

European Youth Perceptions of EU Strengths and Challenges: Implications for Optimism About the Union's Future

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Abstract: *This study investigates the determinants of optimism about the future of the European Union (EU) among young adults by integrating perceptions of EU strengths and challenges with socio-demographic characteristics and cross-national variation. Drawing on data from the European Commission Flash Eurobarometer 556 conducted across EU member states, the analysis examines how European youth's evaluations of the EU's strengths and challenges shape optimism about the future of the EU. The findings indicate that optimism is primarily driven by positive assessments of tangible EU contributions, particularly regional investment, solidarity, climate action and democratic governance. In contrast, economic insecurity – especially concerns related to the cost of living – and migration-related challenges exert the strongest negative effects on optimism. Freedom of movement and developments in digital technologies, including artificial intelligence, do not exhibit statistically significant effects. Attitudinal factors outweigh socio-demographic characteristics, although higher educational attainment and urban residence are positively associated with optimism. Substantial cross-national differences persist even after controlling for individual-level covariates, highlighting the continued importance of the national context in shaping public attitudes toward the EU.*

Keywords: *EU youth, EU Optimism, EU Strengths, EU challenges*

Introduction

The process of European integration has repeatedly been tested by regional and global economic, political and institutional crises. Over the past decade alone, the European Union (EU) has faced a series of profound challenges, including

the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the Union (Brexit), the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. These events have generated significant politico-economic pressures, such as inflation, economic insecurity and the electoral rise of populist and Eurosceptic parties across several member states. Against this backdrop, one might reasonably expect younger generations in Europe to hold pessimistic views regarding the EU's institutional future.

Contrary to this expectation, recent evidence suggests a markedly optimistic outlook among European youth. According to the 2025 Flash Eurobarometer survey conducted among individuals aged 16–30 across all 27 EU member states, 72.6% of respondents express optimism about the future of the EU (European Commission 2025). This finding is particularly consequential, as today's young people will become the primary political, economic and social stakeholders of the Union in the coming decades. Their expectations regarding the EU's future therefore carry existential significance for the sustainability and legitimacy of European integration.

Public attitudes toward the EU constitute a well-established and multifaceted field of research. However, despite the extensive literature on support for or opposition to European integration, systematic empirical analyses focusing specifically on youth optimism about the future of the EU remain remarkably scarce. Existing studies largely concentrate on contemporaneous attitudes toward the EU or on general levels of support and Euroscepticism, often treating younger generations as part of broader age-based comparisons rather than as a focal group.

This study seeks to address this gap. Its central research question is: What factors are most strongly associated with optimism about the future of the EU among young adults in Europe, based on their perceptions of the EU's strengths and challenges? To answer this question, the paper proceeds as follows. First, it reviews the canonical literature on public attitudes toward the EU, highlighting the limited attention paid to youth-specific future-oriented optimism. Second, it describes the data and methodological approach in detail to facilitate replication. Third, it presents the empirical findings, which are subsequently discussed in relation to existing scholarship. The paper concludes by outlining the academic and policy implications of the findings, as well as the study's limitations.

Literature review

To start with, a conceptual distinction needs to be made between support for the EU and future-oriented optimism. As is evident, one does not directly translate into the other. An individual who supports the EU project may not necessarily be optimistic about its future, while someone who does not support the EU in its current form may still hold positive expectations regarding its future transformation. Therefore, it cannot be directly inferred that future-oriented optimism reflects present levels of EU support.

Nevertheless, keeping this distinction in mind, optimism can still be expected to constitute an important basis for the formation of positive attitudes towards the EU. Accordingly, drawing on the literature on EU support to gain insights into the factors shaping optimism about the EU's future can be mutually enriching.

Research on public attitudes toward the EU gained substantial momentum following the Maastricht Treaty (Hobolt & de Vries 2016). The literature identifies a broad range of explanatory factors, often grouped under different but conceptually overlapping frameworks. Hooghe and Marks (2005), for example, classify determinants of EU attitudes into 'calculation', 'community' and 'cues', referring respectively to economic considerations, identity-based factors and mediating influences such as political parties and the media.

Economic utilitarianism represents one of the most prominent explanatory approaches. At both the individual and national levels, perceptions of economic benefits have been shown to shape support for European integration (Gabel & Palmer 1995; Gabel 1998). When individuals perceive favourable economic outcomes, they are more likely to endorse the EU. Beyond material considerations, political and institutional factors also play a crucial role. Anderson (1998) argues that individuals with limited knowledge of EU institutions rely on cues from trusted domestic actors, such as political parties, to form opinions about integration. Sánchez-Cuenca (2000) emphasises democratic performance, suggesting that EU membership may enhance democratic standards in member states, thereby increasing public support.

Cognitive and informational factors further condition EU attitudes. Inglehart's (1970) concept of cognitive mobilisation highlights the importance of political knowledge, while subsequent studies underline the role of education in shaping EU support (Hakhverdian et al. 2013). Identity-based explanations, by contrast, stress the constraining effect of national identity and cultural concerns on EU approval (McLaren 2002; Carey 2002). Additional research points to the relevance of anti-immigration attitudes (de Vreese & Boomgaarden 2005), occupational status (Hooghe et al. 2007), political party affiliation (Steenbergen et al. 2007), institutional trust extrapolation (Harteveld et al. 2013) and media coverage (Brosius et al. 2019).

However, these analyses are generally not youth-specific. Research focusing explicitly on young people remains limited, particularly with respect to optimism about the EU's future. Stockemer and Anlar (2024) invite academics and practitioners to consider how they might contribute to addressing the problem of youth underrepresentation in contemporary political systems. Political science research has still not devoted sufficient attention to youth attitudes, even two decades after Furlong and Cartmel (2007: 121) highlighted the issue, attributing it to the perception that youth do not constitute a political group capable of swaying elections compared to older cohorts. Nevertheless, there are

compelling reasons to treat youth as a distinct analytical category rather than subsuming them within the broader population, as they experience specific forms of inequality and marginalisation that warrant recognition (Bayat 2010).

Youth constitutes a crucial analytical focus because many individuals form their political orientations during early stages of life. The development of habits of political participation is well documented to begin early in the life cycle (Hooghe et al. 2004). In addition, young people exhibit different citizenship norms that shape their engagement with political structures (Dalton 2008). They often adopt non-conventional forms of political participation, relying more on latent modes of engagement than on party politics (Ekman & Amnå 2012). Moreover, young people tend not to rely on traditional modes of political participation (Bennett & Segerberg 2012). Taken together, these factors provide strong justification for treating youth as a distinct analytical category.

Some studies suggest that young people may exhibit higher baseline optimism about the future in general, even during periods of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Keating & Melis 2022), but these findings are not EU-specific. Earlier work by Convery et al. (1997) examined young people's attitudes toward the EU, emphasising the role of education, yet this study was descriptive, geographically limited and did not address future-oriented expectations. More recent research indicates that youth mobility increases approval of the EU (Mazzoni et al. 2018), while perceived economic benefits motivate young people to favour EU membership (Cores-Bilbao et al. 2020).

Other strands of literature, though not directly focused on EU attitudes, offer relevant insights. Baillergeau and Duyvendak (2022) argue that young people's future aspirations are shaped by socioeconomic conditions and access to information about alternative futures. Trunk et al. (2022) show that youth attitudes vary systematically depending on whether respondents come from newer democracies or long-established democratic systems. Abbas and McNeil-Willson (2025), while not studying EU attitudes directly, find that young people facing relative economic hardship are more susceptible to extremist ideologies – an observation that is indirectly informative given the predominantly anti-EU orientation of extremist movements.

Taken together, the literature provides a rich understanding of the determinants of EU attitudes but offers limited insight into how young Europeans evaluate the future of the Union. This constitutes a significant gap in the literature.

Contribution of the present study

Existing research spans a wide range of analytical perspectives, including pro- and anti-EU orientations, individual- and country-level determinants, varying geographical scopes and diverse explanatory variables such as economic conditions, identity and sociodemographic characteristics. However, this literature

is overwhelmingly retrospective, focusing on current or past evaluations of the EU rather than future-oriented expectations.

Despite the policy relevance of younger generations' outlooks, there is a striking absence of systematic academic research explicitly examining youth optimism about the future of the EU. While large-scale datasets frequently include young respondents, they rarely centre youth as an analytical focus. Searches conducted in major academic databases such as Web of Science and Scopus reveal only a few studies dedicated specifically to this question. Existing reports produced by the European Commission and other governmental or non-governmental organisations remain largely descriptive and do not offer multivariate or comparative analytical frameworks.

This study addresses this gap by examining how young Europeans' perceptions of the EU's strengths and challenges are associated with optimism about its future. Using a large, harmonised, cross-national survey covering all EU member states, the analysis models evaluative dimensions while controlling for sociodemographic characteristics and country-fixed effects. The empirical strategy aims to document robust patterns of association. Methodologically, the study employs binary logistic regression with country-fixed effects and post-stratification weights, allowing for systematic cross-national comparison while accounting for heterogeneity across member states. Substantively, the contribution lies in the integrated analysis of perceived strengths and challenges within a single framework, offering an account of how different evaluations align with optimism about the EU's future among young adults. In the literature, the effects of objective and subjective factors have been widely examined, yielding differing and often mixed results. The relationships between these factors and the dependent variables are typically designed to draw inferences from non-opinion-based and non-perceptual variables. However, within the current research design, I argue that it is more direct to identify influencing factors based on respondents' own evaluations of the EU. How they perceive the EU's strengths, what they believe these strengths imply and how they assess the challenges facing the EU constitute a more direct way to decipher the dynamics between optimism and pessimism regarding its future. By doing so, the study advances ongoing debates on public attitudes toward European integration and provides a foundation for future causal research on EU optimism and EU perceptions.

Data and method

The analysis is based on data from Flash Eurobarometer 556 (EU Commission, 2025). The working dataset contains 25,920 observations, covering respondents from 27 EU member states. Post-stratification weights ('WEIGHT RESULT FROM TARGET') are applied in all analyses. According to information provided

on the survey's official website, the dataset covers young people aged 16–30 across all 27 member states of the European Union. Data collection was conducted over a ten-day period, from 11 to 20 February 2025. Country samples are approximately evenly distributed, with around 1,000 respondents per country, and smaller samples for Cyprus ($n = 502$), Luxembourg ($n = 506$) and Malta ($n = 516$). Missing values are treated using user-defined missing value rules, and analyses are conducted using all cases with valid data for the variables involved.

Dependent variable

The original variable is derived from responses to the survey question, 'To what extent are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of the EU?' Responses were coded into four ordered categories ranging from 1 ('very optimistic') to 4 ('very pessimistic'), with an additional 'don't know' category. Given that this scale does not represent a natural ordinal continuum, the variable was recoded to capture a net binary measure of attitude.

Among respondents with valid data ($n = 24,467$), 24.9% report being very optimistic and 51.8% rather optimistic about the future of the European Union, while 18.7% report being rather pessimistic and 4.6% very pessimistic. Following recoding, the EU optimism variable was operationalised as a binary indicator, with valid responses coded as 1 = optimistic and 0 = pessimistic. Overall, 5.6% of the total sample were treated as system missing. Of the full sample, 24,467 respondents (94.4%) provided valid responses. Among these respondents, 72.4% were classified as optimistic and 22.0% as not optimistic. Although dichotomising the variable reduces its granularity, it facilitates a clear and interpretable modelling approach using logistic regression. The response distribution demonstrates a distinct separation between optimistic and pessimistic categories, supporting the analytical distinction employed. Nonetheless, it is acknowledged that this recoding entails a potential loss of information, and future research could consider alternative modelling strategies if more finely graded measures are available.

Independent variables

The model includes binary indicators capturing respondents' perceptions of the European Union's strengths (Q3) and current challenges facing the EU (Q6). Specifically, Q3 asks 'In your opinion, which of the following do you think are the main strengths of the EU?', while Q6 asks 'Which of the following do you think are the current main challenges the EU is facing?' Each item is operationalised as a dichotomous variable indicating whether the respondent selected the respective option. The options for both questions are listed in table 1 regression model.

In addition, the model controls for a set of individual-level covariates. Employment status is measured by the question ‘Are you currently in work?’ and coded as 1 = full-time employment, 2 = part-time employment and 3 = not employed, with ‘don’t know’ responses treated as missing. Educational attainment is captured by the highest level of education or training completed, coded on a six-point scale ranging from lower than secondary education (1) to higher education (6); ‘don’t know’ responses are coded as missing. Gender is included as a binary indicator (0 = male, 1 = female). Type of community is measured on a three-category scale distinguishing rural areas (1), small towns (2) and large cities (3). Finally, country-fixed effects are included for all 27 EU member states, with Sweden serving as the reference category. In the preliminary exploratory analyses, age was tested in the model as a separate variable. However, the results indicated that it did not contribute meaningfully to the model, while increasing the risk of multicollinearity with other socio-demographic variables. For this reason, age was excluded from the final specification.

The sample is broadly balanced by gender, with 51.6% of respondents identifying as male and 48.4% as female among those with valid responses. With respect to place of residence, 24.9% of respondents reside in rural areas or villages, 41.5% live in small or medium-sized towns and 33.7% reside in large towns or cities. Among respondents with valid information on educational attainment ($n = 9,912$), 36.7% report having completed higher education. Employment status data indicate that 43.7% of respondents are in full-time employment, 21.4% are employed part-time and 34.9% are not currently working.

A binary logistic regression model was estimated with EU optimism as the dependent variable. All Q3 and Q6 items, sociodemographic control variables and country-fixed effects were entered simultaneously using the Enter method. Due to missing data on some covariates, the final model was estimated on 8,830 cases. The decrease from the original dataset to the final analytical sample is primarily attributable to the requirements of binary logistic regression analysis, which relies on complete-case observations. That is, respondents are excluded listwise if they have missing values on any of the variables included in the model. As a result, individuals who provided partial responses across survey items could not be retained in the regression analysis. In addition, ‘don’t know’ and other non-substantive responses were treated as missing values and therefore contributed to the reduction in sample size. However, the final sample remains relatively large ($N = 8,830$), supporting the robustness of the statistical analysis and allowing for a reasonable degree of generalisability.

Model fit was evaluated using the Omnibus Test of Model Coefficients, pseudo- R^2 statistics, the Hosmer–Lemeshow goodness-of-fit test and overall classification accuracy. All analyses apply the post-stratification weights provided with the dataset to ensure representativeness. Reported values are weighted accordingly. Multicollinearity among the predictors was assessed using Toler-

Table 1: Results for the Binary Logistic Regression Model^a

95% C.I

Independent Variables	b	SE	Exp(b)	(Wald)	Lower	Upper
Strengths of the EU						
The freedom of movement	0.115	0.059	1.121	(3.734)	0.998	1.260
The standard of living	0.663	0.065	1.940	(104.611)***	1.709	2.203
Capacity to create jobs	0.888	0.079	2.429	(126.000)***	2.080	2.836
Commitment to democracy	0.798	0.068	2.220	(139.599)***	1.945	2.534
Trade power and competitiveness	0.735	0.068	2.085	(117.227)***	1.825	2.381
EU investment in regions	1.003	0.074	2.726	(183.396)***	2.358	3.152
Innovation and research	0.606	0.078	1.833	(60.306)***	1.573	2.136
Solidarity between countries	0.840	0.063	2.317	(177.018)***	2.048	2.623
Position in the world	0.660	0.069	1.936	(91.449)***	1.691	2.216
Protecting the climate	0.944	0.072	2.570	(173.400)***	2.234	2.958
Challenges of the EU						
Inequalities	-0.437	0.067	0.646	(42.358)***	0.566	0.737
The cost of living	-0.712	0.062	0.491	(131.291)***	0.434	0.554
Conflicts and instability	-0.412	0.063	0.662	(42.425)***	0.585	0.750
Environmental issues	0.036	0.070	1.037	(0.269)	0.904	1.190
Irregular migration	-0.688	0.063	0.503	(117.515)***	0.444	0.569
Terrorism and organized crime	-0.416	0.064	0.660	(41.866)***	0.582	0.749
Digital technologies	0.028	0.087	1.028	(0.103)	0.868	1.218
Disinformation	-0.253	0.069	0.776	(13.552)***	0.679	0.888
Unfair competition	0.048	0.086	1.049	(0.311)	0.887	1.241
Declining competitiveness	-0.481	0.084	0.618	(32.779)***	0.524	0.729
Socio-demographics						
Employment	0.027	0.033	1.027	(0.665)	0.963	1.097
Highest level of education	0.121	0.020	1.129	(35.847)***	1.085	1.175
Gender	-0.200	0.054	0.819	(13.793)***	0.737	0.910
Type of community	0.169	0.036	1.184	(22.442)***	1.104	1.269
Country (ref.: Sweden)						
Belgium	0.319	0.186	1.376	(2.956)	0.956	1.979
Bulgaria	0.076	0.179	1.079	(0.179)	0.759	1.533
Czechia	-0.525	0.163	0.592	(10.382)**	0.430	0.814
Denmark	0.987	0.200	2.682	(24.246)***	1.811	3.973
Germany	-0.990	0.183	0.372	(29.156)***	0.260	0.532
Estonia	0.572	0.174	1.772	(10.755)**	1.259	2.495

Independent Variables	b	SE	Exp(b)	(Wald)	Lower	Upper
Ireland	1.452	0.235	4.270	(38.304)***	2.696	6.761
Greece	0.353	0.171	1.423	(4.233)*	1.017	1.992
Spain	-0.708	0.188	0.492	(14.182)***	0.341	0.712
France	-1.049	0.168	0.350	(39.160)***	0.252	0.487
Croatia	-0.208	0.169	0.812	(1.528)	0.583	1.130
Italy	-0.112	0.178	0.894	(0.399)	0.631	1.266
Cyprus	1.174	0.226	3.234	(26.972)***	2.076	5.035
Latvia	0.585	0.180	1.794	(10.535)**	1.261	2.554
Lithuania	0.602	0.179	1.827	(11.359)**	1.287	2.593
Luxembourg	0.634	0.252	1.885	(6.315)*	1.150	3.089
Hungary	0.572	0.182	1.772	(9.848)**	1.240	2.534
Malta	1.692	0.336	5.431	(25.394)***	2.812	10.490
Netherlands	0.217	0.169	1.242	(1.638)	0.891	1.732
Austria	0.292	0.180	1.339	(2.630)	0.941	1.905
Poland	-0.209	0.186	0.811	(1.260)	0.563	1.169
Portugal	0.672	0.180	1.959	(13.983)***	1.377	2.787
Romania	0.854	0.215	2.349	(15.753)***	1.541	3.582
Slovenia	-0.196	0.166	0.822	(1.400)	0.594	1.137
Slovakia	0.072	0.169	1.074	(0.179)	0.771	1.496
Finland	0.454	0.183	1.575	(6.165)*	1.100	2.254
Constant	-0.477	0.203	0.621	(5.538)*		

Model statistics:

N = 8,830

$\chi^2(50) = 1,942.206$, $p < .001$

Cox & Snell $R^2 = 0.192$

Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.276$

Hosmer–Lemeshow $\chi^2(8) = 9.962$, $p = .268$

Classification accuracy = 77.2%

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

^aDependent variable: Optimism about the Future of the EU (0 = pessimistic, 1 = optimistic)

Source: Author

ance and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) statistics. All independent variables exhibited Tolerance values ranging from 0.770 to 0.989 and VIF values between 1.011 and 1.299, indicating low correlation among predictors. These results suggest that multicollinearity is not a concern, and the regression coefficients can be interpreted with confidence.

Results

A binary logistic regression was conducted to examine factors associated with optimism about the future of the European Union (0 = pessimistic, 1 = optimistic). The model included perceived strengths and challenges of the EU, sociodemographic characteristics and country-fixed effects (with Sweden as the reference category), based on a sample of 8,830 respondents.

The full model was statistically significant with Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients, $\chi^2(50) = 1,942.206$, $p < .001$, indicating that the predictors reliably distinguished between pessimistic and optimistic respondents. The model explained 19.2% (Cox & Snell R^2) to 27.6% (Nagelkerke R^2) of the variance in EU optimism (-2 Log likelihood = 8942,574). The Hosmer–Lemeshow goodness-of-fit test was non-significant, $\chi^2(8) = 9.962$, $p = .268$, suggesting acceptable model fit. Overall classification accuracy was 77.2%, with particularly high accuracy for optimistic respondents (92.5%) and more limited performance for non-optimistic cases (39.1%), reflecting the skewed distribution of the dependent variable.

All predictors correspond directly to survey items and are theoretically motivated. The effective sample size is well above conventional thresholds for logistic regression given the number of predictors. Model diagnostics, including the Omnibus Test of Model Coefficients, pseudo- R^2 statistics and the Hosmer–Lemeshow test, indicate stable estimation and good overall fit. These results suggest that overfitting is unlikely. Estimates are reported transparently, and no selective interpretation of insignificant coefficients was performed, in line with best practices for survey-based regression analysis.

Perceptions of EU strengths are strongly and positively associated with optimism about the EU's future. Among these, EU investment in regions emerges as the most influential predictor (OR = 2.73, $p < .001$), indicating that respondents who perceive regional investment as a key EU strength have substantially higher odds of optimism. Similarly, large effects are observed for protecting the climate (OR = 2.57), capacity to create jobs (OR = 2.43), solidarity between countries (OR = 2.32) and commitment to democracy (OR = 2.22), all of which are statistically significant at $p < .001$.

Other perceived strengths – such as standard of living, trade power and competitiveness, position in the world, and innovation and research – also significantly increase the likelihood of optimism, though with comparatively smaller effect sizes. In contrast, freedom of movement does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. Overall, these findings indicate that evaluations of the EU's economic performance, redistributive capacity and normative foundations exert the strongest positive influence on future-oriented optimism.

Perceived EU challenges are predominantly associated with lower levels of optimism. The strongest negative effect is observed for the cost of living (OR

= 0.49, $p < .001$), suggesting that economic strain substantially undermines positive expectations about the EU's future. Similarly, irregular migration (OR = 0.50), declining competitiveness (OR = 0.62), inequalities (OR = 0.65), and terrorism and organised crime (OR = 0.66) significantly reduce the odds of optimism.

By contrast, concerns related to environmental issues, digital technologies and unfair competition do not exhibit statistically significant associations with the outcome. Taken together, these results highlight the primacy of material and security-related concerns over more abstract or technological challenges in shaping EU-related pessimism.

Among socio-demographic variables, education has a positive and statistically significant effect (OR = 1.13, $p < .001$), indicating that higher levels of educational attainment are associated with greater optimism about the EU's future. Gender also exhibits a significant effect (OR = 0.82, $p < .001$), with females expressing systematically lower optimism. Additionally, respondents living in more urbanised communities are more likely to be optimistic (OR = 1.18, $p < .001$). Employment status, however, is not significantly related to optimism once other factors are controlled for.

Substantial cross-national variation is evident relative to Sweden (reference category). Respondents in Ireland, Malta, Cyprus and Denmark display markedly higher odds of optimism, while respondents in France, Germany, Spain and Czechia are significantly less optimistic. These country effects remain sizeable even after accounting for individual-level attitudes and socio-demographic characteristics.

Discussion

This study investigates the determinants of optimism regarding the future of the European Union (EU) by integrating perceived EU strengths, perceived challenges, socio-demographic characteristics and country-level variation. Overall, the findings are highly consistent with the broader literature on EU public opinion, which emphasises the centrality of utilitarian evaluations, perceived institutional performance and national contextual factors in shaping citizens' attitudes toward European integration.

Contrary to the argument advanced by Ward et al. (2025), who contend that EU regional policy exerts only a limited influence on public support for the EU, the present analysis identifies EU investment in regions as the most influential among perceived EU strengths. This finding is substantively meaningful, suggesting that young people across Europe value the governance logic underlying EU regional policy and perceive territorial investment as a tangible and credible contribution of the Union. In this respect, the results corroborate the recent findings of Debus and Schweizer (2025).

Perceptions of EU solidarity and climate protection emerge as strong, positive predictors of optimism. These findings suggest that the more the EU is perceived as caring for both people and the environment across its regions, the more likely young citizens are to express optimism about its future, echoing Ronald Inglehart's (1970) concept of cognitive mobilisation.

The effects of regional investments, together with EU policies aimed at job creation, underscore the primacy of utilitarian factors in shaping EU optimism, in line with Gabel and Palmer (1995) and Gabel (1998). The protection of democratic and representative standards also constitutes one of the EU's key benefits, consistent with the findings of Sánchez-Cuenca (2000).

In the literature, freedom of movement is generally associated with immigration, which is often framed in terms of concerns over national identity (de Vreese & Boomgaarden 2005). By contrast, and somewhat unexpectedly, freedom of movement does not exert a statistically significant effect on EU optimism in the present model. This may suggest that, for younger generations, freedom of movement is perceived as a secondary or taken-for-granted benefit of EU membership, whose value depends on the presence of more fundamental economic, social and normative achievements.

Perceived challenges largely mirror the pattern observed for perceived strengths. Economic concerns – particularly those related to the cost of living – constitute the most powerful predictors of pessimism about the EU's future. In line with previous studies, EU youth expect European institutions to ensure economic stability, price control and protection against inflation. This finding reinforces the enduring explanatory power of economic evaluations in shaping EU attitudes, as demonstrated by Gabel and Palmer (1995) and Gabel (1998). Moreover, perceptions of inequality significantly increase pessimism, underscoring the continued salience of solidarity-related concerns among younger cohorts. Security-related challenges – including terrorism, organised crime and irregular migration – also diminish optimism, reflecting expectations that the EU should function as a guarantor of peace, stability and internal security. These variables are consistent with the findings of McLaren (2002) and Carey (2002) regarding identity-based predictors of EU attitudes.

Interestingly, developments in digital technologies, including artificial intelligence, do not exhibit significant predictive power with respect to EU optimism. Despite widespread media coverage emphasising the potentially disruptive effects of AI on employment, young respondents do not appear to perceive digital transformation as a threat to the EU's future. This suggests that younger generations may hold a more adaptive or opportunity-oriented view of technological change.

Consistent with post-materialist theory (Inglehart 1970) and subsequent empirical research (Hakhverdian et al. 2013), education emerges as a significant

determinant of EU optimism. Higher levels of educational attainment are associated with a greater likelihood of expressing optimism about the future of the EU.

With regard to gender, female respondents display slightly higher levels of pessimism than their male counterparts. However, given the mixed and often inconsistent findings reported in the literature, this result should not be interpreted as reflecting a stable gender-based attitudinal difference. Rather, it may point to differentiated experiences or perceived opportunity structures that affect young women's outlooks more negatively in certain contexts.

Consistent with evidence from Hegewald and Schraff (2025), the analysis confirms that urban residents are significantly more optimistic about the EU's future than those living in sparsely populated or rural areas. This enduring urban-rural divide once again underscores the importance of spatial and socio-economic context in shaping attitudes toward European integration.

Diverging from Hooghe et al. (2007), employment status does not emerge as a significant predictor in the model. Although this finding may appear surprising given the exclusive focus on young respondents, it is plausible that unemployed youth anticipate future labour market integration, thereby attenuating the direct relationship between current employment status and EU optimism.

Substantial cross-national differences are also evident. Youth in smaller and peripheral member states – such as Ireland, Malta, Cyprus and Denmark – are significantly more optimistic about the EU's future, whereas respondents from France, Germany, Spain and Czechia exhibit comparatively lower levels of optimism. These differences may reflect variations in national political discourse, perceived distributive burdens or country-specific experiences with EU policies, including migration-related challenges identified in the model.

Taken together, optimism about the EU's future is driven primarily by positive evaluations of its economic, redistributive and normative capacities, while concerns related to economic insecurity and migration exert the strongest negative effects. Attitudinal factors outweigh socio-demographic characteristics, and considerable cross-national variation persists even after controlling for individual-level covariates.

Conclusion

Drawing on data from a large cross-national survey of young adults across the European Union, this study demonstrates systematic associations between optimism about the EU's future and individuals' perceptions of the Union's strengths and contemporary challenges. Optimism is more prevalent among respondents who identify multiple institutional, economic and normative strengths, and less prevalent among those who emphasise economic, social and global challenges.

These relationships remain robust after accounting for socio-demographic characteristics and country fixed effects, indicating that individual-level per-

ceptions play a central role in shaping future-oriented attitudes toward the EU across member states. At the same time, the persistence of substantial cross-national differences highlights the continued importance of national contexts in structuring public opinion.

Overall, the findings contribute to the literature on public attitudes toward European integration by demonstrating the coexistence of positive and negative evaluations within individuals' broader outlooks. They suggest that sustaining public optimism will depend largely on the EU's ability to deliver visible and effective outcomes in areas such as economic security, social cohesion and climate action.

Despite its contributions, the study is subject to several limitations. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference, and public attitudes may shift in response to evolving political and economic conditions. Furthermore, while country-fixed effects capture cross-national variation, they do not elucidate the specific national mechanisms underlying these differences.

Future research would benefit from the use of repeated cross-sectional data to examine how changes in perceived EU strengths and challenges shape optimism over time, as well as from the integration of macro-level indicators to better explain cross-national heterogeneity. Such approaches would deepen our understanding of the dynamics underlying public optimism about the European Union.

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