

RESEARCH ON THE CHALLENGES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AS PERCEIVED BY STUDENTS

T.I. MĂCIUCĂ¹ N. MARINESCU²

Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to investigate how some of the most important challenges facing the European Union are perceived by students. By means of a survey, students' opinions on issues such as the economic situation, the pandemic, unity, climate change, and cyberattacks are researched, analysed, and commented. The findings reveal that students are aware of these issues, mostly via social media. Economic problems were considered the main difficulty, while the pandemic and climate change also ranked high in the list of concerns. In accordance with the conclusions drawn from the research, several recommendations are issued for policymakers.*

Keywords: *European Union, challenges, students.*

1. Introduction

European construction has followed a long and arduous path from the aftermath of World War II to the present day, as integration has not been a race against time, but rather a complex process carried out with meticulous care, to prevent collapse at the first sign of imbalance (El-Agraa, 2011). Moreover, the European Union (EU) faces numerous challenges, and there remains deep and persistent scepticism regarding its value and achievements, both among Europeans and world citizens.

2. Recent Challenges of the European Union

In recent years, the EU has encountered several issues that have gradually extended to the present, becoming priority concerns. The EU was battered successively by the Eurozone crisis, the refugee wave, and Brexit, difficulties that prompted reforms (Jones et al., 2021). The global financial crisis of 2008/09 also left its mark on the slowdown of the EU's economic growth (Della Posta, 2023). The EU's economic stagnation is partly due to its innovation deficit and industrial fragmentation, as Mousa (2025) notes. Coupled with geopolitical setbacks, the EU sees its influence on the world scene waning.

¹ Transilvania University of Braşov, teodora.maciuca@unitbv.ro, ORCID ID: 0009-0000-0044-2181

² Transilvania University of Braşov, marinescu@unitbv.ro, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5942-2107

The demographic shift towards an elderly population (Szucs, 2024) and the pressure coming from citizens' anti-immigration attitude (Miscoiu and Gherghina, 2026), together with social inequalities and regional economic disparities, have triggered wider public dissatisfaction, threatening the European project (Sotiriou et al., 2025). Young people in the EU consider the cost of living to be the main challenge (32%), alongside conflicts, instability, and the erosion of democratic values (European Commission, 2025). Students in particular fear they will be compelled to move to another country (Losito et al., 2018). According to the "Young Europe" research, youngsters regard migration, climate change, and economic policy to be the most important current issues in the EU (ENR, 2024).

Among such issues confronting the EU, we have pinpointed the following in our study: the pandemic, the economy, unity, climate change, and cyberattacks. Starting in 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly shook the entire world, generating major imbalances at the economic, political, and social levels. Given the pre-existing inequalities, as well as the repercussions of the pandemic, the European economy was severely affected. Internal conflicts continued to emerge, with unity struggling against centrifugal forces within the EU. Although many measures aimed at addressing climate-related challenges have been initiated at the European level, in practice, developments have not followed a favourable direction. Alongside the recently pushed digitalisation, the incidence of cyberattacks, such as „Phishing”, „Drive-by”, „Password hacks”, as well as other illegal methods, has increased significantly.

To investigate these issues, we conducted a study entitled „Attitudes, opinions, and behaviour of Romanian students regarding the main challenges faced by the European Union”. The purpose of the research was to highlight the main problems confronting the EU as perceived by students in Romania, as the opinions of young people may generate valuable insights that could contribute to the optimal resolution of these challenges.

3. Research Methodology

The research method chosen in this paper is a survey-based investigation conducted in the online environment, based on a questionnaire (see Appendix), with the primary objective of identifying respondents' opinions regarding the main problems faced by the European Union. The questionnaire used in this survey consists of both closed-ended questions and classification questions, which support the interpretation of statistical data. The measurement scales employed in the construction of the questions include the nominal scale, the ordinal scale, and the interval scale.

The research population is represented by students from across the entire territory of Romania, of both genders, regardless of their level of higher education, residential environment, age, or income.

To obtain relevant results, considering the specific characteristics of the chosen research, a random (probabilistic) sampling method was employed, namely proportional stratified sampling, with the aim of obtaining a sample that mirrors the structure of the researched population. Representativeness in terms of sample structure is fully ensured. The sample used in this study meets the structural requirements and reflects the diversity of motives, attitudes, and opinions within the target population.

The Google Forms questionnaire served as the data collection instrument for this survey, while SPSS software was used for data analysis and interpretation. Data collection was carried out online; any student with internet access was able to complete the questionnaire, which was distributed via applications and social media platforms, either individually or within multiple student-oriented groups.

4. Results of the Study

The largest share of students participating in the survey were aware of the challenges of the EU “to a great extent” (38%, versus just 17% “to a lesser extent”), but there were also 35% with a neutral stance. Most of the respondents inform themselves on EU issues on a monthly, bi-monthly or even annual basis (Figure 1).

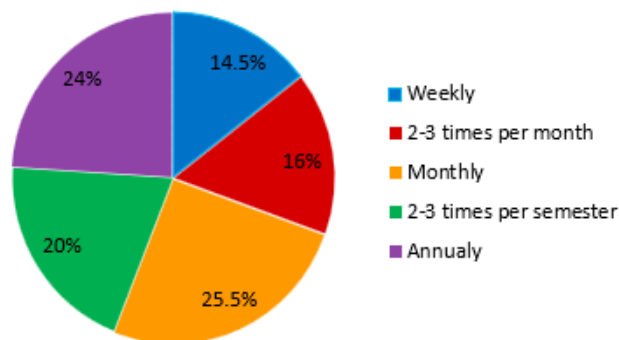


Fig. 1. Frequency of gathering information about EU issues

At present, to keep in touch with EU issues, respondents predominantly use social media and news websites/podcasts as sources of information to an equal extent, the online environment representing a widely used information framework that is easy to access, fast, and readily available to anyone with internet access (Figure 2).

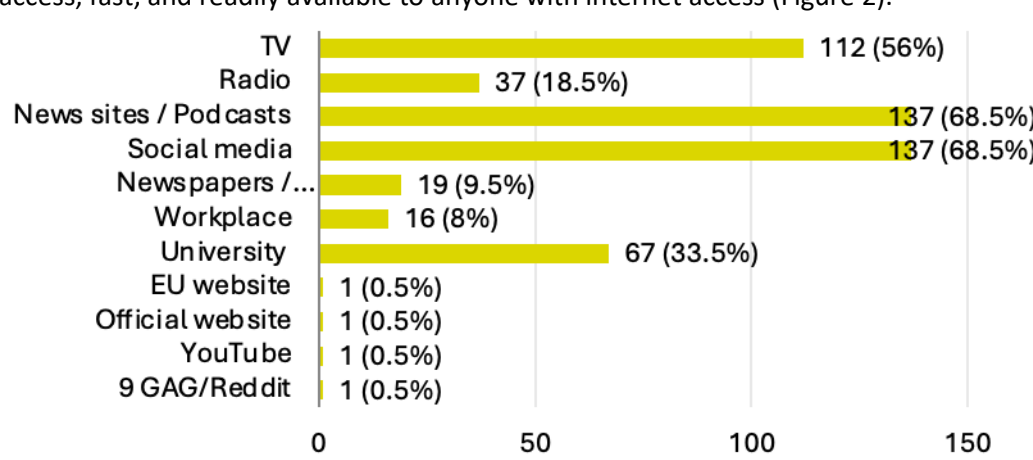


Fig. 2. Means of information about EU issues

The selected EU challenges for the study (pandemic, economy, unity, climate change, and cyberattacks) drew students' interest to different extents (Figure 3). The highest ranking was awarded for economic problems. A total of 85% of respondents considered them "important" and "very important". Second came climate change, on par with the pandemic, with a cumulated 69% share of votes each. Very close to them, the next position, according to its perceived importance, was occupied by cyberattacks (68%), while unity in the EU was felt endangered by 60% of respondents.

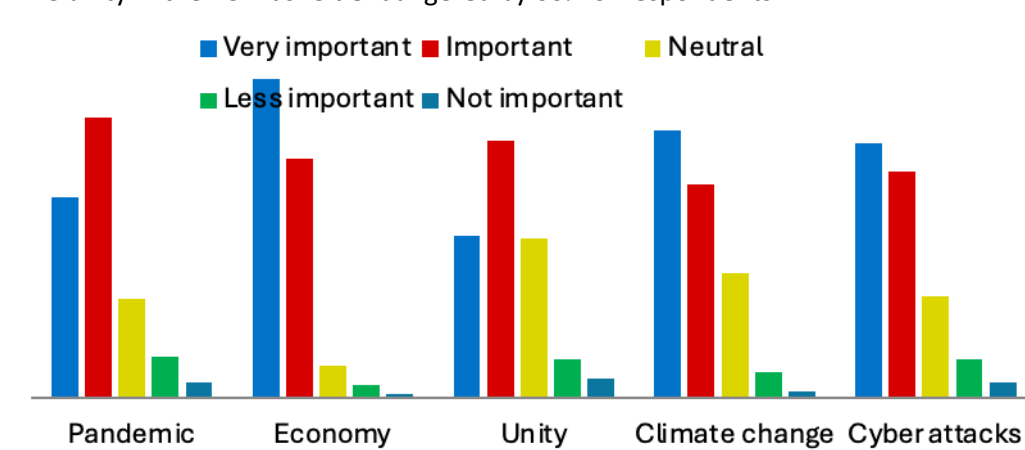


Fig. 3. Importance of various EU challenges

Students were also asked to assess who should be responsible for solving the major EU challenges indicated above (Figure 4). They considered EU Member States to bear the main responsibility (76%), followed by the citizens themselves (68%), and the institutions of the EU (63%).

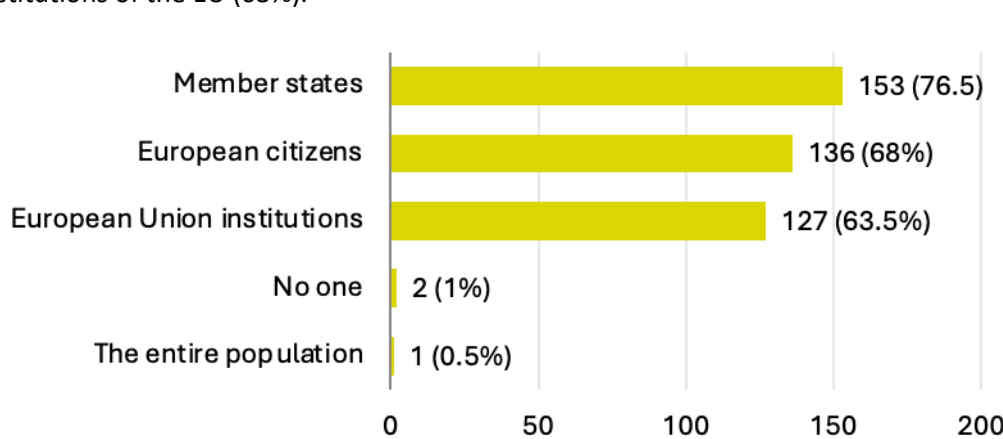


Fig. 4. Who should contribute to solving EU challenges

To synthesise, the characteristics of the surveyed population reveal that:

- Only a small number of students believe that the persistent challenges of the European Union have a very low level of importance, irrespective of the issue addressed in the research;

- 50% of respondents report a medium level of income, while only 5% have a high income, considering that nearly 80% of them are aged between 19 and 22;
- More than half of the researched population, namely 62%, comes from an urban environment;
- The majority of respondents are female (71%) and are enrolled in undergraduate studies (84.5%).

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The completion of the European Union represents a non-linear, dynamic, and complex long-term process. Therefore, continuous debate and refinement of the European integration strategy are both important and necessary. In this context, awareness and understanding of this process among the European Union community and beyond are essential. Consequently, the implementation of information campaigns on the topic of European integration would be appropriate, as they could prove highly effective within educational institutions at any level or specialisation.

In addition, greater emphasis should be placed on the relationship between authorities and citizens, as progress requires that the population of the EU, especially young people, including students as a key target group, be guided toward willingness for change, contributing effectively to the expansion of the European spirit.

Regarding one of the main issues raised in the research, namely the pandemic, media exposure that generates misinformation and chaos among citizens should be replaced with the dissemination of transparent, accurate, clear, and explanatory information that individuals can understand. Civic discipline and civic spirit are largely absent from many individuals' behaviour, an issue that requires mending if we aim to live in a healthy society, both for ourselves and for future generations. Compliance with laws also represents an aspect of major importance, closely linked to the responsibility of all residents of Member States for their actions and behaviour.

Based on the research findings, to address the economic difficulties faced by students, one suggestion is to organise specialised seminars to teach young people how to manage their budgets effectively to avoid monthly financial hardship and how to invest their savings. At the macroeconomic level, requiring Member States themselves to resolve their economic issues to prevent severe imbalances is of paramount importance. Economic development should not be limited solely to financial aspects, but must also incorporate resource conservation, particularly natural resources, which are finite and essential for continuous use.

As stated in the European Union's slogan, "United in diversity", this principle should also be reflected empirically. Among the 27 Member States, unity is ultimately essential to collectively overcome crises, pandemics, and extreme situations. Unity must also be present at the community level. In a world dominated by self-interest rather than collective well-being, a problem of consciousness exists, which will only be solved when we face the harsh reality that we depend on one another.

The research revealed that students predominantly use energy-saving practices as a method of combating climate change. Hence, it can be argued that the turbulent world

we live in, along with the use of energy as a true “political weapon” by certain countries, supports the need to create an energy security zone within the European space. For the EU Member States, now is the appropriate time to think beyond national interests and start acting as a genuine Union to strengthen a common European energy policy.

Regarding the issue of various cyberattacks encountered by students, and which any individual may face regardless of age, we consider that all the citizens of the European Union must be informed about the correct use of the internet, as well as the risks associated with improper usage. To combat such challenges, it is recommended that online payments and the disclosure of personal data be subject to prior verification before any information is sent. Telephone scams are also taken into consideration, as they can undoubtedly have both financial and human repercussions. The tendency to fall victim to false information intended to harass or endanger personal safety must be urgently addressed.

Finally, it is important to focus on existing problems and their resolution rather than generating tens of additional conspiratorial scenarios. It is never too late to contribute to the principle of unity in diversity within the European Union.

References

- Della Posta, P. (2023). “The European Union in the age of slowbalisation.” *Journal of Policy Modeling*, 45(4), pp. 833-847.
- El-Agraa, A.M. (2011). *The European Union: Economics and Policies*. 9th edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ENR (2024). *Youth and the EU: What challenges they face and how they see the EU*. Brussels: European Newsroom.
- European Commission (2025). *EU challenges and priorities: young Europeans' views*. Brussels: European Union.
- Jones, E., Kelemen, R.D., Meunier, S. (2021). “Failing forward? Crises and patterns of European integration.” *Journal of European Public Policy*, 28, pp. 1519-1536.
- Losito, B., Agrusti, G., Damiani, V., Schulz, W. (2018). “Students’ perceptions of Europe and the future of Europe.” In: *Young People’s Perceptions of Europe in a Time of Change*. *International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement*. Springer Open.
- Miscoiu, S., Gherghina, S. (2026). “Consensus About the European Union? Understanding the Views of Citizens and Political Parties.” *Politics and Governance*, 14, p. 11959.
- Mousa, F. (2025). “Why EU economic challenges are reducing its global influence.” *The National*, February.
- Sotiriou, A., Petrakos, G., Alexiou, S. (2025). “The drivers of regional discontent in the EU.” *Global Challenges & Regional Science*, 1, p. 100002.
- Szucs, P. (2024). “Demographic Shifts and Economic Challenges in the European Union.” *European Mirror*, 27(1), pp. 87-106.

APPENDIX: Questionnaire

To conduct a marketing study regarding the challenges faced by the European Union, as seen from the students' perspective, this questionnaire aims to identify students' opinions on these issues, as well as possible solutions. Completing the questionnaire will take approximately 9 minutes, and your answers will remain confidential. Thank you!

1. Are you currently enrolled in a university program? (Bachelor, Master)
 - Yes
 - No

2. To what extent are you informed about the main challenges faced by the European Union?
 - To a very great extent
 - To a great extent
 - Neutral
 - To a small extent
 - To a very small extent

3. How often do you seek information about the issues of the European Union?
 - Weekly
 - 2–3 times a month
 - Monthly
 - 2–3 times per semester
 - Annually

4. What are the sources from which you get information about the issues of the European Union?
 - TV
 - Radio
 - News websites / podcasts
 - Social media
 - Newspapers / magazines
 - Workplace
 - University
 - Others

5. How important are the following persistent issues of the European Union to you?
| Very important | Important | Neutral | Slightly important | Not important at all |
 - Pandemic
 - Economy
 - Unity
 - Climate change
 - Cyberattacks

6. Who do you think can contribute to solving the problems of the European Union?

- Member States
- European citizens
- European Union institutions
- Others

7. What level of studies are you currently enrolled in?

- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree

8. Which university are you studying at?

- Transilvania University of Braşov
- Petroleum-Gas University of Ploieşti
- Bucharest University of Economic Studies
- National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest
- "Carol Davila" University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Bucharest
- Technical University of Cluj-Napoca
- Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca
- Other

9. How would you describe your income level?

- Low income
- Medium income
- High income
- Prefer not to say

10. What is your gender?

- Female
- Male

11. What is your age range?

- Under 19
- 19–22
- 23–26
- 27–30
- Over 30

12. What type of area do you live in?

- Urban
- Rural