SSH CENTRE – WP5.3

Final series of Focus Groups – Science and Society

Final report

The aim of this final series of focus groups was to gather citizen's perspectives, their hopes, concerns and ideas on research and innovation in the EU ahead of the final event organised by Friends of Europe on 28 January 2026. These final online group discussions took place between 17 and 24 September 2025.

The focus group discussion topics while remaining close to the project, avoid specific technical references to allow citizens to contribute based on their differing levels of understanding. As part of the SSH CENTRE project, four focus group series were previously conducted between September 2023 and April 2024, relating to Adaptation to Climate Change; Restore our Ocean and Waters by 2030; 100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities by 2030; A Soil Deal for Europe. The transcripts are not for public as this level of anonymisation is not possible. Participants were given the choice to use a pseudonym so that they would be comfortable sharing their personal perspectives.

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I.   Context and participants' profiles

The discussions brought together **40 young Europeans**, predominantly aged **18-30**, with some participants aged **31-40**. Most held **postgraduate degrees**, and were employed in fields such as research, academia, youth work, law, cybersecurity, public administration, NGOs, clean energy, digital operations, and the private sector. A smaller number were students or unemployed.

Participants came from a wide range of countries: **Italy, Germany, Belgium, France, Estonia, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Greece, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria,** and **Austria** (living and working in different EU cities including Brussels, Madrid, Bologna, Oxford, Cologne, Thessaloniki, Budapest, Rome, Trento, Hamburg, Wrocław and Paris).

Most participants had some indirect or direct connection to EU institutions, science, policy or communication, but repeatedly stressed that their level of awareness is **not typical of the wider public**.

II.   Executive summary

Across all groups, participants expressed a **broadly positive attitude toward science and innovation**, while simultaneously highlighting a **persistent gap between European research activity and citizens' everyday awareness**. EU-funded research is perceived as important but largely invisible, often recognised only through major moments such as the COVID-19 vaccine or high-profile grants. This visibility gap is most pronounced in Southern and Eastern Europe, where participants noted weaker media coverage and lower public engagement with science.

Participants were clear that **technology alone cannot solve Europe's major challenges**, even if scientific progress remains essential. While many emphasised Europe's need to "catch up" with global competitors in areas like AI, energy, defence and medical research, they also stressed that political will, social policies, ethics, and behavioural change must complement technological solutions. Concerns about trust and transparency featured prominently: some participants trust that EU institutions rely on evidence, whereas others questioned the influence of lobbying, political bias, and growing information overload.

Citizens consistently called for **stronger communication** and **better outreach** to make science more accessible and understandable to the general public, emphasising that research becomes meaningful when it is local, concrete, and socially relevant. They supported involving a broader range of actors - especially young people, universities, civil society and industry - but acknowledged barriers such as generational hierarchies, uneven access, and the risk of engaging only the already informed.

Overall, participants envision a Europe where scientific ambition is matched by **clear communication**, **ethical safeguards**, and **genuine public involvemen**t. Their insights suggest that strengthening the societal foundations of European research - trust, transparency, inclusivity, and visibility - is as important as increasing investment or accelerating technological development.

III.   Question-by-question synthesis

Q1. Introductory question and motivation for choosing the topic

> **Question:** "Have I pronounced your first name correctly? Where in Europe do you live?" Check-in/Ice breaker: "Why did you choose this topic?"

Participants' reasons for joining the discussion were closely tied to their **professional and academic trajectories**. Several worked:

- In **EU-funded research programmes** (e.g. research assistants, people in Horizon-type projects).
- In fields **adjacent to research and innovation**, such as cybersecurity, clean energy, youth work, digital operations, or law.
- In **public institutions or administrations**, including city halls and national public companies.

For a number of participants, EU research and innovation literally **provides their job** or has shaped their location choices (e.g. moving to Brussels or other hubs where EU regulation and R&I are concentrated). Others approached the topic from a civic or normative interest, for instance in **academic freedom, student representation, or the social impact of AI**.

Q2. Visibility of European research and scientific projects; awareness of the EU budget

Question: "How often do you hear about European research or scientific projects (like EU-funded programs or big breakthroughs e.g. Covid19 vaccine) in the news or online? Where do you hear about it?" Quick follow-up question: "In July, the European Commission proposed a new budget for 2028–2034. Who knows how much of it is planned for research and innovation? If you think you know, raise your hand."

Common findings

Across all groups, participants agreed that **European research and scientific programmes are poorly visible** to the broader public:

- Those **working within EU-funded projects**, research institutes, or Brussels-based organisations reported *frequent exposure* to EU research.
- Participants **outside these professional circles** said they rarely or almost never encounter information about EU research, other than during **exceptional moments** (e.g. the Covid-19 vaccine).

Typical channels mentioned included:

- **Public broadcasters** (notably in Estonia).
- **Social media** (Twitter/X, LinkedIn, Instagram).
- **University environments** (calls for student projects, PhD opportunities).
- **Conferences** and professional networks.

Many noted that even when projects are EU-funded, the EU dimension is **not clearly communicated**; recognition often requires checking a website for a small EU flag or footnote.

Clara, F, from Germany: *"If I don't take care to look for news… I don't hear anything."*

Flavia, F, from Italy: *"Scientific programmes are not very well known in the general public… if you don't work in that sector, you don't know about it."*

Regarding the **2028–2034 EU budget proposal**, almost no participant could identify how much is allocated to research and innovation. Some groups contained a mix of participants who had heard of the proposal and those who had not, but overall **awareness and understanding were very low**. Even when the existence of a budget proposal was known, participants struggled to translate large figures into meaningful outcomes (e.g. "how many projects?", "what concrete impact?").

Joshua, M, from Germany: *"The money they put into these programmes is not reflected by citizens knowing about the incredible positive impact."*

Anna, F, from the Netherlands: *"The numbers are just so high… it's difficult to grasp what they mean."*

Country and regional differences

- **Estonia (Northern/central)**: Stood out as a positive example, with a public broadcaster that covers European Research Council-style grants and hosts dedicated science popularisation content.
- **Italy, Greece (Southern)**: Several participants reported that national media rarely cover science or EU research; science felt absent from mainstream news.
- **Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, France (Western/Northern)**: Participants tended to access information on EU research through **niche channels** (conferences, professional networks, university communications, specific DG social media); they described general public awareness as low.
- **Hungary and Bulgaria (Central/Eastern)**: Some participants were sharply critical of EU research, perceiving it as ineffective, low-impact or even "simulated", and saw communication as failing to justify the money spent.

Ingrid, F, from Estonia: "*In Estonia, the only place I see it is our public broadcaster. They publish when the Estonian researchers get ERC grant, which is very big and prestigious. And public broadcasting also has a section for science popularisation, or science news, called Novator. So, first they publish the general news 'this researcher got that big chunk of a grant' and then on that science news channel they go deep into it. But that's really the only place that I ever see stuff like that.*"

Q3. Connection between science/innovation in Europe and everyday life

Question: "When you think about science and innovation in Europe, do you feel it connects to your everyday life - if yes, how? - or does it feel far away? Why?"

Common findings

Most participants did feel that **science and innovation are connected to their everyday lives**, but often in **implicit or indirect ways**:

- Through **digital technologies** (AI, apps, transport systems, bus tracking, algorithmic services).
- Through **data protection and regulation** (GDPR, digital services, cybersecurity).
- Through **work contexts**, particularly in research, clean energy, EU policy, digital operations and youth work.
- Through **critical infrastructures** (railways, cars, planes, energy systems).

Arturo, M, from Italy: *"Both innovations and science are deeply connected to my everyday life, especially now with AI."*

Bianca, F, from Slovakia: *"Science feels far away because people don't care about it… researchers are left alone."*

Karim, M, from Belgium: *"It connects through our industries… even if we don't connect the dots right away."*

Several participants noted a **gap between "science," which they described as abstract or distant, and "innovation/technology," which felt immediate, visible, and woven into daily life**. **Science became less abstract only when connected to concrete technologies** such as apps, transport, or energy systems.

Youth workers and social scientists emphasised both the **positive and negative** aspects of digital innovation: increased opportunities, but also risks such as **AI-facilitated harassment, fake images and online abuse**.

Ingrid, F, from Estonia: *"In our work we see AI used for harassment, fake images… it is a growing issue."*

Country and regional differences

- In **Slovakia** and some parts of **Southern Europe**, participants described science as *far from everyday life*, due to low national funding, limited public communication and unclear government priorities.
- In **Estonia, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium**, participants more frequently cited **AI, cybersecurity, digitalisation and social media** as daily manifestations of science and innovation.

Q4. Is Europe trying to 'solve everything with technology'? The role of science and technology in tackling major issues

> **Question:** Some people say Europe is trying to 'solve everything with technology.' Do you think science and technology should be the main tools to solve big issues like climate change, health crises, or energy? If yes, why? It not, and if you could decide how to allocate the EU budget, in which sector would you invest first?

Common findings

Participants in all groups generally **rejected the premise** that Europe is trying to "solve everything with technology". Many noted they had **never heard** anyone say that. Instead, they described a more nuanced picture:

- Science and technology are seen as **necessary but not sufficient** for addressing challenges such as climate change, health crises, energy and security.
- Participants emphasised that **political will, ethics, social measures and behavioural change** are essential complements to technological solutions.
- There was broad support for **increasing EU investment** in science and innovation, but coupled with concerns about governance, fairness and priorities.
- When participants rejected science and technology as the sole or primary solutions, they often redirected the discussion toward **alternative or complementary budget priorities**. These included social policies to reduce inequality, investment in education and human skills, stronger political coordination and governance, and measures to ensure public acceptance of technological change. Importantly, these views did not reflect opposition to funding science as such, but rather a call for a **more balanced allocation of EU resources**, integrating technological innovation with social, political and ethical dimensions.

Susi, F, 18-30, from Austria: *"While they are important, I don't associate the EU with R&I. I'm seeing more other pressing issues. I would give more to a different political agenda: migration for example or developing more human skills."*

Differences and debates

- **Southern Europe (Italy, Greece)**: Participants stressed that technology cannot work without **political will** and clear policy direction. They frequently mentioned the need to **catch up technologically** with the US and China, but warned that innovation alone cannot solve problems such as climate change or health crises.
- **Central/Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Hungary)**: Some participants emphasised **science and technology as core drivers** of solutions, particularly in **security and energy**. One argued that 90% of solutions lie in research and advocated prioritising

security and energy over diversity/equality initiatives, which prompted strong disagreement from others.

- **Western/Northern Europe (Germany, France, Belgium, Netherlands, Estonia)**: Participants tended to present more **balanced or critical** views:
  - They stressed the need to **link technology to social realities**, ethical frameworks and regulation.
  - Several criticised a "gadget" mentality, whereby innovation is expected to fix problems quickly without considering side effects (e.g. cybersecurity, inequality, environmental impacts).
  - Some highlighted **behavioural science** as a crucial complement to technological interventions.

There were also normative debates over whether the EU should adopt a **competitive "catch-up" logic** vis-à-vis the US and China, or instead emphasise a distinct European model of **open, collaborative and ethical science**, including open-source approaches.

Apostolos, M, from Greece *: "We should focus on uniting countries and giving southern labs opportunities."*

Damiano, M, from Italy : *"Technology is a tool, not the main solution. We still need to communicate."*

Q5. Information and evidence in EU policymaking; trust in scientific evidence

Question: What sort of information/evidence do you think European policymakers use when making decisions? Do you trust that they use scientific evidence? Why or why not?

Common findings

Participants broadly believed that **scientific evidence is used at least to some extent** in EU policymaking, especially within the **European Commission**, but they also identified several problems:

- **Lobbying** was seen as highly influential in shaping which evidence reaches decision-makers.
- There was concern about **politicisation of academia**, think tanks and reports, and about the **quality and verification** of some evidence used. Participants also mentioned a fear of instrumentalisation of evidence by media and far-right parties.
- Some participants worried that public narratives about "following the science" during the Covid-19 pandemic had **reduced space for political debate** by presenting decisions as inevitable.

Contrasting perspectives

- Some participants (notably from **Bulgaria and parts of Eastern Europe**) expressed very **sceptical views**, claiming policymakers rely almost exclusively on **lobbies**.
- Participants in several focus groups - particularly in Germany, Belgium and France - provided **more nuanced accounts**, describing instances where **research-based advocacy and scientific evidence informed discussions or resolutions in the European Parliament**, while still acknowledging the significant influence of lobbying.
- Participants across several countries mentioned **public consultations, working groups and youth fora** as channels for evidence and participation, but noted that these are often poorly known or unattractive to the general public.

Benedikt, M, 31-40, from Germany: "*I've been a member of an advocacy group on youth peace and security, and we did get access to policymakers. We also initiated discussions and resolutions in the EU Parliament on this topic by presenting scientific evidence.*"

A recurring theme was the distinction between **"neutrality"** and **"impartiality"**. Some argued that neutrality is illusory and can be used to mask underlying political choices, whereas impartiality recognises positionality but aims at fairness and transparency.

Karim, M, 18-30, from Belgium rejected neutrality outright: *"I don't really believe in neutrality… no individual being on this planet is neutral."* He warned that claims of neutrality can depoliticise decisions that are inherently value-based: *"The most technical entities… are sometimes very political, so neutrality can very much be an etiquette to turn off everyone's sense of critical thinking."*

This concern was echoed in another focus group by **Gregor, M, 18-30, from Austria,** who reflected on the pandemic and cautioned against framing political decisions as scientifically inevitable: *"Political decisions were almost communicated as inevitable because of scientific research, and that silenced the political and social debate."*

Anna, F, 18-30, from the Netherlands added a complementary perspective, stressing that what counts as "evidence" is itself shaped by power and framing: *"It doesn't mean that it's good science evidence. It's the way science is framed."*

Q6. Who should be involved in R&I, and how to ensure science reflects citizens' needs?

Question: Who do you think should be involved in Europe's research and innovation activities: scientists, politicians, citizens, or others? And how can we make sure that science is actually used in public decisions in a way that reflects citizens' needs?

Common findings

Across the groups, there was broad support for involving:

- **Scientists and researchers**, as core experts.
- **Policymakers**, for democratic legitimacy.
- **Citizens**, to reflect lived experiences and societal needs.
- **Private sector and industry**, given their role in innovation, investment and implementation.

However, participants were acutely aware of the **challenges** in achieving meaningful and representative involvement:

- Risk that only the **"most available and vocal"** citizens participate.
- Concerns about **generational hierarchies**, where older (often male) actors dominate discussions and younger voices are marginalised.
- Perceptions that some citizen engagement exercises (e.g. certain polls) might be captured by EU or Brussels-based "bubbles" and thus not representative of the wider population.
- The difficulty for scientists to make their work easily understandable and to communicate their findings effectively to citizens

National and generational nuances

- **Italian participants** frequently raised the issue of **youth exclusion and lack of trust** in younger generations in formal settings.
- **German, Belgian and French participants** focused more on balancing citizen involvement with expertise, and on the risks of assuming neutrality.
- Some participants emphasised **universities, youth associations and citizen science projects** (e.g. birdwatching initiatives) as promising models for citizen involvement.

Q7. What would make science and research feel more engaging?

Question: What would make science and research feel more engaging to you?

Shared preferences

Participants repeatedly called for:

- **More accessible communication**: simpler language, clearer explanations, and better framing of relevance.

- **Engaging and fun formats**: gamification, short videos, interactive apps, podcasts, museum activities, low-threshold citizen science.
- **Localised and contextual outreach**: bringing research to places where people already gather (local centres, schools, community spaces), and tailoring topics to local concerns.
- **Humility and honesty** from scientists: acknowledging uncertainty and limits rather than projecting infallibility.

Some participants emphasised the need for **affordable or free entry points** to science engagement (e.g. museums).

Q8. If more EU money went to science and research, what should it address?

Question: If more EU money went to science and research, what kinds of problems would you want it to help solve?

Although not all groups had time to address Q8 fully, where they did answer, participants specified a rich set of priorities:

- **Climate change and adaptation**: extreme heat, energy transition, resource use, environmental sustainability.
- **Energy and strategic autonomy**: especially in relation to security and dependence on external suppliers.
- **Health and medical research**: cancer, preventive medicine, accessible healthcare.
- **Food systems and diet**: sustainable food production, food security and nutrition.
- **Social equality and redistribution**: using AI and data to improve taxation, redistribution and education.
- **Mental health and the human impact of technology**.
- **Digital divide and digital justice**: ensuring equal access to technology, addressing over-dependence, and reducing corporate predation.
- **Democratic participation and inclusion**: new forms of participation in ageing societies and among politically disenfranchised groups.
- **Ethics in emerging technologies**: addressing ethical questions before deployment rather than retrofitting ethics after problems emerge.
- **Improved transparency and management of EU funds**, to ensure money is used effectively and fairly.

Several participants also argued that EU research funding should **not be confined to the EU's internal borders**, but should support global research efforts on transboundary issues such as climate change and food security.

Q9. Is science being supported or threatened in your country?

> **Bonus question:** In your opinion, is science being supported or threatened in our country today?

Time constraints meant that not all groups addressed this question, but where it was discussed, participants described **ambivalent situations**:

- In some countries (e.g. **Netherlands, Belgium**), science was described as **both supported and threatened**: funding cuts, politicised attacks on certain disciplines, and fragmentation of institutions create vulnerabilities alongside strong scientific infrastructures.
- In **Germany**, science is institutionally protected by democracy and university autonomy, but there are concerns about **more conservative governments becoming critical of specific social sciences**, such as gender studies, and about the impact of targeted funding cuts.
- In **France**, participants felt that the country risks **falling behind** global leaders such as the US, China and Japan in scientific capacity.
- In **Italy**, some participants emphasised **indifference and confusion** rather than direct hostility: citizens may not care enough to engage with science or assess its benefits, which undermines participation and democratic oversight.

IV. Recommendations based on citizens' insights

Drawing exclusively on participants' reflections, the following recommendations emerge for European institutions, national governments and research stakeholders.

1. Improve the visibility and intelligibility of EU research

- **Reinforce existing EU branding requirements** for EU-funded research, ensuring that the EU contribution is clearly and consistently visible across communication materials, media outputs, and project interfaces.

- **Strengthen the use of social media and digital platforms** (e.g. LinkedIn, Instagram, X) to communicate EU-funded research in accessible formats, recognising that many citizens encounter EU research primarily through these channels, often incidentally or through polarised narratives.
- Collaborate with **public broadcasters, trusted media and universities** to create regular, accessible segments on EU-funded research.
- Translate abstract budget figures into **concrete, relatable narratives**: numbers of projects, problems addressed, local impacts, and benefits to citizens.

Benedikt, M, from Germany: *"There's no mention it's EU-funded… you only find out on the website."*

Ingrid, F, from Estonia: "*In Estonia, the only place I see it is our public broadcaster. They publish when the Estonian researchers get ERC grant, which is very big and prestigious. And public broadcasting also has a section for science popularisation, or science news, called Novator. So, first they publish the general news 'this researcher got that big chunk of a grant' and then on that science news channel they go deep into it. But that's really the only place that I ever see stuff like that.*"

2. Strengthen local and contextual engagement

- Bring science and research **into local spaces** where people already meet (schools, community centres, libraries, local events).
- Tailor communication to local concerns (e.g. agriculture, heatwaves, transport).
- Support **low-threshold, participatory activities** such as citizen science, debates in universities, and local workshops where citizens can encounter researchers and policy officers.

Anna, F, from the Netherlands: *"If you want people to engage, bring the research to where they already gather."*

3. Combine technological solutions with political, social and ethical action

- Avoid presenting innovation as a "magic" fix; explicitly communicate that **science and technology require political will, regulation and social measures** to be effective.
- Invest in **behavioural and social sciences** alongside technological research to address behaviours, norms and societal impacts.
- Embed **ethics-by-design**: require that ethical, societal and environmental implications are considered **before** the deployment of new technologies.

Flavia, F, from Italy: *"Without political will, science alone can't do anything."*

4. Address thematic priorities identified by citizens

- Align EU R&I investments with citizens' stated priorities:
    - **Climate change and adaptation** (including extreme heat, agriculture, food insecurity).
    - **Energy and security**, focusing on sustainable and strategically autonomous energy systems.
    - **Health and preventive medicine**, including cancer research and accessible care for marginalised groups.
    - **Social equality, redistribution, and livelihoods**, including fair taxation, housing, transport and water.
    - **Mental health and the psychological impacts of technology**.
    - **Digital divide and digital justice**, ensuring inclusive and sustainable use of digital tools.
    - **Democratic participation and new forms of involvement**, particularly in ageing and digitally divided societies.
- Support **research beyond EU borders** where this is necessary to address global challenges that also affect Europeans.

Ivo, M, from Bulgaria: *"We need to invest in strategic autonomy… I don't feel secure in Europe."*

5. Ensure transparency and plurality in the use of evidence

- **Clarify how evidence informs EU policymaking**, including the role of scientific advice, impact assessments, stakeholder consultations and political judgement.
- **Make advisory processes more pluralistic**, involving experts of different ages, disciplines and socio-economic backgrounds—not just established or narrow scientific circles.
- **Regulate lobbying with transparency**, recognising it as legitimate but requiring clear disclosure of meetings, actors and influence pathways.
- **Strengthen transparency tools**, such as public registers and open consultations, so citizens can see who is consulted and why.
- **Support diverse evidence sources**, including youth organisations, civil society groups and independent researchers, ensuring they can access policymaking spaces on equal footing.
- **Avoid presenting scientific findings as making decisions "inevitable,"** thereby preserving space for political choices and public deliberation.

Joshua, M, from Germany: *"If we say the EU only listens to lobbyists, trust collapses… and it's not true."*

6. Strengthen inclusive and participatory research & innovation governance

- **Establish long-term, structured mechanisms** for citizen, youth and community participation in R&I governance, moving beyond one-off or low-representativeness consultations.
- **Use intermediaries -** universities, youth organisations, civil society groups - to reach a broader and more diverse cross-section of citizens, not only the most vocal.
- **Actively address inclusion barriers**, especially generational and gender hierarchies that limit whose voices are heard in research-related forums.
- **Ensure diverse representation** in advisory boards, missions, expert groups and consultation processes, including young people and early-career researchers.
- **Monitor participation dynamics**, assessing who contributes, who dominates, and whose perspectives shape decisions.
- **Promote scientific literacy and engagement**, making involvement meaningful rather than symbolic.

Mariavittoria, F, from Italy: *"Young people are not listened to… it's always older men speaking."*

7. Support science systems under pressure

- Monitor and respond to **threats to specific disciplines**, including social sciences (e.g. gender studies) that may be politically targeted.
- The EU should mitigate **fragmentation and uneven resource distribution** at national level, including cases where institutional duplication and political alignment affect funding outcomes.
- Engage citizens in understanding not only the outcomes of research, but also the **conditions under which scientific work is carried out** (job security, funding, autonomy), to sustain legitimacy and trust.

In sum, the citizens consulted in these focus groups express a strong belief in the importance of science and innovation for Europe's future, but they call for an approach that is **more transparent, participatory, socially grounded and ethically conscious**, and for communication that makes the **European dimension of research visible, understandable and meaningfully connected to their everyday lives**.