



By: Ana Palacio

Can Europe deliver what young Europeans are asking for?



At first glance, the wave of student-led protests that has swept across France might resemble the events of May 1968.

Both featured surging crowds of demonstrators calling for education reform, criticizing the government, erecting blockades, and being confronted by riot police. Both also attracted casseurs, who turn protest into destruction.

But whereas the students of 1968 were seeking to overturn the established order, today's protesters want the established order to deliver for them.

To understand a generation, one must consider the world its members inhabited when they turned 20.

The students of 1968 grew up with parents who had endured war and deprivation.

While the older generation's sacrifices and hardships commanded respect, their children rebelled against their authority—and the system they upheld.

The students of 1968 had relatively few material possessions and limited ability to travel.

The women among them were being directed toward marriage, not professional achievement.

These young people did not expect their parents or the state to eliminate every obstacle to prosperity, let alone hand them opportunities on a silver platter.

They merely wanted to prevent the system from getting in their way.

That generation—my generation—knew that, ultimately, we would find work and live better than our parents. So did the one that followed.

In fact, the generation that came of age after the fall of the Berlin Wall encountered a world overflowing with possibilities, not least thanks to globalization and rapid technological

innovation.

While the first postwar generations came of age with some awareness of planetary limits, underscored in the Club of Rome's 1972 "[The Limits to Growth](#)" report and at the 1992 [Earth Summit](#), they were convinced that tomorrow would be better than today.

Rising expectations

The current generation of young Europeans possesses freedoms, material resources, opportunities to travel, and technological capabilities beyond anything we could have imagined in 1968.

Their demands, however, are strikingly simple: decent schools, secure jobs, affordable homes, and the possibility of raising a family.

From the vantage point of my generation, there appears to be some entitlement at play: whereas we set out to conquer a world of seemingly limitless possibilities, today's young protesters expect more from institutions. But they also confront material obstacles unlike anything we faced.

Europe has encouraged rising expectations among young people

Europe has encouraged rising expectations among young people, while its capacity to generate the prosperity needed to fulfill those expectations has deteriorated sharply.

Whereas the rebels of 1968 belonged to the enormous postwar cohorts, today's young Europeans are a shrinking minority in aging societies whose political systems protect established interests above all.

Rising living costs and high youth unemployment have made it difficult for young people to strike out on their own: according to a [Eurostat study](#), Europeans left their parents' homes at age 26.3, on average, last year, with

the figure exceeding 30 in several countries, including Italy and Spain.

Meanwhile, accelerating climate impacts and the rise of AI are generating profound uncertainty about the future.

Europe's persistent weaknesses

While some of these challenges extend far beyond Europe, the European Union's failure to respond to a transformed world has compounded the problem for its young people.

In 2008, **the EU's GDP** was comparable to that of the United States; today, it amounts to **barely 70%** (in current dollars).

Brexit and exchange-rate movements explain part of the difference, but Europe's persistent weaknesses in productivity, innovation, and technological scale come down to policy.

Former US President Joe Biden understood that the world had changed, and COVID-19 underscored the strategic vulnerability implied by dependence on distant suppliers for essential goods.

So the Biden administration deployed industrial policy, including investment incentives and measures aimed at securing critical supply chains, to rebuild domestic capabilities.

While this effort involved some inward-looking policies, it ultimately sought to reinforce the global institutional order that had served the US so well.

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US President Donald Trump, however, has effectively taken a sledgehammer to that order

since returning to the White House in 2025, turning on friends and allies, starting trade and conventional wars, withdrawing from international bodies and agreements, and dismantling the tools of US soft power.

Nonetheless, the Trump administration recognizes that industrial production, technological leadership, and control of critical resources are vital to security and prosperity in the 21st century.

The US has translated this conviction into concrete policies. For example, to bolster rare-earth processing and magnet manufacturing, the US Department of Defense has delivered financing, long-term purchase commitments, and **guaranteed minimum prices**.

Rather than merely subsidizing a factory or two, the state has been putting in place the market conditions that make a strategic industry viable.

No more vague promises

Europe has also recognized the need to act more strategically, such as by nurturing critical industries, strengthening supply chains, and building technological autonomy.

Former European Central Bank President **Mario Draghi** has documented the EU's competitiveness crisis with devastating clarity.

The European Commission incorporated his findings into a "competitiveness compass."



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frustrations with more vague promises

But so far, Europe has struggled to translate ambition into action. Swedish battery manufacturer **Northvolt** received huge amounts of public financing so that it could challenge Asian dominance, but it collapsed last year amid production difficulties, supply-chain disruptions, and demand shifts.

In defense, Europe touts Airbus as evidence of what industrial cooperation can achieve, yet earlier this year, France and Germany **scrapped a landmark project** to build a next-generation fighter jet.

Europe pursued integration not as a means of managing decline, but as a way to overcome a bloody history and enable countries to achieve more than any of them could alone.

Today, Europe's leaders risk reversing that ambition: protecting yesterday's achievements while surrendering the means to deliver tomorrow's.

Europe's leaders must not respond to young people's frustrations with more vague promises.

Today's young people are coming of age in a world where power, security, and economic prosperity have become indivisible.

They need and deserve from their leaders a credible agenda for delivering affordable housing, educational excellence, competitive industries, and decent jobs.

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