

YOUNG PEOPLE, EU CITIZENSHIP AND ACTIVISM VOL. II

EUact - Final Report

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ABOUT

This publication was compiled as a final analysis of the project 'EP elections and beyond: active participation of citizens at all EU levels' (EUact) that aimed to:

- 1. encourage sustained and active engagement of the citizens, especially young people, in the decision- making process of the EU.**
- 2. enhance the democratic legitimacy of the EU by offering valuable recommendations to EU policymakers.**

The report provides reflections on the perceptions of young people related to their attitudes towards the European Union (EU), their understanding of EU citizenship and activism, as well as reflections on the ways to encourage them to be active EU citizens. The qualitative and quantitative data summarised in this report are a result of a 14 month-long project that involved the following key activities:

- 1. Focus groups conducted in Bulgaria, Germany, Poland and Slovakia during November 2018**
- 2. Transnational reflection groups that took place in Bratislava in November 2018 and September 2019**
- 3. Public debates focused on the May 2019 European Parliament elections that took place in Berlin, Sofia, Lublin and Bratislava between March-April 2019**
- 4. 'Get out and vote' social media campaign conducted in Bulgaria, Germany, Poland and Slovakia between April-May 2019.**



PARTNERS



Das Progressive Zentrum, Germany



GLOBSEC, Slovakia



Slavyani Foundation, Bulgaria



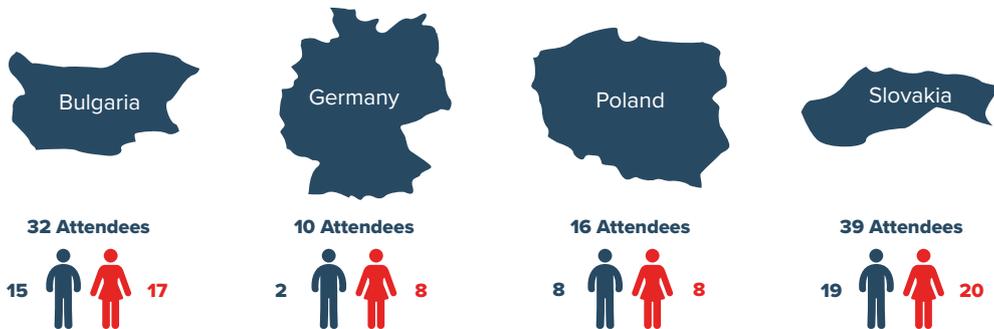
Higher School of International Relations and Communication, Poland



EUACT IN NUMBERS



Focus Groups



Transnational Reflection Groups



Public Debates



Social Media Campaign

Total number of views (includes YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and direct views at events)



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PERCEPTIONS OF THE EU

Should the EU remain an economic union, or become a union of values?

- ▶ Young people in Bulgaria and Slovakia practically avoided discussing the EU in other than economic terms. Some Slovak participants argued that the EU should stay an economic union; Bulgarian participants disputed the very concept of 'European values'.
- ▶ German participants saw a cultural union, and a union of values as much more difficult, if not impossible, to achieve compared to the economic integration.
- ▶ Polish participants were in favour of a collective social narrative which embraces all EU citizens.

What has the EU done for its citizens?

- ▶ The citizens' perceptions of what the Union does for them and the reality are not always aligned.
- ▶ Bulgarian participants saw the EU as a 'big brother' in terms of foreign policy, but did not notice 'the EU around them' in social affairs. Their perceptions were narrowed to 'European investments' and 'European funds'.
- ▶ For the Poles, the presence of the EU around them was clearly visible in their city, and the country in which they live. They pointed to the improvement of living standards of residents after Poland's accession to the EU, development of entrepreneurship in Poland, improvement of the quality of roads, buildings, squares in cities, and playgrounds for children.
- ▶ In contrast, German participants identified the same benefits of the EU's presence in Germany, but a distinct lack of the visibility of EU projects.
- ▶ In Slovakia, the public's low familiarity with the activities of European institutions and weak awareness of the citizens about what the EU's existence means for their daily existence turned into a negative view of the EU.

What do young people appreciate about the EU?

- ▶ There was a shared appreciation of the four freedoms – the free movement of goods, services, people, and money were firmly present in young people's lives.
- ▶ Polish participants emphasised the opportunities to change their place of residence, legal stay and employment in the European countries that the EU membership has given them, as well as great opportunities for students, especially the Erasmus programs, projects and grants for researchers, and the development of science. A greater openness of the Polish society to otherness and changes resulting from joining the EU, as well as greater adaptation of Poles to EU requirements were also noted.
- ▶ Slovaks were mostly apathetic – despite all the benefits of EU membership from freedom of movement, visa-free and problem-free travel and study, through common currency, to EU projects that aid the country's development, some young people did not express an attitude at all, or were not interested in the topic; some even questioned the added value of EU membership.
- ▶ German participants too criticised young people for taking the positive effects of the EU for granted. The EU is active and affects everyone, but many people are either not interested or do not know.

What lies ahead for the EU?

- ▶ The future of the Union was perceived as uncertain; Brexit is the biggest test to date for the existence of the EU.
- ▶ Young people in Bulgaria, Germany and Poland do not see the total breakdown of the EU as likely to happen in the foreseeable future. Some expect to see a new type of formation but are not able to identify it. Others feel optimistic and see today's questioning and weakening of the EU as normal in a cycle of ups and downs.
- ▶ Slovaks were the most Eurosceptic and argued that the EU will have to face changes internally and externally.

(ACTIVE) EU CITIZENSHIP

Do young people identify themselves as European?

- ▶ Germans either identified themselves as European straightaway or said their national or regional politics was more important to them. For some, the EU citizenship does not differ that much from the German citizenship.
- ▶ In Poland, most participants see themselves as Poles first and then as Europeans, despite being strongly connected to the EU. The difference for them is expressed in cultural and historical identity; greater bond with the members of the Polish state than with members of other EU Member States; and declaration of the priority of the Member States' interests over the interests of the EU community.
- ▶ Polish and Bulgarian participants see themselves as European because they enjoy the benefits of being citizens of EU Member States, including free relocation in the Member States, voting rights in elections to the European Parliament, the possibility of submitting complaints and petitions to the European Parliament, and diplomatic protection of the EU.
- ▶ Bulgarians also place more trust in the EU institutions than their own government to resolve their hardships, and as such, they do feel European in the sense of having rights and demands towards the EU institutions.
- ▶ In Slovakia, some failed to see a difference between Slovak and the EU citizenship, having lived most of their lives in Slovakia already being a member of the EU; some felt themselves to be an integral part of the EU because they made the most of the advantages of the EU citizenship; some linked EU citizenship to equality before law; some saw Slovak citizenship as superior. For some students, EU citizenship means nothing – they cannot see any differences before or after the entry of Slovakia into the EU.

Do young people feel connected to European Union politics?

- ▶ Citizens feel they can talk to those who are responsible for policymaking on a national level, but Brussels feels distant. Contacting EU policymakers on a technical level is possible, but not many people know about it. The EU decisionmaking also needs to be more transparent, not only for people to know where they can have an influence, but to also know who really is to blame, or to credit.
- ▶ Polish participants felt more committed to being citizens of Poland than Europe due to the proximity of institutions in the country, knowledge

of the mother tongue, and a good understanding of the political situation in the country.

- ▶ It is difficult to mobilise people on the national, let alone the EU- level. Increasing citizens' interest would be easier if the EU tackled everyday, especially economic, problems, and gave more prominence to social or environmental policies.
- ▶ There is a lack of a clear message on the part of the EU institutions that strong involvement of citizens would matter. The EU itself does not encourage anyone to be an active EU citizen, as there is a 'glass ceiling' above which no ordinary citizen has the chance to access.
- ▶ There is a lot of mistrust towards representatives elected to the EP – rather than listening to the 'voice of the people', they were seen as pursuing their own or party goals and interests.

What kind of EU do the young people want to see?

- ▶ German participants sought to identify a new, more supranational model of the Union.
- ▶ Polish participants were very clearly committed to support not the primacy of the EU over Member States, but rather the development of intergovernmentalism.
- ▶ Bulgarians were somewhere in the middle on this – they supported the rule of unanimity in order to protect national interests while ensuring common decisions at the EU level.

What does it mean to be an active citizen of the EU?

- ▶ For most participants, being an active EU citizen simply equalled voting in the elections.
- ▶ For Slovak participants, to be an active citizen means to be interested in events in the EU, to actively participate in discussions on European issues and to help look for solutions by expressing one's own opinions, to know all the EU Member States, to work on being informed, and to participate in surveys and opinion polls published by the EU on the current topics.
- ▶ Some Slovak students were not able to define what it means to be an active citizen of the EU. As a result, very few students saw themselves as active citizens. According to one participant, it is not possible to be an active citizen because 'it is impossible to directly influence the events in the EU'.
- ▶ Only in Germany was the 'duty to vote' referred to, and active citizenship actively considered. Although elections are not enough to change things, not going to vote means missing the opportunity to participate in decision-making.

CITIZENS' ENGAGEMENT – PUBLIC DEBATES VS. SOCIAL MEDIA

The EU's common identity, citizens' participation (from voting in the EU elections to being actively involved in the EU affairs themselves), and overcoming the social and political division across the Union – these all depended on the communication between the EU and its citizens. Especially crucial was the need to better inform EU citizens about what the EU is good for, to explain its activities and competencies clearly and appropriately, and to give citizens the feeling that taking part matters, that their voice is heard and that they can make a difference.

Public debates

- ▶ **The German debate** was done as a 'sparring' contest of ideas between EU-candidates in Berlin. After each sparring-round there were critical questions from the audience and online voting. This format involved the whole audience and not only isolated voices, plus it allowed the candidates to get direct feedback from the audience.
- ▶ The sparring-rounds focused on three topics: strengthening institutional democracy, strengthening regions, and strengthening social cohesion. The key takeaways were: a strong support for strengthening EU (especially EP) competencies, strengthening of regions and the need to bring EU debates to regions, and the need for some level of convergence across the EU.
- ▶ **The Bulgarian public debate** focused less on the EU competencies and processes, and more on the role Bulgarian citizens can play in those processes. The key aim was to motivate young people to vote in the EP elections, and to influence the new candidates for MEPs to work on making the voice of Bulgaria heard in the process of elaboration of new common policies that will guarantee the future of Europe and that of the younger generations in it, as well as the equal in value place of Bulgaria in the European Union.
- ▶ **The Polish public debate** was a contrast to a Bulgarian debate in terms of the overall message – whilst the Poles were unquestioningly supportive of the EU and of Poland being a Member State, they were also very clear that whilst they want a strong EU economy, they also want a Union that respects the individuality of each Member State. As one of the speakers summed up: 'We need a Europe of homelands, where economic ties will be strengthened while preserving cultural separateness.'
- ▶ The debate attracted students from five different universities and thus, the aim to bring more young people to the ballot was certainly fulfilled – the students that took part in the debate were representatives of academic self-governments, representatives of scientific sections, and opinion-forming students who are well-known and popular in the academic community, and thus likely to spread the message further.
- ▶ **The Slovak discussion** between students and Prime Minister of Slovakia, Peter Pellegrini, followed by an expert discussion with MEPs, local politicians and experts also focused on the place of Slovakia geopolitically. The speakers emphasized that Slovakia's place should remain firmly within the EU, not only due to the clear benefits of the Slovak EU membership, but also because if Slovakia and other EU Member States want to retain strong position on the global stage, more integration is required in the area of technology, R&D or defence and security.
- ▶ Bringing the matter back full circle, the need to communicate the EU issues right is paramount if the voter and citizen mobilisation was to be improved for the future. This responsibility, however, did not just lie with the EU, but with the national politicians too – the EU is seen as something distant and abstract, and many Slovaks feel it has no direct implications on their lives because of the 'us vs. Brussels' rhetoric that has dominated the public discourse.

'Get out and vote' social media campaign

The 'Get out and vote' social media campaign was a pilot action by GLOBSEC and its partners to reach young people that primarily communicate through social media, especially those who are less engaged with traditional forms of citizen engagement such as public debates or focus groups. The videos were produced in local languages and geared to local audiences, featuring politicians, students and experts. The Polish and the Bulgarian video were more informative and focused more on increasing knowledge about the EU, as well as expressing what the EU means to young people in those countries. The Slovak video engaged actors and influencers, emphasizing the need to vote and reminding young people to go and vote on the date of the election. The Slovak video also featured a 'vak Európa', a bag symbolising the ability to freely move around Europe. While the direct link between the campaign and the number of voters cannot be definitively proven with the data available, the effect of the videos can certainly be measured in terms of its reach – whereas the public debates 'only' attracted several hundred people combined, the number of people who saw the videos was counted in the thousands.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Drafting policies and practical solutions was the final key feature of this project. Coming up with concrete solutions in various policy areas and offering them to the EU policymakers has been another way to motivate young people to participate, and to enhance the democratic legitimacy of the EU decision-making process. During the focus groups conducted in Bulgaria, Germany, Poland and Slovakia, and during the transnational reflection groups involving young leaders from 11 European countries, several key recommendations emerged. The following ones were cross-cutting:

- ▶ Good information and knowledge about the EU, and the EU communicating more effectively with the younger generations especially is an indispensable instrument to build a better and stronger Europe.
- ▶ The EU should use common threats and challenges as unifiers and come up with EU-wide solutions and harmonisation of policies and systems wherever possible. The common goal is to achieve more coherence across the Union, bridge an East-West divide and strengthen the EU.
- ▶ There is a need to shift certain paradigms so as to respond to the world of today and tomorrow. From education and training through to labour laws and social welfare, more flexible approaches and frameworks are needed.
- ▶ Coming up with interdisciplinary and intersectoral solutions is crucial. Involvement of various level of expertise, private and public sectors, different generations and communities can lead to better and more sustainable solutions in the future.
- ▶ The EU needs to encourage its citizens' involvement in policymaking on areas that concern them.

Education and opportunities for youth

The discussions on the educational systems across the EU were dominated by two broad concerns – rigidity and inequality. Formal education today is unable to provide the students with the skills they need for the labour market of tomorrow. This gap between educators and employers has two serious consequences – waste of talent, and passivity. The lack of soft and practical skills leads to a lack of entrepreneurial mindset and an ability to do well on the job market, as well as to a lack of active citizenship and involvement in public affairs. The situation is made worse by the differences in quality of educational systems in different EU regions and Member States. In the absence of EU-wide solutions that could enable sharing and implementation of best practices,

this contributes to the deepening of divisions across the Union, especially on the East-West axis. Well thought-out improvements, greater flexibility and more interdisciplinary and intersectoral approaches can lead to education systems that would provide students with better prospects and new opportunities.

Environment and sustainability

Sustainability was spotlighted over the course of 2019, and yet the lack of awareness of the effects of climate change, and the lack of prominence that has been given to environmental issues were identified as the most important issue the EU needs to address. From the need to transform the coal regions to the need to change the way EU measures development and growth to account for environmental effects on its economies, EU needs to take note and take responsibility of the sustainability agenda. If the political will was there, the €500 billion 'green' investment bonds that the European Investment Bank (EIB) issues could be put to use tomorrow using existing treaties/structures. The awareness as well as technology to tackle sustainability issues also needs to be made more accessible to the hard-to-reach, mostly Eastern regions. A complex approach to sustainability is key – we need to foster a sense of sustainable community through a cooperation between the private and public sectors, as well as academics and NGOs, but we also need to make sure that the existing and the new international agreements are binding as well as enforceable. In addition, we also need to tackle the more traditional environmental concerns such as loss of biodiversity, as well as the social effects of climate migration.

EU as a global actor

The lack of leadership, vision and political alignment among the Member States stands in the way of the EU agreeing on a common foreign and security policy, and acting as a consolidated global actor at a time when the US is going down the path of isolationism, and any multilateral basis of international cooperation appears to be up for a re-definition. This is a policymaking as well as an identity concern – developing common identity through education, information, and exchange can lead to a greater understanding among the EU decisionmakers and constituents as to why it makes sense to cooperate as a true political power. The EU needs to overcome its institutional and competency hurdles to prevent the legitimacy and strength of the EU being constantly questioned when it comes to global affairs. In order to become a global power (defined by military might) rather than just a global actor (an economically powerful entity), the EU should become a security actor and protecting power that can credibly defend its interests abroad with military capacity. Finally, the EU should follow a value-based approach when seeking

consensus internally and defining its vision globally; it should also firmly establish itself as a global voice for freedom and democracy.

Migration, internal and external security

There is a widespread dissatisfaction with the way the EU has dealt with the issue of migration: quotas, and lack of EU competence and coordination on the matter has led to a desire to disconnect from the non-EU migration issues altogether. Integration of migrants remains difficult; despite the basic understanding that migration is beneficial for the labour market, public discourse is dominated by fear (largely related to terrorism and job security) fuelled by misunderstanding. These issues pose both a threat to European societies, and an economic, social and political opportunity. For the EU to benefit in any way, however, more dialogue, more unity, and clearer and stricter policies on the EU and Member States level are needed. Regional and global developments including conflict in Ukraine and the Middle East, internal transformations in Turkey, and the growing influence of Russia and China put EU’s external border at risk, but also open a door for the EU to fill a leadership gap, assert itself with one voice as a credible actor and protect its external borders. EU’s internal security is not up to scratch, predominantly due to a lack of cooperation among Member States. There are concerns about the lack of understanding of hybrid threats (as the constant election interference demonstrates), and the imbalance between fast-developing new technologies, policymaking and norm-setting. Such mismatches can be mitigat-

ed only with more systematized knowledge-sharing, and EU-wide mechanisms to deal with these new vulnerabilities.

Employment, social affairs and inclusion

The concerns and recommendations regarding employment, social affairs and inclusion partially overlap with education and opportunities for youth, as well as migration. Developing more innovative European labour market policies for boosting professional opportunities for young people, as well as ensuring that national employment conditions for migrant and domestic workers are equal, and that substandard employment conditions or discriminatory mechanisms/policies are not allowed, were all seen as crucial. Beyond that, however, a change of paradigm and perspective on labour from the policymakers and the population is also needed. There is a need to adjust legislative framework covering the gig economy, and better explore the potential of non-linear business models. Social provisions and housing need to be brought up to speed with the current business climate, with housing being treated not just as a purely infrastructural, but also as a social and environmental issue. Social safety nets – from family planning through child allowance standards to pensions systems – need to be adequately provided throughout the EU. Finally, the inequality of opportunities, and lack of cohesion and convergence need to be addressed. Without more equitable opportunities and conditions, social unrest can be a powerful tool to bring sometimes-unwanted outcomes for Member States and the EU.



INTRODUCTION

We often hear that ‘Brussels is too far away’ from European Union (EU) citizens, especially from the young people. With each European Parliament (EP) election, on average, voter turnout has been decreasing. Nationalism-driven populism and Euroscepticism are becoming more and more entrenched, jeopardising European citizenship and democracy—the cornerstones for the success of the European project. What to do? How to enhance citizens’ understanding of the EU, broaden ownership of the European project and build trust in the EU’s promise of a better future for all?

With these key questions in mind, GLOBSEC’s Europe for Citizens Project, ‘EP Elections and Beyond: Active Participation of Citizens at All Levels (EUact)’ strove to uncover the causes for low citizens’ engagement on the EU level, particularly among young people, and to develop practical solutions for how to motivate them to be active EU citizens. Though in the short term, the project primarily sought to increase the voter turnout in the EP elections, the key long-term aim was to then use that momentum for building sustained active civic participation. Beyond mapping the attitudes of young people towards the EU and encouraging them to actively participate in the democratic life of the Union, the intention was also to enhance the democratic legitimacy of the EU decision-making process by offering valuable recommendations to EU policymakers.

The project has favoured a bottom-up approach, giving young people the opportunity to directly participate in sharing their views and recommendations regarding the present and future shape of the European Union through the following activities:

1. Focus groups,
2. Public debates,
3. ‘Get out and vote’ social media campaign
4. Transnational reflection groups

The focus groups, conducted in November 2018 (8 in total, two in each partner country: Slovakia, Germany, Bulgaria and Poland), gave 97 young people (aged predominantly 18-30) the opportunity to express their opinions on the European Union in general, as well as on EU citizenship, with a particular emphasis on being active citizens on the national and the EU levels. Their opinions were analysed in a separate report ‘[Young People, EU Citizenship and Activism](#)’, published by GLOBSEC in May 2019. In order to reach out to the wider public, four motivational and educational public debates (one in each partner country) were organized, attracting 681 peo-

ple from 21 EU and non-EU countries. Their formats ranged from a panel discussion with key experts and political figures in Poland and Bulgaria, to a discussion with the Prime Minister in Slovakia, to a ‘sparing’ debate of EP electoral candidates in Germany. On top of that, to demonstrate the importance of the EU’s strengthening its social media presence and means of communication, the four partners each produced a short video, encouraging young people to vote in the European Parliament elections. This was part of a ‘Get out and vote’ social media campaign designed to attract the younger electorate. Finally, for the two transnational reflection groups, 47 young leaders from 11 European countries gathered in Bratislava to engage in debates with experts and policymakers and to formulate concrete recommendations for the EU in the following areas: education and opportunities for youth; environment and sustainability; EU as a global actor; migration, internal and external security; and employment, social affairs and inclusion.

The aim of this report is to map the main takeaways from the project’s diverse activities and present key recommendation to the EU policymakers. Throughout the report, particular attention will be paid to the commonalities and differences in attitudes towards the EU and reasons why young people especially across the partner countries (do not) actively participate on the EU level.

Firstly, it will look at young people’s attitudes towards the EU in general – what does the EU mean to them and what do they identify as its greatest achievements and shortcomings that need addressing? Secondly, it will focus on the key issue of active EU citizenship – what is it that young Europeans especially need to be more involved in EU affairs on all levels? Thirdly, will look into the various ways in which this project sought to engage young people, especially the public debates and the social media campaign, and the main lessons learned from those formats. Finally, it will reflect on, and offer, some of the key recommendations that the participants of the two transnational reflection groups had for the EU policymakers. The report also pays attention to how the priorities of young people may have evolved during the 10 months between the first and second transnational reflection group meetings. This is especially important to consider given the specific timing of both meetings - the first meeting happened at the end of November 2018, i.e. the beginnings of the pre-EP election campaign, whereas the second meeting took place in mid-September 2019, just as the new Commission started taking shape, with Ursula von der Leyen’s manifesto being unveiled a mere day before the event.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE EU

(Opinions presented in this section were gathered at national focus groups and transnational reflection groups.)

The first question asked at every national and transnational reflection group was a simple one – ‘What does the EU mean to you?’. The answers, though similar in many ways, revealed quite a nuanced range of perceptions across the different Member States. The first thing that came to the participants’ minds included ‘unification’, ‘one country’, ‘united states’, ‘globalization’, ‘borderless community’, and ‘moving to the future’ in Bulgaria; ‘peace’ and ‘freedom’, but also ‘bureaucracy’, ‘(economic) integration’, ‘supranational entity’, ‘compromise’ and ‘democratic deficit’ in Germany. In Poland, the EU is perceived as a community of cooperating Member States aimed at improving the continent of Europe and strengthening Europe’s position worldwide. In more concrete terms, it’s perceived firstly, as an economic community; secondly, as a political community; thirdly, as a historic community; and, finally, as a community of shared values. Slovaks perceive the EU as a community based on economic and business cooperation which is currently facing a challenge in terms of its future form of existence; they immediately defined the future of the EU as questionable, especially in connection to Brexit. The international group that met in Bratislava also identified the EU as a worthwhile project with an uncertain future and unfulfilled potential; beyond a ‘huge experiment’ though, they also associated the EU with ‘diversity’, ‘unity’, ‘freedom and privilege’, and ‘opportunity’. Most young people have a positive view of the EU - it’s a place they call home that allows them to work, study, travel, learn and open their minds to new possibilities.

WHAT KIND OF UNION DO THE EU CITIZENS WANT?

The key point of contestation is whether the EU is, and should remain, a predominantly economic union, or whether it should strive to become a union of values too. Most of the answers to follow up questions on how the participants perceive the EU, or what kind of Union it is, focused on the economic aspect. Young people in Bulgaria and Slovakia practically avoided discussing the EU in other terms but an economic entity with access to goods and services, though they were clearly aware that there were other aspects including a political community. Some of the Slovak participants even argued that the EU should stay an economic, not a political, union, while Bulgarian participants actually disputed the very concept of ‘European values’ with the argument that it is actually a question of ‘civilization values’.

“ The EU is firstly an economic union.

“ The EU is a chance for a better tomorrow.

German participants did discuss both the cultural union, and the perception of a union of values; both concepts were regarded as much more difficult to achieve than economic integration, which they stressed was not without problems either. They argued many social aspects are still missing for a cultural union to exist, and the process of its creation is hindered by the rise of populism and differentiating national positions. The latter was also a major obstacle to a union of values, together with the principle of the unanimous vote. One participant saw a union of values as impossible to achieve; even on the national level, there would not be a homogeneity of values. Instead, equal rights for everyone should be discussed, for instance, a common democratic EU election law could ensure equal rights for all voters. Others argued that common values already exist, and that the creation of the economic union was based on certain shared interests and values. All in all, whilst a total homogeneity of values was not seen as essential, they were in favour of a collective social narrative (referring to cultural aspects or values) which embraces all EU citizens. It was added that Article 2 of the Lisbon Treaty defines some common values and that such a narrative should be based on those.

Young people in Poland also paid a lot of attention to the discussion about the values promoted by the European Union, and the values and national legacies of individual countries. Their discussion, however, was much more divisive – they tried and failed to find a consensus and work out common values for the European Union and for Poland. Most attention was paid to the lack of coherence in religious and moral issues. The European Union is perceived by the Polish participants as an institution that’s very liberal and too tolerant. They indicated the lack of references in the normative acts of the Member States to the Bible, God and Christian values. Their argument was that Europe is the cradle of Christianity and that Christian values should be promoted by the EU all over the world. The EU’s weakness in the fight for its own values, and the perceived fall of moral values of European society, was pointed out. The point that without common values the EU is unable to survive was made predominantly in connection to the influence of Islam on Europe and the possible

changes that this could bring to the EU countries and the entire Union.

What the Polish stance (on the idea of the EU as a union of values) revealed was a division in the Polish society between dynamically developing liberalists (who are great proponents of values promoted by the EU including the tolerance for otherness) and the opposing part of the Polish society consisting of the conservatives contradicting the values 'imposed' by the EU, such as: abortion, euthanasia, gender parity, sexual freedom or the acceptance of homosexuality. On a related point, the power of societal divisions and a dominant public discourse too was revealed in the way some Slovak young peoples' expressions were funnelled through negative populist simplifications about the EU related to regulations in food and agriculture industries, for example. One young person described negatively the growing food dependence of Slovakia as, according to the participant, Slovakia was agriculturally independent before joining the EU.

“ *The European Union is a great idea if it is managed by competent people and its actions are legitimized by its members.*

THE EU IN THE LIVES OF ITS CITIZENS - WHAT THEY (DON'T) SEE

The attitudes of citizens across the Union are formed not just on the basis of conceptual, but also concrete perceptions of how the Union actually contributed to their lives and the lives of people around them. It is important to point out that the citizens' perceptions of what the Union does for them and the reality are not always in complete alignment. As will be discussed at more length later, this is just as much an issue connected to EU's consistently insufficient communication about its intentions and actions, as it is an issue about the individual nation's priorities. To use Bulgaria as the first example, the participants spoke of the EU as being perceived as an elder brother of the country that they could rely on to help in unforeseen circumstances, and in terms of overall development. They were also the most fervent proponents of the idea that small countries need the EU in terms of foreign policy. Countries such as Bulgaria can hardly play an independent role on the international scene, so being part of the EU carries much more weight in that regard; an attitude that Slovaks too mostly agreed with. However, when it came to other issues, the young people did not notice 'the EU around them'. Bulgaria for example struggles with high levels of unemployment, which is something the EU tried to address as early as 2000 when launching the Lisbon Treaty. And yet, young people

in Bulgaria fail to see that tackling unemployment is also partially done through EU-wide mechanisms. Rather than seeing EU's presence in social affairs, their frames of attention were narrowed to 'European investments' and 'European funds'.

“ *On the international scene Bulgaria, as a small country, can hardly play an independent role. So, the common foreign policy (although not always unified) of EU would weigh more.*

“ *For a small country like Slovakia the best alternative is to remain a part of the EU.*

For the Polish participants, the presence of the EU around them was clearly visible in their city, and the country in which they live. They pointed to the improvement of living standards of residents after Poland's accession to the EU, development of entrepreneurship in Poland, subsidies and EU funds for the development of entrepreneurship, improvement of the quality of roads, buildings, squares in cities, and playgrounds for children. Young Polish people indicated that many buildings and monuments were renovated with EU funds, and it was made very visible on the numerous billboards. Participants noted the positive impact of the EU on the local community as well as the whole country, and the positive effects of Poland's accession to the EU are visible at many levels of Poles' lives.

“ *I can see the EU around me in European funds and investments.*

In contrast, the German participants identified the same benefits of EU's presence in Germany, but a distinct lack of the visibility of such EU projects. They mentioned this in connection with the urban-rural divide - people in the urban areas are often pro-EU and interested in cross-border issues, while people in the rural areas rather focus on regional topics. This does not mean that these areas do not benefit from EU projects, but they are not marked visibly enough by signs or posters which promote the EU. So, while the rural population and the older generations are more aware (and sceptical) of the EU's presence in terms of border controls or data security, they have very little idea that the EU also financed the infrastructure investments that benefit them much more. In Slovakia, the public's low familiarity with the activities of European institutions as well as weak awareness of the citizens about what the EU's existence means for their daily existence, turned into a negative view of the EU.

“ *Firmly present in our everyday life today are the EU’s ‘four freedoms’ – the free movement of goods, services, people, and money.*

Zooming out, there was a shared appreciation of the four freedoms – young people affirmed that the free movement of goods, services, people and money were firmly present in their lives. Polish participants in particular emphasised the opportunities to change their place of residence, legal stay and employment in the European countries that the EU membership has given them. They also pointed out great opportunities for students, especially those participating in Erasmus programs, projects and grants for researchers, and the development of science. A greater openness of the Polish society to otherness and changes resulting from joining the EU, as well as greater adaptation of Poles to EU requirements were also noted. This also brought greater openness to other nations, greater friendliness to foreigners and a greater sense of community with citizens of other EU countries.

That being said, a lot of things are also being taken for granted. Slovaks in particular displayed a certain level of apathy – despite being aware of all the benefits of EU membership, from freedom of movement, visa-free and problem-free travel as well as study, to common currency, to EU projects that aid the country’s development, some young people did not express an attitude at all, or were not interested in the topic; some even started to question the added value of EU membership. German participants too criticised young people for taking the positive effects of the EU for granted. It is important for people to be more actively aware of the privileges they have through the EU. The EU is active and affects everyone, but many people are either not interested or do not know. In the case of more socially deprived people as well as older generations, this is somewhat understandable – with EU citizens’ dialogue mostly reaching university graduates and people that are already interested, and with the wider public mostly being aware of negatively connoted EU occurrences, it is not surprising that those people do not go out to vote. However, although Europe is of utmost importance, especially for young people, the turnout statistics for the EP elections show a low participation rate, even among the youth. The young clearly notice the EU benefits in some instances (through participating in the Erasmus Programme for example), but not in others and that needs to change.

“ *The EU is good because it contributes to the development of smaller and less developed countries, to freedom of movement and problem-free travel.*

Finally, popular perceptions of the EU are also rather clearly influenced by what the EU is perceived to either do too much or too little of. A lot of attention was paid to the migration issue, unsurprisingly, by the Polish and the Slovak participants. In Poland, they argued that the decision regarding the admission of migrants to Europe should have been preceded by a European referendum and should have been implemented only when approved by a majority. It was also noted that the EU should not punish the countries that refused to accept migrants because such refusals had been caused by the attempts to guarantee the citizens’ safety. Participants jointly recognized that when it comes to resolving the issues of migration, the EU turned out to be weak. Additionally, they saw EU’s actions on the matter as the EU overstretching its role and taking on national sovereignty issues.

Slovakia was a similar case to an extent – some participants only perceived the EU through their difficulties in agreeing on a common migration solution, as well as a place of high politics, where citizens really can’t have an impact. In addition, aversion to EU ‘bureaucratisation’ and ‘limitations’ in the form of specific standards and regulations was particularly strong in Slovakia. One participant considered the EU as the source of problems in the country which had not existed before, mainly economic ones, connected to Slovakia’s participation in the euro area. The conversation in Slovakia, more than in any other country, exposed the still lingering sense of inferiority even among young Slovaks towards citizens from the West. Several times the feelings of inequality between East and West, displayed for example through the rise in prices and low wages, were connected to the inability for some to see themselves as EU citizens.

“ *There is a boundary between the West and the East.*

WHAT LIES AHEAD FOR THE EU?

Some of the discussions also turned to the issue of the future of the Union, which was perceived as uncertain. Slovaks in particular were rather Eurosceptic and argued that the EU will have to face changes internally and externally. Internally they identified the issue of ageing population. This is seen as a threat to the future of the EU, because with the continued demographic crisis across the Union, the ‘strong’ countries will not be able to provide the economic and financial support for the countries which are less developed. Brexit was lingering in every conversation as the biggest test to date for the existence of the EU. Comments on the vacuum left after the UK

leaves the Union included the realisation that there will be serious short- and long- term consequences. Short-term, EU citizens are likely to feel the negative effects in terms of trade, cohesion and R&D funds, even security. Brexit, according to the young Bulgarian participants, also provides ammunition to nationalist movements and thus could endanger the EU itself. Some Slovaks also thought that other member states will follow the example of Great Britain. Still, young people in Bulgaria, Germany and Poland do not see the total breakdown of the EU as likely to happen in the foreseeable future. Some expect to see a new type of formation but are not able to identify it. Others feel rather optimistic and see today's questioning and weakening of the EU as a normal occurrence in a cycle of ups and downs (the Bulgarian group).

The final conclusion of the Bulgarian group gives the most hope about the future of the EU from young people's perspective. Although it may seem tempting to complain of Brussels' bureaucracy and the frequently hopeless rigidity of the political leaders of Europe, it is not the right thing to do. The EU's failure to resolve the refugee crisis with a common mechanism, and the difficult situation Bulgaria found itself in, as an external border of the EU, should not mean that Bulgarians should leave behind the European project of an inclusive, democratic society, where solidarity, diversity, freedom and equality are cherished and safeguarded.

“ *An integrated Europe, with its single market, common rules and a shared framework of human rights and justice, is a legacy worth improving, not abandoning.*

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN THE EU AND ITS CITIZENS

The number one issue identified by all focus groups and both transnational reflection groups that pervades all the other issues was the need for the EU to better communicate its workings, actions and benefits. Concern about the EU's lack of visibility and clarity to its citizens was identified in all four countries, with German young people identifying it as one of the main problems leading to the lack of engagement by citizens at the European levels. Especially lacking in the eyes of the German participants is visibility and communication to all audiences, independent of income and level of education. At the same time, while mainstream awareness-raising campaigns are seen by young people on the streets, parks and buildings, their main channel of communication is social media. It is in this domain that participants in the focus groups saw a great gap to be filled by the EU. In addition, it is not just about information, but also about involvement – young people see Brussels as too far away and too bureaucratic, which might at least partially be due to their being unable to identify whom to contact or how decisions proceed through the institutions. Lastly, the need to know more about the Union goes beyond its actions – lack of civic education about EU values and citizenship leads to a lack of common EU identity, young people's difficulty to see themselves as receivers from and contributors to the EU, and an overall lack of interest in thinking about the EU at all, whether in positive or negative terms.



On the basis of the issues identified, the following recommendations from the project's participants can be highlighted:

- ▶ **The EU:** Increase the visibility of the EU's activities and decision-making processes, through the use of modern technology and techniques that capture the interest of young people (social media and influencers). For example, the EU could organise a group of young European influencers to present EU news in an encouraging and interesting way, or create an interactive portal, endorsed by the EU, where it would be possible to vote on important EU matters as an opinion poll; these voices should be noted by the EU policymakers;
- ▶ **The EU:** Increase sustained activism/feel of belonging by the EU citizens through strengthening programmes and initiatives to 'experience' the EU, allowing for participation by all groups of the population, regardless of education levels, socio-economic status or place of residence;
- ▶ **The EU:** Introduce in-between models like EP chambers for citizens or smaller states and explain/create venues where citizens are more integrated with the political process and thus feel more empowered to contact EU institutions;
- ▶ **The EU:** Engage EU representatives and institutions with all levels of society—national governments, local representatives, business and civil communities and individual citizens—in difficult debates, including about the rule-of-law, shared values, and coherent ideas on the future of Europe, etc.;
- ▶ **The Member States:** Increase the level of basic knowledge and beyond about the EU's history, functioning and procedures, through starting mandatory European classes as early as primary school;
- ▶ **The Member States:** Provide truthful and objective information that is easy to understand about the role of the EU in each country to avoid young people becoming a tool in the hands of nationalists and populists with their own agendas;
- ▶ **The Member States:** Ensure that public media provide more information about EU activities, for example through permanent daily thematic blocs concerning only the EU;
- ▶ **The EU and the Member States:** Organise debates on EU issues for young people in the Member States, with those who perform the best in those debates being invited to visit the EU institutions in Brussels. This would be a good advertisement for the EU institutions, bringing EU closer and making the EU citizenship more 'real';
- ▶ **The EU and the Member States:** develop an EU-wide 'Model European Union' (similar to Model UN) supported by the EU where young talents from all EU countries could participate free of cost. Alternatively, the 'MEU' could be added to different types of higher education institutions based on their area of expertise (for example, future teachers from all EU member states would simulate a corresponding EP committee, or the drafting of a legislative proposal related to education, in which all - the EC, EP and Council - could be simulated). As an additional element, the EU could offer a possibility to meet with the corresponding representatives of the institutions;
- ▶ **The EU and the Member States:** develop tailored materials for teachers to use when educating about the EU;
- ▶ **The EU and the Member States:** Initiate a discussion about national and European identities across the political spectrum, to balance the current asymmetric interest in identity issues from predominantly right-wing political movements. Clashing of national identities blocks further integration as well as the development of a genuine EU identity;
- ▶ **The local communities:** Instead of shaming young people for their lack of interest and engagement at the European level, help them embrace their European identity through creative channels, like the 'positive branding' of Europe;
- ▶ **The local communities:** Use more peer-to-peer educational and motivational strategies, rather than telling young people what they should do for Europe.

(ACTIVE) EU CITIZENSHIP

(Opinions presented in this section were gathered at national focus groups and transnational reflection groups.)

It would not be an understatement to say that the question of whether young people feel more European or more Bulgarian/Polish/German/Slovak drew the full range of the possible forms of EU vs. national identity. On the furthest side of the European spectrum was one of the German students, who said that she/he feels European and that the passport with the EU stars always reminds her/him of that. Another student said that she/he likes to be European but that she/he rather feels German because she/he grew up with the laws and values of Germany and her/his connection to German politics is more prominent than to the EU politics. Two students said instead of defining themselves as German, they identify themselves with their regional background. One had the perspective that the EU citizenship does not differ that much from the German citizenship but remarked that this is not the case for all EU countries. The majority in the other EU Member States has a national identity instead of a European one.

This was certainly the case in Poland, where most participants perceive themselves as Poles first and then as Europeans, despite the fact that they are very strongly connected to the EU. The difference between being a Pole and being a European for them is expressed in cultural and historical identity; greater bond with the members of the Polish state than with members of other EU Member States; declaration of the priority of the Member States' interests over the interests of the EU community. Interestingly, many of the young people declared that they have a greater sense of belonging to the EU and being an EU citizen when in contact with citizens of non-European countries and when they travel to other continents. They also more willingly declared that they were Europeans than Poles in South America and Australia. Some participants stated that, in the situation of traveling to other continents, they felt more affiliated to Europe than to their own country of origin. They also felt a sense of pride in being European.

“ *In conversations with Australians, I felt more European than Polish. In Australia they do not know where Poland is, but they know exactly where Europe is. I felt proud being a European, more than proud of being a Polish woman.*

There was an overlap between the Poles and the Bulgarians in a sense that they see themselves as Europeans because they can enjoy the rights and benefits of being citizens of EU Member States. These benefits included free relocation in the Member States, voting rights in elections to the European Parliament, the possibility of submitting complaints and petitions to the European Parliament, and generally understood diplomatic protection of the EU. The Bulgarians, in fact, seemed to have no crystallized opinion about themselves being EU citizens. For them, EU citizenship is defined by greater rights and obligations, free travel and greater possibilities for finding a job. Beyond that, they indirectly assume that with EU membership, there are some national rights and some EU rights to enjoy – however, according to some participants, these can sometimes be at odds. More than any other group though, Bulgarians were very invested in the EU's future.

Slovaks were once again the most peculiar group, for numerous reasons. Some failed to see a difference between Slovak citizenship and the EU citizenship, mainly due to the fact that they have lived a major part of their lives in Slovakia already being a member of the EU, and therefore the EU citizenship, in their minds, does not provide any additional value. Some, just like Poles and Bulgarians, felt themselves to be an integral part of the EU because they made the most of the advantages of the EU citizenship, including the single currency use and the freedom of movement to travel, study or work. For some young people, EU citizenship was also linked to equality before law. According to them, there are better possibilities of claiming rights and achieving justice, as EU citizens can resort to court action at the European level. For some young people, Slovak citizenship is superior, and they highlighted their national pride towards Slovakia as a unique sovereign state. Going back to the East-West divide, some participants stated that they felt foreign and inferior to other European Member States, which further exacerbated the feeling of EU citizenship having no added value. Somewhat worryingly, for some students European citizenship literally means 'nothing' and they do not perceive that something like this exists. Some of the respondents cannot see any differences 'before' or 'after' the entry of Slovakia into the EU, and they do not see how it influences their lives.

“ *European citizenship literally means nothing.*

There was an indirect sense in which the Bulgarians feel European – they place more trust in the EU institutions than their own government to resolve their hardships, and as such, they do feel European in the sense of having rights and demands towards the EU institutions. The relationship between the national/EU institutions was, perhaps unsurprisingly, key in shaping the sense of national/EU identity, and even more unsurprisingly connected to the way in which the EU was (not) able to make its citizens feel that they have an impact on EU affairs. One of the German participants pointed out the fact that, on the national level, people can talk to those who are responsible for policymaking. Brussels on the other hand feels distant. This drew two reactions – a point that contacting EU policymakers on a technical level is possible, but not many people know about it, which goes back to the EU needing to inform its citizens better; and an argument that EU decision-making needs to be more transparent, not only for people to know where they can have an influence, but to also know who really is to blame, or to credit. An important point was also made about the difficulty of mobilising people on the national, let alone the EU, level. Increasing citizens' interest, it was suggested, would be easier if the EU tackled everyday, especially economic, problems, and gave more prominence to social or environmental politics.

These arguments were confirmed by the Polish group; unlike the Bulgarians, they felt more committed to being citizens of Poland than Europe. They are engaged citizens of Poland, due to the proximity of institutions in the country, knowledge of the mother tongue, a good understanding of the political situation in the country. What was as important, however, was that they felt no clear message on the part of the EU institutions that strong involvement of citizens would matter. The EU itself does not encourage anyone to be an active EU citizen, as there is a 'glass ceiling' above which no ordinary citizen has the chance to access. In addition, there was also a significant level of mistrust towards representatives elected to the EP – rather than listening to the 'voice of the people', they were seen as pursuing their own or party goals and interests.

A notable link could be seen between the feeling of identity and the kind of Europe the citizens wanted to uphold for the future. In search for a stronger and closer Union, German participants sought to identify a new, more supranational model of the Union. Among the suggestions were a chamber in the EP with representatives of citizens and another one with representatives of states, as well as transnational lists consisting of MEPs representing pan-European constituencies. (This idea, however, was not left without criticism - those MEPs might be unknown on the national level, parties in bigger and more

prosperous countries could have a greater ability to invest in election campaigns and thereby get an advantage.) The Polish on the other hand, were very clearly committed to support not the primacy of the EU over Member States, but rather the development of intergovernmentalism. Thus, the EU institutions should support the development of strong nation states, preserving their cultural identity and strengthening the common EU economy. Bulgarians were somewhere in the middle on this – they supported the rule of unanimity in order to protect national interests while ensuring common decisions at the EU level.

An interesting discussion on what it is that holds an identity together (beyond the measures already discussed) occurred among the German focus group participants – whether cultural icons, such as a common holidays or increased use of the EU flag, or other forms of branding and symbolism could contribute towards a greater EU identity. This was countered with an argument, however, that values were more important than common items for building an identity. According to her/him, one does not need to create something which does not exist artificially. The EU identity does not need to be the same as a national identity. The student proposed that the EU should instead strengthen common values, as it already did in some issue areas, such as consumer protection or the banning of plastic. That way might take longer but, it would also be more sustainable. Another student answered that maybe a combination of both aspects would be good. She/he said that people would only care about what they see. So, the internalisation of common values can only work when the EU is visible to the citizens.

THE EU MEMBERSHIP – RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The ideas of what it means to be an active citizen of the EU were much less diverse than the ideas of EU citizenship as such – for most, it simply equalled voting in the elections. Before going into details, it is worth pointing out that none of the discussion in the countries brought up the responsibilities and obligations that come with EU citizenship and EU membership. Most often, benefits for citizens and Member States were pointed out, countered with what the participants perceived as not working well in the EU. Bulgarians for example were more eager to speak in abstract terms of how to be active but were less forthcoming about what is the reality for them, and if they are themselves engaged EU citizens. In Poland, only 2 out of the 16 participants were able to indicate the date of the elections to the EP. The young people were more eager to speak about what it means and how to be an active citizen of their country than to reflect on their own actions. Slovaks too per-

ceived engagement at the European level through using their right to vote in the European Parliament elections. Some argued that EU citizens could participate also in EU projects in various areas (e.g. social, environmental). To be an active citizen means to be interested in events in the EU, to actively participate in discussions on European issues and to help look for solutions by expressing one's own opinions, to know all the EU Member States, to work on being informed (including about the EP elections), and to participate in surveys and opinion polls published by the EU on the current topics.

There were Slovak students who also were not able to define what it means to be an active citizen of the EU. As a result, very few students saw themselves as active citizens. According to one participant, it is not possible to be an active citizen because 'it is impossible to directly influence the events in the EU'. Another student expressed that she/he does not consider herself/himself to be an active citizen, does not participate in the elections, is not interested in the topic of the EU, and this topic is not close to her/him in any way related to her/his life; she/he ended with expressing her/his overall distrust towards the EU. Two other students also said that they were not planning to participate in the next elections as they cannot see why they should vote.

“ *It is not possible to be an active citizen because it is impossible to influence events in the EU directly.*

“ *On the national level, people can talk to those who are responsible for policy making. Contrary, Brussels feels more distant.*

“ *There are many possibilities for exchange, but the problem is that no one knows about them.*

Only in Germany was the 'duty to vote' referred to and active citizenship actively considered. All participants bar one assured that they would go vote during the EP election in 2019. They named a variety

of reasons for this - the conviction that the European project is excellent, the importance of voting to co-decide in which direction the EU moves, and to prevent that Eurosceptic parties get too powerful. Although elections are not enough to change things, not going to vote means missing the opportunity to participate in decision-making. It was also mentioned that many people had to fight for their right to vote and that it is a moral duty to vote. Furthermore, some said that they would go vote to support their national parties during the election and that they would also campaign. The one participant who was not sure if she/he would vote said that some things can do more than voting, such as consumer choices. Some of the students are active on the EU level while others are more active on the national level. A student who is active on the municipal political level noted that through this work she/he could also support EU politics. Some students stated that just speaking about Europe makes someone an active citizen. However, one said that moving to a country where your wishes are already implemented is easier than becoming active to change something.

“ *The EU should promote the political participation of young people because they have the responsibility to obtain the EU. Europe is as a matter of course for them. They do not know how much work it is needed to preserve the EU.*

The young people also attempted to provide ways how to motivate people to vote. They pointed out that one has to make people appreciate that they can vote by giving them reasons, such as specific topics which are vital for them. The last regional elections had shown that young people want to vote. In addition, more technology should be used, for instance, promoting the EP election more on social networks or by hiring busses that bring citizens to the voting places. One student said that 'it is our duty to make people go to vote. In the weeks towards the election everyone should become a bit political and for instance, use their social media accounts.'



CITIZENS' ENGAGEMENT – PUBLIC DEBATES VS. SOCIAL MEDIA

“ *Social media is an informational channel that is not sufficiently used by the Union. Only representatives of the EU institutions put posts on Twitter, which is more frequently visited by politicians than by the average EU citizens.* ”

The need to address the EU's lack of ability to reach out to its own citizens was one of the key aims of the project, and, as it turned out, a pivotal point that was made in all the citizens' discussions that were held as part of the project. The EU's common identity, citizens' participation (from voting in the EU elections to being actively involved in EU affairs themselves) and overcoming the social and political division across the Union – these all depended on the communication between the EU and its citizens. Especially crucial was the need to better inform EU citizens about what the EU is good for, to explain its activities and competencies clearly and appropriately, and to give citizens the feeling that taking part matters, that their voice is heard and that they can make a difference. To do its part, the EUact project reached out to EU citizens in both the traditional way – i.e. through public debates with policymakers and experts – and in the much needed and much lacking innovative way – i.e. through a 'Get out and vote' social media campaign. Due to the focus as well as the timing of the project, both sets of activities were centred primarily around the topic of EP elections. As such, rather than focusing just on their predictions and recommendations ahead of the elections, which may or may not have been heeded, this section will focus on two issues instead. Firstly, it will reflect on how the broad content of the debates as well as the motivational videos reflected the concerns of the respective national populations. Secondly, it will look at their effectiveness as a tool to engage the populations, both in terms of numbers and reactions.

The debates across the partner countries varied in terms of form, focus and the crowd they attracted. The German debate stood out in terms of its form – rather than a panel discussion, the event was done as a 'sparring' contest of ideas between EU-candidates in Berlin. In three sparring-rounds, Damian Boeselager (Volt), Engin Eroglu (FREIE WÄHLER), Hannah Neumann (Demokratie in Europa) and Susanne Zels (CDU) had two minutes to convince the audience of their visions for Europe. The sparring-rounds

focused on three topics: strengthening institutional democracy, strengthening regions and strengthening social cohesion. After each sparring-round there were not only critical questions from the audience but also online-voting. This format involved the whole audience and not only isolated voices, plus it allowed the candidates to get direct feedback from the audience. In terms of content, it is interesting to note the alignment between the political candidates and the ordinary citizens in terms of their support for strengthening EU competencies, especially the EP ones – only one of the candidates argued for stronger nations rather than federal Europe. The strengthening of regions too was a primary concern, though opinions differed whether to do that from an EU or national level. The need to bring EU debates to regions, however, was an undisputed point. On social cohesion, again, opinions differed whether to agree on a common social and labour policy, or whether to tackle the issue through minimum standards applied throughout the Union, and through increasing labour mobility. Either way, some level of convergence across the EU was seen as necessary throughout.

The Bulgarian public debate, on the other hand, focused less on the EU competencies and processes and more on the role Bulgarian citizens can play in those processes, reaffirming the citizens' concern about the EU's future and the place of Bulgaria in it. It was led by the Chairman of the Slavyani Foundation, Professor Zahari Zahariev and Ambassador Milan Milanov, former ambassador to France and involved political figures such as Chairman of the PES party Sergei Stanishev, MEPs Georgi Pirinski and Momchil Nekow, MP Rumen Getchev and a Sofia municipal councillor Kaloyan Pargov; experts Daniela Todorova (Rector of the VTU 'Todor Kableshev' University) and Nako Stefon (Professor at 'Kliment Ohridski' Sofia University); and finally, Enyo Savov, a lawyer and a leader of a youth association. The key aim of the debate was not only to motivate young people to vote in the EP elections, but also to influence the new candidates for MEPs to work on making the voice of Bulgaria heard in the process of elaboration of new common policies that will guarantee the future of Europe and that of the younger generations in it, as well as the equal in value place of Bulgaria in the European Union. Beyond Bulgaria's place in the EU the discussion also covered the quality of education, Europe of two and more speeds, improving

the conditions for cooperation between young and older entrepreneurs, the future of digital Europe and new legislative initiatives and changes in the EU for better living conditions.

Just like the opinions expressed in the focus groups, the Polish public debate too was a contrast to a Bulgarian debate in terms of the overall message expressed – whilst the Poles were unquestioningly supportive of the EU and of Poland being a Member State, they were also very clear that whilst they want a strong EU economy, they also want a Union that respects the individuality of each Member State. As one of the speakers summed up: ‘We need a Europe of homelands, where economic ties will be strengthened while preserving cultural separateness.’ The debate attracted students from five different universities, partially due to a lack of debates on EU topics being organised in Poland, and partially due to a panel full of Members of Parliament and well-respected experts, including MPs Beata Mazurek (PiS), Elżbieta Kruk (PiS), MEP Krzysztof Hetman (PSL), Professor Kazimierz Kik – a well-known figure in Poland, an advocate of the EU, former Mayor of Chelm and Marshal of the Voivodship Krzysztof Grabczuk (PO), and Riad Haidar (PO), with opening remarks being given by Przemysław Czarnek, Voivode of Lublin and Jarosław Stawiarski, Marshal of the Voivodship. Though the media coverage was not as strong as in case of Bulgaria or Slovakia, the overall aim to bring more young people to the ballot was certainly fulfilled. The students that took part in the debate were active in their communities - representatives of academic self-governments, representatives of scientific sections, opinion-forming students who are well-known and popular in the academic community.

The Slovak discussion between students and the Prime Minister of Slovakia, Peter Pellegrini, followed by an expert discussion with František Ružička, State Secretary of the Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Ladislav Miko, Head of the Representation of the EU Commission in Slovakia, Ivan Štefanec, MEP, Katarína Cséfalvayová, MEP and the Chair of the Slovak National Council’s Foreign Affairs Committee, and Aneta Világi, Vice Dean of the Development and International Relations Faculty at Comenius University, bore some similarities to Bulgaria in terms of focusing on the place of Slovakia geopolitically. The speakers emphasized that Slovakia’s place is and should remain firmly within the EU, not only due to the clear benefits of the Slovak EU membership, but also because if Slovakia as well as other EU states want to retain strong position on the international stage, even more integration is required, especially in the area of technology, R&D or defence and security. Bringing the matter back full circle, the need to communicate the EU issues right was seen as paramount if the voter and citizen mobilisation was to be improved for the future. This responsibility, however, did not just lie with

the EU, but with the national politicians too – the EU is seen as something distant and abstract, and many Slovaks feel it has no direct implications on their lives because of the ‘us vs. Brussels’ rhetoric that has dominated the public discourse.

Many Slovak politicians misrepresent the democratic decision-making process within the EU (i.e. a myth that unelected bureaucrats take decisions on our behalf), which inevitably has a negative impact on public perception of the EU. Moreover, Slovak politicians and media do not cover this topic enough to create a public dialogue so the people would understand the importance of participation in the EU elections. Finally, the way the campaigns are being led requires a change. Slovaks need to have something to associate themselves with in order to improve voter mobilisation. If citizens do not have the impression that they are going to influence something important, they are less likely to vote. In order to increase participation in the EU election, education and critical thinking is paramount. There should be more space for open public dialogue about the EU, outlining why Slovakia is a member of the EU, emphasising the things people enjoy thanks to the membership and, importantly, what is the alternative. According to Prime Minister Pellegrini, there is an alternative to Slovakia being in the EU, but nobody wants it; it’s in Slovakia’s best interest to reach a consensus and strengthen its common pro-EU position, in terms of its foreign policy actions and public statements.

The ‘Get out and vote’ social media campaign was a pilot action by GLOBSEC and its partners to reach young people that primarily communicate through social media, especially those who are less engaged with traditional forms of citizen engagement such as public debates or focus groups. The videos were produced in local languages and geared to local audiences, featuring politicians, students and experts. The Polish and the Bulgarian video were more informative and focused more on increasing knowledge about the EU, as well as expressing what the EU means to young people in those countries. The Slovak video engaged actors and influencers, emphasizing the need to vote and reminding young people to go and vote on the date of the election. The Slovak video also featured a ‘vak Európa’, a bag symbolising the ability to freely move around Europe. While the direct link between the campaign and the number of voters cannot be definitively proven with the data available, the effect of the videos can certainly be measured in terms of its reach – whereas the public debates ‘only’ attracted several hundred people combined, the number of people who saw the videos was counted in the thousands.



TRANSNATIONAL REFLECTION GROUPS – KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

(These recommendations reflect only the views of the young leaders and experts that participated in the transnational reflection groups, rather than everyone who took part in the project. It is also worth remarking that the participants were not always clear about the division of responsibilities between the EU and the Member States and their recommendations might be slightly skewed as a result.)

Beyond mapping the attitudes of young people towards the EU and encouraging them to actively participate in the democratic life of the Union, drafting policies and practical solutions with young leaders and experts in various areas of EU policymaking was the final key feature of this project. Coming up with concrete solutions to the shortcomings identified in earlier sections of the report and offering them to the EU policymakers has not only been another way to motivate young people to participate, but also a way to enhance the democratic legitimacy of the EU decision-making process.

To that end, six months before and four months after the European Parliament election, GLOBSEC hosted a transnational reflection group in Bratislava, bringing together a total of 62 young leaders and experts (31 male and 31 female) from 11 European countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Finland, France, FYROM, Germany, Greece, Italy, Montenegro, Poland and Slovakia) and from fields ranging from international relations through law to medicine. All of them committed to strengthening the EU that is prosperous, secure and beneficial to all of its citizens. They first engaged in discussions with experts and policymakers and experts including MEP elect, Miriam Lexmann, Ladislav Miko and Lívia Vašáková, Head, and Economic Team Leader of the Representation of the European Commission in Slovakia respectively, State Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of Slovakia František Ružička, Thibault Muzergues, Europe Program Director at the International Republican Institute in Bratislava, and Jakub Wisniewski, Alena Kudzko, Kinga Brudžinska and Vladislava Gubalova, Director, Deputy Director and Senior Research Fellows at the GLOBSEC Policy Institute respectively. Their reflections on what kind of EU we want have been embedded into earlier sections of this report; this final chapter focuses on their recommendations on how to get the EU we want in the following broad areas:

- 1. Education and opportunities for youth**
- 2. Environment and sustainability**
- 3. EU as a global actor**
- 4. Migration, internal and external security**
- 5. Employment, social affairs and inclusion**

There was a number of themes that emerged as cutting across the various topical areas during the course of both events. Firstly, the importance of good information and knowledge about the EU was emphasized by both groups, as was the need to communicate more effectively with the younger generations especially. It was pointed out as an indispensable instrument to build a better and stronger Europe.

Secondly, the EU should concentrate on the common threats and challenges as unifiers. The participants stressed the need to work together in Europe on areas where all citizens can benefit; to come up with EU-wide solutions and harmonisation of certain policies and systems wherever possible. The common goal was to achieve more coherence across the Union, preventing an East-West divide and strengthening the EU as a whole.

Thirdly, there is a need to shift certain paradigms so as to respond to the world of today and tomorrow. From education and training through to labour laws and social welfare, the participants felt very strongly that there is a need for more flexible approaches and frameworks.

Fourthly, both groups paid a lot of attention to interdisciplinary and intersectoral solutions. Involvement of various levels of expertise, private and public sectors, different generations and communities, according to the young leaders can lead to better and more sustainable solutions in the future.

And finally, keeping very much with the aim of the project as such, the participants expressed the need for the EU to encourage citizens' involvement in policymaking on areas that concern them.

EDUCATION AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH

The discussions on the educational systems across the EU were dominated by two broad concerns – rigidity and inequality. Both groups of participants were in agreement that formal education today is unable to provide the students with the skills they need for the labour market of tomorrow. This rigidity pervades the institutions as well as the curricula, with emphasis still being placed on learning information rather than gaining soft and critical thinking skills, as well as practical and STEM skills. Vocational training schemes are weak in most EU countries, and the motivation of students to participate in those schemes is even weaker. In today's complex world that requires mastery of more than one skill, the education systems fail to explore the potential of interdisciplinary approaches and non-formal education.

This gap between educators and employers has two serious consequences – waste of talent, and passivity. Students are not given the opportunity to develop their skills and passions, not least because the education systems struggle to even identify the talents and skills needed for the market of today and tomorrow. Teachers are not sufficiently trained to enrich the courses in a way that would make them respond to market needs, and to unleash/support the development of the right skills among the students; the number of professionals from the field teaching practical courses is low too. The lack of soft and practical skills leads not only to a lack of entrepreneurial mindset and an ability to do well on the job market, but also to a lack of active citizenship and involvement in public affairs.

The situation is made worse by the differences in quality of educational systems in different EU regions and Member States. In the absence of EU-wide solutions that could enable sharing and implementation of best practices across the board, this contributes to the deepening of divisions across the Union, especially on the East-West axis. Countries with lower economic and living standards invest into education of specialists (doctors, etc.), who subsequently leave to use their skill(s) for higher wages elsewhere. This leads to a loss of people as well as investments into those people and makes the process of EU convergence much harder. It is also worth remarking at this point that less advantaged groups have worse access to quality education; not enough resources are being invested into schemes that support quality education for talents from less-advantaged social groups.

Well thought-out improvements, greater flexibility and more interdisciplinary and intersectoral approaches can lead to education systems that would provide students with better prospects and new opportunities. To that end, the following practical recommendations can be highlighted:

- ▶ Revise national education, labour, and industry priorities to create a coherent relationship between the educational system, the labour market and the needs of employers;
- ▶ Create an independent EU body responsible for:
 - ▶ independent rating of all higher educational institutions' quality, and subsequent development of degree rating, visualisation of the gap between graduates and market needs in specific fields in each country and regular updates on data on employability;
- ▶ Establish additional, complimentary and well targeted financial schemes from the EU and Member States that recognize new realities and assist young people to better access public and private education programmes;
- ▶ Invest more resources into promoting Erasmus Mundus degrees and encourage more interdisciplinary programs within the scheme;
- ▶ Dedicate more resources into promoting the internship mobility scheme within Erasmus+, as well as the EU funding schemes for young entrepreneurs;
- ▶ Support the development of a pan-EU platform linking businesses offering paid internships with universities, as well as pan-EU and local student job fairs in each country;
- ▶ Recommend higher educational institutions to include previous experiences in volunteering and/or civic participation in their entry requirements, to promote volunteering and civic participation within their activities, and to include courses ran solely by non-academic staff;
- ▶ Add a coaching/mentoring element to Erasmus+ schemes where students would have an opportunity to communicate and learn from professionals from across the EU;
- ▶ Invest resources into teachers' exchange programs, as well as business-teacher exchanges, to encourage teachers to gain practical experience in the field, transposable into teaching materials;
- ▶ Create one main EU-wide online education sharing platform, allowing for e-twinning and involvement by country and EU associations of teachers, connecting teachers, parents and students.

ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

Given the way in which sustainability was spotlighted over the course of 2019, it may not come as a surprise that the discussion on environment and sustainability was where the greatest divergence between the two groups occurred. Both groups identified the lack of awareness of the effects of climate change as well as the lack of prominence that has been given to environmental issues as the most important issue the EU needs to address. The first group focused on the way sustainability needs to be embedded into all actions and policies, whereas the second group was more focused on the outreach. Though sustainability had already become the number one issue according to the EU polls by the time the second group met, the accessibility of both the message and the technology to tackle sustainability issues remained limited in the hard-to-reach, mostly Eastern regions. There was also a discernible generational gap in accepting, understanding, and acting with regards to climate change. From the need to transform the coal regions to the need to change the way EU measures development and growth to account for environmental effects on its economies, both groups agreed that EU needs to take note and take responsibility of the sustainability agenda.

However, a notable development occurred during the 10 months between the events – whereas the November 2018 group emphasized the need for the EU to actually make a serious financial commitment to the transition to a green economy (rather than just pay lip service), the September 2019 group pointed out that the European Investment Bank (EIB) issues €500 billion of ‘green’ targeted investment bonds per year (equivalent to 5% of the euro area’s GDP), with the ECB ready to stabilise the EIB bond price in secondary markets if it falls below a certain level. This has given serious ammunition to targeting climate change and could kick-start green-led investment growth in the currently stagnating economic environment. The second group argued that if the political will was there, the €500 billion in EIB ‘green’ investment bonds could be put to use tomorrow using existing treaties/structures.

The most interesting difference, however, occurred when discussing the level at which climate change needs to be tackled. The first group focused on the potential of a circular economy and on the need for cooperation between the private and public sectors, as well as academics and NGOs, to build a real sense of sustainable community. Whilst the second group did not dispute the need for individuals and communities to step up their efforts, they did warn of a danger of creating a distracting narrative - if we only focus on personal actions supporting sustainabili-

ty, we ignore the biggest issues, such as corporate emissions. Both groups emphasized the importance of binding agreements – the first group pushed for new agreements to be made, whereas the second group pushed for the progress on and enforceability of existing agreements first.

In the end, what connected the two groups was the complex approach to sustainability – in order to tackle the more traditional environmental concerns such as loss of biodiversity, as well the social effects from climate migration, our participants recommended to the EU policymakers the following:

- ▶ Increase awareness of sustainability issues – make it part of formal education, and provide citizens with useful information, not just facts and figures;
- ▶ Make it part of targeting rules to focus on engaging people in various difficult-to-reach regions outside the capitals;
- ▶ Facilitate the setting up of a circular economy from the individual and community levels up to the national and EU single-market levels, giving citizens and local governments an active role;
- ▶ Continue building comprehensive guidance mechanisms and policies on the EU level, helping their implementation with solid financial support, even if this means switching funds from traditionally accepted priorities;
- ▶ Develop schemes, with EU financial support, to provide employees and communities affected by climate change and the shifting economy with viable work alternatives (and information on those alternatives), as well as the opportunities to requalify and re-train;
- ▶ Account for SDGs in all new policy proposals and enactments by EU institutions, and improve accountability and transparency of sustainability-related actions within the EU;
- ▶ Make provisions of sustainability enforceable, in cooperation with international organisations – set up a dispute resolution mechanism, introduce a carbon tax on producers, etc.
- ▶ Standardise tracking and expand oversight of European habitats/species at risk; make deforestation a top priority and create viable mechanisms to put pressure on the relevant actors; work towards a total abolition of single-use plastics;
- ▶ Dedicate resources for research into future climate migration.

EU AS A GLOBAL ACTOR

Underpinning all concerns and recommendations on the issue of the EU's global standing is the lack of unity within the EU, and it is rather telling that this has remained unchanged in the time that passed between the two group meetings. The lack of leadership, vision and political alignment among the Member States stands in the way of the EU agreeing on a common foreign and security policy, and acting as a consolidated global actor at a time when the US is going down the path of isolationism, and any multi-lateral basis of international cooperation appears to be up for a re-definition. Both groups saw this as a policymaking as well as an identity concern – developing common identity through education, information, and exchange can lead to a greater understanding among the EU decisionmakers as well as constituents as to why it makes sense to cooperate as a true political power, in Europe and globally.

There are three key aspects to be considered. Firstly, as discussed in detail, primarily by the first group, but also identified by the second, the EU needs to overcome its institutional and competency hurdles. While there is plenty of bureaucracy, actions are often too small and too late. In addition, the current authority held by EU institutions concerning foreign and defense matters is prohibiting a shift towards the EU speaking with one voice in the global arena, preventing the Union and Member States from taking substantial action in international matters. Consequentially, the legitimacy and strength of the EU is constantly questioned when it comes to global affairs.

Secondly, a definitional difference was drawn between a global actor (an economically powerful entity) and a global power (an actor that also possess the military means to enforce its interests). Whilst the EU is definitely a global actor, it lacks the military might to also be considered a global power. Creating a European Army is taking a long time, not least due to the lack of consensus and, in the meantime, the EU is having to rely on NATO and other bodies for its safety. In time, the EU should become a security actor and protecting power that can credibly defend its interests abroad with military capacity.

Finally, the EU should follow a value-based approach when seeking consensus internally and defining its vision globally. Strategy at the EU level needs to be designed to systematically aid the fostering of European patriotism to counter harmful nationalism, a concern more prominent in the period before the EP elections. Nonetheless, such steps increase the probability, consequentially, of a more unified foreign and defense EU vision. The EU should also build global alliances based on common values –

with the US, Canada, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, etc.

Beyond strengthening the Union and establishing itself as a global voice for freedom and democracy, EUact participants had the following recommendations to offer:

- ▶ Establish EU representation offices' participation in more international organizations and countries, as well as more EU civilian missions in developing regions and conflict zones, so that the presence of the EU globally is more visible and credible;
- ▶ Reform the office of the EU High Representative so that in the global arena the representative is an equal counterpart to the other international leaders (decisionmakers with powers);
- ▶ Play an active role in pushing for a reform in international organizations so that the EU can have a more active role and power;
- ▶ Work on a European Army that is fully compatible with NATO, but that enhances its international credibility;
- ▶ Steadily integrate the European armies to build capacity for non-military interventions;
- ▶ To strengthen and safeguard liberal democracy, Member States should establish a new instrument monitoring the rule-of-law, as an alternative to Article 7;
- ▶ Focus EU foreign policy first and foremost on its immediate neighbourhood (Eurasia, Africa, the Mediterranean); also, focus on democratic development in the Western Balkans rather than purely economic integration;
- ▶ Member States and EU leaders need to take into account the different proposals on how to reform existing foreign and defense policy, as well as EU structures with a view to reaching agreement on a reasonable reform plan as well as a global vision;
- ▶ Finally, the EU should kick-start initiatives to enhance European identity:
 - ▶ Increase the accessibility of EU politics to 'bring the debate to the pubs';
 - ▶ Create more transparency for EU legislation;
 - ▶ Bring NGOs closer to EU-level policymaking.

MIGRATION, INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL SECURITY

Several years have passed since the migration crisis of 2015, yet migration is still the key concern when it comes to security issues. Participants of both groups discussed the issue in all its complexity, from border controls and the EU's involvement in conflict/climate change affected regions where migrants mostly come from, to the issue of assimilation of migrants in Member States, to the persistent issue of terrorism and the subsequent fear and prejudice towards Islam and the Muslim people especially. In all those areas, more dialogue, more unity, and clearer and stricter policies on the EU and Member States level were seen as the answer. There is a widespread sense of dissatisfaction of the way the EU has dealt with the issue: quotas, as well as a lack of EU competence and coordination on the matter has led to a desire to disconnect from the non-EU migration issues altogether. Integration of migrants remains difficult; despite the basic understanding that migration is beneficial for the labour market, public discourse on the issue is dominated by fear (largely related to terrorism and job security) fuelled by misunderstanding. As much as these issues posed a threat to European societies, participants were clear that they could also mean an economic, social and political opportunity for the EU. However, for as long as the public perceives the issue through lenses of fear or indifference, the EU is unlikely to benefit from the situation in any way.

The issue of political opportunity also dominated the discussion on the EU's external threats, including conflict in Ukraine and the Middle East, internal transformations in Turkey, the growing influence of Russia and China, and the already mentioned issue of the US retreating from its global role. Though the EU's already-tested external border were at even greater risks, these regional and global developments opened a door for the EU to fill a leadership gap, assert itself with one voice as a credible actor and protect its external borders. On the note of external threats, it is also worth remarking that the EU's active involvement is also necessary in order to better understand and even mitigate the influence all the actors involved in the conflict regions can have on the migrants that are already inside the EU.

Zooming in on the EU's internal security, the clear conclusion was that it is simply not up to scratch, predominantly due to a lack of cooperation among Member States. National authorities holding too much power over intelligence sharing has increased the danger of radicalised elements slipping through the net, which resulted in the acute danger of the some of the best EU value-based benefits having to be curtailed (e.g. freedom of movement, freedom of expression, etc.). The uncontrolled flow of migrants and their possible influence has contributed to ter-

rorism within the Union; in order to eliminate that, we invade privacy through monitoring and data collection; however, the fine line between security and privacy must be maintained. Participants were also concerned about the lack of understanding of hybrid threats (demonstrated, for example, by the constant election interference), as well as the imbalance between fast-developing new technologies, policymaking and norm-setting. Such mismatches can be mitigated only with more systematized knowledge-sharing, and EU-wide mechanisms to deal with these new vulnerabilities.

If the common threats are to be turned to common benefits, the EU must come up with unified solutions, including:

- ▶ Establish a strict procedure to obtain asylum status in the EU, including identifying an area to live in, process of reporting to an asylum officer, and an evaluation of the integration progress;
- ▶ Set up clear information flow on the issue - the EU needs to better communicate its actions and accomplishments. Debate on migration needs to be widespread, including schools and universities;
- ▶ Establish strict border controls and protections using new available technology with EU standardized guidelines, ensure higher exchange of expertise and information on border controls, and establish a special task force;
- ▶ Increase the coordinated effort at an EU level to better support countries of origin through various tools — financial, capacity-building, sharing best practices, etc. Dedicate more financial support for refugee camps in non-EU states;
- ▶ Discuss the viability of, and alternatives to, military interventions in regions of chaos, including well-coordinated and continuous EU political and economic pressure of actors that endanger the external security of the EU;
- ▶ Deepen EU cooperation (financial and otherwise) and increase the number of joint operations with countries and regions on the periphery of the EU;
- ▶ Devise common EU standards in information gathering, resource usage and sharing, as well as a more workable and efficient intelligence sharing mechanism, to provide better protection and reaction, and to uphold the freedom of movement;
- ▶ Ensure a considered application and enforcement of policies in the Member States through EU monitoring, enacting EU mechanisms to punish interference and reward (financially) good practices, like building national counter-action institutions, tools and rules.

EMPLOYMENT, SOCIAL AFFAIRS AND INCLUSION

The concerns and recommendations regarding employment, social affairs and inclusion in many ways overlap with other areas, especially education and opportunities for youth, as well as migration. The first group especially focused on the need to address youth unemployment, and within that, on the need to ensure that a cheap labour force coming from outside the EU does not erode the bedrock of job opportunities available to young people. Developing more innovative European labour market policies for boosting professional opportunities for young people, as well as ensuring that national employment conditions for migrant and domestic workers are equal, and that substandard employment conditions or discriminatory mechanisms/policies are not allowed, were all seen as crucial. If the fears of young people are substantiated and not dealt with appropriately, the EU risks creating a generation that is alienated and willing to subscribe to alternative political and social perspectives and beliefs.

The second group came at the issue from a different perspective – they argued that a change of paradigm and perspective on labour from the policymakers and the population is needed. There is a lack of understanding and legislative framework covering the gig economy, and the potential of non-linear business models also remains largely unexplored. Beyond this skills-labour market gap, this group also discussed social provisions and housing, both of which need to be brought up to speed with the current business climate. On the one hand, there is a problem with housing in many parts of Europe, while at the same time residential housing also stands for almost 30% of Europe's CO2 emissions. Housing needs to be seen not just as a purely infrastructural, but also as a social and environmental issue. To top it off, social safety nets – from family planning through child allowance standards to pensions systems - are not adequately provided in some parts of the EU.

The two key issues that both groups agreed on were inequality, and lack of cohesion and convergence. Social mobility within educational systems and the labour market is low in some parts of the Union, not least because of a lack of trust in and understanding of social mobility. Equal opportunities and inclusion in the workplace too are lacking, and discrimination remains a challenge. This includes the gender pay gap and glass ceilings in specific industries, as well as in power structures. There is still a notable East-West, and North-South divide, the urban-rural gap is widening, and the ongoing gentrification and displacement of low-skilled workers continue to divide societies across the Union. Without more equitable opportunities and conditions, social unrest can be a powerful tool to bring sometimes-unwanted out-

comes for Member States and the EU. To avoid such social unrest, some of the following solutions could be implemented:

- ▶ Get citizens more involved in shaping the labour market of the future – the EU should explore experimental ways of having a dialogue with its citizens by launching Policy Lab Initiatives for example;
- ▶ Use the EU's new Multiannual Financial Framework to fund different schemes, carefully tailored for closing the labour market and social welfare gaps;
- ▶ Ensure that mutualised social services are available for the new industries;
- ▶ Empower trade unions at the national level and interconnecting at EU level to ensure an extra layer of protection in the labour market;
- ▶ Harmonise pension systems across the EU and create child allowance standards throughout the EU based on an average wage in each Member State;
- ▶ Agree on a Green New Deal for Housing with a social focus – create a European Community Housing Fund and build affordable and high-quality green housing;
- ▶ Dedicate resources to research and innovation in green and socially sustainable housing, to regional and municipal initiatives that build new houses, and to initiatives that put more public power into housing;
- ▶ Dedicate more resources, spaces and services to education – to language courses, Erasmus programs, dual education, etc. At the same time, put in place EU-wide checks on the use of educational resources and their relevance for the labour market;
- ▶ Standardise educational systems across the EU further, especially the higher-education institutions; foster university partnerships/checks to raise the standards of education throughout the EU;
- ▶ Ensure more diversity within the EU institutions, incentivize equal hearing, support EU-wide awareness-raising activities on inequality, and enforce strict national policies to ensure salary transparency.





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