

Index of Intergenerational Justice

Executive summary
November 2025



Access to Services



Economic Fairness



Political Equality



Relational Equality



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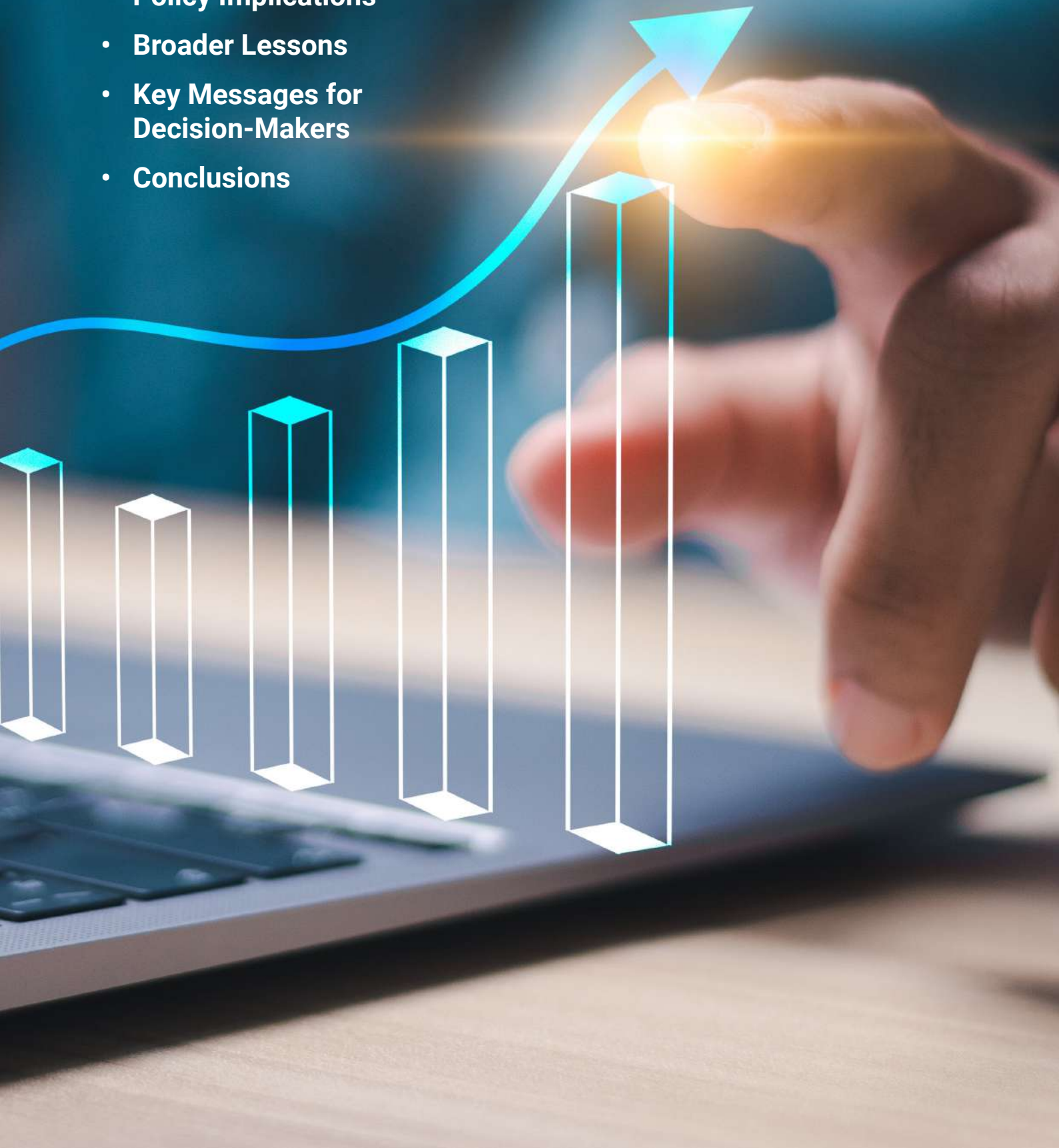


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- **Context and Purpose**
- **Conceptual and Methodological Framework**
- **Main Findings**
- **Cross-Country Patterns**
- **Policy Implications**
- **Broader Lessons**
- **Key Messages for Decision-Makers**
- **Conclusions**





1. Context and Purpose

Europe is undergoing a demographic transformation unprecedented in its speed and magnitude. Life expectancy has risen steadily, while fertility rates remain low across almost all Member States. This shift has profoundly altered the balance between younger and older citizens: a smaller working-age population sustains a growing number of retirees, while fiscal and social systems built in the post-war era now face mounting strain. These dynamics are not only economic or institutional challenges but also raise a fundamental question of fairness.

“Do younger and older generations today enjoy comparable opportunities, resources, and voice in shaping their societies, or do systematic disadvantages fall disproportionately on one group?”

The Index of Intergenerational Justice (IIJ) addresses this question through a systematic and transparent assessment of fairness between age groups in Europe. Covering nineteen EU Member States, it compares younger adults aged 25–34 with older adults aged 55–64 for labor-market indicators and 65+ for broader measures of welfare, inclusion, and participation. The Index provides a multidimensional picture of how the two groups fare today, offering policymakers a real-time diagnosis of where intergenerational gaps are largest


and where targeted intervention is most urgent.

Unlike studies that track cohorts over decades and rely on uncertain projections, the IIJ takes a snapshot perspective. It evaluates fairness as it is experienced now, making it immediately relevant for governments and institutions seeking to manage the consequences of demographic ageing while ensuring social cohesion.

2. Conceptual and Methodological Framework

The theoretical foundation of the IIJ rests on the principle of *age-specific sufficiency*. Justice between age groups is not about identical treatment but about ensuring that each generation has the resources, opportunities, and recognition required to live with dignity at its stage of life. Children and young adults require opportunities to build autonomy and accumulate human capital; older adults require care, health protection, and social respect. Fairness therefore implies meeting age-appropriate needs and preventing deprivation in early life that can leave permanent scars.

The Index adopts an *age-group comparison* rather than a cohort approach. This choice is pragmatic and normative at once. It avoids the speculative assumptions needed to reconstruct entire lifetime transfers while capturing the realities that shape people's current perceptions of fairness. Age groups, unlike cohorts, coexist within the same



institutional and economic environment; their differences in income, services, or voice reveal how the benefits and burdens of the welfare state are distributed today.

Four dimensions structure the assessment. *Economic fairness* captures material security through poverty risk, unemployment, contract stability, wages, housing adequacy, and financial resilience. *Access to essential services and public goods* measures equity in health care, social transfers other than pensions, environmental quality, personal safety, and digital connectivity. *Relational equality* examines the quality of social relations, the extent of age-based discrimination, and mental well-being. *Political equality* assesses participation, representation, and responsiveness of institutions to generational concerns.

“Each dimension corresponds to a distinct aspect of justice: distribution of resources, access to services, social recognition, and political standing.

All indicators are drawn from harmonized European datasets.

The *EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC)* provides cross-sectional data on income, poverty, labor, and housing.

The *European Social Survey (ESS)* supplies information on attitudes, social relations, discrimination, and political participation.

The *Manifesto Project* codes electoral programs to measure the salience of generational issues in party competition, while the *WARP* database tracks the age composition of national parliaments. Together these sources permit consistent comparisons across countries and across the four dimensions of the Index.

Indicators are normalized against the EU-19 average to measure within-country gaps rather than overall levels of development. They are coded according to a uniform rule—*the more, the better*—so that

“positive values of the index consistently indicate an advantage for older adults and negative values an advantage for younger ones.

To aggregate the indicators, the Index employs three complementary weighting strategies. Equal weighting offers a transparent benchmark; empirical weighting assigns greater importance to variables most closely associated with life satisfaction; normative weighting reflects explicit principles of justice, giving priority to sufficiency, the avoidance of scarring disadvantages, and equal citizenship. The combination of these methods ensures that results are both empirically robust and normatively interpretable.

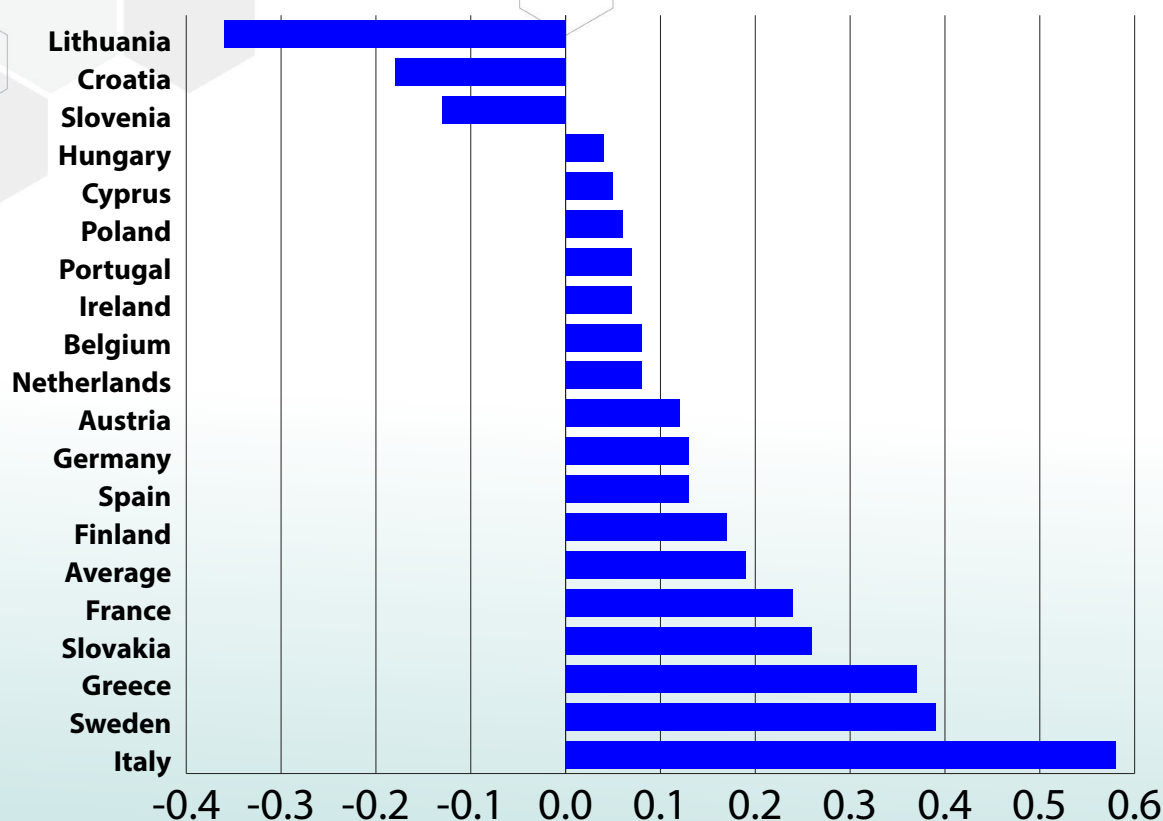
ECONOMIC FAIRNESS

**ACCESS TO
ESSENTIAL SERVICES**

RELATIONAL EQUALITY

POLITICAL EQUALITY

Figure 1: Economic Fairness Dimensions



Index composed of: 1) poverty, 2) unemployment, 3) permanent contracts, 4) wage gap, 5) residential crowding and 6) financial distress

3. Main Findings

The analysis reveals that intergenerational justice in Europe is highly uneven and multidimensional. No country is uniformly favorable to either the young or the old. Apparent balance at the aggregate level often conceals deep inequalities that offset one another across different domains.

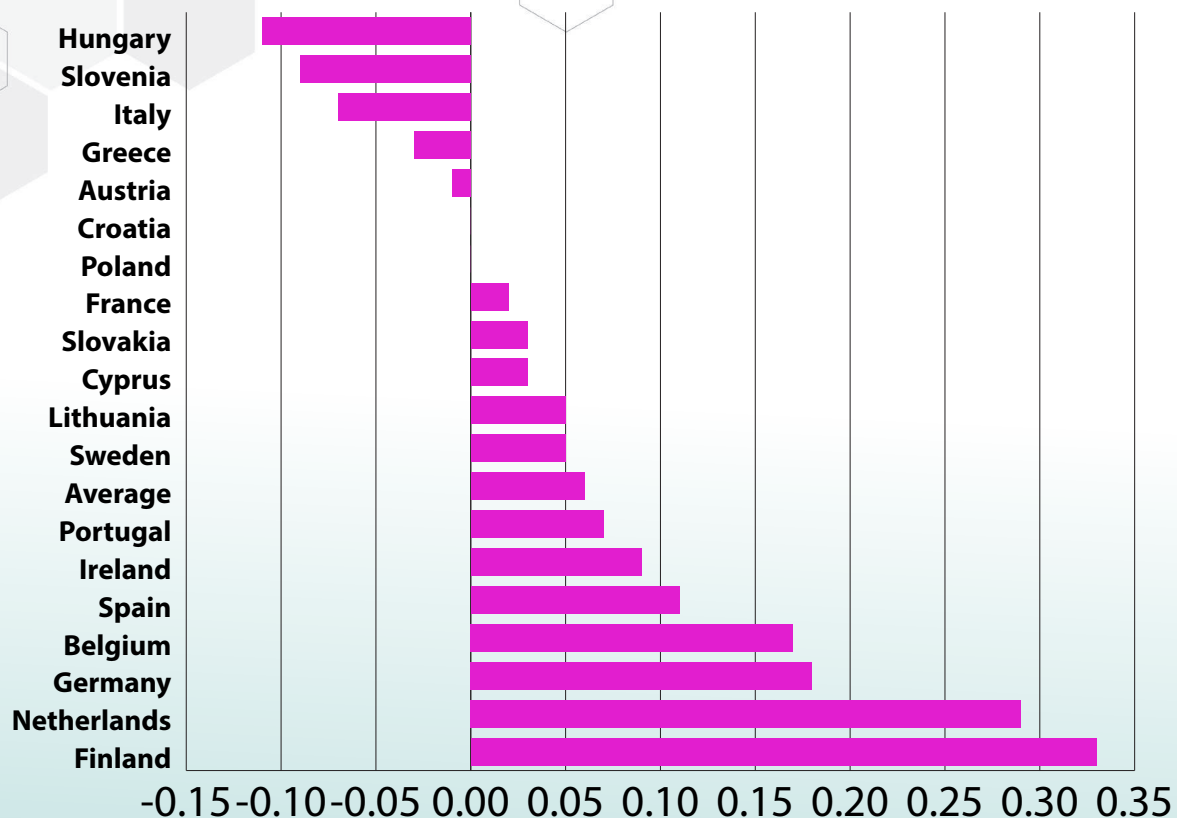
Economic Fairness

“In the economic sphere, older adults enjoy clear and persistent advantages,

as shown in [Figure 1](#). They are more likely

to hold permanent contracts, to earn higher wages even after controlling for education and occupation, to live in adequate housing, and to possess financial buffers that protect them from shocks. Younger adults face consistently higher unemployment, greater job insecurity, and more precarious living conditions. Overcrowded housing is widespread among the young, particularly in Southern Europe, where the combination of high housing costs and limited credit access delays residential autonomy and family formation. In countries such as Italy and Greece, dual labor markets perpetuate insecurity: insiders—often older workers—enjoy stable contracts, while outsiders—

Figure 2: Essential Services Dimension



Index composed of: 1) unmet health needs, 2) social transfers, 3) exposition to pollution, 4) exposition to crime, 5) Internet

mostly young people—rotate through temporary jobs with few rights.

The wage premium for age remains pronounced in Ireland, the Netherlands, and other Northern states, reflecting both seniority pay systems and unequal opportunities for progression. Even when young workers are equally qualified, they receive systematically lower remuneration. These disadvantages translate into weaker financial resilience. Across most of Europe, younger households are less able to meet unexpected expenses, exposing them to a cycle of vulnerability that compounds over time.

Only a few exceptions reverse this pattern. In Slovakia, Lithuania, and Croatia, older adults experience higher poverty risk, indicating that pension systems in those countries do not fully protect against late-life insecurity. Nevertheless, the overall picture reported at Figure 1 is

unambiguous: in sixteen of the nineteen countries studied, the economic domain tilts in favor of the elderly. The imbalance is most pronounced in Italy, Sweden, and Greece.

“ *This finding points to structural obstacles preventing younger Europeans from achieving economic independence and undermines the foundations of intergenerational solidarity.*

Access to Essential Services and Public Goods

“ *Access to basic services reveals a more nuanced configuration,*

as shown in [Figure 2](#). Older adults are more likely to report unmet health needs, particularly in Italy, Greece, and Belgium,

where long waiting times and out-of-pocket costs hinder access even within universal health systems. In other countries, such as Cyprus and Slovakia, younger adults experience greater difficulty obtaining care, often because of unstable employment or residence status.

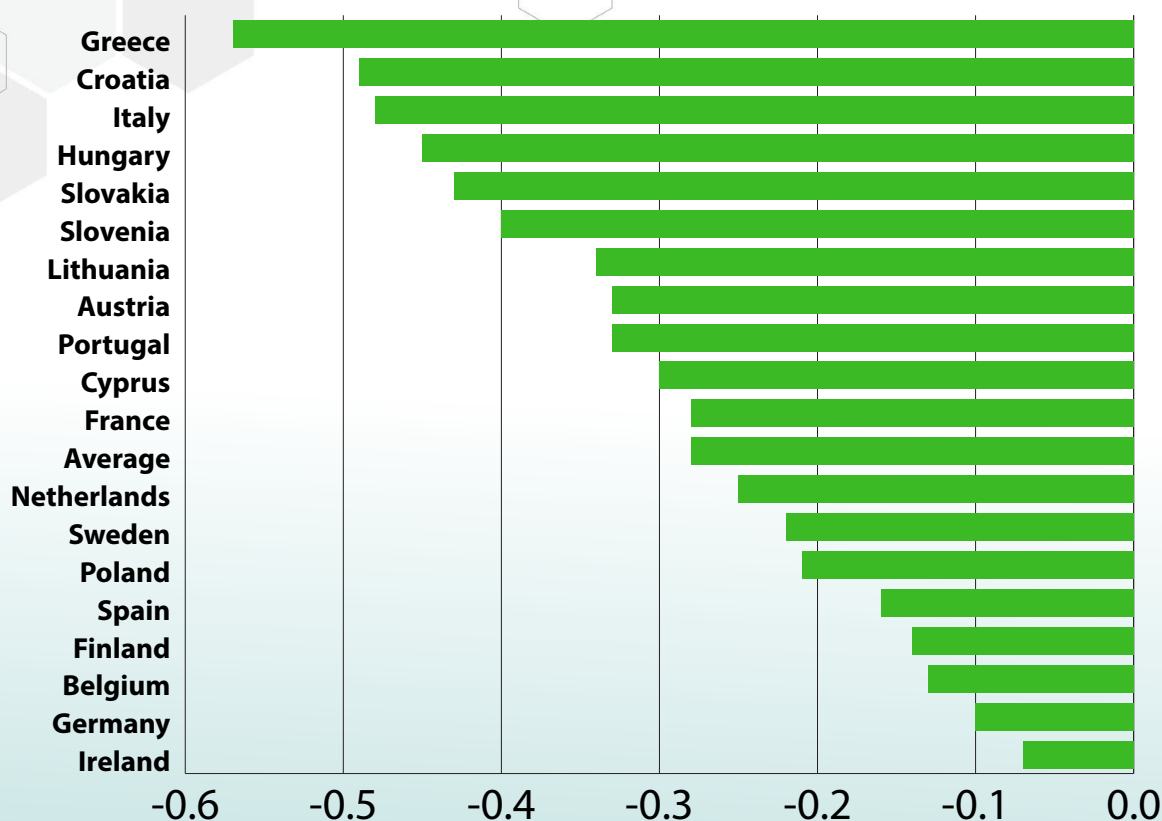
Environmental and safety indicators show systematic advantages for seniors. Older adults tend to live in cleaner, safer, and less noisy environments, while younger people, concentrated in urban areas, are more exposed to pollution, crime, and vandalism. These patterns reflect residential segregation and unequal capacity to afford better neighborhoods. In contrast, access to the internet has become nearly universal across generations. Affordability no longer represents a significant generational divide, though qualitative differences in digital literacy persist beyond the scope of this measure. Welfare transfers excluding pensions display significant variation according to national welfare regimes.

When all indicators are combined, twelve of the nineteen countries show a tilt in favor of older adults, with Finland, the Netherlands, Germany, and Belgium at the top of the list. Hungary, Slovenia, and Italy stand out as systems more favorable to younger adults. Italy's position illustrates that advantages for the elderly in income security can coexist with stronger service access for the young, reminding policymakers that the overall balance can mask sectoral inequalities.





Figure 3: Relational Equality Dimension



Index composed of 1) regular leisure activity, 2) social relations; 3) close relations, 4) Discrimination, 5) mental well-being

Relational Equalities

“*Relational equality—the ability to participate in social life with dignity and without stigma—favors younger adults across nearly all countries,*

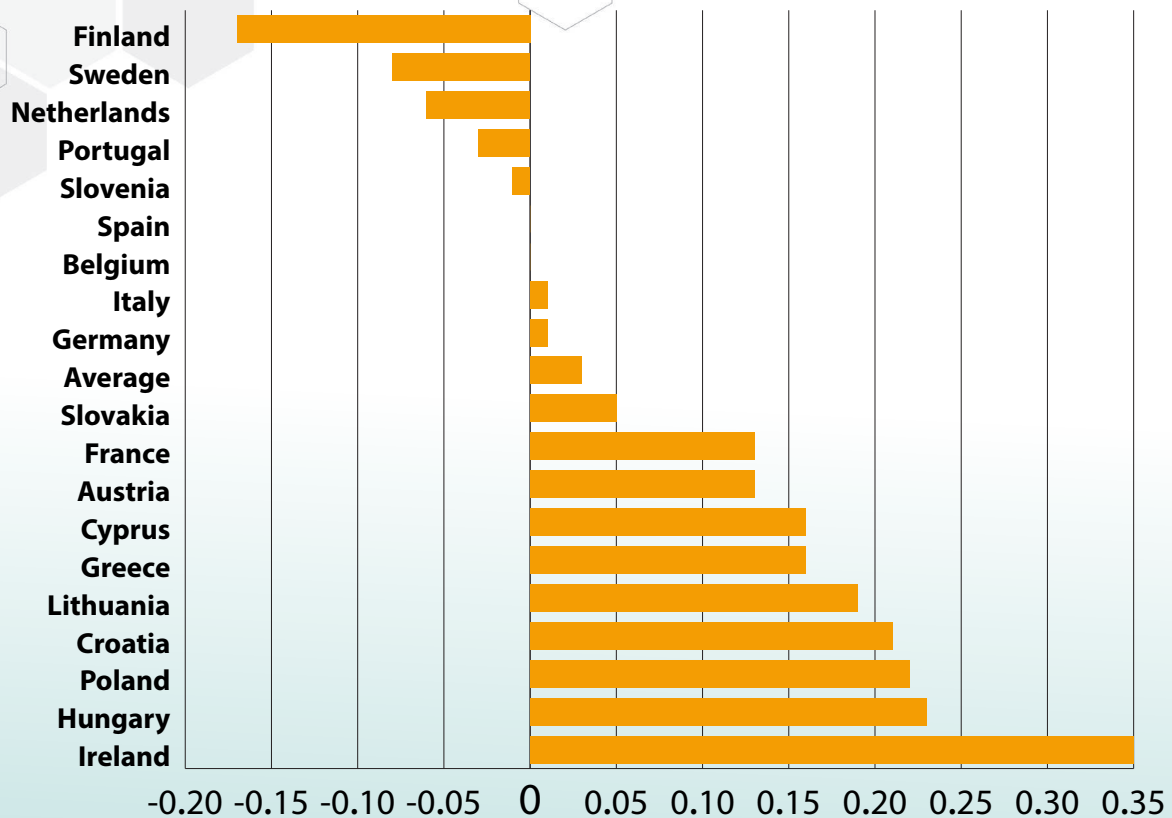
as displayed in [Figure 3](#). They engage more frequently in leisure activities, sustain broader networks of friends and acquaintances, and report lower levels of loneliness. In most of Europe, older adults are at greater risk of isolation, reflecting retirement, health deterioration, and shrinking social circles. Yet the picture is complex. In Germany and Ireland, older respondents report better mental health than the young, suggesting that material security can partly offset relational disadvantages.

A critical finding is that discrimination based on age affects both ends of the life course. Everywhere, but particularly in Slovakia and Finland, younger people report more experiences of unfair treatment or exclusion, often rooted in stereotypes of immaturity or unreliability. This confirms that

“*ageism is not confined to old age; it can equally disadvantage youth in employment and public life.*

The relational domain therefore highlights the dual nature of intergenerational inequality: older adults suffer more from loneliness and declining networks, while younger adults face social and professional stereotypes that limit recognition. Policies aimed at combating ageism and fostering intergenerational contact are necessary to sustain cohesion in ageing societies.

Figure 4: Political Equality Dimension



Index composed of: 1) say, 2) influence, 3) turnout, 4) party closeness, 5) political interest, 6) manifesto salience, 7) age representation

Political Equality

Political equality is another dimension where disparities are striking, as shown in [Figure 4](#). In every country studied, older adults display higher political participation, stronger interest in politics, and greater identification with parties. They vote more consistently and perceive themselves as having more influence over political outcomes. Younger adults, although often expressing optimism about their political voice, translate this confidence into participation far less frequently. The result is a structural mismatch between perception and practice: younger generations believe they can make a difference, but

“electoral outcomes are shaped predominantly by older voters.”

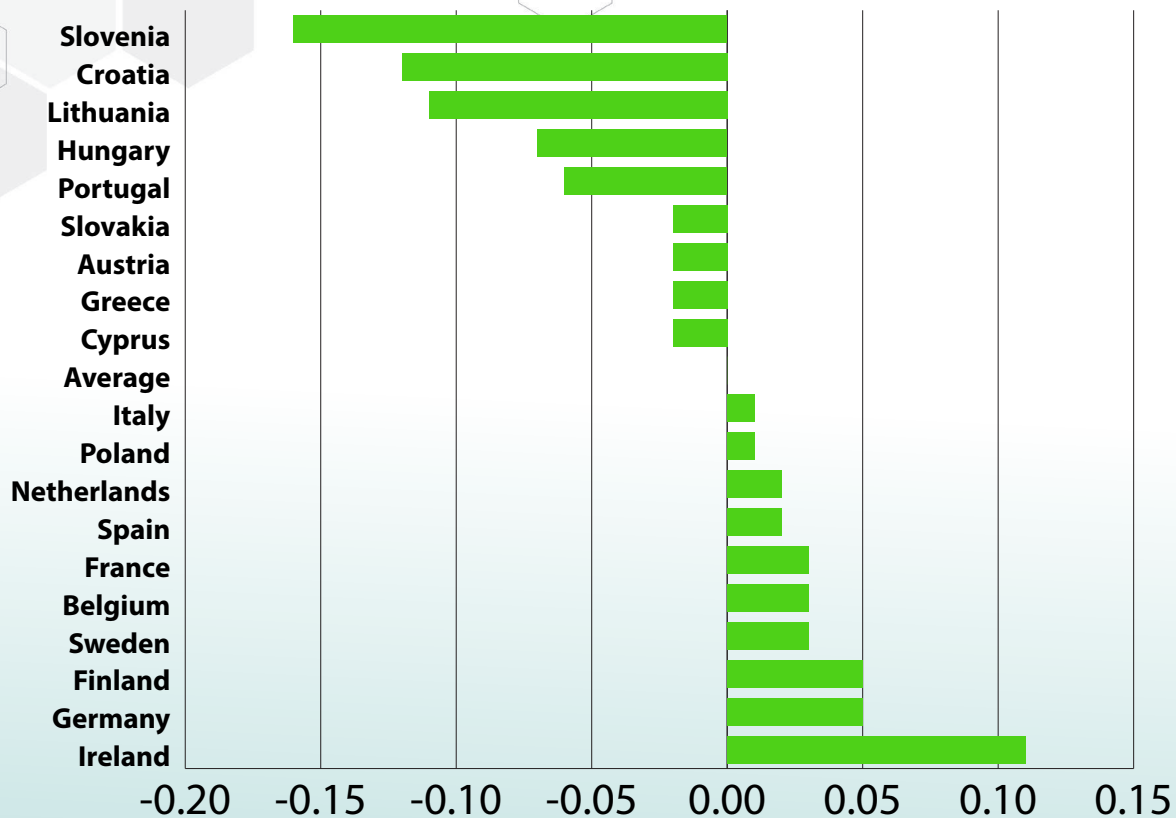
Institutional indicators reinforce this imbalance.

“Parliamentary representation overwhelmingly favors older cohorts,

and party manifestos often devote greater fiscal and policy attention to elderly concerns than to youth issues such as education or employment. The over-representation of older legislators and the programmatic bias of parties may lead to democratic responsiveness being systematically skewed toward the preferences of older citizens. This is not simply a reflection of demographic weight but of participation asymmetries that threaten the legitimacy of democratic decision-making. Political equality is thus one of the domains where intergenerational imbalance is most entrenched.



Figure 5: Intergenerational Equity Index



Index composed of: 1) economic fairness, 2) access to essential services, 3) relational equalities and 4) political equality

4. Cross-Country Patterns

“When the four dimensions are aggregated, most European countries appear balanced overall. Yet this apparent equilibrium is deceptive, as it conceals compensating inequalities

As displayed in [Figure 5](#), some countries, such as Italy and Ireland, are heavily pro-elderly in economic and political dimensions but lean pro-young in access to services or relational equality. Others, including Croatia, Lithuania, and Slovenia, display the opposite pattern, with younger adults faring better economically but facing disadvantages in political representation.

No welfare model emerges universally superior. Nordic countries combine relatively equitable service access with strong political participation gaps. Southern systems struggle with economic and housing inequalities but often maintain stronger family networks that cushion some disadvantages. Eastern Member States exhibit greater variation, with recent reforms reshaping both labor and welfare structures. What is consistent across all contexts is that fairness between generations does not necessarily depend on the volume of spending alone but on how resources and rights are distributed across life stages.



5. Policy Implications

“*The Index reveals a dual and interlocking imbalance.*”

Younger adults are disadvantaged primarily in the economic and political realms: they face higher unemployment, precarious contracts, limited housing opportunities, and weaker representation in decision-making institutions. Older adults, by contrast, are disadvantaged in the domains of services and social life: they encounter more unmet health needs, shrinking social networks, risks of isolation, and in some contexts greater mental distress.

Addressing these asymmetries requires a comprehensive rather than sectoral approach. Labor-market policies must aim to reduce the structural dualism that confines young people to temporary jobs. Expanding vocational training, apprenticeship programs, and re-skilling pathways would enhance youth employability. Housing policy is equally critical. Affordable rental schemes, targeted credit access, and the integration of housing initiatives with family policy can promote autonomy and demographic renewal.

“*At the political level, democratic institutions must become more age inclusive.*”

Civic education, youth councils, participatory budgeting, and reforms to party recruitment practices can strengthen young people's voice. Lowering the voting age where politically feasible, and supporting candidacies of young representatives, would help correct generational under-representation.

For older adults, the priority lies in ensuring accessible health care and combating social isolation. Community-based care, preventive health services, and local infrastructures for social participation can preserve dignity in later life while reducing the burden on younger family members. Mental-health services and intergenerational centers can provide shared spaces of interaction, helping to rebuild mutual trust between age groups.

Finally, welfare design must be recalibrated. Pensions should not crowd out other forms of social support. Balanced systems that protect the elderly while investing in youth and families are both fairer and more sustainable. Policies that enable younger adults to work, save, and raise children underpin the fiscal viability of pensions themselves.

“*Intergenerational justice is therefore not a zero-sum trade-off: strengthening one side of the contract reinforces the other.*”

6. Broader Lessons

Three broader lessons emerge from the findings. First, fairness between generations must be understood as a multidimensional issue. Economic redistribution alone cannot secure justice if political representation and social recognition remain unequal. Second, perceptions of fairness matter as much as objective outcomes. If young citizens perceive systematic exclusion from good jobs or political influence, the legitimacy of welfare and democratic institutions erodes, even if material conditions improve. Third, sustaining intergenerational solidarity requires an explicit policy framework. As gender equality and regional cohesion have become mainstream policy priorities, also

“ *intergenerational equity should become a guiding principle for economic and social governance in the EU.* ”

7. Key Messages for Decision-Makers

The *Index of Intergenerational Justice 2025* provides clear evidence that Europe's intergenerational contract is under strain. Economic and political advantages are concentrated among older citizens, while younger generations bear the costs of labor-market insecurity, unaffordable housing, and limited political voice. Yet the report also demonstrates that fairness across ages is achievable. Countries that balance pension protection with active family and labor-market policies — such as Sweden and Slovenia — show that solidarity

between generations can be renewed through coherent design rather than competition for resources.

Policymakers should therefore view investments in youth not as concessions but as preconditions for sustainability. Empowering younger adults to participate fully in economic and political life strengthens the very systems that will support the elderly in the future. Likewise, safeguarding dignified care and inclusion for older people relieves younger families and reinforces trust in collective institutions.

8. Conclusion

The Index of Intergenerational Justice 2025 transforms the moral concern for fairness between generations into an operational policy instrument. By measuring disparities in resources, services, recognition, and political influence, it enables governments to identify where the social contract falters and how it can be repaired.

“ *Intergenerational justice is not merely an ethical aspiration; it is a condition for the long-term stability of Europe's welfare states and democracies.* ”

Societies that invest in both youth opportunity and elderly care create the trust and reciprocity on which sustainable welfare depends. The lesson of the Index is simple but urgent: a just Europe is one in which people can live with dignity, autonomy, and equal respect—at every stage of life.