

# The European Union in the lives of young people: Perceptions and opinions from Bulgaria, Germany, Poland and Slovakia



## THE EU IS A GOOD THING, BUT WITH MANY CAVEATS

In general, young people have a positive attitude towards the European Union (EU). Instinctively, they see the EU as a good thing, with expressions like “community” and “unification” having been used. Yet, much more is desired from the Union. They want European institutions to be more effective and transparent. They wish differences between Member States, including between the Eastern and Western countries, and the current incompatibility of some national and European values to be resolved, among other demands.

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



## THE EU IS AN ECONOMIC UNION THAT PROVIDES MATERIAL BENEFITS

While the young people in Bulgaria, Germany, Poland and Slovakia have positive attitudes towards the idea of the EU, in all countries the European project is primarily identified as an economic union that provides economic benefits to the Member States. Only in Germany a broader discussion includes the EU as a union that ensures peace on the continent. Young people in Poland and Slovakia are pessimistic of the possibility for the EU to become a “political community” or a “community of shared values.”

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

Young people in Bulgaria, Poland and Slovakia identify the EU mainly through the receipt of material benefits. There is a high level of understanding of the EU by connecting it to economic prosperity, freedom of movement, increase of living standards, cohesion and structural funds, as all are identified repeatedly as the most positive consequences from EU membership. These are benefits that most of them have and do enjoy. To this end, it seems that the EU has influenced these countries and their citizens.



## EUROPEAN SHARED VALUES—THE BIG HURDLE

While young people in all four countries agree across borders that the EU as an economic union brings a positive value to their lives, divergences occur when the topic of shared European values and common cultural union (union of values) is introduced into the conversations. In both Bulgaria and Slovakia, young people tend to shy away from the issue all together. On the other hand, in Germany and Poland heated conversations lead to opposite conclusions. Young people in Germany express a real commitment to find a path for forging the EU not only as an economic union but also a union of shared values. While they realize the difficulties, they see the added value of such union, where a genuine sense of belonging is developed.

*“The Union is too liberal, the collapse of moral values has initiated the fall of the ancient Rome.”*

The conversations in Poland lead to the conclusion that currently there is no solution in finding a consensus between the idea of common European values and Polish values and, therefore, a European Union of shared values is not probable. The main hurdle expressed is connected to a lack of coherence of religious and moral issues, expressing that today the EU is too liberal and too tolerant. Young people add that while

Europe is the “cradle of Christianity,” this notion is missing in the EU’s normative documents. They fear that this might lead to the change of traditional European values to another less desirable form.



## SMALL COUNTRIES NEED THE EU

Discussions in Bulgaria and Slovakia pointed to the importance of the EU as a sort of protector of, and helper to, the small countries towards their development and prosperity. According to young people in these countries, the EU also amplifies the voice of smaller members when it comes to foreign policy. On the other hand, in Poland the role of the EU is challenged as possibly overarching and taking on national sovereignty issues (e.g. migration).

*“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.”*



## THE FUTURE OF THE EU IS UNCERTAIN

Brexit is 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 realization that there will be serious consequences. In the short-term, EU citizens would most likely experience negative situations related to trade, cohesion and R&D funds, and even security. Brexit, according to the young Bulgarians, also provides ammunition to nationalistic movements and thus could endanger the EU itself. In Slovakia, young people lean towards Eurosceptical scenarios about the future of the EU.

*“The EU had a rise, then a decline, followed by a new upsurge. Brexit is an example.”*

Still, young people in Bulgaria, Germany and Poland do not see the total breakdown of the EU 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).



## BRUSSELS IS TOO DISTANT AND BUREAUCRATIC

Overwhelmingly, young people perceive EU institutions as too distant and too bureaucratic. In each country, they list this perception as one of the main negative sides of the Union. Perhaps, as they are unable to identify whom to contact or how a process goes through the institutions, their assumptions lead to blaming Brussels for being too rigid and inefficient.

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



## THE EU IS NOT VISIBLE NOR EXPLAINED ENOUGH

While in Poland, Bulgaria and Slovakia, there are some concerns that the EU is struggling to communicate the benefits and functioning of the Union, German young people identify this difficulty as one of the main problems leading to a lack of engagement by citizens at the European level. Especially lacking in the eyes of Germans is visibility and communicating to all audiences, independent of income and level of education. While mainstream awareness-raising campaigns are seen by young people in streets, parks, and buildings, their main channel of

communication is social media. It is in this domain that young people see a great gap to be filled by the EU.

“ *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.* ”



## EU CITIZENSHIP: FROM NOT EXISTING TO PRIMARY IDENTIFIER

There is no clear view across the four countries as to how young people perceive EU citizenship. While in Germany some feel first European and then German, or first identify their subnational belonging and then their European, in the other three countries most participants feel the importance of their own nationality above that of being European. However, interestingly, in Poland it is noted that, once having been in a non-European country or having met non-Europeans, young Poles often present themselves as European citizens and even express a feeling of pride.

“ *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.* ”



## ACTIVE EU ENGAGEMENT MEANS VOTING IN EP ELECTIONS

The most obvious mechanism to get involved in the EU, according to young people, is through voting at the European Parliamentary elections. However, peoples' levels of knowledge as to when these will be, and their willingness to vote, differ. In Germany, young people tend to express a willingness to vote in May 2019. In Poland, many do not know when the elections are happening, and in Slovakia there are young people declaring that they would simply not vote. In the latter two cases, young people expressed some concerns about the effectiveness of voting.

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



## EAST-WEST DIVISIONS STILL SHAPING SOME EU ATTITUDES

The conversations in Slovakia expose the still lingering sense of inferiority even among young Slovaks towards citizens from the West. The feeling of inequality between East and West is repeatedly connected to the inability for some young people to see themselves as EU citizens. On the other hand, young people in Poland and Bulgaria do not dwell too much on East-West divisions, as these were not mentioned in the conversations.

“ *Slovakia is still perceived as “Eastern Europe” which is inferior in comparison to “Western Europe.* ”



## MEMBER STATES' AND CITIZENS' OBLIGATIONS?

Neither discussion with young people in the four 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, but then countered with what young people perceived as not working well in the EU. Only in Germany was the “duty to vote” referred to.

“ *Many people had to fight for their right to vote and it is a moral duty to vote.* ”

## OBSERVATIONS, BASED ON CONVERSATIONS WITH THE YOUNG PEOPLE

- Low levels of knowledge and understanding about the functions and activities of the EU and its institutions.
- Not much knowledge of the different channels to influence and engage in European matters.
- Difficulty of young people to see themselves as both receivers from and contributors to the EU.
- Overall lack of interest in thinking about the EU in either positive or negative terms.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE TO YOUNG PEOPLE

### HOW TO GET YOUNG PEOPLE MORE ENGAGED AND INVOLVED AT A EUROPEAN LEVEL

- The EU: Increase the visibility of the EU's activities and decision processes, through the use of modern technology and techniques that will draw in the interest of young people (social media and influencers)
- The EU: Increase the feeling of belonging among European citizens by strengthening programmes and initiatives that allow for participation of broad populations, regardless of levels of education, socio-economic status or place of residence, to “experience” the EU
- The EU: Engage EU representatives and institutions with all levels of society—national governments, local representatives, business, civil communities and individual citizens—in difficult debates, including about rule of law, shared values, 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, by starting European studies 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 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.



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