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POLICY BRIEF

WELCOME TO BARBIELAND: EUROPEAN SENTIMENT IN THE YEAR OF WARS AND ELECTIONS

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SUMMARY

- In the movie "Barbie" the titular character comes to realise that Barbieland is not the utopia she assumed it to be.
- Similarly, European political leaders have blind spots that illustrate the difference between the principle and the reality of the EU's Enlightenment ideals. In time, these could come to undermine the health of democracy inside the bloc.
- This year's European Parliament election and the aftermath of the war in Gaza exposed the 'under-participation' in Europe of groups such as non-white and Muslim Europeans, central and eastern Europeans, and young EU citizens.
- At the same time, developments concerning each of these groups pointed to one joint challenge – which is about the bloc's dangerous xenophobic drift.
- Pro-Europeans should urgently acknowledge these blind spots, give voice to underrepresented groups, and reverse the drift towards an 'ethnic' conception of Europeanness by reconstructing a 'civic' offer that upholds the foundational values of the EU.

Welcome to Barbieland

Today's European Union resembles a Barbieland: a place prone to regard itself as more perfect than it really is – and harbouring some notable blind spots.

In Greta Gerwig's 2023 film, the eponymous character leaves the fantastical Barbieland and finds her way to the real world. Much to her consternation, Barbie discovers not all girls are eternally grateful to her for empowering and emancipating them. Worse, many see her as a source of suffering and oppression.

In the past 12 months, many people who consider themselves "pro-European" might have experienced the equivalent of Barbie's shock. Within Europe, not everyone is in love with the EU – but, worse, many are visibly disillusioned with the European project, some are simply uninterested, while others see themselves as outsiders to the EU community.

This paper considers the experience of three specific groups: non-white and Muslim Europeans; people in central and eastern Europe; and Europe's youngest citizens. Over the past year, all three groups have 'under-participated' in Europe, though for different reasons.

Other sections of European society might have equal claim to such analysis – this paper is inevitably a 'director's cut'. Yet what binds these three groups is the challenge they pose to the EU – whose cherished ideals might expect enthusiastic participation and support from Europeans who should be benefitting from the bloc's free, open, and equal space. But signs exist that not all are happy. The EU risks leaving several blind spots unattended, until such time that sudden events bring these areas of inattention inescapably to the fore.

But consideration of these three groups together is also warranted by their connection to one joint challenge – which concerns the bloc's drift towards an 'ethnic', rather than a 'civic', understanding of Europeanness.

This is not to say the bloc is in imminent danger or even that most Europeans have turned their backs on the EU. "European sentiment" – the sense of belonging to a common space, sharing a common future, and subscribing to common values, which is best observed against the background of major shocks and events – remains strong across most of the EU.

Read more about European sentiment

The paper opens with an assessment of the state of European sentiment in 2024. It then examines three 'blind spots' the EU must attend to, reflecting on the extent to which they have

been exposed by two major events of the past year: the war in Gaza and the European Parliament election. It examines the relationship between these 'blind spots' and the risk of xenophobic drift in the EU. And it recommends three key actions for pro-Europeans: firstly, to open up workable channels of participation in Europe for all EU inhabitants, especially those who may currently feel voiceless; secondly, to resist the temptation to adopt an 'ethnic' conception of Europeanness, whether for electoral or strategic reasons; and thirdly, to fill the 'civic' conception of Europeanness with content to offer a tangible and attractive alternative.

This is the third edition of the annual European Sentiment Compass, which is a joint initiative by ECFR and the European Cultural Foundation. It is largely based on research conducted by ECFR's 27 associate researchers in summer 2024.

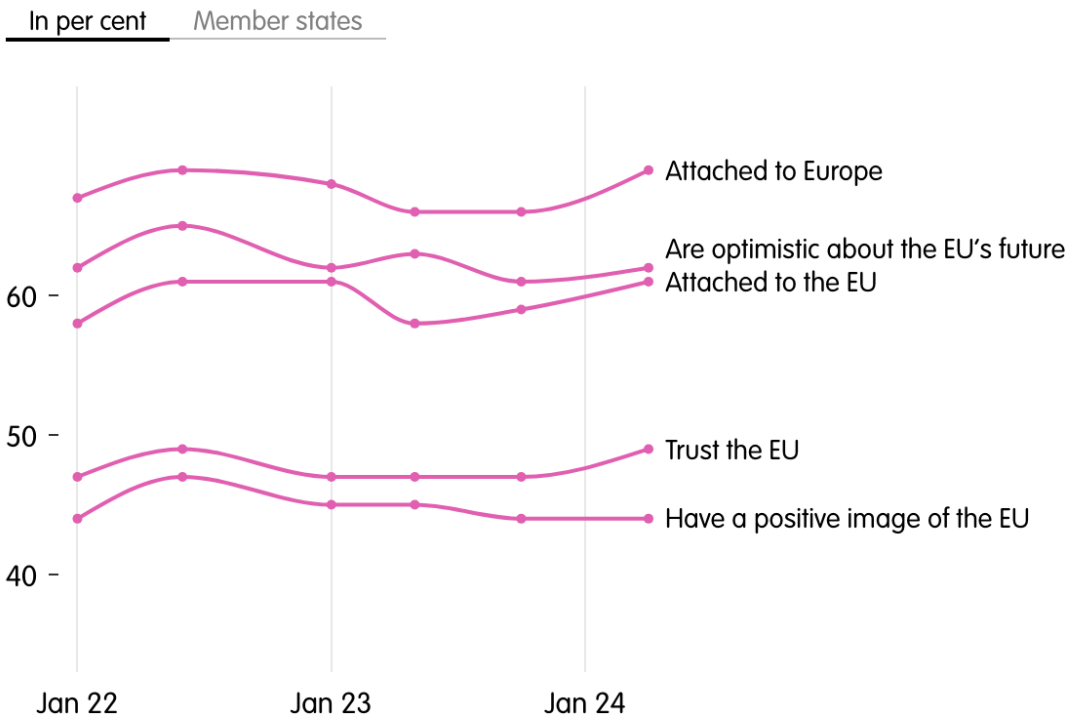
The EU's blind spots

The bird's-eye view of European sentiment in the EU in 2024 is surprisingly positive. Whether one examines the state of public opinion or member state governments' posture towards the bloc, a strong consensus behind the European project emerges.

Despite nearly two decades marked by recurrent crises, most citizens in almost every EU member state are well disposed towards the EU – they trust the bloc, they are optimistic about its future, and they personally feel attached to it. There have been difficult moments – in particular, around the time of the global and European financial and economic crises over a decade ago – but perceptions of the EU have largely recovered, except in Greece (see national trend charts at the end of the paper). The covid-19 pandemic and Russia's aggression in Ukraine contributed to the consolidation of European sentiment, as set out in the earlier editions of the European Sentiment Compass. Over the last 12 months, nothing has arisen to suggest this has changed. If anything, average trust and attachment to the EU have actually strengthened.

Public opinion about Europe

Weighted average across 27 national results from EU member states (in per cent)



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, and 101.
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The situation at the political level is also – for the moment – relatively stable. Research conducted for this study confirms that the vast majority of EU member state governments remain pro-European in outlook and policy. The exceptions are Hungary, Slovakia, and the Netherlands, where government attitudes are negative; and Italy, where Giorgia Meloni has excelled in displaying a pro-European face outside her country and a Eurosceptic one domestically. Perhaps Austria might soon join this group.

Over the past year, Warsaw has rebuilt bridges with Europe, after the Law and Justice party lost power in Poland's parliamentary election in October 2023. In the meantime, the tide has turned in the opposite direction in Slovakia and the Netherlands, where populist and Eurosceptic parties came to power. But the prospect of a far-right government in Paris was rejected by French voters in the July 2024 legislative election. Similarly, the far-right made limited gains

in this year's European Parliament election and pro-European political forces retained control of the chamber – although, arguably, the political balance within this institution has shifted to the right.

The country profiles that form part of the European Sentiment Compass demonstrate the wide diversity among member states that sits just beneath this appearance of stability.

But the story of European sentiment would be incomplete – and misleading – if it did not investigate the blind spots. Three in particular have come into focus over the past 12 months.

Firstly, the EU's "whiteness" – which some observers have critiqued for some time – was on full display. Not only did the candidate lists in the European Parliament election fail to reflect the diverse character of European society, but anti-immigration discourse also flourished in the campaigns in most member states. For many non-white or Muslim Europeans, this would have exacerbated existing worries, including about discrimination after Hamas's attack on Israel in October 2023.

Also on display was a subdued European sentiment in central and eastern Europe, which may reflect a re-evaluation of what it means to be European. This part of the EU saw low turnout for the European Parliament election, the normalised presence of Eurosceptic parties and attitudes, and low-key celebrations of the 20th anniversary of joining the bloc. However, rather than pointing to these countries' sense of marginalisation, this evolution of European sentiment may – to the contrary – reflect a newly acquired self-confidence. This, in turn, is underpinned by a vision of Europe that differs from that of the EU in its current guise. Not unconnected to this is the war in Gaza which exposed quite different attitudes in the region towards diversity and multiculturalism in comparison to western Europe.

Thirdly, Europe's youngest citizens – broadly speaking, those below the age of 35 – show signs of being unconvinced by the EU of today. Despite being, on average, more pro-European and tolerant on social questions than older generations, many young Europeans did not turn out to vote in the European elections – and, when they did, they often opted for far-right or anti-establishment alternatives. In turn, where some did show increased activism was in the student protests against Israeli bombardments in Gaza. The question here is whether increasingly normalised xenophobia in the EU is not driving some young people away from the European project, while at the same time habituating others to an 'ethnic' conception of Europeanness – and thus easing their path towards supporting the far-right.

The following sections explore each of these blind spots in more detail.

Beyond "white" Europe

In the EU, a person's ethnicity, religion, or skin colour should not matter. The EU considers the legacy of the Enlightenment – including the principles of universalism, equality, and secularism – to be foundational to its values and identity. Such principles are reflected in key legislation. France goes so far as to adhere to a policy of "colour-blindness", which means it does not collect data on race or ethnicity in official statistics, based on the belief that such distinctions should not influence public policy.

Yet, ignoring race and ethnicity altogether can obscure a proper understanding of the particular challenges faced by certain groups.

Over the past year, some of these challenges became particularly prominent.

First came the Hamas-led attack on Israel. In its wake, the EU's Agency for Fundamental Rights identified a major rise in both antisemitic and anti-Muslim hatred and violence.

In terms of relations with Europe's Muslim population, several EU member states limited the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly of those opposing the Israeli counteroffensive, leading to a warning from Amnesty International. Seeing most (though not all) European governments support Israel, many Muslims living in Europe may have felt that Europe's solidarity was chiefly with the Jewish rather than the Palestinian victims of the war in the Middle East; and that no criticism of Israel was permitted. A poll of French Muslims found that two-thirds believed media reports on the conflict to favour Israel – and most saw the government's position as equally partial. This has become a particularly big issue for western European countries with large Muslim populations – including France, Germany, Belgium, Austria, Sweden, Netherlands, and Denmark, where Muslims are estimated to account for over 5 per cent of the population.

At the same time, the war in Gaza provided new material for xenophobic, anti-Muslim narratives and attitudes across the EU. As a result, many European Muslims reported feeling not just physically threatened but also marginalised, alienated, and "out of place".

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Then came the election to the European Parliament. The tenor of much of the campaign across the 27 member states suggested the EU – whose motto expresses a desire to be "united in diversity" – was becoming increasingly unwelcoming not just for Muslims but also for all

inhabitants whose Europeanness could be questioned based on their real or imagined origin. As one seasoned commentator on EU affairs put it: "I'm a brown, Muslim European. For people like me, these EU elections are terrifying."

Far-right parties appeared to be on the rise in almost every member state, usually issuing promises to stop immigration or even planning (as the Alternative for Germany, or AfD, did) to expel large swathes of the population. Several such parties openly played on anti-Muslim tropes: for example, Italy's Lega featured a veiled woman on a poster that said: "Let's change Europe before it changes us". Worse still, parts of the European political mainstream (especially among centre-right and liberal parties) certainly appeared to embrace elements of a xenophobic view of the world – as reflected in the EU's new migration and asylum pact, adopted in April, or in political proposals to send refugees to third countries, both of which raised major human-rights questions.

In the end, the far-right's advance in the European Parliament proved to be modest. Nevertheless, the far-right won the election in France, Italy, Belgium, Austria, and Hungary, and came second in the Netherlands and Germany. Some analysts suggest that the rise of the National Rally (RN) in France testifies to the normalisation of xenophobia in this country.

Against this background, limited diversity inside the European institutions is (still) conspicuous. In most countries, non-white and Muslim people were underrepresented in candidate lists. According to ECFR's own assessment, no more than 20 non-white MEPs were elected this year – less than 3 per cent of the total, and well below the 10 per cent share that racial and ethnic minorities are estimated to account for in the EU population. What is more, all these MEPs come from either Sweden or four other countries – France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium – which have significant histories of immigration from former colonies. In some countries – such as Italy, Austria, and Denmark – non-white and Muslim people were notably missing from candidate lists and among elected MEPs, despite constituting an important share of these countries' populations. (A separate problem concerns a complete lack of MEPs from the EU's single largest ethnic minority – the 6 million Roma people – who had outspoken representatives in the European Parliament's previous terms.)

There may be different reasons for this underrepresentation. Non-white and Muslim people might be less politically active or face barriers to political participation (for example, when established political parties discriminate against them). In some countries, they are simply excluded altogether. For example, Italy's strict citizenship criteria deny the right to vote to around 1 million adults with a migrant background. The share of legal non-EU citizens and

undocumented migrants amounts to around 9 per cent in Germany, Austria, and Spain, and over 5 per cent in Sweden, Italy, France, Portugal, and Denmark.

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The "whiteness" of the European Parliament election also stands out when set against other important 'European events' of the past year – such as the UEFA European Football Championship held in Germany, the Summer Olympic Games in Paris, and the Eurovision Song Contest in Malmö. Olympians such as Sifan Hassan from the Netherlands, Teddy Riner from France, and Rashidat Adeleke from Ireland, have served as important role models for their multicultural national publics. At Eurovision, Denmark was represented by a singer born in Ethiopia, and France by a Muslim from a Franco-Algerian family.

This sometimes led to racist backlash from the far-right – for instance, when French extremists protested against Aya Nakamura singing at the opening of the Summer Olympics; or when Slimane, France's Eurovision entrant, faced racist comments from members of the public and parts of the commentariat. In Italy, a far-right Italian MEP, Roberto Vannacci, said the "physical features" of Italian volleyball player, Paola Egonu, did not "represent Italianness." In Germany, whose football team is diverse and captained by a player of Turkish origin, a fifth of respondents in a controversial survey said that "they would prefer for the German national team to have more white players again".

But, overall in 2024, sport and art enabled a showcasing and celebration of Europe's diverse and multicultural character – in sharp contrast to what happened in the political realm. Cultural life often better reflects underlying changes in society; but it should also spur politicians to catch up.

Beyond "western" Europe

In their 2019 book, Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes suggested in the three decades since the fall of communism in central and eastern Europe, a "widespread popular resentment" emerged, caused by the humiliating "imperative to imitate the West." They argue that this sentiment contributed to illiberalism's rise in that part of Europe, with Viktor Orban in Hungary and Jaroslaw Kaczynski in Poland as its chief representatives. The authors also argued that central and eastern European populists seized on the EU's 'refugee crisis' of 2015 to argue that their countries were not only not inferior to the West – but, on the contrary, were superior because they had not lost their cultural identities to multiculturalism.

Five years on, much of the authors' diagnosis remains accurate. But things have moved on in

two ways. Firstly, xenophobic language and policy is no longer a staple of the region's Eurosceptic politicians only – it is also shared by much of its mainstream and faces only limited resistance from other politicians and the media. Secondly, it would be difficult to identify major signs of these countries' continued sense of humiliation and resentment towards the West.

Many might feel disappointed about the benefits of the EU membership. But, if anything, public opinion data often seem to point to central and eastern European citizens' new self-confidence: for example, over 35 per cent of people in Poland, Romania, Slovenia, and Bulgaria believe their country could better face the future outside the EU – while only a fifth or less share a similar feeling in Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland. In some countries of the region, such self-confidence could partly be explained by their perception that Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 proved them right – and that, by being so welcoming to Ukrainian refugees and migrants, they have once and for all debunked the myth of being particularly incapable of showing solidarity to others. In short, not only might many people and governments in central and eastern Europe feel vindicated, but they may now also claim the right to moral leadership in the EU.

Such a perspective makes it possible to explain the paradox of central and eastern Europe's lukewarm pro-Europeanism. Most people and governments in the region present themselves as attached to the EU. But relatively few people bothered to vote in this year's European Parliament election; the 20th anniversary of EU membership for many central and eastern states passed by virtually unremarked; and Eurosceptic parties and politicians enjoy high popularity.

But this situation also points to a danger that – witnessing the tensions in western Europe's multicultural societies (such as around the war in Gaza) – central and eastern Europeans might drift even further towards an 'ethnic' understanding of Europeanness, and feel justified in that approach. At this stage, the only governments that have expressed their opposition to implementing obligatory relocations, which form part of the EU's new migration pact, are from central and eastern Europe – and they include not only the Eurosceptic governments in Budapest and Bratislava but also pro-European Warsaw. Meanwhile, in terms of public opinion, Czechs, Slovenians, and Bulgarians are among the EU societies most likely to nominate immigration as one of the top two most important issues facing the EU – even if fewer of them believe this is also an issue that directly concerns their own countries.

If so, this would confirm writer Hans Kundnani's hypothesis that the war in Ukraine, rather than representing the start of a new, "more humane" approach to migration in central and

eastern Europe, might only reaffirm policy rooted in a "sense of ethnic/cultural solidarity". And, just as importantly, such trends and currents in that part of the EU could draw the rest of the bloc along with them. Such a scenario is not unavoidable. But the power of its challenge to the EU is underpriced.

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The 2004 accession to the EU was undeniably a groundbreaking event for central and eastern European countries. It not only allowed their economies to prosper and enabled their citizens to move freely across the continent, but confirmed their symbolic "return to Europe" while also boosting their security. Nevertheless, whether one looks to Warsaw or Bratislava, Ljubljana or Riga, this year's 20-year anniversary celebrations were strikingly low key. Waning enthusiasm for the EU may explain the subdued nature of the celebrations, despite the array of membership benefits.

This transformation is not immediately visible in public opinion polls. As the graphs displayed at the end of this paper show, attitudes towards Europe (such as optimism about the EU, attachment to Europe, and attachment to the EU) are relatively stable and strong in most countries of the region; in some places, they have even improved over the past decade. Trust in the EU has declined somewhat, but remains in majority territory in each country apart from Slovenia and the Czech Republic.

But such stability also means that, in most countries of the region, a plurality of over 30 per cent (in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Croatia, Latvia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia), or even an absolute majority (in Slovenia), look on the EU with "distrust". Such Eurosceptic attitudes have become part and parcel of European politics – but this normalisation in the EU's younger members is still stark.

Other evidence suggests a more discreet shift. For example, Poland – for many years, one of the most pro-European societies in the EU – is now, according to Eurobarometer, unrivalled among all member states in terms of the share of the population (47 per cent) who believe their country could better face the future outside the bloc. Meanwhile, new studies suggest the major changes in attitudes to Europe within the countries of central and eastern Europe are qualitative rather than quantitative. According to one such study, Poles have become "mature and assertive" in their approach to the EU: no longer looking on it with a blind fascination, they now feel empowered to criticise it, without this necessarily implying they want to leave.

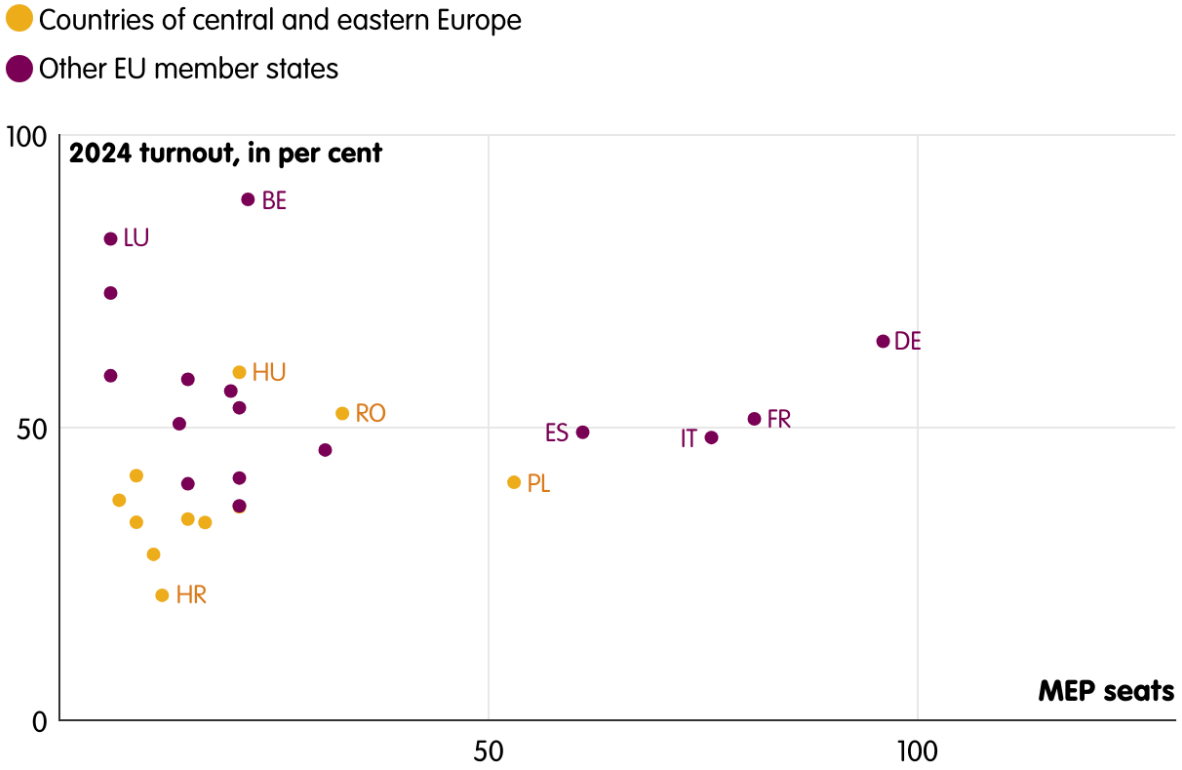
People in most other countries in the region might have even better reasons than the Poles to

revisit their approach to the EU. Some states have benefitted less from EU membership than others: over the past two decades, its economic impact has been much more pronounced in Poland and Lithuania than in Slovenia and the Czech Republic. Some countries (including Bulgaria, Romania, Latvia, Lithuania, and Croatia) have suffered a major outflow of the national population, eased by the freedom of movement of people that is so central to the EU's identity. Over 3 million Romanians (16 per cent of the country's population) now reside in other EU member states. And in some places, patronage networks have developed around EU funds that leaves many people with a bitter feeling that corruption is widespread – which deprives their countries from realising the full potential of membership.

Unsurprisingly, many feel disappointed about the benefits of having joined the EU. In ten of the EU's 27 member states only a minority believes the interests of their country are well taken into account in the bloc – and of these, six (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Latvia, Slovakia, and Estonia) are in central and eastern Europe; the other four are Greece, Cyprus, France, and Malta.

The region's lukewarm approach to the EU could also partly explain this year's relatively low turnout in the European Parliament election. In seven out of 11 countries of the region, turnout failed to reach 40 per cent; only one 'older' member state, Portugal, also saw this happen. A country's size cannot fully account for this: in western Europe, turnout was usually higher even in relatively small countries (and even when – unlike in Luxembourg or Belgium – voting was not compulsory). Similarly, this cannot be simply explained by a lower overall electoral engagement of citizens: across the 11 countries of central and eastern Europe, average turnout in the most recent general elections stood at 59 per cent. This is much higher than the 38 per cent in the 2024 European Parliament election.

European Parliament election 2024 turnout in relation to the number of seats per member state



Source: elections.europa.eu
ECFR · ecfr.eu

The normalisation of Eurosceptic governments is the most visible symptom of the re-evaluation of attitudes toward the EU in central and eastern Europe. Over the past year, Robert Fico returned to power in Slovakia on a strongly Eurosceptic platform. Andrej Babis – who has also moved considerably towards Eurosceptic positions – won the European Parliament election in the Czech Republic, putting himself in pole position ahead of the country's next national election. The far-right Homeland Movement joined the Croatian government, having come third in this year's general election. While Eurosceptics in Poland have now left office after eight years in charge, they still, together with the far-right parties, command the support of nearly half of voters. As for Viktor Orban, the Hungarian leader might have been surprised at the emergence of a serious contender in the European and municipal elections in Hungary – but his party, Fidesz, still got the largest number of votes.

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Central and eastern European far-right parties and illiberal populists are not operating in a vacuum. Their growing assertiveness towards the EU channels a certain demand among citizens; and the political mainstream is now also trying to tap the same sentiments. For example, this assertiveness is echoed in the policy stance of the new – and otherwise pro-European – Polish government under Donald Tusk. Warsaw retains a sceptical stance towards a number of crucial items in the EU's policy agenda, from migration, to climate, to eurozone membership. Tusk vehemently opposed the relocation of migrants within the EU on the grounds that Poland had already helped Ukrainian migrants. While this approach has clear electoral explanations, it may nonetheless further normalise xenophobic attitudes, as the developments of the past 12 months have shown.

The war in Gaza has played a certain role in the latter respect – by activating the region's widespread Islamophobia in reaction to the perceived tensions in western Europe's multicultural societies. But it might have also interplayed with a newer sentiment: of feeling proven right in February 2022 on major questions around the intentions of Russia; the value of NATO; and the policies of western Europe. Over the past two years, several western European leaders have acknowledged this feeling – for example, in his 2023 Bratislava speech , French president Emmanuel Macron said that "even after Slovakia and many other countries joined the union, we did not always hear the voices you brought. (…) [W]e sometimes missed opportunities to listen." Such a recognition has emboldened central and eastern European leaders. Kaja Kallas, while still Estonia's prime minister, observed that war has at last given "equal" status to all countries of the EU. Such burgeoning self-confidence is not in itself unwelcome, but the vocalisation of xenophobic attitudes is.

An important facet of debates in central and eastern European countries is to present multiculturalism as an exclusively western European enthusiasm – and problem. Orban once even suggested that countries where races mingle were "no longer nations." Paradoxically, many countries of the region are, in fact, fairly diverse and multicultural, given the presence of ethnic minorities, Roma communities, and Ukrainian migrants. However, most of these countries are fairly homogeneous in terms of nationality and religion, and in being a home to a limited number of people with African or Middle Eastern origins. In a survey of Europeans, asked if they have friends or acquaintances whose skin colour differs from their own, the largest proportion of people responding "no" are to be found in central and eastern Europe. The same survey confirms few people in these countries would be happy with one's child being in a relationship with a Muslim.

Against this background, Hamas's 2023 attack on Israel – despite attracting generally less interest in central and eastern Europe than in western Europe – nonetheless provided a new canvas for Islamophobic narratives.

In much of the region, a sort of 'immigration panic' was already present after 2015 – for example, judging by the perception of immigration as one of the most important issues facing the EU at that time in Hungary, Slovakia, and Slovenia (see national trend charts at the end of this paper). But Islamophobia has usually played a leading role in migration discourse – some countries of the region (notably the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Latvia) feature among the most anti-migrant but also anti-Muslim places in Europe.

Thus, what the region's xenophobes denounced after October 2023 was not simply Hamas's attack on Israel – but rather western European multiculturalism and the wisdom of becoming more like these countries. They took aim at pro-Palestine protests held across much of western Europe. For example, one of the leaders of the Czech far-right, Tomio Okamura, claimed that "Germany [was] turning into Germanistan", in reference to pro-Palestine demonstrations in Berlin.

The public debate in several central and eastern European countries suggests an 'ethnic' understanding of Europeanness is broadly accepted – not just among the far-right, but also within the political mainstream. In Lithuania, a respected journalist called solidarity with the Palestinian population an "infantility" that only paves the way for the destruction of Western civilisation.

It certainly does not help that, in some countries of the region (such as Poland and the three Baltic states), immigration is increasingly linked to security – notably due to the

instrumentalisation of refugees and migrants by the Russian and Belarusian regimes. But the consequence is that even the pro-European Tusk strikes far-right tones when he talks of "60-140 million migrants who plan to cross into Europe", or when he presents "uncontrolled migration" as "a question of the survival of our Western civilisation."

High levels of xenophobia are also longstanding among the public. In a 2019 study, Pew Global Research identified a major difference in the attitudes towards Muslims between countries of western Europe (France, the Netherlands, Germany, and Sweden), where they attracted mostly favourable views, and central and eastern Europe (Slovakia, Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Lithuania), where most people regard Muslims unfavourably. These findings were later supported by other evidence – for example, "Arabs" were regularly among the people that the Poles say they dislike the most, according to the annual survey that studies perceptions of other "nations".

Undeniably, xenophobic feelings are also present in western Europe, where the "great replacement theory" is in voguein far-right circles – and where non-white and Muslim inhabitants undeniably face discrimination too. But similar views face more limited public resistance in central and eastern Europe. As a matter of comparison: in Germany, the campaign for the European Parliament election featured huge rallies against racism, and many voters seem to have been motivated by a desire to halt the rise of the far-right. The far-right is present in most western European countries – but so too are major political forces and opinion leaders who stand unequivocally for diversity, tolerance, multiculturalism, inclusiveness, and a 'civic' conception of Europeanness. In central and eastern Europe, such voices tend to be fainter. Much of mainstream politics and media are complicit in normalising an 'ethnic' understanding of Europeanness.

Beyond "boomer" Europe

The third blind spot exposed in 2024 concerns Europe's youngest citizens. While the available data are patchy, young people appear to have been less mobilised than other age groups, and (if they did turn out) less likely to vote for mainstream parties – benefitting not just green or liberal parties but also the far-right and anti-establishment independents.

As with the EU's other blind spots, this too is a deeply political question: will young people's weak mobilisation and tendency to vote out-of-the-box prove to be just a temporary habit or something that will continue as they grow older? Another question is whether this is just the habit of one generation – or whether even younger Europeans will follow their lead. But this question of youth has a strong connection to the two other blind spots. One might also wonder

whether the EU's normalised xenophobia may not put some young people off the European project altogether while habituating other young people to an 'ethnic' conception of Europeanness, and thus allowing them to feel able to vote for the far-right.

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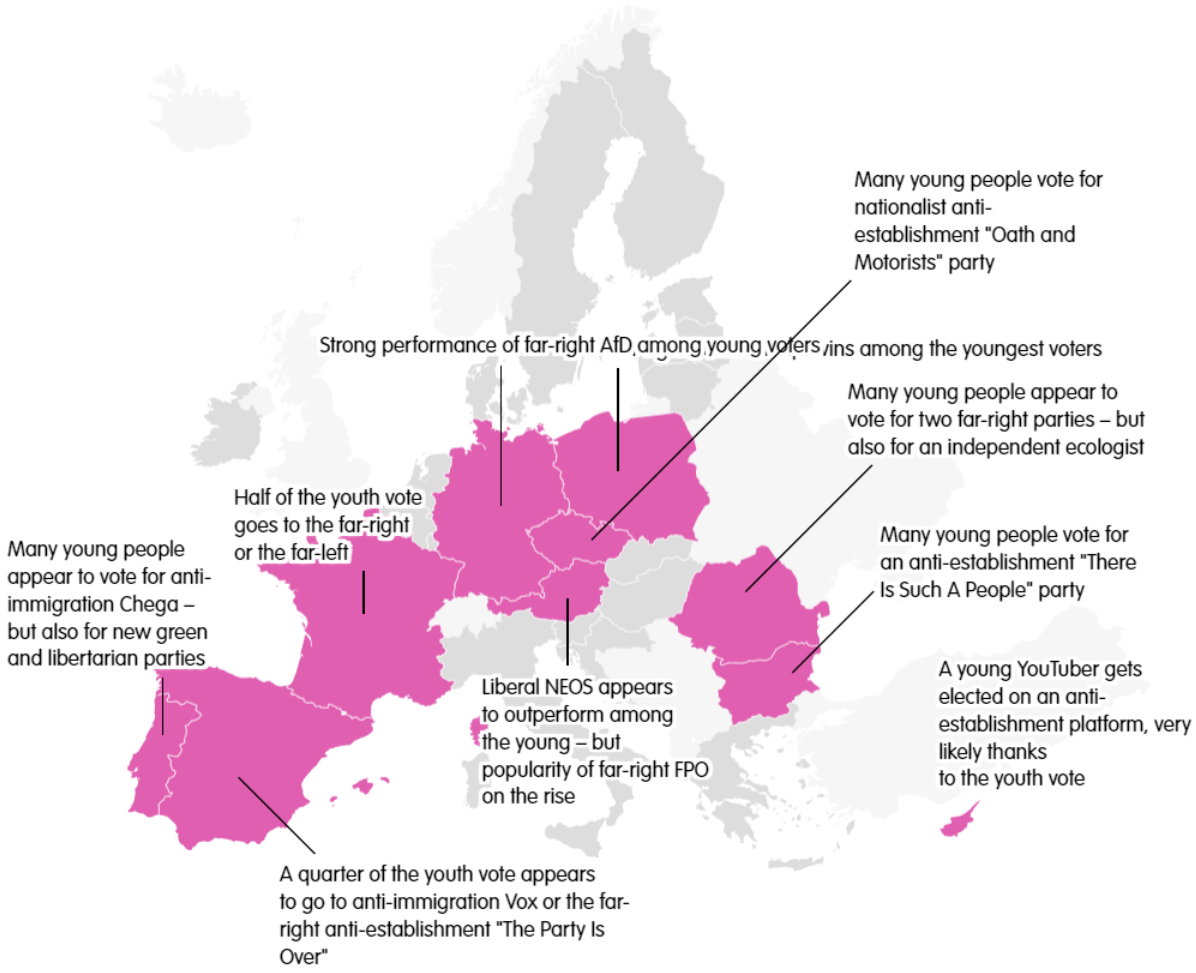
In June, the 24-year-old YouTuber Fidias Panayiotou was elected to the European Parliament by winning nearly 20 per cent of all votes cast in Cyprus (close behind the country's two leading parties, and the highest result for a single candidate in Cyprus). Over the summer, his social media posts went viral – partly thanks to endorsement by Elon Musk. In one, Fidias announced he would vote in favour or against Ursula von der Leyen depending on the result of a survey among his followers. In another, he compares the EU to a "black box" he wants to be open to everyone.

It is easy to see Fidias as a populist whose experiments with digital direct democracy (reminiscent of the voting app developed by the Five Star Movement in Italy) could be detrimental for representative politics. But it is impossible not to acknowledge his mobilisation of many voters disenchanted with mainstream political offerings. Without Fidias, such voters might have stayed at home or opted for Cyprus's far-right alternative (which came fourth and won one MEP seat, also benefitting from an anti-establishment mood). Fidias's unexpected emergence might also have boosted overall turnout in the country, which increased from 45 per cent in 2019 to 59 per cent this year. While there are no official data on how different age groups voted in Cyprus, the YouTuber MEP's performance likely owed much to strong support and turnout among the youngest Cypriots.

Instances where the youth voted for far-right and anti-establishment parties or candidates in the European Parliament election 2024



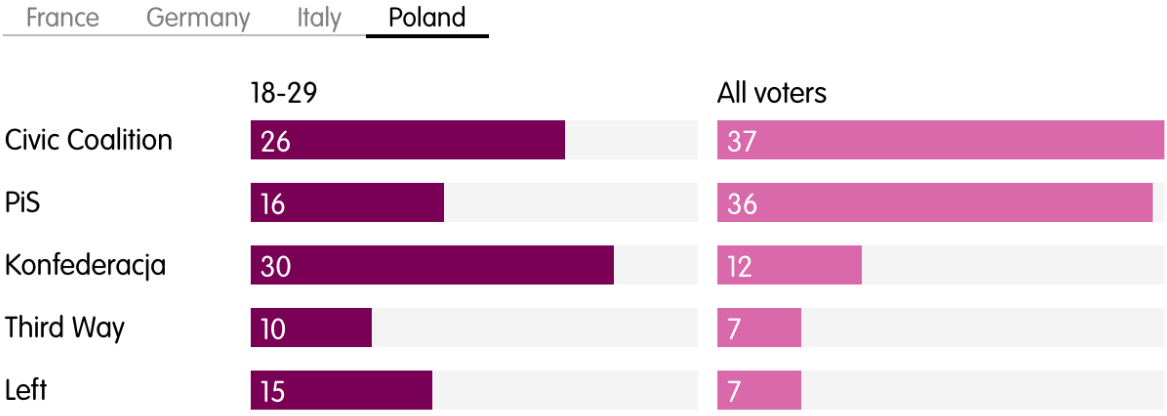
Source: Exit polls in France, Germany, and Poland; pre-electoral surveys in Austria and Spain; ECFR national researchers' conversations with local pollsters and electoral experts elsewhere.
ECFR · ecfr.eu

Fidias is no isolated case but an example of a broader pattern according to which young European voters, despite being less likely to vote than the rest of the population, are nonetheless drawn towards non-mainstream alternatives – especially when these are represented by young people like them.

This often means that many young people end up voting for the radical right. For example, in this year's European Parliament election, the AfD came a close second among young German voters. This is a major change compared to 2019, when young people were reluctant to vote

for the far-right and most voted for the Greens. In Poland, Konfederacja won the youth vote this year, obtaining 30 per cent – much more than among older voters and a major improvement on the party's 2019 result among the young (18.5 per cent). In France, a third of the young voted for Rassemblement National.

Poland: European Parliament 2024 election result
By age, in per cent



Source: Late poll by Ipsos
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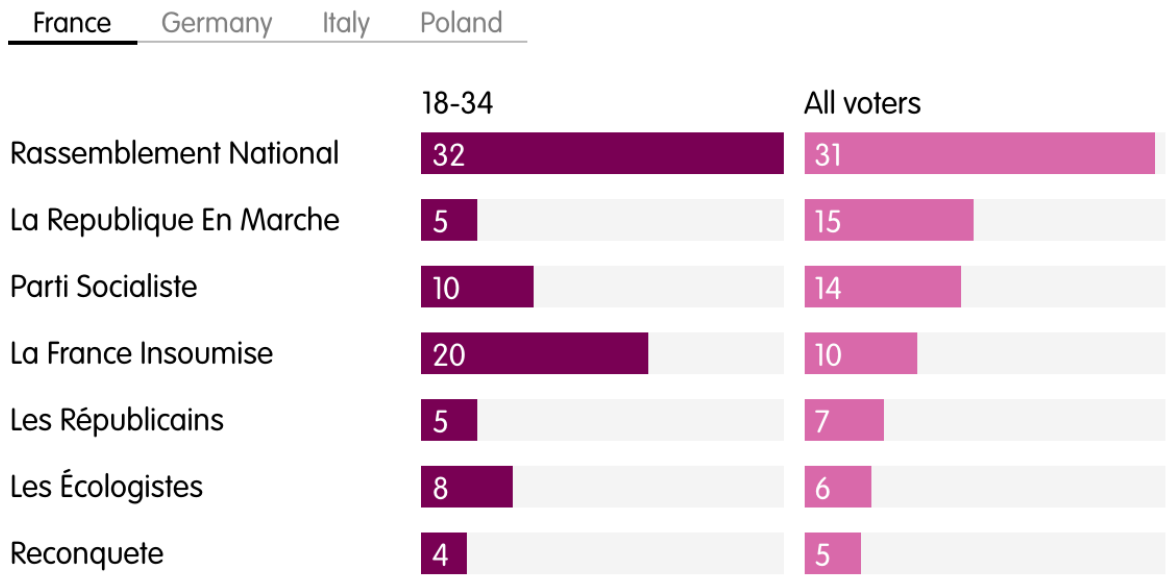
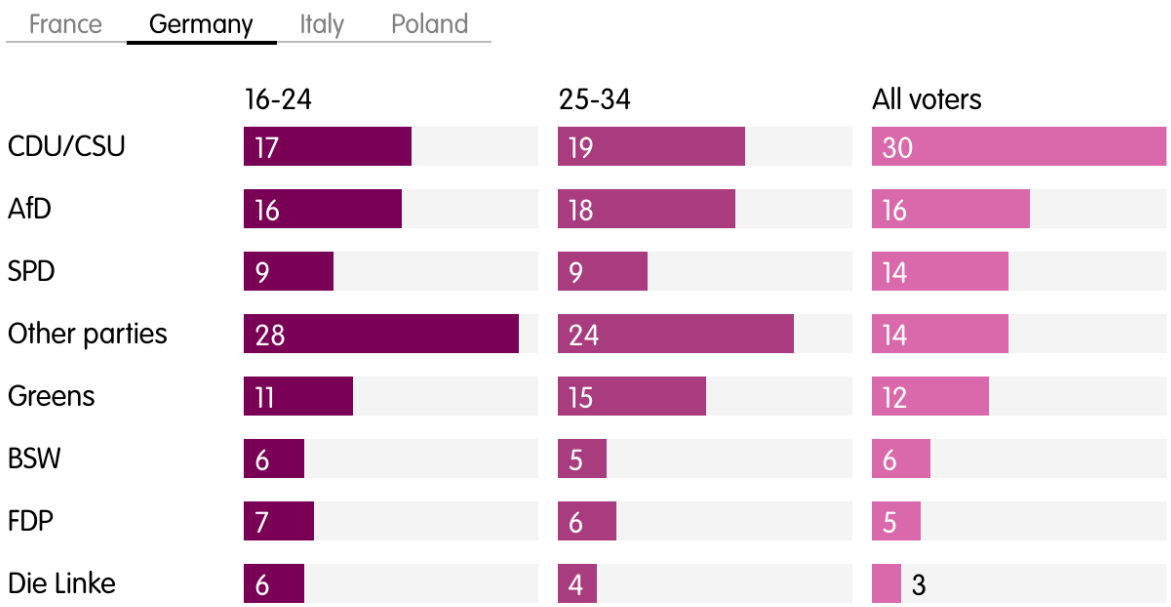
France: European Parliament 2024 election result
By age, in per cent



Source: Day-of-the-vote poll by Elabe, and final official results
ECFR · ecfr.eu

Germany: European Parliament 2024 election result
By age, in per cent



Source: Exit poll by infratest dimap
ECFR · ecfr.eu

It would be premature to interpret this as a demonstration of a growing anti-European, xenophobic, or illiberal sentiment among the European youth. To the contrary, public opinion surveys (from Eurobarometer to European Social Survey to the Allianz Foundation Next Generation Study) consistently show that, in most of the EU's 27 member states, young people are, and continue to be, more pro-European and more socially tolerant than their parents and grandparents. Yet this does not appear to motivate them to vote in European Parliament elections, nor particularly for mainstream parties.

The problem might be largely located on the supply rather than the demand side. With an election dominated by relatively old candidates from established political forces, many younger people might consider the EU and its elections a party for the boomers. When young voters swing behind the radical right, this might largely be because other political parties do not make a comparable effort to attract them – as they prioritise a much larger (and electorally more reliable) pool of older voters. Meanwhile, far-right parties are often among the most effective in the use of the newest social media (for example, former AfD MEP Maximilian Krah, and Slawomir Mencel of Konfederacja, outperform all national rivals on

TikTok). They also tend to feature many young candidates; some are even led by young politicians, such as 29-year-old Jordan Bardella of the RN. This year, his party outperformed any other single political party in Europe in terms of the representation of young people by sending to the European Parliament four politicians aged 30 or younger.

Of course, there exist voters (especially young men) who are attracted by the far-right's ideological offer: including its nationalist and xenophobic appeals, or moral panics on issues related to sexuality, reproduction, and gender identity. But this does not suffice to explain these parties' popularity, because such attitudes are not as widespread among the young as the popularity of these parties suggests.

Based on the available data, it rather appears that the young represent a niche that can – but does not have to – be occupied by far-right parties. In several countries, it is not just the far-right but also other non-mainstream parties – as well as independent candidates – that are responding to something younger people want.

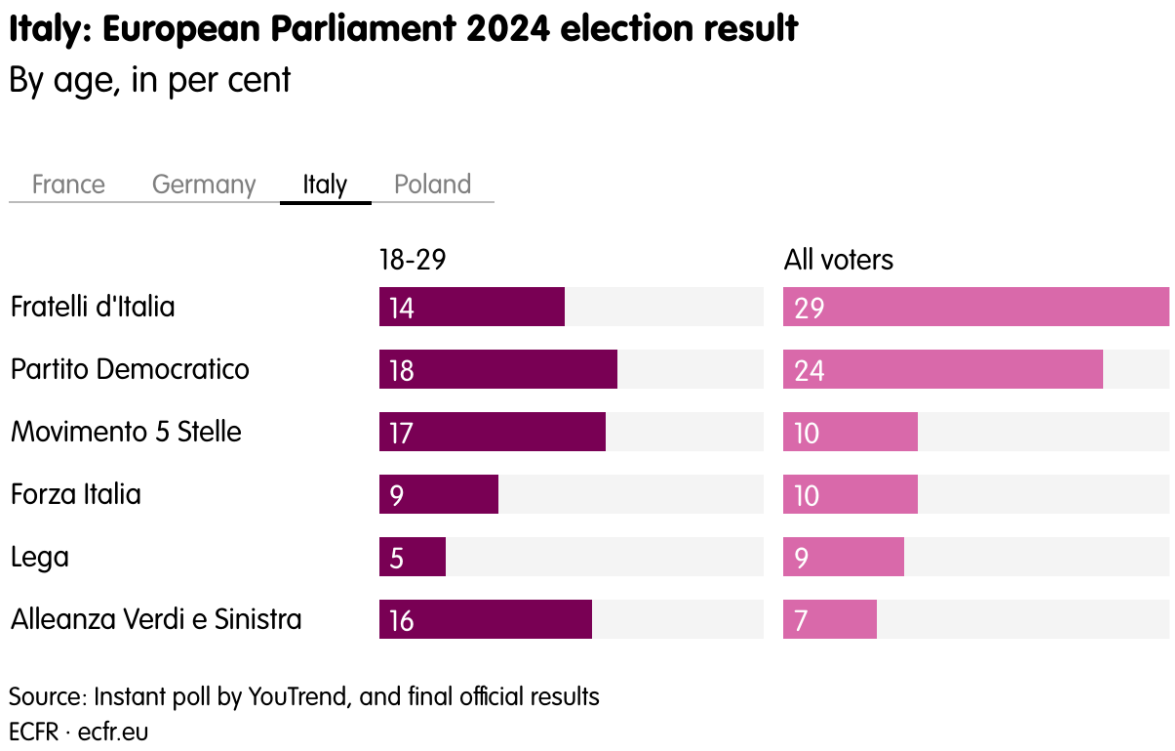
For example, in France, the far-right as well as the far-left were the two most popular parties among young voters in the European Parliament election. In Germany, a record number of young people voted for "other" (ie, non-mainstream) parties, including European federalist party Volt. And while in most countries data on how young people voted are unavailable, our researchers' conversations with local pollsters and electoral experts point to a similar situation in several other EU member states. Thus, in Portugal, the youth vote appears to have been concentrated among the most recent political formations – including not just Chega but also the libertarians and the greens. In Romania, it appears that young people voted disproportionately for the far-right parties – but also for an independent ecologist, Nicolae Stefanuta. And in Austria, a liberal party – the New Austria and Liberal Forum (NEOS) – appears to be particularly popular among the young, even if the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPO) is also winning over some of their number.

Data concerning turnout among different age are even harder to obtain. But, based on available exit polls, it is known that only 26.5 per cent of young Poles voted in the European election – far below the national average of 40 per cent. In France, the abstention rate was highest (53 per cent) among the youngest voters. Before the election, a Eurobarometer study showed that young voters were, on average, less certain to vote than older voters.

There are exceptions to the rule – both on turnout and the far-right vote. Based on conversations with local pollsters and experts, our national researchers suggest that youth mobilisation is no longer below the national average in some countries (including Slovenia

and Bulgaria). Domestic political turmoil in the recent past in these countries may have encouraged many younger people to engage directly in the political process.

When it comes to the far-right vote, countries such as Italy, Sweden, and Croatia are outliers. In Italy, young people were the only age group among whom Brothers of Italy failed to come first; in fact, the party only came fourth – behind the centre-left, the anti-establishment Five Star Movement, and the greens (the last two being much less popular among older voters). In Sweden, young voters appear to have been much less supportive at the ballot box for the nationalist Sweden Democrats than older generations. Like counterparts elsewhere, young Swedes preferred to vote for other non-mainstream options, such as the radical left and the greens. And in Croatia, an independent "Gen Z" list led by Nina Skocak, which consisted of 12 candidates aged between 19 and 30, obtained over 4 per cent of popular vote – insufficient to send an MEP to Brussels but very likely showing strong support among its target group – the young.



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Before this year's European Parliament election, there was strong media interest in the role that young voters could play. This was driven by the 2019 experience, when high mobilisation and often a progressive vote by young people was widely interpreted as giving the new

European Commission a strong mandate to focus on climate policies.

However, on their own, younger voters are not in a position to make a major mark on the electoral result. Not only are they still usually less (or much less) likely to vote than older generations, but they are also a relatively small group. Voters aged under 30 account for just a sixth of the overall European electorate – and while, this year, Austria, Belgium, and Germany lowered their voting age to 16, this has only marginally increased the relative size of the youngest portion of the electorate. In 2019, despite their much greater increase in turnout compared to other generations, the share of young people among voters hardly changed among all those who cast their vote. For these reasons, mainstream parties might conclude this is a group not worth investing in.

But this is a risky approach. If voting habits and preferences are shaped early on in life, as research in political science and psychology suggests, then young people's weak mobilisation and tendency to snub mainstream offers could, over the years, have a growing electoral and political impact. If they stick with their political preferences but begin to vote more regularly, and are joined in this by the generations after them, then Europe's political mainstream risks shrinking even further – often at the expense of the right-wing and left-wing extremes. And if, on the contrary, they get used to abstaining from voting – and the next generations also follow suit – turnout at European Parliament elections will decline again, weakening the political mandate bestowed on EU leaders. This is not unlikely, given that just 38 per cent of young Europeans consider voting in local, national, or European elections to be "the most effective action for making young people's voice heard by decision makers".

Fidias constitutes an exception to the rule – he is one of only 24 MEPs aged under 30 in an institution dominated by politicians in their 40s and 50s (and where the average age is 50). But Fidias is also a sign of his times. He serves as a reminder that, without adjusting their offer, the EU risks losing younger members of the public – who could either vote the mainstream out, or lose interest in European affairs altogether, if they look on the EU as detached from their concerns and needs.

What was the EU made for?

Together, the EU's three blind spots contain a warning for the European project: the risk of the bloc drifting towards an 'ethnic' rather than 'civic' understanding of Europeanness.

The 'voicelessness' of non-white and Muslim inhabitants in today's EU means these groups' perspectives may never be heard – allowing xenophobia to flourish in the language, policy,

and outlook of EU politics. The unchallenged ethnocentrism of central and eastern European governments and politicians risks further normalising such attitudes in that region and in the rest of the EU. And young Europeans growing up in such an environment could adopt a xenophobic outlook while others reject an EU they see as standing for values they do not share.

To some extent, the EU's drift towards an 'ethnic' vision of Europeanness is already taking place, judging by the popularity of xenophobic political parties across the bloc and the way politicians and citizens tend to discuss immigration. It is also possible that – as Kundnani suggests – the United Kingdom's exit from the EU, coupled with Ukraine's possible entry, will hasten the move in this direction by making the EU's society much whiter and less ethnoculturally mixed.

However, "while there has been a frightening upsurge of ethnic politics in Europe", as ECFR's Mark Leonard once argued, "there is nothing intrinsic about European identity that makes it antithetical to diversity." On the contrary, the EU – thanks to its post-national character – should be particularly well positioned to defend civic values inside its own societies.

Three actions could allow the EU to fulfil that promise – and to serve its founding purpose.

Firstly, all those who consider themselves "pro-European" should strive to build or unclog the channels of participation in Europe, so that everybody belonging to the EU's constituent public (including non-white, Muslim, and young Europeans) get the chance to be involved in the iterative process of defining and redefining the EU's purpose. Secondly, pro-Europeans need to reject the 'ethnic' conception of Europeanness. And thirdly, they need to fill the 'civic' conception of Europeanness with concrete content – and thus make it politically competitive with its 'ethnic' rival.

Make it worthwhile to take part

Any expectation that the EU should be something people actively shape and participate in is a relative novelty. In its original conception, the EU was "not even designed as a democratic political entity." The need to create channels of participation for its citizens is a demonstration of the EU's maturity and growing importance. A recent rebound in turnout at the European Parliament election could also be seen in this light: between 1979 and 2014, turnout fell from one election to the next – before springing up to 51 per cent in both 2019 and 2024.

Yet 51 per cent is a very telling number. It is a majority – but only just. Almost half of the

European public chooses not to vote in European elections and staying at home could easily again become the majority choice. To be sure, voting in the European Parliament election is an imperfect index of European sentiment. But it would be equally erroneous to suggest that it tells us nothing about the state of Europeans' sense of attachment to the bloc. The EU might have started out as an elite-driven project, but it currently runs on the fuel of European sentiment – which only its public can provide. Ensuring taking part is worthwhile will provide essential insurance against running out of fuel.

If the EU is to represent its constituent publics, the first and necessary step is to face the crisis of representation by building or unclogging the channels of participation (or doing both) for 'voiceless' groups.

Thus, political parties need to cultivate a more ethno-culturally diverse membership and voting base, in both national and European elections. European institutions need to tackle their internal racism. And the European and national media have an important role to play here too – they need to watch over political parties on this issue in the same vigilant way as many already do with regard to gender balance in politics.

When it comes to the youngest voters, Austria, Belgium, and Germany have set a promising precedent by reducing the voting age in the latest European Parliament election to 16. This helps young people develop electoral habits while they are still studying civic education at school. It also somewhat increases young people's share among the overall number of voters. For example, as a result of the decision to lower the voting age, people under 30 now make up 20 per cent rather than 17 per cent of the eligible voting population in Belgium, 19 per cent instead of 17 per cent in Austria, and 18 instead of 16 per cent in Germany, according to Eurostat data. (If such a reform was introduced in Denmark, Ireland, France, Cyprus, the Netherlands, or Sweden, the under 30s would account more than 20 per cent of those countries' electorates.)

Another useful proposal is to legislate for quotas for young people on European Parliament candidate lists. Certain other barriers to youth representation could also be tackled, such as lowering national eligibility rules or introducing higher limits to campaign donations, which disadvantage newcomers. Pro-European parties would benefit from extending the range of topics they discuss with young people.

And finally, the interests of the future generations (including today's youth) need to be reflected in the EU's democratic decisions – as some non-governmental organisations are already advocating, denouncing short-termism that "repeatedly override[s] future needs and

interests in numerous EU policies". The appointment of a new commissioner for "intergenerational fairness" is a promising step in that direction, though much will depend on political abilities of the youngest member of the proposed college of commissioners – and on the others' readiness to treat this issue seriously.

Reject the 'ethnic' conception of Europeanness

Much of the EU's current political establishment is actively flirting with xenophobia, and yet Euroscepticism is not going away. Many of the otherwise pro-European politicians pay only lip service to the EU's foundational values of universalism, equality, and secularism – while, at the same time, presenting immigration from Africa and Asia as a threat to European "civilisation", or the Muslim population as a security risk for Europe.

Perhaps some European leaders have concluded that cultivating this contradiction is the only way to win re-election. Thus, stricter migration management rules that formed part of the EU's pact on migration and asylum – adopted shortly before the European Parliament election – might be seen as an effort by the European mainstream to neutralise the far-right. European leaders might also be avoiding clashes over migration policy (and the language in which it is discussed) for strategic reasons, such as preserving the EU's delicate unity on the war in Ukraine.

But this is dangerous. In several member states, especially in central and eastern Europe, xenophobic discourse has encountered barely any resistance from politicians, the media, and intellectual elites. This contributes to its normalisation. And young generations are growing up witnessing all this, potentially leading to disillusionment with the EU for some or affiliation with the far-right for others.

From this perspective, the threat of losing the interest of its public – and running out of 'European sentiment fuel' – is perhaps not even the main risk the EU is currently facing. A more alarming scenario would consist in European sentiment remaining strong but becoming increasingly rooted in a xenophobic, ethnic, closed-minded understanding of Europeanness. The EU would still be running – but on a dirty fuel.

This is why it is so important – and urgent – for pro-Europeans to resist the short-term electoral or strategic temptation of staying quiet about the 'ethnic' conception of Europeanness, and instead to unambiguously oppose and reject it. That will often also entail confronting their own voters on issues of migration and diversity. Responsible politicians should be able to call xenophobia by its name and explain to the public that certain opinions

that they share or tolerate run contrary to their own interests – for example, by undermining internal social peace within societies that are already diverse.

Give substance to the 'civic' conception of Europeanness

But betting on the 'civic' notion of Europeanness does not simply mean rejecting xenophobic language and policy. The EU's civic image would be strengthened if the bloc were recognised by the European public as a successful force for delivery – for example, on the economy, security, and climate change.

This is also why tackling the problem of the EU's weak economic competitiveness – which recently was diagnosed again in a report by former Italian prime minister Mario Draghi – matters for the future of European sentiment. It is hard to expect the EU to recover its economic dynamism if this is not supported by strong European sentiment – and, similarly, European sentiment risks becoming increasingly gloomy if the EU's economy is failing. (Still, it is striking that Draghi's report does not consider immigration a potentially important contribution to resolving the bloc's competitiveness problem.)

Earning its reputation as a successful force for delivery should help the EU address some of the drivers of discontent behind the drift towards 'ethnic Europeanness'. But to do this, European leaders will need to work to dispel the fear of migration. This requires enacting policy that deals with irregular migration and ensures the control of borders in a law-abiding way without closing the EU completely to newcomers. Pro-Europeans need to 'regain control' of the way migration is discussed in their countries, instead of either avoiding the topic altogether (and suggesting anyone wanting to discuss it is a xenophobe) or copying the language of the far-right – which appear to be their two preferred approaches so far.

*

Pro-Europeans thus need to find ways to: offer workable channels of participation in Europe for all its inhabitants; reject the ethnic notion of Europeanness; and fill its civic notion with substance, including on migration. Taken together, this should allow European sentiment to thrive in a form which is not just consistent with the EU's foundational values but also with a purpose that today's union could serve in its contemporary context. The EU has changed significantly since its foundation. It should not be afraid of adapting to new circumstances.

Three paths lie ahead. The first sees European sentiment collapse as a growing number of Europeans conclude the EU neither represents them nor acknowledges their concerns and values. The second sees European sentiment flourish, but in a closed, xenophobic form.

These are the likelier routes if the European political mainstream continues to further legitimise the 'ethnic' conception of Europeanness and ignores the voiceless in defining the purpose of the EU. But there is also a third way – a 'civic' future in which the EU is open, and seen to be open, to all its citizens. Or, as Americans might say, a "creedal" Europe winning over a tribal one.

*

The Barbie film has a happy ending. Eventually, Barbie fixes a glitch in the fantasy world and shows she can still be an inspiration for the girls of the real world. For this to happen, she first needs to recognise and confront the blind spots of Barbieland – with its tyranny of happiness and sameness.

The EU still needs to decide whether and how it will address its own blind spots.

Country profiles

choose a country: Austria Belgium Bulgaria Croatia Cyprus Czech Republic Denmark Estonia Finland France Germany Greece Hungary Ireland Italy Latvia Lithuania Luxembourg Malta Netherlands Poland Portugal Romania Slovakia Slovenia Spain Sweden All

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Austria

5/10 Strengths of European sentiment in 2024

✓ **The government has a positive attitude towards Europe**[1]
The government's attitude towards Europe has improved over the last year[1]
There are no major anti-European political forces[1]
Anti-European political forces have become less popular over the last year[1]
✓ **The public feels attached to the EU**[2]
✓ **The public feels attached to Europe**[2]
The public trusts the EU[2]
The public has a positive image of the EU[2]
✓ **The public is optimistic about the future of the EU**[2]
✓ **Majority turned out at EP election**[3]

7/10 Challenges to European sentiment in 2024

High level of pessimism about the EU among the young[4]
✓ **High popularity of anti-European political forces among the young**[1]
Low (<40 per cent) overall turnout at EP election[3]
✓ **High level of distrust towards the EU**[5]
✓ **Low media freedom**[6]
✓ **High level of anti-Muslim sentiment**[7]
✓ **Broad recognition of colour-based discrimination**[8]
✓ **Immigration among key concerns of the public**[9]
Major domestic political tensions around the Gaza war[1]
✓ **Plurality of the population without citizenship of reporting country**[10]

European sentiment in Austria is somewhat of a paradox. While Austrian society has, in several ways, a strong positive attitude towards Europe, this sentiment also faces severe challenges to its strength.

Most of Austria's public feel attached not just to Europe (64 per cent), but to the EU as well (52 per cent). They are also optimistic about the bloc's future (61 per cent). Turnout in the 2024 European Parliament election was healthy (56 per cent), and the current government is clearly pro-European – including in its support for Ukraine.

But the increasingly EU-critical, far-right Freedom Party will probably win the parliamentary election in September, very likely allowing it to participate in Austria's coalition government. The party's popularity is also growing among younger voters. Distrust towards the EU is high among the general population (46 per cent), and media freedom is more restricted than in most countries of western Europe – making Austria more susceptible to anti-EU propaganda.

In recent decades, Austria has become a much more multicultural country, but this is leading to major societal tensions. Anti-Muslim sentiment is high, with over a third (38 per cent) saying they would feel uncomfortable about their child having a romantic relationship with a Muslim person. Discrimination based on skin colour is also widely recognised (55 per cent believe it is widespread). Immigration is one of the public's main concerns and a key topic in this year's electoral campaign. As demonstrated by the European Parliament election result in Austria, which returned solely white MEPs, non-white inhabitants are underrepresented in the country's politics. This is also partly because many non-white residents do not have Austrian citizenship.

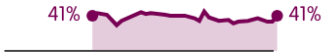
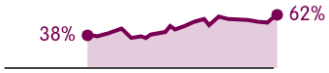
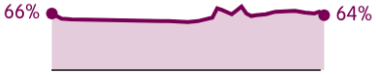
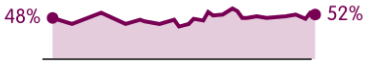
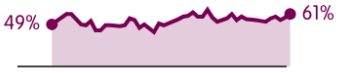
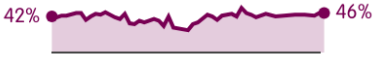
▶ Sources

ECFR · ecfr.eu

National trend charts (2005-2024)

choose a country: Austria Belgium Bulgaria Croatia Cyprus Czech Republic Denmark Estonia Finland France Germany Greece Hungary Ireland Italy Latvia Lithuania Luxembourg Malta Netherlands Poland Portugal Romania Slovakia Slovenia Spain Sweden EU All

Austria

Agreeing one's own country could better face the future outside the EU	
Agreeing that the EU takes well into account the interests of one's country	
Attachment to Europe	
Attachment to the EU	
Distrust towards the EU	
Immigration as one of two most important issues facing the country at the moment	
Immigration as one of two most important issues facing the EU at the moment	
Optimism about the EU's future	
Trust towards the EU	

Additional 243 rows not shown.

Source: Eurobarometer
ECFR · ecfr.eu

Methodology

To understand European sentiment in 2024 and how it may evolve in the years to come, the European Council on Foreign Relations and the European Cultural Foundation oversaw a study across the EU. In their respective EU member state, ECFR's network of 27 associate researchers investigated their governments' and citizens' attitudes towards Europe, paying particular attention to key events of the past 12 months, including the European Parliament election, various national elections, and the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. The researchers conducted interviews with relevant policymakers and policy experts and drew on opinion polls and other sources, and in June and July 2024 they completed a standardised survey. This allows the comparison of the 27 member states on three major issues:

- The broader evolution of attitudes towards Europe on the part of EU27 governments and citizens;
- The extent to which different member states are multicultural – and whether that multiculturalism (or lack of it) affects in any way their national debates about Europe;
- The extent to which young voters participate in elections, how they vote, and what attitudes towards Europe they display.

European sentiment

In using the concept of the "European sentiment", we have been inspired by the works of Swiss philosopher and founder of the European Cultural Foundation, Denis de Rougemont, who – in the aftermath of the second world war – wrote about the need to awaken a "common sentiment of the European."

In the first edition of the European Sentiment Compass, we elaborated on the way this concept could be operationalised for the analysis of today's Europe. The working definition of European sentiment used in this paper understands it as a sense of belonging to a common space, sharing a common future, and subscribing to common values – which is best observed against the background of major shocks and events.

About the author

Pawel Zerka is a senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations. As lead analyst on public opinion, he spearheads the organisation's polling and data research on

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This project is largely based on research conducted by ECFR's 27 associate researchers, whose hard work needs to be recognised. The include: Sofia-Maria Satanakis (Austria), Vincent Gabriel (Belgium), Marin Lessenski (Bulgaria), Robin-Ivan Capar (Croatia), Hüseyin Silman (Cyprus), Vladimir Bartovic (Czech Republic), Christine Nissen (Denmark), Viljar Veebel (Estonia), Tuomas Isu Marko (Finland), Gesine Weber (France), Stephan Naumann (Germany), George Tzogopoulos (Greece), Zsuzsanna Végh (Hungary), Harry Higgins (Ireland), Alberto Rizzi (Italy), Aleksandra Palkova (Latvia), Justinas Mickus (Lithuania), Tara Lipovina (Luxembourg), Daniel Mainwaring (Malta), Niels van Willigen (Netherlands), Adam Balcer (Poland), Lívia Franco (Portugal), Oana Popescu-Zamfir (Romania), Matej Navrátil (Slovakia), Marko Lovec (Slovenia), Astrid Portero (Spain), and Nicholas Aylott (Sweden).

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Any mistakes or omissions are the author's alone.

European Cultural Foundation

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The European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) is the first pan-European think-tank. Launched in October 2007, its objective is to conduct research and promote informed debate across Europe on the development of coherent, effective and values-based European foreign policy. ECFR has developed a strategy with three distinctive elements that define its activities:

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