

# Understanding and engaging a new generation - a key to a liberal democratic future

Edited by  
Zoltán Ranschburg





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## **UNDERSTANDING AND ENGAGING A NEW GENERATION - A KEY TO A LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC FUTURE**

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**Edited by Zoltán Ranschburg**  
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## EDITOR'S NOTE

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Stable liberal democracies require citizens' active participation and engagement with the principles of democracy and liberalism. Our contemporary European society, and the peace and prosperity it has provided for its members for decades, is based on institutions that ensure the rule of law, and the legitimacy, reliability and efficiency of those institutions are rooted in public trust in them. People participate in elections and cast their votes because they believe that their voice matters. Individuals and parties enter the political field because they believe that they have the opportunity to gather public support and represent certain constituencies and ideas in decisions making processes. Think-tanks and civil society organisations develop, promote and advocate for certain agendas because they believe that citizens and their organisations have the right and are able to shape public policy. If trust in the institutions constituting the backbone of our liberal democracies decreases, it undermines the foundations of our society. The fewer people cast their votes in elections, the less legitimacy an elected government has, and the fewer voices are heard. The fewer think that it's worth taking part in politics, the less diverse decision-making bodies become, therefore the less they can reflect on the needs and priorities of different constituencies. The fewer organisations believe that they can make an impact on formulating public policy, the less inclusive and open-minded a government (national or local) becomes.

Approximately over the last decade, we have seen the rise of populism around the globe; it's enough to think of the success stories of Giorgia Meloni in Italy, of Mateusz Morawiecki in Poland (even if his success story seems to have come to an at least partial end in 2023), of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, or of Donald Trump in the United States. Populism is not an ideology, but a political instrument, and one of its many characteristics is that it offers very simple solutions to deeply complex issues in order to appeal to voters. The promise of simple and easy solutions is most of the time a false one: the erection of walls and fences at borders doesn't solve the issue of migration; occasional state interventions in response to economic hardships can't resolve systemic problems of national economies; or, to mention one of the most pressing issues of our time, the suggested response to which is becoming dangerously more and more prevalent among populist leaders and political groups, calling for an immediate ceasefire in Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine doesn't answer the question of how long-term peace could be achieved in the region, and certainly doesn't answer the challenge to European and global security and prosperity posed by an aggressive authoritarian leader. And yet, probably the biggest problem with the false promises of populism is not that they are false, but that they undermine trust in liberal democratic institutions. Why should we care about international law and institutionalised cooperation within the European community in connection with migration if building a wall resolves all our problems? Why should we care about and protect the free market if we can rely on our respective state's and government's wisdom when it comes to protecting our economic interests? Why should we care about the unity and aligned policies of NATO and the European Union if the war in Ukraine can be so easily brought to an end?

As we stated above, our contemporary European society is based on institutions and the public trust in them. This has been the situation for decades, but with the rise of populism, and with the rise of political forces challenging those institutions and public trust to pursue short-term political gains, there is no guarantee that it will stay so for the future. It depends on the younger generations to keep our liberal democracies alive, therefore there are hardly any more important fields of study than that of the youth's attitudes, perspectives and priorities. First, we need to understand what young people, most of them first time European voters in the 2024 European Parliament elections, consider to be the most important issues affecting them either individually (such as housing, costs of living, or opportunities in education), or as members of a European and a Global society (such as wars, macroeconomic challenges, or climate change). Then, we must take steps in the direction of increasing their engagement and involvement in attempting to address those issues within the liberal democratic institutional frameworks.

In 2024, with the support of the European Liberal Forum, the consortium of Fondazione Luigi Einaudi, Projekt: Polska! and Republikon Institute cooperated to conduct surveys among Italian, Polish and Hungarian youth (respectively) to have a better understanding of what issues young European citizens care about the most, and how much they trust they have in existing institutions (from local civil society organisations and political parties to national and international organisations and decision-making bodies). The findings of these surveys, which were presented in Budapest on 16 October 2024, at the conference Do Youth Want the Future? give the body of the three papers included in this publication, but the papers' intention wasn't only to enrich our knowledge on youth attitudes (not that it wouldn't have been a noble cause in itself). The aim of this publication's authors also was to interpret the surveys' findings, to give plausible explanations to why young European citizens have the fears,



concerns, interests and priorities they have, and to come up with policy recommendations for decision-makers (at many different levels) to consider in order to contribute to the long-term success of liberal democracies. We can't take the youth's commitment to liberal democratic values for granted: the future certainly belongs to the young, but it's everyone's responsibility to make sure they take ownership, and shape it in a liberal democratic way.

# ABSTRACT

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The present publication consists of three studies based on the results of surveys carried out among Hungarian, Italian and Polish youth exploring their interest in politics, their involvement in political activities, their levels of trust in institutions, and their attitudes towards key issues of public interest, centred mainly around the 2024 European Parliament elections. While the methodologies of the surveys were not exactly the same due mainly to different country characteristics and language differences (each paper included in the publication contains the description of the methods used in the survey on which the paper is based), their findings together contribute to a better understanding of the issues the young of the three countries subject to the project consider to be the most pressing to themselves, their respective home states, and to the European Union. The studies also show that while young people are less likely to be affiliated with political parties, and have a lower-than-average turnout in elections, it doesn't mean that they are not interested in matters of public policy, but have less trust in institutions and existing political structures. While there were significant differences between the levels of participation of the different countries' youth in the European Parliament elections and in its campaign, the surveys found that although the trends and the circumstances may be different, the vast majority of young Hungarians, Italians and Poles are in favour of their respective countries' EU membership, and they very much care about liberal democratic values.

## Chapter 1

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# Youth activism and political participation in Poland

## Chapter 1

# Youth activism and political participation in Poland

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**Krzysztof Mączka, Maciej Milewicz,  
Miłosz Hodun, Klaudia Rodziejczak**

### Executive summary

The "Youth Activism Report" from July 2024, focused on promoting liberal youth activism in Poland under a populist right-wing regime, examines young Poles' attitudes toward democracy, the European Union (EU), and political engagement. Amid concerns over declining trust in political institutions, this research highlights Generation Z's distinctive experiences and views, shaped by social media and a unique sociopolitical climate. The report's methodology employs triangulation, integrating surveys and data analyses across diverse regions and demographics to capture a comprehensive view of young adults' political attitudes and motivations.

Survey results reveal complex dynamics: while a majority (62%) of young people in Poland support EU membership, their engagement in politics remains limited, with only a minority expressing strong interest. Economic concerns, such as inflation and housing costs, are paramount to respondents, overshadowing ideological issues. Political preferences align with regional and demographic factors, showing support for liberal and leftist parties among urban youth, while rural areas lean toward right-wing, Eurosceptic views. These findings underscore a broader European trend: a persistent yet fragile liberal support amid rising populist influence.

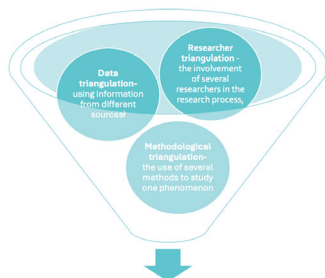
The report concludes with policy recommendations to foster youth engagement through non-traditional, relatable methods like social media campaigns. Emphasis is placed on responsive, pragmatic approaches that align with the priorities and communication styles of young people, aiming to rebuild trust in democratic institutions while countering populist narratives.

## Methodology

In order to ensure the highest possible reliability in the implementation of the research process and the accuracy of the conclusions and recommendations formulated, we have used a methodological approach within the framework of the study based on the so-called triangulation, which is one of the cornerstones of conducting social research. Triangulation, or multiplication, will involve three areas:

- Research methods and techniques (methodological triangulation) - involves controlling the consistency of conclusions formulated using different methods of data collection;
- Sources of information (data triangulation) - involves multiplying sources of information within the same method of collection;
- Research perspectives of those implementing the study (analytical triangulation), related to the fact that the results of the study are analyzed by a team of several people.

### Triangulation scheme used in the study



**Reliable research and accurate recommendations**

Source: own work

## Main objective and research problems

In our research, we focused on the age group of 18-25, and on the following problems:

1. Attitudes towards EU membership
2. Interest in politics
3. Party preferences at a national level
4. Perceiving social problems from a personal, national and European perspective
5. Electoral attitudes and engagement

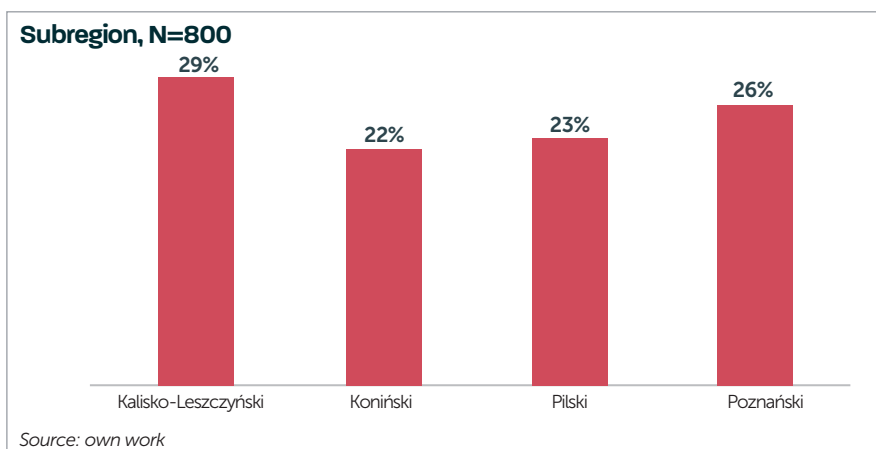
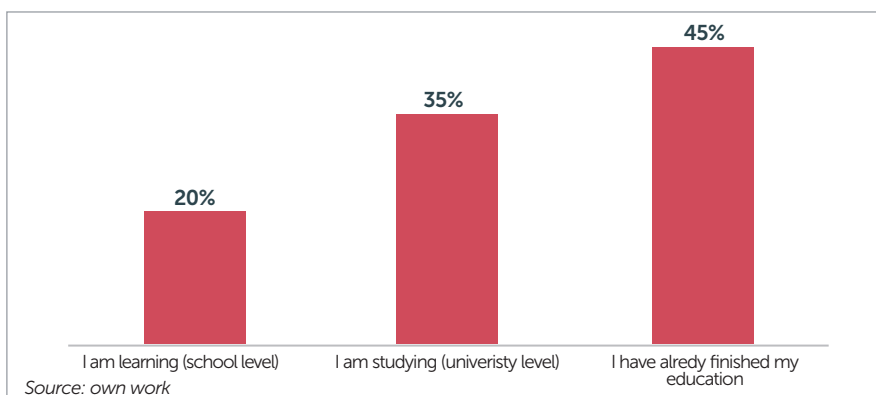
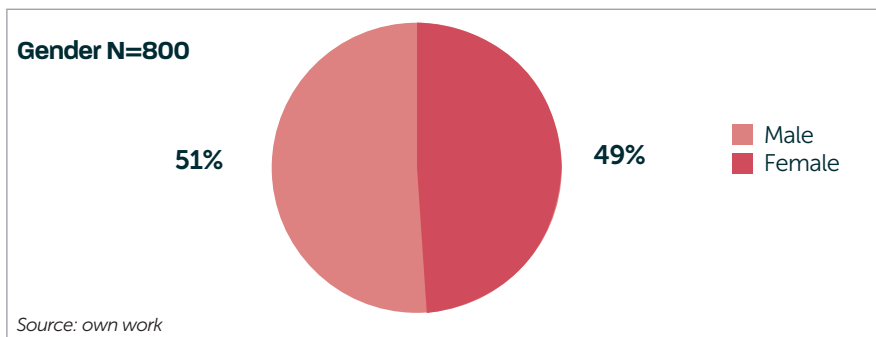
## Research methods and techniques

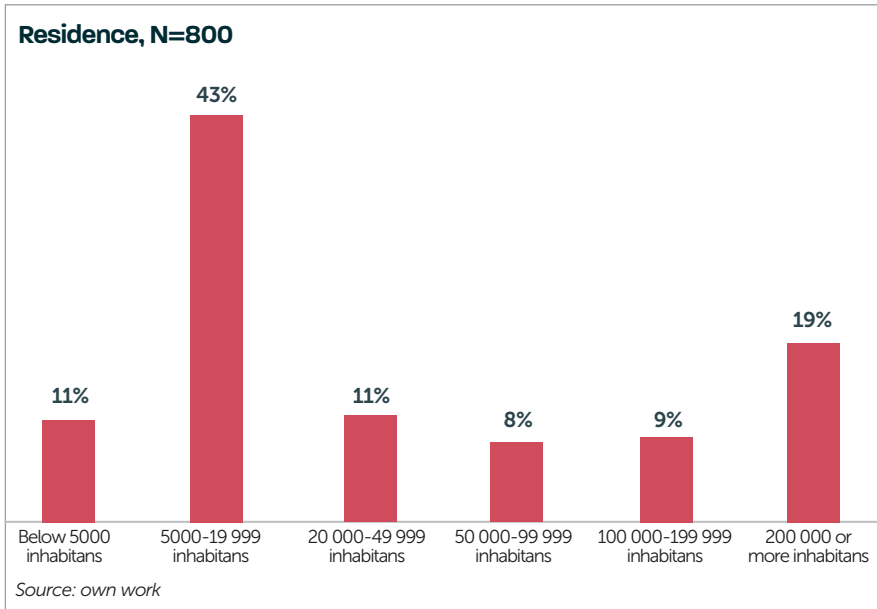
Justification for the choice of research techniques with a description of the research sample.

methods	Justification	Sample selection and sample size
<b>Analysis of existing data (desk research)</b>	The analysis of the existing data was the first stage of the study - a prelude to conducting the research proper. It allowed not only to get acquainted with the context of the study, but also with all the documents relevant to it.	Surveys of Poles' attitudes toward the EU and publicly available sociological reports were analyzed.
<b>CAWI online survey)</b>	In surveys conducted using the CAWI method, the interview with the respondent was conducted over the Internet, and the questions were written according to a special computer script. The script allowed the questionnaire to be automated.  The purpose of the CAWI survey was to attempt to analyze attitudes toward the EU described according to the operationalized research questions.	The online CAWI survey involved 1400 respondents from the Greater Poland region aged 18-25 in two measurements (N=800 and N=600 - before and after the European Parliament elections).

Source: own work

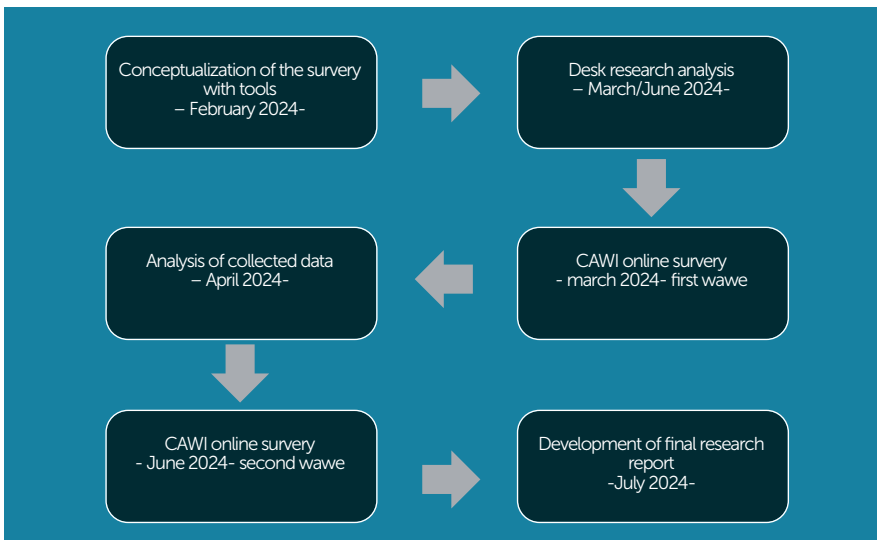
## Sample structure





## The flow of the study with the schedule

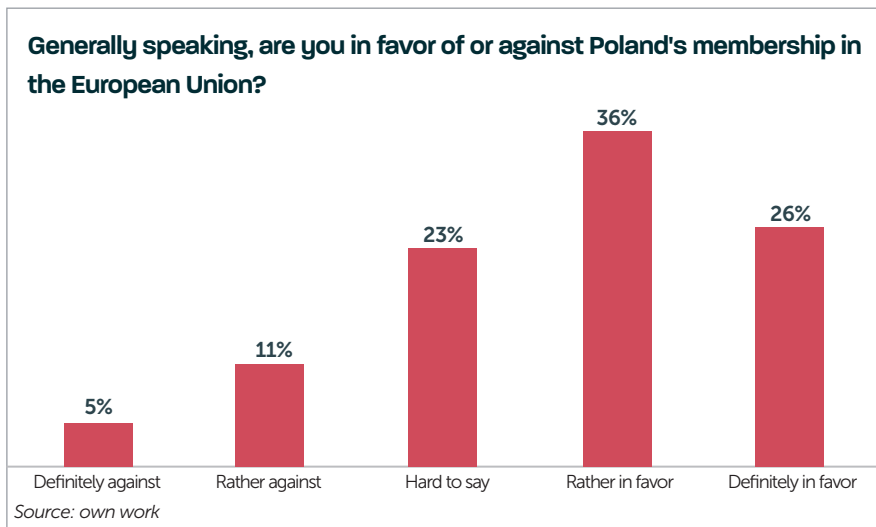
### Diagram of the research procedure





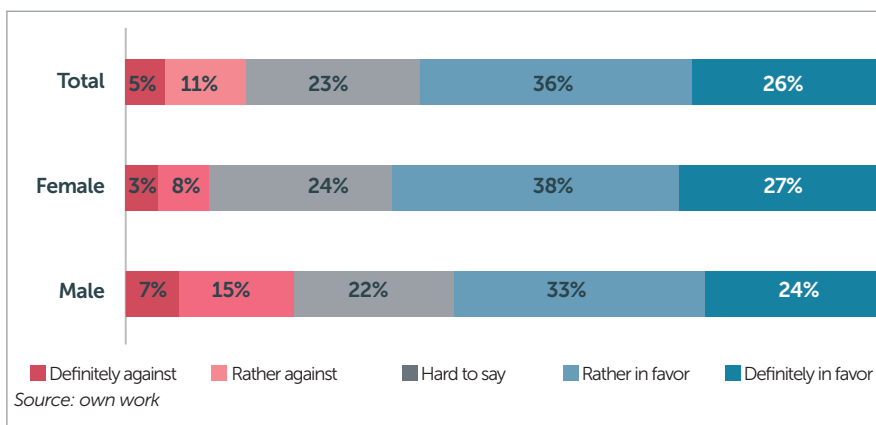
## Analysis of survey results

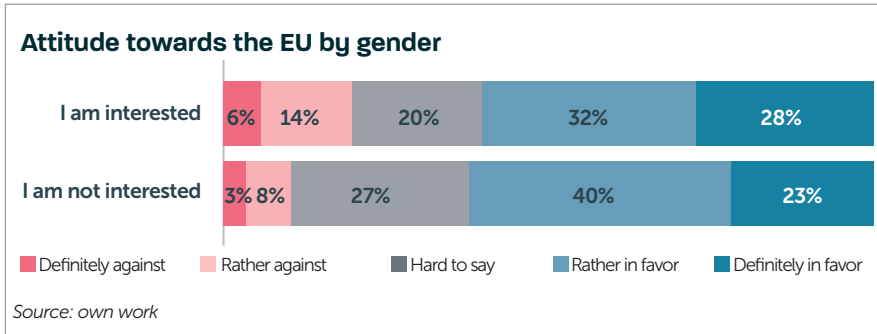
### Attitudes towards EU membership



Generally speaking, are you in favor of or against Poland's membership in the European Union?

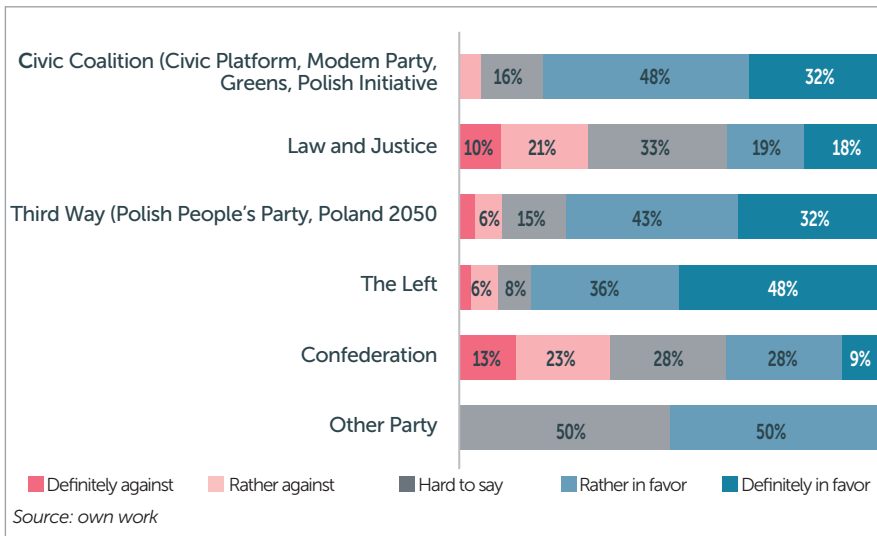
The survey shows that 62% of respondents declare themselves as supporters of Poland's membership in the European Union. 16% of respondents hold the opposite view.





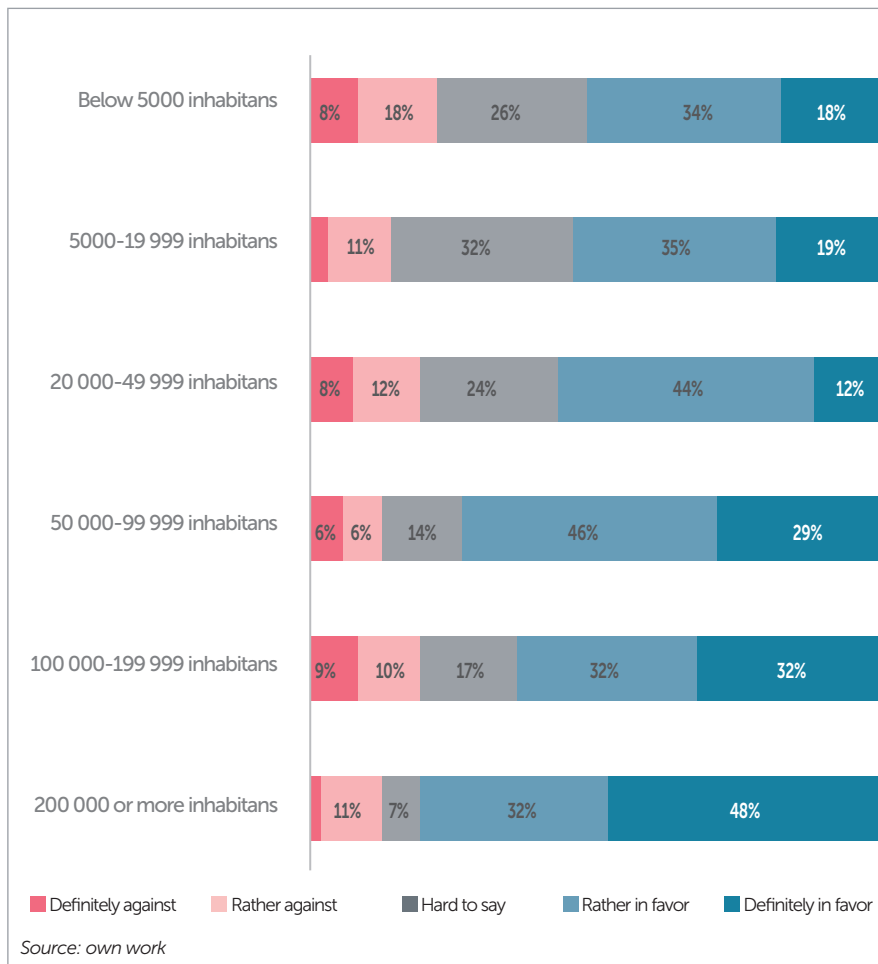
### Attitude towards the EU by degree of interest in politics:

There are marginally more supporters among women (65%) than among men (62%) and among those "not interested" in politics (63% in favor of the EU vs. 11% against; among those "interested": 60% in favor vs. 21% against).



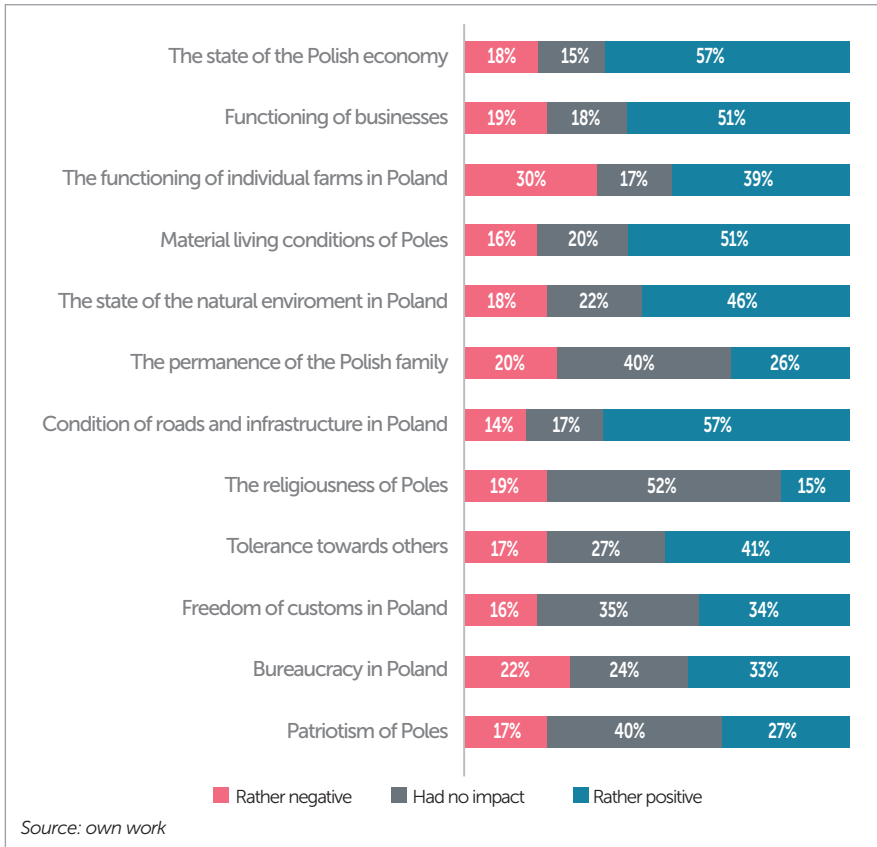
### Attitude towards the EU by political views:

The biggest supporters of the European Union are voters of the Civic Coalition (80%), the Left (84%) and the Third Way (75%). Opponents are voters of the Law and Justice Party (37% in favor vs. 31% against) and the Confederation (37% in favor vs. 40% against).



### Attitude towards the EU by degree of Attitude towards the EU by size of the place of residence:

The biggest supporters of the EU are also residents of localities with over 200,000 inhabitants (80% in favor vs. 12% against) and those with 50,000-99,000 inhabitants (75% in favor vs. 12% against). On the other hand, opponents are mainly respondents from localities with less than 5,000 inhabitants (52% in favor vs. 22% against) and those with 5,000-19,999 inhabitants (54% in favor vs. 13% against).

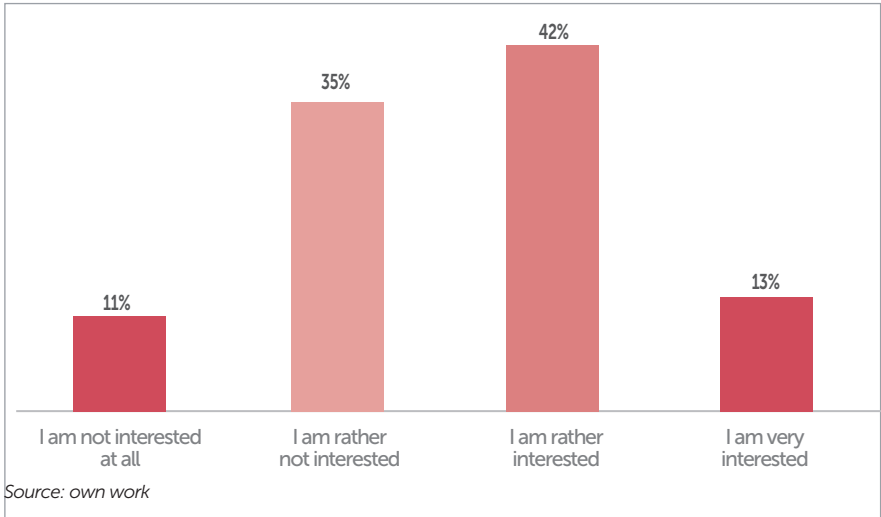


**In your opinion, has Poland's accession to the European Union had a rather positive, rather negative, or no impact on:**

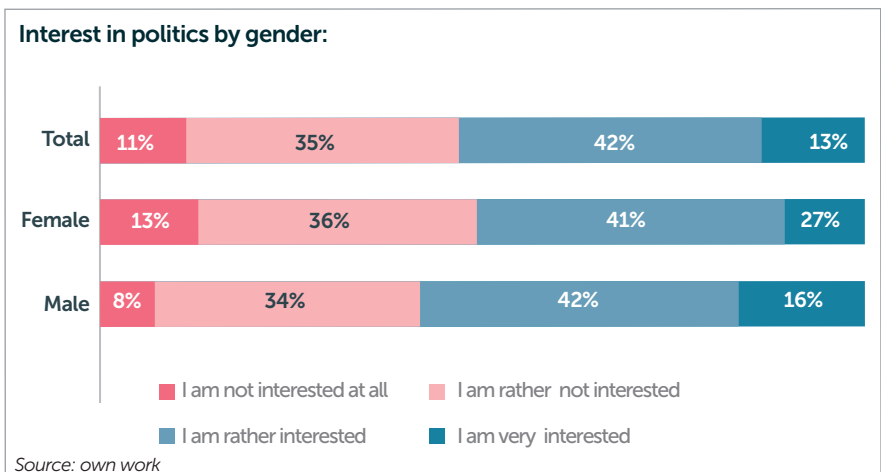
According to respondents, Poland's accession to the European Union has had the most positive impact on: the state of roads and infrastructure in Poland (57%), the state of the Polish economy (57%), the functioning of businesses (51%) and the material living conditions of Poles (51%). European Union - in the opinions of young residents of Greater Poland - has most adversely affected: the functioning of individual farms in Poland (30%) and bureaucracy in Poland (22%). It has not affected: the religiousness of Poles (52%), the permanence of the Polish family (40%), the patriotism of Poles (40%).

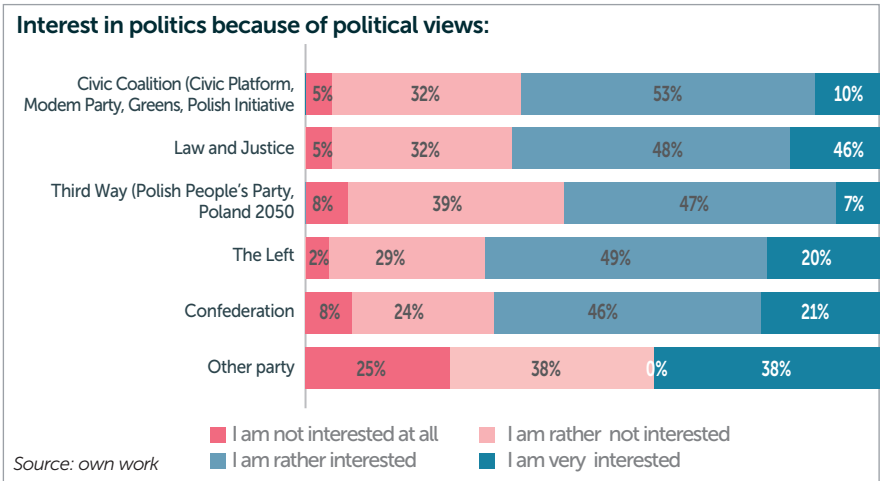
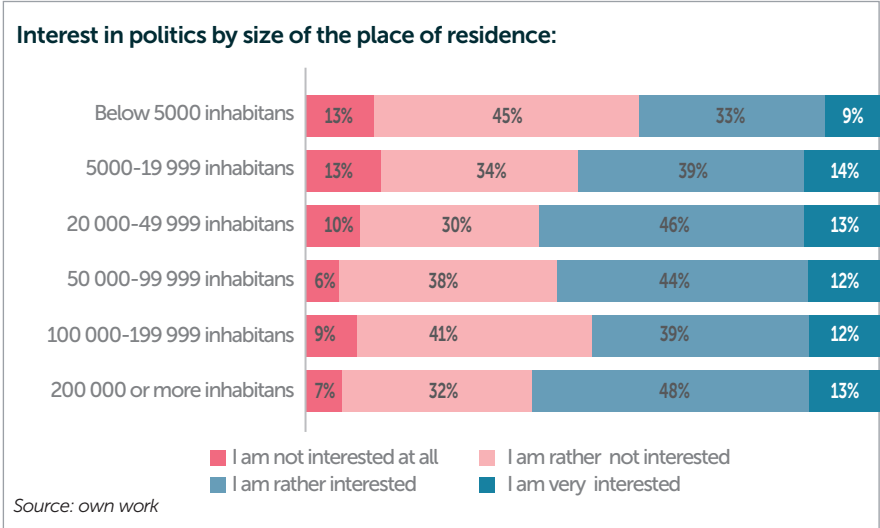
## Interest in politics

To what extent are you interested in politics? Voting on the referendum due to



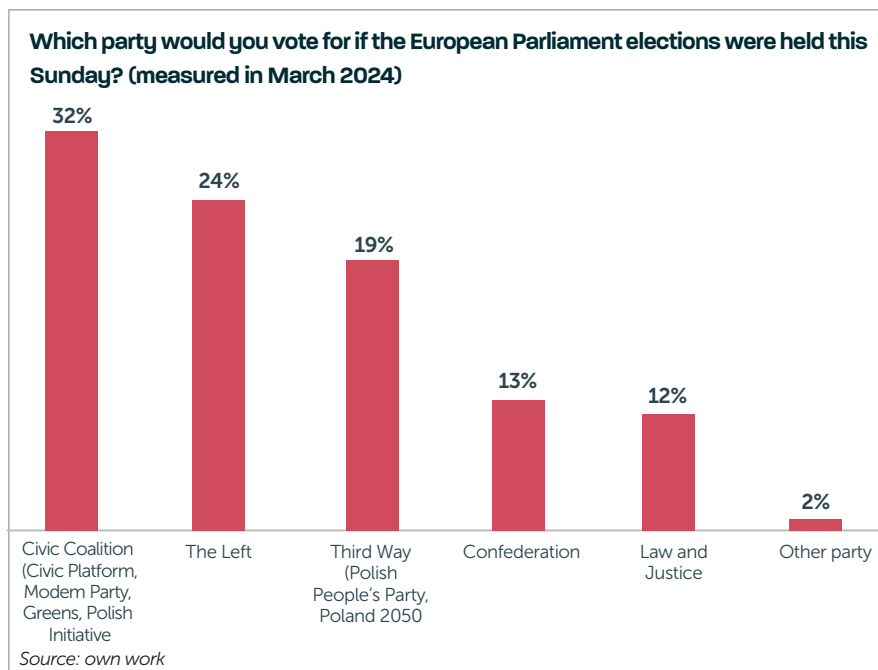
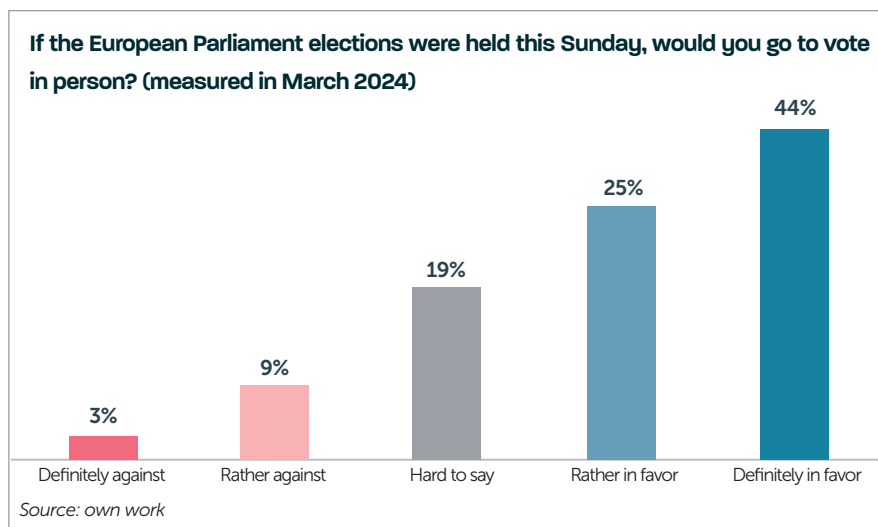
Only 13% of respondents declare that they are "very interested in politics," 42% consider themselves "rather interested," and a total of 46% say they are "not interested at all" and "rather not interested."



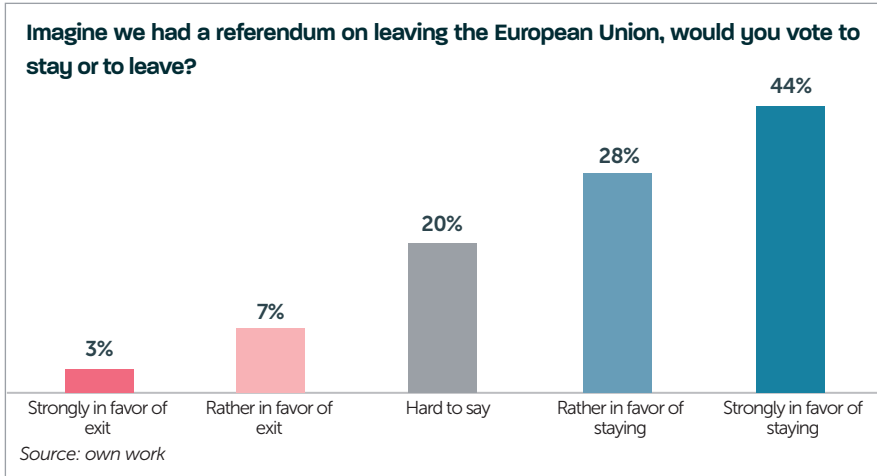


Slightly more males than females say they are interested in politics (58% to 51%). In contrast, place of residence is not a variable that differentiates these views. When it comes to political views, voters of the Left and Confederation are slightly more engaged (20-21% say they are very interested in politics) - the least interested, on the other hand, are Third Way voters (as many as 47% say they are not interested in politics).

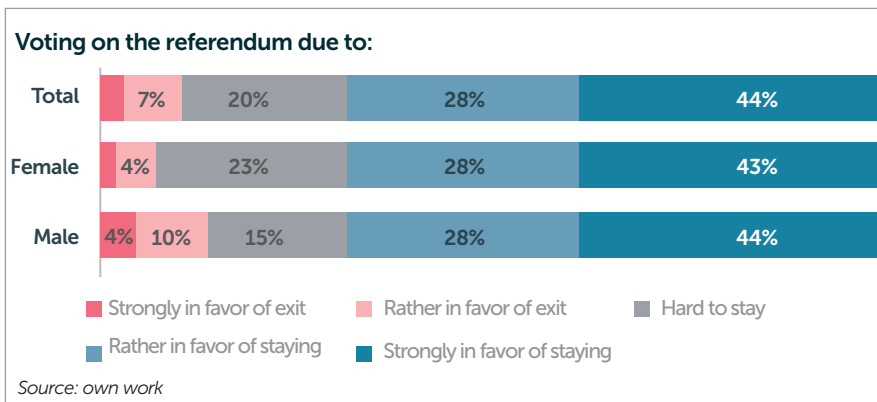
## Party preferences at a national level



If the elections to the European Parliament were held this Sunday, 44% of respondents would definitely take part in them, and 25% would consider doing so. Most young people from Greater Poland would vote for the Civic Coalition (32%), the Left (24%) and the Third Way (19%). Confederation (13%) and Law and Justice (12%) scored lower.

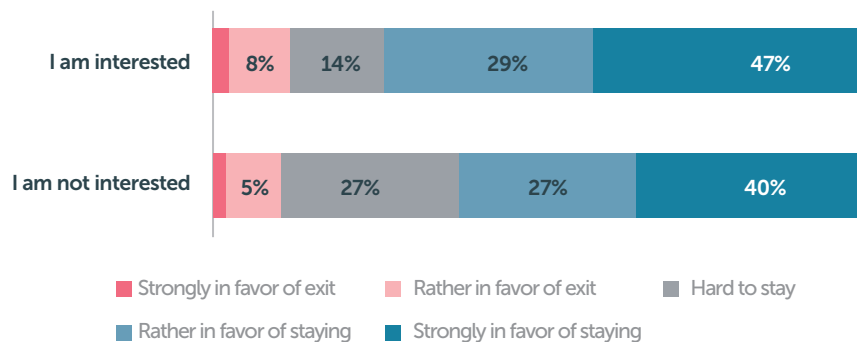


As many as 72% of respondents would vote in favor of Poland staying in the European Union if such a referendum vote were held. Only 10% of respondents hold the opposite view.



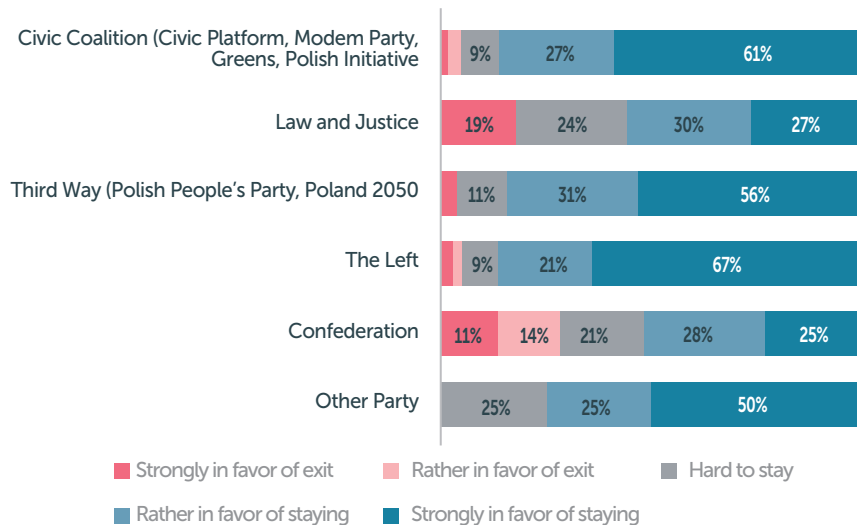


### Voting on the referendum by interest in politics:



Source: own work

### Voting on the referendum due to political views:



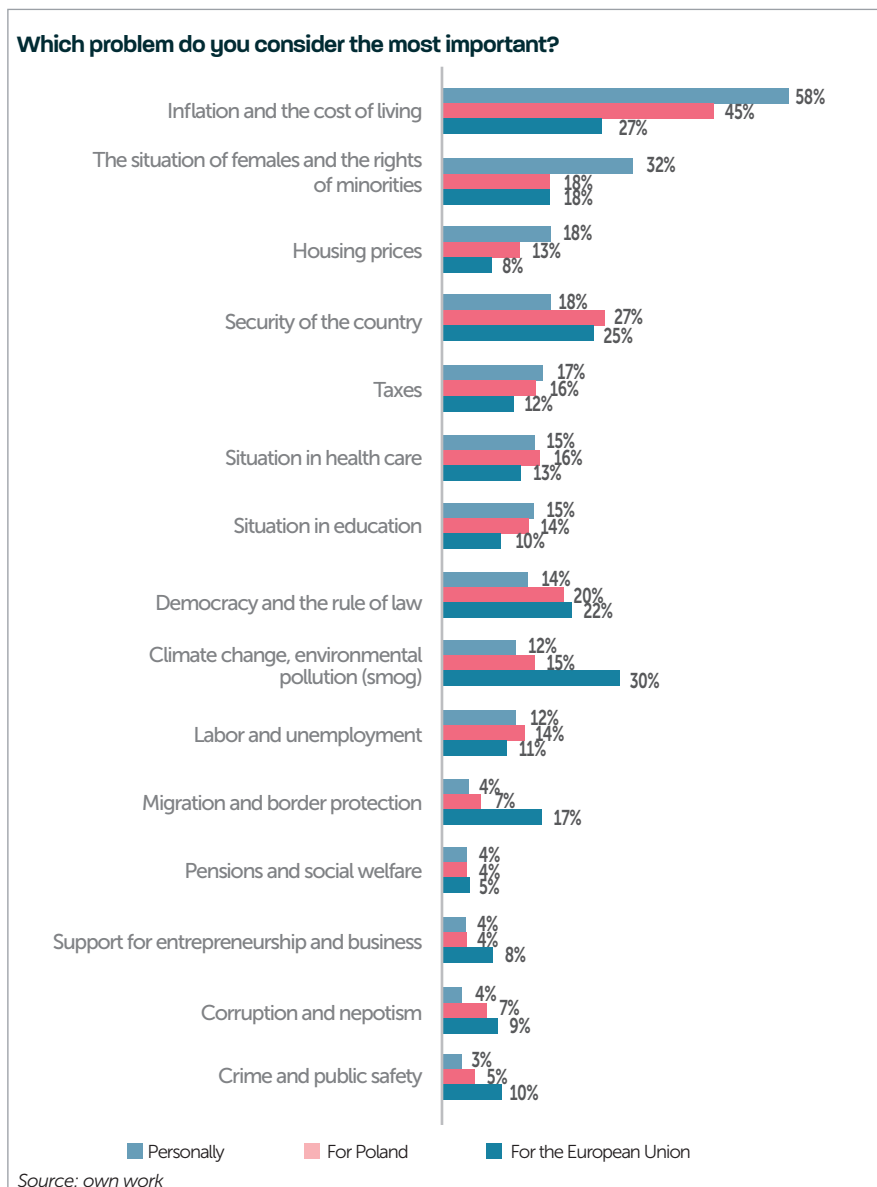
Source: own work



More often "yes" would be voted by females (71%), people interested in politics (76%, but also 10% "no"), Civic Coalition (88%), The Left (88%) and Third Way (87%) voters, and residents of large cities (85%).

More likely to vote "no" would be males (13%), people interested in politics (10%), Confederation (25%) and Law and Justice (19%) voters, and residents of towns with a population of less than 19,999 (10-12%).

## Perceiving social problems from a personal, national and European perspective



The most important problems from the perspective of the respondents' personal situation are:

- Inflation and cost of living – 58% (highest score)
- The situation of females and the rights of minorities – 32% (highest score)
- Housing prices – 18% (highest score)
- Security of the country – 18%

The most important problems from the perspective of Poland according to the respondents are:

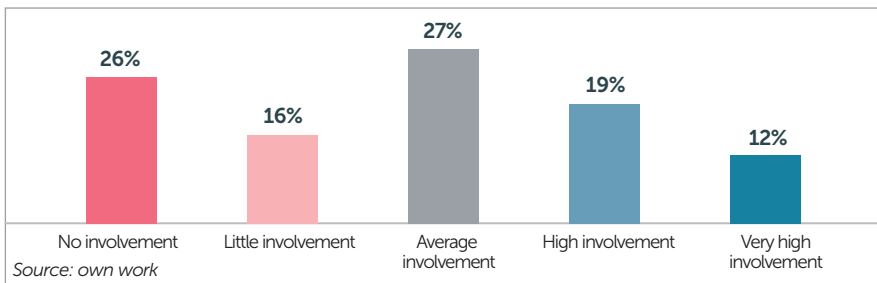
- Inflation and cost of living – 45%
- Security of the country – 27% (highest score)
- Democracy and rule of law – 20%
- The situation of females and the rights of minorities – 18%

The most important problems from the perspective of the European Union according to the respondents are:

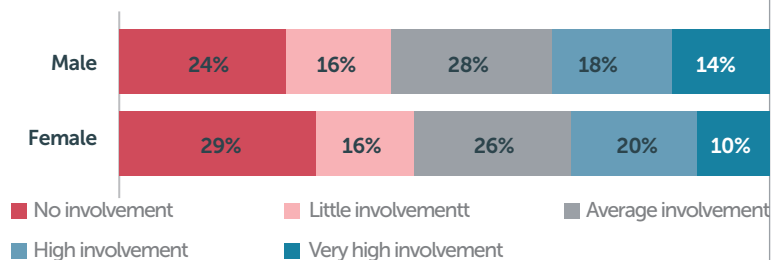
- Climate change, environmental pollution (smog) – 30% (highest score)
- Inflation and cost of living – 27%
- Security of the country – 25%
- Democracy and rule of law – 22% (highest score)
- Migration and border protection – 17% (highest score)

### Electoral attitudes and engagement

The European Parliament elections were held in June. To what extent, on a scale of 1-5 were/were you involved in the election campaign? (1 - means no involvement, 5 - means very high involvement)

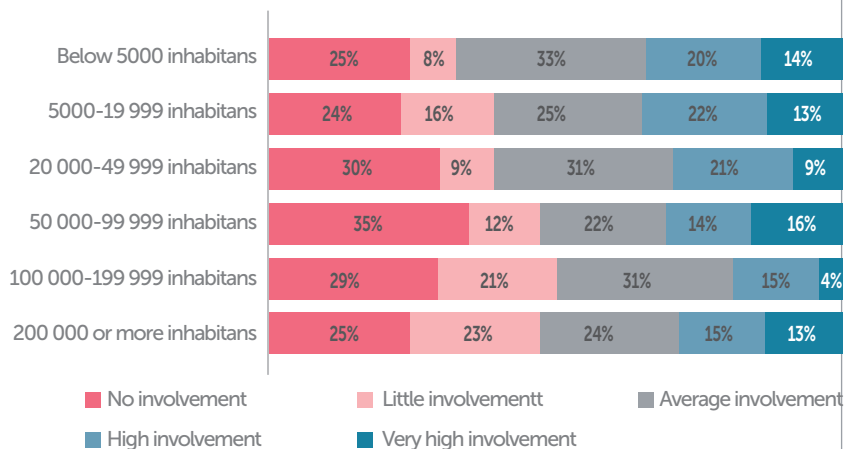


### Involvement in the election campaign by gender:



Source: own work

### Involvement in the election campaign by size of the place of residence:



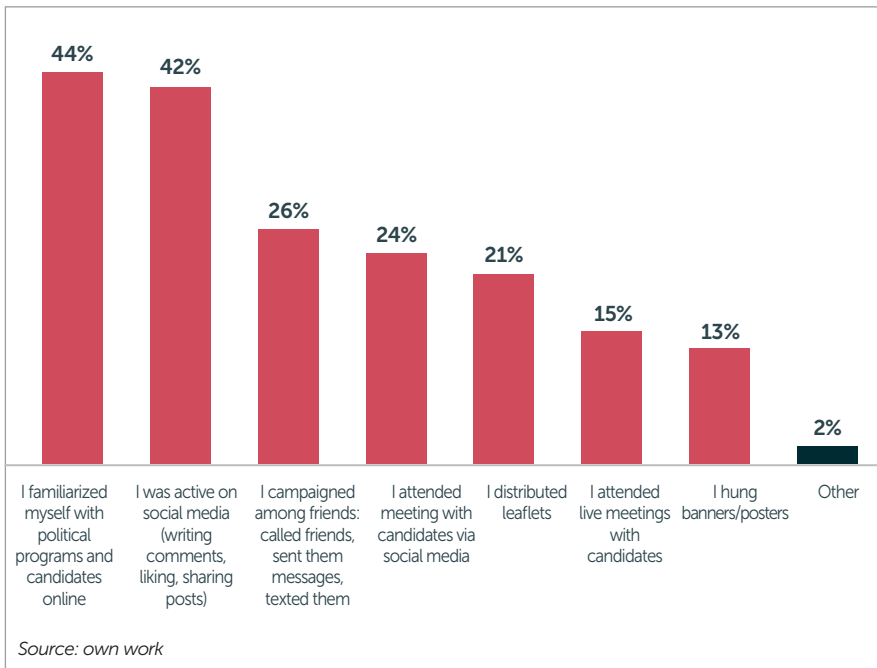
Source: own work

Higher than average involvement in the election campaign was declared by 31% of respondents, 42% described themselves as uninvolved or little involved, while 27% said their involvement in the election was at an average level.

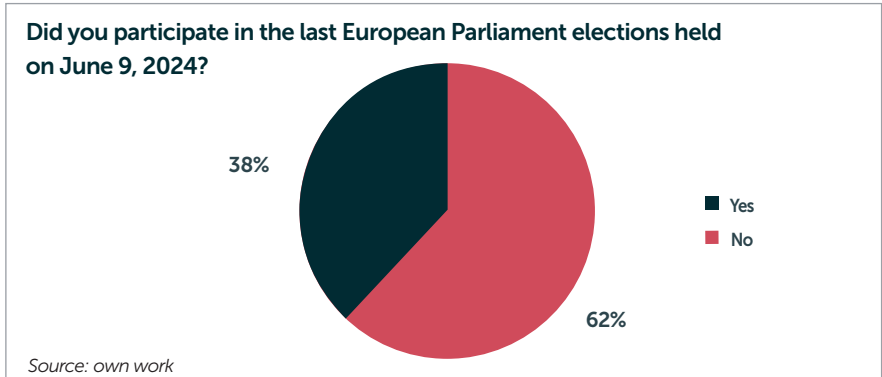
Looking at these declarations by gender, it is difficult to talk about differences that would be statistically significant. Those who rate themselves as involved are 32% males and 30% females (those who are not involved are 42% males and 45% females, respectively).

In the case of the results regarding the size of the place of residence, a slight trend can be observed, according to which more uninvolved are in larger cities (33% uninvolved in towns with up to 5,000 residents vs. 48% in cities with more than 200,000 residents).

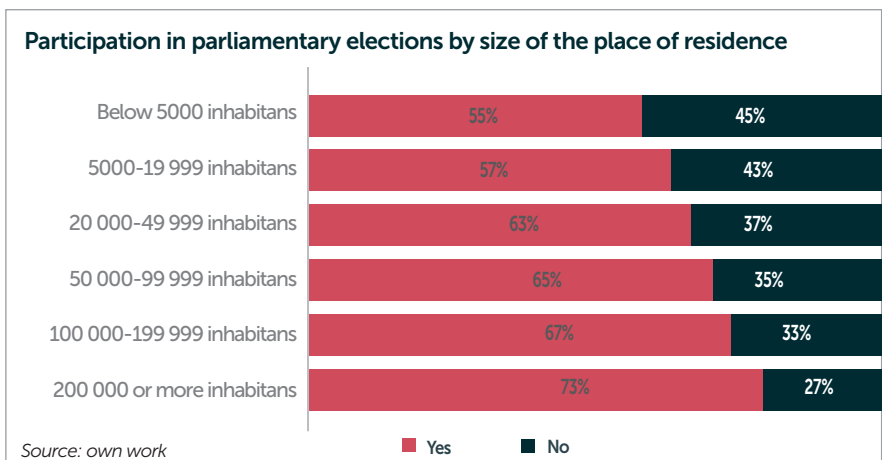
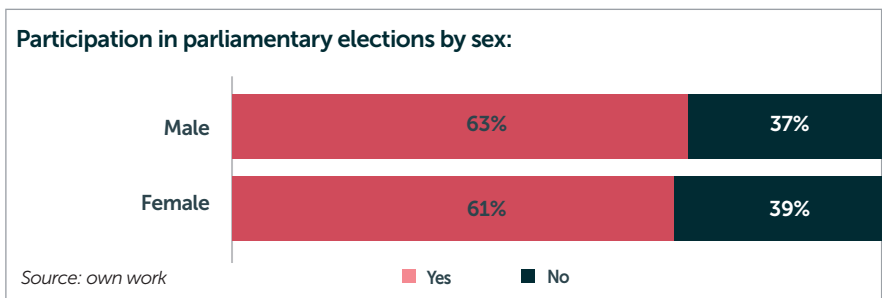
What was your involvement in the election campaign for the European Parliament elections? (Multiple answers can be marked, rotating question)



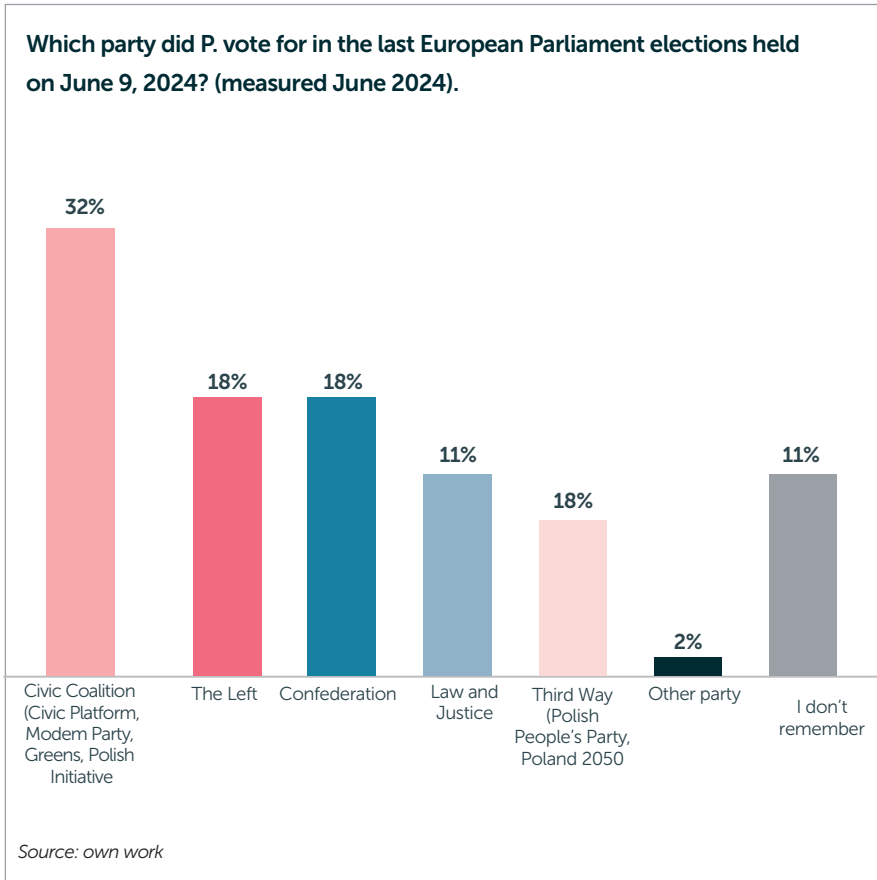
For the vast majority of respondents, "involvement in the election campaign" means becoming familiar with candidates' programs and profiles (44%) and "activity on social media" (42%). The form of direct election campaigning, requiring activities typically within election headquarters, was indicated least often - 21% of those who declared above-average involvement in the previous question indicated that they "distributed leaflets," 15% that they "met with candidates," 13% that they "hung election banners."



As many as 62% of respondents said they had participated in the European Parliament elections.

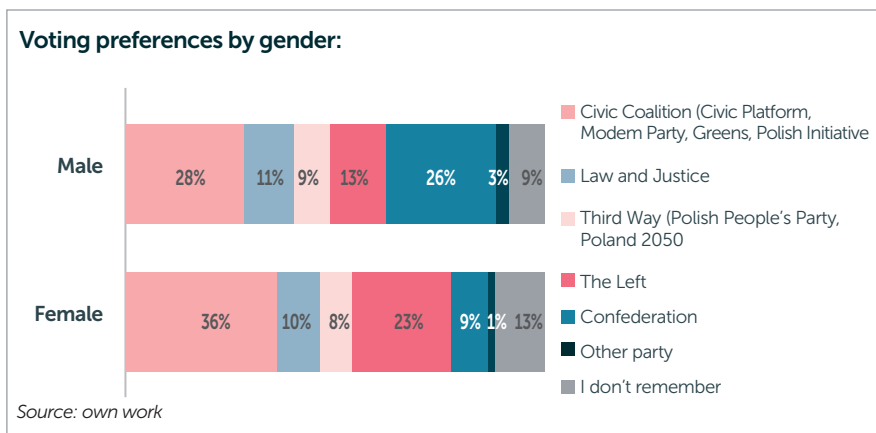


Gender did not differentiate turnout declarations, while differences appeared in the case of size the place of residence. Thus, the lowest participation was declared by residents of the smallest towns (up to 5,000 residents - 55%), and the highest by residents of the largest cities (over 200,000 residents - 73%).

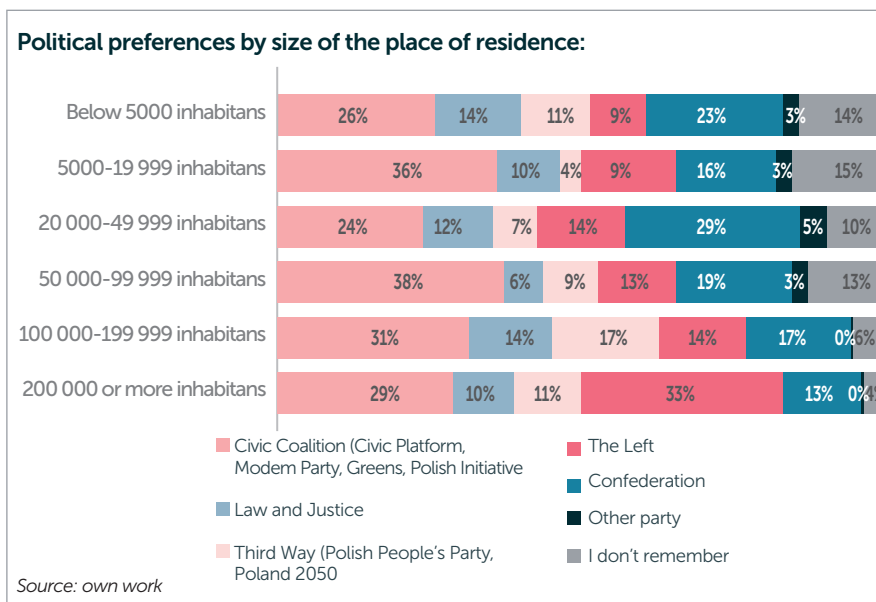


Young residents of Greater Poland region who took part in the elections declared themselves mainly as supporters of the Civic Coalition (32%), the Left (18%) and Confederation (18%). Only fourth among their choices were Law and Justice (11%) and the center-right Third Way (8%).



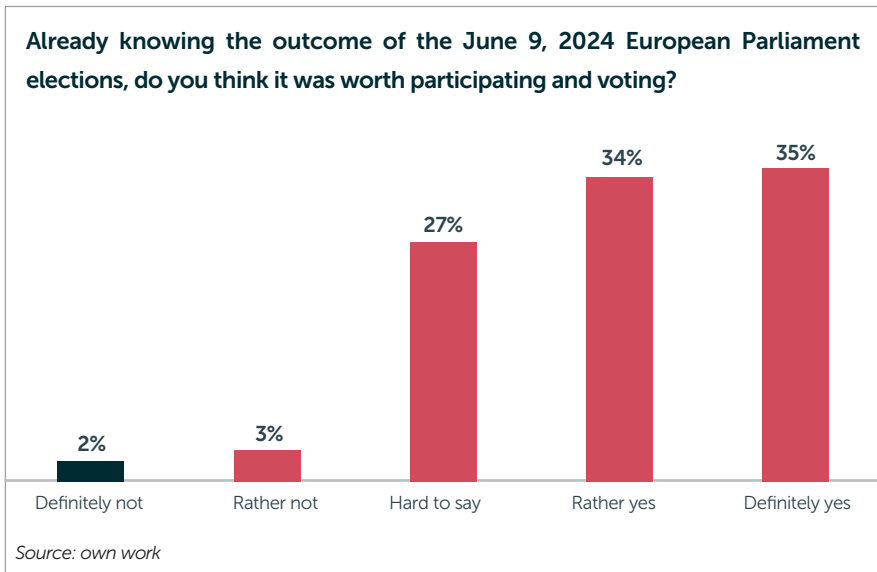


Considering political preferences by gender, it should be noted that females were more likely to vote for the Civic Coalition (36% to 28% - men) and the Left (23% to 13% men), and less likely to vote for Confederation (9% to 26% men). Among young males, it was this formation that had very high support - lower support was received by parties with a leftist and liberal profile.



**Analyzing political preferences by size of the place of residence, it can be seen that:**

- The Civic Coalition had the highest support in cities with 50,000 to 99,999 residents (38%); the lowest in cities with 20,000 to 49,999 residents (24%)
- Law and Justice had the highest support in towns with less than 5,000 residents (14%), the lowest support in cities with 50,000 to 99,999 residents (6%)
- The Left had the highest support in cities with more than 200,000 inhabitants (33%), the lowest in towns with up to 5,000 inhabitants (9%)
- Confederation had the highest support in towns with a population of 20,000 to 49,999 (29%), the lowest in cities with a population over 200,000 (9%)
- Third Way had the highest support in cities with 100,000 to 199,999 residents (19%), lowest in cities with 5,000 to 19,000 residents (4%).



According to 69% of respondents, after knowing the results of the European Parliament elections, it was worth taking part in them. Disappointment was declared by only 5% of young respondents.

## Conclusions and recommendations

In proceeding to analyze the results of the survey, it should be noted that elections to the European Parliament are not among the most socially engaging elections in Poland. Among these, presidential elections (the most personalized) and parliamentary elections (which have the greatest impact on the broadly understood future of the country) lead the way. Thus, it can be stated that European elections, like local elections, are in a sense "second-class elections" that are of less interest to voters, especially young people.

Although, on the one hand, the positive attitude of young Poles (from Greater Poland) toward the European Union (62% of respondents declared themselves supporters) should be welcomed, it is still lower than the nationwide result. This, in the latest Centre for Public Opinion Research poll of March 2024, was 72%, the lowest result since May 2013, when Poland's membership in the EU was supported by 77% of Poles.

It is also somewhat paradoxical that those declaring themselves "more interested in politics" are more critical of the EU - although at the same time there are more people in this group who "strongly support Poland's membership in the EU" (28% - interested in politics to 23% - not interested). This shows that the mere fact of political involvement is not equivalent to declared support for the vision of a common Europe.

This is because these opinions depend on political affiliations. Support for pro-European parties equals support for Poland's membership in European Union. Conversely, support for right-wing and far-right parties implies a critical attitude toward the EU.

Support for Poland in Europe is also revealed more in large cities than in smaller towns, where there are more and more undecideds (the number of opponents is relatively constant).

Importantly and interestingly, the benefits of EU membership are seen through an economic prism, not an ideological one. This was also revealed in the focus studies we conducted, where the key benefits were those related to the construction of new infrastructure, subsidies or the operation of businesses. Meanwhile, Eurosceptic respondents often pointed out that today's EU, is not the same EU that Poland joined in 2004. Today, in addition to environmental topics (the Green Deal), the greatest emotions among EU opponents are stirred up by worldview issues and related absurdities (bans).

This corresponds with the current perception of problems as seen from a personal, national and European level. What worries young people are primarily economic issues, such as "inflation and the cost of living" (58%) and "housing prices" (18%). A high score was given to "the situation of females and minority rights" (32%), which relates to the strong need for personal freedom manifested more clearly at a young age. Also important - due to the war in Ukraine - is the security situation, which in turn is most related to the national level (27% of indications and the highest score in this category). Similarly, "inflation and the cost of living" (45%) is indicated as a national problem, followed by "democracy and the rule of law" (20%) and "the situation of females and minority rights" (18%).

On this background, the EU appears as a kind of separate entity. What respondents think is important for the EU and distinguishes its problems from personal and national problems are: "climate change, environmental pollution" (30%), "democracy and the rule of law" (22%) and "migration and border protection" (17%).

In light of the survey, the European Union may still be an attractive story for young people, although not without controversy. For Euro-enthusiasts, it's an institution that makes us feel secure, that roots us in the group of law-abiding and democratic states and cares about the natural environment. For Euroskeptics, it's more like a bureaucratic giant that, under the guise of caring about the climate and the environment, issues absurd

bans hitting mainly agriculture and is co-responsible for the influx of migrants to Poland.

Also striking in the focus groups was the historically motivated mistrust of other member states, especially Germany, and an aversion to the idea of greater federalization of the European Union (which, in the opinions of those surveyed, would involve the marginalization of Poland in favor of Germany and France).

Although the European Union is considered a guarantor of security, this is due more to the fact that there have been no wars in Europe since 1945 (with the exception of the war in the former Yugoslavia) rather than to the empowerment of member states. Eurosceptic respondents do not really know how the European Union could prevent the migration crisis and help protect the borders (especially with Belarus). Here, NATO and the presence of U.S. troops are more often cited as guarantors.

Respondents' negative opinions towards the EU, however, relate primarily to the Green Deal signaled earlier and the EU's climate policy. Respondents believe that the plans for the transition to green energy, despite being correct, are too fast and not adequately tailored to less economically developed countries, which will result in significant financial losses for Poland and its residents.

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It should be noted, however, that despite their critical attitude toward the EU, young people in the survey (as opposed to older people who also participated in our project) declared a willingness to change their attitude to a more neutral or pro-European one. In addition to the aforementioned need for greater subjectivity in terms of climate policy and self-determination or expressing opposition to the EU's plans, the second aspect was issues related to leadership, that is, broadly speaking, strengthening Poland's position in Europe and increasing its influence on its functioning.

Despite the fact that 31% of respondents say they have become more than a little involved in the election campaign, this is mainly "lukewarm" involvement, consisting of familiarizing themselves with candidates' profiles and programs and some form of social media activity. Interestingly, greater involvement among residents of small towns does not transform into declared participation in elections (turnout). Conversely, turnout comes out higher in large cities, that is, where there were relatively fewer people indicating that they were more involved in the election campaign.

What could be the explanation for this phenomenon? The specific nature of the European elections indicates that the election campaign takes place mainly in large cities - the most election materials are distributed there and the largest number of potential voters live there, who can be persuaded. In this context, reaching information about the elections, candidates and programs does not require great commitment. However, we do not know whether this hypothesis is true. Perhaps it is the case that delving into the campaign of voters from smaller towns discourages them from participating in elections. On the other hand, the young, metropolitan electorate is more disciplined in European elections and does not necessarily require additional "incentives" in the form of greater involvement or interest in the election campaign. Certainly, the issue would require further study.

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Another issue is the survey's overestimation of declared participation in the European elections. Our respondents who indicated that they participated were as high as 62%, while the national voter turnout was 40,65%. Moreover, the Ipsos late poll shows that the 18-29 age group was the least active of all on June 9, 2024. Only 26.5% of the youngest voters participated in the election.

One can point to at least three possible explanations for this phenomenon. First, it is generally the case that people overestimate their activity and participation in elections. Second, the CAWI online survey is a tool that rewards respondents who are active and more engaged. Third, the dichotomous design of the question ("yes" vs. "no") excluded nuanced responses (e.g., "I don't remember," "refuse to answer," "don't know").

This is why it is so important to confront the survey's declarations with other available sources. And these indicate that the electoral activity of young people was at low levels in the June elections.

The survey also found differences between the party preferences obtained in the June/July survey and those available based on the results of the June 9 late poll.



Thus, young residents of Greater Poland who took part in the elections declared themselves mainly as supporters of the Civic Coalition (32%), the Left (18%) and Confederation (18%). Only fourth among their choices were Law and Justice (11%) and the center-right Third Way (8%).

Meanwhile, comparing this with nationwide results (Ipsos late poll for TVN, TVP and Polsat televisions), 29,5% of voters between the ages of 18 and 29 voted for the Confederation. Young voters also voted for the Civic Coalition (26,4%), Law and Justice (16,1%), the Left (15,3%) and the Third Way (10,4%).

However, our results confirm the commonly observed trend that young females from large cities are more likely to vote for left-wing and liberal parties, while young men from the provinces vote for the right-wing and anti-European Confederation.

Interestingly, participation in elections is a reason for respondents to feel satisfaction. As many as 69% of those who participated felt that it was worth it, which means that they felt their subjectivity and voting power.

**In light of the results of the above surveys and desk research analysis, it is important to note the disturbing trends among young people that manifest themselves:**

- low electoral turnout and involvement in politics compared to the average
- anti-European sentiments declared mainly by young males from smaller towns
- the increasing difficulty of building and maintaining a positive narrative about the European Union, which from the goal and aspirations of previous generations has become an unattractive and familiar reality for those who do not remember the time before 2004 (Poland's entry into the EU).



Experts point out that young people's political activism is different from that of their predecessors. Instead of attending election meetings, they prefer to take part in crowdfunding campaigns, go to demonstrations or get involved in community initiatives on a volunteer basis.

Others point out that among young people we have groups characterized by different attitudes toward politics.

- Group I is the PASSIVE - that is, the silent and significant majority who are distanced from any social and political activity. In this group there are both "silent annoyed" (for whom passivity is an expression of rebellion against the system, the adult world, democracy and politicians) and "private" (completely uninterested in politics, preoccupied with their private affairs, relationships, work, career, pleasures - for them politics is unattractive and boring).
- GROUP II is the ACTIVISTS and REBELIOUS- not very numerous, but loud. This group includes all young people who engage in politics, which means that today they are mostly far-right and far-left. This group is motivated by rebellion and annoyance at the system, hence their so-called anti-system or revolutionary political affiliations.

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young residents of Greater Poland who took part in the elections declared themselves mainly as supporters of the Civic Coalition (32%), the Left (18%) and Confederation (18%).



According to experts, all these groups have in common a deep disagreement with current politics. Moreover, politicians have no authority among the young, so they have no influence on their views.

**The following conclusions are drawn from the above analysis:**

- As representatives of the system, political parties have little potential for mobilizing the young. This can only change if any of them is perceived as anti-system or bringing with it the hope of change. Therefore, if any party is able to mobilize the young, it will tend to be an opposition party.
- It is necessary to carefully examine and think about who realistically shapes the views of young people. Intuitively, it can be assumed that these may be so-called media personalities - people known mainly from the media (TV, internet and social media), celebrities, not associated with politics or associated with it "by the way".
- Assuming that politics is personalizing, leaders, their personalities, and personally specific politicians and leaders are becoming increasingly important, while party signboards are losing importance. Thus, those who will mobilize will be those who build strong personal brands, and not necessarily those who will be politicians through the support of their party.
- In this context, there is a need for a new type of politician - articulate and attractive to the media, speaking in unambiguous, understandable language; preferably known for something other than politics.
- There also remains a strong need to educate young people about politics, its mechanisms, tools, etc. There is a lack of modern, media-attractive educational and PR activities for politics. The young today do not understand why politics is needed at all, if it is fundamentally wrong. These mechanisms should be described in simple, understandable language, just like the functioning of democracy.
- The European Union as an idea may have a role to play in this process. It remains an open question to what extent its values will be values

shared by young people, or contested by them. An obstacle is certainly the perception that it is part of a heavily bureaucratic system, personalized by Euro-politicians or bureaucrats far away from ordinary citizens (including young people).

- Looking more broadly, for young people's attitudes to change, politics itself must change. To become more inclusive, open, democratic and honest. These epithets can be multiplied. Which shows how big the task is. However, it is difficult to imagine that it can be done by the hands of politicians themselves, especially since most do not necessarily care about changing the status quo.

## About authors

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## Chapter 2

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# Youth activism and political participation in Italy

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# Youth activism and political participation in Italy

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**Antonio Casella, Karina Kozhakhmet, Enrico Molinaro**

### Executive summary

The following research investigates youth involvement in politics, their expectations from the future, their trust in people and politicians, and their main concerns in general.

After submitting a survey to 589 young Italians, aged between 18 and 25, we extrapolated the results through data analysis, which highlighted clear attitudes and new forms of participations regarding political issues, as well as new trends about concerns and emotional fragilities affecting the new generations.

The results show first of all an apparent contradictory scenario: on the one hand the lack of interest in long-term activities – such as formal membership of a party, or an association – , while on the other hand the high level of engagement in activities related to specific issues meeting their interests.

Regarding the emotional profile of the respondents, the issue that local, European and global institutions should face with higher priority was climate change, followed by the need to guarantee human rights and, about personal issues, a significant concern about mental health and economic instability, leading us to describe the youth as an anxious generation.

In the conclusive part of the paper we invite policy makers to adopt a multi-generations approach in their decision-making policy, as well as effective communication strategies to engage the youth in an inclusive policy-making process, but also social researchers to commit on finding common issues among different generations.

## Introduction

### **1948-2024, a brief history of the main Italian political parties**

In order to properly understand the Italian youth's attitudes, this survey's analysis, and our research's findings, an introduction to modern day Italian politics can explain its connection with our results, in light of the deep sense of frustration affecting particularly the younger generations in light of the complete failure facing any effort of institutional or structural reform in Italy since the constitution of the Republic after the Second World War.

From the birth of the Republic in 1948 until 1992, the Christian Democrats ("Democrazia Cristiana" DC) had been leading Italian politics succeeding in keeping the far-right parties, particularly the Italian Social Movement ("Movimento Sociale Italiano", MSI), at the outskirts of political power.

The choice to involve from the beginning in this strategy the main opposition party (the Italian Communist Party, PCI), which Alcide de Gasperi, founder of DC and prime minister of Italy between 1945 and 1953, invited to cooperate

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with, at the first elected Constitutional Assembly, is consistent with the prevailing inclusive national frontier State identity model, symbolically born with the 1648 Westphalian peace. This Westphalian<sup>1</sup> - oriented strategy was in line with the DC leader Aldo Moro, murdered in 1978 because he tried to include the PCI into his Solidarity Unity government.

On the contrary, in the opposite Glocalist identity model originated in the Middle Age, trans-boundary ideological slogans prevail, replacing State frontiers with limits to communities based on religious, financial, racial, or universal ideologies in conflict with each other. One of the main Italian Glocalist leaders was the Christian Democrat seven-time Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti (a fierce adversary of Moro for decades), facing legal challenges from different Westphalian anti-mafia magistrates, in particular Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, who both paid with their life a courageous judicial investigation against organized criminals in Sicily.

Since the Glocalist Cold War was based on the trans-national identity dichotomy of West versus Communism, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and

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<sup>1</sup> See Dr. Enrico Molinaro's works: "Nation, Religion and Collective Identity between Europe and the Mediterranean", in Eva Pfoestl ed., *The Creation of an Area of Peace and Stability around the European Union* (in Italian), San Pio V Research Institute, 2007; *The Holy Places of Jerusalem in the Middle East Peace Agreements. The Conflict between Global and State Identities*, Sussex Academic Press, (2009: [https://www.mediper.org/images/materiale/pdf/altre\\_pubblicazioni/nazione\\_religione\\_identita.pdf](https://www.mediper.org/images/materiale/pdf/altre_pubblicazioni/nazione_religione_identita.pdf), [https://www.mediper.org/images/materiale/pdf/altre\\_pubblicazioni/bib\\_naz\\_rel\\_identita.pdf](https://www.mediper.org/images/materiale/pdf/altre_pubblicazioni/bib_naz_rel_identita.pdf)); "The Euro-Mediterranean Dialogue Starts from Collective Identities: the Innovative Role of the Anna Lindh Foundation's Italian Network", in H. Kato, L. Lomiento (eds.), *The Mediterranean as a Plaza. Japanese and Italian insights on the Great Sea*, Cisalpino Istituto Editoriale Universitario, Milano 2018, pp.183-202 (<https://ride.mediper.eu/images/pdf/Estratto.pdf>); "The Westphalian Hamas (and Iranian) strategy behind its 10/7 attacks", in CESPI Osservatorio Mediterraneo Medio Oriente (Brief n. 1/March 2024): [https://www.cespi.it/sites/default/files/osservatori/alegati/brief\\_01\\_the\\_new\\_westphalian\\_strategy\\_of\\_hamas\\_-\\_molinaro.pdf](https://www.cespi.it/sites/default/files/osservatori/alegati/brief_01_the_new_westphalian_strategy_of_hamas_-_molinaro.pdf).



the consequent Westphalian reunification of Germany in 1990 (Andreotti saying was that he loved so much Germany to prefer having two) allowed the appointment of the first two non-DC prime ministers from secular parties, respectively Giovanni Spadolini (leader of the Italian Republic Party: PRI) and Bettino Craxi (leader of the Italian Socialist Party: PSI), who inaugurated the dawn of a new lib-lab era towards a cyclical rotation between two alternative moderate coalitions, raising hopes for a new generation of politicians.

In the early 1990s, however, a pool of magistrates based in Milan launched a massive nationwide judicial investigation into political corruption in Italy known as *Mani pulite* (lit. 'clean hands') targeting several leading politicians, especially Westphalian DC and PSI leaders (in particular the aforementioned Craxi, who died in exile in Tunis on January 19, 2000, without, however, touching Andreotti. Craxi used patriotic slogans and images, collecting souvenirs about the Italian independence hero from the XIX century Giuseppe Garibaldi, comparing Westphalian Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat to the other Italian independence hero Giuseppe Mazzini, and faced a furious Glocalist US President Reagan in the confrontation taking place at the Sigonella Italian military airport<sup>2</sup>.

The historical outcome of the described turbulent political period marked, according to some observers, the birth of the Italian Second Republic, when in 1994 the outsider entrepreneur Silvio Berlusconi, the leader and candidate of the then recently founded Forza Italia party, inaugurated a new bipolar political system, with the center/right-wing parties allied under his guidance, in alternate periods of governance with center/left-wing former PCI-led coalitions, which included also some former DC leaders.

In this new context the Westphalian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi - Secretary General of the Democratic Party PD (new name for the former PCI), which

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<sup>2</sup> "Crisis of Sigonella": [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crisis\\_of\\_Sigonella](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crisis_of_Sigonella).

received 41% of the votes in the 2014 European Parliament elections, setting a new Italian record - became the prime minister who served for the second longest time in Italian history. Renzi's ambitious declared intention to scrap his party's old guard, and to renew the Italian constitutional structure, had to face so many obstacles that opened the political stage to the Glocalist Five Stars Movement Party (Movimento Cinque Stelle: M5S).

M5S' leader Giuseppe Conte, despite the victory in the 2018 elections, needed coalition partners to reach the parliamentary majority, so he first opted for a center right coalition with the League Party ("Lega", formerly Northern League), and then for a center left coalition with the PD in 2019 with Renzi's support, when the then extremely popular League's leader and Deputy prime minister Matteo Salvini asked immediate snap elections invoking autocratic Full Powers ("Pieni Poteri")<sup>3</sup>.

In 2021 Renzi, leaving the PD, set up his new Italy Alive (Italia Viva) party, succeeding with parliamentary manoeuvres to stop prime minister Conte's attempts to form a new coalition and government without Renzi, who instead convinced Italian President Sergio Mattarella to appoint Westphalian Mario Draghi, prestigious former President of the European Central Bank (ECB) as Prime Minister. Draghi gathered in his national unity emergency coalition all the parliamentary groups except for Brothers of Italy ("Fratelli d'Italia, whose name comes from the first words of the Italian anthem), then a party on ultra conservative positions inspired by the aforementioned MSI.

However, Conte took his revenge on Renzi suddenly withdrawing his M5S' support from Westphalian Draghi's national unity coalition, opening the way to the electoral success of the coalition in power at the time of writing, which includes prime minister Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia, Lega and the

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<sup>3</sup> "Beach Boy Salvini Bids for Full Power While Italy's on Vacation": <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-08-11/beach-boy-salvini-bids-for-full-powers-while-italy-s-on-vacation?embedded-checkout=true>.

aforementioned “Forza Italia”, now under the guidance of Berlusconi’s successor Antonio Tajani, deputy prime minister and foreign minister.

### **Aims and methodology**

Despite Italian parties apparent transformations, in the last fifty years political life has followed a constant trend: participation in the national elections had continuously lowered from 94% in 1976 to 64% in 2022<sup>4</sup>, a general phenomenon affecting also local and European Parliament’s elections, whose turnout is even worse, lowering from 86% to 50% in the last fifty years<sup>5</sup>.

These figures express a broad disaffection towards politics, probably due both to the (still frequent, after Tangentopoli) corruption scandals, and to the aforementioned resistance of the Glocalist political leaders towards effective Westphalian institutional reform.

In this context the research investigates young Italians’ thought, lifestyle and attitude towards political and non-political institutions. It focuses on their personal, local, and global concerns, their primary world views, and the idea of what the role of the State should be, highlighting the differences between left, center and right voters.

### **Research hypotheses**

A strong ideological polarization characterizes the current Italian political debate, fueled by a rhetoric that, through the media, concerns every issue adopting two strongly opposed points of view, creating an over-politicized context where rational debate and research of a common solution is almost a pipe dream.

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<sup>4</sup> National elections <https://www.truenumbers.it/affluenza-elezioni-politiche/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ipsos.com/it-it/elezioni-europee-2024-risultati-elettorali-analisi-post-voto-ipsos>

The aforementioned approach - more similar to social networks' search for people following a political party as if it were a sport team, or an influencer on social media rather than concrete and constructive policies - entails a simplification of the political discourse, where a Manichean good versus bad dichotomy contributes to the circulation of fake-news.

Global threats to human survival represent the pillars of a new generation's political culture that at the risk, which displays sensitivity about climate change organizing strikes - even to the point of adopting illegal protest practices, like with the Last Generation (Ultima Generazione) protest group, attacking famous monuments or blocking highways - in order to raise awareness about climate issues, as well as organizing public activities aimed at obtaining gender equality, or at the reduction of poverty and economic inequality.

### **Data collection and sample**

In order to analyze the current youth cultural context, in the first phase we conducted 21 open-ended interviews, detecting the most common topics that the target population cares about. These interviews allowed us to finalise the first version of the survey.

Once the interviews gave us a basis to start from, we began collecting data through a survey made of 24 questions, using the CAWI method. In this pre-test phase we submitted the survey to 60 people, then we revised the draft, and wrote the final version.

The total number of respondents was 508, 18-25-year-olds, evenly distributed in the territory of Italy following the national distribution from the Italian Institute of Statistics (ISTAT)<sup>6</sup>. The sample is also divided between students and non-students according to the ISTAT 2023 Italian population data<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?QueryId=42869>

<sup>7</sup> idem

## Results' Highlights

- In contrast with the national result of European elections, only 18% of the sample voted for a right party - vs 47% of national result - while 48% voted for left or center ones (M5S excluded).
- There is a general positive attitude towards the European institutions, particularly among Left and Center voters, while Right voters express more trust in national institutions. There is also a general trend towards socialist and liberal views of the world, while conservative/nationalist view is lower, and even less people recognize order and stability as their main principles. About non-political institutions the level of trust undergoes major fluctuations: from a very high trust towards volunteering organizations to very low trust towards religious ones.
- Despite almost nobody is officially member of a party, about 50% declares to have actively participated to the European elections campaign, and 70% declares to participate to debates on public policies when there is the opportunity.
- About challenges and threats, respondents make a clear difference on the rule of the different institutions: climate change is the main global threat, as the issue European institutions should face with higher priority while, when asked about the role of national institutions, they indicate National Health System and job opportunities (climate change is at the third place) as primary issues.
- Among the personal problems, there is a general concern about the future, particularly due to economic instability, inflation and difficulty to find a good job, but also to the presence of mental health issues (15%).
- Using the method of comparing means, we detected that Right voters display the lowest level of trust towards people with different nationality,

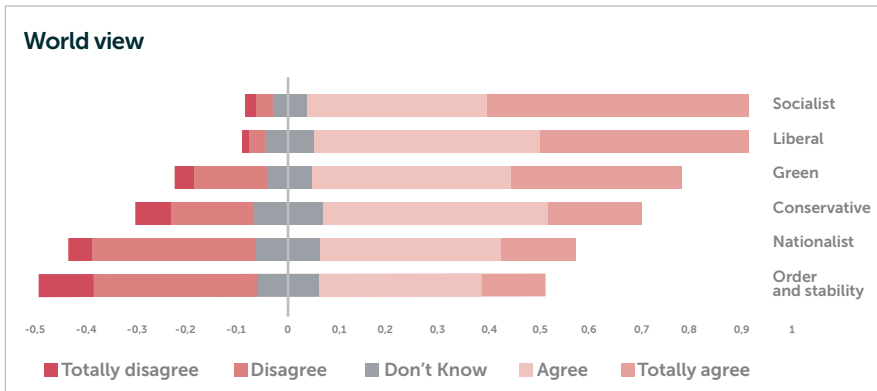
religion or sexual orientation, while Left voters reveal the lowest level of trust towards people with different political orientation.

- Females and males have different lifestyle: the formers seem to have a better social and cultural life, albeit accompanied by higher consumption of smoke, alcohol and drugs (typical group activities); the latter, although practicing more team sports, tend to dedicate their time to lonely activities like playing videogames, consuming pornographic content, or using online apps to know new people rather than doing it in person.

## Main topics

### Primary world view

During the first interviews we realized that young Italians have some difficulty to define their world view through a commonly used label. Young voters make their choice focusing on single issues more than a global concept. To reveal the primary world view we transformed every ideological category in a corresponding sentence and asked the interviewees to express their level of agreement/disagreement, then we used a Likert scale to visualize the result.



As shown in the chart, young Italians main tendency goes towards Left-oriented concepts, putting civil rights, rule of law, and environmental policies at the first places.

## Interest in politics

Interest in politics is a very wide concept and can be measured in many ways. Since this project is based on activism, instead of asking a general question about the personal interest, we chose to submit a specific question related to the social dimension rather than a private activity, such as the time spent to get information about politics, or the most used media channels.

### We asked: How often do you participate in a debate on public policies when there is an opportunity?

Never	18.8%
Rarely	26.2%
Sometimes	29.1%
Often	17.3%
Always	6.4%
I'd rather not answer	2.2%

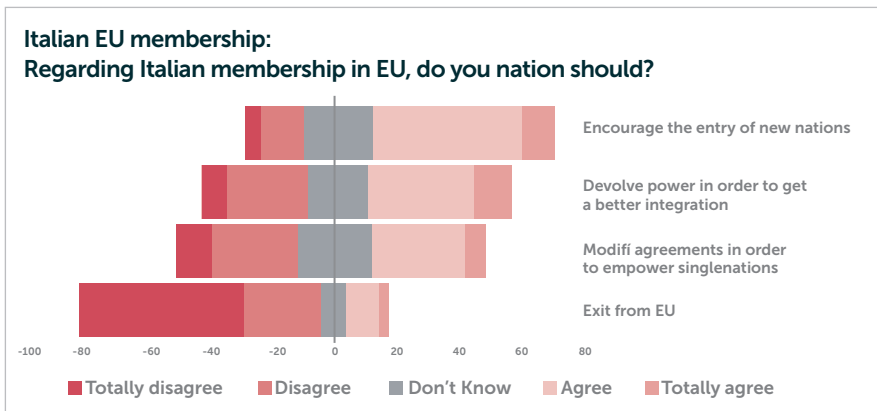
The results show that only less than 20% isn't interested at all about politics, the vast majority usually gets engaged when it comes to debating about policy issue.

## Attitudes towards Italian EU membership

Italian membership in the EU has been a very debated and crucial ideological issue for many politicians belonging to right and far-right area, particularly following such significant events as the 2008 economic crisis; the establishment of the so-called technocratic government - a cabinet made up of experts not officially affiliated to any political party or political coalition - of Mario Monti in 2011; Brexit, which contributed to the birth of a new Italexit party on 23 July, 2020; and the extraordinary financial help of European nations to Italy during the pandemic.

Nowadays, particularly after the 2022 national elections, even right-wing politicians seem to have changed their claims, adopting a softer, but still critical, position towards European policies and institutions.

We wanted to measure the level of agreement about the Italian EU membership submitting four questions regarding the behavior that Italy should adopt about its relationship with the European institutions.



As the above chart shows, most people do not agree with the idea of quitting the EU, rather they prefer to encourage the entry of new nations, and to devolve power in order to get a better integration. In the next section we formulate a hypothesis explaining this positive attitude towards the EU.

**Global, European, national, and personal issues**

During the first interviews we noticed a solid knowledge about global risks, and a remarkable consciousness about local threats, accompanied by a general concern about the future. The respondents also make a clear distinction between the responsibilities of different institutions, and declare various levels of trust, depending on the political area representing their ideology.



We divided the issues into global, European, national and personal categories. In the first three cases we asked the respondents to choose three topics (plus “other”) from a list of items, and to rank them from 1st to 3rd. The items of the list were chosen based on the outcomes of the first interviews and the pre-test phase.

### Identification of global threats

We asked the respondents to choose three topics from a list of 8 items, and to rank them from 1st to 3rd, we then created a unique ranking list elaborating the answers (same in chapter 6.2.2 and 6.2.3).

*Q: What do you consider to be the biggest global threat in this moment?*

1st	Climate change
2nd	Economic instability
3rd	Risk of a nuclear conflict
4th	War in Ukraine
5th	Middle-East conflict
6th	Migrations
7th	Growing tensions between China and USA
8th	A new pandemic

The respondents also make a clear distinction between the responsibilities of different institutions, and declare various levels of trust, depending on the political area representing their ideology.



### Identification of the biggest problem that the EU is facing

We asked the respondents to choose three topics from a list of 11 items and rank them in from 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup>.

*Q: Which of this issues European institutions should face with higher priority?*

1st	Climate change
2nd	Management of migration
3rd	Ensuring individual rights
4th	Defending the Rule of law
5th	The creation of a common defense system
6th	Implementation of a common foreign policy
7th	The Middle East conflict
8th	Reforming the European governance system
9th	Creation of a common European debt
10th	War in Ukraine
11th	The transfer of enterprises outside the EU borders

### Identification of the biggest problem that Italy is facing

About Italian problems, we asked the respondents to choose three topics from a list of 13 items, and to rank them from 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup>.

*Q: Which of this issues Italian institutions should face with higher priority?*

1st	The situation of National Health System
2nd	Job opportunities
3rd	Policy for the reduction of environmental impact
4th	Gender equality
5th	The strenght of democracy
6th	Protection of minorities
7th	High cost of house rent/purchase
8th	The educational offer of schools and universities
9th	Demographic crisis
10th	Criminality
11th	Migration management
12th	Corruption and patronage
13th	Promotion of a healty lifestyle

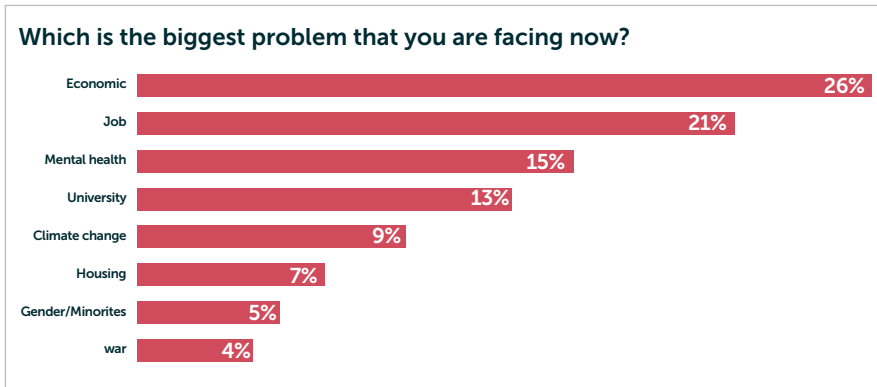
### Identification of personal problems

The question about personal problems was open-ended, we then divided the answers in categories in order to proceed to a quantitative analysis.

The issue of the most concern is the economic situation, 41% of respondents declared to feel in a weak and uncertain situation, mainly due to economic issues or working instability. They express concerns about low income and high levels of inflation, or about the possibility to find a first/better job providing them economic independence.

An unexpected result is about mental health: 15% of respondents declared to be facing a mental health issue, the most frequent ones being, in order: depression, loneliness, and feeling to live in a restrictive and judgmental environment, where the elderly have a permanent critical look at the youth. The less concerning issues are the following: 12% of them put in first position the difficulty to choose or finish an academic career, 9% gave priority to climate change, and the remaining 16% is concerned about high costs of housing, gender inequality, war in Ukraine, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Q: Which is the biggest problem that you are facing now?



### European Parliament elections party preferences<sup>8</sup>

Answering options were one for each major party, receiving more than 2% of votes (plus “Other” and “Didn’t vote”), afterwards we divided them in four groups following this framework:

Right: Lega, Fratelli d’Italia, Forza Italia

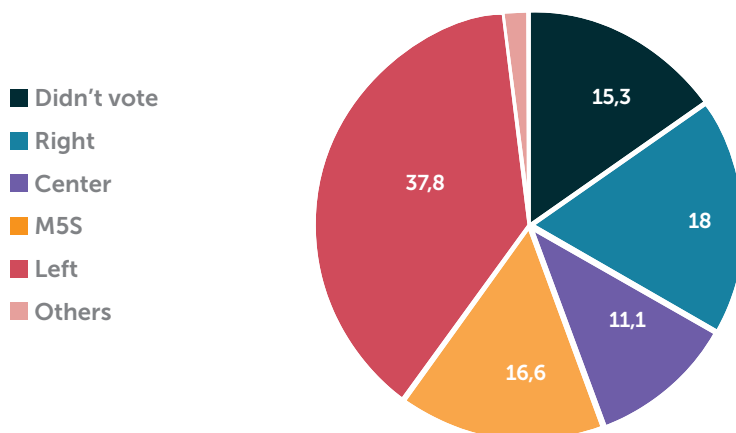
Center: Stati Uniti d’Europa, Azione

Left: Partito Democratico, Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra

M5S: Movimento 5 Stelle (Since 2020, occasionally allied with Left and/or Right parties)

<sup>8</sup> We also asked which party they voted in national elections and the results are overlapping the European party preferences

### Which party did you vote during the last European Parliament elections? Percentage



### Engagement in the European Parliament elections' campaign

We asked: How frequently did you actively participate to the last EU elections campaign?

Never	41,6%
1-2 times a month	23,0%
1-2 times a week	18,6%
Almost every day	7,0%
Every day	2,7%
I'd rather not answer	7,0%

Besides almost none of the respondents is officially member of a party, 52% of them declares to have participated to the last EP elections at least once a month. This result gives the idea that young people get involved on single initiatives but refuse long term commitments.

**Attitudes towards participation in the European Parliament elections.**

We asked: *Knowing the result of the elections, do you consider it was worth participating in the European Parliament elections?*

Yes	62.7%
No	13.8%
I didn't vote	12.8%
I don't know	10.7%

**Membership in a civil society organization**

We asked: *Are you a member of a NGO, Association or Civil Committee?*

I am not, and neither interested	24.2%
I am not now, but I would like to be in the future	30.6%
I have been, but not anymore	22.7%
Yes	20.0%
I'd rather not answer	2.5%

The level of engagement in civil society organizations seems to be higher than participation to a strictly political activity, that is EU elections campaign. If we exclude respondents who are not member neither interested in a civil organization, the remaining part raises at 73%, higher than 52% referring to political activism.

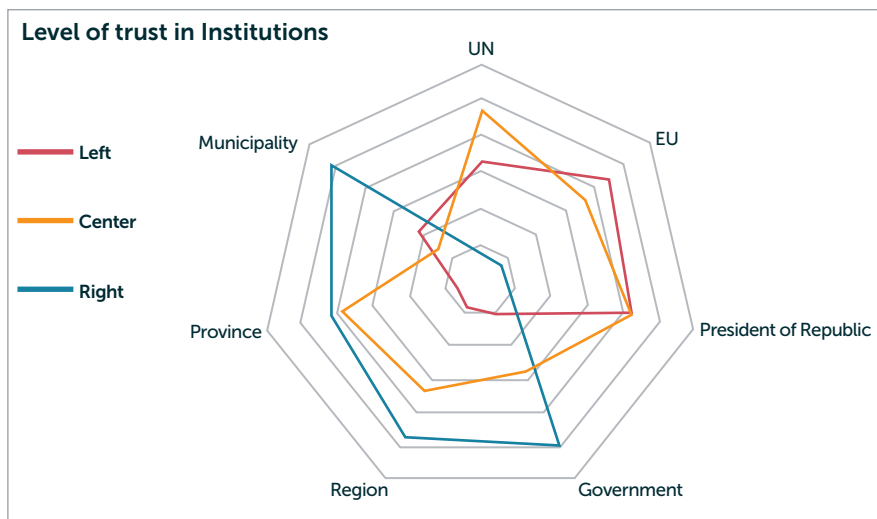
**Level of trust**

We asked the respondents to express their level of trust (on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 represents the lowest, and 5 the highest level of trust) in specific social groups and institutions, aiming at highlighting differences between left, center (including M5S that gave very similar values to center parties), and right voters.

We asked: *What is your level of trust towards people of...*

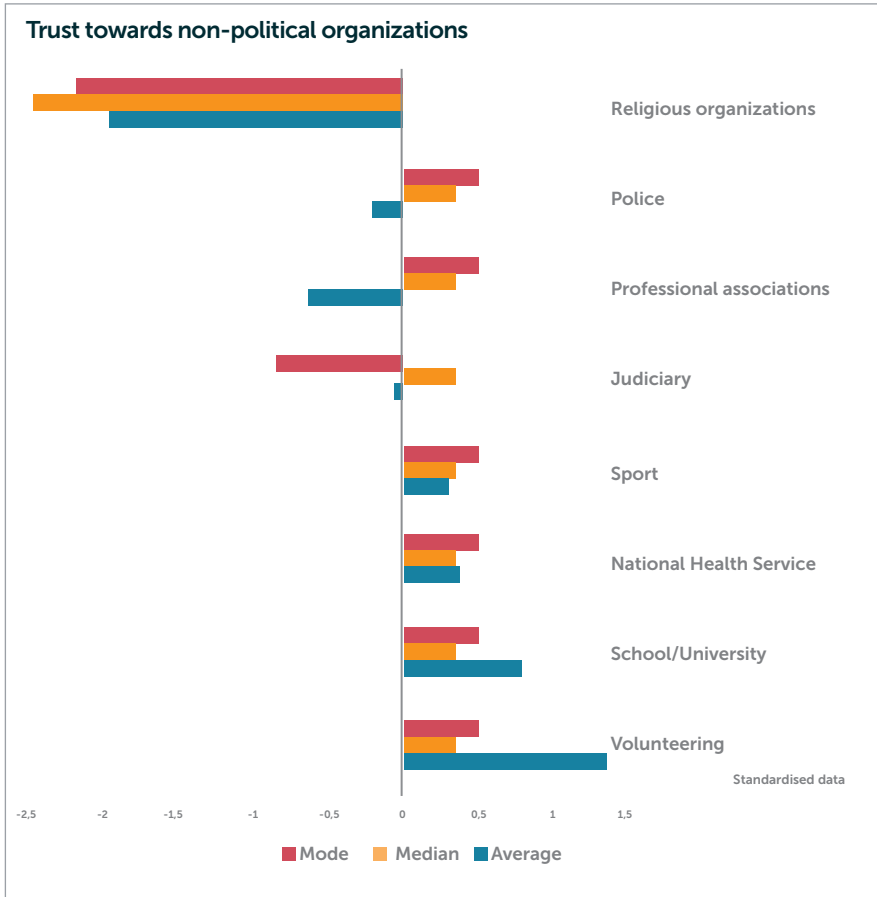
	Different religion	Different nationality	Different sexual orientation	Different political orientation
Left	3.56	3.81	3.96	2.59
Center	3.43	3.61	3.89	2.98
Right	3.06	3.14	3.20	3.10

The data show that while right-wing voters have the lowest level of trust in people with different nationality, religion or sexual orientation, left-wing voters seem to express a sort of prejudice against people with a different political orientation, with center voters positioned in the middle.



The chart shows how right-wing voters have more trust in national institutions, from Municipality to Government, while left-wing and center voters trust more international institutions and the President of the Republic.

We asked: *What is your level of trust towards the following non-political organizations?*



The unexpected results highlighted in the chart, particularly the high level of trust in School/University and the extreme low level towards Religious organizations, seem to give an idea of the progressive mindset of young people, that probably see religions as conservative institutions incapable of understanding their world view. A further investigation on this issue would be necessary to get a brighter idea of the phenomenon.



There is a clear general difference in the level of trust towards different non-political organizations and, as with the political institutions, attitudes differ between right-wing, center and left-wing voters, as highlighted in the following chart.



## Conclusions – An anxious generation

At the end of this journey, a clearer image of young Italians' thoughts, attitudes and expectations towards both political and civil institutions emerges, offering a better idea of their private and social life, habits, expectations about the future, and concerns.

Young Italians, a deeply worried generation, in their answers highlight a general fear for the future, both about environmental issues, and about the guarantee of their and others' rights, more than about economic aspects mainly underlining the difficulty to find a good job, and the possibility to achieve economic independence.

Our results show that the majority of young Italians do not express a sense of belonging to a political party, nor to an ideological well-defined category, rather they are passionate about specific issues, most frequently climate change.

This explains why, in order to face those problems perceived as threats for their life and future, they rarely activate themselves collectively in long-term organized political commitments. In other words, while their level of engagement increases, paradoxically their level of commitment decreases.

Although they try to escape from stereotypes and declare themselves non-conformists, the data analysis demonstrates that the distinction between right-wing, center and left-wing voters is still valuable. The answers to the survey highlight a prominent tendency towards those subjects attributable to the left and center parties, marking a respective clear distinction about the ability of national or international institutions in solving political and social problems. For instance, they assign to national institutions the responsibility about job opportunities, or the efficiency of the National Health Service, while the Italian youth support the idea that global issues, such as climate change or migrations, are under the responsibility of international institutions.

Another unexpected result is the great fluctuation in the levels of trust towards non-political institutions, trusting more volunteering associations rather than religious organizations. The result is unexpected because religious identity has always influenced Italian culture: Italy, a nation whose inhabitants declare a level of participation to worship services among the highest in Europe<sup>9</sup>, was the land of the Church State, nowadays limited to Vatican City under the Holy See, and nowadays every public school still has classes on religious studies.

Moreover, the activities of religious and volunteering organizations are often

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<sup>9</sup> Evans J, Baronavsky B, 2018, How European countries differ in religious commitment?, Pew Research: <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/12/05/how-do-european-countries-differ-in-religious-commitment/> (consulted 2024/09/11)

similar, so a deeper understanding of the decline of trust in religious organizations - in contrast with level of trust towards volunteering organizations in particular often carrying out very similar activities - would require further research.

### **Policy recommendations**

This survey represents an opportunity to discuss key issues on how to increase Italian and European youth in civil, social, and political active engagement. Many of the social problems emerged in the survey – such as unemployment, migration, high brain drain, and lower youth political participation rates – require a systematic approach and thorough analysis leading to change and progress.

On September 2, 2024, the UN General Assembly adopted the Pact for the Future<sup>10</sup>, a milestone in terms of forward-looking policies about future global challenges, with particular attention to social issues and the new generations. In particular, the chapter “Youth and future generations” promotes social inclusion and investments on developing human potential, as well as two Actions (36, 37) for youth integration both at the national and at the international level: “We can only meet the needs and aspirations of all young people if we systematically listen to them, work with them and provide them with meaningful opportunities to shape the future”. Both researchers and decision makers should take into consideration this UN appeal to a multi-generations approach.

Differences between generations are not as strong as we think, as a IPSOS study about global trustworthiness<sup>11</sup>, highlights climate change, human rights, and economic instability as growing global interest among the whole planet,

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<sup>10</sup> UN, Pact for the Future, Global Digital Compact and Declaration on Future Generations <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n24/272/22/pdf/n2427222.pdf>

<sup>11</sup>IPSOS, Trust across generations: different but the same <https://www.ipsos.com/en/trust/trust-across-generations-different-same>

independently from the age of people. Interests and worldviews differ among the generations but, instead of sharpening those difference between them, we can work on finding what they have in common.

Our study highlights the high interest of young people (79%) in participating to debates about public policies and their consciousness about the different roles that local, national and international institutions have when it comes to find a solution for different problems. Urgent reforms should be part of a renewal agenda, namely a greater emphasis on social policies targeting the most vulnerable groups, and focusing on re-skilling and reintegrating workers. In light of the low level of trust in young people towards European institutions, an evident policy recommendation would be to get young people more involved in higher education, promoting the inclusion of European studies in high-school curricula, and in the curricula of institutions of higher education regardless of their specific fields of research and study in order to increase the transparency and the understanding of the operation of EU institutions among young people.

Last but not least, the EU institutions should support initiatives facilitating the sense of community and the awareness of collective identities, especially towards the youth, in order to raise and make effective their engagement in social policies and their positive motivation in community activities, increasing the involvement of youth in decision making processes in order to improve their trust in public institutions.

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**Antonio Casella** is a junior data analyst, approached to social research after a long experience as communication strategist, he is focused on sustainability issues, exploring the possibilities given by Big Data to uncover inequalities and social trends. Mainly working as a freelance, he is now committed in a strict collaboration with Eurispes (Italian Institute of Economic, Social and Political Studies).

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## **Chapter 3**

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# Youth activism and political participation in Hungary

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# Youth activism and political participation in Hungary

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**Kitti Kósa, Márton Schlanger**

### Executive Summary

This study examines youth involvement and participation tendencies in Hungary following the 2024 European Parliament elections.

Political engagement and voting trends.

- Youth voter turnout remains lower compared to the national average, but the gap is closing. Currently 62 percent of young people aged 18-25 report certain willingness to vote, compared to 68 percent of adult population.
- Voting patterns reveal a shift among young voters away from traditional parties; TISZA, an emerging anti-establishment party, is highly popular among youth.
- Younger voters display a higher preference for liberal and opposition parties and express significant disinterest in Christian-conservative and older left-wing parties.

Institutional trust and EU attitudes.

- While institutional trust among youth is generally low, support for EU membership is high, especially relative to older generations.
- Hungarian youth are more inclined to support EU membership as a counter to the government's Eurosceptic stance.



Forms of political and civic engagement.

- Engagement isn't just about voting; it can take many forms. Youth participation in protests, petitions, and other non-party-based activities doesn't necessarily lag behind the national average.
- Online participation and "micro-activism" (e.g., social media discussions) are widespread, but supplement, rather than replace offline activism.
- Discontent with national governance and political parties pushes youth towards civil engagement, especially in issues like education, environment, and human rights.

Youth disillusionment and anti-party sentiment.

- Young people report a sense of disconnect from formal party politics.
- Many young people avoid party affiliation due to concerns about negative peer perceptions and lack of relevant recruitment efforts.

Top issues and activism catalysts.

- Key concerns for young Hungarians include the rule of law, healthcare, cost of living, and democracy quality. They worry more regarding democratic backsliding compared to the adult population.
- Trigger events, such as government scandals, can ignite significant youth mobilization, as seen in high-profile protests against the government's controversial decisions.

While Hungarian youth may be politically disillusioned, they remain engaged on specific issues, reflecting strong pro-democratic and pro-European values.

- The popularity of TISZA among youth suggests potential for new political movements to tap into youth discontent with established parties, while the threat of right-wing extremism remains a concern due to rising support of the far right among some youth demographics.

## Introduction and methodology

At the core of the liberal democratic idea, there's another idea, that of participation. Participation is the enabler of democracy, it is what legitimizes any democratic regime, any election. However, high participation doesn't automatically mean strong democracy, just as strong democracies may sometimes struggle with low participation.

Hungary is an example of the former. A country of constantly eroding democratic institutions and generally high participation when it comes to elections. Be it the residues of compulsory voting from our socialist past, or the result of deep political polarization, the highly politicized public discourse, we've just experienced record breaking local and EP elections in 2024, with Hungarian national elections often boasting a participation rate of over 70%.

However, in the sample of voters, different social groups aren't equally represented. The most notable example of this is youth. For decades, willingness to participate in elections among young people seemed much lower than the national average. In recent years, this was confirmed by our research as well. In 2021, willingness to vote among 18–25-year-olds was 65% while the national average was 78%<sup>12</sup>. In 2023, willingness to vote among people aged 18-29 was 58%, while the national average was 75%<sup>13</sup>. The reasons behind this might be manifold. The political socialization of Hungarian youth took part entirely during the Orbán era. Those born at the time of the forming of the first Orbán government are now 14 years old, which means in 4 years' time there might be Hungarian voters who've never seen a regime change. If we're discussing 18–25-year-olds, it's important to note that these

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<sup>12</sup> The survey was conducted between January 8 and February 4, 2021, on the basis of a sample of 5,000 adults from Hungary, representative of the adult population of the country by gender, age, type of settlement and education. The survey was conducted by Závecz Research.

<sup>13</sup> The survey was conducted by interviewing 1,000 Hungarian adults between 24 March and 10 April 2023; it is representative of gender, age, education and place of residence. Margin of error +−3.1%.

young voters were between 4-10 years old when Orbán's Fidesz-KDNP coalition won the 2010 elections, so ever since they follow politics (If they do), their perception of the Hungarian political system is that it is completely set in stone, immovable and that the current government cannot be changed through election. 2024 was an important milestone, however: the first European Parliament election where EU-born citizens of the 2004 accession countries had the right to vote. The EP elections are different compared to national elections. EP voting is seen as both more and less influential than national voting. On one hand, it's a great chance to influence politics through participation, as there's more fluctuation in power in EU institutions and the election system is fairer, change is constant. On the other hand, the influence of the EP result on national politics is less obvious, less direct. EP elections attract a slightly different voter base compared to national elections, and young people might also be keener on taking part. There are, of course, forms of political participation other than voting, some of which are virtually immeasurable with a statistical toolkit. When exploring the relationship of youth and the political process, we must view participation as a complex mixture of interest, involvement, voting and activism. In the following analysis, we attempt to do just that: We are looking at where and how young people interact with democratic processes.

Our analysis makes use of data collected by different youth research projects of Hungarian research institutes and Republikon Institute's more recent databases, as well as data collected as part of the 2024 youth activism project of ELF and Republikon Institute<sup>14</sup>. These don't only include data regarding youth activism and politics, but also data on problem perception and values, as these are driving forces of participation. Additionally, we feature non-data-based academic sources from multiple fields, sociology

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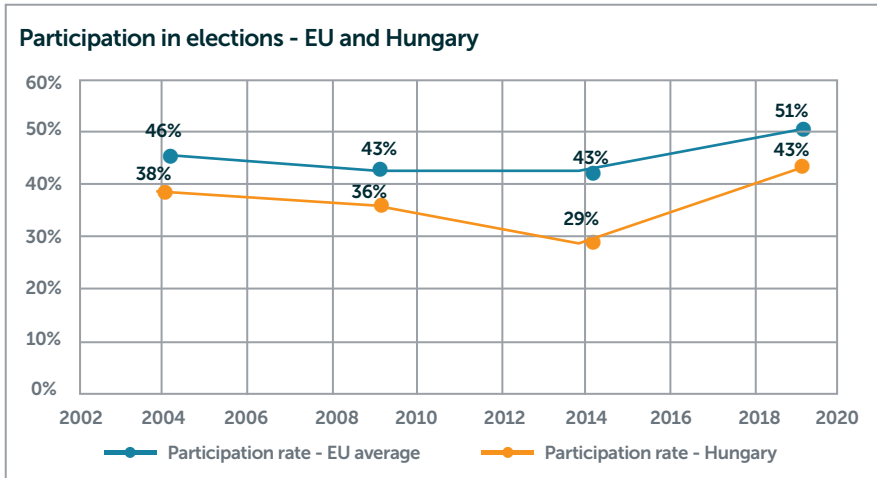
<sup>14</sup> The survey was conducted by interviewing 800 Hungarian adults aged 18-25, and 1000 Hungarian adults of all ages between 1-8 July 2024 with uniform questionnaires. Both surveys were representative of the respective age groups based on age distribution, gender, type of settlement and education.

and political science research, to provide the most comprehensive analysis possible. While young people are generally viewed as less active citizens, we cannot mistake discontent for apathy, and to avoid such confirmation bias, we explore and define the ideas of participation and activism.

### EU membership and institutional trust

Our research was carried out after the 2024 EP elections, so knowing attitudes towards the EU provides necessary context. Attitudes towards the EU are measured through directly asking for opinions, asking about trust, as well as polled and actual participation in the European elections.

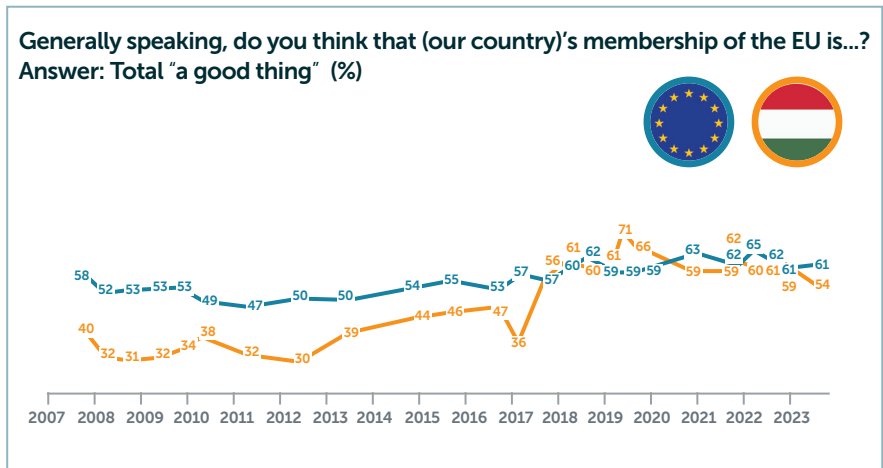
On a national scale, Hungarian EP voter turnout always underperformed the EU average, though it often outperformed other Eastern Accession countries such as the V4, where EP turnout has been similarly low, if not lower.



The lowest turnout was observed in 2014, due to the national elections taking place just months prior to the EP elections, and voters having election fatigue. Overall, the EP voter turnout stagnated since Hungary’s accession in 2004, unaffected even by the increasingly Eurosceptic communications of the Orbán regime. European Elections in Hungary mobilize only the core voters

of political parties and can serve as a large-scale public opinion poll as well as a bartering chip ahead of the next national election, especially among the opposition parties, who are pressured to cooperate in national elections by the often-amended and fine-tuned electoral system of Fidesz-KDNP.

The changing public image of the European Union in Hungary doesn't necessarily correlate with the EP vote turnout. Perhaps the most straightforward way to measure the public image of the EU is to look at public support of Hungary's EU membership.



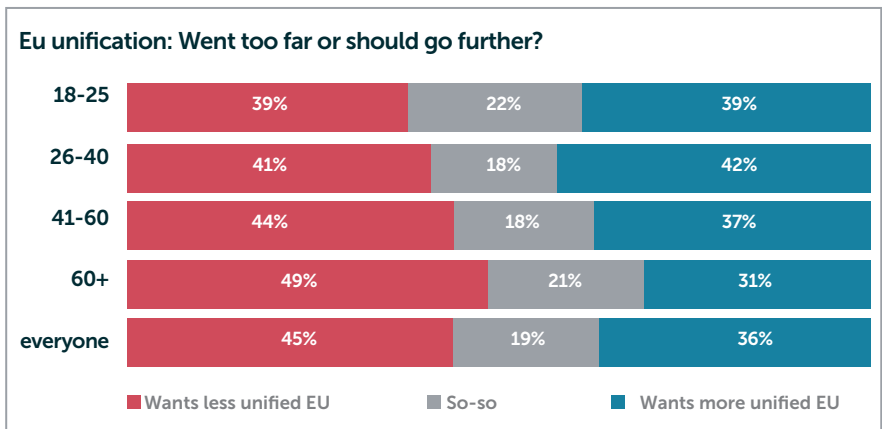
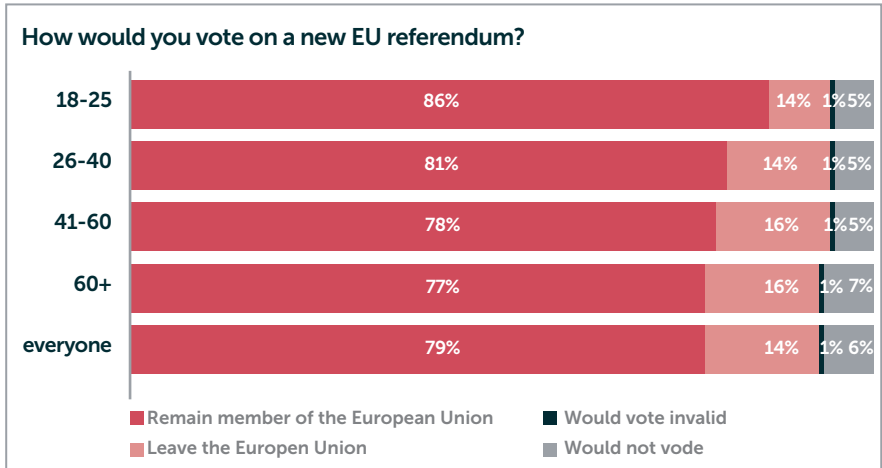
Overall, the Hungarian support for EU membership is lower than the EU average, but it generally increased since the first measurement in 2007. In fact, it rose most during the Orbán regime. The upward trend began around the same time the Hungarian government introduced its "Eastern Opening" strategy in 2012, which is the foundation of its much-criticized collaboration with competitors of the European Union, such as Russia and most recently, the Middle East. 2012 was the year when Hungarian support for the European Union membership was at an all-time low: After the years of the 2008-2010 economic crises, felt heavily by Hungarians, in 2012 only

30% of Hungarians considered Hungary's membership a "good thing". After years of slowly growing EU support, the greatest dip was observed in 2017, when in less than one year, support for EU membership fell 11%, from 47 to 36 percent. This was the year of the Orbán government's largest anti-EU campaign, the "Soros-plan" campaign, which suggested that George Soros controls the EU to flood Hungary with illegal immigrants. This goes to show how much damage can be done by a nationalist government and a few million euros spent on anti-European propaganda. Luckily the recovery in EU support was similarly quick (showcasing the volatility and susceptibility of public opinion). In the 2018 national and 2019 EP elections, European values were a part of the opposition election campaigns, and the government tuned down the anti-EU campaign material, which saw an increase in support of EU membership. The lackluster initial response of the EU regarding the COVID-19 pandemic led to a slight decrease in EU support, but Russia's invasion of Ukraine initially stabilized it, as being part of the West seemed a preferable alternative to close ties with the aggressor Russia. In 2024, 54% of Hungarians believe EU membership is a good thing. It is possible that the growing Eurosceptic tendency in government rhetoric prompted a stronger support of the EU from opposition voters, as a protest, and as a means to differentiate themselves from the government. That was true until recently, but in 2023 the government set its sights once more on Brussels in their new election campaign and EU support fell 5 percentage points in six months. The realized damage of this anti-EU campaign and the complementing pro-Kremlin propaganda will only be seen in the upcoming years.

Now, regarding youth. While we see the general trend of changing public opinion and voting intentions when it comes to the EU, young people in Hungary are generally more pro-EU compared to older generations

While support for our EU membership is high among all Hungarians, the younger a voter is, the more likely they are to vote in favor of continued EU membership. While anti-EU sentiment is the minority opinion, there are

twice as many “Huxitters” in even the second youngest, 26-40 bracket, than in the youngest voter group of 18-25.

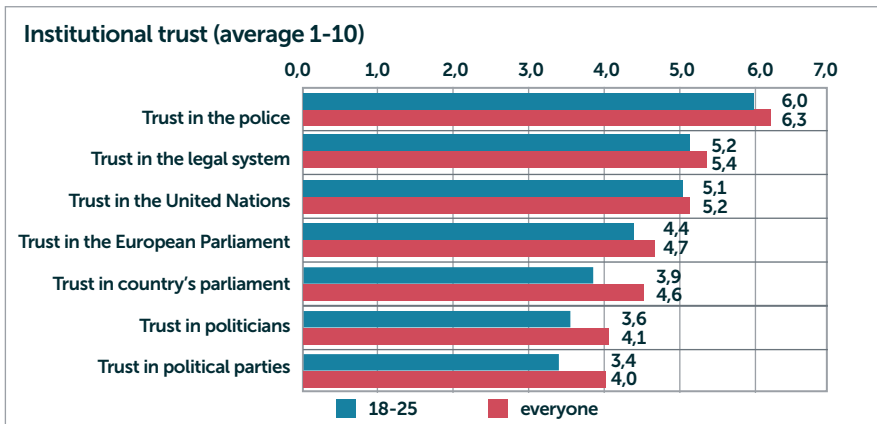


The European Social Survey measures regularly whether respondents think EU unification should go further or has already gone too far. The most recent round was recorded in 2023, where once again, we can see that anti-EU sentiment deepens with age, as the oldest generation is most likely to think EU unification has gone too far.

Another important measurement is institutional trust. Found commonly in public opinion surveys, it provides a comparative measurement of the level of trust towards common institutions such as the police or legal system. It also often includes NATO and the European Union.

While young people are more “European” based on opinion polls, institutional trust among youth is generally lower than in the entire population. This may lead to interesting results, such as that of the 2023 ESS survey, which shows us that young people trust the EU less than the national average. However, they trust every institution less, which no doubt is related to their relatively low participation.

Most trusted of the institutions are the police, followed by the legal system, then supranational organizations such as the NATO and EU, and finally, at the bottom of the list, their own national parliament, politicians and finally, political parties. So, while the EU received a less-than flattering rating of 4,4/10, it did considerably better than the Hungarian parliament, politicians or parties, which all scored below 4,0.



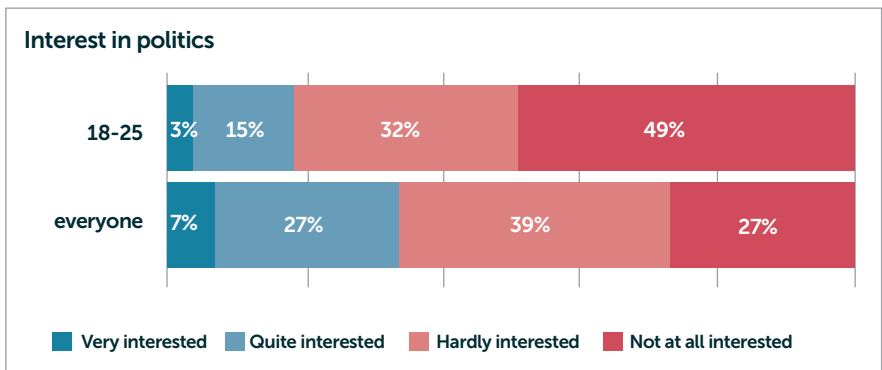
It was apparent through our research that the Hungarian youth is more European-minded than the rest of the adult population, which was further reinforced by our findings related to political preferences, discussed in chapter 3.



### Voter participation and political preferences

Young people have a long history of involvement in politics, but studies over the past decades show that a tendency to turn away from politics and to adopt an apolitical attitude is becoming more and more common among them worldwide. However, as Judith Bessant argues, it should not be overlooked that there are more than just traditional ways of political participation and that young people can also effectively use these opportunities. In recent years we have witnessed several major waves of protests in which young people have played a key role. The rise of the internet, smartphones and social media has fundamentally transformed the ways in which young people engage in politics.<sup>15</sup>

Participation is driven by interest, and young people are less interested in politics compared to adults. According to the European Social Survey in 2023, only 23% of young people aged 18-25 are interested in politics, as opposed to 34% in the total population.



Half of all adults aged 18-25 say they don't care about politics at all, twice as many people as in the total adult population. Only 8% of young people claim to be very interested in politics.

<sup>15</sup> Bessant, J. (2021): Making-Up People: Youth, Truth And Politics. Routledge, London - New York. 210-236

## Participation and virtual space

First and foremost, it is important to show what kind of forms political participation takes, both online and offline. There is an almost infinite repertoire of ways in which voters can express their political participation, but these forms of participation can be grouped into different categories. According to Dániel Oross, a Hungarian youth researcher, there are three types of participation: traditional, direct and online. Traditional forms of participation include participation in elections, participation in political organizations, and involvement in political organizations, such as campaigning or wearing political badges. Direct participation includes actions that do not require a sustained commitment and are low-resource intensive, such as signing protest letters and petitions or participating in demonstrations.<sup>16</sup> Online participation includes forms of action made possible by the internet, such as posting on social networking sites about social issues, liking political news, blogging, or creating online events.<sup>17</sup> An important feature of online political activity is that it requires little time and financial investment, does not require the individual to belong to any organization and can be done at any time. In the context of online participation, the concept of micro-activism is often mentioned, which covers small-scale political communication activities, such as setting up political groups or sharing political news.<sup>18</sup>

Although online participation creates new opportunities for political participation, several studies have also concluded that the Internet has not brought significant new opportunities for democratization, as the groups most active in the online space are those that are already engaged and thus best

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<sup>16</sup> Oross, D. (2016): A magyar fiatalok politikai részvételének változása. In.: METSZETEK - Társadalomtudományi Folyóirat. Vol. 5 (2016) No. 4. 35-36. Available online: [https://metszetek.unideb.hu/files/metszetek%202016\\_4\\_03\\_ross.pdf](https://metszetek.unideb.hu/files/metszetek%202016_4_03_ross.pdf)

<sup>17</sup>Oross, D. – Szabó, A. (2014): A demokratikus részvétel tendenciái a magyar nappali tagozatos hallgatók körében. In.: Racionálisan Lázadó Hallgatók II. Apátia– Radikalizmus – Posztmaterializmus. A Magyar Egyetemisták és Főiskolások körében. Editor. Szabó, A. Belvedere Meridionale Kft, 2014, Szeged. 76.

<sup>18</sup>Marichal, J. (2012): Facebook Democracy. The Architecture of Disclosure and the Threat to Public Life. Los Angeles, Ashgate. 15.

placed to take advantage of the potential of the Internet. However, online space can offer a participative alternative for those who wish to engage creatively and more expressively in social and political issues.<sup>19</sup> It is important to underline that online and offline activity are not independent but complement each other.

Before we turn to the political attitudes of young people in Hungary, it is worth briefly reviewing the factors that are necessary for the development of the will to participate in politics. In his research, Lester Milbrath focused on identifying the elements that influence individuals' political participation, and, on this basis, he set up a hierarchical system that divides people into three groups. The first group includes „gladiators”, who are active participants in the political “arena”. They are followed by the „spectators”, who are passive observers of political events. In the third category are the „apathetic”, who turn their backs on politics altogether. In Milbrath's model, factors such as age, religion, gender and place of residence play an important role, and can be used to classify members of society into different groups. In his classification, everyone, with the exception of the apathetic, is engaged in some level of political activity. He separates three levels of activity: at the highest level is gladiatorial activity, which involves party membership and participation in campaigns. Transitional activity includes, for example, participation in demonstrations or contact with officials. Finally, at the lowest level is spectator activity, which includes activities such as political debates, voting or wearing badges. In Milbrath's concept, individuals can move between the different levels, but this depends largely on their personal attributes.<sup>20</sup>

### **Young people's political attitudes and social media usage in Hungary**

Research conducted over the last years and decades shows that the political

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<sup>19</sup> Oross, D. – Szabó, A. (2014): A demokratikus részvétel tendenciái a magyar nappali tagozatos hallgatók körében. In.: Racionálisan Lázadó Hallgatók II. Apátia – Radikalizmus – Posztmaterializmus. A Magyar Egyetemisták és Főiskolások körében. Editor. Szabó, A. Belvedere Meridionale Kft, 2014, Szeged. 75.

<sup>20</sup>Milbrath, L.W. (1965): Political Participation: How and why Do People Get Involved in Politics? University Press AMERICA.

interest and involvement of young people has (drastically) declined, not only in Hungary but also internationally. It is important to note that in order to be able to represent their own interests, young people need to be informed about social and political issues. It is a prerequisite for a modern democracy that its citizens participate in public affairs, but young Hungarians are characterized by a lack of trust in politicians and the political world.<sup>21</sup> This is due to the particularities of political socialization in Hungary and the fact that since the change of regime, the party-centered elite has not needed to participate in public life. Domestic political parties are not socially integrated, and the role of their youth organizations has been greatly reduced.<sup>22</sup>

What opportunities are there for young people to develop an interest in politics and what channels of mobilization do they have access to? Dániel Oross's study „A magyar fiatalok politikai részvételének változása”/„Changes in the political participation of young Hungarians” shows that there is not necessarily a problem with young adults' willingness to participate in politics; rather, it is a question of a number of new forms of participation that are not taken into consideration but are actively used by members of this age-group.<sup>23</sup> This age-group considers it important to express their own opinions, although they often do not act on them or, if they do share their opinions, they do not attract the attention of the authorities. Maria Grasso also agrees that young people's forms of participation are different from those of older people. There is no consensus among researchers as to whether young people are truly apolitical or simply interested in a different kind of politics.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Bogrnár, A. (2015): A fiatalok politikai attitűdjei. In.: Kultúra és Közösség. VI. évfolyam, 85.

<sup>22</sup>Oross, D. - Szabó, A. (2019): A politika és a magyar fiatalok. Noran Libro Kiadó, Budapest. 54-55.

<sup>23</sup>Oross, D. (2016): A magyar fiatalok politikai részvételének változása. In.: METSZETEK - Társadalomtudományi Folyóirat. Vol. 5 (2016) No. 4. 35. Available online: [https://metszetek.unideb.hu/files/metszetek%202016\\_4\\_03\\_oross.pdf](https://metszetek.unideb.hu/files/metszetek%202016_4_03_oross.pdf)

<sup>24</sup>Grasso, M. (2018): Young People's Political Participation in Europe in Times of Crisis. In.: Young People Re-Generating Politics in Times of Crises. Szerk. Sarah Pickard, Judith Bessant. Palgrave Macmillan. 179-196.

The research team of András Déri and Andrea Szabó introduced the definition of the "asteroid effect", meaning that the temporary but radical transformation of Covid-19 and the world of life that goes with it can affect young people's views on political participation, so that they cannot be clearly described as passive, but only as non-traditional forms of participation. What is even more exciting in their research, however, is that they also raise the possibility that communicative action, as such, counts as political action. Their research confirms that talking about politics became a visible form of political action after the pandemic. This is mainly interpreted in terms of manifestations aimed at influencing others, and it is important to note that online platforms are not preferred by the subjects surveyed to share their political opinions, in contrast to offline forms of participation.<sup>25</sup> This raises the question of whether it is a form of participation if many of the most popular pop culture artists in Hungary among young people who fill stadiums and festivals (Beton.Hofi, Carson Coma, Krúbi, etc.) are highly public figures, so that the young audience listening to them may also show a public/political interest in various pop culture productions?

Some experts believe that political activism is rather part of a process in which people develop an "activist attitude" based on a certain cultural capital, which is necessary to achieve political effectiveness. The process of becoming politically active shows that people do not simply decide to become active, but that they need to gain the different forms of political knowledge and the social and cultural capital necessary to participate, as well as the practical skills and experience to do so. The rise of the internet, the spread of smartphones and the growth of social media platforms have significantly transformed many ways in which young people engage in politics.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Déri, A. – Szabó, A. (2024): A politikai részvétel diskurzusai a magyar fiatalok körében. *Pólusok*, 4(2), 95–118. Available online: <https://journals.lib.pte.hu/index.php/polusok/article/view/7599>

<sup>26</sup>Bessant, J. (2021): *Making-Up People: Youth, Truth And Politics*. Routledge, London - New York. 210-236.

Looking at young people's use of social media, this age-group is the primary user of social media platforms, but these platforms are of limited use to them in exercising their democratic rights. In general, young people have a low level of both print and online media consumption, but with the rise of smartphones, the amount of time spent online has increased significantly. The emergence of smart devices has also made it easier to connect, read and create content.<sup>27</sup>

It is essential to mention that there is a lot of political content on social media, which creates opportunities for people to lock themselves into an information bubble that suits their own political views. These bubbles become politically relevant when they are able to form narratives.<sup>28</sup> In Hungary, a significant part of the citizens is unilaterally informed. Katalin Parti, in her summary „A fiatalok és az online közösségi média” / „Young people and online social media”, points out that as long as there is no uniform regulation of the legal framework for online expression, it is not appropriate to encourage young people to participate online. The political sphere can easily lead to defamation, hate speech and the spread of fake news, so it is essential to educate people on how to use the media properly.<sup>29</sup>

### **Results of previous youth surveys about young people's political participation**

Over the past two decades, several studies have been conducted on the political participation of Hungarian youth and students. These studies show similar results on young people's ideological orientation, political associations and political participation, both online and offline. Overall, young people's

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<sup>27</sup> Píkó, B. – Kiss, H. (2019): Az okostelefon- és közösségimédia-használat néhány sajátossága egy fiatalok körében végzett online felmérés alapján. In.: Információs Társadalom, XIX. évf. (2019) 1. szám, 108–122. Available online: [http://publicatio.bibl.u-szeged.hu/19261/1/InformTars\\_167-836-2-PB.pdf](http://publicatio.bibl.u-szeged.hu/19261/1/InformTars_167-836-2-PB.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> Janky, B. – Kmetty, Z. – Szabó, G. (2019): Mondd kire figyelsz, megmondom mit gondolsz! Politikai tájékozódás és véleményformálás a sokcsatornás kommunikáció korában. In.: Politikatudományi Szemle. 28. (2.).

<sup>29</sup> Parti, K. (2016): A fiatalok és az online közösségi média. Konferenciabeszámoló. In.: Ügyészek Lapja. 23(1): 81–94. Available online: <https://adoc.pub/parti-katalin-a-fiatalok-es-az-online-kzssegi-media-konferen.html>

interest in public life is low and they tend to be loosely connected to their communities. The research shows that young people have low trust in politicians and political parties and that their political participation is low. Online participation has also declined, although liking is still widespread. Political interest is higher among those where there is a lack of agreement in the family, and the opportunity for discussion and the environment also influence the development of interest. The following is a brief summary of the results of some previous research, without claiming to be exhaustive.

In recent years, the Active Youth in Hungary research series has found that the interest of young people in Hungary for public life is low by international standards. This age-group is characterized by conformity, they tend to accept their parents' worldview and are characterized by insecurity, lack of purpose and commitment, and have an apolitical attitude. Family and friendships, cultural content and local characteristics are strong components of young people's identity. They show a lack of civil activity and are not typically associated with grassroots organizations. On the other hand, electronic media are increasingly important in their free time, and they spend a huge amount of time in front of screens. The research highlights an important finding: in recent decades, young people have become more attached to informal communities, such as product- and consumption-oriented groups or lifestyle-based groups, rather than political subcultures.<sup>30</sup>

In their 2019 work, Andrea Szabó and Dániel Oross concluded that political participation is based on a minimum level of public and political interest and affinity and that it is useful to examine public and political interest separately, because public interest is much higher due to the negative connotation of politics. In their study, they denied that young people are apolitical, as one group of young people, the university students, are very active. They noted

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<sup>30</sup> Székely, L.: Digitális részvételi kultúra – aktív és csendes új generáció. In.: *Csendesek vagy lázadók? – A hallgatók politikai orientációi Magyarországon (2011–2015)*. Editor. Szabó, A. Oross, D. *Belvedere Meridionale és az MTA TK PTI, Szeged–Budapest, 2017. 37–51.*

that peer socialization and communication with family are the most important factors in the development of political interest. A higher interest in politics is observed where there is no agreement between the subject and his parents. The authors emphasize the huge role of debate in the development of interest, and other important factors are the size of the municipality (those living in Budapest are the most active) and the father's education. Turning to online and offline political participation, Szabó and Oross point out that online participation has not replaced offline participation and vice versa, they are not substitutes for each other. At the same time, young people's activity is significantly higher in online platforms and is quite election-oriented. Virtual space can also provide a participatory alternative for previously non-mobilized groups.<sup>31</sup>

The Hungarian Youth 2021 research also found that in the Central European region, Hungarian youth are far behind, whether in terms of offline and online political participation or electoral participation. However, by 2020 there was a slight increase in interest in politics, possibly influenced by the COVID-19 virus. In this episode of the research series, important findings emerged, such as the fact that young Hungarians in the region are the least likely among their peers to feel that their interests are represented in political life, or the high level of dissatisfaction and mistrust in the current state of governance and democracy. Young people in their country rarely talk to their parents, friends and contacts about politics and tend to take a conformist position. On the issue of trust, they have most confidence in the authorities and the European Union. A higher proportion of respondents consider democracy to be a good political system, but they would like to have more influence in politics and a few think that reliable information is available in the public domain. For young Hungarians, liberalism and environmentalism are important values - if we were to place them on an imaginary axis, they would prefer centralists, liberals and

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<sup>31</sup> Oross, D. – Szabó, A.: Aktív és fiatal = magyar egyetemista? In.: Mások vagy ugyanolyanok? A hallgatók politikai aktivitása, politikai orientációja Magyarországon, 2019. 35-66.



moderates. They see corruption and climate change as particularly dangerous and most of them think that elections are not fair.<sup>32</sup>

The fifth wave of the Active Youth Survey was published in 2024. The research provides up-to-date data on the political views and positions of young people in Hungary, especially university students. The research is also interesting from the point of view that the political socialization of the subjects in the sample took place during the Orbán regime; since 2010 Fidesz-KDNP has been in power in Hungary.<sup>33</sup> However, it is also important to remark that besides the fact that this research focuses on university students, the data was collected before the emergence of Péter Magyar, so the TISZA Party was not included in the list of parties in the data collection. The most popular party among the respondents was the Magyar Kétfarkú Kutya Párt / Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party, followed by Momentum Movement and then Fidesz (support below 10%).<sup>34</sup> 43% of the respondents in the survey were non-party, a record high, but respondents talk about politics much more than before and 70% of them had some kind of public activity in 2024. The most popular forms of participation are signing protest petitions, donating money, participating in demonstrations and boycotts.<sup>35</sup>

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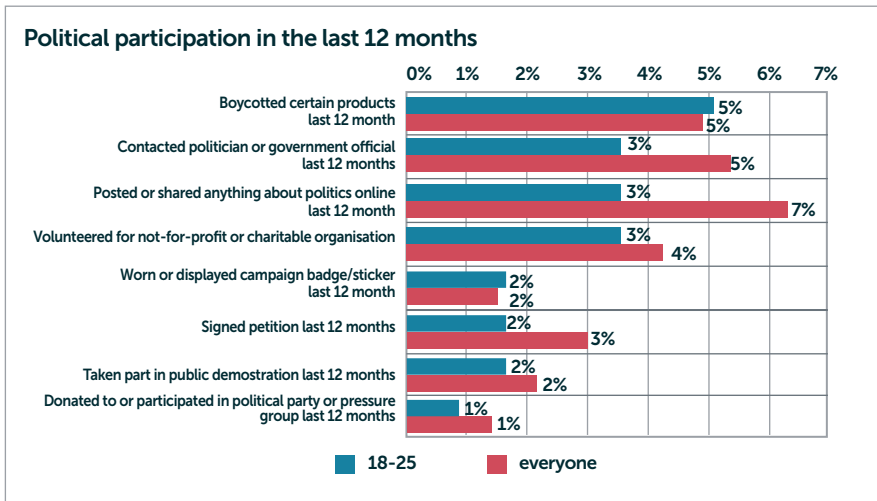
<sup>32</sup> Bíró-Nagy, A. - Szabó, A. (2021): Magyar Fiatalok 2021 Elégedetlenség, Polarizáció, Eu-Pártiság. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Budapest. Available online: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/budapest/18607.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> Szabó, A. – Oross, D. (2024): A magyar egyetemisták politikai gondolkodása és integrációja 2024-ben. Hallgatói Önkormányzatok Országos Konferenciája, Nemzeti Ifjúsági Tanács. 4. Available online: [http://www.aktivfiatalok.hu/public/files/documents/Gyorsjelentés\\_20240711.pdf](http://www.aktivfiatalok.hu/public/files/documents/Gyorsjelentés_20240711.pdf)

<sup>34</sup> Szabó, A. – Oross, D. (2024): A magyar egyetemisták politikai gondolkodása és integrációja 2024-ben. Hallgatói Önkormányzatok Országos Konferenciája, Nemzeti Ifjúsági Tanács. 9. Available online: [http://www.aktivfiatalok.hu/public/files/documents/Gyorsjelentés\\_20240711.pdf](http://www.aktivfiatalok.hu/public/files/documents/Gyorsjelentés_20240711.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> Szabó, A. – Oross, D. (2024): A magyar egyetemisták politikai gondolkodása és integrációja 2024-ben. Hallgatói Önkormányzatok Országos Konferenciája, Nemzeti Ifjúsági Tanács. 53. Available online: [http://www.aktivfiatalok.hu/public/files/documents/Gyorsjelentés\\_20240711.pdf](http://www.aktivfiatalok.hu/public/files/documents/Gyorsjelentés_20240711.pdf)

According to the 2023 wave of the European Social Survey, the most common (although still largely uncommon with 5% claiming to have done it within a year) form of participation among Hungarian youth is boycotting products, while the most common form of participation among the total population is posting about politics online. Young Hungarians post less than half as much about politics as other adults do, and they prefer private forms of activism.



Respondents have had several recent events in their lives that have fundamentally shaped their political views - the wave of teachers' protests, the KATA protests, the clemency scandal. The so-called clemency scandal broke out in Hungary on 2 February 2024, when the President of the Republic, Katalin Novák, pardoned the former deputy director of a children's home. The person was convicted for having helped to cover up his superior's pedophile crimes, including by forcing one of the victims to withdraw his confession. In the wake of the case, an influencer demonstration was held in Budapest's Heroes' Square on 16 February 2024, attracting 100,000 people. This scandal, which caused a huge stir and eventually led to the resignation of the President

of the Republic, Katalin Novák, and the then Minister of Justice, Judit Varga, probably contributed to the increase in the number and intensity of public discourses. In the students' self-reflections, when they answered the question „What was the event that fundamentally influenced the formation of your political views and values?” this scandal, the resignation of Katalin Novák and the large-scale demonstration organized by celebrities and public figures were prominent. This scandal, which generated an unusually high level of publicity, may in itself have increased the number and intensity of public discourses and thus may have had a fundamental impact on the students' current political views. A very lively space of communication and interaction emerged, in which students talked more with their parents and friends about public and political issues.<sup>36</sup>

In contrast to the above, however, the research conducted in early 2024 shows that, overall, students' interest in politics and their attachment to formal organizations has declined. As far as political preferences are concerned, the opposition side has completely shifted, students are open to new political movements and anti-establishment movements (the most popular parties among them were previously such), and the attitudes and preferences of students follow the changes in the population as a whole, the group under study seems to be particularly politically sensitive. However, the political scandal (also) detailed above has increased the number of non-party voters and the number of undecided voters: 43% are non-party voters and a further 26% are undecided.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Szabó, A. – Oross, D. (2024): A magyar egyetemisták politikai gondolkodása és integrációja 2024-ben. Hallgatói Önkormányzatok Országos Konferenciája, Nemzeti Ifjúsági Tanács. 34-36. Available online: [http://www.aktivfiatalok.hu/public/files/documents/Gyorsjelentes\\_20240711.pdf](http://www.aktivfiatalok.hu/public/files/documents/Gyorsjelentes_20240711.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> Szabó, A. – Oross, D. (2024): A magyar egyetemisták politikai gondolkodása és integrációja 2024-ben. Hallgatói Önkormányzatok Országos Konferenciája, Nemzeti Ifjúsági Tanács. 34-36. Available online: [http://www.aktivfiatalok.hu/public/files/documents/Gyorsjelentes\\_20240711.pdf](http://www.aktivfiatalok.hu/public/files/documents/Gyorsjelentes_20240711.pdf)

The results of the survey also showed that students are pro-democracy but dissatisfied with its domestic variant (with the exception of young people from the governing party), and that pro- and opposition students see two separate worlds, with a uniquely high degree of polarization. The difficulty of ideological self-classification arises among the surveyed subjects, but there is a spectacular shift to the "left"<sup>38</sup>, with the most liberal student population since 2011.<sup>39</sup>

### **Research results on electoral participation and party preferences**

Following the 2024 European Parliament and local municipal elections in Hungary, the Republikon Institute conducted an opinion poll, consisting of two parts: a survey of 1000 people representative of the entire adult population (sex, age, education and type of settlement) and an extension of said survey which included 800 young adults aged 18-25. The two operated using the same set of questions, allowing us to not only examine the opinions of the Hungarian youth, but to compare it with the entire adult population. Data collection was conducted via phone interviews between 1-8 July 2024. The goal of the survey was to fill in the blanks and acquire up-to-date information regarding youth opinions, including voting habits, party preferences, reactions to the election results, but also problem perception, opinions on the EU, and other issues.

### **Active political participation**

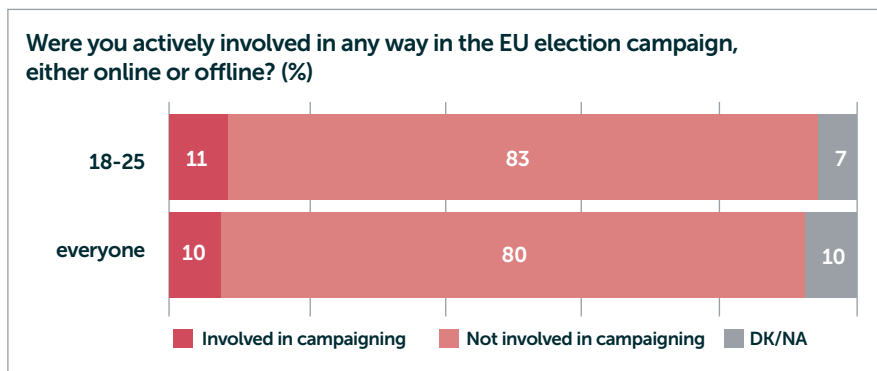
It is worth starting where we left off in the previous chapter. While it's difficult to define activism, participation and involvement and their various forms, one can always rely on survey respondents to decide what it means to them. We've asked respondents whether they actively participated in the 2024 election

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<sup>38</sup> In the Hungarian public discourse, the two major political sides are generally described as "liberal left" and "conservative right", the latter being the governing parties

<sup>39</sup> Szabó, A. – Oross, D. (2024): A magyar egyetemisták politikai gondolkodása és integrációja 2024-ben. Hallgatói Önkormányzatok Országos Konferenciája, Nemzeti Ifjúsági Tanács. 34-36. Available online: [http://www.aktivfiatalok.hu/public/files/documents/Gyorsjelentés\\_20240711.pdf](http://www.aktivfiatalok.hu/public/files/documents/Gyorsjelentés_20240711.pdf)

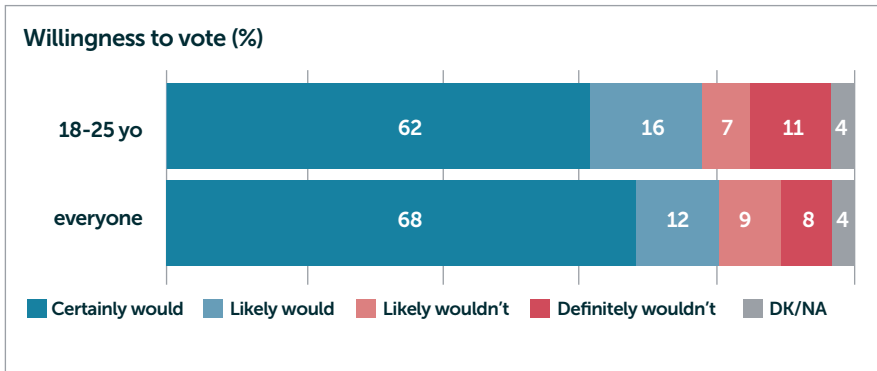
campaign in any way. This way, it is up to the respondents to decide where mere interest in politics ends and where active participation begins.



According to the answers, only 11% of young people surveyed said they had been involved in some way in this year's campaign, 83% had not, and a further 7% did not know.

The results are similar for the population as a whole: 10% participated in some way, 80% said no, and a further 10% did not know or did not answer. The results clearly show that not only among young people, but also for the population as a whole, active political participation among citizens is low, regardless of the form of participation. Based only on this data, we cannot announce that youth would be less active politically, in fact, those aged 18-25 reported slightly higher levels of activism compared to all respondents. However, it is also clear from our measurement - confirming the patterns of the youth surveys above - that the vast majority of young people do not engage in party politics by their own admission, and so did not participate in this year's campaign, either offline or online. The low level of youth campaign participation is consistent with the political passivity observed among young people in other, youth-specific research. It is important to note, however, that low activism isn't reserved for the youth only, as the youth and the entire adult population measured the exact same in terms of involvement.

## Willingness to vote



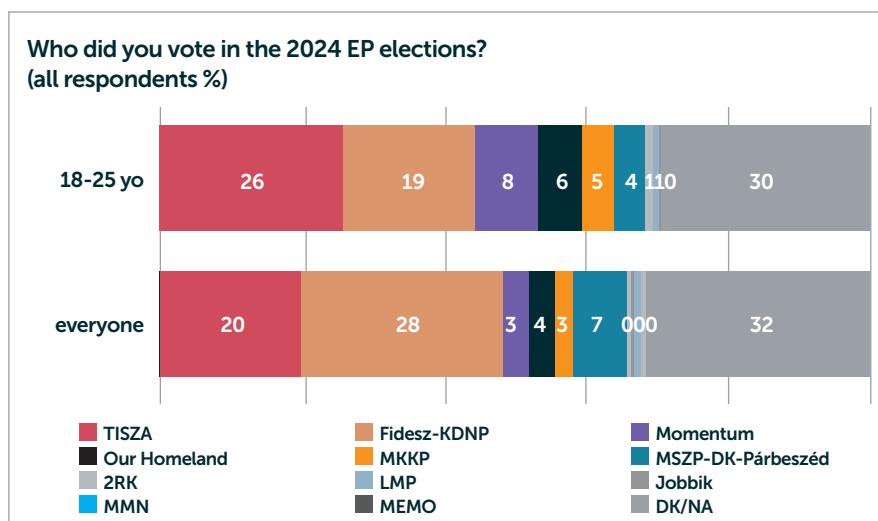
Regarding voting, a very high proportion (62%) of the young people who responded said they would definitely go and vote if national elections were this Sunday, even though data collection was just after an election. A further 16% say they would probably go. Willingness to vote is even higher among the total population, with 68% of respondents saying they would definitely vote and a further 12% saying they would probably vote.

The figures are also interesting because in reality, fewer people than this, 59.46% of eligible voters, went to the polls on 9 June. We must note that survey respondents consistently exaggerate their voting intentions, a general rule of thumb is that those who say they would likely, but not definitely vote, will not turn up at the booth. Still, voting intentions data is useful to approximate the scale of upcoming elections, as well as differences between subgroups of voters or voters of different parties. We can see that young people are less likely to participate in the vote compared to all adults, which further confirms a long-standing observation.

## Retrospective voting preferences

We asked respondents which party they voted for in the 2024 EP elections. In the case of such retrospective questions, it is common to observe some level of winner-take-all bias on the part of respondents, that is, election-winning

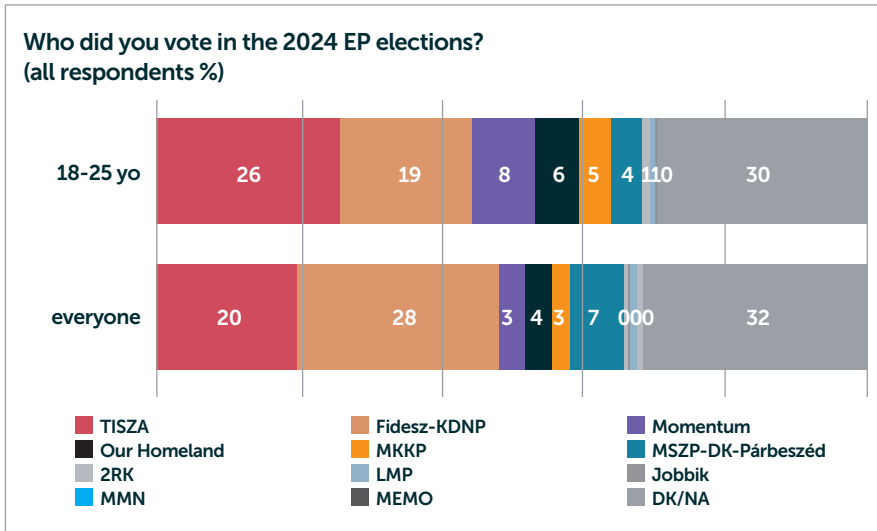
parties jump in popularity in polls after the elections. Fidesz-KDNP won the most Hungarian seats in the European Parliament in June 2024, but it was their worst EP result in terms of seats won since the EU accession in 2004. Interestingly enough, the common respondent bias towards election winners was not observed in our recent research, which confirms that even voters are unsure whether the 2024 EP elections were a victory for the governing parties.



In fact, looking at the data of party voters (respondents minus undecided) we see that Fidesz-KDNP underperforms their election result, which was just under 45%. This means that some of the respondents who voted for Fidesz-KDNP now claim they in fact voted for someone else, or didn't vote/refused to answer.

In the total population, the governing coalition, Fidesz-KDNP still had the highest result among the sample, followed by the TISZA Party and in third place the MSZP-DK-Párbeszéd, the coalition of older opposition parties. The order of preferences of the overall population is the same as the order of votes

in the EP elections, however, based on the new data, young people’s preferences vastly differ from the adult population.



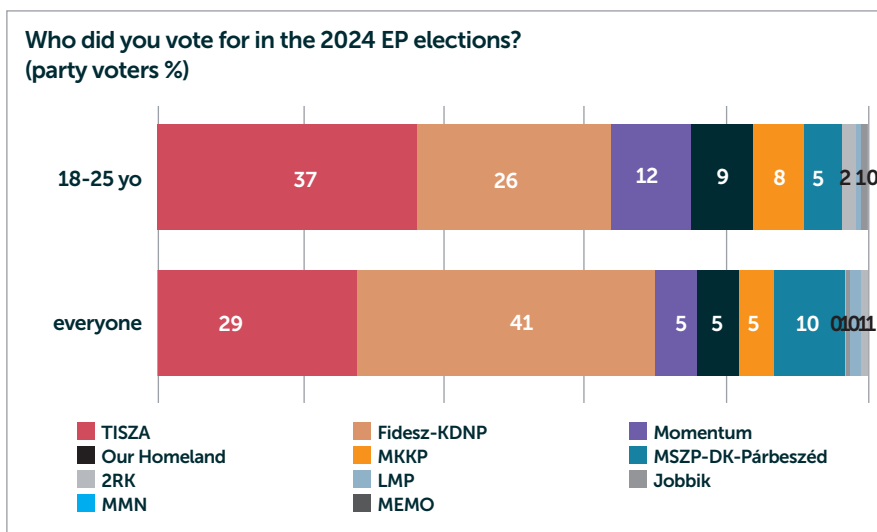
The results show that the majority of young people voted for the TISZA Party, followed by Fidesz-KDNP, and then Momentum, which was ranked fourth in our survey. On the other hand, the results also show that the Two-Tailed Dog Party lost popularity, as Our Homeland was also more popular than it in the polls. The coalition of old opposition parties underperformed among the youth, beaten by the far-right (Our Homeland), the liberals (Momentum) and the “pirate” party (MKKP). It is clear that liberal parties and liberal values are much more popular among the youth, while compared to the Hungarian population, young people are less into the Christian-conservative governing party or the coalition of leftist parties. Worryingly, the far right is also popular among the youth, almost twice as popular as in the total population.

**Current party preferences**

The aforementioned tendencies carry over to current party preferences as well. In terms of the total population, Fidesz-KDNP leads the polls, but once again underperforming their election result by a few percent. TISZA Party,

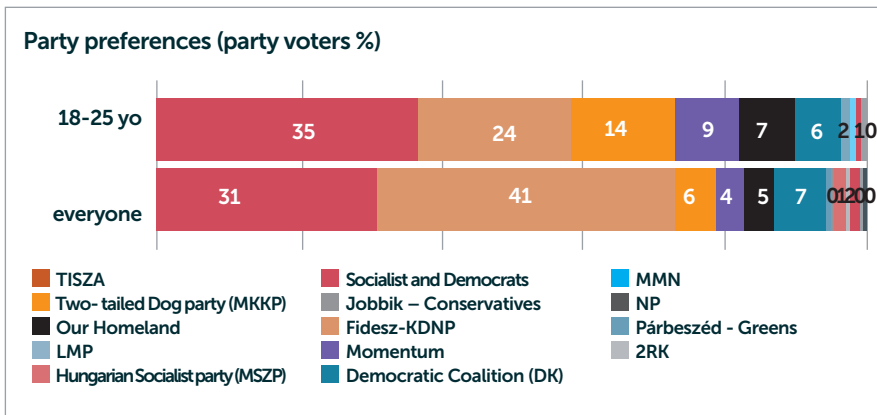


however, performs slightly better in the recent polls than it did on the election day. This is within the margin of error, so we cannot announce winner bias towards Péter Magyar's TISZA. We measured the three cooperating opposition parties, DK, MSZP and Párbeszéd separately, as the coalition, which was supposed to last until 2026, fell apart due to the election result. DK descended to only 5 percent, which means they might not meet the 5% requirement in 2026. The other two parties, the greens and socialists are almost immeasurable, but were already quite small even before the election, so DK came out the worst from this election.



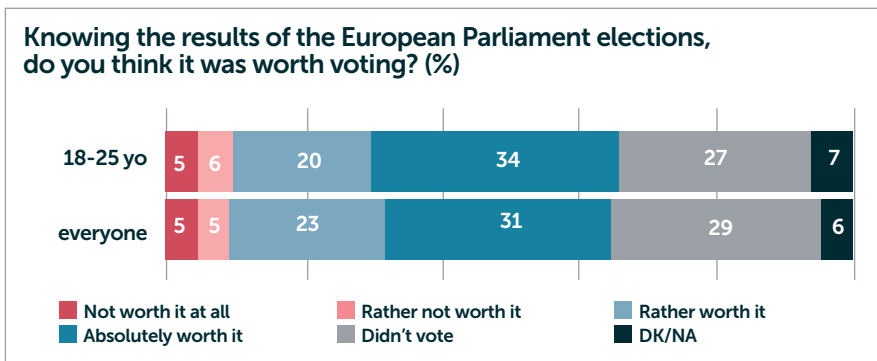
Once again, young voters think differently. It is clear from the results that at party preference level, the TISZA Party is in first place by a landslide among the total sample of young people and is also highly ranked in first place among those who are sure party voters. The incumbent government parties (Fidesz-KDNP) are in second place, after being the strongest party (technically parties) among young people for years. It is followed by the Two-Tailed Dog Party (MKKP), the self-described joke party turning semi-serious in 2024. While they measure high, their voters are notoriously absent from election booths, which results in them underperforming their popularity in all elections. It is also clear

from the answers to these questions that the party preference of young people is different from that of the full sample and that they prefer mainly opposition parties. Young people are strongly anti-government, often liberal. TISZA party is hard to pinpoint ideologically, it is right leaning but attracted many of the liberal Momentum and Democratic Coalition voters, as well as MKKP and green voters. TISZA joined the EPP, which is not the norm among opposition parties, who usually join S&D or Renew.



### Was voting worth it?

Elections usually leave opposition voters – young people included – unhappy and disillusioned, but as there’s no clear winner this time, it was important to measure satisfaction with the results right after this election.



34% of young respondents think it was totally worth it to go out and a further 20% think it was more worth it. 27% of young respondents claim they did not vote in this year's EP elections. On an overall sample, 31% of respondents think it was totally worth it to go out and a further 23% feel it was more worth it. 29% of respondents did not vote.

There isn't any significant difference between the youth and everyone else in how this past election was perceived. In both cases, the majority of respondents believe that voting was worth it, with over 50% perceiving their participation worth it, and only 10% stating it wasn't worth it. These ten percent are likely voters of under-performing opposition parties. It's apparent that while there's a strong anti-party – and according to some studies, even anti-politics – atmosphere, especially among the young, they don't denounce elections or the democratic process automatically, and generally consider that taking part was worth it, even though less than 30% of young voters were rooting for the winner, Fidesz-KDNP.

Our data was recorded after 9 June 2024, so the party list also includes Péter Magyar and his party, TISZA, which suddenly burst into political and public life at the beginning of the year, and which also competed in the Hungarian EP elections (finally winning 29.6% of the votes). In the previously mentioned Active Youth 2024 survey, conducted at the beginning of the year, TISZA Party was not yet included in the party list, which, being a new opposition political party, could be inviting for young people polled who are disillusioned with Hungarian democracy - as our results show: among young respondents, TISZA Party was by far the most popular. In the Active Youth 2024 survey, the Magyar Kétfarkú Kutya Party was the most popular party among university students, but in our survey, which was representative of young people (18-25 year olds), the governing parties were also very popular, finishing second to TISZA in all cases (though performing much worse than in the total population), with Momentum, which also enjoys greater support among young people, and the Magyar Kétfarkú Kutya Party sharing third place, depending on the

question. Overall, however, the above data shows that young people are more distrustful of the historical parties (Fidesz-KDNP, MSZP-DK-Párbeszéd) and most of them prefer or convert their preference into a vote for an opposition party. This distrust may be related to the general political disillusionment of young people and to the fact that these parties do not effectively represent the interests of the age group surveyed. It is also noticeable that, while Fidesz-KDNP continues to enjoy significant support among the population as a whole, it is becoming less popular among young people.

A new formation in Hungarian party life, the TISZA Party, has gained traction among young people as a strongly anti-establishment party, clearly attracting voters away from other opposition parties and thus achieving high levels of support, as the sample shows. These results suggest that young people gravitate towards the strongest party, and that many of them may have voted for TISZA Party as opposed to other parties for tactical reasons. The data suggests that a proportion of young people chose the TISZA Party for tactical reasons, recognizing that this party is the strongest opposition alternative. This may have been a pragmatic move on the part of young people to maximize the effectiveness of their vote, rather than voting for smaller but more sympathetic parties with less chance of entering parliament. The rapid growth in support for the TISZA Party among young people shows that traditional political forces have discouraged young people. The TISZA Party, as a new opposition formation, offers an alternative to those who have become disillusioned with the old political parties. The party's strong online presence may also have contributed to the fact that young people's social media-oriented information made it easy for them to reach the TISZA Party's messages.

In terms of the total population, Fidesz-KDNP came first in our survey, TISZA Party came second, and the long-standing MSZP-DK-Párbeszéd coalition came third, in stark contrast to young voters, where this coalition of long-standing opposition parties came sixth, beaten by parties such as

the Two-Tailed Dog Party, the social-liberal Momentum or the far-right Our Homeland. The election served its purpose as a palette-cleaner, as some parties, including Második Reformkör (2RK) do not currently appear anywhere in the party preference of young people (nor in our results for the total population), but still had young voters in this year's EP elections among the sample.

The results of our research suggest that political preferences among young people can change rapidly, especially with the emergence of a new, strongly anti-establishment party. This suggests that the political environment is currently very dynamic and that young voters are interested in new alternatives. This could be a warning to traditional parties to pay more attention to the needs and expectations of young people if they want to maintain or increase their support.

### **Political and civil activism**

In recent years, a number of protests and demonstrations in Hungary over domestic policy decisions - the abolition of the KATA tax form, teachers' protests, the outsourcing of state universities to foundations, the pedophile scandal over clemency - have led to an increased focus on political and civic activism among young Hungarians, with more and more young people expressing their views on various social and political issues. The spread of social media and the impact of global movements may contribute to young people becoming more active in public life. Although their interest in political parties is low, their participation in civil initiatives and local community affairs shows a more encouraging trend. Issues such as the environment, the quality of education or human rights are particularly important to young people and are often the subject of popular movements.

The HorizontON 2022 report also highlights that this turn to public life may be due to COVID-19, which has partly solved the passivity of young people by allowing those with more reserved attitudes to experience directly the

direct consequences<sup>40</sup> of government decisions during their periods of quarantine. As our way of life changed, new attitudes quickly emerged in the political arena.

### **Politics on social media**

According to data from a 2020 large sample survey of young people, more than half (53%) of 15–29-year-olds in Hungary use social media to consume political and public news on some regular basis, and nearly a third (29%) do so on a weekly basis. Facebook continues to be the most popular social networking site among young people, although there has been a significant increase in the use of Instagram and TikTok recently. However, when looking at their actual political participation on these platforms, very few of those surveyed engage in any online political activity. Among them, liking political news/questions is the most popular form of participation (15%), followed by commenting on political news (11%), and 11% of them delete or ban a friend because of their political opinions or statements. Voting online on public/political issues, sharing news/opinions or starting a discussion or signaling their participation in an event on public issues - is extremely rare among them, with all such forms of participation below 10%.<sup>41</sup>

### **Civil Activism**

According to the latest publication of the Active Youth Research Series, the proportion of Hungarian students involved in formal organizations has declined: while between 2013 and 2019, 60–62% of Hungarian students were

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<sup>40</sup> Székely, L. (2022): A nagymintás ifjúságkutatás legfontosabb eredményei és tanulságai. In.: HorizontON - Aktuális kérdések a magyarországi fiatalok élethelyzetéről és életmódjáról. Editor. Székely, L. 15. Available online: <https://ifjusagkutointezet.hu/kiadvany/horizonton-aktualis-kerdesek-a-magyarorszag-i-fiatalok-elethelyzeterol-es-eletmodjarol>

<sup>41</sup> Hajdú, A. – Tóth, B. (2022): Politikai aktivitás és generációváltás kérdése. In.: HorizontON - Aktuális kérdések a magyarországi fiatalok élethelyzetéről és életmódjáról. Editor. Székely, L. 87-88. Available online: <https://ifjusagkutointezet.hu/kiadvany/horizonton-aktualis-kerdesek-a-magyarorszag-i-fiatalok-elethelyzeterol-es-eletmodjarol>

members of an organization, this figure fell to 54% in 2024. In particular, the proportion of students affiliated to sports organizations, professional-scientific groups, and cultural and traditional organizations has decreased significantly. Furthermore, the proportion of students affiliated to church organizations and to student governments has also decreased. Only NGOs working with the sick, the elderly, the disadvantaged, the disadvantaged and children have seen a significant increase. However, there is a significant increase in students' political participation compared to the previous survey: while 43% of students were not involved in any political activity in 2019, this proportion fell to 30% in 2024. Particularly notable is the increase in protest petitions, fundraising, demonstrations and boycotts, with activism in 2024 at a similar level to that measured in the early 2010s.<sup>42</sup>

In the previous chapter, we looked at the forms of participation available to young people, both offline and online, when they want to be politically active. There is no doubt that political participation among young people in Hungary is low, especially in terms of participation in elections, and one of the main reasons for this is a general distrust and disillusionment with politics, coupled with dissatisfaction with government institutions. Many young people feel that their interests are not well represented by decision-makers, which contributes to their passivity. In contrast, their civic activism, especially on environmental and human rights issues, is much more active. In the field of volunteering, initiatives on animal welfare and health are popular among young people.<sup>43</sup> However, it must be pointed out that civil activism has not replaced political

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<sup>42</sup> Szabó, A. – Oross, D. (2024): A magyar egyetemisták politikai gondolkodása és integrációja 2024-ben. Hallgatói Önkormányzatok Országos Konferenciája, Nemzeti Ifjúsági Tanács. 10-11; 51. Available online: [http://www.aktivfialok.hu/public/files/documents/Gyorsjelentes\\_20240711.pdf](http://www.aktivfialok.hu/public/files/documents/Gyorsjelentes_20240711.pdf)

<sup>43</sup> Gyorgyovich, M. (2022): Az erős önkéntesidentitással bíró fiatal önkéntesek alakulása a koronavírus árnyékában. In.: HorizontON - Aktuális kérdések a magyarországi fiatalok élethelyzetéről és életmódjáról. Editor. Székely, L. 23-35. Available online: <https://ifjusagkutatoiintezet.hu/kiadvany/horizonton-aktualis-kerdesek-a-magyarorszagi-fialok-elethelyzeterol-es-eletmodjarol>

activism, and the decline and aging of the political party membership in our country has not been accompanied by the rise and growth of NGOs and social movements.<sup>44</sup> The difficulties of civil society organizations are also reflected in their limited resources to mobilize young people and their weak advocacy capacity in society. These problems are exacerbated by the fact that their activities and operational possibilities are not only hampered by insufficient funding, but also by constantly changing political expectations since the change of regime. Especially after 2010, government measures have become particularly frequent and have adversely affected or made impossible the existence of many NGOs that perform or intend to perform public functions.<sup>45</sup>

### **Why are young people who are politically active not involved in party life and party politics?**

Young people who are less politically active prefer to use the adjective 'public' rather than 'political' when it comes to political issues. Many do not have open statements, strong political opinions and identities. They approach political participation from a completely different perspective than their elders, but what about young people who claim to be politically active? Why are they not active in political parties? - Annamária Sebestyén searched for an answer to this question by asking young university students in her research why they do not participate in national political parties. The answer is much more complex, with historical and contemporary social circumstances being both factors in young people's absence. Among the main findings of the research were that young people fear negative peer perceptions if they were to join a party, that

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<sup>44</sup> Sebestyén, A. (2024). Miért nem vesznek részt a politikailag aktív fiatalok a pártokban? A pártpolitikai részvétel ellenőztőnzői a magyar egyetemisták körében. Socio.Hu Társadalomtudományi Szemle, 14(1), 89. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.18030/socio.hu.2024.1.87>

<sup>45</sup> Sebestyén, A. (2024). Miért nem vesznek részt a politikailag aktív fiatalok a pártokban? A pártpolitikai részvétel ellenőztőnzői a magyar egyetemisták körében. Socio.Hu Társadalomtudományi Szemle, 14(1), 92. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.18030/socio.hu.2024.1.87>



parties are increasingly inaccessible to them because they are left out, that they are not effectively targeted (also due to recruitment problems) and that many young people do not know what party membership means. The situation of active young people is further complicated by the fact that in many municipalities there are no local party organizations, and that schools, as a political socialization agent, are no longer involved in shaping individuals' political knowledge. This is also due to the fact that civic education was weeded out of the school curriculum.

Another interesting result of the research was that the members of the age group under study can be mobilized mainly through personal appeals, while online appeals and advertisements are not effective in involving young people. The focus is on emotions, which can be managed effectively if a party organization can touch young people emotionally with a relevant topic and awaken their desire to take social responsibility.<sup>46</sup>

Last but not least, we consider it necessary to mention that active citizenship of young adults cannot simply be imposed; rather, educational pathways are needed that promote active participation in public life. Active citizenship includes a sense of belonging to the community, knowledge of rights and responsibilities, and the promotion of values of solidarity, respect and commitment. Education should develop this sense and knowledge in young people, taking into account the social, economic, legal and political context and global developments. Educational processes should be flexible and tailored to the needs of the individual, fostering resilience, confidence and community empowerment. Active citizenship can take different forms, such as volunteering, civic service or even protest actions. This approach gives young people the opportunity to participate meaningfully in community life

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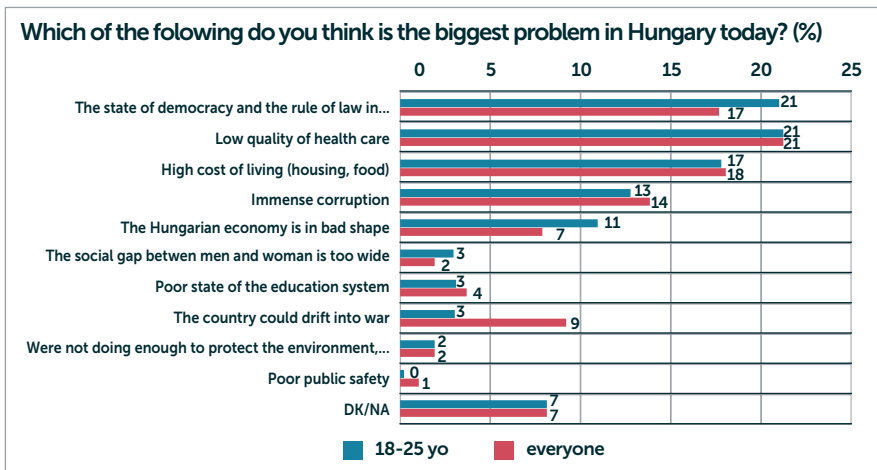
<sup>46</sup> Sebestyén, A. (2024). Miért nem vesznek részt a politikailag aktív fiatalok a pártokban? A pártpolitikai részvétel ellenőszközöi a magyar egyetemisták körében. *Socio.Hu Társadalomtudományi Szemle*, 14(1), 89. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.18030/socio.hu.2024.1.87>

and contribute to solving social and cultural problems.<sup>47</sup> The aim of education should also be to educate responsible citizens who are able to think and act independently, thus contributing to social change, which is unfortunately not the trend in Hungary at the moment.

### Problem perception

While young people are clearly less keen on the usual party politics, it's been established that specific issues can inspire youth activism. As in the case of the aforementioned pedophile scandal of the Hungarian president, which resulted in a record-breaking protest, or the emergence of the TISZA party, which reached certain younger audiences in 2024, it's certain that one can reach young adults if one knows how to and with what message.

This finally brings us to the problem perception of young people. What are the most important issues among young people? In Republikon's recent survey, we've compared young respondents with the adult population to find out whether there's a difference in which issues are important for the youngest of voters.



<sup>47</sup> Bajka, Gy. (2022.09.08.): Civil és polgári szerepvállalási készségek az aktív részvétel érdekében: a fiatal felnőttek bevonása. EPALE - Európai Felnőttképzési Elektronikus Platform. Available

There're also a few problems which are specifically more important to either the youth or the rest of adults. The state of the economy worries young people more compared to adults (11% to 7%). While the threat of imminent war spread by government propaganda reached older people more (3% of young people think the greatest problem is that we might drift into war, compared to 9% all adults).

The least important problems were the same for young people and all adults, last place was public safety (1% and 0%) followed by not protecting the environment (2-2%). So, as apparent from the struggling green parties among the opposition, Hungarian youth in general doesn't care as much about the environment, a sad turnout which is no doubt due to complete lack of environmental education. 2% for the environment is a record-low result, which means recent years of multiple crises took attention away from this problem.

Seeing these problem-ratings it's no surprise that Péter Magyar and the TISZA party put healthcare in the center of their current campaign communication, no doubt as a result of an opinion poll. However, for young people specifically, issues regarding the rule of law, like in the case of the presidential pardon scandal, are even greater mobilizers, with the right communication tools and formats.

## Conclusions

Based on our research, a clearer image of young voters emerges. While it's true that young adults are less interested in politics, less trusting of institutions and are more withdrawn especially from party politics, which results in lower voter turnout, this is just one side of the coin. On the other hand, democratic values are more important to young people, as is Hungary's EU membership. Certain issues prompt more activity from youth, and in some forms of activism, such as boycotting, they're more active than other adults.

Furthermore, currently young people aren't much behind everyone else in terms of willingness to vote, which might be due to the emergence of TISZA, by far the most popular party among young people. They generally think voting in 2024 was worth it, and based on their answers, they were just as active (or inactive) in this years' election campaign as any other adult. They are dissatisfied with the government, but are also dissatisfied with more historic opposition parties such as the Socialist Party or Democratic Coalition. Momentum, the liberal party and the Two-Tailed Dogs can still hope for young votes, and worryingly, the far-right Our Homeland is more popular among youth than other adults, and they're one of the 4 parties which made it into the European Parliament.

While increased youth activism would be most welcome, as young voters generally seem to want a stronger, more European, more liberal democracy, the danger of right-wing extremism still lurks, made evident by EP election results across Europe.

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# CONCLUSION

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The future of liberal democracy belongs to the youth. The only guarantee for the long-term survival of the institutions that have been developed to ensure that peace and cooperation prevails in Europe and beyond, and have naturally evolved into the systems (both national and international) we recognise as the pillars of our contemporary societies is that the following generations keep trusting them, and regard them at least as high as their predecessors. It is natural for the youth to be more sceptical about the 'old ways' of getting things done: about big and complex institutions, about the highly formalised and bureaucratised methods of decision making, about political elites often consisting of people much older than them, who don't always seem to be able to grasp the fears, concerns and worries of young citizens. There is nothing surprising about this, young people have been more enthusiastic, less patient and more open to radical ideas since the beginning of time. It is important, however, to avoid making the mistake – if not sin – of patronisingly belittling the issues the youth are concerned about, and not only because it could eventually lead to losing young citizens to radical political ideas, but also because the issues young people raise are fully legitimate, and they well deserve the attention of decision makers, analysts, and of the majority of our societies in general. Access to quality education at all levels is a concern much more burning to young people, who may still have years of school ahead, and to whom finding the best trainings and courses that prepare them for the labour market is an acute challenge to overcome, but it doesn't mean at all that a call for better and more accessible education is not a legitimate and crucially important one. Older generations might be less concerned about climate change and about its potentially excruciating long-term impact, but it by no means legitimises the dismissal of calls for

immediate action coming from young citizens, who will be the ones having to live with the consequences of decisions made today. And when young people express their concerns about the state of rule of law and democracy in their respective countries and in Europe, those concerns must be heard, understood, and appropriately responded to.

The three papers included in this publication confirm the old axiom, underpinned by several decades of European studies on the matter, according to which the youth are less involved in party politics, and are less likely to cast their votes in elections. This phenomenon is partly explained by young people's above-described scepticism of old political structures, and their unwillingness to compromise. If we think about it, those 19-25-year-olds, who participated in European Parliament elections 15 or 20 years ago in lower rates than their older fellow voters are in their late 30s – early 40s today, and their generation's willingness to vote has increased over the years, similarly to that of all generations: the gap between the youth's and the general population's willingness to vote appears to be relatively constant<sup>48</sup>. However, it is far from being indifferent what parties, what ideologies, what political offers young people choose because that can be formative not only of their future political preferences, but also of our entire political system. The rise of populism, which has been mentioned a number of times throughout this paper, and has become one of the most pressing issues of contemporary political literature and public discourse, poses a particular threat to young citizens. There is no voter who wouldn't prefer easy and simple solutions to complex problems, and who had no criticism towards the existing political structures and decision-making bodies either at a global or at a European level, or in their respective countries. More experienced voters, however, are likely to have at least a bit more resilience towards populist messages offering such solutions and questioning the legitimacy of institutions.

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<sup>48</sup> Dressler (2024) <https://fepe-europe.eu/youth-turnout-in-the-2024-european-elections-a-closer-look-at-the-under-25-vote/>

Populistic messages resonate very well with young people's pre-existing scepticism towards the 'old guard' and are in general quite compatible with anti-establishment sentiments. The stakes of better understanding, reaching out to, and engaging the youth are very high, as losing generations to populism can be the biggest threat to liberal democracy.

Although the words above may sound dramatic, and the stakes are really high, the authors of this paper have no intention to create panic among those caring for liberal democratic values. While young people might be more prone to falling for populist and extremist messages, we can also see that their majority believe in democracy, believe in liberalism, believe in Europe. Comparing the data collected by the three surveys we can see, for example, that the vast majority of Hungarian, Italian and Polish youth prefer their countries to remain members of the European Union, and those who would like to see their nations quit is a relatively small minority in each of the countries. The tendencies and the comparisons to the total population might be different in each country, but the results can still be considered encouraging, and they show that young people haven't given up on the European project. In order to at least maintain, but, even better, to increase the number of pro-EU young citizens, we must not give up on them, either: it has to be examined what issues they consider to be the most pressing, and they must be appropriately addressed through the existing democratic framework.

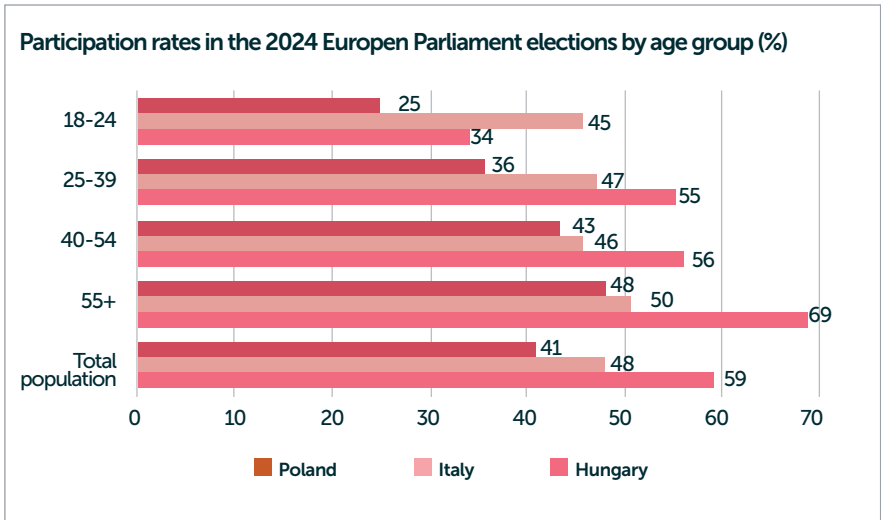
Comparing data from Hungary, Italy and Poland we can see that while the exact ranking of the issues young people care about the most in their countries differ, there is very much overlap among the problems ranked in the top five by the three nations' young. Issues related to the rule of law and democracy are the most prevalent (6/15), followed by economic concerns (5/15), problems with the national health systems (2/15), environmental issues (1/15) and security (1/15).

Issues the youth consider to be the most important for their respective countries			
	Hungary	Italy	Poland
1.	The state of democracy and the rule of law	The situation of the national health system	Inflation and the cost of living
2.	Low quality of health care	The lack of job opportunities	Security of the country
3.	Cost of living (housing, food)	The need for policies to reduce environmental impact	Democracy and the rule of law
4.	Immense corruption	Gender equality	The situation of women and the rights of minorities
5.	The Hungarian economy is in bad shape	The strength of democracy	Situation of health care

- Democracy/rule of law
- Economic issues
- Health care
- Security
- Environment

On one hand, the fact that the youth are worried about the situation of democracy and rule of law in their respective countries so much can be concerning, as it is quite telling of the existence of threats to liberal democracies and democratic institutions. On the other hand, though, the fact that young people are not only aware of the issues, but consider them to be crucially important from their homelands’ perspective, is a very much positive outcome of the surveys. It tells us that the youth don’t require much further awareness raising in connection with the threats to democracy, because they are already quite aware of them; what they need are actionable solutions. And that, of course, is true for the rest of the issues young Hungarian, Italian and Polish citizens care about, too: they can be engaged through properly addressing their problems.

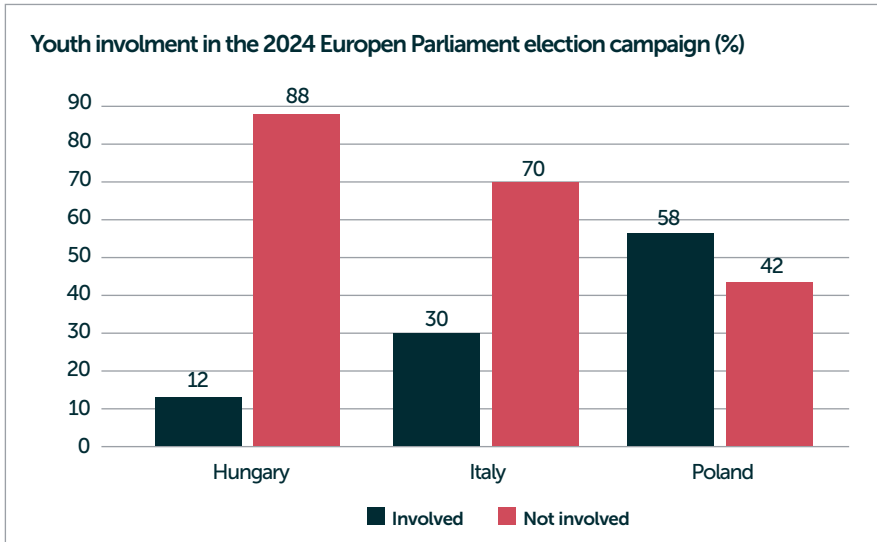
Eurobarometer’s post-electoral survey<sup>49</sup> showed that even though there were big differences among the three countries in terms of youth participation rates in the 2024 European Parliament elections, the rate of Hungarian, Italian and Polish voters between the ages of 18 and 24 who cast their votes was the lowest among all age groups in their respective countries’ average.



In addition to election participation rates, it is also worth examining how actively the youth participated in the campaign of the 2024 European Parliament election. To be able to compare the data from the three surveys, we dismissed the respondents who didn’t or couldn’t respond to the surveys’ question on their level of participation in this year’s EP elections and simplified the categories to ‘involved’ and ‘not involved’. From the Italian survey, those who claimed that they never got involved in the campaign, or got involved only 1-2 times a month, were put in the ‘not involved’ category, while the rest into the ‘involved’ one. For the comparison’s sake, from the Polish survey, we

<sup>49</sup> EU Post-electoral survey (2024) <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3292>

categorised those who claimed to have had only little or no involvement in the campaign as 'not involved', and those who said their level of involvement was 'average', 'high' or 'very high' as 'involved'.



The comparison shows that there are major differences among the levels of engagement of the youth in party political activism in the three countries. Although a vast number of factors can contribute to such difference, and it would require a lot of further research to explore the underlying reasons, which may include historical, cultural, political and various other characteristics, it is very much plausible that the contemporary political landscape of the countries plays an important role. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán’s illiberal regime has been in power for 14 years, which means that the generation that is subject to the survey has grown up without any different personal experience of national-level political leadership. Young Hungarians witnessed the domestic opposition’s failure of defeating governing Fidesz-KDNP time after time in parliamentary, municipal, and European Parliament election, which has further eroded their level of trust in political parties and in

the entire political system. At the other extreme, there is Poland, where the youth have a very recent experience of opposition parties successfully joining forces, and defeating the populist conservative Law and Justice government, and that 2023 experience can have a very strong mobilising effect on young voters. Regardless of their political preferences, witnessing political change, and internalising the concept that in liberal democracies different political groups have the chance to win and lose political power can largely contribute to young people's willingness to get engaged in shaping politics.

The papers collected in this publication include policy recommendations on how the youth's level of engagement in politics, and level of trust in liberal democratic institutions could be increased. As we could see from the papers themselves, and from the data comparisons of this concluding chapter, there are several differences among the priorities, attitudes and preferences of young Hungarians, young Italians and young Poles. That, however, doesn't mean that no general conclusions can be drawn from the surveys.

First, regardless of what country's youth we would like to engage, it is crucial to comprehend the issues they care about the most. The priorities of the young might be different from those of the general population, but they are just as important to study and to address as any other. Belittling young people's concerns, and/or dismissing them as irrelevant or untimely only pushes the young away and erodes their trust in European political systems.

Second, education is of key importance. A generation has grown up since the great 2004 wave of EU accession, so today, there are young Hungarian, Polish, Czech, Estonian etc. voters who were already born within the European Union, and who don't have any memories of their countries' existence outside of it. For the older generations living in EU Member States that used to belong to the Eastern Bloc there is no need to explain why free movement, the free flow of labour, or the single market are major achievements, but for the young, that is something that has to be taught. And that, of course, is true also to those who live, and whose families have probably lived for generations in

Western European democracies. European studies on the history, the role and the functioning of the EU, and on the fundamental importance of liberal democratic values in our contemporary European society should be a part of the curriculum in both secondary and tertiary education.

Third, young people must be involved in decision-making, not only, but particularly when the decisions concern their long-term future. When we talk about the youth, we talk about a group that is a part of our society, which is just as affected by political decisions and policy measures as anyone else, from family policies to taxation, from environmental policies to foreign affairs. If we want the youth to trust liberal democratic institutions, we must trust the youth, too: young people need support, encouragement and incentivisation to make their voices heard at the local, national and international levels alike, because the future of liberal democracies belongs to them.



## EUROPEAN LIBERAL FORUM

The European Liberal Forum (ELF) is the official political foundation of the European Liberal Party, the ALDE Party. Together with 59 member organisations, we work all over Europe to bring new ideas into the political debate, to provide a platform for discussion, and to empower citizens to make their voices heard. Our work is guided by liberal ideals and a belief in the principle of freedom. We stand for a future-oriented Europe that offers opportunities for every citizen. ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European. We bring together a diverse network of national foundations, think tanks and other experts. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of different EU stakeholders.

## FONDAZIONE LUIGI EINAUDI

The Luigi Einaudi Foundation is a think tank promoting liberal ideas and liberal political thought. It was founded in 1962 by Mr. Giovanni Malagodi (secretary of the Italian Liberal Party, former president of the Italian Senate and of Liberal International). The Luigi Einaudi Foundation engages in guaranteeing to every citizen the conditions to grow as a human being and for living in wealth, relating to others and thrive in peace. All this, through the recognition of diversity, the safeguard of human liberties and freedoms, as well as through the promotion of constructive discussions on facts and ideas. The Foundation promotes liberalism as an instrument to elaborate original responses to the complexity of the current issues related to globalization and to the progressively increasing technological evolution, with the goal of fostering individual liberties and economic prosperity.

in cooperation with

## RIDE

The Italian Network for the Euro-Mediterranean Dialogue (R.I.D.E., Head of the Anna Lindh Foundation in Italy) is a non-partisan, non-profit, Association aiming at actively involving its members in an innovative network developing a shared vision based on collegiality, mutual listening and respect, pluralism, democratic election of the internal governance, transparency, and independence. Its founding goals include the promotion of initiatives to develop cooperation and international solidarity, dialogue between peoples and their respective collective identities, identifying shared cultural values to support the development of harmonious and mutually respectful relations between majorities and national, ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities, also by setting up a permanent forum (think tank of the think tanks) for meetings, research, analysis, and debates in order to produce actions and publications aimed at facilitating coexistence in the context of political, economic, cultural and security interaction.

## **PROJEKT: POLSKA**

The Foundation was created in 2007 by a group of experts and think-tankers, non-governmental activists and female entrepreneurs to support efforts for a more modern, open and liberal Poland. The Foundation is an interdisciplinary think-do-tank pursuing its goals through scientific research, social projects and educational and informational campaigns. The Foundation acts as a platform for cooperation, combining the knowledge and experience of professionals who come from different backgrounds and believe in a progressive Poland in a strong Europe.

## **REPUBLIKON FOUNDATION FOR SCIENCE, EDUCATION AND RESEARCH**

Republikon Foundation is a liberal think tank organisation based in Budapest, focusing on analysing Hungarian and international politics, formulating policy recommendations and initiating projects that contribute to a more open, democratic and free society. The goal of the Foundation is to promote discussion and implementation of liberal ideas, approaches and policies. Republikon believes that Hungarian politics can take a turn for the better only if liberal ideas and opinions are formulated in policy and public discourse. Republikon Foundation has played an important role as a think tank in Hungary: independent from any political party, but committed to liberal values, it has been endeavouring to shape policy thinking and public debate with its innovative approach to politics and policy. It is Republikon's mission to articulate new ideas and to find ways of making the values of liberal democracy, human rights and tolerance more popular.





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