



Time to get real: How European institutions can reengage Europe's young people

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> Hello.

There's a group of people out there who are listening to more voices and ideas than any generation before. Who want to be engaged. Who want something, or someone to believe in. Who want a better world, and to do their bit to make that world a reality.

The problem?

If you're a European institution, they're probably not listening to you.

But with European parliamentary elections coming up, don't make the mistake of thinking that just because they've switched off from you, they're switched off from politics. To vote for someone, you have to believe in them. They should speak to you, about the things that impact your daily life. You need to hear from them about how they'll make your life better. You need to trust them to do it.

Today's young Europeans are now navigating a sea of competing voices, messages, and ideas. They face storms of fears and anxieties, from climate change to AI. And they're hearing lots of solutions, all while they're switched off by yours.

This guide will show you how to communicate with them better. Use it, and light up your comms to guide them back to our shared European vision before they are lost forever.



My inbox is full of guides telling me how to speak to Gen Z. Why should I bother reading this one?

It's a fair point. We get them too. But we've done things a little differently this time.

This guide is based on real conversations, with thousands of young people aged between 16 and 30 across 6 countries. But unlike other surveys, we didn't focus on whether individuals are 'for' or 'against' the EU or the idea of Europe. Instead, we asked whether they feel 'supported' or 'abandoned' by these institutions.

It delivered some startling results, which we'll share here.

Combine that data with the experience of the people at WIDE in Belgium and the analytical expertise of ICF's global team of specialists, and we've created the fresh insights you'll find here. We've also learned from the communicators who are doing a good job of talking to younger people—everyone from the gaming industry to populist political parties.

This guide turns those insights into practical actions that you can apply, right now, in your own comms. Ready?



How do Europe's young people really feel?

Let's begin with the data. The results showed that many are feeling **abandoned** and **disengaged** from the European Union and its institutions—people defined in the research as the 'Switched Off'.



Here are the key points:

- **Many young European citizens feel abandoned by the European Union (EU).** Percentages of the 'Switched Off' range from **39%** to **53%** across different countries.
- **This is the case even in the EU's leading countries.** France tops the list with **53%**, followed by Germany, Slovakia, and Sweden at **46%**, and Portugal and Poland at **39%**.
- **Young Europeans feel more abandoned by their politicians and national governments than the EU.** **73%** in Portugal, **65%** in Poland, **62%** in Slovakia, and **60%** in Germany and Sweden expressed this sentiment.
- **More 'older' young people (26-30) feel abandoned by the EU than the younger demographic (16-25).** **44%** of those aged 16-25 and **46%** of those aged 26-30 feel abandoned by the EU.
- **Negative perceptions of Europe are roughly equal** in both the Supported and Switched Off.
- **The Switched Off have many reasons for their feelings** towards the European Parliament and the EU:



76%

believe that the European Parliament does not **understand** their life.

74%

think it doesn't **care** about them.

74%

feel it doesn't **represent** them.

70%

think it isn't doing enough about the rising **cost of living**.

68%

believe it isn't doing enough good work on **climate**.

68%

feel it doesn't **defend the interests** of citizens. This has to do with issues around understanding, representation, and consideration.



Why are they feeling like this?

Interestingly, both supporters and those who feel abandoned have similar reasons for feeling negatively about the EU. Responses include:

49% vs. 52%

of supporters

of abandoned think the EU despises 'ordinary people.'

54% vs. 52%

of supporters

of abandoned feel the EU primarily defends minorities and migrants.

45% vs. 42%

of supporters

of abandoned believe the EU is dictated by elites.

43% vs. 44%

of supporters

of abandoned think it costs more than it delivers.

47% vs. 41%

of supporters

of abandoned believe the EU takes its orders from the financial world, IMF, and Big Pharma.



With European Parliament elections due in 2024, are they planning to vote?

- **A smaller percentage of the Switched Off are prepared to vote.** 45% of those who feel abandoned would vote compared to 64% of supporters.
- **Attitudes toward voting among the Switched Off are lukewarm at best.** 36% of the abandoned are lukewarm about voting, with 14% saying they would vote if they had nothing else to do, 13% unsure, and 9% inclined to cast a blank vote.
- **And a significant proportion probably won't vote at all.** 17% of the abandoned are entirely negative about voting, with 15% not planning to vote and 4% indifferent.

What emotions are the abandoned experiencing?

Over a quarter of Switched Off people feel indifferent (26%)

The rest feel despair (18%), fear (14%), rebelliousness (14%), and disgust (12%).

The story isn't all bad, however:

- 24% of the Switched Off also express hope.
- 22% feel confident.

So, there is some hope and motivation for change among the Switched Off.



But the big message is clear.

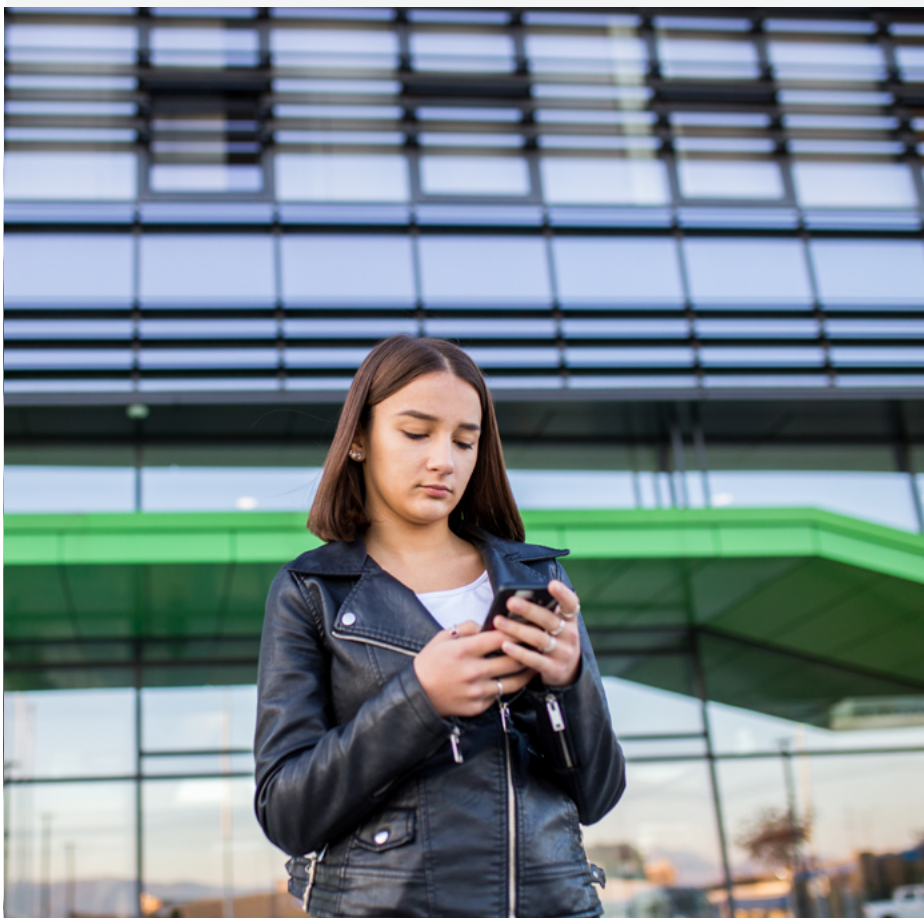
Indifference and
negativity towards Europe is
the prevailing feeling among its
younger citizens.

Who do you think you're speaking to?

If the EU is going to survive—let alone thrive—it needs to address these feelings of **abandonment** and **disengagement**. But sometimes, it's hard to imagine exactly who it is you're speaking to with your comms.

That's why we created two personas: 'Maeva,' who is Switched Off, and 'Mateuz,' who feels Supported.

Think of these people as your audience when you write. Let's meet them.





Maeva: The Switched Off.

- A 24-year-old woman in France.
- Her experiences reflect the challenges faced by youth in small towns with limited access to public services and unstable job opportunities.
- She likes sports and playing video games.
- She is part of the **45%** who share this feeling of abandonment.

Why does she feel abandoned?

Maeva feels abandoned by the EU because of a perceived lack of understanding, care, representation, and defense of citizens' interests.

What emotions does she feel towards the EU?

Her emotions towards the EU are mixed. They range from indifference and despair to hope.

How can communicators improve Maeva's motivation to vote in the upcoming European Parliament elections?

- **Addressing issues that show that decision makers understand the issues that are close to citizens' hearts.** Politicians need to show that they care about these issues, and crucially, show that they are listening to and acting on these concerns.



- Young people like Maeva want a political program that takes citizens into account, and to have political candidates who tour local areas to see how people really live. This could include debates in public places such as schools and sports centers.
- **Developing and communicating a powerful vision for change.** This requires political candidates with a strong personality who are capable of explaining and delivering a clear and strong vision.
- **Cleaning up the system.** Maeva needs greater transparency and honesty from politicians who are working to create a political system that is open and fairly represents the needs of every citizen

> Mateuz: The Supported

- Aged 17.
- He likes sports and playing video games.
- Among the **55%** of individuals who feel supported by the EU.

Why does he feel supported?

He believes that the EU defends citizens' interests, takes action on climate issues, addresses rising living costs, and cares about him.

What emotions does he feel towards the EU?

His emotions towards the EU are hope, confidence, and pride.



How can communicators improve Mateuz's motivation to vote in the upcoming European Parliament elections?

- **Greater knowledge sharing and increased participation.** This will improve Mateuz's motivation to vote.
- **Empowering strong leadership, fighting against the destabilization of democracy, and tackling essential challenges.** This would also be crucial to sharing knowledge and increasing participation.

What can we learn from both Maeva and Mateuz?

Both Maeva and Mateuz see the European Parliament (EP) as being run by financial elites who put more effort into defending minorities and migrants, and less effort into defending 'ordinary people.'

The good news is that both trust the EP to address challenges such as ethical AI, climate issues, and inflation.





So, what are they looking for in a politician?

The Switched Off are more likely to vote for politicians with the following qualities—incidentally, exactly the kind of qualities that many populist politicians specialize in. They are looking for politicians who:

16% and above

Who tour in person, and who visit people to see how they live.

22%

Have a political program that takes citizens into account.

28%

Listen to them.

10%

Who hold debates in schools and sports centers.

22%

Are demanding more transparency from the EU.

16%

Who have a strong personality.

25%

Have a clear and strong political vision.

20% and above

Who want to clean up the political system.



And what are they not so bothered about?

The Switched Off are less worried about whether a candidate is young (18% and below), has more knowledge about policies (17% and below), or has participated in EU policymaking before (15% and below).

Go to where they are

Largely, both groups use the same sources. However, the content and platforms they prefer differ.

Both groups love Instagram and YouTube, and Facebook is also widely used. However, supporters are more active on Twitter, Reddit, Twitch, and Discord.

Those who are Switched Off have a higher percentage of users who don't have a favorite platform.

In terms of hearing what influences them, and where they get their information, the Switched Off are interested in news and politics. They are also inclined towards entertainment, travel and tourism, sports, health and fitness, and sustainability content.

However, Supporters are likely to be more interested in technology and gaming, too.

Now we know where they are, how do we get them to read our content?

To help you in your comms, we've boiled our research down into six key things to bear in mind as you write for a younger audience:

1. Don't try to be perfect

We love to polish our messages, working them until they are pitch-perfect and focus-grouped to death.

Forget it. Younger people value authenticity and transparency above all else.

If they think what you're saying is too good to be true, or too polished, they'll stay Switched Off. So, let go of excessive control and embrace a more genuine approach.

Here's what you can do:

- **Be genuine:** Share real stories and experiences. Avoid overly curated content.
- **Embrace imperfections:** Don't worry too much. Show your human side.
- **Listen and respond:** Young people want to be listened to. And for what they say to be put into action.

2. Be realistic about their reality

Young people are facing huge challenges, from COVID-19 to economic uncertainty, environmental crises, and political polarization. Showing you understand these worries, and that you're prepared to do something about them, is crucial to connecting with them. Write for the real world, not for the Brussels bubble.

Here's what you can do:

- **Empathize:** Show empathy for their struggles and concerns.
- **Address real issues:** Focus on policies and solutions that directly impact their lives.
- **Provide hope:** How can they get involved? Give them tangible ways they can make a difference.

3. No attention span for boring

Younger people have grown up in the digital era. They have constant, competing demands on their attention. They get their information by moving quickly from one bite-sized, engaging piece of content to the next. Keep your comms compelling and dynamic.

Here's what you can do:

- **Visual storytelling:** Use visuals, videos, and infographics to convey your message.
- **Keep it short:** Get to the point quickly and don't use unnecessary jargon.
- **Use relatable examples:** Relate your message to their everyday experiences.

4. Speak the language they can understand

Complex terminology and political jargon are a sure-fire way to switch off younger people. Keep your language straightforward and relatable—imagine they're standing in front of you as you write. Speak in a way that they can easily grasp.

Here's what you can do:

- **Simplify your message:** Break complex ideas down into simple, relatable terms.
- **Avoid buzzwords:** Steer clear of buzzwords and cliches.
- **Tell stories:** Use narratives to illustrate your points.

5. Don't try too hard

There's nothing more excruciating than watching an older person try to mimic the way that younger people speak. Younger audiences are simply looking for authenticity, and they can spot attempts to "youth-wash" them from a mile away. Don't try to be cool or relevant. Just be yourself and say what you really think. They'll appreciate it.

Here's what you can do:

- **Avoid over-emphasis on trends:** Stay true to your message without relying on fleeting trends.
- **Honesty over hype:** Be honest about your intentions and capabilities.
- **Authenticity is key:** Let your true values and mission shine through.

6. Switched Off from EU politics ≠ Switched Off from politics

Just because a lot of younger people aren't actively engaged in European Union (EU) politics, this doesn't mean they don't care about politics altogether. Ask them about the politics that interest them, listen to their answers, and recognize this in your comms. Reach them where they are.

Here's what you can do:

- **Expand the conversation:** Politics is a big place. Don't just discuss the EU-centric issues that concern you. Find out what they want to talk about.
- **Bridge the gap:** Show them how the things they're worried about connect to larger political themes.
- **Encourage participation:** Show them what they can do to shape their future themselves.



What does all this mean for how we re-engage younger audiences?

Younger Europeans care about Europe. They care about the wider world. And they want to be involved in politics. It's just that the messages they're hearing from European institutions are switching them off. If this goes on, many will be lost to those who don't believe in the European vision.

Reengaging them won't be easy. You'll need to adapt what you say, and how you say it, to their preferences and concerns. Ditch the perfectly crafted messages. Be authentic and show empathy for their challenges. Acknowledge these in language that's authentic, relatable, straightforward, and genuine. Ditch the jargon and Euro-speak. Offer them concrete solutions.

**These are the people who will shape the future of Europe.
We can't afford to lose them.**

**To find out more about how ICF can help you with your communications,
contact [Elena Linczenyiova](#)**

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Learn more at ICFNext.com

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