

Young Minds, Democratic Horizons: Paving the Way for the EU's Promising Future

Attitudes of Young People from Austria, Greece, Ireland and Slovakia



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Editors

Vladislava Gubalova, Senior Fellow, Centre for Global Europe, GLOBSEC

Lukas Dravecky, Project Coordinator, Centre for Global Europe, GLOBSEC

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About

This report was compiled as a part of the project “Towards Democratic and Inclusive Europe: EP Elections and Active Citizens’ Participation and Contribution” (EUact2) which aims to:

- ▶ engage, connect and empower EU citizens especially young people;
- ▶ ensure the sustainability of activism and public participation in European policymaking;
- ▶ contribute to an open, rights-based, democratic, equal and inclusive Union premised on the rule of law.

This publication provides insight into the perceptions of young people living in four EU countries (Austria, Greece, Ireland and Slovakia) with respect to democracy, democratic forms of participation, citizen activism and the future of the EU. As they are potential new leaders who will contribute to crafting EU society in the future, it is important to glean the voices of young Europeans to evaluate current strategies and policies. It is also necessary to assess the need to enact changes and/or create new tools to more impactfully and consistently engage young people. Now less than a year away from the next European Parliament (EP) elections, gauging citizen attitudes can provide a foundation for understanding possible trends regarding European (dis)integration developments in the near future.

Methodology

The publication employs qualitative data gathered by conducting focus groups in four European countries (Austria, Greece, Ireland and Slovakia) between November 2022 and March 2023. In each country, partner organisations conducted two focus groups¹ in either the respective local languages or English with, on average, 25 participants (all young people - predominantly 18-30 years old). Each country report includes relevant sociodemographic data.

The discussions lasted approximately 90 minutes and were led by an expert moderator. The conversations were semi-structured, informed by pre-selected general questions. The conversations were cascaded, with the first focus group tackling ‘the basics’ and the second focus group picking up from there and ‘looking forward.’

The aim of this methodological approach generally is to attain - from relatively small groups - a realistic picture of human perceptions and attitudes about specific social and existential facts. This methodological approach comes with numerous benefits including the ability to obtain needed research data from respondents in an interactive manner.²

The quotes cited in this publication are indeed direct statements from the focus group participants.

General themes:

Focus group 1

Attitudes towards democracy
(national and European level)

Attitudes towards representation
(national and European level)

Attitudes towards the EU's future

Focus group 2

Attitudes towards democracy
and representation

Attitudes towards the EU's future

Recommendations on how to
achieve desired EU future

Introduction

In less than a year, EU citizens will vote a new European Parliament into office and the current European Commission (EC) will end its mandate.³ The 2024 EP elections come at a time when societies are more polarised than ever. Civic spaces are shrinking and democracy, under attack by malign domestic and foreign influence, is in defensive mode. The continent, moreover, is facing geopolitical fissures heightened by Russia's war against Ukraine. At the same time, the EU and its Member States are tackling the climate crisis and confronting energy, economic and migration challenges. The results of the upcoming elections could significantly affect European institutions - the protectors of democracy and stability - and the future of the Union.

A recent Eurobarometer survey found that 45% of EU citizens are aware about the upcoming EP elections and 42% of European youth perceive voting in 2024 as important.⁴ Yet, interest highly fluctuates from country to country. Whereas 66% are interested in Ireland and 61% in Austria (above the EU average), only 49% express interest in Greece. Slovaks stand least interested among all 27 Member States, with a mere 26% in the country expressing interest in next year's EP elections.⁵ Austrians and Slovaks share something in common though: both populations carry negative overall perceptions towards EU membership, with, respectively, only 42% and 44% saying it is a good thing.⁶

In this context, there is an urgent need to examine the attitudes of young people and assess their perceptions before the upcoming 2024 EP elections but also to gauge the attitudes of the next generation towards the fundamental principles of democracy and the future of the EU.

Through this project, we set out to listen to young people living in four countries (Austria, Greece, Ireland and Slovakia) to capture important intersectional nuances across Europe on topics related to European democracy, representation and activism, and the future of the Union. Through semi-structured focus group discussions, we sought to collect data and advance recommendations to national and EU officials on how to engage young people as they work on mechanisms to defend democracy in the EU and ensure inclusive, impactful and transparent policymaking.

Our findings indicate strong convergence around the belief that democracy and the EU are the best alternatives for young Europeans, with themes like gender equality, ambitious climate goals and socially-oriented policy dominating the focus group discussions. Nevertheless, the conversations revealed that young people lack a deep grasp concerning the root causes of challenges or knowledge about EU processes and participation formats. An apparent lack of interest in discussing disinformation and the effects (positive and negative) of social media on youth perceptions regarding national and European policymaking and/or the future of democracy in the EU should also give some pause.



Key Findings

THE MEANING OF DEMOCRACY IS BROADLY UNDERSTOOD AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

Young people from all four countries (and those from other nationalities living in Austria, Greece, Ireland and Slovakia) highly value democracy and see it as intertwined with freedom, equality, and the feeling of genuine representation, sometimes using these terms interchangeably. Slovaks focus on 'freedom' as the primary identifier of democracy, while their counterparts in Austria, Greece and Ireland also relate the concept to the ability of citizens to influence governance and hold officials accountable. Democracy, young people say, should also be predicated on the quality of decision-making processes and less on institutional design.

"Democracy is the process of structured and coordinated disagreement"

DESPITE ITS NUMEROUS FLAWS, DEMOCRACY IS (STILL) THE PREFERRED CHOICE OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Young people residing in Austria, Greece, Ireland and Slovakia cannot imagine living in any political regime type other than democracy. Though they acknowledge there is considerable space for improvement, they are resolute that democracy still offers more strengths than weaknesses. Both Slovak and Greek residents, nevertheless, recognise that democracy in their countries is suffering from substantial defects. Ever worsening societal polarisation, seemingly unstoppable corruption, incompetent governance and a focus on political personalities rather than the issues are all seen as exerting enormous pressure on modern democracies. Austrian residents point out that their democracy is "selectively democratic" depending on how politically sensitive a given policy area is. Young people in Ireland, meanwhile, acknowledge that their elections provide a representative choice but assert that more options are needed that reflect their values and interests.

"Democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time" Winston Churchill

EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY FROM A SAFETY NET TO NOT ON THE RADAR

While young people are able to discuss their perceptions regarding democracy in their own countries at ease, for most, European democracy is less well understood. Young people in Ireland focus on their own values and priorities rather than on institutional design or EU policies. Slovak youth, for their part, struggle to engage in democracy at the EU level. Austrian residents, meanwhile, warn against 'democratic backsliding' which, if not addressed now, will lead to grave consequences for the Union as a whole. At the same time, young people in Greece see the EU, buoyed by its institutional design and legal framework, as a safety net and a protector for democracy even though it is not without flaws (e.g. Qatargate, lack of inclusion of young people, and its slow-paced and onerous bureaucracy).

EU CITIZENS ARE (STILL) CONFUSED ABOUT THE EU AND DO NOT BELIEVE IN THE POWER OF EU PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS

The belief that the EU decision-making process is too complex and difficult for the public to grasp continues to resonate among EU citizens living in Austria, Greece, Ireland and Slovakia. Those that have some knowledge concerning EU governance find themselves in a minority among peers. Sceptical views towards the power of the European Parliament are especially worrisome; young people see parliamentarians not as the primary decision-makers but rather playing second fiddle to 'closed-door deals' made at the Council. While voting in the European Parliament is still identified as one of the main channels for participation at the EU level, the elections themselves are perceived as secondary in importance to national and local elections.

MEMBERS OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT COULD DO THEIR JOB BETTER

Young people residing in the four countries stress that Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) can do better. Young people in Slovakia and Austria called for more stringent conditions to become a candidate to ensure that MEPs are sufficiently qualified to conduct their work in the EP. Irish residents suggested that MEPs need to improve their outreach with their constituencies. Young people in Austria, meanwhile, desire more clarity regarding who MEPs represent (their voters, their political party or lob-

bying interests). While some steps can be taken directly by MEPs, young people see value in implementing some structural changes to increase the legitimacy and decision-making power of the EP. They believe that through measures, such as decreasing the number of MEPs, creating transnational lists of candidates and mandating pan-European political debates regularly, EU citizens will grow more interest in voting, holding their MEPs accountable and pressing for better representation.

YOUNG PEOPLE DO NOT FEEL REPRESENTED BUT SEE THEMSELVES AS ACTIVELY ENGAGED CITIZENS

Young people do not think that they are sufficiently represented either at the national or European level. They rather see a disconnect between themselves and Brussels, with few opportunities and/or little knowledge concerning opportunities for getting engaged. The youth population continues to feel detached from political processes and hold the impression that they are not considered important enough to be represented. Yet, they are prepared to take responsibility for the development and governance of the EU in the future and to restore politics to its rightful place in the collective social consciousness, stressing also the importance of gender equality (Slovakia, Greece). Most young people see themselves as actively engaged citizens, though they stress that voting in elections is the main channel through which they practice this activism. Other forms of engagement, like protests, advocacy and education campaigns on certain causes and participating in youth political movements, are also appealing to them.

“Is there any desire [of the representatives] to listen to the youth?”

“...despite the challenges and obstacles, I have faith that today’s youth will continue to work toward creating a world that is more democratic and just.”

THE ALTERNATIVES TO REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY ARE STILL RATHER UNKNOWN

The ability to distinguish between representative, participatory and deliberative forms of democracy poses a broad challenge to young people. Irish youth are most familiar and outspoken on the benefits of deliberative formats, advocating for using good practices from Ireland to devise a more permanent pan-European deliberative mechanism. Young people, in general, are interested in participation to potentially amplify their voices, yet they also demand to see a real impact on policymaking before committing themselves.

THE CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE WAS A GOOD, THOUGH FLAWED, EXERCISE

Most young people aware about the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) appreciate the ambitious effort that was made. They emphasized, however, that there is considerable space for improvement including by introducing an element of permanency into the format to enable it to yield a tangible policy impact over time. They, furthermore, see a need to ‘translate’ the initiatives, formats and topics to the specific needs and realities of different countries, regions and local communities. These changes are all needed, they feel, to avoid certain perceptions of detachment and non-inclusivity apparent during the CoFoE, which perpetuated feelings of distance from Brussels.

BRUSSELS (STILL) APPEARS TO BE TOO FAR AWAY FROM EVERY CORNER OF THE UNION

The perception that the EU’s decisions are made in distant Brussels and Strasbourg and that smaller Member States are not sufficiently visible and represented at the EU level is still predominant. This sentiment traverses East and West, with young people from Ireland to Slovakia sharing similar attitudes. The EU further continues to not be ‘seen’ and ‘understood’ in rural areas and in socio-economically disadvantaged communities where voting in EP elections or engagement in various forms of EU activism falls rather low on daily priority lists. Young people recognise the problem and express a fervent interest in serving as advocates not just for other young people but also in a more intersectional manner.

THE FUTURE OF THE EU WILL BE BRIGHT BUT MUCH NEEDS TO BE DONE

Young people are generally optimistic about the future of the EU and consider it to currently provide the best option available for multidimensional cooperation between European countries. They see the EU, over the next 20 years, as becoming more integrated in some areas and continuing to enlarge. They also envision the bloc as greener and more globally visible. Challenges like Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian war in Ukraine are identified, in fact, as unifying events that are proving to accelerate integration. That said, young people living in Slovakia are concerned that the prolonged war is feeding further polarisation, especially in Central Europe, and bolstering far-right and more extreme political disruptors. This dynamic is perceived as a threat to national and European democracy and the EU project more broadly. Some caution is also apparent among Greek youth, fuelled by that country’s experience navigating a multitude of overlapping crises over the last decade. Young people from Greece

oscillate between “pragmatism” and “idealism” when thinking about the future of the Union.

THE EU SHOULD CONTINUE DEEPENING INTEGRATION ACROSS VARIOUS FIELDS

While young people residing in Austria, Greece, Ireland and Slovakia do not foresee a federation of European countries on the horizon, they are confident that EU citizens will significantly benefit from further integration in several policy areas. Slovak youth, for instance, stress that the economic dimension of integration needs to play the primary role in European integration in the future to enable the bloc to withstand growing economic pressure from China and the United States. To enhance Europe's global position, young Austrian residents, for their part, call on the EU to develop new partnerships, strengthen the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and relaunch the EU enlargement policy. The pursuit of the EU strategic autonomy concept across sectors the bloc considers strategically important also finds support. For Greek and Irish residents, migration, however, particularly requires urgent common reforms. Young people in Austria and Ireland would further like to see the EU on the right path towards climate neutrality within 20 years, while Slovaks are more cautious on the steps necessary to get there. Most young people, additionally, scrutinise EU policies through social welfare and humanitarian lenses and call for ensuring complementarity, for example, with environmental, migration and even public health policies.

THE EU NEEDS TO BE MORE TRANSPARENT AND EXERT A MORE ASSERTIVE HAND AGAINST DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

Young people are willing to surrender some national autonomy in the future and instead embrace a move towards a more multispeed type of integration. Yet, they demand increased transparency from the EU, a more balanced power relationship between institutions and improved accessibility for citizens. These steps would increase the EU's legitimacy and credibility among citizens and Member States, which can contribute to more assertive actions in defending democracy and the rule of law—very important values and principles for young people living in Austria, Greece, Ireland and Slovakia.

RECOMMENDATIONS

How can the engagement of young people (and all citizens) in EU matters/affairs be ensured?

1. Improve communication:

- ▶ of EU officials and EU representatives with young people about the EU and take time to listen to their ideas about the EU's future.
- ▶ with national and local authorities in tailoring EU campaigns to the contexts of particular countries and their diverse populations and in translating the EU presence into real tangible benefits for local citizens.
- ▶ by running sustained campaigns and information activities about the EU to encourage citizens to vote in EU elections and engage and learn about government affairs.

2. Focus on knowledge-building:

- ▶ by conducting interactive training sessions on national and European democratic processes in various Member States.
- ▶ by including multidisciplinary European curriculum in elementary and secondary education to ensure that the key principles of European integration are practically explained and understood by children early in their schooling.
- ▶ by strengthening the study of democracy and various forms of citizen engagement including representative, participatory and deliberative involvement (and, similarly, engaging different government levels in trainings focused on strengthening democracy at home and in the EU).

3. Institutionalize deliberative formats:

- ▶ Take inspiration from Ireland's model of deliberative democracy and apply it across the Union on a more permanent basis.
- ▶ Create youth councils, political assemblies and fora for public consultation in the EU where citizens can leverage opportunities to share their views on relevant issues and formulate proposals for the policymaking process.
- ▶ Develop digital applications that allow citizens to vote directly on proposals in the form of “digital referendums”.
- ▶ Establish an EU institution responsible solely for advocating the interests of students, young people and new entrepreneurs.

“We need to create permanent channels of participation in Europe so that we can bring it to our lives. We want to be able to influence it as it affects us enormously”



Focus Groups Report: Austria

AUSTRIA			
Location of discussions	Number of participants	Age range	Gender ratio (Women:Men:Non Binary)
Vienna	25	Avg. 30-31	18:7:0
<i>(uniform group: age)</i>			
Location of discussions	Number of participants	Age range	Gender ratio (Women:Men:Non Binary)
Vienna	32	Avg. 28-30	23:9:0
<i>(uniform group: age)</i>			
Nationality: Austrian, Bulgarian, Czech, Croatian, German, French, Hungarian, Irish, Italian, Polish, Romanian, Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish			
Fields of study:			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ International affairs ▶ Political science ▶ History ▶ EU policies ▶ Public Relations ▶ Urban design ▶ Health services 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ European studies ▶ Journalism ▶ Economy ▶ Public policy ▶ Applied arts ▶ Banking ▶ Medicine 	
Population	9 120 000⁷	EP elections 2019 turnout	59,8%⁸

GENERAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS DEMOCRACY (NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN LEVEL)

For respondents in Austria, democracy encompasses the ability to vote in elections, partake in decision-making processes and influence state governance including, if necessary, through protests and other forms of civic participation. Young people also singled out the rule of law, protection of human rights, freedom of expression, tolerance, equality and media pluralism as values that are essential for a well-functioning democracy. They finally noted that citizens should feel safe and protected in a democratic state.

Regarding the state of democracy in Austria, focus group participants noted that the quality of democracy in their country can be selective, depending on how politically

sensitive a given policy area is. They referred to the Austrian approach to migration as an example that contradicts democratic values.

The respondents were relatively sceptical about the possibility for citizens to influence European politics apart from European Parliament elections which they perceive as secondary in importance to national elections. Nor are there real pan-European political debates aimed at the public even during the EP election campaign period. They also agreed that the power of the EP is not sufficient to counter the “closed-door” proceedings of the Council. Participants shared the view that EU institutions and certain EU agencies, such as Frontex, should be more transparent than they are today. Young people are also rather pessimistic about the limited representation of EU citizens in decision-making process in Brussels. While respondents acknowledged that there are a fair number of channels for engagement and participation at the EU

level, they pointed out that these forums are not well advertised or known to ordinary citizens. According to the focus groups, youth also believe that democratic backsliding within the EU is an important topic that needs to be addressed if EU legitimacy is to be maintained both within the Union and abroad.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS REPRESENTATION (NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN LEVEL)

The young interviewees do not feel represented at the EU level. They believe that MEPs, to this end, do not represent the citizens who elected them but rather the interests of their parties and various lobby groups. Participants also expressed concern that EU institutions are not sufficiently democratic or transparent. They would, consequently, welcome EU institutional reforms such as the establishment of transnational candidate lists for European Parliament elections to “truly represent the people of Europe”.

As far as the Conference of the Future of Europe is concerned, respondents perceived it as a good idea that could have benefitted from a more inclusive participant pool. According to respondents, the failings herein indicate that EU initiatives cannot be merely implemented from above in Brussels. EU institutions, they say, rather need national and local governments to “translate” their ideas into local settings to engage ordinary citizens. Participants concluded that the activities and initiatives of EU institutions will continue to be seen as detached and too generic – as opposed to tailor-made to specific national contexts – until these adjustments are made.

If asked to rank different forms of democracy (representative, participatory, deliberative), respondents are not particularly adamant towards any particular option. However, they see space for reducing the number of (mostly unknown) MEPs. Participants reiterated that MEPs should be more proactive and defend people’s interests more than those of their parties. They also called for higher selection criteria for political candidates, such as requiring that office seekers hold at least an MA degree or another similar qualification.

“MEPs do not represent the people, only political party interests”

The respondents also see themselves as actively engaged citizens who vote regularly and participate in political processes through, for example, protesting or supporting national causes and issues. They also partake in policymaking and advocacy activities. Respondents additionally emphasised the importance of university education and encouraging students to learn about EU institutions to promote further participation. They acknowledged that in contrast to the EU level, citizens enjoy considerably more instruments to influence and actively engage with politics at the national level.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE EU'S FUTURE

Europe should be freer, greener, more secure, more assertive, more digital and more united – these were the key words stressed most often by participants when asked how they would like to see the EU in 20 years. They also aspire for Europe to play a stronger role on the global stage by developing new partnerships, strengthening the CFSP and relaunching the EU enlargement policy. The bloc should also continue pursuing strategic autonomy in sectors it considers strategically important.

There was a consensus among participants that the EU will be more federal and therefore transnational than intergovernmental in 20 years. It is also possible that rather than moving together, the EU will become more of a “multispeed” project consisting of various levels of integration between Member States. Participants believe that the future of the EU will be intrinsically connected to EU enlargement and engagement with the Western Balkans.

“I want to see more unity, better-functioning EU and enlarged EU in 20 years time”

The stability and independence of Ukraine will also play a crucial role in affecting EU security. In this context, respondents agreed that the war in Ukraine has paradoxically strengthened EU unity. Regarding the CFSP, meanwhile, participants held that its future lies in the launch of an EU army which should be complementary to NATO – strengthening EU-NATO cooperation rather than antagonising it.

Participants further hope that, within 20 years, the EU will be on the right path towards climate neutrality. Likewise, they believe that EU migration policy will see changes and suggested that the EU should provide recognition to refugees in one of its conventions. Regarding migration within the EU, they identified a potentially alarming risk that people will increasingly move between countries based on political considerations.

“If we don't like our country's political parties or conditions, we can just move somewhere else. In the end, we lose interest in democracy in our own country and don't try to make it better, but simply leave it.”



Focus Groups

Report: Greece

GREECE			
Location of discussions	Number of participants	Age range	Gender ratio (Women:Men:Non Binary)
Athens	81	18-30	44:37:0
(uniform group: age) Participants were divided into 7 focus groups with approximately 15 participants each			
Nationality: Greek, Italian			
Fields of study:			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ International relations ▶ Political science ▶ Economics ▶ Biology ▶ Russian philosophy ▶ Greek literature 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ European studies ▶ History ▶ Public Administration ▶ Gymnastics ▶ Mechanical design ▶ Greek history 	
Population	10 480 000 ⁹	EP elections 2019 turnout	58,7% ¹⁰

GENERAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS DEMOCRACY (NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN LEVEL)

According to the initial pre-discussion questionnaire given to the Greek focus group participants, a plurality (44.3%) of respondents stated that they were “moderately” satisfied with democracy in their country, while 31% were dissatisfied and 24% were quite satisfied. Notably, no one reported being “extremely satisfied”. When asked the same question about democracy in the EU, the results were slightly more favourable although no participant expressed extreme satisfaction with EU democracy either.

The definition of democracy among participants differed, however, ranging from criteria related to a sense of belonging, freedom, pluralism and inclusiveness to a more pragmatic emphasis on democracy as “the process of structured and coordinated disagreement”.

Focus group participants similarly expressed their concerns about the state of democracy in Greece. Corruption, clientelism and populism were identified as the main drivers of this cynicism. Political parties are perceived as unresponsive to the needs of citizens and as primarily representing the interests of elites and multinational corpora-

tions. Parties across the political spectrum, they say, make use of “clientelism” in government. The rise of populism, on the other hand, has fomented divisive rhetoric and societal polarisation, leaving little room for constructive and structured dialogue between citizens. Many participants, furthermore, highlighted the under-representation of women in Greek politics. These factors, according to participants, are all significantly reducing the effectiveness of institutions, thereby eroding Greek democracy.

“The EU’s democracy is inclusive. There are various states, cultures, and shared values. That is how the democratic ideal is defined”.

The respondents, in light of the above, judged EU democracy to be in a better state than national-level democracy. Participants stated that European institutions further provide a safety net that protects the rule of law at the national level. They believe that the European legal order protects their rights - the EU is indeed frequently regarded as a shield that protects democratic practices. Yet, respondents pointed out that even EU institutions are not completely immune to corruption against the backdrop of the recent Qatargate scandal. Furthermore, respondents criticized the EU’s strong and slow-paced bureaucracy, tedious decision-making processes and lack of input from

citizen voices. Young people fear that these shortcomings are contributing to the rise of right-wing extremism and Euroscepticism more broadly.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS REPRESENTATION (NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN LEVEL)

“Party voters do not include young people. Thus, our voice is never reaching its intended audience.”

On the matter of youth satisfaction with their national level representation, a majority of participants (52%) responded that they were “slightly to not at all satisfied”. Respondents, otherwise, considered themselves as “quite active” though more at the national (61%) than the EU level (48%). Participants agreed that student groups affiliated with political parties and youth organisations serve as the primary institutional vehicles representing young people. However, they expressed scepticism concerning whether these organisations truly represent youth or whether they are merely perpetuating partisan politics without due consideration of youth concerns. According to participants, these perceived features of politics have contributed to youth distancing themselves from political parties and to the under-representation of youth therein.

“...elections are insufficient for appropriate representation because a single [politically educated] vote does not ensure correct and accurate representation and participation”

Respondents, meanwhile, acknowledged that the performance of democratic institutions is dependent on the qualitative features of the decision-making process and less on institutional design. Participants, to this end, stressed concern about a lack of structured dialogue and reasoned debates and instead an emphasis on the personalities of politicians as part of political debates. Participants agreed that this personalisation of politics constitutes a negative aspect of current political practice and can foster disillusionment and distance people from political participation. Young people also believe that it is up to youth to find a way to restore politics to its rightful place in the collective social consciousness by first and foremost reinvigorating the necessary political ethos required for such action.

“There is no battle of ideas in political discourse, but a battle of individuals.”

According to the respondents from Greece, the recent Conference on the Future of Europe attracted the attention of young European citizens, as evidenced by their active engagement. However, as a shortcoming, participants pointed out that the CoFoE channels for participation and dialogue are not permanent. They argue that the EU needs to create permanent channels of participation

in Europe to ensure that citizens gain a say on policies that significantly affect their lives. In the absence of such a mechanism, young people will continue to believe that EP decisions are simply too “far removed” from the lives of ordinary citizens and youth more specifically. They also acknowledged, nonetheless, that young people intuitively recognise the role, impact, and significance of the EU even if the institutions are not directly present in their everyday lives. That said, most young people do not consider themselves to be “active European citizens” due to a lack of information and the absence of appropriate channels of participation. There is a need, in this regard, for reforms enhancing youth accessibility to Europe, especially for young people living outside urban areas. Those living in rural areas often demonstrate an even poorer understanding of how the EU works and tend to feel further detached due to their geographical distance from both national and European political centres.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE EU'S FUTURE

A range of viewpoints were put forward by Greek respondents concerning Europe's future. More optimistic participants believe that European integration will continue to deepen, with Europe playing a leading global role in the future. A more sceptical camp, for its part, sees the EU as stagnant and possibly on the decline. Greek youth, who have lived through multiple crises over the past few years, vacillate, in particular, between “pragmatism” and “idealism”. Young people in Greece, however, uniformly recognise the critical role the EU plays and the need to preserve its core values for future generations.

“I don't have much hope because the system prevents a meaningful shift in favour of a more democratic society.”

“I think the European Union is listening and understands our problems. It has proven that it is moving to the right direction, solidifying its position in our lives, and will keep doing so.”

Respondents were further resolute that migration particularly is a pressing issue that demands urgent reforms if further integration progress is to be achieved. And while young people generally endorse the steps the EU has taken in recent years, they believe more action is required to create a less bureaucratic, more decisive, proactive and greener EU. They indeed want a European Union that defends its weaker states and strives to reduce economic inequality among its citizens. A significant number of young people believe in the Union and accept that they now share a responsibility in shaping it accordingly.



Focus Groups Report: Ireland

IRELAND			
Location of discussions	Number of participants	Age range	Gender ratio (Women:Men:Non Binary)
Dublin	26	18-36	16:10:0
<i>(uniform group: age)</i> Two separate focus groups were conducted with 13 participants in each group.			
Nationality: Irish, Belgian, Dutch, Romanian			
Fields of study:			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ International studies ▶ English studies 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ International politics ▶ Engineering 	
Population	5 150 000 ¹¹	EP elections 2019 turnout	49,7% ¹²

GENERAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS DEMOCRACY (NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN LEVEL)

Participants in Ireland defined democracy as a system where ultimate power lies with the people and where politicians are held responsible by society. Two major preconditions must be fulfilled though – voters must trust the electoral system (an absence of corruption is important herein) and believe their voice matters and is properly recorded. Democracy, in their view, is synonymous with feeling genuinely represented. Based on this metric, the focus group participants concluded that Irish democracy falls short given the limited number of major parties in the Irish political system.

“Even though democracy allows us to have a choice, it might not be the choice we might want.”

A consensus was also reached that Ireland is not sufficiently represented compared to other Member States. When speaking about EU democracy in general though, participants always referred to their own values and priorities and the level to which they were or were not represented rather than looking at EU policies as a whole.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS REPRESENTATION (NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN LEVEL)

“There’s often a perception that people with European jobs “are on a jolly”. There’s a misconception about what it is all about and the importance of the work that they are doing.”

Participants reiterated their concerns that Ireland lacked adequate representation in EU institutions compared to other Member States. Participants were additionally all unsure about the names of MEPs representing their constituencies. Respondents, to this end, concluded that few people are paying attention to European politics in Ireland and there is little to be proud about in the country in that regard. They added that the Irish population more broadly lacks knowledge about EU roles and institutions like MEPs, the European Parliament, the European Commission, and the Council. They also worry about a disconnect between the work being done in Brussels, Strasbourg and Ireland. The media, for one, should cover EU affairs considerably more according to participants. Likewise, MEPs should assume a more proactive role in educating the public and bringing EU discussions back to their constituents. One participant remembered that the MEP from her constituency spoke at her university, making her feel a sense of pride as an Irish citizen when attending the event. Despite an apparent disinterest of Irish citizens in European affairs,

the corollary is that more engagement on the part of Irish MEPs could significantly reverse this negative dynamic.

“I can barely name any Irish MEPs and some of them makes it hard to be proud Irish in the EU.”

Meanwhile, participants were generally satisfied with deliberative democracy at the national level. They note that, through deliberative processes, the entire country has been able to discuss certain issues together and more thoroughly understand the complexities of these topics. Some participants were aware about the Conference on the Future of Europe and regard it as a good idea though they deem it as poorly executed. They criticized, for example, the minimal public awareness about the event.

“Our Citizens Assembly works well and enhances democracy. It is a civilised and inclusive process.”

A group of respondents argued that active citizenship is a self-driven process based on the willingness of individuals to inform themselves. Other participants disagreed, saying that it is impossible for people to inform themselves when information is not easily available. They held that it was more the duty of the government and media to ensure that objective information is available to the public. Both groups agreed though that engagement especially takes place at the local community level and that there are numerous ways to become an active and engaged citizen. Respondents also agreed that voter apathy is a major issue in Ireland. Citizens do not understand the importance of voting in EU elections because they do not see the results or benefits from EU membership. People from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are especially hampered from participating in politics due to the many different issues competing for their time.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE EU'S FUTURE

All participants agreed that the EU is moving in the right direction and that the pandemic and the war in Ukraine have both demonstrated Europe's strength when we all come together. Participants also uniformly spotlighted environmental issues as another policy area where the EU is making a difference that they want to see continue. Also meaningful to respondents concerned the fact that they perceive that the EU supports Ireland's development. They also opined that the EU should better support migrants in the future and are keen to see more EU solidarity in this area.

“Ireland is supported by the EU, and this means a lot to me.”

Young people in Ireland are broadly optimistic about Europe's future and their own role in it. They take it as given that the EU will still exist in 20 years and Ireland will remain a part of it. Focus group participants placed

particular emphasis on social issues, rather than economic topics, when thinking about the EU's future. They, for example, see environmental issues in the context of the social benefits of green programmes rather than the costs or possible economic benefits that they may engender. Irish youth similarly frame migration as a humanitarian issue. Young people, finally, are calling for more integration in the field of public health.

“We need to be more European if we're going to be part of its future.”



Focus Groups Report: Slovakia

SLOVAKIA			
Location of discussions	Number of participants	Age range	Gender ratio (Women:Men:Non Binary)
Bratislava	26	19-24	14:12:0
<i>(uniform group: age)</i>			
Location of discussions	Number of participants	Age range	Gender ratio (Women:Men:Non Binary)
Banska Bystrica	25	17-24	16:9:0
<i>(uniform group: age)</i>			
Nationality: Slovak, Czech			
Fields of study:			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ International relations ▶ Political science 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ International management ▶ Marketing 	
Population	5 450 000¹³	EP elections 2019 turnout	22,7%¹⁴

GENERAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS DEMOCRACY (NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN LEVEL)

One of the Slovak focus groups discussions was primarily targeted towards understanding how participants comprehend the concept of democracy in practice and the benefits and constraints that it brings compared to other political regimes. The discussion revolved around two main questions: “What does democracy mean to you?” and “What do you think about the overall state of democracy in your country and in the EU?”.

What does democracy mean to you?

“Democracy is freedom.”

The respondents consider democracy to be the optimal political regime type available to western countries. Democracy enables people to feel free and uninhibited by any undue restrictions. Respondents especially discussed democracy and freedom as inseparable and sometimes used the terms interchangeably. Yet, the vast number of focus group participants held that Slovakia’s democratic

system specifically comes with some notable shortcomings and considerable space for improvement across the board. Respondents also acknowledged that many of their older family members hold somewhat sceptical views about democracy and claim that the communist regime, despite its many flaws, took better care of young families and ordinary people. The focus group participants, nevertheless, indicated that they did not identify with this view and instead pointed to the main benefits of democracy including the ability to freely choose their political representatives, the opportunity to freely express their opinions and the possibility to move, work, and live anywhere in Europe. For young people, democracy means free institutions, respect for the separation of powers, judicial independence and guarantees for human, civil, and political rights.

Yet numerous respondents also noted that democracy can also come with pitfalls such as unstable governments and poor governance if power is exercised by incompetent elected officials. Other problems may appear if there is a suboptimal level of political culture and if regular corruption accusations surface with respect to leading political figures. Another risk to democracy concerns its inherent openness to a myriad of political stances even as

some ideologies can pose a real threat to the democratic system itself. Despite the threat they represent, many non-democratic political groups and/or actors are generally difficult to institutionally constrain due to protections, for example, on freedom of expression. However, all told, a majority of respondents concluded that democracy is a political system endowed with significantly more strengths than weaknesses.

What do you think about the overall state of democracy in your country and in the EU?

On the overall state of democracy in Slovakia, respondents pessimistically underscored the fierce polarisation in the country. Different camps have moved further away from each other in recent years, exposing large policy differences, especially on geopolitical matters. The clashes between different political ideologies is hindering progress towards a more vibrant social and attitudinal consensus.

Participants shared mixed views on the state of EU democracy. There was a broad consensus that understanding decision-making processes at the European level, however, is too complex for the general population. And though participants generally agreed that EU decision-making needs to be swifter and less cumbersome, some concerns were expressed about abolishing the principle of unanimity in the Council due to the effects such a move might have especially on smaller states that could be easily outvoted by their larger EU partners. By contrast, young people are more buoyant on the establishment of various European financial instruments targeted towards achieving specific EU goals such as spreading and preserving democracy across the continent.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS REPRESENTATION (NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN LEVEL)

More than half of the young respondents had the impression that they are not represented at all, either at the national or European levels. Moreover, they believe that Slovakia's EU representation is not particularly visible because of the size of the country. Respondents also pointed to an absence of qualified candidates for EP elections or concerns about extremist representation.

“On the national level I don't feel that my voice, as a young person, is being represented. Many times I even feel that politicians don't even want to hear us at all.”

The participants found it difficult to distinguish between representative, participatory and deliberative formats of democracy. Yet, they expressed their interest in strengthening the position of interest groups advocating for the demands of students, environmental activists and entrepreneurs. Some even supported the idea of estab-

lishing an EU institution devoted solely to the interests of students and young people.

Most respondents see themselves as actively engaged citizens though these assessments are primarily based on their participation in election processes at various levels. They are aware about the low level of participation of Slovaks in European elections. Participants, nonetheless, regard participation in elections as a major identifiable instrument for public participation in the political system more broadly. They consider the use of existing social networks as a positive means to increase awareness about society and politics, though they acknowledged that the amount of misinformation and disinformation found in digital spaces at various levels poses a serious threat to the current state of democracy.

“There is a lot of information and disinformation. Sometimes it is hard to evaluate it correctly.”

ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE EU'S FUTURE

Respondents from Slovakia consider the EU to currently be the best option available for political cooperation between European countries. Young people are aware that the future of the EU will not be easy but expect the European community to endure as it is set in the right direction. They also believe that Brexit represents the exception rather than the rule and that the EU will stay strong and united in the decades to come. Some respondents, however, expressed concerns about the future of the EU linked to the protracted war in Ukraine and/or environmental policies that are perceived as too drastic. Participants noted that these developments could lead to populist backlash that ultimately contributes to EU disintegration.

“I don't see much positive scenarios for the EU, based on what is happening around us with the war in Ukraine and overall uncertainty.”

As it pertains to the state of the EU in 20 years, respondents are supportive about a possible EU expansion to include the entire CEE region and potential supranationalisation of certain policy areas even at the expense of the political autonomy of individual Member States. They are also resolute that the economic dimension of integration should play the primary role going forward to withstand growing economic pressure from China and the United States. Young people, according to the focus groups, further support deepening the Economic and Monetary Union to enable the bloc to better cope with economic crises, such as ongoing inflation issues.

“The EU will be more integrated and enlarged.”

Young people in Slovakia are specifically prepared to assume responsibility for the development and governance

of the EU in the future. Some are even willing to abandon the nation-state system if it is seen as a prerequisite for attaining a deeper and more complex level of European integration. Respondents also emphasized their aspiration to provide more opportunities to young talented people and promote equal gender representation. Respondents, finally, demanded more compliance with democratic principles at the level of individual Member States and a more adamant campaign against corruption and mounting national debt.

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- 1 In Greece 7 focus groups with about 15 participants each were conducted simultaneously, following common introduction by professional facilitators.
 - 2 Kitzinger, Jenny (1995), "Introducing focus groups," *BMJ*, Volume 331, pp. 299-302
 - 3 <https://eumatrix.eu/en/blog/EU-Commissioners-who-will-stay-from-2024>
 - 4 <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3093>
 - 5 Ibid.
 - 6 <https://www.idm.at/en/european-elections-2024-what-to-expect-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>
 - 7 <https://www.statistik.at/en/statistics/population-and-society/population/population-stock/population-at-beginning-of-year/quarter>
 - 8 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/en>
 - 9 https://elstat-outsourcers.statistics.gr/census_results_2022_en.pdf
 - 10 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/en>
 - 11 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpsr/censusofpopulation2022-summaryresults/populationchanges/>
 - 12 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/en>
 - 13 <https://www.scitanie.sk/en>
 - 14 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/en>





▸ Vajnorská 100/B
831 04 Bratislava
Slovak Republic

▸ +421 2 3213 7800
▸ info@globsec.org
▸ www.globsec.org