioritised** when trying to reduce carbon emissions.

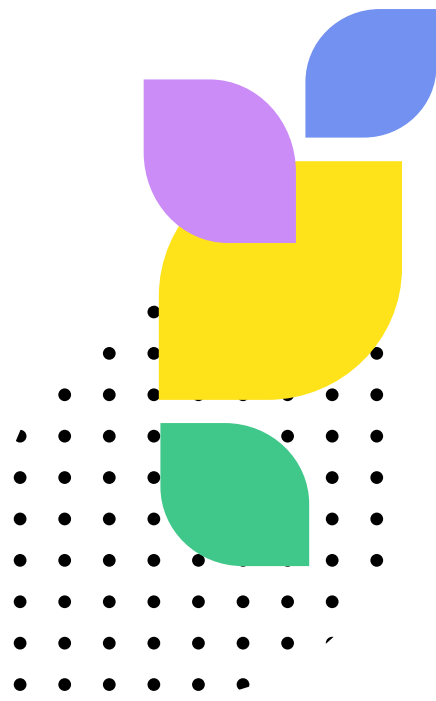
Proving the interconnected nature of the topics, **dependence on imported fossil fuels** was seen as harming not only the environment, but often also as **propping up “unfriendly” regimes** in oil and gas rich countries. On a similar note, much of the discussion regarding **security** was dedicated to **climate-related natural disasters**, which are seen as a more **immediate threat** within the EU than potential armed conflicts.

FOSTERING INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

The general sentiment reflected in the study was that we live in **dire economic times**. **Rampant inflation** and **rising prices** for housing, heating, food and other basic goods and services offer a grim outlook for the economic health of the continent – perceived as something far from a typical financial crisis. Indeed, in addition to worrying about a lack of jobs, participants shared their concerns about a **workforce crisis** which has left many positions unfilled due to an absence of people with the right skills, coupled with the impact of the digital and green transitions.

The one-two punch of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine were seen as determining factors of the current downturn, painting the picture of an EU that is **vulnerable in the face of global shocks**. To this effect, a **reduction in Europe’s dependence on importing essentials** such as food and energy by increasing production and manufacturing capacity at home were repeatedly put forward. Despite generally seeing the EU as a weak global player, citizens still saw economic woes as **best addressed at the European level**, believing robust and wide-spread strategies are needed to get out of the slump.

The most popular solutions for fixing the economy and improving citizens’ wellbeing involved **increasing the salaries of essential workers** and **addressing inequality through tax reform**. Indeed, discussions revealed a broad appetite for **reorienting the current economic model** from one that chases profit above all else to one which benefits the whole of society. Despite labour shortages being a common concern, **inviting foreign workers** to fill in the gaps was **rarely seen as a top priority** by any of the demographics or countries involved.



MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK FOR ALL

When asked about the **state of democracy**, opinions often **varied from country to country**, with participants from Sweden and Germany having a more positive outlook than those from France, Italy and Poland. Across the entire study, citizens worried about **a political system dominated by cliques and party hierarchies**. They saw politicians as weak, ineffective and unwilling to go against their own interests. Citizens felt largely **disconnected from the political process** and bemoaned a general feeling of political apathy across European society.

Participants wanted to see **more grassroots involvement in politics**, with civil society organisations and everyday citizens making more concerted efforts to hold leaders and representatives accountable. They felt that **fighting corruption** and **better equipping citizens to participate in a democratic society** were the best solutions to deal with faltering democratic standards. The topic of democracy saw the least difference in opinion among the different age groups, paving the way for the formation of a **cross-generational consensus** on the matter.

There were worries that **civil rights were being eroded**, with free speech and the right to protest highlighted as key concerns. Citizens also saw a more **polarised society**, in part driven by a biased media and the proliferation of fake news. To counter these trends, they called for suggested programs that **increased media literacy** among the general population. There were also calls for **more inclusivity towards marginalised groups**, their treatment being described as a good way to measure the health of democratic norms within a society.

STRENGTHENING SAFETY AND RESILIENCE

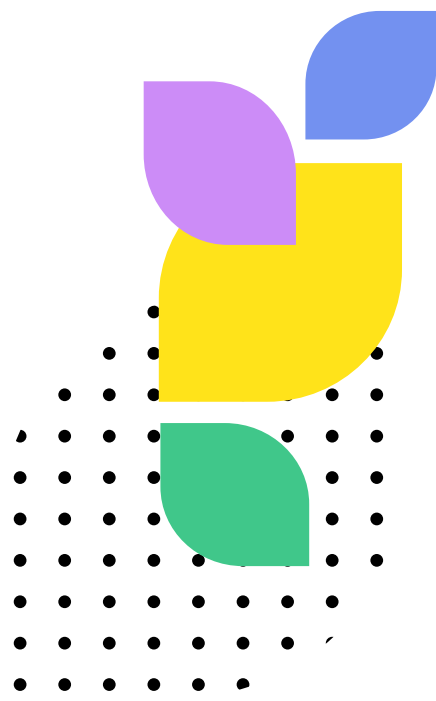
Participants expressed a **general feeling of safety**, believing that foreign aggression against EU countries was very unlikely. Membership of NATO, and to a lesser extent the EU, significantly contributed to participants' peace of mind. At the same time, there was a feeling of **unease about relying too much on NATO** for protection, as the alliance was seen as being highly dependent on who was sitting in the White House. The proposal to **form a unified EU army** was not without its supporters but was generally described as a political and logistical quagmire that was unlikely to come to fruition any time soon even by its adherents.

Despite a sense of security, some citizens also felt that **Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a shock** which brought the possibility of conflict much closer to home, with potential implications for an increase in **cyberattacks** and **election interference**. In general, participants wanted their countries and the EU to **increase their resilience in the face of crises**, whether military threats, natural disasters, cyber warfare or pandemics.

Introducing preventive measures to reduce crime, terrorist attacks and radicalisation were deemed as the most urgent solutions in improving the EU's security situation.

The role of technology

Technology was a recurrent theme throughout the study, revealing both optimism and concern. Participants usually engaged in nuanced discussions on the subject, highlighting drawbacks and ways in which tech could be misused.



Citizens placed great hope in the role technology could play in fighting climate change, especially when it came to **energy and transport**. However, clear warnings were voiced against **relying too heavily on new technologies** to save the planet, as many other actions not involving tech were also seen as important. In a similar vein, citizens stressed the **need to maintain a human centric dimension** to the green transition, protecting those whose livelihoods were affected by technological advancement and automation.

In relation to the economy, new technologies emerged as sources of enthusiasm for their role in **streamlining work processes and improving productivity**. Unequal access to technology, as well as the skills to use it, were perceived as a **potential driver of inequality**, leading to the creation of a digital divide.

When discussing democracy, much of the conversation dealt with **the influence of social media**, which was described as a **double-edged sword**. While offering unprecedented access to the political process and increased reach for social causes, social media platforms were seen too often create ideological echo chambers resulting in an increasingly polarised society.

Technology was seen as crucial in protecting our democratic processes by providing a higher degree of security against malicious acts like **election interference or cyberattacks on critical infrastructure**.

Citizens expressed concern at the apparent secondary position Europe occupies in the tech race, particularly when compared to industries in Asia and North America.

Artificial Intelligence was seen as a mixed blessing, with some participants mentioning its uses in monitoring water usage, energy optimisation or removing disinformation from online feeds, while others worried about the proliferation of deep fakes.

A matter of trust

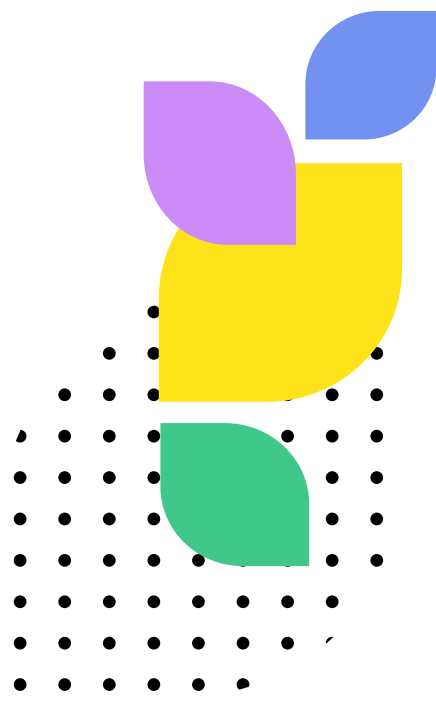
Throughout the study we mapped **who citizens trusted the most** to address their concerns and deliver their proposed solutions across the four themes.

Trust in the **EU** remained high, particularly among the younger generations, as well as in Italy, Spain, and Poland. The EU was seen as **the most trusted and important actor** when discussing goals like **climate action** and **fixing the economy**. Its unique power to influence not only national and local governments, but also citizens and private companies, was seen as unparalleled among all actors.

The study revealed a **high level of trust in civil society and fellow citizens**, especially amongst participants from France, Italy and Sweden. Grassroots organisations were seen as central to strengthening democracy, while also having an important role to play in other fields.

While trust in national governments varied widely according to the topic and country, they were overwhelmingly seen as **the most trusted actor when it came to guaranteeing safety and security**.

Across most topics, trust in the **private sector** was very low, often regardless of age or nationality. Private companies were seen as being profit-driven, only acting in the greater interest when pressured by authorities or the public.





Methodology



This study, conducted by Debating Europe between August and December 2023 captured the diverse perspectives of European citizens on four crucial themes:

- **Supporting the green transition**
- **Making democracy work for all**
- **Fostering inclusive and sustainable growth**
- **Strengthening safety and resilience.**

2024 citizens aged 18–65+ were recruited from seven EU member states: Belgium, France, Italy, Germany, Poland, Spain, and Sweden, **representing a broad cross-section of society, and reflecting a balanced diversity of gender, age, and background.**

Participants were drawn from Debating Europe's existing community and through partnerships with active civil society organisations. We employed a mixed-method approach combining **facilitated 1-hour online focus groups** and **written online surveys**. All sessions were conducted in the participants' **native languages** for optimal engagement and understanding.

The qualitative data generated from the study provided the basis for an analysis of **key themes, trends, and policy recommendations.**

The **intergenerational and comparative nature** of the data allowed for a nuanced understanding of citizen perspectives across different EU member states and age groups.

Supporting the green transition



CONCERNS

There is little left to save

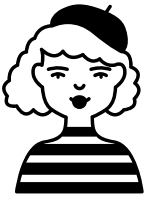
Across the study, participants overwhelmingly declared themselves very worried about climate change. Many considered the climate crisis as the most urgent issue of our time and harboured a grim outlook. A need to **"make up for lost time"** through more urgent and meaningful action featured heavily in the discussions, as the participants lamented decades of inaction that had left **humanity "playing catch-up"** with climate and environmental policies.

A significant proportion of participants believed it was already too late to avoid the worst effects of climate change, with some even claiming that **"there is little left to save"**.

All talk, little action

A lack of political will and courage on climate matters was widely condemned across all countries in the study. Politicians were seen as wary of confronting the largest polluters, particularly in the energy and transport sectors. Many participants said policymakers were denying scientific reality. Even when politicians acknowledged the importance of the climate, the rate of reform was still very slow. As Ana Begoña (F, 18-30) from Spain put it: "It is essential to leave behind risk-averse public policies and commit to profound changes."

Citizens acknowledged that climate change had become a more prominent topic in politics and society in recent years but they were frustrated with an approach summed up as "all talk, little action". Regulatory mechanisms, committees and political organisms were being set up but **concrete action was either completely lacking or woefully insufficient.**



"In the agricultural sector, nothing is changing, despite water shortages and extreme weather events. The effects of climate change are beginning to show, but nothing is changing."

Clara (F, 18-30) from France

Many participants across all age groups expressed the idea that **meaningful climate action was at odds with the current economic system**, which placed growth and profit above all other considerations.



"At the end of the day, it all comes down to money. Green development can only take place if there is an economic profit for companies taking part in it."

Rebecca (F, 18-30) from Sweden

Participants also expressed frustration with what they perceived as the private sector sweeping their share of responsibility under the carpet through **greenwashing** campaigns and insufficient action.

All in this together

Almost all respondents rejected a narrative of "losers and winners" on climate change, arguing that "we're all in this together". While acknowledging that some countries and individuals would be hit harder than others by the immediate effects of climate change, participants framed it as a truly global challenge refusing to accept such polarising messaging around climate issues.



"In the face of inaction on climate change, we are all losers."

Julia (F, 18-30) from Spain

Yet, most participants expressed concern over **large social inequalities** in climate matters, particularly the unfair burden being shouldered by poorer nations.

As **Beatrice** (F, 31-40), from Belgium said: "Developed industrialised countries... pollute, while the countries of the South, the countries still in transition and developing, end up suffering the most from an environmental and economic point of view."

Many participants believed the green transition was becoming increasingly difficult because of gaps in knowledge, a lack of access to reliable information and a dearth of resources. They said the **high cost of sustainable products** - from electric cars to biodegradable nappies - meant environmentally friendly lifestyles were only realistic for the wealthy. For example, **Cecilia** (F, 31-40) from Italy argued that: "Children are very polluting! I tried to buy sustainable, reusable diapers when my daughter was a baby but they would have cost me 500 euros!"



"Sustainability is for rich people."

Luca (M, 31-40) from Italy

On the move

Public transport emerged as an important topic of conversation in every nation in the study. Even in countries with robust transport systems such as Germany, Sweden and France, participants called for upgrades. Public transport was universally seen as the most important tool in **the effort to reduce car dependency**, especially in the big cities. Other measures such as bike lanes, were also popular across the board.

The everyday nature of public transport meant the public would easily notice its failings, but also immediately recognise its positive effects.

Rail transport was often regarded as neglected, despite its vital role in promoting alternatives to high-emission options like air travel.



"Sometimes, I would prefer taking the train if I can afford it. There have been several instances where the aeroplane was less than half the price and I had to opt for that."

Sophie (F, 18-30) from Germany

The topic also featured heavily in discussions led by **participants living in rural or suburban areas**, who said they often had no alternative to their cars. As **Britt** (F, 18-30), from Belgium put it: "Every year my connection to the city gets worse and I need to pay more for it. Everybody is saying 'you should stop taking the car' but it's only getting more difficult to not use the car."

Some respondents said they were willing to stop eating meat or buying new things, but they were **not willing to give up travel**, underlining the importance of greener transport.

Electric vehicles (EVs) were considered crucial to the green transition. But participants expressed concern over the resources needed to build them, particularly the effects of mining for materials for EV batteries on **indigenous people** in Africa and South America.



Family matters

The **environmental implications of starting a family** were raised several times in the study, especially by women. Several participants in Poland and Italy said they were reluctant to start a family in a world they considered already doomed by climate change. Others felt that having children would bring an extra burden to an already strained planet.

Local concerns, global context

Participants were often most concerned by **highly localised** issues, which they felt were just as important as global ones.

In Poland, for example, key issues were the country's **dependency on coal** and reliance on **old cars**, which contributed to poor air quality. As a result, they regarded the green transition as a **matter of national health**.

In Italy, the government's **ban on lab-grown meat** was described as short-sighted and actively working against sustainability efforts.

A change in tone

Significant discussions also took place around the need for a **shift in the narrative** regarding climate change.

Citizens felt that the **benefits of the green transition were often poorly explained**, which allowed bad faith actors to bend the discourse to their advantage.

In Poland, several respondents mentioned that the older generation often opposed climate action because they believed it was being forced on them by the EU.

In Italy, vegetarians and vegans felt their dietary choices were still the subject of social stigma.

Many participants expressed concern over the **lack of positive stories about climate efforts**, fearing it could fuel a sense of helplessness and hinder future action. Social media, often cited as the culprit, was seen as an echo chamber amplifying negativity and downplaying successes.

The geopolitics of fuel

The study highlighted perceptions of a clear link between fossil fuels and security. Europe's dependence on countries like Russia or Qatar to fulfil its energy needs was regarded as **limiting the continent's influence with those countries**.

Several participants, particularly in Germany and Italy, felt fossil fuels not only harmed the climate but also **helped fund unfriendly governments**. Some participants said Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a wake-up call regarding the social cost of relying on gas and oil imports.

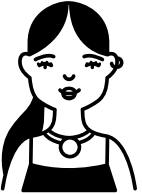
Technology: promise and anxiety



The study found that participants were mostly positive about the role technology could play in the fight against climate change.

"I think innovation and technology play an important role in achieving a green and sustainable economy. People enjoy creating and making new inventions, so let's use this enthusiasm for a good cause."

Lotte (F, 31-40) from Belgium



However, there were also plenty of concerns about technology. Citizens felt that placing too much hope in it to save the planet would be extremely counterproductive, distracting from the other actions that must be taken.

"I am in favour of innovation and technology to boost the green transition but let's also start from quite simple and immediate solutions, e.g., improving public transport services to discourage car use or be careful to where our recycled waste actually ends up to."

Alessandra (F, 31-40) from Italy

Participants stressed the importance of a **human-centric approach to technology**. They highlighted the trend towards remote working, which reduced emissions from transport but increased social isolation. The concept of a **just transition** proved important to participants who mentioned the **need to support those "left behind" by the march of technology**, like farmers trying to compete with lab-grown meat or employees replaced by automation.

There was agreement that the drawbacks of technology should not be ignored. An increasingly technological world comes with energy demands, and the current pace of the green transition trails behind the rate of growth in demand. The **high environmental impact of cloud computing and data centres** were sore points for several participants.

Artificial Intelligence was also a source of anxiety. Fans of the technology have hailed its potential to help mitigate climate change by crunching vast amounts of data and suggesting solutions. But participants said any work in this field would require proper oversight of the way data was used. As **Piotr** (M, 18-30) from Poland commented: "Advances in technologies and innovations, particularly in AI, could certainly play an important role in fighting climate change. Artificial Intelligence is heavily promoted and used, but it is not AI, it is an algorithm that learns. We call it that because we feel the interaction. However, it is a collection of information – correct and incorrect – that needs to be verified and analysed because, like any programme, it has errors and can lead to disasters."

SOLUTIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS

Acknowledging the gravity of our planet's climate and environmental issues, citizens proposed the following recommendations:

- Tax the biggest polluters
- Reduce waste
- Reduce car dependency
- Make eco-friendly products more affordable
- Incentivise companies to offer greener solutions harnessing the potential of technology
- Better inform about the environmental impact of products

It's all political



"Solutions are there, now it's about making a political choice."

Maëllie (F, 18-30) from France

Participants universally demanded more political action on the climate front. Many talked about the need for policymakers to take the threat of the climate crisis seriously and accelerate the rate of reforms.



"Whatever hurts the environment the most continues to make the most money."

Agnieszka (F, 18-30) from Poland

The consensus was that **climate and environmental considerations should be included in every project or legislative proposal** going forward, replacing the current approach of **climate as an afterthought**.

Citizens wanted to see **governments acting tougher when dealing with the private sector**.

The need for higher taxes on polluting industries came up repeatedly. Such taxes would not only fund the green transition using resources generated by companies that pollute the most, but also work as a deterrent against high emissions across all industries. **Ending fossil fuel subsidies** was regarded as common sense. French and German participants put forward a proposal for the taxation of aviation fuel given the environmental impact of the industry.

Believing the carrot to be as important as the stick, some participants also wanted the state to extend **VAT cuts and subsidies** to companies producing sustainable, locally sourced or organic products.

A just transition

The need to address both environmental and social issues simultaneously was a common argument, showing a **popular appetite for a just transition framework**.

Participants believed this was best achieved by incorporating social justice considerations into environmental solutions and redefining the way success was measured in private and public projects to include environmental and social impact.

Many participants believed taxing the rich and offering a higher basic income were necessary for a truly inclusive transition. The **need for wealthy countries to support environmental efforts in less developed nations** was also discussed.

In southern countries like Italy or Spain, much of the conversation regarding a just transition was centred around rural areas, with the consensus being that **sustainable agriculture** was central to an inclusive green economy.



"It's not the company that should die, but its business model!"

David (M, 31-40) from Italy

The **wish for a new economic model** that better accommodates climate efforts was popular, particularly with some German respondents who suggested **"Gemeinwohl-Ökonomie"** (*Economy for the common good*) was more desirable than the prevailing economic model. Some participants suggested only a radical break with capitalism could fix the climate crisis, while others urged more flexibility.

Towards greener transport

Transport once again emerged as a central theme. Participants wanted **improvements to the public transport network on every level**, mentioning **accessibility, cost** and **quality**.

Several voiced the opinion that **public transport should be made free** to further discourage the use of cars. Other measures that discourage car-dependency, such as **bike lanes**, were also popular across the board.

Investment in the **rail network** was framed in countries like Poland and France as a way to **close the rural-urban gap** in transport, while in other countries it was seen as necessary to curb high-emission options like air travel.

Information and disinformation

Climate education was seen as crucial. Citizens wanted schools to begin teaching the subject much earlier, to include a more holistic approach to environmentalism and to offer greater applicability in everyday life.

Calls for policymakers and the public to **pay more attention to climate scientists** were widespread. Participants often suggested that climate-change deniers should be deplatformed.

Participants in most countries urged more action to **counter corporate greenwashing** while stressing the need for more positive narratives.



Tech for earth

Despite broad concerns about the impact of technology, study respondents expressed an **optimistic view of the role technology could play in tackling climate change**. This was particularly true when technology was treated as a solution, rather than a goal in itself. The most eagerly awaited developments were in the **transport and energy sectors**, where technology promises to usher in less polluting and more sustainable alternatives to traditional options.

While some conversation focused on the future promises of tech advancement, plenty of examples were offered of **tech solutions already at work** on the climate and environmental front.

Lab-grown meat and **safer nuclear plants** were mentioned as examples of climate-friendly innovations.

Technology was also hailed for driving a **shift towards common goods**, with car-sharing platforms being brought up as proof.

French participants highlighted the power of social media to **amplify the messaging of activists** and its use as a rallying point in organising great causes.

While often discussed with a cautious tone, AI was also seen as a **source of innovative solutions** in areas like energy optimisation, resource management and climate modelling, all crucial to wider climate efforts.

Participants in Germany, Spain and Italy were among the most enthusiastic about the role of technology, while in France and Sweden they were more suspicious. The level of optimism regarding the role of technology in the climate crisis diminished as the age of respondents increased. In general, male participants tended to be more optimistic than females about technology.





TRUST

The **EU** emerged as the most trusted body to meaningfully enforce climate action. Citizens wanted **more action taken at a European level**, often framing the climate challenge as impossible to fight solely at a national level. This was **particularly popular with young and middle-aged participants**, losing some of its lustre for the over-50s in most countries. The EU was ranked high by all age groups in Belgium, Italy, Poland and Spain and it was seen as the actor with the most power to implement wide-scale changes to the status quo. Many citizens felt the EU was unique in its ability to regulate member states, citizens and companies alike.

Civil society was also ranked high by all age groups. In France, civil society was the most trusted actor for every age group. Participants from Sweden, Italy and Poland were also proponents of the option.

Trust in **regional** and **national governments** varied widely across countries and age groups, often reflecting the level of approval for current or recent administrations. In Poland and Italy, where criticism of recent or current governments were common throughout the study, the options were ranked particularly low.

A low level of trust in the **private sector** was evident across all ages and nationalities. Several participants said big polluters were unlikely to voluntarily change their practices in a way that would benefit the environment, stressing the need for oversight and regulation. The 41-50 age group, and to a lesser degree 51-65, had a more positive view of private actors.

Many spoke against the outsized emphasis placed on **individual responsibility** for sustainability, seeing it as deflecting blame away from large polluters in the private sector. While feeling that the onus should remain primarily on the industries most harming the planet, some participants felt that the public also had a role to play. They encouraged others to reduce meat consumption, air travel and fast fashion.





**Making
democracy
work for all**

CONCERNS



"I think that a democracy that works is a democracy where debate helps to build society rather than dividing it and brings people together around common visions so that we mobilise to face the challenges that we are trying to solve together."

François (M, 31-40) from Belgium

Democracy in poor health

When asked to identify the **ingredients of a healthy democracy**, participants across the study most often mentioned transparency, accountability, media independence, free elections, civic participation, the plurality of opinions and political parties, equality before the law, respect for minority groups and a guarantee of fundamental freedoms.

Opinions on the state of democracy **varied widely from one country to another**. Germans and Swedes felt that democratic norms were in very good shape in their country. But French, Italian and Polish participants were more negative. Opinions were mixed in Spain and Belgium.

Participants were clear that any **lapses in democratic practices in their own countries should be seen in context**. There was general agreement that compared with countries like Russia, European nations still **enjoyed healthy democratic systems**.

However, citizens also warned against taking democracy for granted. Swedish participants accepted they had enjoyed **democratic norms for decades** but argued this had led to a **passive approach** to social issues and a relative lack of civic movements. For example, **Märta** (F, 18-30) from Sweden mentioned: "We cannot blind ourselves to the fact that Sweden has had a strong democracy and an open media climate. Awareness and scrutiny are essential!"

A dysfunctional political class



"A client-based political system goes against a healthy management of public goods, services and resources."

Gloria (F, 18-30) from Italy

In several countries participants complained about a **political system dominated by party hierarchies**, often to the detriment of individual representatives and the public interest. The term "corruption" was rarely brought up unprompted, except in Italy, but a view of a **political class run by cliques** was widespread.

Across many countries, citizens felt remote from their representatives in government. Participants often felt that they were not listened to and that their voices did not matter. **Tomas** (M, 18-30), from Belgium said it clearly: "I think currently so many people are dropping out because they feel that their voices are no longer being heard." Similarly, **Patricia** (F, 18-30) from Spain added: "To ensure that the people legitimise the government, it is essential that they feel that they have been listened to."

In general, participants had **more respect for institutions than for the people running them**.

There was also a feeling that the relationship between different branches of government had broken down. The use of **fast-track legislation** to allow governments to pass bills without a vote from the legislative branch was a huge source of concern in France and Italy.

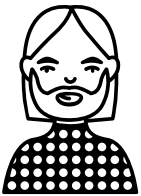
Muffled speech

Freedom of speech was seen as under threat in several countries. The threat came from extremists and demagogues hiding behind freedom of expression to spread hate and further polarise society. But participants also criticised the authorities, accusing them of cracking down on protests and marginalising dissenting opinions. Participants in several countries defended the **right to demonstrate and criticised increasingly violent police action around peaceful protests**.

This feeling was quite evident among French participants like **Sonia** (F, 18-30) who argued: "Debate has become polarised over the last two years, and activists working on these issues are gradually being criminalised." **Coline** (F, 31-40) also from France added: "I'm really worried about the shift in fundamental freedoms, such as the right to demonstrate, the freedom of the press, the freedom of expression... More and more activists are being brutalised by the police, who are extremely well protected by the government. There have been no changes in policing doctrine. This is worrying in a country like France, which is supposed to be a beacon of democracy in the world."

Participants believed the **everyday exchange of ideas** had become more difficult as societies became more polarised. Even debates among friends, family members or coworkers often **evolved into ideological stand-offs**. This issue was often mentioned in the context of hot-button issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine or the Israel-Palestine conflict.

In Poland, many respondents reported an alarming increase in the **use of offensive language in the public sphere** and a decline in respectful political discourse. Participants linked the collapse in civility spurred by the political class an increasing number of aggressive incidents in schools and a rise in anti-social behaviour.



"I see so much aggression, and language of fear and hate, amongst young people, which is generated from the world of politics."

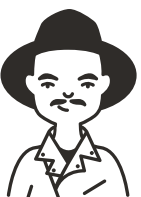
Maciek (M, 31-40) from Poland

Electoral malaise

In most countries in the study, **insufficient participation in the political process** was highlighted as a pressing matter. Citizens felt increasingly separated from political life, sometimes blaming the problems on a **complicated political system** being inaccessible and confusing to the average voter. **Gabriel** (M, 18-30) from Belgium expressed it clearly: "We don't understand anything from the Belgian democratic system. We don't understand what is happening and how it works. This has a big effect on democracy. Citizens who don't know what is happening or don't know what's at stake can be easily manipulated and are lost. This means they don't really practise their rights as citizens."

The **low voter turnout** of recent elections, particularly at local or European level, was a source of apprehension. In some places, this discussion was framed around the inability of the authorities to **make the electoral process more inclusive**. In Italy, for example, a recurring grievance was the inability of university students living away from home to take part in elections.

In Belgium, where voting is compulsory, the discussion went beyond turnout at the polls and focused instead on the lack of grassroots participation.



"Belgian citizens only vote and make their voices heard every few years. For me, that is not the basis of politics. For me, the basis of politics is being engaged about what is important to you and making your voice heard that way."

Daan (M, 31-40) from Belgium

Bad news

While not to the same degree, citizens across all countries in the study felt that there had been a **decline in quality and independence of news sources**. Many felt media outlets were **increasingly biased and partisan**, often representing the interest of political or financial groups rather than the average citizen.

A lack of trust in the media was seen as one the driving forces behind **the spread of conspiracy theories, fake news, disinformation and echo chambers**. Social media was often described as a lawless medium where false information regularly passes as fact. **Eva** (F, 18-30) from Germany observed: "The potential [of social media] is enormous, but the reality is sobering."

As a counterpoint, Swedes and Belgian Flemish-speakers specifically mentioned the role of **public service media channels** as crucial in keeping the nation informed in a fair and unbiased way. Proposals by the current Swedish government to cut funding for the service were seen as alarming.

Vulnerable groups

Most participants broadly agreed that a society's **treatment of marginalised groups** was an important indicator of democratic norms.

In countries where right-wing parties have been in power, such as Italy and Poland, the **marginalisation and scapegoating of minority groups**, including migrants or members of the LGBT community, was a recurring topic.

Participants of colour in Germany mentioned being frequently exposed to **discrimination and racism**.

The politics of tech

Across the entire study, participants recognised that technology, especially when dealing with communication, can be a **double-edged sword**. Despite its unparalleled ability to bring people together, citizens felt that modern channels of communication could create harm. Some participants were unconvinced that technology alone could have a major impact on political participation.

Algorithms employed by popular websites were seen as prioritising the viewer's already-held beliefs, leading to the **formation of echo chambers**.

Participants felt that using social media as the main forum for political discussions led to **knee-jerk reactions** and poorly informed decisions.

There were worries about **the grip social media had on young people**, who were often seen as primarily taking their information from social media channels.

The challenges of dealing with **AI-generated deep fakes** came up in several countries as a source of anxiety.



"A healthy democracy needs citizen participation, and this does not depend on technology but on the human component."

Lucia (F, 65+) from Italy

A major source of concern was the ease with which **bad faith actors could exploit modern channels of communication** like social media. Participants occasionally expressed worry about the way in which some politicians used social media channels, gaining and engaging followers in ways that were compared to brands or football clubs. As **Chiara** (F, 18-30) from Italy mentioned: "Lately, Italian politics has become like a football match with football fans. You defend a political party as enthusiastically as you support your favourite football team with no interest in the actual agenda points of the parties."

Most participants saw the possibility of **online voting** as a way of **increasing electoral participation**. However, it also aroused suspicion for security reasons, being seen as vulnerable to interference and fraud. This sentiment was stronger in countries like Poland or Italy, who saw themselves as lagging in the tech race.



"There is also so much budget on social media from political parties that it seems it becomes more like football fan clubs instead of politics."

Johannes (M, 31-40) from Belgium

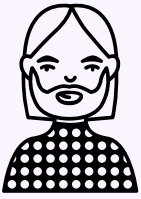
SOLUTIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS

Though disillusioned with the current state of democracy, citizens proposed the following recommendations:

- **Fight corruption**
- **Provide citizens with the skills needed to fully participate in a democratic society**
- **Increase citizen involvement in formal decision-making**
- **Introduce youth quotas in politics**
- **Introduce paid civic service**
- **Reduce the voting age to 16**

Changing the culture



"Both politicians and citizens need to be prepared to cross over into common areas of ideas to agree on at least some level of common good that can be shared by everyone."

Maciek (M, 31-40) from Poland

Across most countries, the need for a **new way of doing politics** arose as a topic of discussion. Citizens want to see politicians move away from populist and often unrealistic campaign promises and embrace an approach more **focused on concrete solutions** to the most urgent concerns in society.

At the same time, politicians should not strive to become faceless bureaucrats or experts unable to connect with voters. Some conversations centred on the need to "**deprofessionalise politics**" to allow for more relatable representatives in positions of power, while others want to **revitalise the role of the politician** in society to attract the best talent to the field. Similarly, some participants wanted to see a **better representation of society** in the decision-making process, with some even proposing quotas for blue and white-collar workers in the legislative branches, similar to gender quotas that already exist in some institutions. For example, **Coline** (F, 31-40) from France felt that: "Politics shouldn't be a job for experts; everyone has a right to a say."



"In a well-functioning democracy, the role of the politician shall be seen positively. However, lately, when talking to highly competent people, they tell me they'd not enter politics because the role of politicians is not well seen."

Lorenzo (M, 18-30) from Italy

Beyond the voting booth

The need to **increase citizen involvement** in the political sphere was stressed in every country in the study. While this was often framed in terms of local politics, plenty of participants also expressed the need to involve citizens in national and EU level decisions.

Foulques (M, 18-30) from France noted that: "Voting isn't going to change democracy, whether it's online, or whether you can vote at 16. The real change comes from including citizens in decision-making and working with local residents on every issue."

There was broad agreement that **public participation should not end with voting** but should include citizen assemblies or public pressure groups. The prevailing view was that the current top-heavy system of decision-making should be improved with stronger pressure coming from below. As **Patricia** (F, 18-30) from Spain argued: "Direct democracy, through participatory exercises, seems crucial to me."

Rather than relying solely on voting, citizens should be involved in decision-making processes more closely and more often.



"I wish for tools to allow citizens to get closer to participation, such as civic education or citizens' assemblies, because there's widespread low trust in politics and what we can all do."

Francesco (M, 18-30) from Italy

However, participants frequently pointed out that such informal bodies often had **limited power in the absence of binding mechanisms**. Some citizens wanted more referendums and other direct democracy tools, but others felt leaving too many important issues to be decided by less-educated people in the electorate could be dangerous. All citizens taking part should be well informed about the subject under discussion, the participants said.

Educating the electorate

Education was one of the most frequently mentioned topics in this part of the study, with participants in most countries saying there was a clear **lack of proper and high-quality civic education in schools**. This has led to a declining interest in the workings of government and the popularity of fringe political candidates. Some participants suggested civic education should continue **beyond the school environment**, starting from the earliest possible age and continuing throughout life, emphasising its importance as a lifelong learning process. As **Wiclif** (M, 31-40) from Belgium said: "The earlier you educate a child, the better prepared s/he'll be to live a life as a citizen, as a role model and prepare her/him to take on responsibilities because living in a democracy is also being able to make informed choices."

Calls for **improvements in civic education** were strongest in Italy, Poland and Spain, where participants felt the levels were very low. Conversely, Swedish participants felt civic training was at a satisfactory level and did not see any need to boost efforts.

There were repeated calls for an **increase in media literacy** and the ability to spot disinformation. This was seen as something that should be implemented not just in schools but also for adults.



"Citizens who don't know what is happening or don't know what's at stake can be easily manipulated and are lost."

Gabriel (M, 18-30) from Belgium

A specific proposal raised in Spain was the creation of a **media quality score** at EU level, overseen by an independent body like the European Commission, which could be a valuable step toward promoting trustworthy information and combatting disinformation in democracies. Transparency and independence would be crucial elements in establishing the credibility and effectiveness of such a score, ensuring that the assessment process remained objective and reliable. A media quality score could incentivise media outlets to adhere to higher standards of journalism, promoting accuracy, reliability and factual reporting. Moreover, it could function as a valuable tool for consumers, enabling them to make informed choices about the sources they trust for information. It could serve as a guide, helping individuals navigate the vast media landscape and discern between reliable and less credible sources.

Younger voters?

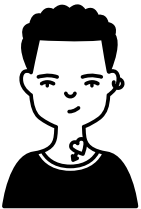
The idea of **lowering of the voting age to 16** proved one of the most **contentious** topics in the study, with splits in opinion cutting through age groups and nationalities. For example, **Giuliana** (F, 18-30) from Italy expressed her support: "I am quite in favour of lowering the voting age to 16 also because Italy is a country of old people, for old people and by old people." However, **Charles** (M, 18-30) from France seemed less enthusiastic: "Rather than the right to vote at 16, every citizen should be able to take a trip to Europe during high school. We need across Europe of culture and citizenship."

On the one hand, participants believed such a measure could **raise engagement among the young** and force politicians to adopt more youth-friendly positions to cater to the new electorate. It was also pointed out that it was hypocritical to allow 16-year-olds to work, pay taxes, or have access to abortion, while denying them the political right to vote.

On the other hand, there were **grave concerns about the lack of political maturity** and the younger generation's reliance on social media for information. Political education was often seen as lacking and there were fears young voters would be poorly informed and easier to manipulate. Even those who supported the proposal felt that it would need to be **implemented in conjunction with advancements in civic education**.

A compromise solution proposed by German participants involved **extending voting rights to 16-year-olds in local elections** but not in national elections.

The **absence of young people from politics** was not limited to the topic of 16-year-olds voting, participants also mentioning a **lack of young representatives in politics**.



"How many people under 30, for example, are sitting [in the European Parliament], and how many people over 50 or 60 are sitting there?"

Jonas (M, 18–30) from Germany

Tech solutions

Participants were optimistic that technology could play a role in strengthening democracy, though with **major caveats**. They believed it offered opportunities for individuals to **engage with governance directly**, reduce reliance on bureaucracy and access more thorough information on the political platforms of parties.

Social media once again emerged as a central topic.

Platforms were praised for **enabling news and information to flow freely** with greater reach than traditional communication channels. Though it was pointed out that the same could be said of its ability to spread misinformation.

Social media was described as **a game-changer for political organising**, allowing like-minded individuals to find each other and organise in support of their shared cause.

Participants wanted to see **stronger regulation** of the industry at a European level.

Citizens were hopeful that **AI could be used to counter disinformation**, by cleaning up feeds of illegitimate and manipulative sources. Some argued that regulations of AI would be needed sooner rather than later, thinking it would be better to address the situation early on.

Younger participants were broadly more optimistic about the role of technology in strengthening democracy, but differences among age groups were slight, except in Italy where the 51–60 age group was noticeably more positive about technology than their younger counterparts.



TRUST

No consensus emerged over which institutions would be best suited to improve democracy. When asked to choose, **the EU, the national government and civil society were the actors most often ranked in the top three**, with the latter on average the most popular option.

Participants in Sweden, France, Italy and Poland placed more trust in civil society and their fellow citizens than in any other actor. Differences were often slight, but on average the 18-30 generation tended to rank this option lower than all other generations.

The **EU** also enjoyed a high level of trust. It was the top choice in Spain and ranked highly across all countries. In Belgium, it was the main choice of Flemish speakers, while the French-speaking population gravitated more towards civil society. On average, the youngest generation of 18-30 placed more trust in the EU.

National governments also fared well but with bigger differences between countries. In Germany it was the most trusted actor, also ranking high in Sweden. However, in Italy, Spain and Poland national governments occasionally sank to last place for some older age groups. **Local and regional governments** were also sometimes included in the top three, particularly in countries where the national government enjoyed little trust.

Trust in **international organisations** appeared mixed, often placing in the second half of the table, except for the 18-30 generation, who tended to rank it higher.

Both **media** and the **private sector** were regarded with distrust on the topic of democracy, most often competing for the position of least trusted actor across all countries and age groups.



Fostering inclusive and sustainable growth



CONCERNS

Ailing fortunes

Europeans are worried about the health of the continent's economy. **Global shocks** such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine brought economic hardship, with **rocketing inflation, spiralling prices and a cost-of-living crisis** defining the current mood across the continent. Of course, participants also recognised that not all of Europe's woes were caused by recent events, given rising inequality, demographic decline and the urban-rural gap are not new issues.

Citizens broadly agreed that **structural, EU-wide** problems were at the heart of the current economic slowdown. They saw Europe as **lacking a competitive edge** against China and the US, particularly in manufacturing and an advanced homegrown technology ecosystem, meaning billions of euros of research and manufacturing investments were going to America and East Asia. Many believed greater EU integration could help the EU compete globally.

Feeling poorer

A significant part of the study revolved around the **cost-of-living crisis** that has gripped the continent for the past few years. Often linked to the war in Ukraine, it dominated discussions as a topic **directly affecting the lives of the participants**. **Energy prices** came up regularly, with many participants saying they were **struggling to heat their homes** during the winter.

Gregoire (M, 18-30) from France shared: "I have lots of friends who don't turn on the heating because they just can't afford it."



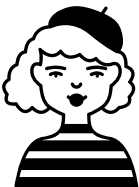
"Recently my grandma told me 'I don't know if I will be able to heat the home this year after year like this!'"

Chiara (F, 18-30) from Italy

Karla (F, 18-30) from Germany, argued that the exorbitant energy prices affect not only individual consumers, but also small and medium-sized enterprises: "They are unable to offset these costs like larger corporations. They pay taxes and rely directly on consumers, which leads to a spiral effect where everything becomes more expensive."

The **housing market** was also a source of angst, many participants describing **buying a home** as both a necessity and an increasingly inaccessible luxury. It was one of the rare occasions where rural communities were seen as having an advantage, as buying a property was considered more realistic outside of big cities.

The **price of essential goods** was also a source of dismay. Discussions of **food poverty** were prevalent, particularly among students and other young people. Even participants who were relatively well-off mentioned having to **curb everyday "luxuries"** like holidays and restaurant meals under the strain of rising costs.



"The government should have made sanitary protection free at the same time as they chose to make condoms free for under-26s."

Solène-Agnès (F, 18-30) from France

The woes of youth

Across all countries in the study, **the plight of younger generations** came up repeatedly.

There was agreement that young people were the most affected by the housing market crisis, with many **forced to live with their parents** until later in life. In Belgium, students complained about the cost of heating being so high that many had no choice but to continue living with their parents. Indeed, **Wout** (M, 18-30) from Belgium said: "I noticed the rising costs especially when I went to live in a student room during my student life. This became much more expensive in a few years. I think more students will have to stay and live at home or have to make a decision whether they should continue studying or not."

Such concerns were not only coming directly from young people. Participants of all ages agreed that today's youth are at a grave economic disadvantage compared to older generations.

Groups of participants from a range of countries felt that low birth rates were seen as contributing to economic woes, a so-called "**demographic winter**", leading some advocating for a fresh look at migration policies.



"We need migration because of our inverted demographic pyramids across Europe, so we need much better integration policies of migrants and seeing them as potential contributors to our economies and democracies."

Marcos (M, 18-30) from Spain

A **crisis of the pension system** was regarded by many participants as a major challenge for Europe, as the proportion of working-age citizens continues to fall.



"In Italy, you don't access the labour market so that one day you can retire because it's likely that you will never be able to."

Lorenzo (M, 31-40) from Italy

Nice work if you can get it?

A **shortage of skilled labour** was also raised across most countries. Citizens taking part in the research highlighted a **disconnect between educational training and the needs of the job market**. Participants in Germany said investment was needed for digitalisation in higher education and apprenticeships, and "business education" should be introduced as a new subject in schools, with an emphasis on sustainable business models.

Among one of the explanations given for the labour shortage was the idea that **physical labour was not valued** by modern society. Essential workers in fields like education and nursing were also seen as being chronically underpaid.

Some participants, particularly in Germany, also complained about a **lack of migration policies** that could solve some of these shortages by allowing in labour force from outside the EU.

Gregor (M, 18-30) from Germany stated: "The German labour agency has already noted that we actually need a gross migration of around 1,000,000 people per year to meet our labour demands. I hope for a swift process to enable immigration. This

also involves keeping political discourse within certain boundaries when discussing migration."

Conversely, in Poland, the influx of Ukrainian refugees was framed as **increased competition** for local workers.

It is not only young people who feel detached from the labour market. In Belgium, the point was raised that not enough was being done to guide people over the age of 55 into jobs in which they feel valuable.



"More importance needs to be given to vocational and technical education, so that people are offered pathways to integrate into the economy, including the workforce, not only through university education."

Jagoda (F, 18-30) from Poland

The concept of "**brain drain**" also came up, with participants in Italy and Spain particularly dismayed by the flight of young, highly skilled people to other countries. **Flavia** (F, 18-30) from Italy, believed the inability to retain graduates after investing resources in their training was a "failure of the public education system".

An unfair system

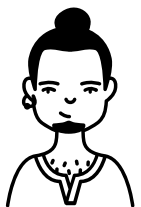
Inequality was a hot topic in most discussions, with the massive accumulation of wealth at the top seen increasingly as unacceptable, particularly in the context of dire economic struggles for other parts of society. The current model of economic growth was described as a "race to the bottom", perceived as encouraging inequality and putting short-term profits before long-term gains.



"The biggest economic challenge today is to combine profit-making with moral duty."

Dante (M, 18-30) from Italy

The **gender gap** in wealth was also mentioned in Italy and France, with both men and women seeing it as a significant issue.



"We need to unlock the hidden potential, i.e., female participation in the job market, especially from the South of Italy by boosting welfare services which typically fall in women's family care duties. I refer to both children but also the eldest population."

Roberto (M, 31-40) from Italy

Climate economics

There was a notable overlap between the part of the study dedicated to the green transition and the implications for our economies, as many of the participants saw the **response to climate change** as the most important challenge faced by the continent. There was agreement that extreme weather events like heatwaves, droughts and storms had **profound effects on the economy**, disrupting supply chains, affecting agricultural productivity, straining energy systems, and impacting infrastructure.



"Ultimately the entire society benefits from us becoming more sustainable so that we don't have to suffer as much from the consequences of the climate catastrophe."

Pelle (M, 31-40) from Germany

Participants in Poland, Spain, and France mentioned **water scarcity** as a major concern for the future. While acknowledging that much of Europe was still in a privileged position, citizens saw dwindling water resources as a pressing global issue and believed that proactively addressing it was crucial.

There were calls for the **green transition to take into account social issues**, particularly for people working in polluting sectors. In Poland, for example, the conversation revolved around the coal mining sector, which it was agreed needed to be phased out without leaving former miners destitute.

Some German participants were not keen on green transition measures like carbon and emission taxes, which they blamed for making their country increasingly unappealing for businesses.



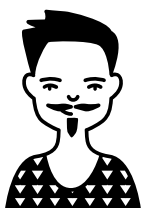
"Sustainability is not only about the environment but also social and economic issues."

David (M, 31-40) from Italy

Europe's technological competitiveness

Much of the conversation surrounding technology focused on **Europe's perceived backwardness** in the field. There was a call to have **more competitive European tech companies underpinned by more modern and dynamic infrastructures and policies fit for the 21st century**.

While participants in Germany were most vocal about both their country and the EU as a whole lagging behind in the technology race, the prevailing sentiment in all countries was that Europe was not yet able to compete with industrial giants in Asia and North America. As **Andy** (M, 18-30) from Germany put it: "Many companies, especially small and medium-sized ones, struggle with rather basic digitalisation measures. There's a lack of know-how and no competitive pressure, which is different from the situation in the USA, where they are much more advanced in this area."



"I believe that Europe is entering into a very dangerous stage economically: the EU institutions are banking everything on competitiveness, but we hardly have any fully European companies that can effectively compete with the likes of many US giants, which are effectively winning on technology!"

Andrés (M, 31-40) from Spain

Outdated higher education standards and an **industry fragmented across member states** were seen as contributing factors.

Technology was also seen as a **potential driver of inequality**. A skills gap between those who are digitally proficient and those who are not can create even more economic disparity.



SOLUTIONS

As **Sebastiano** (M, 18-30) from Italy argued: "AI is an opportunity in some areas, but in general risks eliminating too many jobs too quickly for workers to adapt to the change in terms of training and creating new employment patterns."

Although the possibility of losing jobs due to AI was raised, German participants also emphasised how much potential there was if businesses and the government took immediate action.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the fact that they continued to face significant economic hurdles, citizens proposed the following recommendations:

- Increase the salaries of essential workers
- Reform taxes to address income inequality
- Standardise telework and introducing the four-day work-week
- Support youth entrepreneurship and training through digital skills
- Discourage excessive consumption
- Invite foreign workers

Rethinking the economy

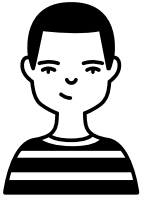
Across the study, participants were eager to share solutions and improvements, often focusing on **taxation, education, employment and technology**. While some proposed local solutions like reducing dependence on tourism in Spain or using "local money" in France, the conversations tended to spotlight structural changes.

Participants frequently stressed the need to **evaluate the economy beyond the traditional economic indicators**. Several called for a shift away from GDP towards other indicators that take greater account of social inequalities and people's wellbeing.



"It's not logical to think of an endless growth with limited resources... We should move away from GDP as the parameter for economic growth."

Jacopo (M, 18-30) from Italy



"GDP is a notion that takes into account added value. But what exactly is value?"

Robin (M, 18-30) from France

They suggested the GINI index (an indicator of economic inequality) or other gauges taking more account of mental health, the rate of unpaid work and overall societal resilience. The concept of a **four-day work-week** received a lot of support as a way to achieve better work-life balance.

The prevailing sentiment was that major changes were needed to the current economic system, with **taxation** and **incentives** emerging as flashpoints in the conversations.

Taxing the rich, unhealthy products and environmentally unfriendly industries more heavily was often proposed. Lowering tax on labour while increasing tax on wealth was also a popular idea.

German participants wanted to see a flat tax that simplifies the tax code, particularly for recently established businesses.

A popular suggestion was EU-level incentives for social and youth-led enterprises and other alternative business models, as well as subsidies for affordable housing. There was agreement that tax breaks for the rich must end.

A vision for Europe

Many participants believed **economic solutions were best implemented at a European level**. As **Matthieu** (M, 31-40) from Belgium put it: "What we need today is a truly global strategy and vision for Europe that meets the challenges we're facing, particularly the climate challenges. We need to have something coherent, not just separate actions."

Some called for **relocating the production of necessary goods to Europe**, both for economic and security reasons. Depending on imports from outside the EU for basic goods was seen as a risk, as shocks such as pandemics or wars could severely disrupt international supply chains. Others were against manufacturing jobs moving to countries that do not respect human rights.

It's basic education

Education was seen as an essential aspect of improving the economy. The need to reorient old-fashioned curriculums to better suit the demands of the labour market appeared in most discussions of the topic.

Citizens also wanted to see **increased funding for colleges and universities**, particularly for institutions training medical professionals and educators, as well as **better salaries for teachers** at every level.

Closing the **education gap** by providing more scholarships for low-income individuals was proposed. Participants suggested that offering **more vocational and technical training** alongside traditional universities could better match training options with the demands of the modern labour market.



"Nowadays, conditioned on the one hand by the increasing digital transformation and on the other by the intensive development of generative AI, it is extremely important to support the higher education and science sector... Science is innovation. Innovation is a competitive advantage."

Piotr (M, 31-40) from Poland

Teachers were not the only essential workers who were seen as underserved by society. There were similar calls to offer additional support to **healthcare workers, scientists and social workers**, who were regarded as vital to maintain a high standard of living and a healthy economy. Participants mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic as strengthening their belief in the vital importance of essential service workers.

The study across the seven countries revealed a strong appetite for exploring **alternative and innovative economic models** beyond the current status quo. **Investments in green technologies and a more dynamic technology sector** emerged as **promising avenues** for propelling the European economy forward.

In France, the **concept of "degrowth"** garnered significant attention, reflecting a desire for a **balanced approach that reconciles economic growth with sustainability**. Participants felt this would allow sectors like luxury goods or leisure industries to **move towards more sustainable practices**, while enabling continuous innovation in crucial sectors like medicine.

Digital productivity

Across all countries, participants typically believed that technology could most directly improve the economy through **improved productivity**, particularly with streamlining work processes and bureaucracy.

There were calls for increased funding and investment for **digitalisation efforts**, particularly for higher education and apprenticeships. Some participants felt more incentives should be given to **small and medium-sized technology companies** across Europe.

Technology solutions that could help **monitor tax evasion and money laundering** were enthusiastically supported by participants in Italy, where financial mismanagement was described as a serious problem.

While support for AI solutions on the economic front were muted, **Antoine** (M, 18-30) from France, believed **AI would soon become necessary in modern economies**: "We need to learn how to use AI, and adapt to it before it's too late!"



TRUST

Across most countries, the **EU** was the most trusted actor for implementing solutions for the economy. The bloc typically enjoyed greater trust among the younger generations, often the top choice of 18-30s. In Italy and Spain, the option was very highly ranked by all age groups.

The sheer scale of the competition from the US and Asia made participants believe that European nations could only compete on global markets if they worked together.

As a bloc, the EU was seen as having more negotiating power compared with national governments.

Civil society and fellow citizens were also popularly trusted actors to deliver better economic solutions. In Belgium, their importance was considered crucial at the local level. In France and Italy, however, they were ranked in a more dominant position, sometimes competing with the EU for the first spot.

International organisations were often ranked among the least trusted actors. Some participants feared external influences from countries such as the United States and the “excessively neoliberal approach” of the International Monetary Fund. These fears were less prominent among under-30s, who were more likely to trust international organisations.

Trust in **local and regional government** on economic matters was ranked around the middle of the table. There were most trusted in France, where there were the top option for the 31-40 and 51+ age groups, with some Polish generations also ranking them high. The **national government** was also given a middling ranking by most countries and age groups but was subject to more variety of opinion. In Poland and Italy, it enjoyed significantly less trust than in other nations, while in Spain it was ranked second across most age groups.

The **private sector** was not trusted to have a role in improving the economy, typically coming last or second to last in the ranking. Participants felt that private companies were interested in their own profit and little else. Middle-aged participants displayed more trust in the role of the private sector than other age groups, but the difference in opinion was marginal.



**Strengthening
safety and
resilience**

CONCERNS

Safe and sound?

There was a **general feeling of safety** among participants in the study. In all seven countries, participants saw their security situation as being **among the safest in the world** and believed foreign attacks at home were extremely unlikely.

This position was influenced by the fact that six of the seven countries in the study were **members of NATO**. The only country outside NATO, Sweden, was expected to join soon.

Being part of NATO, and to a lesser extent the EU, was considered by most participants to be an **exceptional deterrent** to any would-be aggressors.

Ahmet (M, 18-30) from Germany said: "I didn't really feel the threat to body and soul because we [Germany] are part of NATO."

However, **uncertain US election outcomes** have made dependency on NATO a hot topic in some countries, with participants agreeing that the question of a united front among Western nations was heavily dependent on who the US president was.



"Now Biden is in power, but imagine Trump or another type as Trump to be back in power. I think Europeans should cooperate more within the EU and form less of a front with America."

Jakob (M, 18-30) from Belgium

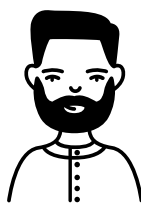
Despite the general feeling of safety, many participants described the war in Ukraine as being a **shocking event** that made the possibility of **conflict in their country appear much more plausible** than previously thought.

Simon (M, 18-30) from Sweden shared: "I think that Sweden was incredibly poorly prepared for the war in Ukraine. As a Swedish citizen, I still don't know what I would do if there was a war in Sweden."

Some respondents admitted that the sense of immediate danger had dissipated even as the war continued, mostly because media coverage had wound down.

However, some were concerned that Russian aggression could spread further. Russian interference in Georgia, Moldova and Serbia was brought up along with the threat of **covert operations** in EU countries. Others felt that more recent flare-ups in Gaza or Yemen further contributed to destabilising global security.

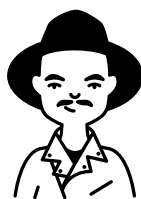
Some participants mentioned that the welcome given to people fleeing from Ukraine showed **double standards** when it came to migrants.



"It's absolutely right to welcome Ukrainian refugees and support their defence but I noticed a double standard when it comes to migrants' reception. It seems easier for some but not for others."

Michelangelo (M, 18-30) from Italy

In a similar vein, the role of media came under scrutiny in several countries. There was agreement that the **media played a prominent role in the way foreign wars were perceived in Europe**. Some participants questioned why Syria or Yemen were given significantly less coverage than Ukraine or Israel.



"I have been absolutely in favour of all the help we have given to Ukrainian refugees but when it comes to protests, media coverage and public opinion, I was surprised that we haven't given the same attention to other wars."

Rochd (M, 18-30) from Italy

Towards self-reliance

In several countries, participants expressed surprise at how strongly interlinked the world had become. Many were surprised at how the Russian invasion of Ukraine affected prices of gas, electricity and food in the EU.



"When it comes to energy dependency, especially with the Russian attack on Ukraine, it has become evident that we need to consider from which countries we allow ourselves to become dependent or even want to be dependent on."

Andreas (M, 18-30) from Germany

The issue of **self-reliance** was raised regularly, especially regarding **energy and food**. Participants believed that Europe would be stronger and more resilient in the face of shocks if it **stopped depending on imports** for its essentials.

Participants also talked about indirect effects of global instability, such as the **radicalisation of discourse and the proliferation of disinformation**. Broadly, there was a feeling that foreign conflicts often create secondary, ideological fronts in Western countries.



"Whilst the EU does not have military competences, it can certainly use its soft powers and political leverage in the face of a military conflict."

Ola (F, 18-30) from Poland

The need for a more forceful approach to global security by the EU was also stressed by some participants.

Threats from within

Not all threats mentioned by participants **were external**. In several countries, **political extremists** were seen as potential threats to national security. Participants in Sweden particularly referenced **radical groups who engage in provocative acts**, such as burning the Quran, which are seen as taunts that are sure to attract even more violence and instability.

Urban dangers were also highlighted by some participants living in large cities, where measures to reduce crime and violence were demanded. **Women** in particular spoke out about **not always feeling safe** walking around cities. The topic was most often broached by Belgians, where both men and women regarded it as a problem.

Other sources of concern were typically localised. **Criminal gangs** in Sweden and **organised crime** in Italy were mentioned as important factors when considering overall security. While violence perpetrated by such groups rarely affects the public, **illegal activities and corruption** are seen as detrimental to the security fabric of society.

Responding to disasters

Resilience in the face of natural disasters was a common topic of discussion. Alarmed at their increased frequency, citizens wanted to see authorities doing more **to prevent and mitigate the effect of extreme weather events**, droughts and other natural calamities that can severely affect everyday life.

Respondents often mentioned specific natural disasters from recent years like the floods in eastern Belgium or the wildfires in southern France. They talked about how these instances often **drove the point home regarding the immediate effects of climate change**, giving rise to fears of a future dominated by such extreme events.

Some felt that Europe's **relative safety from large-scale natural disasters** such as typhoons or tornadoes had led to a culture of being **poorly prepared to face increased environmental hardship**.

Aschraf (M, 18-30) from Belgium said: "We realise that despite we're very rich, when there's a disaster here, Belgium looks like a Third World country."

French participants mentioned how the country's overseas territories were more directly affected by natural disasters and less resilient in the face of shocks. For example, **Fanomezantsoa** (F, 18-30) from France argued: "Overseas France is the forgotten part of French policy. Mayotte, for example, has huge water supply problems, while prices in Martinique and Guadeloupe are exorbitant."

A password away

The prevailing sentiment on cybersecurity was that Europe was **poorly equipped to face threats** from criminal data breaches and more direct attacks like attempts to destabilise energy grids.

Weronika (F, 18-30) from Poland said it clearly: "We now have a legal structure in place, but it leaves a lot to be desired and the regulations it handles are still very far away from the reality of cyber threats."

The possibility of large-scale cyberattacks was deemed a real concern by many participants, who argued that a **successful attack would be devastating** seeing how much of everyday life depends on computers and online connectivity.



"In reality, only a password separates us from being able to access pretty much everything about the lives we play out in cyberspace, our personal data, our identity, our relationships."

Marcos (M, 18-30) from Spain

While Russia was not thought likely to directly attack NATO countries, some participants said the country would have no qualms in engaging in cyberwarfare. **Election interference, disinformation campaigns, attacks on critical infrastructure and online spying** were all discussed as real threats.

Divine (F, 18-30) from Belgium: "There are unknown people, mainly adversaries, who are intervening in national politics to get information and this is a risk to national security. So we need to take a lot of measures to deal with this because today everything is digital. We really need new reforms to deal with this, mainly at national level, but also at supranational level, such as the EU and even NATO."

The prevailing view was that cyberwarfare was a threat that would only increase in scope as technology continued to advance.

While worrying for their safety and their country's security, citizens proposed the following recommendations:

- Preventive measures to reduce crime, violence and radicalisation
- Make essential services more resilient in the face of attacks
- Counter polarisation and propaganda via media literacy awareness
- Offer citizens training to deal with emergencies
- Bolster the national defence budget with an emphasis on cybersecurity

A more perfect union

The most commonly expressed wish of participants in the study was **greater European collaboration on security matters**. In part, this desire was spurred by the war raging in Ukraine, which made many respondents more aware of security risks.

But another important reason was the **perceived unreliability of the US**, which convinced many participants that Europe should seek to reduce its dependence on its ally. This is why some participants like **Nathan** (M, 18-30) from France said: "A central European command must be created."

There was agreement, particularly in smaller countries, that **defence pacts were necessary**, as it would be impossible to defend against major hostilities using only the national army.



The level of collaboration and integration European countries would need to employ, however, was a matter of much debate.

"The Ukrainian conflict has shown that having an army like the one we have in France is great when intervening abroad, but if we have to defend ourselves, will it be enough?"

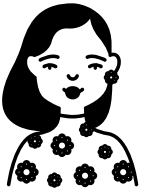
William (M, 18-30) from France



The issue of a **unified EU army** proved divisive among participants in the study. Plenty expressed support for the idea with some seeing it as a culmination of the European integration process. In Germany, many participants believed that for historical reasons the country's participation in a unified EU army would be more easily accepted than an attempt to bolster the national army.

"Development policy, foreign policy, defence policy—all of this needs to be concentrated at the European level because the national state solution is pointless in this century."

Moritz (M, 19-30) from Germany



However, many supporters of the idea agreed that **its implementation would prove incredibly difficult**. The cost, the amount of coordination required and the need for absolute agreement between member states on foreign policy were seen as major obstacles in setting up such a vast organisation.

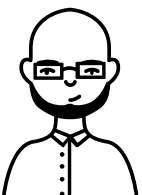
"The EU army is a remote option because the EU can't agree on so many other and more simple issues, imagine having a joint army!"

Stefania (F, 18-30) from Italy

Bracing for impact

In many of the countries in the study, participants expressed the **need for better mechanisms to deal with emergency situations**. Citizens wanted to see more alert systems, rapid response centres and crisis preparedness training, as well as **better coordination between the relevant authorities**, in the eventuality of a crisis.

Building a more robust framework to address the **vulnerabilities of businesses and individuals during crises** was also discussed.



"Resilience is the key word. We're going to have to change our lifestyles not by choice but by constraint."

Gauthier (M, 18-30) from France

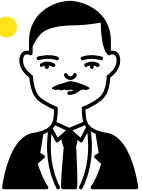
The economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic was offered as an example of states failing to plan for major disturbances. As **Roger** (M, 18-30) from Spain expressed: "I believe that the COVID-19 pandemic and the initial responses of the government, not just in Spain, but across Europe, showed how much of a chaos an unexpected crisis can cause and how seriously it can disrupt the way we lead our daily lives."

Some participants urged **increased policing** to deal with everyday crime and urban violence, issues they regarded as constant threats to safety rather than exceptional events. Participants also proposed **volunteer programmes and training sessions** for the public as further measures to improve emergency responses.

Preventive measures to reduce crime, violence and radicalisation were also discussed, as participants acknowledged they were complex issues that needed to be **tackled at their root causes**. This meant addressing factors like inequality, marginalisation, exclusion and mental health by empowering communities, reforming the justice system and countering online extremism.

Some participants, particularly in France, expressed the need for a return of something akin to compulsory military service, albeit shorter and more focused on civic education. Reinstatement of compulsory military service was also discussed in Italy, but not everyone was convinced.

Rumo (non-binary, 18-30) from Italy said military activities were better left to the experts. Conscription would mean "the state has failed to protect its citizens".



"I'm 26 and male, essentially in the age bracket for military service, and would be the first considered if things escalated. I've often played scenarios in my head that I never used to think about: would I flee, would I not flee, where could I flee to, how would it be if I had to go to war?"

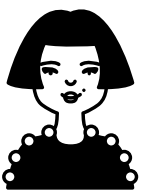
Malik (M, 18-30) from Germany

Combating cyberthreats

The topic of **cybersecurity** was often approached during discussions, with the consensus being that European nations should **do more to protect themselves from possible digital interference**. **Michał** (M, 18-30) from Poland emphasised the need to better educate citizens: "I have only recently learnt, through my studies, about how easy it is to fall victim of cybercrime when naively joining open, unsecured, WIFI networks. There is certainly not enough awareness of this and much more education of citizens is needed in how to use the cyberspace safely."

Citizens wanted to see **cyberthreats taken more seriously**. **Bartosz** (M, 31-40) from Poland shared: "I totally rely on services such as non-stop internet access and banking, as well as water, energy, and heating. I would hardly be able to do anything myself, which is why I believe that the strategy of defence against crises and failures caused by cyber-attacks and disasters should be led by the government, and much more strongly, and at the same time the regional authorities should be involved in this process."

With so many essential services depending on the internet or other networks, some felt **cybersecurity should become a central tenet of any modern defence strategy**.



"A more efficiently managed computer network and greater investment in technology would enable better defence against cyberattacks, as well as a better communication network between relevant bodies and citizens"

Irene (F, 18-30) from Italy

Participants once again expressed the need for cooperation, deeming the issue of cybersecurity as one **best organised at the European level**. Both **Karim** (M, 18-30) and **Nicole** (F, 18-30) from Belgium agreed: "We should centralise as many cybersecurity initiatives as possible and then coordinate via the EU" and added: "Cybersecurity is an issue that the EU needs to get to grips with."

Marcos R. (M, 18-30) from Spain also stressed: "There should be so much more robust regulation in this area, and it falls to those who have the most power in their

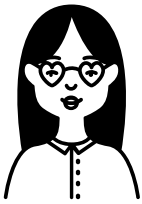
hands to do so, such as the EU, working closely with governments.”

Most participants said they personally felt poorly prepared for a large-scale cyberattack, particularly one that would cause disturbances to basic services like water or energy supply.

Finally, fears of online propaganda undermining the security of our democracies surfaced, coupled with **demands for better regulating social media and AI**. Participants saw these technologies as powerful tools for manipulation, necessitating safeguards to prevent their misuse and ensure they contribute to, not hinder, stability.

Technology and AI as disaster response

Participants also highlighted the potential of technology and AI for predictive and rapid response capabilities, with **Cécile** (F, 51-65) from France arguing: “Technology will make it possible to anticipate future systemic risks and to mitigate the predominant hybrid risks (geopolitical, cyber-security, climatic, economic)”.



"Technology can prevent flooding by improving drainage systems in urban areas. It can also predict how a fire will behave given land and weather conditions so that it can be extinguished more quickly."

Manoli (F, 18-30) from Spain



TRUST

In general, citizens believed **national governments** were best placed to improve security.

That level of trust was common across all age groups, rarely losing top spot in the ranking. The 18-30 age group was most likely to choose a different option as their most preferred solution, typically the EU, but even among young people the national government ranked very high.

The most notable exception was Italy where trust in the national government on issues of security was lower. The option was ranked outside of the top three by almost all age groups.

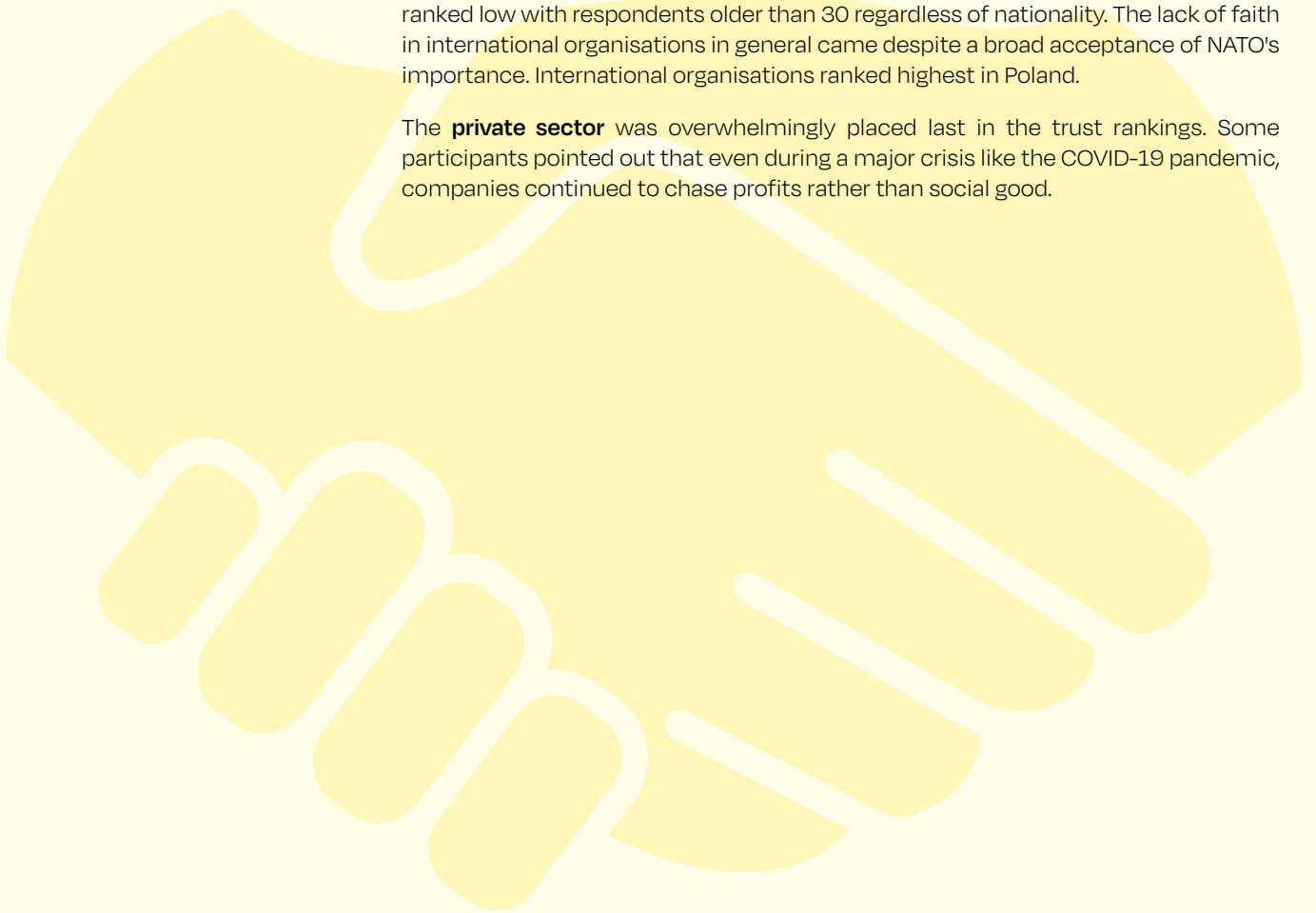
The **EU** was the second most trusted actor on security and the preferred option for all age groups in Spain and Italy. The EU also ranked higher with the 18-30 generation. Young people in France, Belgium and Poland were far more likely than older people to place trust in the EU.

Trust in **police and the armed forces** varied widely across age groups. Older generations tended to have a more favourable opinion than younger ones. But the most striking differences were between countries. While in Sweden trust in security forces was very high, particularly with older generations, in Italy the option was among the least trusted. Security forces came last with some age groups in Italy and outside the top three across the board.

While **local government** enjoyed some level of trust, its smaller jurisdiction meant few rated it highly for security issues. **Civil society and fellow citizens** came in mid-table, the strongest support coming from France and Italy. Its role was particularly valued in the aftermath of natural disasters.


International organisations were trusted by some of the younger age groups but ranked low with respondents older than 30 regardless of nationality. The lack of faith in international organisations in general came despite a broad acceptance of NATO's importance. International organisations ranked highest in Poland.

The **private sector** was overwhelmingly placed last in the trust rankings. Some participants pointed out that even during a major crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, companies continued to chase profits rather than social good.





Conclusion



When dealing with four interconnected themes and participants that spanned multiple generations and seven countries, it was not surprising that this study revealed a plurality of diverse opinions. However, speaking perhaps to the ability of Europeans to find unity not only in diversity, but also in adversity, there was a remarkable amount of overlap between the worries, hopes and priorities of participants in this study.

There was general agreement that the main topics in this research were deeply interconnected. Climate action, social-economic fairness, strengthening of democratic resilience, increased security, and digitalisation, were seen as goals that must complement each other, rather than compete for resources or political attention.

Participants of all ages believed that young people were the most disadvantaged by the current socio-economic circumstances. Key issues like rising housing and utility prices, a precarious and stressful labour market, the financial and environmental implications of starting a family, an increasingly unstable world, and a low level of representation in politics, were all identified as factors bearing down on Europe's youth. It is not surprising then that the youngest age group in the study were the most likely to express divergent opinions compared to the other generations, leaning often towards more forceful or radical solutions to society's issues.

Social inequalities and an "unfair economic system" were similarly mentioned across several topics. The need for a just transition which protects the environment without leaving behind large segments of the population was stressed. Similarly, citizens wanted to see less pressure placed on private individuals and more on the heavy polluting industries when it comes to reducing emissions or waste.

Another point made frequently across the entire study was the desire to see stronger cooperation between EU member states. Europe was often described as lagging behind China and the US when it comes to technology, economic recovery, green transition, cybersecurity and response to natural disasters. From dealing with organised crime to creating a shared response to the climate crisis, citizens overwhelmingly believe that European cooperation was the way forward.

Education emerged as a focus point across all discussed topics. Citizens wanted to see better training in digital skills, environmental and financial education, as well as improved training for civilians to deal with emergency situations. A disconnect between formal education and the demands of the modern job market were seen as



a major factor in current labour shortages. Education was also frequently discussed in relation to democracy, where many hoped that better civic education could create an electorate that is better informed, more aware of its rights and more resilient in the face of political manipulation and fake news.

Finally, technology was another dimension deeply entrenched in each of the four topics. From innovations in green energy and transport to increased productivity, cybersecurity and a more direct line to political leaders, the potential of tech was viewed with guarded optimism. However, participants were not blind to the threats from those who sought to use technology for malign purposes like spreading disinformation or conducting cyberattacks.



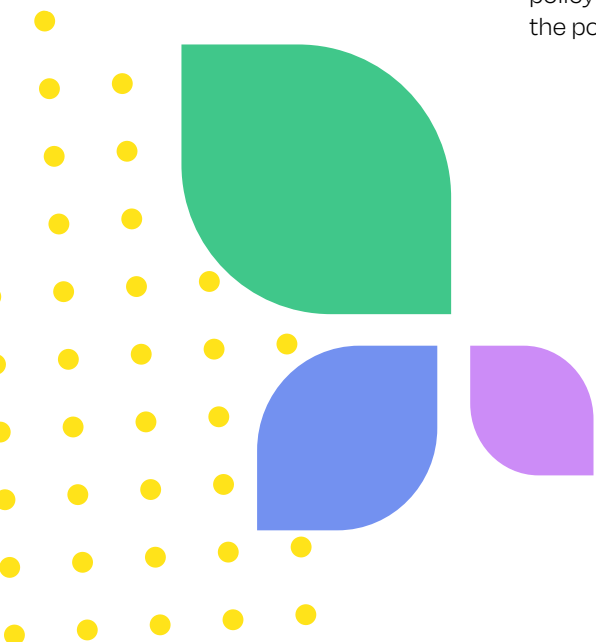
At times, the study can appear to paint a grim picture of a Europe threatened by climate disaster, unable to pay its bills, falling behind in the tech race, less democratic than it used to be and worried about a war on its doorstep. However, the ability of participants to pinpoint the problems they face was not a sign of resignation, but rather a testament to the determination of everyday citizens to improve not only their own life, but that of their fellow citizens and indeed that of the planet.

Conversely, participants were brimming with ideas on how to improve virtually every level of society. From common sense propositions like investing in education and improving public transport, to innovative ideas like using AI to fight disinformation or replacing GDP as the measure of economic growth, citizens were eager to get their voices across. Whether they were radical or traditional, exotic or mundane, widely held or minority views, these solutions were valuable in understanding not only what's broken in modern society, but also how to fix it.

This is where the Renewed Social Contract comes in. An approach to policymaking which keeps citizens at its heart is the best way to navigate this age of transitions and to begin to repair Europe's delicate social fabric.

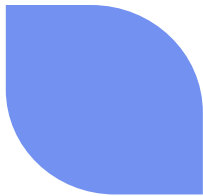
By sourcing citizens fears, hopes and ideas, this report is a starting point for renewing Europe's social contract. But it is only that – a starting point. Citizens must be continuously engaged in the process, with policymakers taking their perspectives into account in their decisions, but also being prepared for reality checks with citizens along the way.

In the years ahead, our objective is to do just that. By using our focus group methodology to reach out to citizens across Europe, we will continue to provide senior stakeholders with the citizen-driven insights they need for evidence-based policymaking, as well as engage in regular sense checks along the way to ensure that the policies enacted are built upon citizens' real needs and concerns.





National perspectives



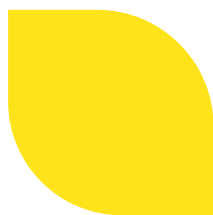
Throughout the study we focused on four themes:

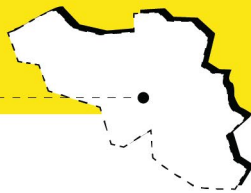
- **Supporting the green transition**
- **Fostering inclusive and sustainable growth**
- **Making democracy work for all**
- **Strengthening safety and resilience**

For each theme, we asked the 2024 participants aged 18-65+ across 7 EU countries to rank:

- **Top 3 solutions:** Actions they favoured for addressing their main concerns.
- **Trusted actors:** Institutions and organisations seen as most capable of delivering solutions.
- **Technology's role:** Perceptions on technology's potential impact on each thematic focus.

Results are provided country-by-country below.





FOSTERING INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE GROWTH



TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Increase the salary of essential workers
- 2 Reform taxes to address income inequality
- 3 Standardise telework and introduce the four-day work-week

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

- National government
- European Union

LEAST TRUSTED

- International organisations

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Small and medium-sized companies need to be supported and incentivised not to relocate overseas and maintain Europe's competitiveness, leveraging technology as a key enabler

STRENGTHENING SAFETY AND RESILIENCE



TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Preventative measures to reduce crime, violence and radicalisation
- 2 Make essential services more resilient in the face of attacks
- 3 Counter polarisation and propaganda via media literacy awareness

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

- European Union
- National government

LEAST TRUSTED

- Police and armed forces
- International organisations
- Private sector

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Digital security is a priority that should be tackled at the European level

SUPPORTING THE GREEN TRANSITION

TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Reduce waste
- 2 Tax the biggest polluters
- 3 Make eco-friendly products more affordable

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

- European Union
- International organisations
- Civil society

LEAST TRUSTED

- National government
- Private sector

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

While technology could support the green transition, it alone cannot halt climate change, and should not be overly relied upon

MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK FOR ALL



TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Fight corruption
- 2 Provide citizens with the skills needed to fully participate in a democratic society
- 3 Increase citizen involvement in formal decision-making

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

- European Union
- Civil society

LEAST TRUSTED

- Media
- Private sector
- International organisations

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Technology could support democratic processes by disseminating information and countering disinformation, but stringent supervision is essential to mitigate the risks of polarisation and protect citizens' data



FOSTERING INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE GROWTH



TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Increase the salary of essential workers
- 2 Reform taxes to address income inequalities
- 3 Standardise telework and introduce a four-day work-week

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

- Civil society
- Local government

LEAST TRUSTED

- International organisations
- Private sector

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Technology could pose threats to certain job sectors, but it could also offer valuable tools that citizens must adapt to and use effectively

SUPPORTING THE GREEN TRANSITION

TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Tax the biggest polluters
- 2 Reduce waste
- 3 Make eco-friendly products more affordable

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

- Civil society
- European Union
- Local government

LEAST TRUSTED

- National government
- International organisations
- Private sector

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Technology serves as a valuable resource for sharing information and mobilising around significant causes, but the environmental impact of the digital sector and algorithm-driven polarisation should not be underestimated

STRENGTHENING SAFETY AND RESILIENCE



TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Make essential services more resilient in the face of attacks
- 2 Offer citizens training to deal with emergencies
- 3 Counter polarisation and propaganda via media literacy awareness

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

- National government
- Local government
- European Union

LEAST TRUSTED

- Police and armed forces
- International organisations
- Private sector

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Technology can protect national and European territories, calling for strategic investments to enhance our defense against potential threats

MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK FOR ALL



TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Fight corruption
- 2 Increase citizen involvement in formal decision-making
- 3 Provide citizens with the skills needed to fully participate in a democratic society

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

- Civil society
- Local government
- National government

LEAST TRUSTED

- Private sector
- Media
- International organisations

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Technology and social networks wield considerable influence, capable of both positive outcomes (raising awareness) and negative consequences (disseminating disinformation). Stringent regulation is imperative at both national and European levels



FOSTERING INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE GROWTH



TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Increase the salary of essential workers
- 2 Reform taxes to address income inequality
- 3 Standardise telework and offer four-day work-week

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

- Private sector
- National government
- European Union

LEAST TRUSTED

- International organisations
- Civil society

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

The country must swiftly catch up and innovate if it wants to maintain its competitiveness in technology and AI on the global stage

STRENGTHENING SAFETY AND RESILIENCE



TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Make essential services more resilient in the face of attacks
- 2 Preventative measures to reduce crime, violence and radicalisation
- 3 Offer citizens training to deal with emergencies

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

- National government
- European Union
- Local government

LEAST TRUSTED

- Private sector
- International organisations

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Technology has the potential to enhance safety and resilience, provided it addresses misinformation and fake news, which can lead to societal radicalisation

SUPPORTING THE GREEN TRANSITION



TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Reduce car dependency
- 2 Tax the biggest polluters
- 3 Reduce waste

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

- European Union
- Civil society
- Local government

LEAST TRUSTED

- Private sector
- International organisations

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Emerging technologies hold the promise of fostering a more sustainable economy

MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK FOR ALL



TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Fight corruption
- 2 Provide citizens with the skills needed to fully participate in a democratic society
- 3 Increase citizens' involvement in formal decision-making

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

- National government
- European Union
- Civil society

LEAST TRUSTED

- Private sector
- Media

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Failure to take AI seriously enough can render technology a threat, undermining its potential to positively influence democracy



FOSTERING INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE GROWTH



TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Reform taxes to address income inequality
- 2 Standardise teleworking and introduce a four-day work-week
- 3 Increase the salary of essential workers

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

- European Union
- Personal social network

LEAST TRUSTED

- National / Local government
- Private sector
- International organisations

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Technology has the potential to improve productivity and efficiency, but it could also generate job losses

STRENGTHENING SAFETY AND RESILIENCE



TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Preventative measures to reduce crime, violence and radicalisation
- 2 Make essential services more resilient in the face of attacks
- 3 Countering polarisation and propaganda via media literacy awareness

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

- European Union
- National / Local government
- Civil society

LEAST TRUSTED

- Private sector
- Police and armed forces

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

The country needs to boost its technological infrastructures to become safer and more resilient against cyberattacks

SUPPORTING THE GREEN TRANSITION



TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Reduce waste
- 2 Reduce car dependency
- 3 Tax the biggest polluters

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

- European Union
- Civil society

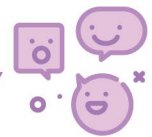
LEAST TRUSTED

- Private sector
- National / Local government
- International organisations

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Technology stands as a potential ally in the green transition, yet questions arise about how this transition will occur and who will spearhead it

MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK FOR ALL



TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Fight corruption
- 2 Provide citizens with the skills needed to fully participate in a democratic society
- 3 Increase citizen involvement in formal decision-making

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

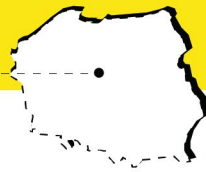
- European Union
- Civil society

LEAST TRUSTED

- Media
- Private sector
- National / Local government
- International organisations

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Technology presents challenges to democracy, particularly around misinformation and disinformation, yet it also holds the potential to enhance democratic participation, positively enabling digital voting from any location



FOSTERING INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE GROWTH



TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Increase the salary for essential workers
- 2 Standardise telework and introduce a four-day work-week
- 3 Reform taxes to address income inequality

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

- Local government
- European Union

LEAST TRUSTED

- Private sector
- National government

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Remaining competitive in a swiftly evolving business environment requires adapting to technological advancements and embracing innovation and digital skills across diverse sectors. It demands ongoing learning for both entrepreneurs and industries

STRENGTHENING SAFETY AND RESILIENCE



TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Make essential services more resilient in the face of attacks
- 2 Offer citizens training to deal with emergencies
- 3 Preventative measures to reduce crime, violence and radicalisation

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

- National government
- Police and armed forces

LEAST TRUSTED

- Private sector
- Local government

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Strong cybersecurity measures and contingency plans are essential to safeguard vital services and infrastructure against evolving cyber threats

SUPPORTING THE GREEN TRANSITION



TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Reduce waste
- 2 Reduce car dependency
- 3 Tax the biggest polluters

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

- International organisations
- Civil society
- European Union

LEAST TRUSTED

- Private sector
- National government

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

The potential of AI in combatting climate change is considerable, providing innovative solutions across multiple domains such as energy efficiency and pollution tracking. However, AI systems are not without their flaws

MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK FOR ALL



TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Increase citizen involvement in formal decision-making
- 2 Fight corruption
- 3 Provide citizens with the skills needed to fully participate in a democratic society

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

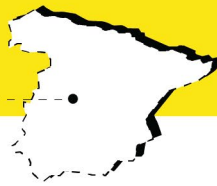
- Civil society
- European Union

LEAST TRUSTED

- National government
- Media
- Private sector

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Effective regulation of technology is needed, especially social media, recognising its dual role as both a valuable information resource and a potential channel for spreading radical and harmful ideologies



FOSTERING INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE GROWTH



TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Standardise telework and introduce a four-day work-week
- 2 Reform taxes to address income inequality
- 3 Increase the salary for essential workers

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

- European Union
- National government

LEAST TRUSTED

- International organisations

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

AI has the potential to create new jobs and boost the economy, but it may also cause potential erosion of social cohesion

STRENGTHENING SAFETY AND RESILIENCE



TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Preventative measures to reduce crime, violence and radicalisation
- 2 Make essential services more resilient in the face of attacks
- 3 Offer citizens training to deal with emergencies

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

- European Union
- National government

LEAST TRUSTED

- Private sector
- Police and armed forces
- Civil society

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Technology needs to be regulated at the European level to address disinformation and safeguard the rule of law

SUPPORTING THE GREEN TRANSITION

TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Reduce waste
- 2 Reduce car dependency
- 3 Make eco-friendly products more affordable

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

- European Union
- Civil society

LEAST TRUSTED

- Private sector
- Local government

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Technology has the potential to drive a fair and environmentally friendly transition only if protecting nature is top priority and greenwashing is stopped

MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK FOR ALL



TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Fight corruption
- 2 Increase citizen involvement in formal decision-making
- 3 Provide citizens with the skills needed to fully participate in a democratic society

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

- European Union
- Civil society
- National government

LEAST TRUSTED

- International organisations
- Media
- Private sector

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Regulation, particularly at the European level, is deemed essential to safeguard fundamental rights and prevent negative exploitation of technology, AI and social media platforms



SUPPORTING THE GREEN TRANSITION

TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Tax the biggest polluters
- 2 Reduce waste
- 3 Reduce car dependency

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

- European Union
- National government

LEAST TRUSTED

- Civil society
- Private sector

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Technology holds immense potential as a tool to conserve energy, expand the use of renewable energy sources and facilitate easier recycling

FOSTERING INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE GROWTH



TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Increase the salary for essential workers
- 2 Standardise telework and introduce a four-day work-week
- 3 Reform taxes to address income inequality

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

- National government

LEAST TRUSTED

- International organisations
- Civil society

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Technology could drive economic growth but potentially increase inequalities

STRENGTHENING SAFETY AND RESILIENCE



TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Preventative measures to reduce crime, violence and radicalisation
- 2 Make essential services more resilient in the face of attacks
- 3 Offer citizens training to deal with emergencies

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

- National government
- Police and armed forces

LEAST TRUSTED

- Private sector
- International organisations

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

There should be greater investments in technology to strengthen civil protection, cyber security and emergency preparedness

MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK FOR ALL



TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Provide citizens with the skills needed to fully participate in a democratic society
- 2 Fight corruption
- 3 Increase citizen involvement in formal decision-making

ACTORS

MOST TRUSTED

- Civil society
- National government

LEAST TRUSTED

- Private sector
- Media
- International organisations

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Technology can enhance democracy by disseminating verified information and offering media literacy and digital education opportunities. Addressing echo chambers generated by AI and algorithms is crucial to prevent polarisation



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About Debating Europe



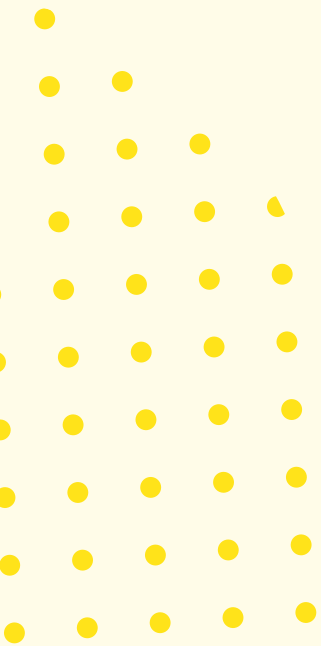
Debating Europe is the citizen engagement unit of the Brussels-based think tank Friends of Europe, tasked with harnessing the collective intelligence of citizens across the EU to generate and road-test policy ideas for a Renewed Social Contract for Europe by 2030.

We do this by engaging our growing community of citizens and civil society organisations across Europe in focus groups and surveys. Our research aims to ensure that Europe's institutions and member states, can reframe and rebalance their relationship with the citizens they serve.

We further contribute to redesigning a Renewed Social Contract by working with policymakers and stakeholders to reimagine a democracy fit for the 21st century, one that:

- Encourages and empowers people to play a greater role in the big strategic and policy decisions that affect their lives, and the lives of future generations.
- Fosters dialogue through which people can develop the skills and confidence needed to involve themselves in the decisions that shape their lives.
- Nurtures a healthy public space to enable democratic change to happen by connecting citizens and policymakers.

By changing the dynamic between political institutions and citizens we aim to ensure that decision-making processes and policies across the EU truly reflect the aspirations of its people, creating a more inclusive, sustainable, and forward-thinking Europe.



Debating Europe

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Making European democracy fit for the 21st century

