

EU Youth Dialogue

German edition

EU Youth Dialogues – German edition

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this second edition of the EU-Youth Dialogue, **6 university students and young professionals** gathered in Nürnberg, Bavaria, for a friendly conversation on democracy, politics, ecology, solidarities and the contemporary challenges for Germany and Europe.

From the exchanges first emerged **the overarching dominance of a sentiment of anxiety towards the future, in particular eco-anxiety**. The second important point underpinned by the conversation was **the importance of education, at all ages of life**. The collective awareness and reform of the system appears to be a priority for our group. And in this regard, **the issue of radical actions and speech, as well as the respect for the words coming from the younger generation** stood out as another major issue of discussion. While some would deplore a lack of understanding from the older generations, which could justify a louder voice in the debate, those more involved in the public debate and action already would rather insist on the necessity for a more balanced yet equal dialogue. Unsurprisingly, **the gradual disappearance of the middle ground and the nuance from the public sphere was a source of concern**. And the acknowledgement that everything is *political*, while it shouldn't be necessarily *partisan* emerged as a shared opinion.

Finally, Europe was a constant horizon called upon. Whether it is the open-ended promise of opportunities that they enjoyed, or that everyone should be able to enjoy, or simply the other relevant level of action for real change, with local government of course, **Europe is a defining part of their identity**.

Social Media summary

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Keywords

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Short bio

An historian and European affairs expert, **Edouard Gaudot** is a writer and a political advisor. Committed to the causes of Europe, Ecology and Education, he teaches (ESSEC, HEC business schools), works as a trainer and facilitator, and regularly publishes on European politics, and political ecology. He also conceives and implements European projects on youth, citizenship, education and ecology. His next book, *Les Sept Piliers de la Cité*, is due on 29 September, at Plon.

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1. A conversation about politics, action and responsibility

The German edition of the EU Youth Dialogues took place on Monday 27 June, in Nurnberg, Southern Germany. Organised with the precious help on the ground of **Kerstin Dowdell** on behalf of the IED, it was held under the patronage of **IED Vice-President Gabi Schmidt**, and **Tobias Gotthardt** both Members of the Regional Parliament of Bayern.

The conversation was animated by **Edouard Gaudot**, project coordinator. The aim of the EU Youth Dialogue is to sketch through these *in camera* discussions a partial, yet living picture of the current situation and state of mind of this group of young Europeans, from Germany in this case, as well as from Poland, France, Cyprus and potentially more countries.

It gathered **6 young Germans**, aged 19 to 25, predominantly students, with backgrounds mostly in social or political sciences, with a clear majority holding a daily job as well. The group was small, homogeneous, with a majority of women, and the participants were mostly from smaller towns in the surroundings of Nurnberg. Those who worked did so in the fields of human resources, tax or unemployment services. In addition, two were directly employed by sitting members of the regional parliament of Bavaria in addition to studying at the university.

One purpose of the project is to foster a conversation between participants who consider themselves as politically active and those who prefer to declare themselves inactive. In this regard, unfortunately for this edition, the balance was strongly tilted in favour of the politically active. 5 out of 6 participants declared themselves as “active”, some holding even several official positions, or rather directly working in the field of politics.

They all shared in addition a converging political inclination towards the *Freie Wähler* party. This did contribute to the strong cultural and political homogeneity of the group. The smaller size and a significantly marked similarity of the group made the conversation easier and more comfortable, although quite less representative of the potential differences across the generation. Nevertheless it didn't stifle dissent or argument, fortunately. Some differences for instance emerged, when it came to the means of action

and the acceptance of certain levels of radicalism in politics – and they proved to depend on whether the participants were closer to party politics or to civil society activism.

As foreseen in the project, the conversation covered the same issues as in Poland (see Polish report) and in the next countries. It started with taking stock of the recent and current period, and its many ordeals.

“How difficult were the last two years for you? Did you experience any particular difficulties.”¹(EG)²

From the crisis mood of a post-pandemic, war-ridden, hard inflationary context³ to the anxieties of climate change and the ecological crisis, and its consequences, the first set of questions was mostly about their state of mind and current welfare.

“Do you have such “eco-anxiety”, as broadly shared in Europe? This fear that there is no future because the environment is degrading too fast and too irremediably?” (EG)

Then it went on to address the various cracks in the society, from rising inequalities to the many illustrations of lacks in solidarity. The conversation consequently brought forth, as expected, the question of an increasingly polarised and individualistic society, explained by the combined effects of the disruptive impact of social networks and an insufficient level of general education.

“How do you evaluate and feel the cohesion of the society, the care for the most vulnerable ones, from the elderly, to the poor and the sick, as well as refugees?” (EG)

¹ All excerpts from the conversations are quoted in *cursive*.

² Unless noted EG (Edouard Gaudot, animator), the quotes from the participants will remain anonymous for confidentiality reasons.

³ <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/from-inflation-to-recession-is-germany-s-prosperity-at-risk-a-bd8650be-2075-40b9-a762-05e2baaf2a7d>

You mentioned the growing polarization in the society, and the radicalisation. Where does it come from according to you?” (EG)

The general question of politics, democracy and their personal involvement in the public sphere constituted a *fil d’Ariane*, throughout the discussion.

“Whether you are politically active or not, the question is ‘do you consider the world as going well’, and how much is it your personal responsibility to change it?” (EG)

Most of the issues, whether about work and education, climate and solidarities, as well as values and radicalism in the public space brought us to that of individual implication in the life of the society. In other words the relationship to “politics” pervaded the entire conversation with recurring references to the necessity to act in responsibility; because not everything is partisan, but as some participants agreed on, and insisted upon: *everything is political*.

2. A sense of gravity

The first exchanges did establish the difficulty of the past two years.

- it was a very demanding and challenging period for me, and for everyone around.

Although the effects of the pandemics were not that much referred to, contrary to what would have been expected. This might come as a relative surprise, since Germany’s youth was deeply affected, according to a 2021 research conducted by Simon Schnetzer, who coined even the descriptive

concept of “Reset generation” – “because whenever there seemed to be light at the end of the tunnel, someone pressed the reset button”⁴.

Actually some participants did express such feeling – *it felt like I had to start all over again*, said one – however, as noticed, it seems like the disruptive effects of the past two years had been relatively well absorbed and weathered by this group.

It might be linked to their personal family situation, or the fact that they were already integrated in active networks such as political activities, or jobs. But in fact, it is eventually consistent with the 2021 *Eurofound* survey whose data showed that Germany’s youth was somewhat less dramatically affected than other parts in Europe. And furthermore, that it was the young under-17 people, as well as the poorer or the ones from families with migrant origins who were more strongly impacted⁵. In other words, our focus group was by age, occupation and social background, relatively shielded from the most distressful consequences of the pandemic.

Overall, young Germans are not quite unhappy – contrary to some other EU countries, like Spain or Greece, where the younger generations have shouldered the cumulative effects of a dire economic and social crisis before plunging into the Covid one. Even if the figure has receded by almost 10 points, there are still 70% of the respondents declaring themselves as content⁶.

But if the past wasn’t much of an issue, the future is.

Our group was completely aligned with another feature of German youth: a diffuse and generally widespread feeling of “fear for the future”⁷. The mention of a challenging and unforeseeable future was recurrent.

⁴ see the study *Junge Deutsche*, published on 9.3.2021: <https://jungedeutsche.de/junge-deutsche-2021/>, and “Covid and the Reset generation”: <https://www.deutschland.de/en/topic/life/youth-in-germany-covid-pandemic>

⁵ Eurofound on 9 November 2021 <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2021/impact-of-covid-19-on-young-people-in-the-eu> “Furthermore, in Germany, a representative online survey conducted among 1,586 families with 7- to 17-year-old children and adolescents between 26 May and 10 June 2020 found **that one in every two children aged between 11 and 17** had suffered mentally because of reduced social contact. **Children with low socioeconomic status, a migrant background or limited living space were affected significantly more.** Among children and teenagers, 29% reported weaker ties with friends (Ravens-Sieberer et al, 2021).”

⁶ See “Covid and the Reset generation”, art. cit.

⁷ <https://www.mdr.de/wissen/generation-zukunftsangst-100.html>

*- I find the future quite worrisome:
inflation, war... There is some kind of
chaos looming.*

War did certainly come up in the discussion. The general mood of young Germans is quite worried when it comes to the war in Ukraine⁸, although our group was a bit older than the younger segment who declares to be “really afraid”, according to a poll conducted by IZI institute⁹.

Inflation and the cost of living were mentioned as well, especially as they weigh on the freedom to find a job they would like and feel aligned with – *in the current times, with such inflation, when prices are rising, and everyone must look how they can pay their weekly groceries, bills, etc.*

However in this group, the environment came out as one overarching concern. In spite of a conversation initiated under the sign of the pandemic and the war waged by Russia, it’s actually the eco-anxiety¹⁰ feeling that quickly took over. Indeed among the youth surveyed in the landmark study¹¹ on the mental and physical impact of the ecological crisis on young people, young Germans are ranking quite high¹². The “Fridays for Future” demonstrations initiated by Greta Thunberg’s School Strike for Climate a few years ago are still attracting droves of young Germans¹³.

As regard their priorities of concerns, our group is definitely aligned and representative of the broader German youth. In the “*Generation Zukunftsangst*”, climate issues have this peculiar resonance because they are long term bound, contrary to other sources of anxieties that public action can weather or circumstances make disappear.

⁸ <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/wissen/reaktion-auf-den-ukraine-krieg-die-jugend-in-deutschland-steht-unter-schock/28229538.html>

⁹ <https://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-russia-conflict-has-german-teens-terrified/a-61069344>

¹⁰ [https://www.iberdrola.com/social-commitment/what-is-ecoanxiety#:~:text=The%20American%20Psychology%20Association%20\(APA,and%20that%20of%20next%20generations%E2%80%9D.](https://www.iberdrola.com/social-commitment/what-is-ecoanxiety#:~:text=The%20American%20Psychology%20Association%20(APA,and%20that%20of%20next%20generations%E2%80%9D.)

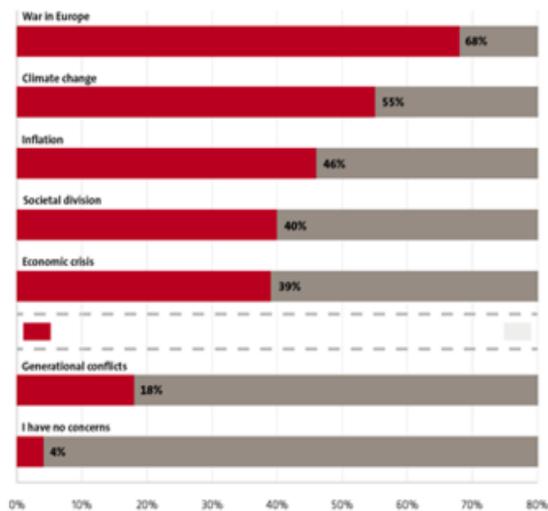
¹¹ In a major study of young people aged 16 to 25 published in *The Lancet* last year, 75% said the “future is frightening” and more than half said “humanity is doomed.” The study is to be found here: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3918955

¹² <https://natureandthecity.ch/junge-menschen-leiden-unter-oeko-angst/>

¹³ <https://www.dw.com/en/fridays-for-future-protests-call-for-peace-and-climate-justice/a-61264847>

Actually, the level of green consciousness is quite interesting for a group whose dominant political affiliation should rather make confident that science, technology and innovation will eventually deliver a holistic solution. Instead, there were both doubts at the public discourse and a kind disbelief at the current situation: *our education did not prepare us to the world we have to live in.*

Question: "What economic and social issues are you concerned about?"



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- The stuff currently we only had in mind as far as the Corona crisis, was growth, growth, growth. We just forgot a lot of things. One has only consumption in the head.

3. The question of radicalism

No wonder then that, here and there throughout Germany, the 2021 elections brought so much more young people to the polls. As a matter of fact, they do still turn out quite less than the older parts of the electorate (70 to 72% for the younger ones, against 80% for the 50-69 yo)¹⁴ but this time, they did vote more than the previous ones (+3,9 for the 21-29 yo compared

¹⁴

https://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/dam/jcr/8ad0ca1f-a037-48f8-b9f4-b599dd380f02/btw21_heft4.pdf

to the last election)¹⁵. And they voted explicitly for a kind of change – whether green or liberal¹⁶.

A strong demand for action and tackling the challenges too long delayed during the previous mandates: it was in fact the “Merkel generation” coming of age that flocked to the polls to demand a “reorientation” of the society – its priorities, its production model, its pension system and its overall fairness¹⁷.

Obviously, for such a politically aware group voting comes naturally. They consider it even as the first basic duty owed to the community, and to the future: *I think it's a shame, especially when young people don't vote, because we are the future. We are the future generation of this country and of Europe.* For them, it’s about taking responsibility, and partaking to the society.

- Even if I don't feel affiliated to a party myself, I have the feeling that I would like to have a say in who makes the decisions. No matter whether it's Europe-wide, Germany-wide or in the local council and in my village.

But beyond voting, there is a whole world of action. As sociologist Norbert Schäuble, of the Sinus Institute for Market and Social Research, noted if these young voters representing the “future milieus”, as he calls them, are united in their concerns for the future, they more often diverge when it comes to the means of action and ranking priorities.

It might have been the most salient argument in the group, when it came to radicalism and having your voice heard. The presence of two elected officials, one of them being of their parents’ age triggered also a discussion on whether the younger generation is being heard or not. Especially when it comes to the climate and ecological emergencies.

Is it a *privilege of the youth to speak louder*, or a necessity when you see the failure of the institutions in their responses? The question is beyond

¹⁵ https://www.destatis.de/EN/Press/2022/01/PE22_036_14.html

¹⁶ <https://www.ft.com/content/91090a03-5ba9-41f7-9cd5-846f07d72fa2>

¹⁷ <https://www.dw.com/en/german-youth-voted-for-change-but-what-does-that-really-mean/a-59379884>

rhetorical, in fact. With nuances, there was a feeling that the current political system is not entirely functioning as it should.

For instance, one participant questioned the purpose of politics, if the whole game just amounts to communication and PR stunts. In their eyes, the overwhelming obsession for spin and public relations can take over the substance of the work and the reality of the actions.

- I also very much feel, as an outsider, that political work has to level a lot. I find extremely irritating and extremely annoying all the pictures and videos that are made for Facebook, Insta, etc. And I don't know what percentage of the work is just also from local elections just taking pictures, making videos.

In other words, politicians, even those they trust, have to level up. And meet the challenge of a demanding youth. Primarily by listening to the science and the scientists¹⁸.

There was the brief, interesting and not so unfamiliar suggestion raised in the group that too often the men and women within the institutions should be, perhaps not replaced but bound by a more “technocratic” level of power – or at least by people who would not try to bend over the facts to their political agenda.

However, overall, the group lamented that the voices of the youth are not heard enough. While for some participants it might justify *talking louder* and perhaps a kind of radicalism, for a majority of the others, the risks of polarization in the public debate and the society are too great.

- Maybe some of the radical side think that only the big, the high politicians decide everything while the rest of them is just not listened to. I think that currently the two sides are drifting apart a bit and it just goes on and on.

¹⁸ The best and most famous example being: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/sep/18/greta-thunberg-testimony-congress-climate-change-action>

You have to find a way to stop it.

The evident danger here is to pit an “us” (the people, the citizens, the young ones, etc.) versus “them” (the elites, the politicians, the adults, etc.), which constitutes the fertile ground for populist behaviour and the political movements they inspire – to be noted, in the discussion, the only mention of Germany’s political radical (and far-right) populist movement, namely the AfD, came from the elected Members of the Regional Parliament.

All in all, because of their political commitment, and for some, their participation to the institutions, the group was quick to dispel the kind of risk posed by the populist radicalisation. But the question whether one should raise their voice, and take more radical action in face of the coming emergencies, remained open – and pending.

Additionally, the group observed with concern the polarization of the society they live in. All participants did consider that the gradual disappearance of the middle ground is damaging the public discussion and eventually harming democracy.

- This can also be best observed in America with the two parties that always clash quite radically. And there is also in Europe as a whole. For example, also in Poland our neighbours, there are also very radical movements, where abortions are banned and everything and it's right next to us...

As the US example underpins, this is *not only a German and European problem*; and the impression of helplessness in the face of the divisions is growing.

- I have the feeling that there is no longer a remedy.

A feeling perhaps more strongly felt by participants directly involved into party politics, whose message is increasingly difficult to convey in a heightened militant and partisan context.

The increasing polarization is echoed in their view in the solidarity behaviours. Entire parts of the society seem to fall into selfish patterns, while other keep a strong commitment to welcoming refugees, caring for the elderly, the weak and the poor.

- ...and then there are the others who say they don't want to do anything, they only want to look after themselves, they would prefer to have the borders closed and not help at all.

- Overall I see that there are just these two extremes in the helpful people who are very involved in society and then also people who rather take themselves out. »

Is it a mark of the weakening of the old church-based solidarity networks? Or an individualistic response to the challenges of a bitter economic and social crisis? Or the reflection of a persistent East/West divide in the country? As a matter of fact, while none of the participants declared any specific and explicit faith affiliation, they tended to uphold the humanist and generous values of human fellowship.

4. Education and privilege

These kind-hearted feelings might have something to do with education. At several occasions, the group voiced their awareness of being educated. And considered that it meant both a great chance and a great responsibility.

In their view, education is the answer to most of the challenges faced by the society and their generation. It is a lack in education that endangers democracy and feeds the polarisation; that weakens the solidarity; that hinders the response to the environmental urgency.

- So I think that education is the biggest key, also in the whole world. [...], it has both sides in individuals and for society and each individual

should be a role model, which is then also reflected again and again on society and so then also steer society in the right direction.

Education is a way to embrace complexity – and hence to acknowledge the many perspectives, including the diverging or contradictory ones. *All the issues are too complex in our world* to condone only one side, one aspect, one version of the problems. Education is the bedrock of the *willingness to compromise [... and] create something together, with which everyone is reasonably happy*. That's the beauty of democracy, a kind of togetherness – which is now threatened by the herds of self-righteous ignorant flooding the social networks to shove their version of the world down the throat of their fellow citizens.

- They polarize also through the Internet. Same minds, so same opinions together. And then among themselves they get radicalized even more.

Education is an open field of opportunities: it offers *all the possibilities to continue in Germany and Europe*, and to avoid the jobs you wouldn't feel aligned with. Most of them still students or relatively shielded from the hardships of the labour market, the participants expressed faith in the virtue of undertaking the studies you like and evolving.

This is the one moment when most of the optimism about the future was expressed – for them, and for everyone else.

- On the one hand, you have to make the labour market more transparent, and on the other hand, you simply have to help these people [victims of the economic crisis]. I am for the movement is becoming more and more that there are more unions in the companies and that you also look that the people are more satisfied. I believe also then it is the reputation of

the individual occupations also again better and one can develop it then also, if one says, okay, better working conditions are created, also in the handicraft.

Together, the future can be saved, it seems. *We have to work hard to make things better. And I believe that the professions that we will need in the future will then become more attractive again.* As the road to welfare and a peaceful, prosperous, harmonious society, education matters. A lot. And for this group of well-educated students and young professionals, citizens of a wealthy region in the most affluent and powerful Member state of the European Union, it sounds even like a privilege.

5. A responsible European youth

This awareness of being somewhat privileged was particularly striking in the group – and gave more depth to their personal political pledges. When the conversation turned to their own commitment in the society and the public sphere, it came with an emphasis on the responsibility that education entails. All the participants insisted quite extensively on the necessity of enhancing solidarity and cooperation and raising above the selfish limitation to personal interest – especially when it comes to tackling the pressing challenges of climate and environmental degradation.

The feeling that the older generation has perhaps a bit let go of its commitments to the future (and to them) came back at this point in the discussion.

- there should be in principle more people, especially older people, to really take responsibility.*
- one should not be censored when speaking*

But all in all, solidarity is rooted in the personal responsibility. The

combination of the many crises we currently have to face is *a very big challenge, which one can tackle actually only together and one must try to take along as many people as possible there. We have to get away from egoism.*

However political it might be, taking responsibility doesn't necessarily imply to be wearing a political label. It's the sense of community that matters and the ability to include everyone, namely the youth. As related by one participant: *in our community, for example, we have a youth council that is not a party, so the young people do not have to be in a party, but they are still allowed to have a say. And I believe that such forms are very important, that one listens to the youth, that one also gives them a certain power in quotation marks or in a certain framework, where they are allowed to participate, because then this, this culture, this disenchantment with politics, that all parties are bad and that politicians are basically all bad, that one can simply get rid of this by talking to each other.*

However it does entail awareness and education to foster the willingness to *work on ourselves a little bit, to create more acceptance, to show more consideration for nature, for the environment, to bring our eyes back down to earth a little bit and simply to see these problems that we have as an opportunity to grow together again and to approach things a little bit more gently and in a better way.*

A plea for combining the little steps and the big picture approaches, which reflects quite well the involvement of the participants in political movements, and the meaning they give to the sentiment of belonging to a community, whether at regional, national or European levels.

- [We should] have the commitment to get involved in the society. Because only if you get involved and actively participate, you can also change something.

It is a duty to get involved, to have a say, to contribute with his or her interest, ideas for the common future: this kind of inclusive and optimistic exhortation to democracy and political commitment was shared across the

table, whether politically active or not.

- Even if I don't feel affiliated to a party myself, I have the feeling that I would like to have a say in who makes the decisions. No matter whether it's Europe-wide, Germany-wide or in the local council and in my village.

From big to small and back again. The intertwined levels of political actions converge also on Europe. The European horizon came throughout the conversation as often as the regional and local ones.

Whether it's for future work opportunities, or studies, or simply to expand the borders of the community, Europe was on everyone's mind. Especially as the adequate scale to respond to this century's challenges.

- I think that in the next few years there will be great challenges for all of us and especially for young people. And that is why it's important that we think from the big to the small but also from the small to the big.

When it comes to Europe, their (millennial) older brothers and sisters may be quite disenchanted as this ECFR study from 2018 signalled¹⁹. But this group certainly wasn't. Perhaps because like a majority of the younger German generation they still do expect some very concrete positive things from Europe: "more environmental protection and justice".

Freedom to travel, of course. But above all climate change action, refugees welcome, growth within the limits of the planet, enhanced democracy, upheld global justice and cooperation, stronger solidarity... Germany's youth demands of the EU that it abides by its principles – that EU politics and EU policies finally match EU values.

A welcome statement of hope and optimism, in a certain way.

¹⁹

https://ecfr.eu/publication/the_young_and_the_restful_why_young_germans_have_no_vision_for_europe/