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Europeans: caught between confidence and the need for protection: the paradox of a Union that is 'necessary but distant'

Ipsos's analysis, based on data from the [Spring 2026 Eurobarometer survey](#), paints a picture of a Europe which, faced with persistent shocks – the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, instability in the Middle East and rising prices – is once again turning to the EU for stability. Average confidence in the European Union is on the rise and support for the euro remains at its highest level in recent years. But the picture is not cut and dried: there is both a growing demand for Europe to deliver on security, energy, health and migration, and a persistent perception of a bureaucratic Union that wastes money and struggles to control its borders. It is a 'love-hate' relationship; people want it to be stronger where necessary, but criticise it when it fails to meet immediate expectations or when decisions seem remote.

1) CONFIDENCE IS ON THE RISE, BUT VARIES SIGNIFICANTLY FROM COUNTRY TO COUNTRY: THE 'CASE OF FRANCE'

The key finding is clear: 'Europeans' confidence in the EU is growing'. On average, those who 'tend to have confidence' outnumber those who 'tend not to have confidence', indicating a positive balance compared with previous six-month periods. However, a breakdown by country reveals a patchy picture across Europe. Where the political and economic contexts are relatively stable and where the European Union is perceived as a shield (geopolitical, energy-related, regulatory), confidence clearly prevails.

Elsewhere, the public narrative of Europe as a 'constraint' or 'bureaucracy' dominates.

In this context, France stands out: a founding member of the European project which, in the latest surveys, shows levels of confidence below the European average. This is significant, as it refutes the notion that scepticism is the sole preserve of 'peripheral' or 'Mediterranean' countries in difficulty: here, a complex interplay of factors – high expectations of the Union, internal social tensions, political polarisation – fuels the perception of a 'demanding but largely absent Europe'. The political message could have serious repercussions: if a major founding democracy struggles to recognise the 'added value' of the EU, the entire European narrative suffers from a lack of relevance and a failure to deliver perceived results.

2) EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP: THE 'YES, BUT NOT EXACTLY'

When it comes to the question of identity, the picture is consistent with this ambivalence. The share of those who feel they are citizens of the Union remains high, but those who say 'yes, I definitely feel like a European citizen' are in the minority almost everywhere, whilst the majority respond 'yes, to a large extent'. The emotional connection to the EU is more often described as 'somewhat', and less often as 'very'. And when asked whether 'their voice is heard in Europe', the

proportion of those who are convinced remains limited. Europe, therefore, exists and is useful, but it is perceived as distant at times when citizens seek recognition, a listening ear and swift action. Yet Europeans know what unites them: when asked what creates a European community, 'democracy and the rule of law' (26 per cent) and 'culture' (24 per cent) top the list, followed by 'values' (22 per cent), 'history' (21 per cent) and 'the economy' (21 per cent). This provides valuable insight for building a new founding narrative: not merely the sum of material interests, but a coherent narrative of shared principles, history and creativity.

3) EUROPE'S REQUEST IS CLEAR AND PRAGMATIC

The clearest part of the survey concerns what citizens want from the European Union in the coming years. The priorities at European level for the next five years are as follows:

- Security and defence (36%)
- Economy/competitiveness (29%)
- Health (23%)
- Migration (22%)
- Climate and the environment (22%)
- Employment (22%)

This picture is borne out by the areas of expenditure in the EU budget that citizens consider to be priorities:

- Defence and security (39%)
- Immigration (24%)
- Climate/environment (23%)
- Agriculture and rural development (23%)
- Transport and energy infrastructure (21%)

Despite a lukewarm attitude towards Europe, European citizens would like to see common policies on various issues:

- Common security and defence policy (81%)
- Trade agreements with the highest social and environmental standards (81%)
- Common trade policy (77%) and common foreign policy (75%)

- Common energy policy (75%)
- Economic and Monetary Union with the euro (74%)
- Digital Single Market (71%)
- Common immigration policy (71%)
- Common health policy (68%)

This is a reassuring attitude at a time when 'sovereignist' political forces appear to be enjoying greater support than in the past. The data indeed paint a picture of European public opinion calling for greater integration precisely in those areas where individual states are structurally less effective (defence, energy, migration, health), with the realisation that, on many issues (not just cross-border ones), 'useful sovereignty' is best exercised collectively.

At the same time, the list of immediate concerns (the 'challenges for Europe') is dominated by:

- Conflict in the Middle East (25%)
- The international situation (23%)
- The war in Ukraine (20%)
- The cost of living (17%)
- Security and defence (15%)
- Energy supply (15%)
- Immigration (14%)
- Climate (8%)

Europe's priorities are therefore selective and specific: defence, energy, migration, health and competitiveness. It is an agenda focused on 'protecting freedoms' in an increasingly complex world.

4) WHY DO THE NEGATIVE ASPECTS DOMINATE THE NARRATIVE?

Three mechanisms explain the paradox between benefits that are often 'invisible' and highly visible criticisms.

- Visibility bias: European benefits are diffuse, everyday and taken for granted (free movement, consumer protection, environmental standards, etc.); the costs or constraints are concentrated and make the headlines (infringement proceedings, rules on national budgets, criteria and deadlines

for the allocation of funds). What makes a noise outweighs what underpins the system.

- Selective attribution and buck-passing: when things go well, the credit goes to national or local authorities; when things go wrong, 'it's Brussels' fault'. This is a tactic used by political actors facing difficulties or under pressure to secure support within their own country, which has a negative impact on the legitimacy of the European Union.
- Procedural distance: the European Union makes decisions following lengthy, multi-level processes. Without a 'face' or deadlines perceived as swift, the legitimacy of the outcome (output) struggles to offset the perception of weak legitimacy at the input stage, that is, the perception that each country has little say in the matter.

5) WHAT NEW FOUNDING NARRATIVE CAN 'WARM PEOPLE'S HEARTS'?

It is clear that Europe must set itself the goal of presenting itself in a different light so that it is perceived as being closer to its citizens, capable of translating its vision into emotion, as Bono, the lead singer of U2, said in 2018.

The historic 'three Ps' – peace, protection and prosperity – are not outdated: they must be adapted to the era of competition between major powers and the twin green and digital transitions. The evidence suggests a narrative that unites security, freedom and sustainability.

However, we need to reflect on what the guiding principle of the new narrative might be – for example, Europe as a community that protects freedoms (of movement, enterprise and expression) by making them resilient in an unstable world, and which passes them on intact to future generations through the green transition and innovation. These themes are consistent with the findings of the Eurobarometer:

- Peace, democracy and the rule of law: citizens cite these as the primary 'cornerstones' of their

identity. Common defence aims to preserve peace, not to militarise the Union.

- Common security and defence: at the top of the list of priorities and desired spending.
- Clean energy sovereignty: energy as a source of economic and geopolitical security, combined with climate and environmental considerations.
- Fair and competitive well-being: an economy that innovates and creates high-quality jobs.
- Caring for people: common health and a humane and effective management of migration, as a concrete expression of European solidarity.

This can be summarised as follows :

- Preserving freedoms (peace, rights, the rule of law).
- Empowering people (health, education, employment, mobility).
- Transforming our model (energy, climate, digital) to prosper without leaving anyone behind.

6) HOW CAN WE 'PRESENT' EUROPE IN SUCH A WAY THAT THE BENEFITS OUTWEIGH THE DRAWBACKS?

We need practical, measurable proposals that are relevant to everyday life, translating principles into concrete experience. There could be a wide range of actions, for example:

- For every new European measure, clearly set out the timelines, benefits and safeguards for citizens or businesses, with concrete examples from everyday life.
- Identification and traceability of funds: a visible 'EU label' on infrastructure, services and projects; publicly available, up-to-date maps showing construction sites and results; real-time trackers of local benefits (kilometres of network upgraded, students on exchange programmes, exporting businesses supported, etc.).
- Shared responsibility, but also shared credit: for every significant result, joint communication between the European Union, national government, regions and mayors. For every delay, a catch-up plan naming the person responsible and setting deadlines.

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- Communication with citizens as a strategic lever: listening, participation and feedback ("we have changed X because you told us Y").
- Measurable simplification: for example, targets for reducing processing times and administrative burdens when accessing funds; a single digital point of contact from the EU for SMEs and the third sector; public indicators showing 'days saved' per application.
- Creation of 'local ambassadors': networks of schools, GPs, chambers of commerce and the third sector, acting as 'storytellers' of European value, using simple resource packs, local data and regular micro-events.
- Highlighting the 'European dividend' through a personalised annual report entitled 'Your Year with the EU': rights exercised, estimated savings, and opportunities unlocked in your local area.
- The demand for Europe is strong and tangible: citizens want more of the EU, particularly where challenges transcend borders, and are prepared to support it if they see it as safeguarding freedoms and providing opportunities.
- The new founding narrative will not emerge from a slogan, but from the alignment of unifying values (peace, democracy, the rule of law, culture) with policies that protect and empower (common defence, clean energy sovereignty, health, orderly management of migration, sustainable competitiveness).

If the European Union can present itself as a 'home of secure freedoms' – protecting its citizens and strengthening, rather than undermining their freedoms – mistrust may diminish. And Europeans' ambivalence towards it, rather than being an obstacle, will become a driving force: that of a continent which, true to its motto '*in varietate concordia*', when put to the test, rediscovers its *raison d'être* in the fulfilled promise of peace, protection and prosperity, updated for the century of resilience and sustainability.

The latest Eurobarometer survey conveys three clear political messages.

- Average confidence in the European Union is rising, but it remains fragile and highly uneven: the significant decline in confidence recorded in France is not a mere detail, but a warning about the central importance of recognition and results.

Nando Pagnoncelli

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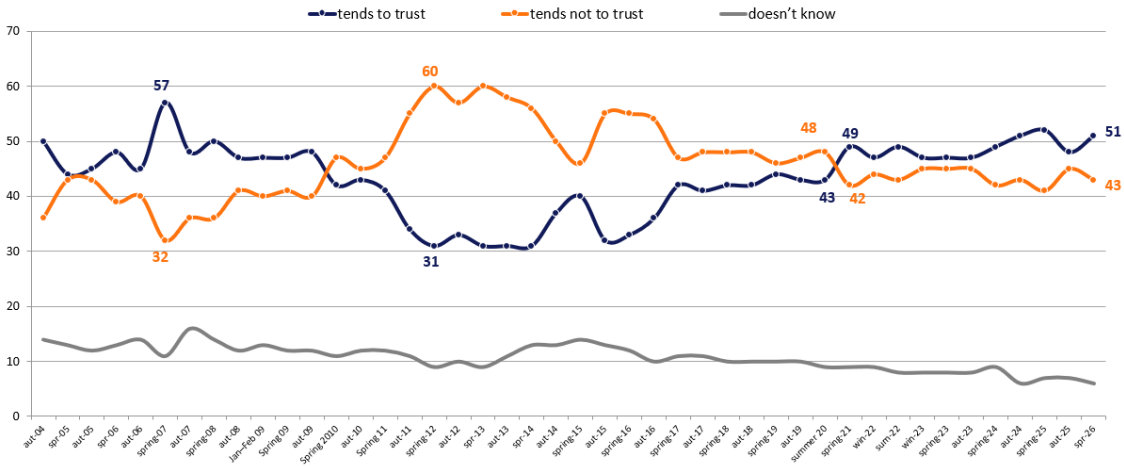
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Europeans' trust in the EU is on the rise

I would like to ask you a question about the level of trust you have in certain institutions. For each of the following institutions, please tell me whether you tend to trust them or not - EUROPEAN UNION



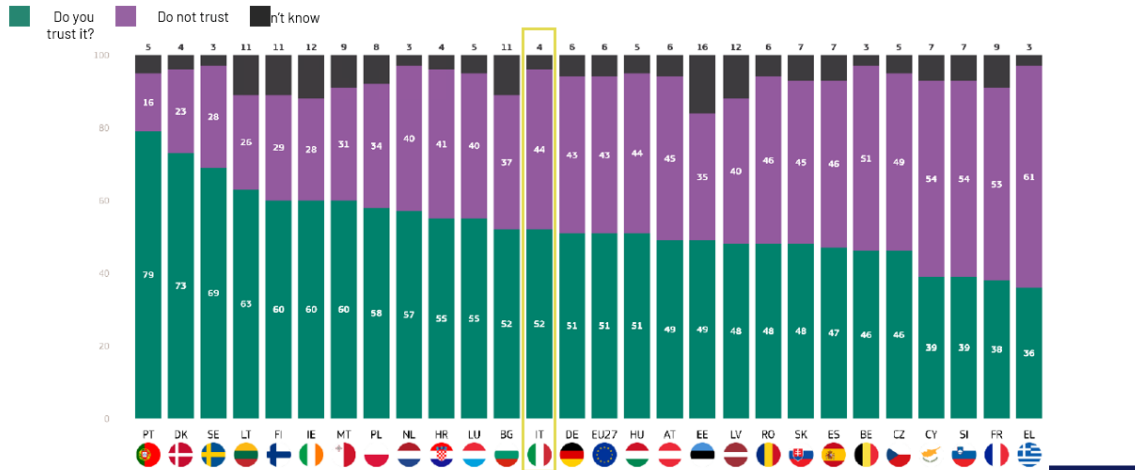
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Source: Eurobarometer Ipsos Doxa

Trust in the European Union: a breakdown by country

I'd like to ask you a question about the level of trust you have in certain institutions. For each of the following institutions, please tell me whether you tend to trust them or not - EUROPEAN UNION



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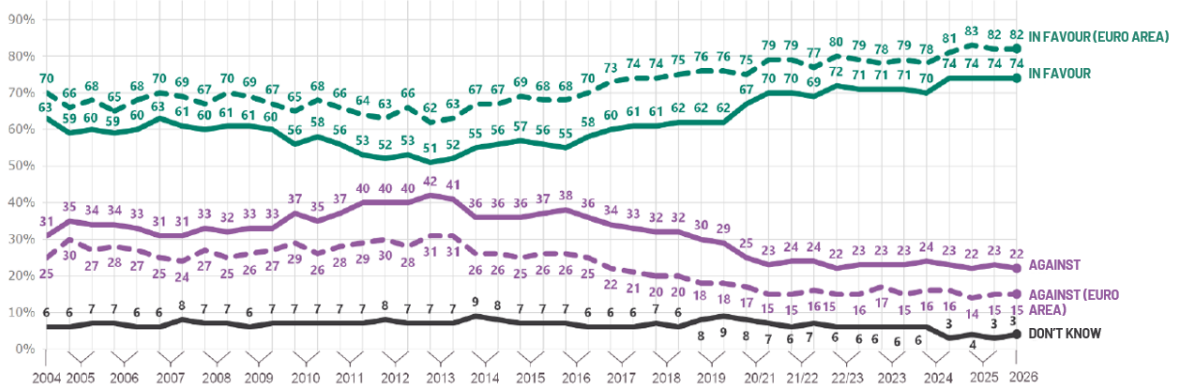
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Source: Eurobarometer Ipsos Doxa

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Support for the euro remains at its highest levels in recent years

Are you in favour of or against monetary union and the single currency?



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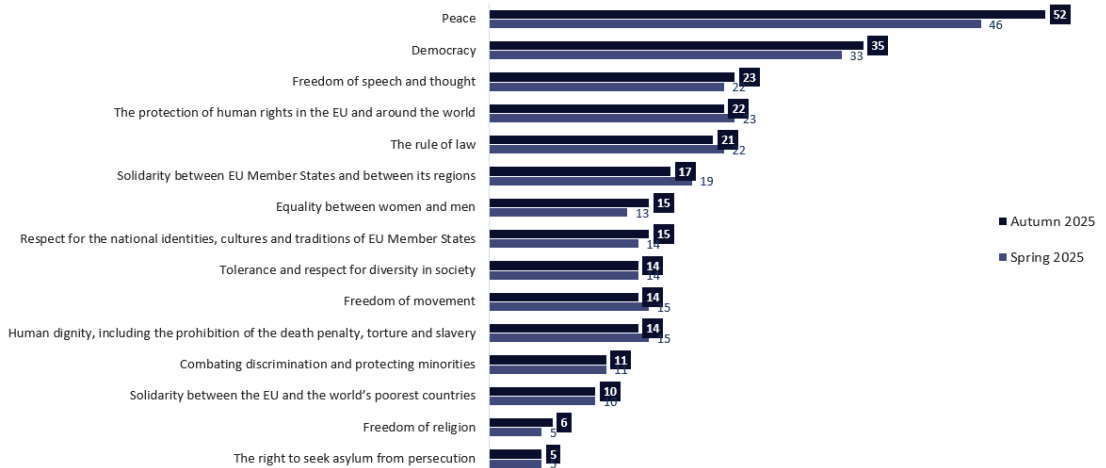
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Source: Eurobarometer



The values that the European Parliament must uphold

In your opinion, which of the following values should the European Parliament prioritise in its defence? First and foremost? And then?



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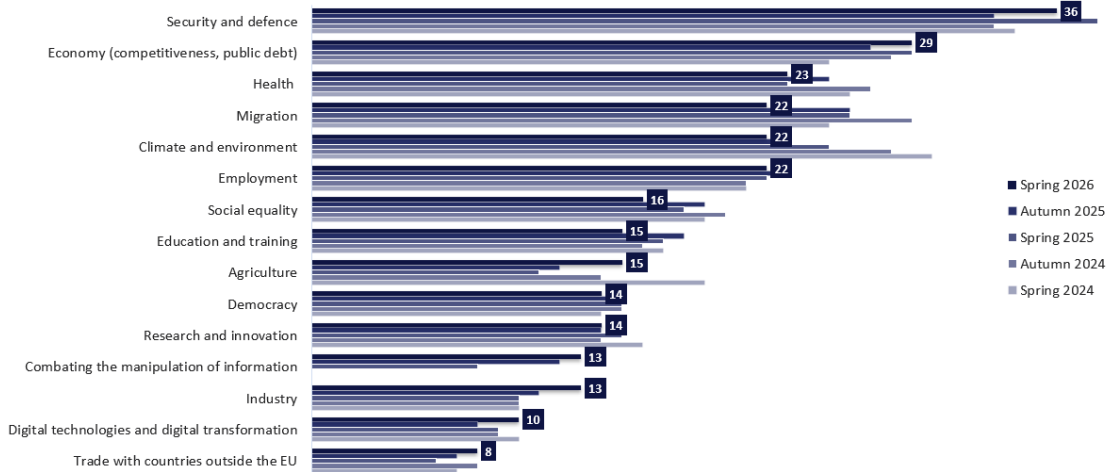
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Source: Eurobarometer
Multiple answers allowed (max 3 answers)



Citizens' priorities at European level

In your opinion, in which of the following areas should the EU take action in the medium term, i.e. over the next five years? First and foremost? And then?



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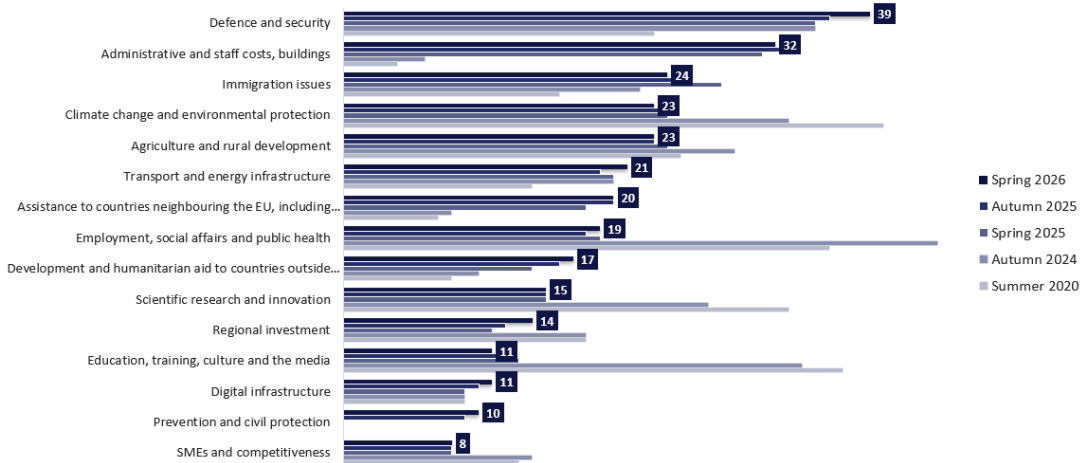
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Source: Eurobarometer
Multiple answers allowed (max 3 answers)



Priority areas for European investment for citizens

And which of the following areas would you like the EU budget to be spent on? First and foremost? And then?



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Source: Eurobarometer
Multiple answers allowed (max 3 answers)



Priority areas for European investment, as identified by citizens

And which of the following areas would you like the EU budget to be spent on? First and foremost? And then?

	EU27	BE	BG	CZ	DK	DE	EE	IE	EL	ES	FR	HR	IT	CY	LV	LT	LU	HU	MT	NL	AT	PL	PT	RO	SI	SK	FI	SE
Defence and security	39	45	37	40	48	41	44	34	37	33	43	35	36	48	48	56	46	35	36	51	30	42	21	33	43	33	43	42
Administrative and staff costs, buildings	32	27	31	20	29	50	21	23	46	38	20	26	35	28	19	19	35	15	33	22	31	22	30	17	34	30	35	30
Immigration issues	24	26	27	32	13	28	21	31	42	18	18	33	28	43	23	26	25	34	27	30	22	20	19	22	24	31	18	13
Climate change and environmental protection	23	21	21	28	30	23	35	27	30	18	23	23	20	15	18	18	16	21	18	35	30	23	22	15	19	25	27	25
Agriculture and rural development	23	21	17	20	54	28	17	24	14	12	26	19	14	17	17	20	23	24	15	39	52	22	17	20	21	16	37	59
Transport and energy infrastructure	21	19	25	21	21	19	28	26	29	23	18	22	22	16	15	24	20	18	17	18	24	17	20	20	23	20	30	32
Assistance to countries neighbouring the EU, including candidate countries	20	19	17	19	17	23	25	18	22	19	19	30	15	20	16	19	20	28	17	21	30	16	30	23	18	31	12	22
Employment, social affairs and public health	19	23	18	13	15	16	12	26	12	27	17	23	19	19	12	22	18	21	33	21	28	20	20	19	19	19	19	15
Development and humanitarian aid to countries outside the EU	17	14	15	18	19	18	17	17	12	16	13	22	18	13	13	12	23	12	19	25	16	19	18	14	20	8	15	
Scientific research and innovation	15	18	16	16	14	9	7	12	17	11	17	15	27	18	7	10	14	16	15	13	17	10	10	12	10	17	11	13
Regional investment	14	18	15	15	28	10	14	19	16	12	9	19	14	9	11	9	15	13	37	21	23	14	8	17	11	20	34	37
Education, training, culture and the media	11	13	11	9	8	4	10	17	11	16	13	16	15	16	12	11	13	13	24	10	11	8	11	17	8	11	3	6
Digital infrastructure	11	12	12	13	7	10	12	12	22	7	6	14	15	9	10	8	9	12	13	10	16	11	11	13	10	15	10	7
Prevention and civil protection	10	9	12	6	12	5	10	6	17	6	6	10	13	7	12	13	6	15	7	6	11	23	13	18	8	7	8	8
SMEs and competitiveness	8	11	9	7	10	5	6	9	6	7	9	11	9	7	4	8	9	14	11	6	11	6	10	9	9	11	9	

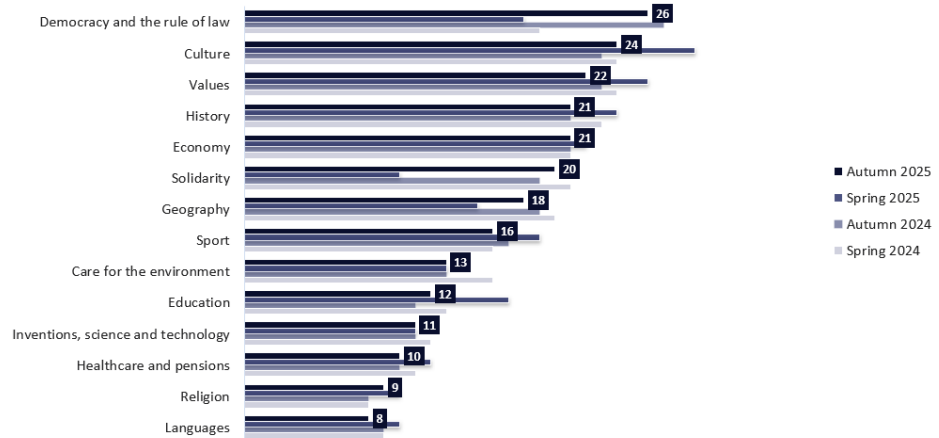
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Source: Eurobarometer Ipsos Doxa

A sense of European community is built through democracy and culture

In your opinion, which of the following issues do you think contribute most to creating a sense of community amongst EU citizens?

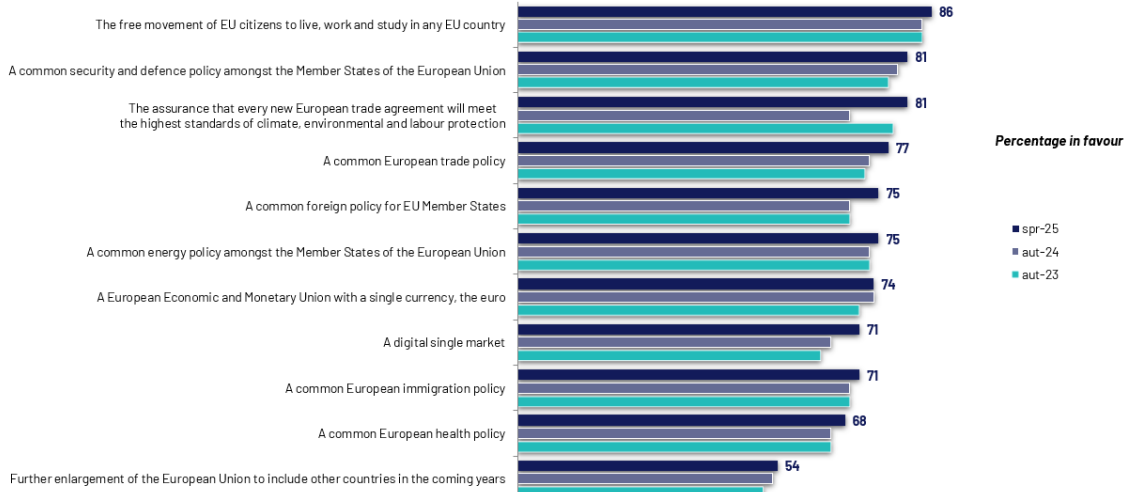


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Source: Eurobarometer Multiple answers allowed (max 3 answers) Ipsos Doxa

The Europe I would like to see: what citizens are asking of the European Union



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Source: Eurobarometer
Multiple-choice question (max. 3 answers)

