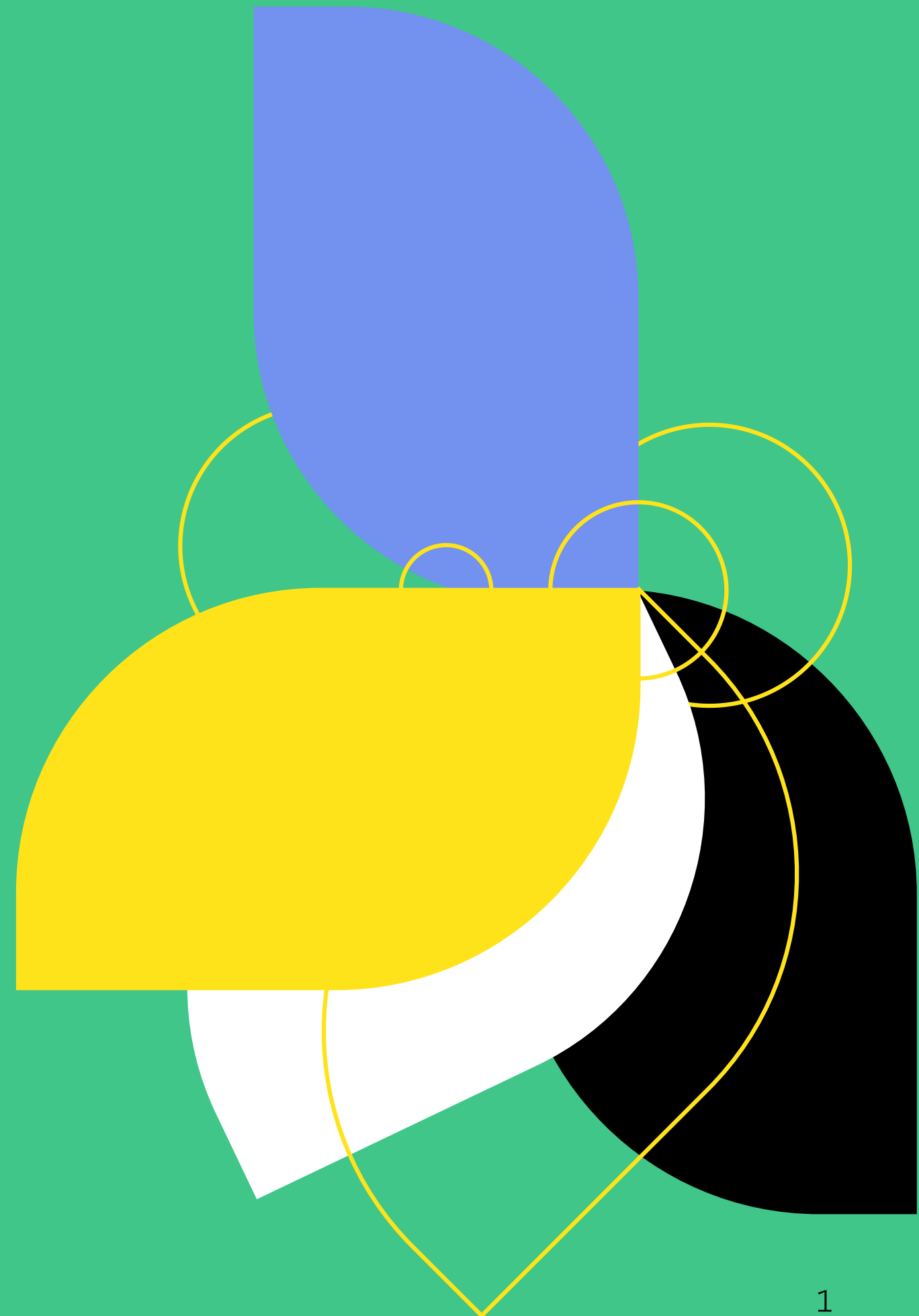


Voices for choices

Data for decisions
that matter

2025 country report — **Germany**



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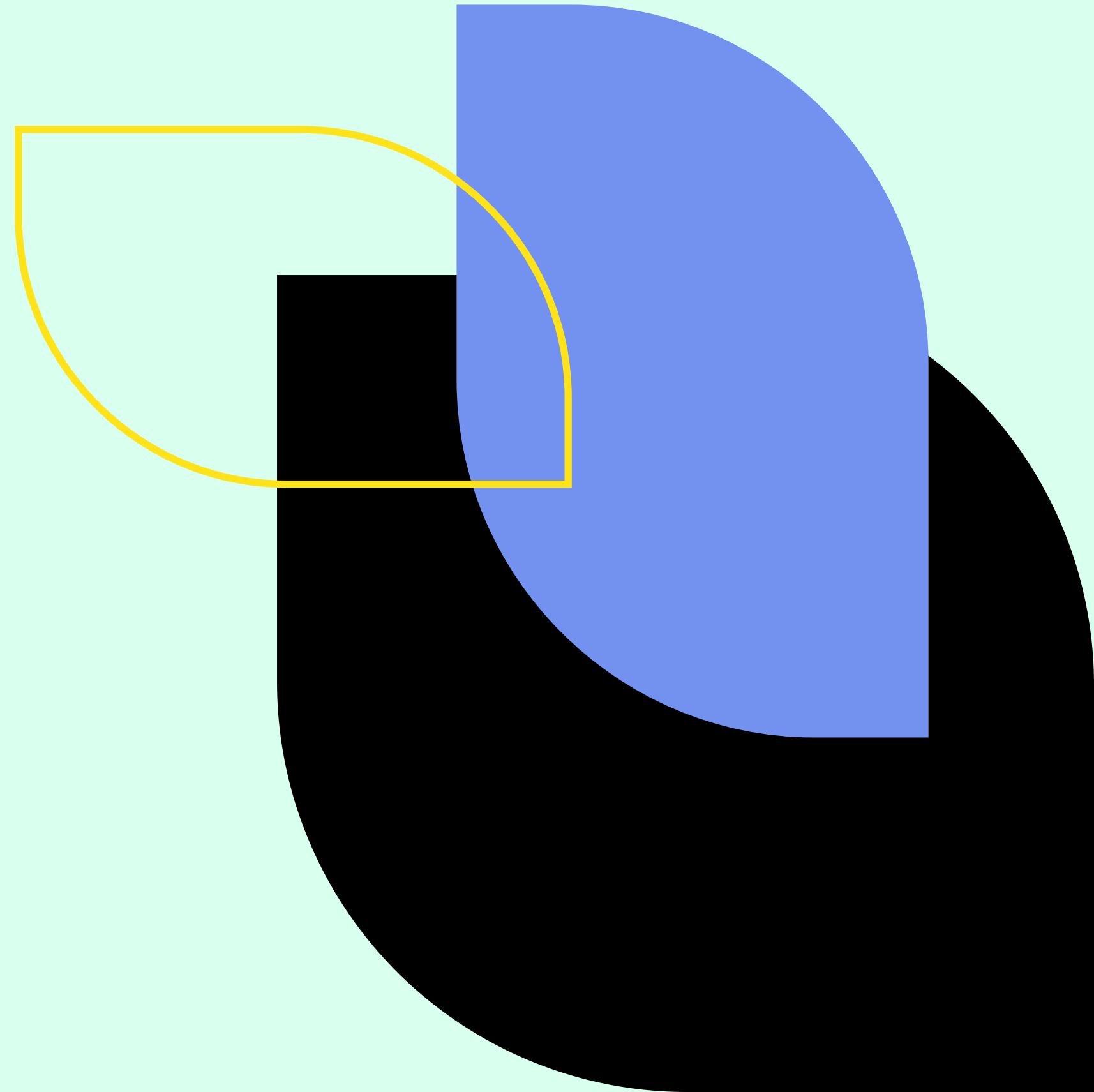
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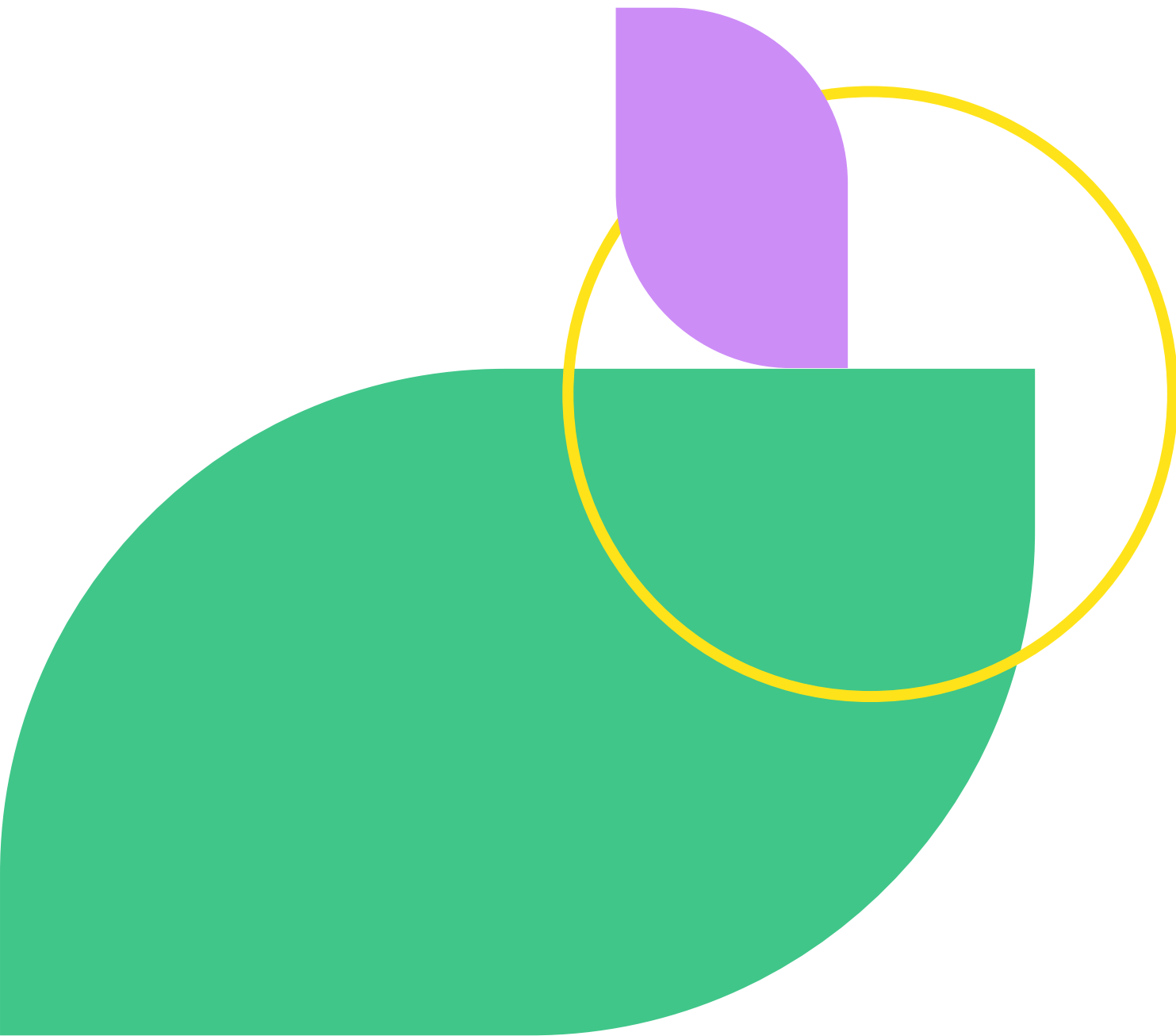
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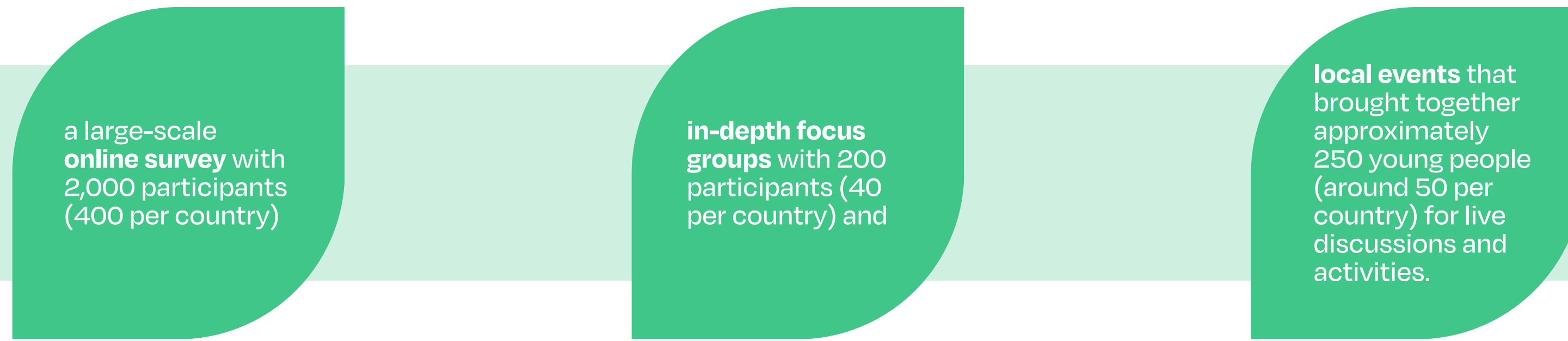
Introduction



Debating Europe is the citizen engagement unit of *Friends of Europe*, an independent and non-partisan think tank working to shape a more inclusive, sustainable and forward-looking Europe. Through both qualitative and quantitative methodologies – such as surveys, focus groups and local events – Debating Europe brings citizens into the heart of the policymaking conversation. Our work empowers people to play a greater role in shaping the decisions that affect their lives, fosters meaningful dialogue and helps build bridges between citizens, policymakers and stakeholders across sectors.

We believe that **designing better policy starts with listening to people**. That's why we work closely with citizens, public institutions, private actors and civil society to surface grounded, data-driven insights that inform inclusive and responsive governance.

This German country report presents the national findings of **Voices for Choices**, a citizen engagement project (autumn 2024-summer 2025) that involved over **2,000 young people (aged 18–35)** across five EU countries: Denmark, France, Germany, Italy and Poland. In total, the project included:



a large-scale
online survey with
2,000 participants
(400 per country)

**in-depth focus
groups** with 200
participants (40
per country) and

local events that
brought together
approximately
250 young people
(around 50 per
country) for live
discussions and
activities.

The report focuses on what emerged from a diverse group of young Germans today, shedding light on their views, priorities and concerns. What choices do they feel are available to them? What role do they believe they have in shaping policy, society and the future? And what do they need to feel more empowered and heard?

By capturing these insights, this report aims to support policymakers, funders and organisations seeking to better connect with young people in Germany and strengthen democratic participation in practice.

Young Germans think that...*



POLARISATION & DEMOCRACY

- 74% Germany is **polarised**
- Politicians are **responsible** for polarisation
- 78% Better **education** is the best solution to **overcome** polarisation
- 82% Experts are the **most trusted source** of information
- 79% Elections are their favourite form of democratic engagement

ROLE OF AI & TECHNOLOGY

- 61% AI contributes to polarisation
- 48% AI-generated content has not affected their political opinions

49%

Their life will get **harder** in the next five years

55%

Their **government** will **not protect them** in hard times

93%

Governments should **invest more** in **affordable housing**

38%

Somewhat **prepared** to **handle** the green transition

ROLE OF AI & TECHNOLOGY

73%

Governments should use technology to create jobs

43%

AI will provide more opportunities to improve living standards for all

EQUITY & PROSPERITY



SECURITY & RESILIENCE

50%

The **EU** should be in **charge** on Europe's defence

72%

NATO should **not** **reduce** their role in European defence

54%

Ukraine should join the **EU**

77%

Cybersecurity should be a **top priority** for European defence

ROLE OF AI & TECHNOLOGY

63%

The EU should invest more in AI in defence and space security

72%

AI can help guarantee online safety

73%

Environment-friendly options are **too expensive**

74%

The **EU** should coordinate the **economic efforts** among its 27 countries to **reduce** their **environmental impact**

74%

Businesses should **share** their **research expertise** with governments

68%

Governments should **provide** **tax incentives** to reduce environmental impact

ROLE OF AI & TECHNOLOGY

34%

It's unclear if AI & tech will protect the planet from climate change

CLIMATE & SUSTAINABILITY



*Source: 'Voices for Choices - Data for decisions that matter' survey report



Focus groups

Young Germans from *Voices for Choices* demonstrate a **strong awareness of the profound challenges** currently facing their society. Across all four discussion themes – sustainability, economy, democracy and security – several cross-cutting trends emerge: growing **distrust towards political institutions**, a desire for genuine participation and structural change, demands for social justice, and an ambivalent attitude towards **artificial intelligence and digitalisation**. It transpires that young people do not view politics as an abstract process, but as something that directly affects their everyday lives – and which, in their view, must urgently become **more transparent, fair and inclusive**.

Loss of trust & demand for participation

- Declining trust in political processes and institutions.
- Youth feel ignored at both local and national levels.
- Political communication seen as too technocratic or too populist.
- Frustration over unfulfilled political promises, especially in economy and environment.
- Strong demand for greater transparency in media, lobbying and decision-making.

Systemic inequality & social justice

- Social justice viewed as a structural issue, not just individual responsibility.
- Key barriers identified in housing, education and political participation.
- Calls for a stronger social safety net and targeted financial support for youth.
- Economic insecurity linked to reduced political engagement and sense of stability.

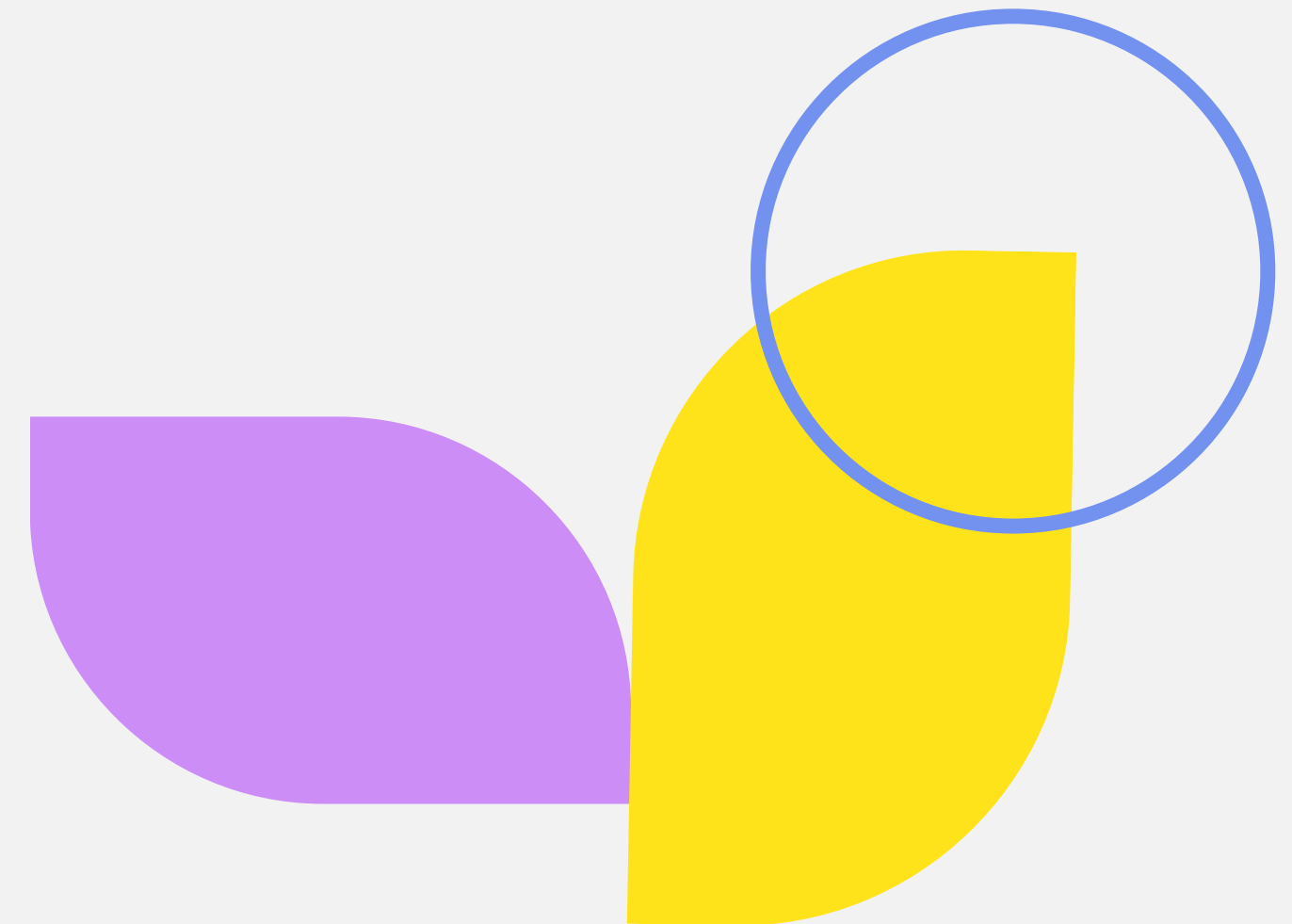


Digitalisation & AI

- Mixed views: potential for education and participation vs. risks of misuse.
- Concerns about manipulation, disinformation, algorithmic bias, and weak regulation.
- Demand for clear legal frameworks and societal – not corporate – control over AI.

Civic education & local participation

- Need for more civic education in schools and informal settings.
- Desire for inclusive spaces for dialogue and learning beyond party politics.
- Youth want participation formats (e.g., citizen dialogues) with real impact.
- Emphasis on democracy as ongoing dialogue, not just voting.
- Calls to enhance local and intergenerational participation opportunities.





Democracy

The discussions made clear that democracy is not taken for granted by young citizens in Germany – they believe it must be explained, experienced and protected. Education, participation, transparency and the feeling of being heard are at the core of their expectations. In their view, polarisation, frustration and disinformation can only be addressed through long-term structural measures. A strong public broadcasting system, civic education across all types of schools and spaces for genuine human connection are seen as particularly effective.

Judging friendships based on political views would be dangerous for democracy.

Klara, F, 18–24



Democracy under pressure

- Democracy is seen as essential but increasingly under strain.
- Society is perceived as deeply polarised, with politics, social media and news media fuelling division.
- Many stated that it is extreme views that tend to lead to exclusion – not moderate differences.

"It's [polarisation] basically everywhere. You talk to people from all kinds of backgrounds – and it always seems to split into two camps," said Klara, F, 18–24.

"Judging friendships based on political views would be dangerous for democracy." – Klara, F, 18–24

Trust & frustration

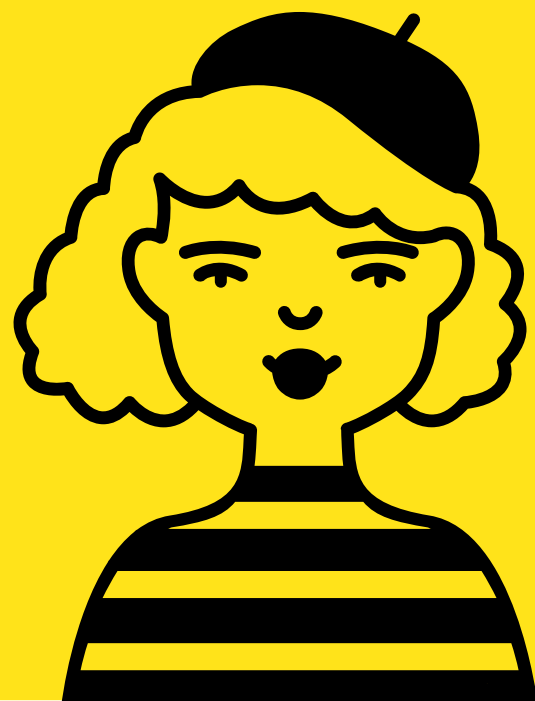
- Broad trust in institutions like the Federal Constitutional Court and scientific bodies, but scepticism towards politics and media persists.

"I have a fundamental trust in our Basic Law – but everything must still be questioned critically." – Emma, F, 18–24

"I've developed a real distrust in the media." – Lisa, F, 25–30

Just knowing that a law doesn't get passed just like that, but needs majorities – that already helps build trust.

Emma, F, 18–24



Political education & participation

- Civic education seen as vital to counter polarisation and strengthen democratic trust.

"Just knowing that a law doesn't get passed just like that, but needs majorities – that already helps build trust." – Emma, F, 18–24

"We hardly have any spaces for discourse – youth centres, places for political education – that's where funding has been cut in recent years." – Klara, F, 18–24

"They [citizen dialogues] check a box and move on to the next agenda item." – Simon, M, 25–30

"[We need] social spaces where people can simply encounter one another – not necessarily to debate, but to understand that we share similar needs." – Olga, F, 31–35

Digitalisation & AI

- New tech is seen as both an opportunity and a risk to democracy.

"[Chatbots] becomes dangerous in school settings if they start inventing sources." – Emma, F, 18–24

"AI could be helpful because it doesn't react emotionally – that can take some pressure off public discourse." – Simon, M, 25–30

- Call for strong regulation and digital literacy.

Anti-democratic parties & radicalisation

- Mixed views on banning the AfD; concern over unintended consequences.

"People would feel even more alienated." – Klara, F, 18–24

"It would strip them of their political affiliation – that could do more harm than good." – Carolina, F, 18–24

- Root causes of extremism seen in a lack of opportunity and political neglect.

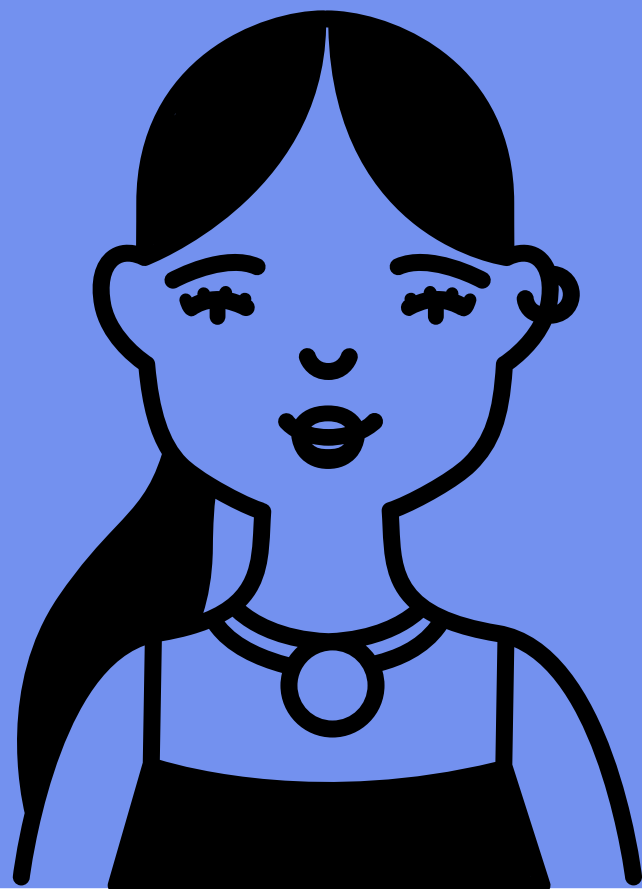


Security

For young Germans, security goes well beyond military deterrence. They advocate for a holistic approach that encompasses social, digital, ecological and institutional dimensions. The EU is seen as a potential key actor in this domain – provided it is credible, democratically legitimised and capable of taking action.

There isn't even a common weapons system.

Sophie, F, 18–24



Expanded understanding of security

- Young Germans see security as more than military defence – it includes social, digital, ecological and institutional stability.
- Support for greater EU autonomy in defence, but scepticism around feasibility of an EU army.

“There isn't even a common weapons system.” – Sophie, F, 18–24

- NATO seen as essential but with caution due to US political instability.

“Trump is a warning sign.” – Darius, M, 18–24

Civic engagement vs. military service

- Many open to civil crisis roles (logistics, medical help), but hesitant about bearing arms.

“I hope I would stand up for democracy, but I was also relieved to hear that conscription is harder to enforce for women.” – Theresa, F, 18–24

- Mandatory service (civil or military) should be openly debated, especially among young people.

***I fundamentally
wouldn't trust
an AI.***

Luca, F, 18–24



Cybersecurity & disinformation

- Strong concern about digital threats, especially from Russia and platforms like TikTok and Telegram.

“Russia wanted to influence the federal election – education in schools is crucial.” – Sophie, F, 18–24

- Media literacy access varies by school type.

“At grammar school [Gymnasium] we had classes on disinformation – but not at secondary school [Realschule].” – Darius, M, 18–24

- Call for broader digital education in schools, youth centres and social media.

AI & security

- AI viewed with scepticism – associated with surveillance, manipulation and lack of control.

“I fundamentally wouldn't trust an AI.” – Luca, F, 18–24

- Consensus: AI should never make life-or-death decisions. Laws must ensure human accountability.
- Fears expressed about tech advancing faster than regulation.

***I live in Saxony
– a state
government led
by the AfD is a
real scenario***

Alexander, M, 25–30



Perceived vs. actual safety

- Many young people distinguish between objective and perceived security. Political developments also affect subjective feelings of safety.

"I live in Saxony – a state government led by the AfD is a real scenario." – Alexander, M, 25–30

- Sophie, F, 18–24, felt her sense of safety changed after the 2024 Magdeburg Christmas market attack (6 people killed).

Trust in institutions

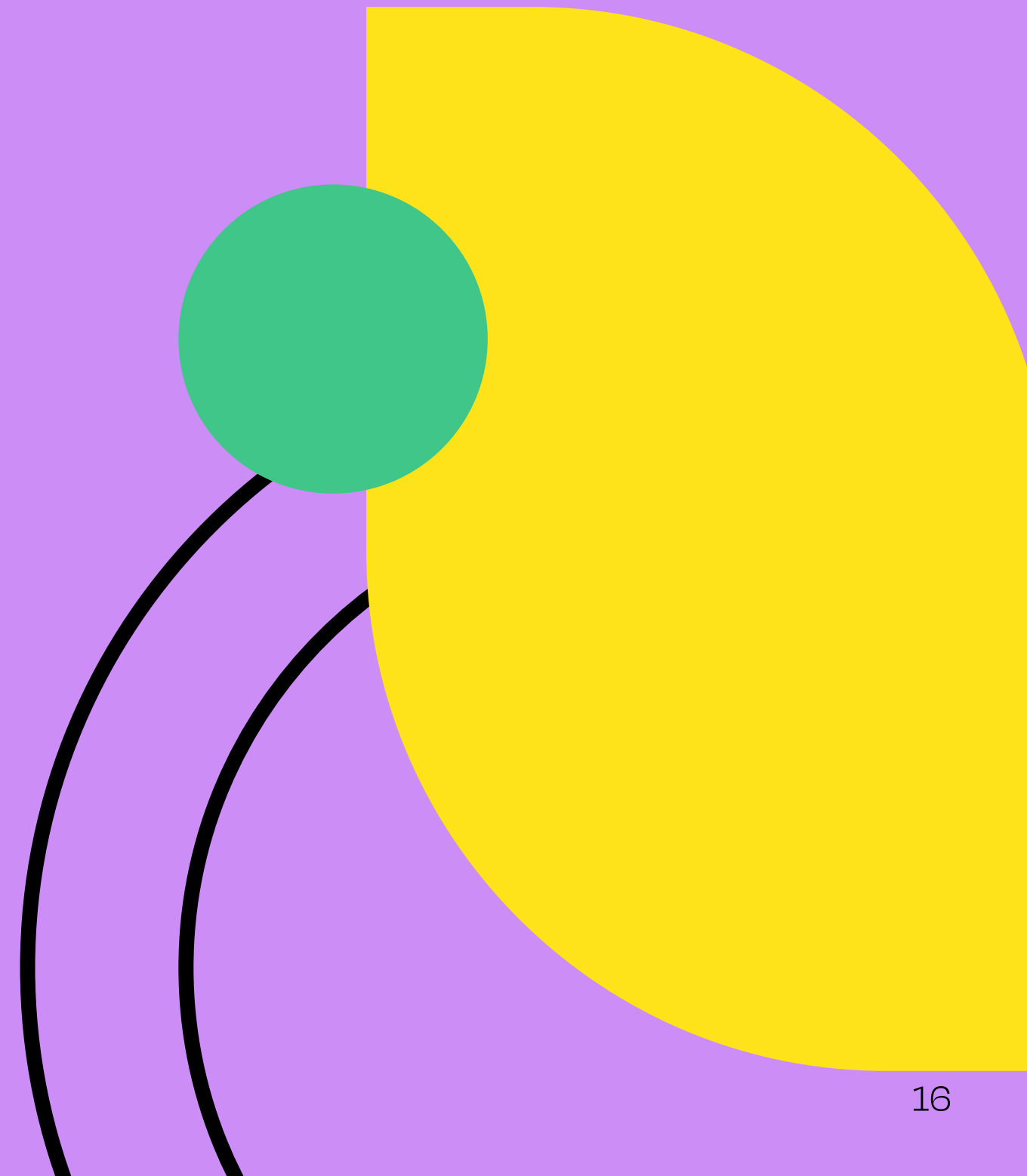
- Trust in institutions, police and political actors is essential for feeling secure.
- Concerns about police violence, biased enforcement and unequal protection of minorities

Broader threats: social & ecological

- Security includes risks like climate change, inequality and infrastructure attacks.
- Ferhat, M, 18–24, highlighted the danger of targeted attacks on critical infrastructure such as hospitals – as seen during the 2020 cyber-attack on the University Hospital in Düsseldorf.
- Instability can arise not only from external threats, but also from growing social inequality and a lack of prospects.

Economy

For young citizens in Germany, economic security means more than growth – it requires fairness, access and real opportunities. They expect politics to deliver on promises, invest in affordable housing and education, and manage digital and ecological transitions with social equity in mind. They believe that trust in the economy depends on tangible improvements in daily life and genuine inclusion in shaping future policies.





We're constantly talking about minimum wage or basic income – but the problem is: there just isn't enough housing.

Eirik, M, 18–24

Economic security & quality of life

- Young Germans link economic security to time, autonomy and social protection—not just finances.
- Biggest concern: lack of affordable housing, especially in cities.
- Frustration with unkept political promises and lack of long-term vision.
- Economic growth seen as disconnected from individual prosperity.

“We're constantly talking about minimum wage or basic income – but the problem is: there just isn't enough housing.” – Eirik, M, 18–24

“The automatic assumption that economic growth benefits everyone no longer holds true.” – Stefan, M, 25–30

Housing & financial barriers

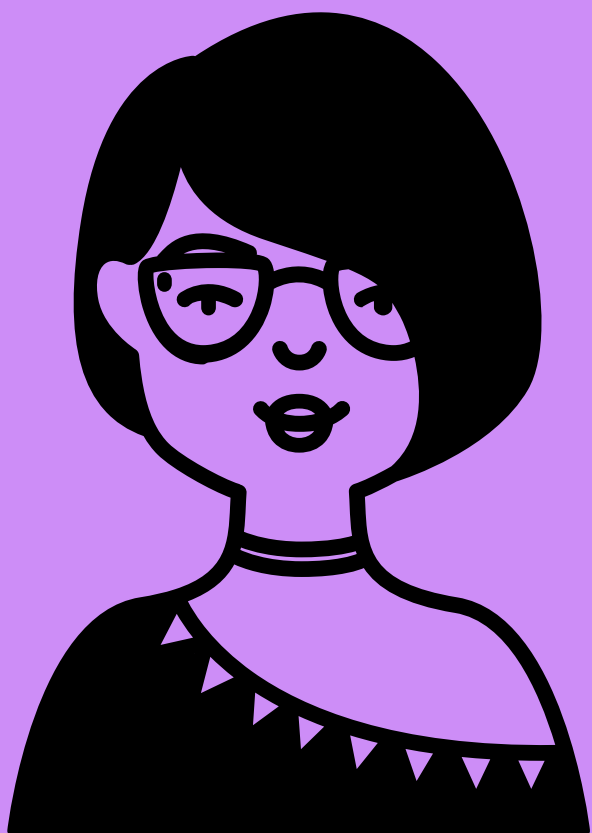
- Criticism of narrow student aid schemes (e.g. BAföG, scholarships).
- 20-hour work limit for students seen as restrictive.
- Calls for major investment in affordable housing through public and private means.

Social protection & mental strain

- Support for a strong, modernised social safety net adapted to current realities (e.g. precarious jobs, mental health).
- Economic insecurity adds mental pressure and limits future planning.

I worry that certain groups are simply being forgotten.

Lilli, F, 18–24



Distrust in political communication

- Widespread scepticism towards empty political announcements.

“There is no real political vision.” – Philipp, M, 25–30

- Political discourse viewed as alarmist or dismissive, lacking honesty.

AI, digital skills & inequality

- Concern about AI’s impact on equity and social inclusion.

“I worry that certain groups are simply being forgotten.” – Lilli, F, 18–24

- Digital access depends heavily on education and teachers’ commitment.
- EU praised for protective digital regulation, but national implementation seen as slow.

“We’re just not prepared – there’s no clear plan when it comes to AI or the ecological transition.” – Philipp, M, 25–30

Disillusionment with institutions

- Feeling of political powerlessness extends from national to EU level.
- Demand for stronger EU action, especially in economic and tax policy.
- Institutions seen as reactive rather than forward-looking.

Tax policy & fair competition

- Discussion around using taxation to reflect social and environmental costs in product pricing.
- Some participants suggested making Chinese products less attractive through taxation, using the resulting revenues to strengthen the purchasing power of European citizens.



Sustainability

Young Germans perceive sustainability as a multifaceted issue that interlinks ecological, social, economic and technological dimensions. Their expectations are clear: more transparency, more consistency and more justice. Above all, they called for a political system that does not only listen to young people but truly empowers them to shape the future.

I try hard – but when others don't care about climate protection, it's frustrating.

Alisia, F, 18–24



Sustainability as a cross-cutting issue

- Young people in Germany view sustainability as more than environmental policy – it's tied to social justice, economic structures and political participation.
- They support individual action but stress it's not enough for structural change.
- Political inaction and inconsistency damage trust; young people demand credibility, action and genuine integration into policymaking.

Transparency, equity & structural barriers

- Strong call for more transparency and easier participation.
- Sustainable living should not be income-dependent; tax relief and fair regulation are seen as essential.
- Youth feel their sustainable efforts are undermined by systemic obstacles and others' behaviour.

"I try hard – but when others don't care about climate protection, it's frustrating." – Alisia, F, 18–24

Good public transport connections should not take twice as long as driving.

Tien, M, 18–24



Living conditions & sustainable choices

- Rural residents face limited mobility and car dependency.

“Good public transport connections should not take twice as long as driving.” – Tien, M, 18–24

- Sustainable product choices hindered by cost and access.

“Healthier food should be cheaper.” – Ela, F, 25–30

“Sustainable consumption is often mentally more exhausting.” – Theresa, F, 25–30

Information & generational responsibility

- Desire for simple, clear product labelling (e.g., sustainability Nutri-Score).
- Mixed views on older generations: criticism of overburdening youth vs. admiration for past sustainable habits (e.g., mending, avoiding food waste).

Greenwashing & corporate responsibility

- Distrust in companies' climate claims; strong demand for regulation and penalties.

“Multi-million euro fines for large companies – like Apple and Meta.” – Tien, M, 18–24

- Preference for incentives (e.g., subsidies for solar/e-mobility) over bans.

Where is the climate money?

Theresa, F, 25–30



Frustration with climate communication

- Climate protection measures are often poorly communicated and difficult to understand.
- *“Where is the climate money?”* asked Theresa, F, 25–30, referencing the popular concept of ‘climate money’, which refers to financial resources used for actions to address climate change.

Mixed views on the EU

- EU seen as a key player for coordinated policy but criticised for inaction.
- “Lack of decisiveness.” – Maximilian, M, 31–35*
- Desire for member states to retain local decision-making capacity.

Artificial intelligence: opportunity & concern

- Broad consensus that digital technologies are not inherently sustainable, but that they can be helpful under the right conditions.

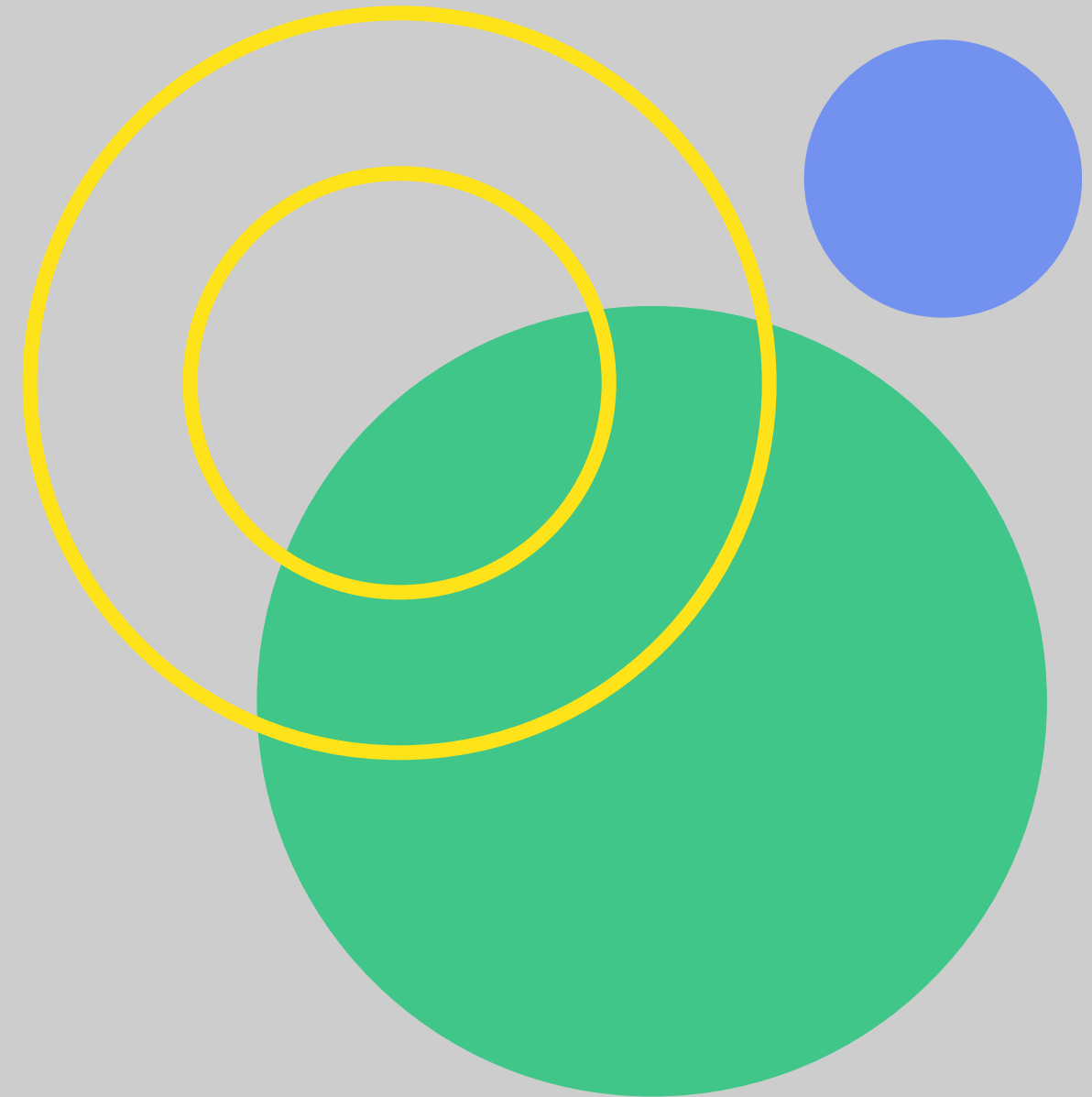
Ela, F, 25–30, sees *“incredible potential”* in AI; Tien, M, 18–24, emphasised that *“AI could contribute to greater efficiency and resource conservation if applied correctly.”*

Education & participation

- Strong demand for climate education in schools/universities.
- Support for low-threshold info and youth inclusion in decision-making.
- Local initiatives and intergenerational formats (e.g., in companies) welcomed.

Local event

Together for a secure Europe



● Voices for choices

2025 country report — **Germany**

The German local event, hosted by Polis180 in Berlin on 4 June 2025, gathered young people from across Germany. The workshop explored the four *Voices for Choices* themes: **sustainability, economy, security** and **democracy**, through inclusive and participatory group discussions.

The aims were to:

- Encourage open dialogue on multifaceted security challenges;
- Reflect critically on institutional roles and citizen engagement; and
- Generate actionable ideas for policymakers.

Participants began by sharing words they associate with security, revealing it as a **multidimensional concept that goes beyond military defence** to include climate resilience, social equity, digital security and gender justice. Discussions unfolded around three main blocks: **responsibility for security** in the EU and NATO context, reforms and preparedness in the **Bundeswehr** (Germany's armed forces) and civilian defence, and the broader **societal dimensions of security** including democracy, social cohesion and environmental risks.

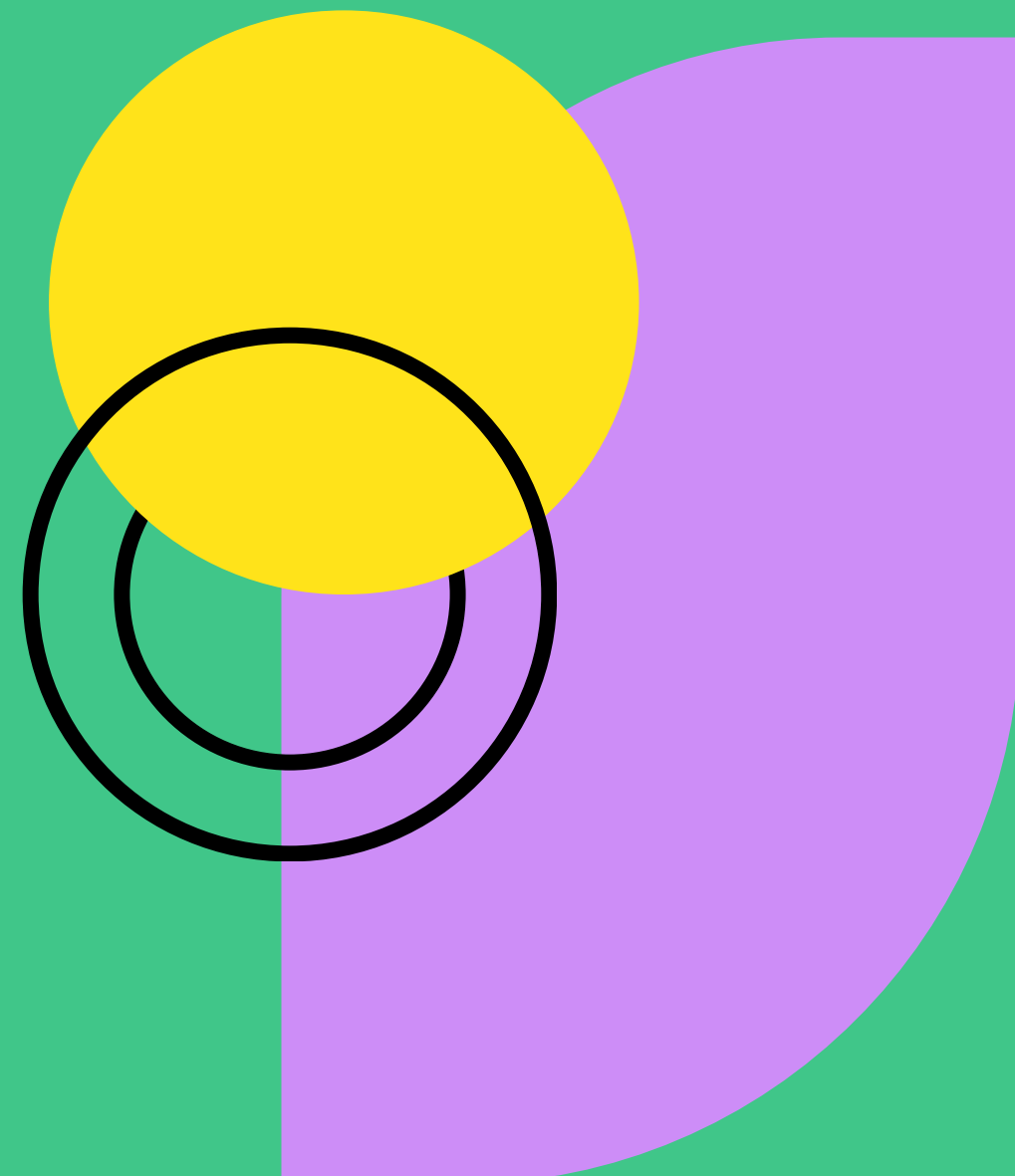
Key themes included the need for **clearer security mandates** that also address economic, environmental and social factors; the importance of modernising infrastructure and investing in digital skills; and fostering stronger cooperation between military, civil society and European institutions. Regarding the Bundeswehr, participants argued that increased funding must be accompanied by structural reforms that reflect young people's expectations and priorities.

The role of youth was a constant focus – not only in contributing to defence and crisis preparedness but also in shaping democratic dialogue, combating misinformation and advocating for sustainability and fairness. Despite some doubts about institutional trust, participants expressed a mix of concern and determination, showing readiness to engage actively if provided with genuine channels to influence Europe's security future.

Top 3 takeaways



Conclusions



Young Germans from *Voices for Choices* are calling for coherent, just and future-oriented policymaking. They view **ecological, social, economic** and **institutional** issues as deeply interconnected and reject fragmented individual measures. Their expectations of politics are high: they demand **transparency, reliability, inclusion** and a genuine opportunity to help shape decisions. From their perspective, **polarisation, loss of trust** and **social inequality** are not personal attitudes, but symptoms of a political system that must urgently open – to the **diversity, needs** and **ideas** of the younger generation.

Grounded in lived experience and shaped by forward-looking aspirations, *Voices for Choices* offers policymakers timely, evidence-based insights – arriving at a pivotal moment as the EU prepares its next **Multiannual Financial Framework**. The message is clear: the future of Europe must be shaped **with** young people, not merely **for** them.

By integrating these findings into Friends of Europe's broader citizen engagement work in Brussels, we aim to inform EU-wide approaches that promote **intergenerational equity**, reinforce **democratic legitimacy** and safeguard **long-term prosperity**. In this way, the perspectives of Germany's youth can contribute not only to shaping national priorities, but also to advancing inclusive and sustainable strategies across Europe.