

Between Nostalgia and New Horizons

How Young Europeans Imagine
and Shape the Future



ALLIANZ
FOUNDATION

Executive Summary

Europe's younger generation cannot be reduced to a single political camp: They are neither simply left nor right; they are neither entirely focused on change nor do they all cling to the status quo.

While a majority of young Europeans calls for far-reaching social and ecological transformation, a sizable minority longs for a return to a "better" past. These views coexist within the same generation and could pave the way for very different futures - ranging from democratic renewal and the strengthening of a reform-minded civil society to the empowerment of backlash movements and political agitators.

This tension between transformation and political backlash is at the heart of the second Allianz Foundation Next Generations Study, which is based on a representative survey of more than 8,500 young people aged 16 to 39 in France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Spain - the EU's five largest member states and home to 65% of Europe's youth and young adults.

To explore what kind of future youth and young adults envision for their countries, the Study draws on seven future scenarios developed in the [New Horizons 2045](#) project by more than 50 experts from research, politics, business and civil society. To see how closely respondents' views align with these scenarios, they were asked to evaluate contrasting visions of the future along specific issues and policy choices. For example, should artificial intelligence (AI) be tightly regulated or broadly applied across all areas of life with minimal rules? Answers were then systematically grouped and assigned to the future scenarios.

Wanted: A Future That Is Sustainable, Democratic, Beyond Growth

At first glance, young Europeans appear far from united in their visions of a future society. In fact, 54% get a sense there is a great deal of disagreement within their generation. Divisions become visible on issues such as migration and cultural diversity or on questions around the "right" balance between greater public security and personal freedoms.

Young Europeans are, however, in strong agreement on the broader priorities for their countries and the EU: Across the five countries, 65% of youth and young adults want to live in a future society that moves beyond today's dominant focus on economic growth. They envision futures where sustainability, cleaner environments and more meaningful forms of political participation take precedence - even if it means accepting trade-offs such as slower progress or less consumer choice. Importantly, this orientation is shared almost equally across the left, center and right of the political spectrum.

The dividing lines run less along whether such change is needed and more along how to achieve it.

Young people on the political right are more drawn to "green growth" approaches that combine major infrastructure investment, private-sector innovation and public deliberation. Their peers on the left embrace this vision, too, but they are also interested in scenarios of local, circular economies and scaled-back consumption. Centrists gravitate toward somewhere in between.

Despite this enthusiasm for a future that looks beyond growth, current economic models remain influential. Nearly a quarter (23%) of young Europeans continue to favor conventional growth approaches. But within this group, too, opinions are diverse: Some believe in achieving a prosperous society through disruptive technological innovation while others act as "guardians of the status quo," emphasizing continuity and stability. Their sheer presence is likely to ensure that, among young Europeans, the growth paradigm will remain a powerful reference point in debates about the future, especially if frustrations over the costs and trade-offs of transformation risk eroding enthusiasm for new visions.

The 12% of undecided youth and young adults - close to 10 million people across the five countries - may prove decisive here. More than half are concentrated in the political center. Winning them over would reinforce today's transformation-friendly majority. Losing them could shift momentum toward more conventional alternatives.

To assess how widespread political nostalgia and radical sentiments are among young Europeans, the Study draws on a specially developed Backlash Barometer, i.e., a validated set of 16 questions designed to measure public affinity for backlash politics.

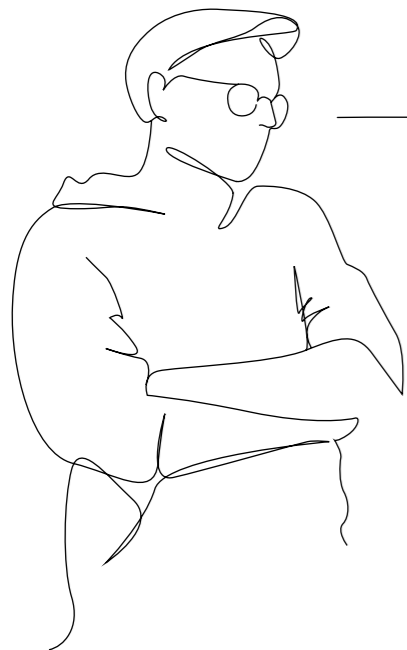
The Barometer provides actionable data for European civil society. It was created by the Allianz Foundation and the SINUS Institute in collaboration with civil-society leaders, the WZB Berlin Social Science Center, with methodological support from the GESIS Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences.

Backlash: Young Europeans Longing for a "Better" Past

Alongside this appetite for transformation, a troubling share of young Europeans show signs of political backlash. Many - particularly men in their thirties - feel disillusioned with politics and are receptive to ideas that challenge the foundations of liberal democracy. **The Backlash Barometer, developed alongside this Study, highlights these tendencies along four scientifically validated dimensions of political backlash affinity:**

- > First, nearly half of young Europeans (47%) report a deep **sense of political deprivation**. No matter their gender, age or level of education, a striking near-majority feels that politicians ignore their needs and primarily serve elites. Such feelings of exclusion create a breeding ground for political backlash.
- > Second, discontent often translates into **retrograde aspirations**, i.e., a longing for an idealized past. On average, 43% of young Europeans across the five countries express such nostalgia, peaking in France (48%) and dipping in Poland and Germany (both 39%). While more common on the political right, these views are not absent from the left or center.

- > Third, 28% of young Europeans openly endorse **regressive visions** of society, imagining a future with restored traditional gender roles and marginalized minorities. There are stark differences between the five countries surveyed: Endorsement is highest in Poland (33%) and France (34%), lower in Germany and Spain (both 25%) and lowest in Italy (17%). These attitudes link nostalgia for the past to exclusionary visions of identity and are currently saturating backlash movements against liberal-democratic norms across Europe.



> Fourth, and most troubling, a sizable minority supports the **extraordinary and often radical tactics** used by backlash movements and political instigators. About one in nine (11%) considers illegal protest, abusing political opponents or even political violence to be legitimate tools for forcing change. Support peaks in France (17%), is lowest in Italy (5%) and hovers around 10% in the other three countries. Strikingly, 25% young people across all five countries endorse not all but a majority of these tactics — a stark warning for European democracies.

Along these four backlash dimensions, a polarizing dynamic could accelerate in the coming years: Feelings of deprivation and nostalgia for an idealized past could, when combined with regressive values, grow into further tolerance for radical political mobilization. For instance, wholesale endorsement of extraordinary tactics such as political violence jumps from 5% among those who feel politically (relatively) content to over 30% among those who feel disillusioned, nostalgic and hold regressive views.

Backlash attitudes also shape electoral behavior. While openness to extraordinary tactics correlates with support for parties on both fringes (far left and far right), young people with regressive feelings of nostalgia are far more likely to back far-right parties. This suggests that, although political backlash is not inherently right-wing, it is currently more pronounced on the right.

Civic Action for a Livable Future

Despite the very real risk of political backlash, the overall picture remains clear: The vast majority of young Europeans reject radical impulses and remain committed to civilized debate, non-violence and the rule of law.

A key indicator of this democratic resilience is their breadth of civic engagement. It ranges from quiet, individual acts such as climate-conscious consumption or donating, to supporting online campaigns and petitions to loud protest actions and involvement in citizens' initiatives.

Overall, nearly every young person (97%) has taken at least one form of civic action, most commonly voting, changing their consumption habits or donating (75%, 65% and 59%, respectively). More intensive, collective formats like protesting or volunteering for an NGO or a citizens' initiative draw smaller numbers. The same goes for political parties or movements, which 22% of young people say they have supported in some form (other than voting) in the past.

However, the numbers taking part in protests have increased since 2023: Italy saw the sharpest rise (from 26% to 43%), Germany a more modest but notable increase (from 31% to 36%) and Poland a smaller jump (from 31% to 34%). Today, 38% of youth and young adults in the five countries report taking part in demonstrations. A similar upward trend is visible for participation in citizens' initiatives.

It is above all the major issues of our time that drive young Europeans to act: Protecting human rights, ensuring access to quality education, advancing climate action and environmental protection, advocating for peace in conflict-ridden regions and defending civil rights such as free speech or the right to privacy.

Civic engagement has clear limits, though. Among those who remain mostly inactive, the main obstacle is lack of time: Nearly one in three says their lives are too busy. Others doubt that their individual contributions will have any impact (21%) or they simply lack motivation (21%). Notably, more than half (55%) of young Europeans view collective civic action as risky. Many report personal costs when they do participate, especially conflicts with friends and family (31%), psychological strain (26%) and verbal attacks or hate speech (24%). These obstacles help explain why individual, low-threshold activities predominate, while more demanding collective forms are still less widespread.

The Study's deep dive into selected fields of civic action also shows that different issues trigger different styles of engagement: Climate change and human rights engagement spark broader, more collective and high-intensity action. By contrast, action taken to preserve traditional values tends to mobilize fewer young people and mostly through individual, lower-intensity contributions.

From Research to Action

Two years ago, the Allianz Foundation Next Generations Study found that the potential for collective action is indeed larger than current levels of engagement suggest: About half of young Europeans could imagine pulling more strongly together with others.

The recent surge in the number of people taking part in protests and citizens' initiatives now validates this conclusion: Young people's civic and pro-democratic potential is a resource waiting to be tapped. Yet an alternative path — toward anti-democratic sentiment and action — remains equally real and must be proactively countered.

The Allianz Foundation Research series thus provides not only rigorous insights but also actionable mobilization pointers — by civil society, for civil society — on what is needed to build on young people's democratic impulses and strengthen their resilience in the face of today's backlash currents:

- > **To mobilize young people, focus on what matters to them:** Connect your message to everyday issues, e.g., education or the environment. People act when issues feel tangible and personally relevant.
- > **To make your message resonate, tell a story that feels real:** Avoid jargon and abstract language. Speak in ways that connect authentically with young people's daily lives and values. Use authentic voices to make your cause relatable.
- > **When a crisis hits, don't step back — lean in:** Crises can be paralyzing, but also opportunities to open new conversations with young people.
- > **To grow engagement, keep it simple and social:** Involvement often begins through friends, peers or direct encounters with civically engaged people. Create low-barrier, social opportunities where participation feels natural and connected to community life.

> **Know your audience:** Effective mobilization and dialogue require tailored approaches. This Study identifies six distinct types of civically engaged young Europeans — from cautious but mobilizable Hesitant Progressives and the consensus-seeking Quiet Mainstream to highly active groups like Progressive Movers on the left, the Proactive Center and Regressive Campaigners on the right, as well as disengaged Passive Regressives.

The ideological differences between these groups are real and echo a familiar story of polarization. Yet even at the opposing political poles of young civic engagement, the aforementioned broader visions for the future often resonate, pointing to potential for constructive dialogue among non-radicalized factions — not as a romantic cure-all, but as a space for democratic problem-solving grounded in the non-negotiable civic norms of mutual respect, factual honesty, non-violence and respect for the rights of all groups in society.

By Civil Society, For Civil Society

How can more young people be encouraged to take civic action and work together to counter anti-democratic impulses? To address this question, the Allianz Foundation invited 78 leading voices from civil society, the arts and journalism to seven interactive Future Labs in seven European cities (Athens, Berlin, Istanbul, London, Palermo, Prizren and Warsaw). The mobilization pointers in this Study were elaborated based on the survey data, insights and on-the-ground experiences shared by Future Lab participants.



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