



# From principle to policy: Intergenerational solidarity as a pillar of the EU's long-term governance

European View

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## Abstract

This article reflects on the evolution of intergenerational solidarity from being a conceptual value to becoming a policy concern within the EU institutional system. It analyses the current strategies which aim to mainstream intergenerational fairness across EU policymaking and argues that, despite recent progress, the EU still lacks binding mechanisms to assess the long-term impact of its decisions on future generations. The article highlights that, for the sustainability and legitimacy of EU action, intergenerational solidarity must evolve from a principle to a governance tool—guiding not only social and climate policy but also emerging areas such as EU defence, fiscal strategy and digital transformation. As growing defence spending reshapes EU priorities, the importance of aligning security investments with the interests and rights of younger and future generations is underlined.

## Keywords

Intergenerational solidarity, EU governance, Long-term policymaking, Generational fairness, Sustainability, Youth inclusion, EU defence

## Introduction: from value to governance principle

Intergenerational solidarity—broadly understood as mutual support and responsibility between age groups—has moved from the periphery of political rhetoric to the heart of debates on sustainability, justice and democratic legitimacy. While its moral appeal has

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long been recognised, only in recent years has it begun to influence institutional discourse within the EU (Age Platform Europe 2023; Ellerich-Groppe et al. 2021).

In the EU context, the concept has gained traction in response to overlapping crises: demographic ageing, the growing precariousness of employment for young people, the climate emergency and the long-term costs of public debt. Intergenerational solidarity is increasingly framed not only as a normative principle but as a strategic imperative—the foundation for sustainability, equity and democratic renewal (European Commission 2024b; EESC 2024).

Despite rhetorical progress, one can observe that concrete policy implementation remains limited. Although the EU treaties enshrine intergenerational solidarity as a foundational value—particularly in Article 3(3) of the Treaty on European Union, which calls for ‘solidarity between generations’ as a cornerstone of sustainable development—this principle is seldom operationalised in binding legislation or fiscal frameworks (Jensen and Pfitzner 2025; EESC 2024).

In practice, many EU policies prioritise short-term fiscal discipline over long-term societal investment. For instance, the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) sets limits on national debt and deficits, aimed at ensuring macroeconomic stability, yet fails to distinguish between current spending and future-oriented investment. This structure discourages public spending in critical areas such as education, climate resilience and housing—sectors that disproportionately affect younger and future generations (Darvas et al. 2024). In the domain of pension reform, political reluctance to rebalance benefits between current retirees and younger contributors has led to worsening intergenerational inequalities in social spending (European Commission and Social Protection Committee 2024).

Finally, while the European Green Deal and the EU Climate Law are steps forward, implementation remains fragmented and insufficient. Fossil fuel subsidies still persist in several member states, and climate transition funds are not always tailored to reach the young or vulnerable workers of the future (European Commission 2024a).

## **From welfare to forward-looking justice: the evolution of intergenerational solidarity in the EU**

For much of its history, the EU’s approach to intergenerational solidarity was rooted in a narrow welfare-state logic. In this paradigm, solidarity between generations was primarily understood as the protection of older people through public pensions and healthcare systems. This model, common in post-war Europe, reflected demographic realities— younger populations, growing life expectancies and political consensus on the need for the welfare state (Vanhuyse and Goerres 2012). However, this setup gave little structural thought to the rights, opportunities and burdens facing younger generations—especially those not yet born (Kuslits and Sulyok 2024).

As a result, intergenerational fairness was not a guiding principle in EU policymaking. For decades, policies were reactive and risk-averse, focused more on managing demographic ageing than on equipping future generations for social, economic or environmental challenges (European Commission 2020). Fiscal rules, such as those enshrined in the SGP, reinforced short-term thinking by penalising deficits but failing to distinguish between consumption and investment—a flaw that disincentivised long-term spending on education, climate action and digital transformation (EESC 2024).

This began to change in the late 1990s and early 2000s, due to a convergence of factors, which included the following:

- *Demographic alarm.* The growing visibility of Europe's ageing population—and its long-term implications for pension sustainability, healthcare costs and labour markets—began to reshape EU priorities (Eurostat 2023). The Lisbon Strategy (2000) and the European Year of Active Ageing (2012) linked ageing with life-long learning and active labour participation, offering a first step towards cross-generational thinking.
- *Crisis-driven awareness.* The eurozone and financial crises of the 2008–14 period acted as a wake-up call. Austerity disproportionately affected younger generations—via cuts to education, youth unemployment programmes and innovation funding (European Commission 2014). By contrast, older cohorts were often shielded due to their stronger political voice and reliance on institutionalised benefits. This gave rise to a growing academic and civic discourse of generational injustice (Mulkeen 2025).
- *Climate mobilisation.* Perhaps the most transformative factor has been the rise of youth-led climate activism. Movements such as Fridays for Future succeeded in reframing intergenerational fairness not just in economic terms, but as a matter of planetary survival (Sieverding et al. 2024). This shifted the debate beyond pensions and into existential questions about what kind of world the current generations are leaving behind. The European Green Deal and the EU Climate Law now explicitly reference the obligation to safeguard the environment 'for future generations' (European Commission 2019).

As a result of these factors, the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic triggered a fiscal and symbolic rupture with past practice. In response to the crisis, the EU adopted NextGenerationEU, a €750-billion recovery instrument financed through common EU debt. The initiative was explicitly branded as an act of solidarity with future generations and represented a turning point (European Commission 2021). For the first time, the EU raised funds in the name of young people, investing in the digital transformation, education, employment and climate resilience. This represented a tangible, institutional acknowledgment that younger generations should not be left to pay the price for today's crises.

Recently, institutional shifts have reinforced this evolution. The Conference on the Future of Europe (2021–2) provided a platform for young people to demand youth quotas, climate justice and future-oriented policy impact assessments. In 2024 the European Commission appointed a commissioner for intergenerational fairness, and a comprehensive Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness is now under development, supported by a public consultation and new metrics such as the Intergenerational Fairness Index.

Finally, survey evidence shows that younger Europeans remain committed to the EU project but expect it to align with their priorities: education, health, climate protection, housing and meaningful participation. They support common EU action on defence and security, but only when it is balanced against the need for sustainability and inclusion (European Commission 2024b).

Together, these factors and the subsequent shifts outlined above have pushed the EU from having a passive and one-dimensional understanding of intergenerational solidarity to setting a multidimensional and future-oriented agenda. While implementation remains uneven, there is growing recognition that the legitimacy of the EU increasingly depends on its ability to safeguard the interests of all generations—especially the young and the not yet born.

## **Institutional advances and the remaining gaps in the mainstreaming of intergenerational solidarity**

In recent years, the EU has made visible institutional progress in elevating intergenerational solidarity from a rhetorical ideal to an emerging pillar of policymaking. The appointment of a dedicated EU commissioner for intergenerational fairness, youth, culture and sport in 2024 marked a notable milestone. This shift has been further institutionalised through the ongoing development of an EU Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness, expected in 2026. The strategy aims to embed a cross-cutting intergenerational lens across key domains: climate action, housing affordability, the digital and green transitions, employment precarity and pension sustainability. It recognises that today's decisions—fiscal, infrastructural and ecological—will shape the life chances of both current and future generations (EU Policy Lab 2025).

Several innovative mechanisms are proposed within this strategy:

- the creation of an Intergenerational Fairness Index, assessing how well EU and national policies protect the long-term interests of younger and future citizens;
- the introduction of intergenerational impact assessments, evaluating the long-term consequences of laws and policy proposals; and
- the promotion of participatory structures, ensuring young people and civil society are included in consultations and long-term planning.

However, as promising as these developments are, serious gaps remain between institutional ambitions and operational delivery. One of the most glaring limitations is the absence of a dedicated EU budget line for intergenerational fairness. Without earmarked funding, even well-designed strategies risk remaining aspirational. Existing EU programmes such as Horizon Europe, Erasmus+ and the Just Transition Fund contribute only partially to generational equity, and lack a coordinated investment framework focused on supporting intergenerational priorities across policy areas.

Moreover, the EU's core fiscal governance frameworks, especially the SGP, continue to act as barriers to future-oriented investment. Designed in the 1990s to ensure macroeconomic stability, the SGP focuses on short-term deficit and debt reduction, with little distinction between current expenditure and investment with long-term returns—such as in education, digital infrastructure or green innovation (Darvas et al. 2024). As a result, member states are often discouraged from borrowing for or spending on youth-focused public goods, even when such investment would be economically and socially sound.

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has taken an important step towards making intergenerational solidarity more actionable. In its influential 2024 opinion, it recognised that although the importance of fairness between generations is gaining political traction, it still lacks coherence and visibility within EU policymaking structures. To address this, the Committee urged the European Commission to publish a Green Paper on Intergenerational Solidarity—a move that could consolidate the EU's vision and provide a conceptual foundation for further action (EESC 2024).

Beyond this, the EESC calls for the mainstreaming of intergenerational fairness across all EU policies and funding instruments, including the European Social Fund and cohesion policy. Rather than treating it as a niche concern, the aim is to embed a generational lens horizontally across employment, housing, health and innovation.

Crucially, the opinion also highlights the need for legal mechanisms to assess the long-term impact of EU laws and regulations. These would involve integrating future-oriented impact assessments into the legislative processes, ensuring that today's decisions do not impose unfair burdens on tomorrow's citizens (Kuslits and Sulyok 2024). It even proposes the creation of a European Pact on Intergenerational Fairness—a governance framework to coordinate efforts across the Commission and member states and avoid fragmented approaches.

Finally, the Committee stresses the role of civil society and youth organisations in shaping and monitoring EU policy. Intergenerational fairness, it argues, cannot be achieved through top-down planning alone. It requires a culture of participatory democracy, where those most affected by future outcomes—especially young people—are involved in co-designing the rules and strategies that will govern their lives.

## **Defence spending and intergenerational trade-offs: a test for European solidarity**

Nowhere is the tension between present-day imperatives and long-term responsibility more visible than in the EU's evolving approach to defence. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, escalating global competition and mounting pressure from partners such as the US have catalysed a dramatic shift in European security thinking. The Union has moved towards greater coordination and joint procurement, and has even floated the idea of EU-level defence bonds (European Commission 2023). While this shift responds to legitimate threats, it also raises difficult questions: who pays, who benefits, and how do today's decisions shape the futures of younger and unborn Europeans?

From the standpoint of intergenerational solidarity, the defence debate represents a major cross-roads. On the one hand, young Europeans are not indifferent to security concerns. According to the 2024 Eurobarometer, 77% of those aged 15 to 30 support the creation of a common EU defence and security policy—revealing strong support for shared responsibility at the European level (European Commission 2024b). However, when asked about their investment priorities, young people clearly ranked education (57%), health and well-being (55%), and climate action (49%) far above defence (24%). In short, younger generations support defence cooperation—but not at the cost of social and environmental investments that secure their future.

This points to a broader dilemma: public resources are limited, and increased military spending inevitably entails opportunity costs. Expanding defence budgets may come at the expense of investments in affordable housing, digital education, green infrastructure or youth entrepreneurship. The challenge is not only fiscal but also normative—a matter of distributive justice between generations.

Moreover, this concern is also geographically and socio-economically layered. Defence investments disproportionately benefit countries with large defence sectors—such as France, Germany and Italy—creating structural asymmetries in who gains from EU-level defence coordination. Smaller or less industrialised member states may contribute to collective funds but see little local return in jobs or innovation, risking the creation of resentment across both generations and regions (Wolff et al. 2025).

From a policy perspective, the key challenge is to redefine what constitutes a 'just' defence policy. Intergenerational solidarity does not imply neglecting defence needs, but it requires that choices in this domain be forward-looking and inclusive. This could mean prioritising dual-use technologies—such as cybersecurity tools, space systems and sustainable logistics—that enhance both defence capabilities and civilian resilience. Investments in security could also be channelled into programmes with wider societal benefits, such as artificial intelligence for disaster relief or cyber-resilience infrastructures that protect governments, businesses and households alike (European Commission Expert Group on the Economic and Societal Impact of Research and Innovation 2025).

As underlined in its 2024 opinion, the EESC insists that solidarity must be mainstreamed across all policy areas, including defence and security. This involves assessing not only the financial implications of defence choices but also their broader social and ecological footprint—particularly whether they displace youth-oriented policies, exacerbate inequalities or slow down the EU’s green transition. The proposed Green Paper on Intergenerational Solidarity could provide the institutional space for a transparent, democratic debate on these trade-offs.

The evolving EU defence agenda is therefore both a test and an opportunity. Approached with foresight, it could reflect the values of shared security, technological innovation and collective responsibility. But if advanced through opaque budgeting, the uneven distribution of benefits and disregard for the long-term consequences, it risks becoming yet another policy area where intergenerational fairness is sacrificed to the pressures of urgency.

## **Embedding intergenerational solidarity: a way forward**

For the EU, advancing meaningful intergenerational solidarity requires moving beyond declaratory principles towards durable institutional frameworks. As demographic change, climate emergencies and rapid technological transformation reshape the foundations of European society, the challenge is not only to safeguard today’s citizens but also to secure the well-being of those yet to come. In this sense, protecting future generations has become a litmus test of the Union’s capacity to govern with foresight and credibility over the long term.

A critical conceptual shift lies in redefining what solidarity means. Public debate too often frames intergenerational solidarity as a one-way transfer, with older cohorts expected to give up privileges for the benefit of the young. Such a zero-sum perspective overlooks the potential for mutual reinforcement. Investments in youth—affordable housing, quality education, inclusive labour markets and climate resilience—are not only about fairness for the next generation; they also strengthen long-term economic stability, improve public health and enhance social cohesion.

To embed this vision of reciprocal solidarity, the EU must institutionalise intergenerational fairness within its governance architecture. Several measures stand out as priorities:

- Systematic intergenerational impact assessments should be carried out on all major EU laws, fiscal instruments and strategic frameworks. These tools could help to forecast how today’s decisions affect the rights and opportunities of future generations.
- Enhanced strategic foresight capacities are needed across all institutions. Each directorate-general, agency and advisory body should be equipped to anticipate

long-term risks and design resilience-oriented policies, rather than relying on reactive measures.

- Meaningful youth representation and future-generation participation must go beyond tokenistic consultations. Youth assemblies, ethical panels and permanent citizens' dialogues could help to ensure that long-term perspectives are embedded in critical domains such as artificial intelligence, climate action and fiscal planning.
- Reform of fiscal governance is equally vital. The SGP continues to conflate current consumption with investment, thereby discouraging future-oriented spending. New rules should allow productive investments in green infrastructure, digital education and health—areas essential to intergenerational equity—without penalising member states under deficit constraints.

Taken together, these proposals are crucial to turning normative commitments into durable institutional practice. Without such structures, the EU risks losing legitimacy not only among younger Europeans but also in the eyes of future generations.

## Conclusion

Intergenerational solidarity can no longer be treated as a distant aspiration; it must become a foundational principle of the EU's future. The challenges facing the Union—climate breakdown, demographic ageing, technological disruption and mounting security threats—are inherently intergenerational. They require a Union capable not only of managing immediate crises, but of safeguarding rights, resources and opportunities across time.

The legitimacy of European governance will increasingly depend on its ability to protect those with the weakest voice: the young, the marginalised and the unborn. Turning the concept of intergenerational fairness from rhetoric into reality will demand institutional courage, cross-sectoral coordination and, above all, a cultural shift in political reasoning—from reactive crisis management towards long-term stewardship.

The foundations are already in place. Europe's youth have demonstrated not only their concern but their commitment to building a more just and sustainable Europe. They do not reject security or stability, but they expect the Union to match its ambitions with credible promises for the future. The real question, then, is not whether young people are ready to contribute—it is whether the EU's institutions are prepared to listen, adapt and act.

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