

# 1. Who Are Young Europeans?

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The idea of a united Europe is rooted in the aftermath of the Second World War, as a generation who had witnessed bloody conflict vowed to never again let European countries fall into battle against one another. The European project was carried forward by individuals who lived through a period of breath-taking change in Europe as in the world and who watched a new era dawn with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union. The torch will soon pass to a new generation of young Europeans who have never seen Europe divided by war or wall, but who will nonetheless determine the future of the European project. In this section, we offer our definition of this young generation and summarise what they want from the European Union.

In our March 2021 poll, 71% of people responded that they ‘identify as European,’ but our qualitative interviews suggest that what defines that European identity varies across generations.<sup>1</sup> We argue that while older generations are united by the collective experience and sense of freedom that dawned in 1989, young Europeans have taken advantage of that freedom and instead find common ground in personal formative experiences of travel and exchange around Europe. Young Europeans treasure this freedom of movement and seek to preserve it. We also find substantial appetite among the young for the EU to act on important issues. There is strong support for climate action, as well as broad support for the EU to uphold rights and democratic freedoms in member states. Our results do not always reflect conflict between different generations—climate action is identified as the main priority by all age groups, demonstrating that consensus can emerge between the generations despite their differing experiences of Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Garton Ash, Eilidh Macfarlane and Dan Snow, “Europe today and tomorrow: What Europeans want”, *eupinions*, 25 May 2021, <https://eupinions.eu/de/text/europe-today-and-tomorrow-what-europeans-want>.

## Defining a generation

Defining a generation is a challenge that can be approached in many ways. Within our original research, both qualitative and quantitative, we use the following three groups: ‘young’ (aged 16-29), ‘middle’ (30-49), and ‘old’ (50-69). In defining generations by age, we sought to explore common experiences, or lack thereof, within specific historical periods while acknowledging that birth in one year versus the next does not necessarily prescribe a generational identity.<sup>2</sup> We therefore divide the young cohort from the middle-aged cohort approximately by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Aptly referred to as the post-89ers, this generation does not share the experience of watching Eastern and Western Europe unite.

We expect that shared experiences will create long-lasting effects that endure over time within a generation. We anticipate young, middle-aged and old Europeans to have different attitudes and priorities partly because they have different European experiences during their critical ‘coming of age’ or ‘formative’ moments. Such moments, we presume, will differ *between* generations but be similar *within* generations. In demography, this is sometimes referred to as a ‘cohort effect’.<sup>3</sup> As demographer Norman Ryder wrote, “The members of a cohort are entitled to participate in only one slice of life, their unique location in the stream of history.”<sup>4</sup> It is distinct from a ‘period effect’, where attitudes shift across all age groups simultaneously, and distinct from an ‘age effect’, where attitudes change over a person’s lifetime as they age.<sup>5</sup> These terms fall within what demographers call the Age-Period-Cohort model, which is used loosely throughout this report for describing broad trends in attitudes to the European Union, though we do not seek to employ the model in any precise statistical way.<sup>6</sup>

## A new generation united by the freedom of movement

With our original qualitative research, we sought to discover what constituted the unique European formative moment(s) for young Europeans and how these differ from those of middle-aged and older Europeans. We asked some 200 people, born between 1937 and 2003, six main questions in a series of interviews, including the open-ended question: “What was your formative European moment?”. This group of interviewees is by no means a representative sample, and given the self-selecting nature of the group, is likely to over-represent highly educated and pro-EU

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<sup>2</sup> Nor are our cohorts likely to be perfectly homogenous. Though we focus on broad age categories, it should be noted that our ‘young’ age group includes both the ‘Generation Z’ and the ‘millennial’ generations, groups which are likely to have somewhat different experiences of growing up.

<sup>3</sup> Ethan Fosse and Christopher Winship, “Bounding Analyses of Age-Period-Cohort Effects”, *Demography*, 56 no. 5 (2019): 1975–2004, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-019-00801-6>.

<sup>4</sup> Norman B. Ryder, “The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change”, *American Sociological Review* 30, no. 6 (1965): 843–61, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2090964>.

<sup>5</sup> Fosse and Winship, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

Europeans.<sup>7</sup> We asked intentionally pan-European questions during our interviews, resulting in answers with a focus on Europe as a whole, rather than specific national particularities.

For older Europeans (born before 1972), the fall of the Berlin Wall and the unification of Eastern and Western Europe is omnipresent, with a third of this entire age group selecting 1989 as a formative or best moment. By contrast, only 7% of young Europeans and 19% of middle-aged Europeans listed it as such with a very clear cut-off for those born after 1981. An Austrian composer born in 1960 encapsulated the feeling of that moment: “When the Iron Curtain fell in 1989 [...] you can’t remember how relieved I was [...] in general for my generation [...] the Baby Boomers, the fall of the Iron Curtain was a very big thing for us. This gave us the promise of a new freedom.”<sup>8</sup> The moment the Wall fell is a defining event in the collective memory of this generation.

**“For my generation, the Baby Boomers, the fall of the Iron Curtain was a very big thing for us...”**

Our results suggest that freedom of movement and personal travel is formative for young Europeans in the same way that the fall of the Berlin Wall was formative to older Europeans. Rather than a specific collective historic moment, mobility throughout the EU overwhelmingly defined the formative years of our young European interviewees. Of young interviewees (born after 1991), 39% listed personal travel experiences or Erasmus exchanges as their formative or best moment (compared to 19% of older interviewees and 24% of middle-aged interviewees). A Polish communications consultant born in 1992 shared that “the most important thing that the EU has done for me is giving me the ability to live and work in different countries very easily [...] it opened up so many opportunities for me academically and professionally that wouldn’t have been available to me otherwise.”<sup>9</sup> Many of these interviewees have little or no memory of 1989, likely explaining its lack of significance for them.<sup>10</sup>

Given that many young Europeans view personal travel experiences as their defining European moment, it is unsurprising that our interviewees see freedom of movement and free travel as indispensable aspects of the EU. 43% of our young interviewees independently said that freedom of movement is the “single best thing the EU has done for them personally”. A French lobbyist born in 1995 shared that the “Schengen [Agreement] is one of the biggest achievements of the European Union, especially for

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<sup>7</sup> All EU 27 + UK countries are represented except for: Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Luxembourg, Malta, Sweden. Several ‘EU-proximate’ countries, like Turkey and Ukraine, are also represented.

<sup>8</sup> Europe’s Stories, “Interview with Karlheinz Essl”, *europeanmoments.com*, 2020, <https://europeanmoments.com/interviewees/karlheinz>.

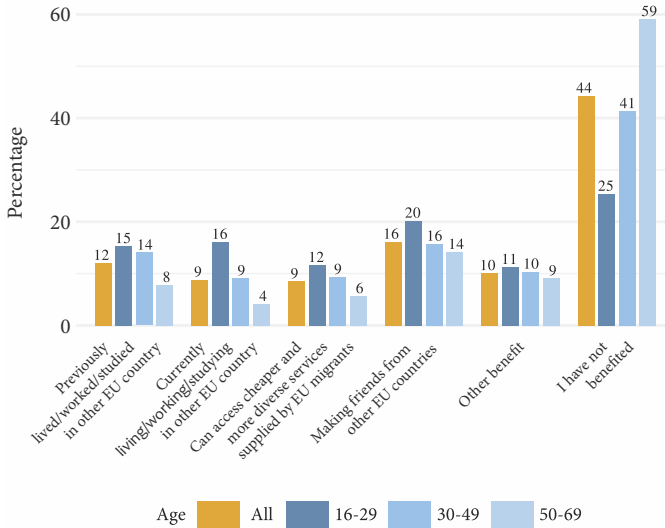
<sup>9</sup> Europe’s Stories, “Interview with Anthony”, *europeanmoments.com*, 2020, <https://europeanmoments.com/interviewees/anthony>.

<sup>10</sup> Howard Schuman and Jacqueline Scott, “Generations and Collective Memories”, *American Sociological Review* 54, no. 3 (June 1989): 359-81, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095611>.

**Figure 1**

**Young Europeans much more likely to have personally benefited from freedom of movement**

Talking of freedom of movement, which aspect of the European Union have you personally benefited from the most, if you have benefited at all?



Source: eupinions survey, conducted in March 2021

our generation”, referencing free travel specifically.<sup>11</sup> Only around one-third of older and middle-aged interviewees referenced free movement as the best thing done for them by the EU, perhaps because of the limited mobility that existed during their formative years, prior to the 1995 establishment of the Schengen Area.

The results of our representative opinion polls of Europeans across all 27 member states and the UK strongly reinforced these findings.<sup>12</sup> The four opinion polls that we fielded revealed that young Europeans see the existence of the EU and the privilege of free movement as inextricably linked. For example, in our December 2020 poll, 76% of young Europeans that we polled stated that “the EU would not be worth having if it did not offer the freedom to travel, work, study and live in other EU member states.”<sup>13</sup> In our March 2021 poll, only one-fifth of young Europeans claimed to have never personally benefited from freedom of movement in the EU, compared to the 59% of over-50s who said they had not benefited.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Europe’s Stories, “Interview with Louise Bucaille”, *europeanmoments.com*, 2020, <https://europeanmoments.com/interviewees/louise>.

<sup>12</sup> For further details on our polling sample, please refer to our eupinions reports.

<sup>13</sup> Timothy Garton Ash, Eilidh Macfarlane and Dan Snow, “What Europeans Want from the European Union”, *eupinions*, 26 Jan 2021, <https://eupinions.eu/de/text/what-europeans-want-from-the-european-union>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

## What do young Europeans want?

Our qualitative interviews confirm the impression of a generational divide between young, middle and old interviewees regarding their formative experiences. While their thoughts surrounding formative experience suggest a more individualistic tendency among young Europeans, we found collective unity among the young, and across generations, in a vision for the future of Europe. Our interview findings strongly reinforce the concern surrounding climate change and the support of freedom of movement. These two foci are somewhat contradictory, as the current ways of achieving freedom of movement often entail a significant cost to the climate. Indeed, our September 2020 poll found that, in an attempt to resolve this tension, 65% of Europeans say they would support a ban on short flights to destinations that could be reached within 12 hours by train.<sup>15</sup> We return to the inherent tension in such ‘trade-offs’ throughout the report.

Contrary to what is often suggested, we believe that the consistent focus on climate action across all European generations may reflect a ‘period effect’ rather than a ‘cohort effect’, with a general rise in climate concern across the whole population. Although the charge against climate change may be driven partly by members of ‘Generation Z’, such as Greta Thunberg, young people are not alone in their concern for the long-term welfare of the planet.

European generations define their formative experiences differently, but they are largely united in their hopes for the future of the EU which focus on climate action, regardless of age. When asked, “What is the one thing you would like the EU to have achieved by 2030”, one-third of our interviewees independently selected climate action. As a German think tank manager born in 1987 put it, “This is easy. It’s the message I’m telling everyone at the moment, which is that we must rise to the challenge on climate. And currently, the European Union is being asked, and the new Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has proposed that European Union adopt not only the goal of becoming climate neutral by 2050 but also increasing its ambition on 2030 to show leadership in global climate negotiations, and we must rise to this challenge.”<sup>16</sup> A Polish events manager born in 1992 hoped the EU would “make significant progress in fighting climate change [...] putting this as a priority for the whole European Union and each country, in particular, that is a part of it”, while a Hungarian script-writer born in 1982 advocated specifically for “zero emissions and zero waste.”<sup>17</sup>

**“Show leadership in  
global climate  
negotiations”**

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<sup>15</sup> Timothy Garton Ash, Antonia Zimmermann, Dan Snow and Eilidh Macfarlane, “What Europeans say they will do to combat climate change”, *eupinions*, 20 Nov 2020, <https://eupinions.eu/de/text/what-europeans-say-they-will-do-to-combat-climate-change>.

<sup>16</sup> Europe’s Stories, “Interview with Andreas Graf”, *europeanmoments.com*, 2020, <https://europeanmoments.com/interviewees/andreas>.

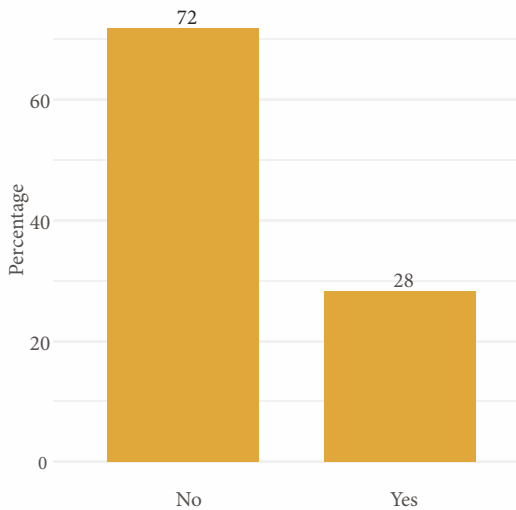
<sup>17</sup> Europe’s Stories, “Interview with Małgorzata Zurowska”, *europeanmoments.com*, 2020, <https://europeanmoments.com/interviewees/malgorzata>; Europe’s Stories, “Interview with Balazs Juszt”, *europeanmoments.com*, 2020, <https://europeanmoments.com/interviewees/balazs>.

Such thoughts echo the results of our September 2020 poll, particularly surrounding views on the EU's lack of action on climate change.<sup>18</sup> Young Europeans are not alone in their concern about climate action. An April 2021 poll found that young Americans are similarly disenchanting with the U.S. government's action on climate change.<sup>19</sup>

**Figure 2**

**Only three in ten Europeans think the EU is doing enough to combat climate change**

*Do you think the EU is doing enough to combat climate change?*



*Source: eupinions survey, conducted in September 2020*

**Do the young trust the EU to combat climate change?**

It is clear that young Europeans see climate change as a serious threat, and think the EU should prioritise climate action even over Covid-19 recovery and other EU policy changes.<sup>20</sup> However, our data also suggests that many young Europeans harbour doubts about whether the EU is best equipped to tackle the problem. For example,

<sup>18</sup> Garton Ash *et al.*, 25 May 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Cary Funk, “Key findings: How Americans’ attitudes about climate change differ by generation, party and other factors”, *Pew Research Center*, 26 May 2021, [https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/05/26/key-findings-how-americans-attitudes-about-climate-change-differ-by-generation-party-and-other-factors/?utm\\_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm\\_campaign=cb151d2bd5-Weekly\\_2021\\_05\\_29&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_3e953b9b70-cb151d2bd5-399761565](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/05/26/key-findings-how-americans-attitudes-about-climate-change-differ-by-generation-party-and-other-factors/?utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=cb151d2bd5-Weekly_2021_05_29&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-cb151d2bd5-399761565).

<sup>20</sup> Directorate-General for Climate Action, Directorate-General for Communication, “Special Eurobarometer 490: Climate Change”, *European Commission*, 2019, [https://ec.europa.eu/clima/sites/clima/files/support/docs/report\\_2019\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/clima/sites/clima/files/support/docs/report_2019_en.pdf); Catherine E. de Vries and Isabell Hoffmann, “Great expectations”, *eupinions*, 27 Nov 2019, <https://eupinions.eu/de/text/great-expectations>; Friends of Europe, “More Europeans prioritise the environment than prioritise the COVID-19 economic recovery”, *friendsofeurope.org*, 12 Oct 2020, <https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/new-poll-more-europeans-prioritise-the-environment-than-prioritise-the-covid-19-economic-recovery/>.

our March 2020 polling results reveal that an astonishing 53% of young Europeans agree that authoritarian regimes are more equipped than democracies to manage the climate crisis, a finding that would be worth revisiting in the future wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>21</sup> And while young people generally have a favourable view of the EU and support democracy, they are divided as to what should be the responsibilities of national versus EU governments.<sup>22</sup> Increasing Eurosceptic voting patterns among young people, in France and Italy particularly, also challenge the conventional notion of pro-EU sentiments among young Europeans and suggest growing scepticism of democracy among some young Europeans.<sup>23</sup> If the European project aims to speak and act for the next generation, it must work towards better action on climate change, a key policy priority of Europeans, alongside other important issues including jobs, social security and fighting terrorism.<sup>24</sup>

## A Generation C?

Our report suggests that young Europeans are united more by the experience of free movement than by a single ‘formative moment’, but we may be currently living through just such a moment. The Covid-19 pandemic has directly impacted all Europeans, with wide-reaching consequences for all citizens but the young in particular have sacrificed much by way of personal liberty and economic security to protect the older generations that are far more at risk from the virus. Alongside an age-structured distribution of the Covid-19 vaccine, this may lead to a sense of pride among the young in their collective sacrifice, or it may instead lead to resentment.<sup>25</sup> At our webinar on defining historical generations in Europe, demographer Jennifer Dowd suggested that “young adults obviously have been so impacted by the unemployment and also the social isolation aspect of [Covid-19] [...] delaying dating and marriage and all sorts of knock-on effects from that. So, I think Covid is going to

<sup>21</sup> Timothy Garton Ash and Antonia Zimmermann, “In Crisis, Europeans Support Radical Positions”, *eupinions*, 6 May 2020, <https://eupinions.eu/de/text/in-crisis-europeans-support-radical-positions>.

<sup>22</sup> Laura Silver, Moira Fagan and Nicholas Kent, “Majorities in the European Union Have Favorable Views of the Bloc”, Pew Research Center, 17 Nov 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/11/17/majorities-in-the-european-union-have-favorable-views-of-the-bloc/>; Dániel Bartha, Tamás Boros, Maria Freitas, Gergely Lakir and Meghan Stringer, “What is the European Dream? Survey on European Dreams for the Future of Europe”, *Foundation for European Progressive Studies*, March 2020, [https://www.fepe-europe.eu/attachments/publications/ed\\_web.pdf](https://www.fepe-europe.eu/attachments/publications/ed_web.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> Fabian Lauterbach and Catherine E. de Vries, “Europe Belongs to the Young? Generational Differences in Public Opinion towards the European Union during the Eurozone Crisis”, *Journal of European Public Policy* 27, no. 2 (2020): 168–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2019.1701533>; R.S. Foa, A. Klassen, M. Slade, A. Rand, and R. Collins, “The Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020”, Cambridge, United Kingdom: *Centre for the Future of Democracy*, 2020, <https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/global-satisfaction-democracy-report-2020/>.

<sup>24</sup> Catherine E. de Vries and Isabell Hoffmann, “The Hopeful, the Fearful and the Furious”, *eupinions.eu*, 3 Apr 2019, <https://eupinions.eu/de/text/the-hopeful-the-fearful-and-the-furious>; de Vries and Hoffmann, “Great expectations”, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> For further reflection on this topic, see our February 2021 webinar Europe’s Stories, “‘68ers, ‘89ers, & post-89ers: What are the key historical generations in contemporary Europe?”, *europeanmoments.com*, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qz3t0PiTYE8>.

**“I think Covid is going to be one of those huge events that has very different impacts across cohorts...”**

be one of those huge events that has very different impacts across cohorts and to see how that plays out over the long run will be interesting.”<sup>26</sup> Despite its global nature, the pandemic has also been something of a ‘European moment’ for European citizens, with a disproportionate number of deaths in southern states like Spain and Italy that only recently suffered in the Eurozone crisis, and an EU vaccine rollout that has been anything but smooth. Indeed, our March 2021 poll found that 45% of Europeans believe that the vaccine rollout has been handled badly.<sup>27</sup>

Some Europeans argue that the EU’s response has undermined its credibility. A British teacher born in 1965 said that it was a “failure of European leadership”, and an Armenian interviewee born in 1991 listed Covid-19 as the worst European moment, “as it’s a real challenge for the European Union to prove its credibility and ability to manage the current crisis in Europe”.<sup>28</sup> Others see a silver lining, arguing that it has demonstrated the capability and solidarity of the EU despite the shortcomings. A Portuguese law professor listed it as the best European moment and shared that, “With all the difficulties, with all the time delay, the answer that the European Union has been able to provide to the pandemic, it has managed to provide vaccines and to support its member states in acquiring vaccines, and to do it in a way that is fair, balanced, and equal to all the member states.”<sup>29</sup>

Such remarks echo our December 2020 opinion poll findings which suggest that young Europeans care more about outcomes of the EU than they do about the procedures used to achieve them.<sup>30</sup> This focus on ‘performance legitimacy’ suggests that the EU gains credibility in the eyes of young Europeans by providing positive benefits, such as vaccination, more so than it does in justifying the procedures used to achieve such outcomes. The Covid-19 pandemic is yet to conclude, leaving it uncertain at present whether it will define a generation. Will the pandemic curtail the freedom of movement as member state economies recover and ‘vaccine passports’ take hold? Or will the post-pandemic world look more united and progressive than

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<sup>26</sup> Europe’s Stories, “’68ers, ’89ers, & post-89ers: What are the key historical generations in contemporary Europe?”

<sup>27</sup> Lauterbach and de Vries, 2020; Garton Ash *et al.*, 25 May 2021; Matina Stevis-Gridneff and Monika Pronczuk, “Worry Over 2 Covid Vaccines Deals Fresh Blow to Europe’s Inoculation Push”, *The New York Times*, 13 April 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/13/world/europe/covid-vaccines-astrazeneca-johnson-johnson.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Europe’s Stories, “Interview with Ani Khachatryan”, *europeanmoments.com*, 2020, <https://europeanmoments.com/interviewees/ani>; Europe’s Stories, “Interview with Richard Stevens”, *europeanmoments.com*, 2021, <https://europeanmoments.com/interviewees/richard>.

<sup>29</sup> Europe’s Stories, “Interview with Miguel Poiares Maduro”, *europeanmoments.com*, 2021, <https://europeanmoments.com/stories/miguel-poiaraes-maduro>.

<sup>30</sup> Garton Ash *et al.*, 26 Jan 2021.



before as Europeans consider healthcare and social services more closely? As a British interviewee born in 1989 noted, “right now the pandemic is one of the worst moments in Europe, but how history will remember this is still uncertain”.<sup>31</sup>

Though Covid-19 has eclipsed several other policy areas during the past year, young Europeans have not lost sight of their priorities. This report explores those priorities, and the trade-offs they require, to understand how young people will shape the future of Europe. What are young Europeans willing to sacrifice

to combat climate change? Does preserving freedom of movement for Europeans require restricting it for others? Who should bear the primary responsibility for the preservation of democracy? Could Europe adopt a Universal Basic Income or mandatory minimum wage? Only by offering answers to questions like these can we begin to paint a picture of Europe as it is seen through the eyes of the young.

**“How history will  
remember this is  
still uncertain”**

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<sup>31</sup> Europe’s Stories, “Interview with (name withheld)”, *europeanmoments.com*, 2020, <https://europeanmoments.com/interviewees/anonymousengland>.

