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Supervisor: Fabien Terpan

Youth Perceptions of European Governance: Policy Instrument Preferences and Legitimacy
in the European Student Assembly

Isabelle Woodhouse

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Introduction

In the ongoing effort to renew its legitimacy and reconnect with citizens, the European Union's policy agenda has increasingly turned to new and experimental forms of governance. Policy instruments, far from being neutral conduits for decision-making, are sociotechnical devices that express implicit visions of how authority should be organised and exercised (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2007). Understanding how such instruments are imagined, and by whom, offers an insightful window into the evolving architecture of European governance, particularly when viewed from the standpoint of youth, a group often treated as objects of policy rather than subjects of political meaning-making.

Over the past two decades, the EU has undergone a series of institutional strategic reforms aimed at addressing criticisms of technocracy, inertia and democratic deficit. The White Paper on European Governance, the Kinnock administrative reforms and the Lisbon Strategy were part of an effort to modernise policymaking through more flexible, participatory and multi-level approaches. These reforms were designed with the 'intention of transforming EU governance and providing a new dynamic to integration' and thus marked the emergence of a new world of soft law and new policy instruments which displaced traditional legislation with non-binding mechanisms and incentives (Kassim and Le Galès, 2010, p.6). Since then, EU governance has moved towards a more sophisticated model combining evidence-based regulatory reform, programme-based incentives and sector-specific legal frameworks. The institutionalisation of the European Semester from 2010 and the launch of the Better Regulation agenda embedded systematic impact assessment and ex-post evaluation into the policy cycle (European Commission, 2025; European Commission, 2015). Financial instruments such as InvestEU shifted emphasis towards leveraging EU-level funding to steer national reforms (European Parliament, 2021). Strategic packages including the European Green Deal and Digital Services and Digital Markets Acts illustrate a turn to targeted, cross-sector regulation underpinned by flexible implementation tools, marking an evolution towards a layered anticipatory governance system that blends binding rules and incentive-driven instruments (Ahern, 2025).

These developments reflect broader transformations of EU governance from rule-making to framework-setting, a shift in which policy instruments serve as both technical mechanisms and political symbols. They also underscore the EU's growing reliance on participatory and

deliberative experiments to address legitimacy concerns (Saurugger, 2010). The Conference on the Future of Europe (2021-2022) exemplified this participatory turn with the aim of ‘relaunching European integration after a decade of crises’ (Fabbrini, 2021, p.403). It is within this framework that the European Student Assembly (ESA) was launched in 2022 as a high-level youth forum bringing together over 200 participants annually from across the EU to debate policy challenges and draft formal recommendations, the first edition of which were submitted within the Conference on the Future of Europe. These policy proposals function not only as exercises in civic participation, but as symbolic expressions of how a new generation conceives the nature, purpose and legitimacy of EU governance. It is for this reason that the corpus of recommendations serves as my data set for interpretative analysis.

This research is closely linked to my professional engagement with the European Student Assembly during my internship with the organising team. In the two months leading up to the 2025 edition, I was involved in the organisational preparation and offered advice to student panels as they drafted their recommendations. I attended the event in person, ensuring that the sessions ran smoothly and continuing to provide guidance to participants during the drafting and negotiating process. This embedded role afforded me first-hand insights into the dynamics of their recommendation design processes and direct familiarity with the deliberative environment in which they were produced, thereby informing the contextual understanding underpinning the present analysis.

Problem Statement

Persistent concerns about the EU’s democratic deficit have prompted renewed interest in how legitimacy is constructed beyond formal channels. As Kohler-Koch (2013, p.18) notes, the absence of a fully developed transnational public in the multilayered European system undermines electoral and parliamentary accountability, raising the stakes for alternative modes of democratic expression. Theories of democratic legitimacy tend to examine institutional self-legitimation or aggregate public opinion through participation, rather than how non-elite actors articulate legitimacy claims in specific policy contexts. Similarly, research on policy instruments has predominantly taken a top-down perspective, focusing on the choices and strategies of policymakers (Vargas and Restrepo, 2019; Howlett, 2023). The symbolic and value-laden functions of instruments, while addressed by Lascoumes and Le Galès (2007), are not explored from the bottom up, especially in a cross-sectoral comparative context.

Scholarship on youth politics documents in detail declining trust in institutional channels, alternative forms of participation and protest activism (Pilkington and Pollock, 2015; Weiss, 2020). However, it seldom examines how young people conceptualise policy design and its relationship to EU legitimacy. The European Student Assembly's corpus of recommendations offers a unique opportunity to address this gap by exploring how young Europeans imagine legitimate EU action, not only through desired outcomes, but through the kinds of instruments they believe the EU should use to achieve them.

This paper investigates the following question:

How do the preferred policy instruments in ESA policy recommendations reflect differentiated perceptions of the EU's role and legitimacy across policy domains, and what does this reveal about the evolving relationship between the governing and the governed in the EU?

By treating these recommendations not simply as technical artefacts but as discursive acts that symbolically construct EU legitimacy, the study centres youth as active producers of political meaning and agents of legitimacy imagination. The central theoretical orientation follows Lascoumes and Le Galès' (2007) sociological approach to instrumentation but reinterprets it through the perceptions of those subject to policy, thus shifting the lens towards normative instrumental prefiguration.

The study adopts a sequential mixed methods design that incorporates both content analysis and linguistic discourse analysis of more than 300 ESA policy recommendations from 2022-2025.

Stage 1: a deductive content analysis maps the distribution of policy instrument preferences across six policy domains (EU Values and Democracy; Climate and Sustainability; Health and Mental Health; Education; Digital and AI; Foreign Policy) using Lascoumes and Le Galès' (2007) typology (legislative/regulatory, economic/fiscal, agreement/incentive, communication/information, de jure/de facto standards).

Stage 2: a discourse analysis guided by Lemke's (1998) tripartite model of presentational, orientational and organisational meaning, explores how instruments are linguistically and semiotically constructed in relation to the EU's perceived roles and legitimacy logics.

This combined approach allows for a degree of methodological triangulation as the descriptive mapping of preferences is complemented and enriched by an interpretive analysis

of how instruments are framed, justified and imbued with normative content. My vision is grounded in a hermeneutic rather than analytical-deductive tradition due to the discursive nature of my data set. Gadamer indeed used the paradigm of textual interpretation to show that knowledge in the humanities can be attained beyond the methodologically standardised procedures of the scientific method (Teichert, 2020, p.130). Discourse analysis allows the student voices to speak as acts of political imagination and symbolic interventions in the EU legitimacy debate.

The paper shows that the youth participants of the European Student Assembly use policy instruments as politicised, normative devices that encode distinct legitimacy claims, co-constructing visions of the EU's role that vary systematically across policy domains. They envision a multi-modal EU that is strong and authoritative in defending its foundational values in areas demanding moral leadership, communicative and inclusive in social cohesion, and pragmatic and adaptive in technologically complex fields. By linking cross-sectoral instrument preferences to differentiated legitimacy logics, the study seeks to extend sociotechnical theories of policy instrumentation by offering a novel insight into bottom-up legitimacy construction in the European Union.

Literature Review

Policy Instruments

Lascoumes and Le Galès' (2007) sociological approach to instrumentation departed from dominant functionalist and technocratic understandings of policy tools as neutral conduits for decision-making and by extension superficial dimensions of governance. They conceptualise instruments as 'device[s] that are both technical and social', actively shaping the relationship between the governing and the governed through the meanings, representations and power dynamics they carry (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2007, p.4). An analysis of EU policy instruments is thus an analysis of the EU's political ontology and understanding of legitimacy. Lascoumes and Le Galès (2007) emphasise the inertia, representations and problematisations that instruments generate by drawing upon an assemblage of tools that encode social compromises and ideological orientations. This approach 'reconceptualises instruments as institutions that may need to be brought into existence, constructed or composed rather than readily available objects' (Kassim and Le Galès, 2010, p.4).

Their typology builds on the work of Hood (1983) and goes beyond mapping technical choices to consider distinct modes and legitimation and political relations. Hood's approach 'elaborates on the principles of distinction based on features that are external to the instruments' and is thus concerned with the resources through which instruments are enforced (Capano and Engeli, 2022, p.103).

TABLE 1
Typology of Policy Instrument

Type of Instrument	Type of Political Relations	Type of Legitimacy
Legislative and Regulatory	Social Guardian State	Imposition of a General Interest by Mandated Elected Representatives
Economic and Fiscal	Wealth Producer State, and Redistributive State	Seeks Benefit to the Community Social and Economic Efficiency
Agreement-Based and Incentive-Based	Mobilizing State	Seeks Direct Involvement
Information-Based and Communication-Based	Audience Democracy	Explanation of Decisions and Accountability of Actors
De Facto and De Jure Standards Best Practices	Adjustments within Civil Society Competitive Mechanisms	Mixed: Scientific/ Technical, Democratically Negotiated and/or Competition, Pressure of Market Mechanisms

Figure 1: Typology of Policy Instrument (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2007, p.12).

Legislative and regulatory instruments represent the archetype of state interventionism, functioning symbolically as a marker of legitimate authority, axiologically as an expression of the state's societal values and pragmatically as a tool to shape social behaviour. *Economic and fiscal* instruments, while still legally grounded, derive their legitimacy from their perceived economic rationality and social efficiency, either through resource distribution or behavioural incentives. The three so-called new public policy instruments differ insofar as they emphasise flexibility, participation and consultation to renew the foundations of legitimacy. *Agreement and incentive-based* instruments reflect a shift towards contractual governance and adaptability to fragmented social interests, their proponents critical of the cumbersome rigidity of universal legislations. *Communication and information* instruments form part of a 'democracy of opinion' in which public legitimacy stems not from procedural authority but rather transparency and responsiveness. Indeed, the shift in the 1970s, as identified by Lascoumes and Le Galès (2007, p.13) from citizens' rights of access to inform into authorities' obligation to inform has become further complicated in the era of digital

misinformation and algorithmic filtering. Finally, standards and best practices, whether de jure or de facto, mediate power relations among states, markets and civil society through hybrid legitimacy claims, either grounded in scientific and technical rationality or negotiated by democratic processes.

Policy instruments are not just tools, but statements about the nature of problems, desirable behaviour and legitimate authority. Drawing inspiration from the linguistic turn in philosophy and the social sciences, discursive approaches to public policy are largely constructivist and qualitative as they are interested in 'the subjectivity of actors, the forms of practical knowledge they mobility, the multiple interpretations they deploy to create meaning, and the particular context that individualizes the situations in which these meanings evolve' (Durnova and Zittoun, 2013, p.85). Employing the Habermasian notion of communicative rationality, such an approach illustrates the importance of interactions between actors as the production of sites of discourse and meaning. When applied to public policy, scholars such as Deborah Stone and Giandomenico Majone conclude that 'all policies are first and foremost discursive constructions that combine heterogenous elements such as values, instruments and consequences' (Durnova and Zittou, 2013, p.89).

Foucault's notion of governmentality stresses both the subjectivation process and the forms of rationality that organise powers. Indeed, his disciplinary concept was based on concrete techniques for framing individuals and leading their behaviours from a distance. It is therefore possible to consider the 'new' soft governance instruments through his postmodernist lens 'where self-disciplined subjects change their conducts in relation to assimilated norms and legitimate behaviours promoted by state organisations' (Le Galès, 2011, p.149). Studies of governmentality are interested in the ways in which knowledge and power interrelate to form active subjects, and subsequently how knowledge taken to be normatively desirable can affect freedoms (Triantafillou, 2024, p.125-6).

Legitimacy

The question of democratic legitimacy in the European Union is a long-standing and multi-dimensional concern. A degree of legitimacy from the political subjects is considered indispensable for the power to remain stable and for compliance to be secured without costly or unsustainable coercion (Bodansky, 2012, p.333). Olsen (2002, p.940) argues that the development of a European sphere for public opinion formation contributes to common conceptions of legitimate political organisation, giving direction to action capabilities. This

implies that legitimacy is not simply derived from institutional arrangements but equally from the symbolic and discursive construction of a European public space. Such perspectives are particularly relevant to this study's focus on youth-envisaged policy proposals which participate in informing legitimacy claims beyond formal procedures.

Lord and Magnette (2004) identify four ways of evaluating EU legitimacy: indirect, which derives from the legitimacy of the member states that control it (intergovernmental view); technocratic, which stems from the EU's capacity to solve policy problems and improve the welfare of citizens (neofunctionalist view); parliamentary or representative, rooted in the democratically elected European Parliament and elected member state governments in the Council working together; and procedural, which is enhanced when the EU follows due process, works transparently, engages in consultation, acts proportionally and protects mutually recognised rights. Each of these conceptions has implications for how the EU is imagined and judged by its citizens, each carrying different expectations for the forms and functions of policy instruments.

Schmidt (2012, p.2) offers an alternative interpretation of democratic legitimization as being divided into judgements of output, the effectiveness of the EU's policy outcomes for the people; input, the responsiveness of the EU to citizens' concerns resulting from participation by the people; and throughput, a novel processual dimension concerned with the efficacy, accountability, openness and inclusiveness of governance. This third dimension is particularly reinforced in the context of the EU's multi-level structure in which input legitimacy is located largely at the national level and output at the EU level. Output legitimacy derived from the 'problem-solving quality of laws and rules' (2012, p.4) is highly pertinent to the analysis of policy instruments when viewed as the concrete enactments of problem-solving rationality. Nevertheless, the EU's overreliance on output legitimacy can also be considered a leading explanation behind the enduring 'democratic deficit'.

Public opinion has only grown as a force to be reckoned with since the Maastricht crisis in particular, according to Sternberg (2017, p.26). She bridges distinct approaches to political legitimacy by combining both normative accounts of the conditions under which people should accept something as legitimate as well as empirical behaviouralist accounts of the extent and causes of their doing so. Referendums on the Constitutional Treaty, the Brexit vote and ever growing euroscepticism are taken as evidence that legitimacy can no longer be assumed from institutional design alone. Indeed, Hooghe and Marks' (2009) influential

assertion that ‘constraining dissensus’ of public opinion has replaced any earlier permissive consensus aptly illustrates the significance of positive public opinion to the EU’s very existence. If legitimacy is relational and contingent, it is also future-oriented.

Future Imaginaries

The European Student Assembly is a policy-making simulation which can be understood as a space of prefiguration, bringing this study within the realm of future imaginaries. Students are not merely requesting reform but are modelling prospective practices and institutional structures. Future-oriented thinking has long been implicit in political philosophy and anthropology but emerged as an explicit critical focus after the Cold War through risk studies and environmentalism. Interpreting future-oriented data allows an investigation into ‘the notion of agency that is entrenched in youth narratives of the self’ and by my own extension of the political systems in which they find themselves (Cuzzocrea and Mandich, 2016, p.553). The collaborative ESA recommendations offer a counterpoint to Cuzzocrea and Mandich’s (2016, p.562) study that studied mobility ‘as a form of individual effort to cope with social conditions rather than as a collective project’.

Bazzani (2022, p.383) defines future imaginaries as ‘integral to projectivity and valuable for defining an empirical agenda for the study of the future’. He highlights imaginaries, expectations and narratives as key guiding analytical tools for understanding ‘the different types of future embedded in the course of action and the functions that each performs (Bazzani, 2022, p.392). While his framing captures the significance of projective capacity at a personal level, it leaves open the question of how such capacities might operate collectively at broader scales, such as the European level political system in which the anticipated futures of the students are embedded. Existing studies either analyse personal youth narratives to trace the emergence of interlocking futures (Cuzzocrea and Mandich, 2016) or apply discourse analysis to archival materials, recordings and media to examine the politics of expectation among hegemonic and counter-hegemonic groups (Jasanoff and Kim, 2009). Castoriadis’ definitively socio-historical and ultimately radical conception of the imaginary suggests that the future emerges from collective creativity irreducible to existing structures (Kompouros-Athanasiou and Bottici, 2022). His view situates collective future-making not only as an extension of individual agency but as a generative social process capable of producing qualitatively novel political arrangements. In terms of translating this into contemporary analyses, Bazzani (2022, p.392) cites a lack of ‘data on both the past and

projectivity for the same respondents’ as a major limit to applying social sciences research methods to the study of the future.

Research Design

This study draws on the student-authored policy recommendations produced during the four editions of the European Student Assembly ESA 2022-2025. Following a highly competitive selection process, the student participants were chosen to ensure diverse representation across nationalities and academic disciplines. Students worked together in the online preparatory phase and at the Assembly at the European Parliament in Strasbourg in panels of up to 30 that focused on a specific problem, each in a different policy area. Each of the four editions involved between 8 and 11 panels, each of which drafted 6-10 recommendations. It is important to consider that these participants are not representative of the general youth population; they constitute a politically engaged and highly educated subgroup. This makes them particularly valuable for the present inquiry as their recommendations are likely to offer uniquely informed and critical perspectives on EU governance.

An awareness of the *habitus* (Bourdieu) that the students bring to their analyses is important, as they are influenced by socially and educationally conditioned dispositions aligned with prevailing policy norms. The recommendations reflect both learned policy language and inherited notions of legitimacy which shape the kinds of solutions they deem viable or desirable. Their proposals are thus situated within the broader symbolic order of EU policymaking but not constrained by institutional precedent, or often legal feasibility, when they push beyond established competencies. When considered a form of prefiguration, they contribute an anticipatory stage to policy design theory that reveals the aspirational logics that can precede the formulation of policy mixes. In terms of providing an insight into the governing-governed relationship, the recommendations occupy a space in between the spheres of ‘coordinative policy construction’ and ‘communicative policy legitimization’ (Schmidt, 2015).

To address sectoral variance, recommendations are analysed across six identified recurring policy domains that have been simplified into: Health and Mental Health; Sustainability and Climate; Education; Foreign Policy; EU Values and Democracy; Digital and AI. As Capano and Howlett (2020, p.5) observe, most existing studies of policy instruments are largely descriptive and specialised, resulting in a lack of ‘theoretical generalizations about the impact

of sectoral particularities on the development of mixes and tool choices and their reform or change'. While it cannot contribute a temporal dimension, by examining all policy domains together, this study can provide an insight into the cross-sectoral dynamics of instrumental preferences.

The first step of analysis sought to identify whether the students exhibited discernible patterns in their preferences for particular types of policy instruments across policy domains. Following the methodological framework proposed by Berg and Lune (2014), the content analysis proceeded in both deductive and inductive phases. The initial coding schema was analytically developed through the application of Lascoumes and Le Galès' (2007) typology, defined as Economic and Fiscal; Regulatory and Legislative; Agreement and Incentive; Information and Communication; De Facto and De Jure Norms and Standards. Each of the student-authored recommendations were then individually coded for the instrument it employed, allowing for multiple codes where proposals reflected hybrid forms. At the same time, I applied open and axial coding within each policy area to inductively identify additional thematic patterns, such as symbolic framing, affective language or implied assumptions about the EU's role in order to inform the selection of a stratified sample of recommendations for subsequent deeper discourse analysis.

I used Nvivo to systematically manage and visualise the coded data and then to create the matrix coding query that cross-tabulated policy domains with coded policy instruments. This approach is consistent with Berg and Lune's (2014) methodology combining both a descriptive statistical count of frequency and relative weight with qualitative pattern recognition across and within categories.

In the second stage of analysis, I took a stratified sample of 15 recommendations (3 per policy area, excluding Foreign Policy) and conducted a linguistic discourse analysis informed by Lemke's (1998) model of presentational, orientational and organisational meaning. This approach enables a deeper interpretation of the patterns identified in the content analysis by uncovering how legitimacy, agency and governance modes are semantically constructed. Melrose (2005 p.90) points to the Foucauldian aspect of Lemke's text semantics which are 'inherently related to social norms and have an ideological dimension'. Rejecting the traditional view of semantics that meaning resides primarily at the level of individual words, Lemke asserts the significance of whole discourse patterns and the lexical, use, and thematic meanings that encode the meaning-potential of a word. Such a view is essential for

interpreting the ideological undercurrents embedded in the students' language and revealing how their instrument preferences become vehicles for particular governance and legitimacy logics.

Limitations

It is worth acknowledging the existence of uncontrollable variables related to the composition of the ESA panels that cannot be systematically controlled or disaggregated. Each thematic panel was composed of a different group of students, and while the selection processes aimed to ensure disciplinary and national diversity, variations in knowledge, interest and group dynamics likely shaped the proposals. As such, patterns observed across policy areas may partially reflect idiosyncratic factors of group composition rather than sectoral logics or perceptions of EU roles alone.

The study confronts inherent challenges in typologising policy instruments. As Capano and Engelli (2022, p.106) note, even widely used typologies diverge in their classification logic: 'sanctions are classified in Schneider and Ingram's typology as incentives, while Vedung views them as regulations. A tariff is considered an economic instrument for Vedung but an authority instrument for Schneider and Ingram'. This highlights the broader issue that instruments can mobilise multiple forms of power of resources simultaneously which makes strict categorisation impossible. While the use of Lascoumes and Le Galès' established typologies provides clarity and consistency to the study, the inherent ambiguities of instrument categorisation present an interpretive challenge that affects both the coding process and the study's generalisability. Furthermore, Howlett et al. (2025, p.129) raise the important argument that as patterns of policy tool use in the contemporary era have shifted, as a result of new developments in behavioural economics, digital technologies and participatory processes, the existing instrument classifications become less effective.

It is equally true that some proposals resisted clear categorisation because they proposed changes to the internal structure of the EU through institutional reforms rather than mobilising a specific policy instrument. When an entire recommendation took this form, it was in some cases omitted from the content analysis count to avoid forcing an artificial classification. However, to ensure that such proposals were not disregarded entirely, some were deliberately included in the sample for closer language analysis. This way I could ensure that perspectives challenging the EU's institutional configuration were still included

within the broader discursive picture, even if they did not lend themselves to straightforward coding within the instrument-based framework.

Findings and Data Analysis

	Agreement or Incentive	De Facto and De Jure Standards	Information and Communication	Economic and Fiscal	Legislative and Regulatory
1 : Panel Topic- (Mental) Health	4	4	15	4	13
2 : Panel Topic- Digital and AI	8	11	10	8	17
3 : Panel Topic- Education	11	9	4	3	2
4 : Panel Topic- EU Values, Democracy, Unity	2	3	12	14	11
5 : Panel Topic- Foreign Policy	11	3	8	2	6
6 : Panel Topic- Sustainability and climate	18	10	8	19	21

Figure 2: Table of the Nvivo Matrix Query Results

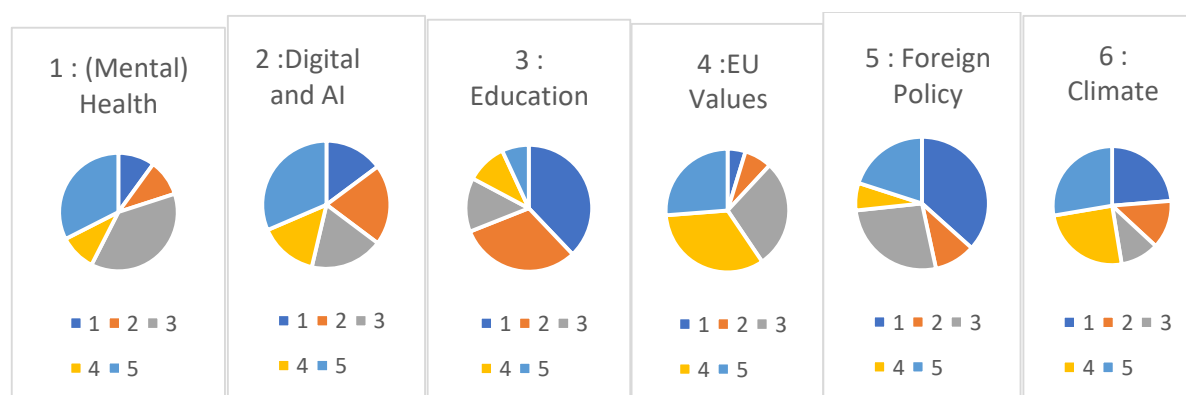


Figure 3: Pie chart visualisations of the matrix query output

The cross-tabulated matrix of policy instruments by policy domains reveals subtle patterns in the students' instrument preferences. While all five instrument types appear across each policy area, their relative frequency varies, suggesting that students' choice of instruments is influenced by the nature of the policy domains in addition to implicit assumptions about the EU's role and capacity for action across areas.

The most pronounced pattern is in the students' tendency to favour traditional economic/fiscal and legislative/regulatory instruments in policy areas linked to EU values and democracy as well as sustainability and climate. In the Sustainability and Climate domain, legislative and regulatory tools (21 instances) and economic and fiscal instruments (19 instances) are the dominant categories, closely followed by agreement or incentive-based measures (18 instances). This suggests that students perceive climate action as requiring binding commitments and significant financial resources, aligning with prevailing EU approaches that emphasise regulatory frameworks and market interventions. Similarly, in EU Values and Democracy, these traditional instruments together dominate, reflecting a belief in the necessity of institutionalised and enforceable mechanisms to uphold democratic standards and cohesion.

In contrast, information and communication-based instruments are the preferred choice in the Health and Mental Health domain, appearing 15 times compared to just 4 instances of agreement/incentive, de facto and de jure standards, and economic/fiscal measures. Legislative and regulatory instruments are also relatively frequent here at 13. This suggests that the students view the EU's role in this area as primarily about raising awareness, promoting best practices and facilitating knowledge sharing.

Education and Foreign Policy both show a different pattern with a marked preference for softer instruments. In Education, agreement/incentive measures (11) and de facto and de jure standards (9) dominate, while hard legislative/regulatory (2) and economic/fiscal (3) tools are scarcely proposed. Similarly, Foreign Policy recommendations favour agreement/incentive-based (11) instruments and information/communication (8), whilst economic/fiscal (2) and legislative/regulatory (6) are less common. These trends indicate that students perceive EU influence in these domains as more normative and collaborative, relying on consensus-building and voluntary alignment more so than coercive measures. This assumption is most likely shaped by the EU's actual competences in these areas as greater powers lie with national governments.

The Digital and AI domain stands out for its relatively even distribution across all five policy instrument types: agreement or incentive (8), de facto and de jure standards (11), information and communication (10), economic and fiscal (8), and legislative and regulatory (17). This suggests that the students see digital policy as a multifaceted area requiring a mix of

regulatory, normative and incentive-based approaches, likely due to the complex and rapidly evolving nature of digital governance.

Taken together as a whole, these patterns reveal that the students' policy instrument preferences are shaped by both perceived sectoral requirements and understandings of EU authority. Traditional binding instruments dominate in areas where they expect the EU to take decisive action, while softer tools are used in domains where issues are normative, value-driven and should be legitimated through consensus and voluntary adoption.

Stage 2: Discourse Analysis

The subsequent section interprets the deeper linguistic significance of selected recommendations using a semiotic discourse analysis guided by Lemke's (1998) tripartite model of meaning-making. An approach firmly anchored in a social semiotic tradition, it is particularly well-suited to interrogating the relationship between language, power and social structure that is central to our bottom-up perspective. To Lemke (1998, p.17), the significance of sign interpretation is that 'language, and typological modes of semiosis generally, have evolved to work in partnership with other, often more topologically grounded, semiotic systems'. He identifies three interrelated dimensions of meaning constructed during discourse:

- 1) Presentational meaning- how language presents events, actors, processes and relationships. This includes grammatical choices that shape thematic focus, agency and causality which ultimately influences how social realities are represented.
- 2) Orientational meaning- describes that stance taken towards the presentational content and participants. Involving modality, evaluative language, tone, and pronoun use, defined statuses contribute to the construction of social relationships.
- 3) Organisational meaning- concerns the internal structure and sequencing of discourse elements, including rhetorical progression and cohesion devices.

This analytical framework supports a layered reading of the recommendations which enables an exploration of not only what the youth participants propose, but also the way in which they linguistically and semiotically construct their own roles as civic agents, their imagined identity of the EU as well as the nature of policy problems and solutions.

Democracy and EU Values

2022 1.6 Creation of local panels about EU issues in each Member State

2023 1.1 Tell Us about (E)U! - Organising an Annual European Citizens Assembly

2023 1.2 Empower(E)U! - Unleashing Citizen Power for Change

The selected recommendations focusing on democratic reform are concerned with addressing the perceived gap between the EU's institutions and its citizens. Recommendation 1.6 from 2022 advocates for the creation of local deliberative panels to discuss EU issues across Member States. Recommendation 1.1 from 2023 calls for the establishment of an annual European Citizens' Assembly. The second recommendation from the same panel in 2023, 1.2, suggests comprehensive reforms to the EU petition process.

The EU is consistently framed as a procedural and institutional actor that often lacks immediacy and responsiveness. Contrastingly, citizens are portrayed as both disempowered and latent agents of change. Youth in particular are framed as capable of energising democracy, with references to 'providing a space for dialogue' and 'discuss[ing] the most vibrant topics of EU politics'. Participation and collaboration are foregrounded as the central processes around which democratic revitalisation is imagined, and the ultimate goal is 'strengthen[ing] the relations between people and EU politics'. The ongoing interaction as opposed to a one-off consultation highlights that participatory democracy is necessarily a structured and repeatable event. Furthermore, the ditransitive verb phrase 'provide space for' is significant insofar as it frames the EU as an active agent that can allocate a resource (metaphorical space) to its citizens as recipients. Dialogue is treated as a commodity, suggesting that democratic participation is something that can be granted or managed by the governing power. To some extent, this idea subtly reinforces institutional authority and legitimises institutional intervention in public discourse.

The orientational stance is constructive and forward-thinking, with a concern for balancing citizen empowerment and institutional credibility. The 2023 panel's choice to use the first-person plural pronoun 'we' establishes the direct implication of youth voices in solutions for democratic renewal. Recommendation 1.1 demonstrates relatively high modality through repetitions of modal auxiliaries 'should' and 'shall' that convey a sense of directive confidence. This also signals a degree of prescriptive intent that positions the proposal as both feasible and necessary. That the participants of the proposed assembly 'shall' come

from all member states, ‘shall’ be compensated relative to income and that the event ‘shall’ take place annually reflects a commitment to equity and consistency. The emotive register of ‘reunit[ing] European citizens under the EU values’ in Recommendation 1.6 brings an additional affective dimension to the civic disconnection from EU-level politics.

The structure of the recommendations is systematic and mirrors the procedural nature of the reforms for which they advocate. The linear progression from problem to solution to implementation reflects a governance logic that positions their proposed assembly as an institutional mechanism grounded in legal and procedural norms, confirmed by the reference to Article 14(2) of the TEU. The intertextual reference to the 2019 Citizens’ Convention on Climate in France not only situates the proposed assembly within a broader European deliberative tradition but also serves a legitimating function by associating with successful participatory events beyond the EU level. The quantitative indicators of system failure (unresolved petitions and inadmissibility rates) introduce Recommendation 1.2 as a problem-driven proposal.

Climate and Sustainability

2023 3.8 Enforce compulsory adoption of low-energy district heating from waste heat, where technically possible

2024 2.1 Fare Play: Transforming Short-Haul Flights into Green Railway Travel

2025 2.2 Board the Green Erasmus+ Train

The three climate-related recommendations articulate a narrative that positions the EU as a strategic enabler of green transition by leveraging regulation, incentives and public investment to guide behavioural and infrastructural shifts. The EU is presented with technical competence and moral leadership on the topic of sustainability. Recommendation 3.8 from 2023 proposes the enforced legal adoption of low-energy district heating systems that use waste heat from factories and data centres. Recommendation 2.1 from 2024 calls for the increased taxation on short-haul flights where it is possible to take greener forms of transport as well as the provision of subsidies to railway operators in order to reduce rail ticket prices. Recommendation 2.2 from 2025 advocates for cost-free Interrail passes to be made available for Erasmus students, complemented by a participatory digital map for reporting areas to improve rail infrastructure. These texts highlight infrastructural and behavioural transitions,

presented through material processes that define the EU as a regulatory and coordinating actor.

Throughout, actions are expressed through nominalised abstractions ('adoption', 'transition', 'shift', 'implementation') rather than verb clauses which creates an effect of technical objectivity linked to the sustainable transition, in which processes are framed as structural features rather than interpersonal commitments. Indeed, agency is often embedded in complex noun phrases ('revenue derived from the increased taxes should be allocated...'; 'the travel pass shall be complemented by a participatory digital map...'). These constructions shift the focus from actors to outcomes, foregrounding systemic mechanisms in driving change. A shared semantic grammar of institutional formality is realised through nominalisation, technical vocabulary and use of the passive voice.

Recommendation 3.8 seeks to position the EU as a standard-setter through enforcement, 'compulsory adoption'. The actors and processes in this case are institutional and technical; the citizen is largely implied as a beneficiary rather than an agent.

Evaluative language is implied and embedded in lexical choices with positive semantic prosody, including 'eco-friendly heat supply', 'climate conscious Europe', 'cost-effectiveness', 'successful implementation'. These expressions encode a positive evaluation through noun-phrases built on value judgements. Alignment with institutional norms including environmental targets and sustainability frameworks becomes the signal of legitimacy.

Recommendation 2.2 from 2025 notably uses rhetorical anticipation when asserting 'we expect demand [...] to increase' and 'this initiative empowers Europeans to shape...'. Such framing positions the proposal as a catalyst for systemic change, linguistically aligning possible future outcomes with present action.

Health and Mental Health

2023 5.7 Keep the awareness of mental health stigma high on the European agenda.

2025 1.1 Breaking the Mental Health Stigma: Youth-Driven Advocacy and Early Intervention

2025 1.4 ClimateSpark: Empowering Youth from Eco-Paralysis to Self-Efficacy through Psycho-Ecological Projects in the EU

These recommendations characterise the EU as a facilitator of cultural transformation and psychosocial wellbeing, whose legitimacy derives from its capacity to mobilise discourse and support emotionally resonant initiatives. Recommendation 5.7 from 2023 calls for greater awareness of mental health stigma through evidence-based campaigns and youth-led projects. Recommendation 1.1 from 2025 shares a similar interest in confronting stigmas and proposes mental health advocacy campaigns across digital and public spaces, as well as the integration of mental health screenings into routine school health checks. This panel's fourth recommendation, 1.4, advocates for the establishment of a programme of psycho-ecological projects designed to foster at the same time climate engagement and mental health empowerment.

Semantic field clustering around stigma, emotion, normalisation, identity, acceptance and resilience shows that the health recommendations foreground affective and cognitive engagement. Described processes are largely behavioural and mental rather than material, for example 'encourages open dialogue', 'normalise seeking psychological help', 'help young people regain a sense of self-efficacy', 'co-creation of diverse projects'. Such verbs signify that the students seek interpersonal and discursive transformations rather than institutional engineering.

Compared to the strong obligations of climate and democracy, modality across these recommendations is softer, favouring 'can' and 'should rather than 'shall'. This reinforces a non-coercive ethos to policy making that is consistent with the orientations of the health and wellbeing sector. Institutional actors including ministries, NGOs and psychologists are invoked in partnership and supportive roles which is indicative of a distributed model of agency involving multiple stakeholders. The EU is therefore not an authority, but a catalyst and convenor within a network of actors.

With a diagnostic lens focusing on perception and discourse, it becomes clear that the students conceptualise health crises as not only biomedical, but deeply cultural and even semantic. As such, their solutions are structured around strategies that reshape collective meaning through an emphasis on real-life storytelling, cultural sensitivity and visual media. While traditional health governance might tend to seek measurable outcomes such as reducing waiting times and increasing treatment uptake, the students' recommendations envisage affective and relational outcomes embedded in community, and with a wider target audience.

Digital and AI

2022 7.1-3 Transparency of Communication and Code

2024 6.8 Enhance digital cultural heritage promotion across the EU

2025 3.4 Encourage cybersecurity while protecting personal data

In these recommendations, the EU must coordinate and balance technical imperatives with normative ramifications in a digital landscape that is highly volatile. Legitimacy thus derives from its ability to mediate competing values and provide clarity in areas of risk. In contrast to the participatory and affective emphasis of the other domains, digital policy is framed through a semiotics of complexity, neutrality and technical intervention. Recommendation 7.1-3 from 2022 calls for increased transparency obligations for social media platforms, including user access to personal data, researcher access to internal platform procedures and the establishment of a European-wide transparency reporting framework. Recommendation 6.8 from 2024 advocates for the digitisation and digital promotion of cultural heritage in the EU using immersive VR/AR technologies as well as standards for open data sharing and institutional training. Recommendation 3.4 from 2025 proposes a legal clarification of GDPR provisions to permit data processing for cybersecurity purposes, supported by EU-level guidelines and a centralised hub for cross-border threat intelligence.

In terms of the presentational dimension, the Digital and AI recommendations combine both material and relational processes, and these are often found in passive and nominalised forms. For example: “there should be higher standards of data transparency”; “cultural collections should be digitized and archived”; “guidelines [...] would outline permissible use cases”; “proprietary data [...] should be made available”. Processes described as obligations and functions leads to a more detached and procedural tone and we see that policy action is characterised as a set of institutional or infrastructural interventions. Furthermore, the frequent use of modals ‘would’ and ‘should’ encode a desirable, projected future state of reform. These deontic modals project a discourse of confidence, that is nonetheless tempered by qualifications such as ‘provided robust safeguards are in place’ and ‘where feasible’ that signal an awareness of the legal and technical complexity.

Agency is assigned to ‘the EU’, ‘platforms’, ‘guidelines’, ‘protocols’, and human actors as users are largely peripheral, e.g., ‘users should have the option of providing

recommendations’. This depersonalised structure positions digital governance as a structural challenge that should be addressed through precise mechanisms rather than direct civic action.

The thematic foregrounding of systems and infrastructures including transparency reporting, legal provisions (GDPR) and immersive technologies creates a distance from everyday practice and presents problems and solutions as reified policy objects. This reflects a conceptualisation of the digital domain as epistemically complex as problems are often embedded tensions (such as between privacy and cybersecurity, access and protection) requiring layered responses.

The problem-solution-outcome sequence continues to structure these recommendations, however with a more technical rhetorical progression than in the previous domains. Problems are identified as ambiguities or asymmetries, e.g. ‘GDPR [...] could inadvertently hamper cybersecurity efforts’; solutions often seek to refine existing systems and frameworks, e.g. ‘clarify and expand GDPR Article 6(1)(f)’, ‘establish standards and protocols’; and finally outcomes result in knowledge gain or improved system interoperability, e.g. ‘enabling rapid response to threats’ and developing ‘better representation and understanding of the world’. Procedural rationality in the organisation of meaning illustrates policy as a sequence of calibrated interventions that are logically tied to domain-specific outcomes.

Education

2022 10.5 Celebrating women in action

2023 9.5 Expanding the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master’s programme to the Bachelor’s level

2024 9.3 Enhancing Disability Data Collection in Higher Education

Within the selected Education policy recommendations, the EU is constructed in terms of its ability to harmonise standards, mobilise networks and promote social equity. Relying primarily on soft instruments, they reflect a conceptualisation of a culturally embedded form of education governance. Recommendation 10.5 from 2022 proposes the creation of a European-wide network to promote female role models, notably in STEM sectors, supported by mentorship, events and online visibility. Recommendation 9.5 from 2023 calls for the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master’s programme to be extended to the Bachelor’s level in order to

better facilitate cross-border academic collaboration and multicultural learning.

Recommendation 9.3 from 2024 advocates for standardised disability data collection in higher education that would be led by a specialist team comprising of internal and external actors and implemented across Member States through coordinated institutional action.

The modal declarative clause ‘the EU [...] has to highlight, celebrate, encourage and promote female talent’ in Recommendation 10.5 uses a coordinated string of transitive verbs to semantically position the EU’s role within a material and evaluative process of institutional agency which foregrounds the advancement of ‘female talent’ as a social good. While agency is assigned to collective actors including the EU, ‘educational institutions’ and ‘other governmental and industry associations’, the change agents (women and girls) are generally the beneficiaries rather than initiators of action. References to social categories of ‘young women’ and ‘older women’ construct the problem as a societal imbalance. In Recommendation 9.5, education is framed as a system that should be scaled and optimised, rather than restructured. Employing a lexicon of global competitiveness, ‘international experience’, ‘knowledge enrichment’, ‘job prospects’ presents education as a tool of labour market integration and cultural diplomacy.

In terms of organisational meaning, the three recommendations interestingly reflect subtle differences in rhetorical mode. 10.5 uses a narrative-propositional structure in which it first narrates the problem of ‘a lack of female role models’ and ‘societal expectations’ and then proposes solutions through network-building and visibility that culminate in the implicit outcome of greater gender equality in education and employment. 9.5 follows instead a projective mode that starts with the expansion of Erasmus+ as a material proposal and then elaborates its potential social and epistemic benefits, thereby constructing education as a vehicle for integration and competitiveness. 9.3 has the most procedural structure and the most concern for precise implementation steps. The sequence of actions from allocation, training, implementation, consultation to monitoring means that the future outcome of ‘advancing disability inclusion’ is framed as a rational consequence of these steps.

Discussion

This paper set out to explore how the preferred policy instruments in the European Student Assembly policy recommendations reflect differentiated perceptions of the EU’s role and legitimacy across policy domains, and what these reveal about the evolving relationship between the EU as a governing institution and youth as governed actors.

The analysis confirms Lascoumes and Le Galès' (2007) conceptualisation of policy instruments as simultaneously technical and social devices that symbolically and pragmatically shape the political relationship between institutions and citizens. The students' preferences across domains were naturally shaped by functional considerations, but also by perceptions of the EU's authority, its appropriate role and implicit expectations of the kind of legitimacy they sought. As such, instruments in this context function as expressive and identity-forming mechanisms: by calling for participatory platforms, ethical AI regulation, inclusive mental health initiatives and equitable environmental infrastructures, the ESA participants utilise policy instruments to promote value-laden visions of the EU as inclusive, responsive, just and democratic in different areas.

The preference for regulatory instruments in the climate domain reflects not only a perceived need for enforceability but a moral claim about the urgency of ecological justice and the EU's leadership role as *social guardian state* (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2011). The ecological transition is thus presented as a collective obligation that is safeguarded by institutional authority. This is also reinforced by the equal presence of economic and fiscal measures that evoke at the same time the *wealth producer/redistributive state*, the legitimacy of which in this case stems from mobilising resources for the common good and steering economic incentives towards a desired behaviour. The ESA participants expect the EU to assume a dual role in climate governance as both moral legislator, enshrining ecological justice in binding law, and economic architect that directs fiscal tools towards systemic change. The moral claim underlying this vision is largely rooted in what Henn et al. (2021) characterise as the postmaterialist values of the cosmopolitan youth, and indeed, the most recent Eurobarometer youth survey for 2024 saw environment and climate classed as the second most urgent priority for the EU (European Parliament, 2025).

Conversely, the prevalence of soft instruments in health and education highlights a desire for cultural and discursive transformation in these sectors rather than coercion. In terms of youth mental health, this reflects an understanding that what may appear to be 'micro problems' are in fact symptomatic of entrenched social and economic conditions, requiring sustained engagement with 'persistent root causes and a surmounting of both local and global barriers (Pashang et al., p.xxviii). Generational differences reinforce this orientation, with a 2024 survey by the Policy Institute at King's College London and Orygen Institute in Australia (2024, p.20) showing that Baby Boomers are more likely than younger generations to attribute a potential rise in youth mental health problems to increased use of drugs and

alcohol, rather than the increased cost of living or worse economic prospects. This systemic observation, which is carried forward by the ESA participants, aligns with Smith et al.'s (2024, p.1) suggestion that youth voices can and should be 'leveraged in the research process to spur positive social change and empowerment by identifying and investigating important issues within their communities'. In the recommendations, the EU earns authority by fostering capacities that enable citizens themselves to enact and sustain policy goals, bringing together governance as regulation and governance as cultural stewardship.

The balanced distribution of instruments in the Digital and AI domain suggests that the ESA participants envisage a polycentric approach to governance in which the EU is a multi-role actor. This reflects an understanding that in such rapidly evolving technological arenas, legitimacy cannot be anchored in a single mode of action. As such, the EU is positioned at once a regulator, standard-setter, convenor of partnerships and communicator. Effective policymaking is achieved when reconciling technical complexity with public accountability and preventing the over-concentration of power in corporate actors while maintaining openness to innovation. This fits with E. Lim and C. Lim's (2025) assessment of distributed responsibility in which developers, users and regulators are legally bound under hybrid deontological-consequentialist governance systems. This means prioritising at the same time moral obligations through transparent decision-making and maximising overall wellbeing and impact. The students echo their calls for 'tiered-responsibility strategies, mandatory algorithmic impact assessments and internationally coordinated oversight mechanisms' (E. Lim and C. Lim, 2025, p.77). Preferences for technocratic modes of operation reflects an attempt towards depoliticisation and 'ways of (re)describing and (re)assigning objects of public policy, and in doing so, designat[ing] their 'owners' and their legitimate management methods' (Robert, 2021, p.203). From this perspective, when the ESA participants turn particularly to delegation and de facto standards, Robert (2021, p.217) goes as far as suggesting that they 'nurture a form of fatalism and indifference towards European institutions'.

The patterns that emerge in the Education policy recommendations, notably initiatives concerned with internationalism, must be read particularly in light of the positionality of the ESA participants themselves. As internationally engaged students who have been able to participate in a transnational forum at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, they are both beneficiaries and exemplars of the very mobility and intercultural exchange they fervently recommend. This experiential grounding appears to shape their preferences for policies that

expand access to similar opportunities. Nevertheless, this is also a domain where the EU's formal competence is particularly limited and restricted largely to supporting, coordinating and supplementing national action. This is therefore a significant driving factor in the choice of non-binding agreement and incentive-based mechanisms. The argument for a *mobilising state* logic, following Lascoumes and Le Galès' (2007) full typology, can be justified, then, as a result of both legitimacy drawn from fostering collaboration between universities, NGOs and civil society but also as a necessary implication of weak EU legislative authority.

The policy recommendations make visible a conception of EU democracy in which the boundary between governing institutions and governed citizens is deliberately permeable. Across domains, but most explicitly in the panels relating to Democracy and EU Values, the students expect the EU to combine the protection of rights and democratic standards with the cultivation of spaces for dialogue and collaborative decision-making. Their notion of democracy aligns with Habermas' deliberative polity, in which formal decision-making is continually anchored in the communicative rationality of the public sphere. Habermas situates morality within the communication framework of a community of selves, requiring a dialogical form of practical reason postmodern societies rely upon for social integration (Odok and Berebon, 2024, p.50). Deliberative democracy is inseparable from 'processes of inclusive reason-giving, where all affected have an equal right and opportunity to participate in collective opinion formation' (Chambers, 2023, p.2). The ESA participants' emphasis on communicative openness, citizen participation and value protection suggests an implicit alignment with this formulation of democracy. In an era of 'condensed, differentiated and multiplied' communication flows, dialogic structures become even more critical for sustaining legitimacy across dispersed publics (Habermas, 2022, p.158). The ESA students position EU democracy as a continuous and reciprocal engagement of a transnational public with the institutions that govern it.

Conclusion: Policy instruments as normative signs of imagined governance

This study set out to discursively examine the way in which policy instruments proposed within the recommendations of the European Student Assembly between 2022 and 2025 reveal differentiated perceptions of the EU's role and legitimacy. By rejecting a solely functionalist approach to policy instrumentation and approaching them as signs, it advances a reading of governance that incorporates both technical rationality and symbolic meaning-making.

The findings show that the role the students envision for the EU across different policy domains varies systematically according to the way policy instruments are mobilised and the implications this has for imagined legitimacy. Traditional regulatory and fiscal tools dominate when the EU is viewed as a moral legislator and economic facilitator, particularly in climate and democratic governance; softer, discursive instruments prevail in domains oriented towards cultural transformation and capacity-building, in this case health and education; and a hybrid, polycentric configuration emerges in the digital field where increased complexity requires layered governance. This mapping of instrumental preferences reveals an underlying political imagination in which the EU alternately embodies shifting identities.

The originality of my study lies in its bottom-up perspective, applying Lascoumes and Le Galès' sociological approach to instrumentation to a citizen-authored corpus rarely studied in this way, and also in its integration of discourse analysis to uncover the semantic and rhetorical construction of governance roles. By treating the policy recommendations as discursive signals, the study attempts to capture the latent narratives embedded in youth political expression. Beyond its empirical contribution, the study invites increased reflection on the role of participatory forums as laboratories for future governance and policy agendas.

The scope of the data, limited to a highly engaged subset of youth, as well as the interpretive nature of the qualitative method, inevitably delimit the generalisability of the conclusions. However, these very conditions also offer a unique vantage point on the aspirational logics of a politically literate cohort. Future research could extend this approach to other participatory spaces, compare youth imaginaries across regions, or analyse longitudinal changes in instrumental preferences.

The European Student Assembly's recommendations are more than a civic exercise; they are a discursive space where governance is imagined, contested and symbolically enacted. Attending to the language of these proposals allows us to see the signs through which a generation articulates its vision of legitimate European action.

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Appendix

Sample of 15 policy recommendations in full:

Democracy and Legitimacy

2022 1.6 | To reunite European citizens under the EU values and to try and re-establish the feeling that citizens can influence the decisions made on a central level through bottom-up initiatives, we propose the creation of local Panels about EU issues in each Member State. The goal is to strengthen the relations between people and EU politics within a deliberative democracy model. Based on a topic to discuss, each panel invites experts to shed light on the topic, facilitate the collaboration within the group and assist in draft preparation. The Panels consist of a proportional amount of people depending on the population of the country and are randomly chosen. If a person participates in one panel, they should have fewer chances to participate in the next one, to have more variety. For all panels, spots are reserved for minority groups, randomly selected, too. Local members of the European Parliament are invited to attend as well. The panels should take place once a year in each Member State. After a Panel-Meeting, the document will be approved by the participants. Every panel

creates a document with policy recommendations, which will then be sent to the European Parliament. The final document should be discussed in the European Parliament in due time.

2023 1.1 Tell Us about (E)U! - Organising an Annual European Citizens Assembly. In order to bridge the gap between policy makers and citizens a dedicated platform is needed. We suggest embracing the idea of an annual European citizen's assembly, providing a space for dialogue and collaboration between citizens, civil society organisations, and policymakers. Based on the role model of ESA 2023 conference participants should be selected randomly and be prepared on their topics by experts meetings. Participants shall come from all member states after the principle of degressive proportionality as set out in Article 14 (2) TEU. Every year people should come together to discuss the most vibrant topics of EU politics. In order to boost the active engagement and allow everyone, including the vulnerable groups, to participate, participants shall be compensated the related income. Following the idea of rotating the Presidency of the Council of the EU, the conference shall be organised yearly in a different member state in order ensure a diverse range of perspectives and promote inclusivity within the EU MSs. The EP, the Commission and the Council of the EU shall publish reports how they want to realise the deliberations of the assembly. The Citizens' Convention on Climate in France from 2019 can serve as an example. Such a yearly assembly shall be also organised as well for young European people aged from 16 to 21.

2023 1.2 | Empower(E)U! - Unleashing Citizen Power for Change. The current state of the petition process in the European Union (EU) requires significant improvements to ensure timely and effective responses to citizen concerns. Taking into account the average of the last four years of publicly available data, it emerges that 28.6% of procedures remain open after one year, indicating a backlog of unresolved petitions. Furthermore, approximately 31.7% of petitions are deemed inadmissible, limiting citizens' ability to engage effectively in public action. This proposal focuses on the following key areas:

1. Increase PETI Budget and Staff: Insufficient budget and staffing contribute to the backlog of pending petitions and significant response delays. To overcome this, we recommend allocating higher resources to the Committee on Petitions (PETI), enabling timely and comprehensive responses.

2. Simplify Petitions and ECIs using AI via Opt-In: A significant number of petitions and European Citizens' Initiatives (ECIs) are deemed inadmissible due to complex rules and lack of clarity. To address this, we propose leveraging artificial intelligence (AI) to provide real-

time assistance and guidance to petitioners if wanted, particularly in determining the subject's relevance to EU competencies. Implementing AI-supported systems can enhance clarity and accessibility, increasing the number of admissible petitions.

3. Strengthen Response to Petitions: Petitions often lack substantial follow-up, limiting their impact and leaving petitioners feeling unheard. Granting petitioners the opportunity to speak before the PETI and requiring the Parliament to codify which petitions it follows up on, shall be the ordinary procedure for admissible petitions. PETI's denial to hear the petitioner shall be justified by objective reasons. This approach recognizes the value of successful petitions, fosters meaningful dialogue between petitioners and policymakers. With a higher budget the PETI shall normally exercise a fact-finding visit for petitions presenting a high number of supporters or treating considerable breaches of EU law. This will improve the understanding of the PETI for the situation of the petitioner and will more likely lead to an appropriate treatment of the petition.

Climate

2023 3.8 Enforce compulsory adoption of low-energy district heating from waste heat, where technically possible. We propose making low-energy district heating systems a legal standard in the EU to maximise the use of waste heat from factories and data centres. This sustainable solution, connecting houses to a centralised heating network, ensures consistent and eco-friendly district-wide heat supply. Drawing inspiration from successful implementation in the Netherlands, we recommend mandating waste heat utilisation in specific projects, like large-scale residential or commercial developments when technically possible. This proposal aligns with the EU's environmental goals, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and promoting energy efficiency. Successful implementation necessitates comprehensive guidelines, a legislative framework, financial support, awareness campaigns, and monitoring mechanisms.

2024 2.1 Fare Play: Transforming Short-Haul Flights into Green Railway Travel. The aviation sector continues to emit substantial levels of CO₂ (in 2023, 87 million tonnes of CO₂ were emitted within Europe). Flights under 1500 km are responsible for 25% of European aviation's CO₂ emissions. With train travel being proven as the most sustainable mode of long-distance transportation, the EU should continue its efforts to support the railway sector instead of further enhancing commercial air transport. To achieve this transition, it is recommended that the EU Government's "Mobility and Transport" Commission department increases taxes on short-haul flights where the possibility is

provided to take the train, bus or other forms of greener transport in under 6 hours. Moreover, subsidies should be provided to railway operators, thereby reducing ticket prices and making rail travel more affordable. The revenue derived from the increased taxes should be allocated towards EU and national funds, improving the railway infrastructure and facilitating a significant shift away from air travel. Introducing climate tickets - covering all forms of public transportation and valid for a specific period of time - will additionally enhance cost-effectiveness and simplify travel logistics for passengers. That way, green travel alternatives will be more accessible for all European citizens.

2025 2.2 Board the Green Erasmus+ Train: Interrail for sustainable mobility High travel costs and long journeys continue to push most citizens towards air travel. To align Erasmus+ with the EU's Green Deal there's an urgent need for more effective and inclusive incentives. Only 22% of Erasmus participants currently travel to their host universities using green transportation options, despite the existing Green Travel top-up. As a cost-covering, appealing solution for Europeans we imagine Interrail, a European Train-Pass, to be given out instead of the current top-up for Green Travel. Financial resources available from the previous green top-up and Erasmus+, enable participants to complete their on and outgoing journeys by using green transportation. The fundamental non-green Travel Grant remains untouched and compensates green travellers for necessary seat reservations. By implementing this policy, we expect demand for and, therefore, supply of more cross-border long distance and night trains to increase. Furthermore, the travel pass shall be complemented by a participatory digital map for reporting areas for improvement in infrastructure. Overall, this initiative empowers Europeans in Erasmus+ to shape a more connected, climateconscious Europe

Health and Mental Health

2023 5.7 Keep the awareness of mental health stigma high on the European agenda. The stigma associated with mental health problems is one of the main barriers preventing young people from seeking help. It affects all aspects of life, reduces social acceptance and self-esteem, and contributes to social inequalities. This policy primarily emphasizes the need to fully understand the extent of mental health related stigma, which should be done through endorsing more research in this area. It also suggests the development and implementation of evidence-based and culturally sensitive campaigns targeting stigma via the following

channels: social media platforms, podcasts, and poster campaigns. Lastly, it encourages active involvement of young people in the co-creation of diverse projects, and youth-led initiatives

2025 1.1 Breaking the Mental Health Stigma: Youth-Driven Advocacy and Early Intervention- To effectively address the stigma surrounding mental health, this policy proposal encourages open dialogue and normalization of the topic through two key strategies: 1) Campaigns driven by young people on platforms like TikTok and Instagram or in metro stations and on the streets can normalize seeking psychological help by sharing real stories. Ministries and NGOs can partner with content creators and align campaigns with awareness days, benefiting from high social and technical feasibility. Choosing social media is not intended to increase the stimulation but to take advantage of it to transmit messages that can help everyone, not only the young; 2) Integrating mental health screenings into routine school health checks can aid early identification and reduce stigma. They can include standardized questionnaires and one-on-one conversations. This can be coupled with mental health education for parents through workshops to help them monitor the behavior of their children and support them. This approach has high social and technical feasibility, as parents seek tools to navigate youth mental health.

2025 1.4 ClimateSpark: Empowering Youth from Eco-Paralysis to Self-Efficacy through Psycho-Ecological Projects in the EU- The EU should help young people regain a sense of self-efficacy through psycho-ecological projects that foster emotional processing of environmental crises. Engagement in environmental action projects can make youth feel in control, hopeful and resilient (Ojala, 2012). On this basis, the EU program ClimateSpark fosters the establishment of psycho-ecological projects which offer co-benefits in mental health and climate action. Municipalities receive funding for citizen-led ClimateSpark projects that suit their community's ecological and social context (e.g. beach cleanups, urban gardening), and center emotional health holistically. A model project is the "Climate Café": Informal gatherings where citizens exchange thoughts/feelings related to /Climate Change with the guidance of psychologists and educators. Climate Cafés are to be offered regularly within existing institutions, including mental health facilities, libraries, and university campuses. The positive effects of ClimateSpark projects can be amplified through a publicity campaign showcasing successful environmental projects and re-empowered youth.

Digital and AI

2022 7.1-3 Transparency of Communication and Code- There should be higher standards of data transparency. Thus, we propose that personal consumer data held by social media companies should be available to the users of the platforms, with the information provided in clear language about the permissions, reasons, and period of use of the data, and an option to download and modify those. Furthermore, proprietary data relating to internal social media procedures should be made available to external researchers for auditing purposes. 7.2 | Users should have the option of providing recommendations as to the operation of social media platforms to regulatory bodies, particularly around moderation and curation. 7.3 | Every social media platform should be subject to transparency reporting according to a Europe-wide regulatory framework. The companies should also have an obligation to be transparent about any government requests for customer data

2024 6.8 Enhance digital cultural heritage promotion across the EU- The European Union must allocate resources and support public initiatives to digitize and conserve cultural artifacts. As a result of technology development we have digital methods and technologies, such as high-resolution imaging and AI-powered artifact recognition. Cultural collections should be digitized and archived taking into account places that are less accessible or fragile artifacts, given the importance of ensuring their accessibility for the current and the future generations. Additionally, the EU should invest in the creation of virtual replicas of heritage sites using immersive technologies like virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) to provide immersive educational experiences, promote cultural tourism, and develop even better representation and understanding of the world by AI models. To facilitate data sharing and collaboration among cultural institutions, the EU should establish standards and protocols for open-access repository and provide training opportunities in digital heritage document and promotion techniques.

2025 3.4 Encourage cybersecurity while protecting personal data- The GDPR's stringent data protection principles, while vital for privacy, inadvertently could hamper cybersecurity efforts by restricting the collection and sharing of threat intelligence. To resolve this tension, the EU should clarify and expand GDPR Article 6(1)(f) to explicitly permit processing personal data for cybersecurity purposes under "legitimate interests," provided robust safeguards against misuse are in place. Guidelines co-developed by the European Data Protection Board and ENISA would outline permissible use cases, such as identifying bot networks or analysing phishing campaigns, while requiring anonymisation where feasible. Additionally, a centralised EU cybersecurity hub would facilitate cross-border data sharing, enabling rapid

response to threats like AI-driven disinformation campaigns or state-sponsored hacking. This balanced approach ensures privacy rights are upheld without leaving democracies defenceless in an era of AI-augmented cyber threats.

Education

2022 10.5 Celebrating women in action. To date, there is a lack of female role models for young girls to feel inspired and represented across industries and sectors (e.g. science, technology, and others). Additionally, older women often face lower access rates to more executive and senior positions due to stereotypes and societal expectations imposed on them. It is important to create strong model references for young women to make sure they are equally represented, as well as have informed access to all professional and educational opportunities without discrimination. The EU, through higher education, has to highlight, celebrate, encourage and promote female talent and participation in all sectors and industries. We recommend the creation of a cross-industry and cross-country network of women with mentorship programs or events, both in-person and online. A solid online network would be supported by a website, important social media presence, strong marketing campaigns and the contribution of educational institutions at all levels, as well as other governmental and industry associations

2023 9.5 Expanding the Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters program to the Bachelor level. Expanding Erasmus+ programs to include joint Bachelor's degrees will provide students with international experience, knowledge enrichment, and improved job prospects. It will foster collaboration among universities, making them more efficient and engaged globally. Joint Bachelor programs will cultivate multicultural perspectives, essential for addressing contemporary challenges. This institutional expansion will create interconnected universities, allowing specialization and capacity sharing among partners. Overall, the proposed expansion will enhance education quality and opportunities for students while strengthening European universities in their global competitiveness.

2024 9.3. Enhancing Disability Data Collection in Higher Education. To address the imperative for inclusivity and equity in higher education, the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with relevant departments responsible for disability services, should establish standardised disability data collection mechanisms across EU member states in line with chapter 2 of the guidance book by European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights for implementation of UNCRPD stating states parties' obligation to collect data. A specialised

team comprising policymakers, data analysts, educators, and representatives from disability advocacy groups should lead the implementation efforts, benefiting higher education institutions and policymakers. The proposed actions include allocating funding and resources to develop tailored survey tools, training programs, and data collection protocols.

Implementation will occur across all EU member states in collaboration with local governments, academia, and EU officials, beginning in the next budget cycle for phased rollout and monitoring. Consultation, resource allocation, training, implementation, monitoring, and ongoing analysis of collected data are essential steps. By outlining these actions, decision-makers will understand the process leading to advancing disability inclusion in higher education across the EU. This collaborative effort underscores the UNCRPD's commitment to creating a more equitable educational landscape for all students.