

“Me and Europe“

How young adults from France and Germany think about Europe.

Documentation
Focus groups in Berlin and Paris

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This documentation is illustrated with collages that were made during the focus groups with young adults on the topic of “Me and Europe”.

Summary

What does the much described Generation Y have to say about Europe? What expectations do its representatives have towards the European Union? What is important to them? What are they concerned about? And how does that compute with these young adults' attitudes to life, their hopes and concerns? These are the questions TerraEuropa has debated with university students aged 20 to 25 in focus groups in Berlin and Paris. The results of a survey carried out in France and Germany among 2,000 youths of the same age were thereby supplemented with deeper insights.

Living in a multi-option society

Everything around here is so nice and colourful. Young Europeans grew up in a world full of opportunities – no borders, no “iron curtain”, no “wall”. The Euro is a matter of course for them. They fly “easyJet”. They learn, study and work in interdisciplinary, intercultural and international teams. They easily navigate between party tourism and patchwork families. Much of what their parents' generation still had to fight for has become self-evident. In dealing with these freedoms, Generation Y is both well-versed and pragmatic. Very assiduously, they seek to find out how they can make the most of these diverse opportunities for themselves. At the same time, they ask more and more sceptically what that diversity means for their lives.

Potential for Europe

It's all about the right mix. The “post-Wall” generation has the potential to become a particularly European generation. Their home country continues to be of high value to them. At the same time, many young adults are geared towards thinking and acting rather “transnationally” in their leisure activities, their friendships but also with respect to their careers. Europe is a large and attractive area of opportunities, impressively heterogeneous, yet still very little succinct and identity-establishing.

All the opportunities' flipside

Where there is light, there is darkness. The multi-option society exerts a lot of pressure. “You have so many opportunities, make the most of it”. This implies high demands on the individual. More and more often, the “multi-option” turns out to be an empty promise. No gain despite pain – this is the young generation's experience and concern.

The schizophrenic officer

So what now? Although they have lots of sympathy for the European project: young Europeans perceive the current state of the European Union to be dissatisfactory, overly complex, fragile and erratic. However for the much-trumpeted unity, they diagnose almost “schizophrenic” fragmentation. A dubious bureaucratic corset arduously holds together a disparate Europe.

War of talents – towards a transnational fight club?

Everybody against everybody else? Many opportunities – for young adults, this also implies increased competition among themselves. While companies need professionals and compete for well-trained youngsters in a “war of talents”, lacking or insufficient transnational rules lead to a war among talents, say the 20 to 25 year olds. They fear inexorable competition that may well transform the idea of a European community into its opposite. The House of Europe – as many fear – turns into a transnational Fight Club.

The European question: recalibrating diversity and unity

Think global, act local? Generation Y is facing the high demands of a digitalised and globalised society. That is why they desperately look for spaces where they can learn and develop in best possible ways. Although Europe is a huge area of opportunities, it is not yet a reliable place for the future. What respondents therefore demand are fundamental rearrangements and regulations of Europe. The key question is: how can we strike a balance between diversity and unity in Europe and convey the message in new ways?

European teambuilding through projects

United we are strong. The shared hope: More unity in Europe, without denying the cultural differences. Young Europeans know: There is no panacea for solving Europe’s problems. Generation Y counts on transnational “teambuilding” through joint efforts for concrete projects. A sustainable environmental and energy policy, the effective harmonisation of education systems and reliable regulations for the European labour market are all on top of the agenda.

Self-conceptions and values

Zwischen Dichtung und Wahrheit

Marco: Ingenieur in Peking.
Thomas: Lehrer in München.
Heute: wieder Studenten in Paris.

»Ein falscher Weg«

wir eigen

die

IT&EINER WICHTIGEN ANGERNEN

Zwischen Dichtung und Wahrheit

Living with multiple options

“We live in an increasingly open world.”

“China is in fact nothing special to us anymore.”

“Besides my studies in law, I also train to become a pilot .”

“My parents only travel to neighbouring countries, we get much farther, we have budget airlines, there are no more borders, everything is intermingling.”

The young generation is characterised by high motivation, an astonishing breadth in their experiences and lots of pragmatism. Participants from France and Germany organise their studies and training in a fast, serious and determined manner. In parallel, they put striking efforts into improving themselves: when doing sports, learning languages, acquiring further „hard“ and „soft skills“.

Living in a multi-option society

Internet, easyJet, emancipation and Erasmus: young people grew up in a world full of opportunities. They want to make the most of that. Many a young person even keeps several options open with „double degrees“ or even „double subsistence“ (trainee and entrepreneur).



Living with multiple options – this also means: freedoms that their parents still had to fight for are self-evident to the „post-wall generation“ – and not a value in and by itself. The fact that they may choose among a huge number of opportunities is not necessarily seen as a gain. Multiple options also imply a world without solid structures and without clear oppositions – an environment with many pitfalls and obstacles.

Europe as a sphere of opportunities

“Europe, that’s nice diversity. And if it’s just the food.”

The young adults’ horizon is impressively broad – be it in their spare time, their friendships, travelling or their studies. Most participants like living in their hometown. At the same time, they are geared towards the international or even better: the “transnational”.

When they talk about stays abroad and trips to the entire world, workshop participants almost sound as if they were talking about their daily public transportation commute. A global sphere of action is hardly unusual today. Acting in an international context, networking with people from all around the world, using foreign languages and negotiating cultural differences is part of generation Y’s daily lives.

A Europe full of options

The young adults by all means view themselves as a European generation, or at least as a generation that was socialised that way. They very naturally grow up with globalisation’s advantages. They are interested in their European neighbours as well as in Asia, Africa or North America. Europe is merely a region among many regions, although one that offers a particularly high number of opportunities.

- **Europe as a travel destination:** the monetary union and free movement allow for daily life across borders (e. g. vacation, short trips, shopping sprees abroad).
- **Europe as a cultural area:** the community of states offers manifold opportunities to get to know and adopt different ways of life.
- **Europe as an economic area:** Free trade and a common currency promise wealth and growth.

Participants are very clearly aware of the historical achievement European unification represents. After two world wars, Europe creates a framework for durable peace, and peace essentially means: a great variety of possibilities and opportunities for individuals.

Diffuse European values

“You understand what Europe really means when you are far away.”

“Nobody ever asked me: do you want the Euro? Do you want the EU? That makes it hard to create a European identity.”

“I feel French rather than European, and I probably have more in common with the Turks than with Northern Europeans.”

Europe’s achievements, as they were attained throughout history, are hard to grasp for young adults. It is only from far away, for instance during a longer stay in another cultural environment, that specific advantages suddenly become “palpable“. Above all, they see the reliability and protection the European model so far guarantees: social protection, medical care, individual rights, comparably low crime rates.

On top of that, Europe first and foremost stands for unique diversity: No-one can think of a comparable political area that encompasses so many different countries, languages and cultures.



Diversity does not mean identity

Diversity is experienced as an outstanding value. As a diverse area of opportunities, Europe however remains hardly tangible. This is the dilemma as it is articulated by the young people: diversity is a very universal and not particularly concise value. Considering specific cultural and religious values as “European” would immediately curtail it. People love and live European diversity. National belonging however remains the relevant factor in identity formation.

National consciousness

When describing their attitude towards life, focus group participants in Paris and Berlin converge. Their perspectives on Europe differs. In so doing, they depart from familiar positions: contrary to what may be expect based on the “Grande Nation” cliché, French students strive after more openness. Their peers in Germany, in turn, have a tendency for stronger national consciousness.

France: calls for cultural openness

Workshop participants in Paris love their country and its daunting cultural diversity. But France is facing an ordeal. The young Europeans in Paris are afraid of France’s getting stuck in an enduring and profound economic and political crisis . They get the impression that the country may be falling behind in the global competition. Participants advocate the nation’s opening up. They believe that France could learn a lot from other nations (in particular Germany and Scandinavia) and are interested in foreign cultures.

Germany: the “homeland's” renaissance at a high global level

Participants in Berlin, in turn, perceive Germany as a country that has undergone considerable change since the 2006 “World Cup summer fairytale” and become more open to the world. To them, experiences abroad confirm that the general standard of living and social security are high in Germany. Despite the Pisa comparisons, the same goes for the level of education. Moreover, against the backdrop of the comparably stable economy during the Euro crisis, the young Germans are convinced of Germany’s economic power. And they ascribe a culture of tolerance to Germany. This is something they can and want to adhere to. They do not want to miss out on the big, wide world, yet they now also seek more ties at home.

Circumstances of life and concerns



All the opportunities' flipside

Where there is light, there is darkness. The multi option society exerts a lot of pressure. "You have so many opportunities, make the most of it". This places high demands on the individual. More and more often, the "multi option" turns out to be an empty promise.

When options turn into the obligation to succeed

Somebody who has that many opportunities also has to make to most of them and achieve extraordinary things. These are the widespread expectations many young adults suffer from. And the pressure does not only stem from themselves, it is also exerted by parents, teachers, professors, friends and peers.

"Before, everything was sort of carved out from the outset, not least because of your parents' profession. Today, you can go everywhere – but you also need to find the right thing. If you fail, you need to justify that. Because you had all the opportunities."

When everything is possible, yet nothing works out

Many things are possible, but many things can go wrong, too. The young generation believes to face contradicting expectations by potential employers and complains about inadequate reforms and bureaucratic pitfalls – Bologna is seen as the perfect example. An achievement-oriented society has high demands, but the newly regulated study programmes are incommensurate with its logic. Sometimes, things just do not work out anymore.

"You can study almost anything, but you don't know if employers will really need it." "It doesn't really have anything to do with finding out who you are or fun."

No gain despite pain

Under the surface looms the fear of coming away empty-handed despite all the effort: because they bet on the wrong horse, because degrees are eventually not recognised, because employers ultimately have other requirements.

"If your studies take too long, because you went abroad, for example, you may be out of the game."

~~*"We can do so many things, but we don't have time for anything."*~~

Erratic Europe

The young adults' sceptical attitude also has to do with their historic experiences. Those who started school at the beginning of the millennium has almost exclusively lived to see European developments in banking and financial crisis mode ever since the dot.com bubble burst.

Europe runs the risk of becoming the symbol for an overly complex, fragile and erratic world. The focus groups' participants deplore aberrations all over the place. To them, the European house means:

- Instead of economic stability, a collapsing house of cards
- Instead of the community of shared gains that was promised, endless battles for shares
- Instead of a common economic policy in a common economic area, increasingly divergent interests
- Instead of common answers to big questions (climate, energy, resources), a "eurocracy" that gets lost in odds and sods
- Instead of promised equal opportunities, an increasingly growing imbalance of economic and political forces

The schizophrenic officer

All their sympathy for the European project notwithstanding: participants do not approve of the European Union's current state of affairs. To the contrary. They are deeply concerned and diagnose "schizophrenic" disintegration. Europe merely seems to be held together by a bureaucratic corset.



How would Europe be as a person?

"Schizophrenic."

"A schizophrenic officer."

"An artificial personality."

"A man with several faces."

"An old woman losing her limbs."

"Like a painting by Picasso, cubistic, fragmented."

"A trompe-l'œil."

A transnational fight club?

“Fellow students are potential competitors.”

“You try to stick out with additional qualifications.”

“You constantly ask yourself what it is you’re better at than all the others.”

“What is negative: the increasing competition, everybody against everybody.”

“The good workers from the countries where things don’t go well come to Germany.”

In the young adults’ views, openness and free movement create attractive opportunities. At the same time, they experience increased competition and struggles. This, at the latest, begins when they compete for places at university. The mounting competition does not seem to be properly regulated – often at the young generation’s disadvantage. Focus group participants in Berlin and Paris deplore

- The unfair distribution of European social burdens – notably at the expense of the younger generation (e.g. social compensation plans for older employees while the young colleagues need to leave),
- Unreliable conditions due to insufficient harmonisation of degrees (a lack of compatibility and recognition by employers),
- Insufficient preparation for the demands in European work life (inadequate language classes already at school),
- Wage disparities in similar labour markets (as far as minimum wages and entry-level salaries are concerned).

Young talents in a “war of talents”

The corollary all participants fear is extremely tough competition under unfair conditions. For quite some time now, the „war of talents“ has not been for talents, but also among them. European peers become competitors.

The idea of a European community is at risk of turning into its opposite. Europe, as many fear, will then transform into a transnational „fight club“.



National particularities

The extent of the young adults' fear of competition and the pressure to perform significantly depends on how they perceive the respective economic status quo, what opportunities they see for themselves and whether they already had to face personal setbacks. Perceptions on that matter differ based on nationality and social background. The fear of a European „fight club“ is yet shared by all interviewees.

France: the risks of excessive demands and too little support

French students worry more about their ability to live up to an open Europe's demands than their German counterparts. It is in particular their language skills, below average in their own perceptions, that makes participants concerned about their "competitiveness". The country must become more open, yet it could also lose from more openness. Notably students from less privileged backgrounds criticise that they are not adequately prepared for the new demands, for example thanks to good language teaching. Immigration is a particularly hot and ambivalent issue many fears are tied to.

Germany: Island of the blissful?

German students rather complain about external obstacles: bureaucratic hurdles, deficient reforms (Bologna) and inconsistent demands (e. g. by employers) get to them. They nevertheless assume that they will "somehow make it" thanks to conducive economic circumstances in Germany in combination with personal achievements. They perceive Germany as some sort of life raft on a continent otherwise in crisis. This does not preclude fears of a fight club. It has nevertheless come to the fore.

Expectations towards Europe and the EU's policies



Looking for open spaces

“That’s the challenge: that we have to make the right decisions right from the outset, to do the right internships, to do the right thing for our careers.”

“They expect us to have experience, but we don’t get the opportunity to make it.”

“We almost don’t have time to think about some things: What do I actually want? They constantly say: You have all the opportunities. But there is no time to develop one’s personality.”

A key result of the focus groups: Generation Y may well be able to choose among numerous opportunities. It is, however, also facing uncountable, sometimes impossible demands. They try to deal with this situation with commitment, strategy, achievement and optimisation: they hope for optimal preparation to give them the edge in an ever tougher competition.

Open spaces for the “internship generation“

Many young people are under the impression that they are required to know their professional objectives before they even leave secondary school. At the same time, they sense that this may be asking too much. The result are growing fears: fear of betting on the wrong horse, fear of the plan not working out, fear of not being able to live up to the plan. The participants realise that “optimisation” alone is not enough. They look for open spaces where they can test things and themselves, learn in ways they believe to be appropriate and make important experiences.



Internships are more positive than their reputation, and young adults urgently try to find some. They think that it is absurd and unfair that businesses merely offer students insufficient opportunities to acquire practical skills.

Stays abroad are the opportunity to put oneself to the test in foreign lands, far away from home. However, the protective framework of exchange programmes and organised contacts is very important in this context.

Calls for Europe's reorganisation

"We are headed towards a federal Europe. Today, there are only directives that are adapted to every country. I would like to see something more compulsory."

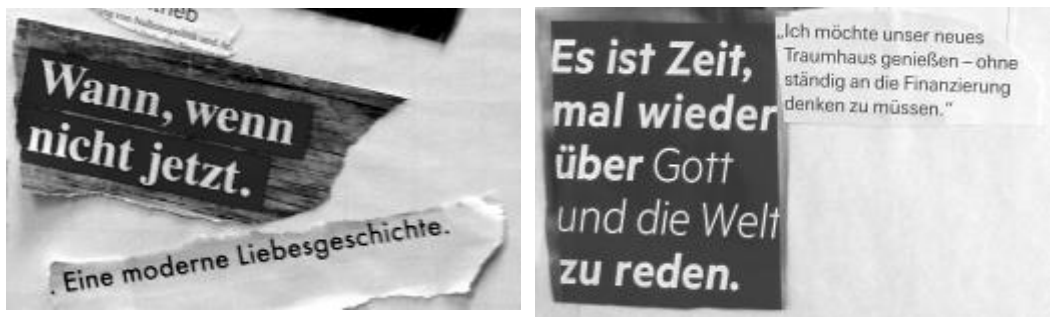
"I think it is right that Europe moves more tightly together, becomes more unitary. But the cultures should be preserved, the languages. The differences should not be blurred."

"The world is on the move, now is the time to decide, the time to find solutions."

Whether the young generation will be able to unfold its potential as a European generation seems doubtful. From both the young Frenchmen's and the young German's perspective, the European process seems to be stumbling, or worse: many good intentions have apparently turned into their opposite.

Unity and diversity – the European question

At the political level, focus group participants in Paris and Berlin see the necessity to fundamentally rearrange the European area. Europe must no longer shy away from fundamental and latent conflicts. The European House must be planned anew, and the countries' interests must be conveyed and regulated in new ways.



The hopes many articulate: more unity in Europe, without abandoning the diversity of national peculiarities. United in diversity. The great European motto is again called upon by the young generation. Whether the "United States of Europe" are an adequate model or whether a less binding form of confederation is better suited to fulfil these hopes remains contentious.

Teambuilding through projects

“You only hear negative things about Europe. We need positive projects for the future.”
“Europe needs to settle down to work, there is some sort of lethargy, all the countries only act as lobbyists. We need something that unites us, an overarching project.”

The young adults know: There is no political panacea for the urgent European issues. They nevertheless believe the need for action to be immense. The participants also feel crippled, perplexed and overburdened. Politics is seen as a complicated, dirty and ultimately impossible business many prefer not to deal with.

Action speaks louder than words



A truly European Union will not emerge at one stroke. It will develop step by step. This process may best be supported, in the young Europeans' view, by concrete experiences, e.g. during study stays in other European countries. For them, the Erasmus programme is an important key to European unity. The participants moreover demand very concrete European projects at the political level, in which all European nations cooperate. "Teambuilding" is the keyword. They wish for stronger transnational cooperation at all levels, visible progress and less fights about who gets what.

Europe at the crossroads

If this does not work out, scepticism and separatism are lurking around the corner. Their sympathy for Europe notwithstanding, young Europeans also doubt whether, at the end of the day, the idea of uniting Europe's diversity under one roof may not be too ambitious. The more complicated they consider their own circumstances of life, the more attractive they find the notion of an assumed, clearly confined national identity.

Education, employment, the environment and energy

Within the framework of the workshops, there were intense debates on expectations towards EU policies. Three policy fields were of special relevance to the young generation in both France and Germany. In these realms in particular, they think that European unity would be extremely important

A sustainable energy policy

The global threat posed by climate change and resource scarcity is uncontested. The young adults call upon EU member states to take a leading role in working towards sustainable solutions. For them, a common energy policy could become a blueprint for European unification, if all countries contributed with their respective strengths and were willing to learn from each other. The participants clearly understand that there are many national self-interests. They all the more demand visible progress, including in single projects, as a symbol for Europe's growing together in this field.

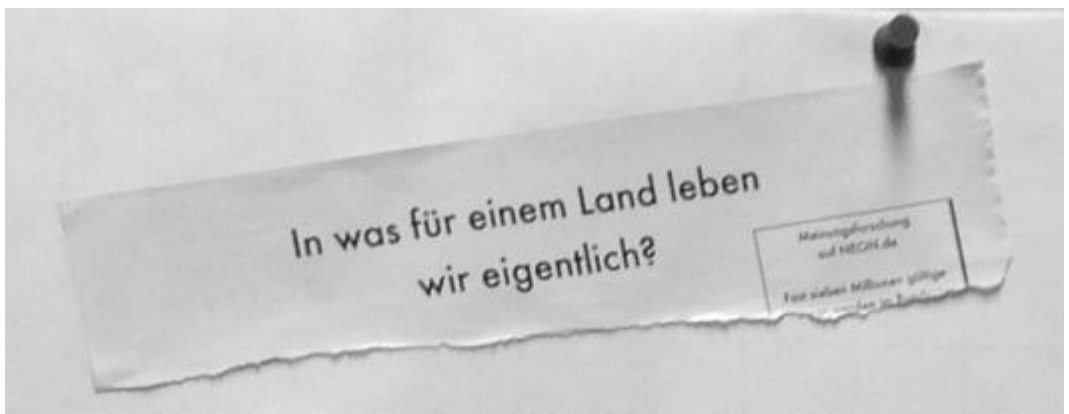
Harmonising education policy

Education policy acutely and directly impacts the participants. For them, it is thus high up on the agenda. The need for action is immense: the majority believe that Bologna was the right idea. Its implementation, in turn, is said to be inadequate. They both challenge the norm of the three-year Bachelor programmes and the faulty harmonisation of curricula. As a result, intended student mobility is hampered. The students expect a truly working harmonisation that should not, however, lead to the disappearance of all individual strengths and national distinctiveness.

Regulating labour markets

A common European labour market has, in participants' views, more or less come into existence a long time ago. Their reaction is ambivalent, as long as these developments only lead to increased competition among young adults. The participants want adequate and just regulation: equal opportunities thanks to comparable working conditions, adapted minimum wages, comparable degrees as well as individual support, e.g. through language courses, guaranteed (vocational) training opportunities and more transparency on offers, for example via job databases.

Research design



Focus groups in Paris and Berlin

A multi-stage process

One focus of TerraEuropa's work consists of identifying concrete political expectations by young adults in Europe. The above documented workshops supplement the political science approach with a psychological view on young Europeans' daily realities.

Key points

- Five focus groups of 2.5 hours with 8 participants each
- Carried out in Paris (2 focus groups) and Berlin (3 focus groups)
- From 24 October to 14 November 2013

Participants

- University students from different disciplines
- Aged 20 to 25
- Half of them female, half of them male
- With experience abroad (e.g. internships, studies abroad)

Topics

- Young adults' everyday reality
- Perceptions on Europe and its relevance
- Expectations towards EU projects

Conceptualisation and realisation

A&B One

A&B One Kommunikationsagentur GmbH

Contacts

About TerraEuropa

TerraEuropa is an international platform in order for young adults to exchange their ideas on Europe among themselves and with representatives from politics, business and society. It was initiated by Michel Marlière, a French entrepreneur who chose to live in Germany. In the face of growing euroscepticism and separatism, he aims to encourage the young generation to more actively engage in Europe and participate more strongly in shaping the European House. TerraEuropa cooperates with Stiftung Genshagen, the French university Sciences Po, the Free University Berlin and the Franco-German Youth Office. Ipsos, the international market and social research company, is partner for opinion research.

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