Recent Trends in Quality of Life and Subjective Well-Being in Europe 1981 - 2022

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Cross-Regional Patterns in Europe

The Nordic countries—Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden—consistently report the highest life satisfaction in Europe across major survey series (Eurostat, 2024; Helliwell, Huang, & Wang, 2016, 2018).

The Netherlands, Switzerland, and Austria also rank near the top, while large Western countries such as Germany and France usually fall in the upper–middle of the distribution (Eurostat, 2024; Helliwell, Layard, Sachs, & De Neve, 2024).

Southern European countries—Italy, Portugal, Spain, and especially Greece—tend to score at or below the EU average, with Greece remaining low through much of the 2010s (Eurostat, 2024).

Post-socialist EU members (e.g., Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Poland, and the Baltic states) have historically scored below Western levels, with heterogeneity inside the group—Czechia and Slovenia often perform noticeably better than Bulgaria and Romania (Inglehart, Foa, Peterson, & Welzel, 2008; Sarracino, 2010; Eurostat, 2024).

Stable cross-sectional differences persist even after three decades of integration, indicating that factors beyond income—such as trust and institutions—sustain the ranking (Helliwell et al., 2016, 2018).

Over-Time Trends (1990s–2020s)

Central and Eastern European countries have shown upward convergence in life satisfaction from the 1990s onward (Inglehart, Foa, Peterson, & Welzel, 2008; Sarracino, 2010).

The Great Recession was followed by marked declines in life satisfaction in several European economies, especially those with severe macro stress, with recovery in the mid-to-late 2010s (Helliwell et al., 2016, 2018).

Pandemic-era data show a sharp fall in spring 2020 and a partial rebound by 2022, varying by country (Eurofound, 2022).

By 2023–2024, EU averages stabilized, but the cross-country dispersion remained visible (Eurostat, 2024; Helliwell, Layard, Sachs, & De Neve, 2024).

Over three decades, the gap between top- and mid-performing regions narrowed modestly as Central and Eastern Europe improved, while already high-scoring countries mostly plateaued (Helliwell et al., 2018, 2024).

Age Patterns in Subjective Well-Being

A large body of evidence reports a U-shaped relation between age and evaluative well-being, with a midlife low and higher levels in youth and older age, observed in Europe as well as other regions (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2008; Frijters & Beatton, 2012). One mechanism highlights rising aspirations and unmet expectations in midlife that subsequently adjust, helping to produce the U-shape (Schwandt, 2016).

Recent reports note declines in life satisfaction among younger adults in parts of Western Europe since the mid-2010s, alongside broad improvements in Central and Eastern Europe, implying that age–well-being profiles are not stationary (Helliwell et al., 2024).

Additionally, the accumulated debate suggests that cohort replacement, period shocks, and changing social contexts may be reshaping the traditional midlife dip (Bartram, 2021; Helliwell et al., 2024).

Different components of well-being follow different age profiles: evaluative measures often display a U-shape, while affective states (e.g., stress, worry, enjoyment) can move differently with age (Steptoe, Deaton, & Stone, 2015).

Predictors of Life Satisfaction in Europe

1 — Absolute income raises reported life satisfaction but with diminishing marginal returns; relative income—how one's income compares with others—also matters for reported life satisfaction (Clark, Frijters, & Shields, 2008; Sacks, Stevenson, & Wolfers, 2012).

2 — Unemployment has a large and persistent negative association with life satisfaction and typically imposes larger welfare losses than inflation (Clark & Oswald, 1994; Di Tella, MacCulloch, & Oswald, 2001, 2003).

3 — Higher income inequality predicts lower life satisfaction in Europe, and the negative association is stronger than that observed in the United States (Alesina, Di Tella, & MacCulloch, 2004).

4 — Social capital and interpersonal trust are strongly and positively associated with life satisfaction across European populations (Bjørnskov, 2003; Helliwell & Putnam, 2004; Bartolini & Sarracino, 2014).

5 — Quality of governance and public services is positively related to life satisfaction across European countries, net of income levels (Helliwell et al., 2016, 2018).

Research Questions:

RQ1. How have age–well-being profiles (for example, U-shaped versus monotonic patterns) shifted across European countries from 2000 to 2024, and how much of this shift reflects cohort replacement versus period shocks?

RQ2. Do Western and Central-Eastern European countries exhibit convergence or divergence in age gradients in life satisfaction after 2010, net of changes in education, family structure, and labor-market status?
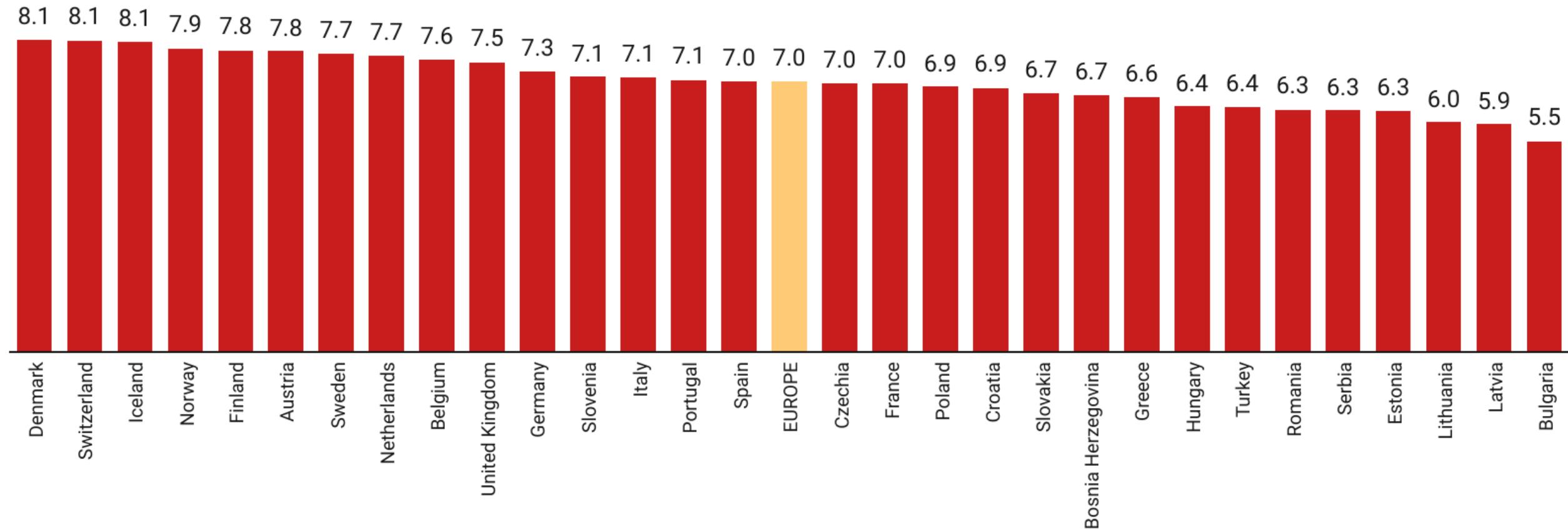
RQ3. To what extent do social capital, health dynamics, and changing expectations account for midlife lows and their attenuation or reversal across cohorts?

RQ4. Did within-country gaps between younger and older adults widen after 2015, and are these gaps associated with housing insecurity, job precarity, and digital-media exposure among the young?

RQ5. Which national institutions (for example, welfare generosity, employment protection, and housing policy) moderate age–well-being slopes over time?

Mean General Life Satisfaction (1981-2022)

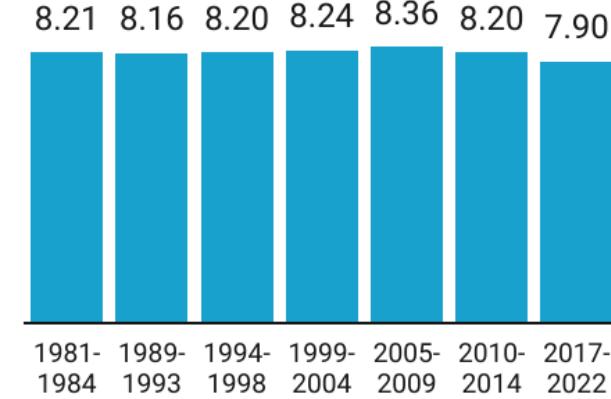Mean on a scale from 1 (completely dissatisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied)

Country	Value
Denmark	8.1
Switzerland	8.1
Iceland	8.1
Norway	7.9
Finland	7.8
Austria	7.8
Sweden	7.7
Netherlands	7.7
Belgium	7.6
United Kingdom	7.5
Germany	7.3
Slovenia	7.1
Italy	7.1
Portugal	7.1
Spain	7.0
EUROPE	7.0
Czechia	7.0
France	7.0
Poland	6.9
Croatia	6.9
Slovakia	6.7
Bosnia Herzegovina	6.7
Greece	6.6
Hungary	6.4
Turkey	6.4
Romania	6.3
Serbia	6.3
Estonia	6.3
Lithuania	6.0
Latvia	5.9
Bulgaria	5.5

Northern Europe: General Life Satisfaction (1-10)

Sweden
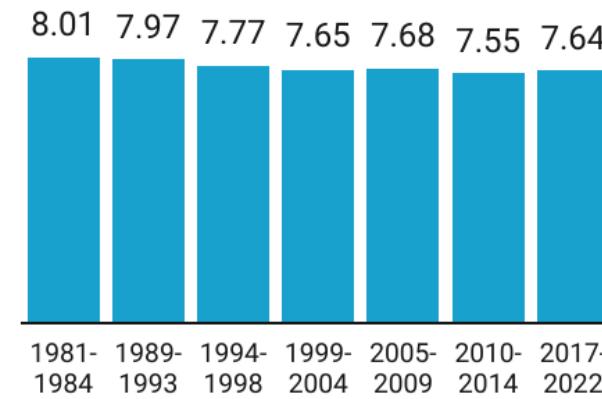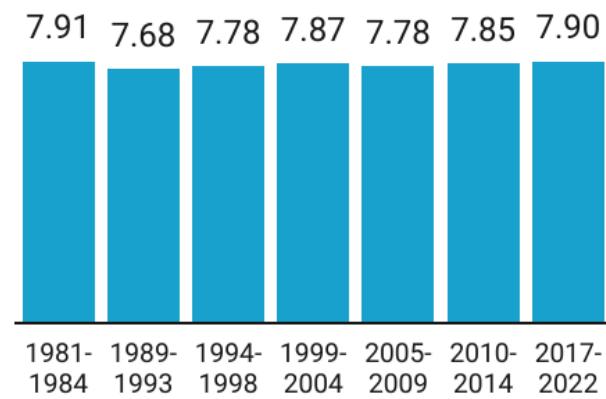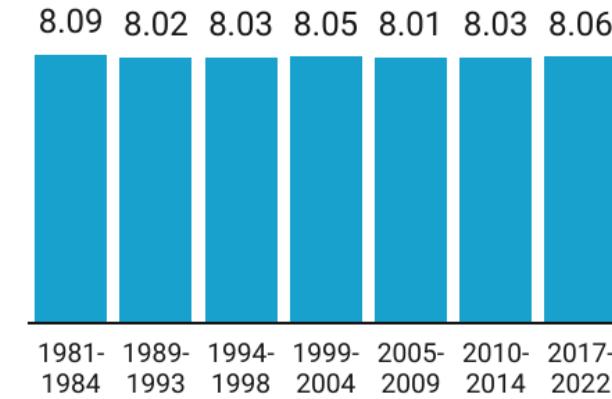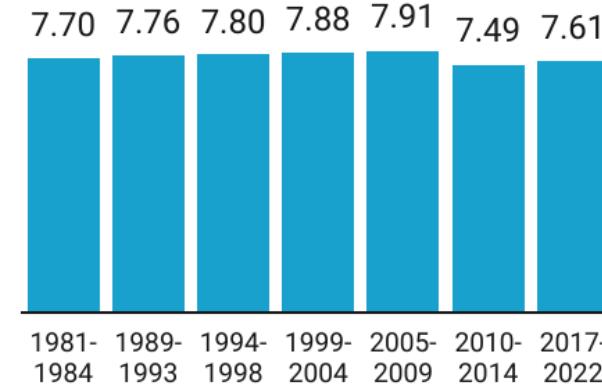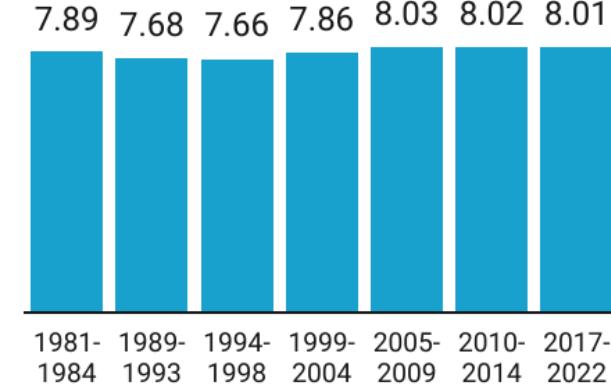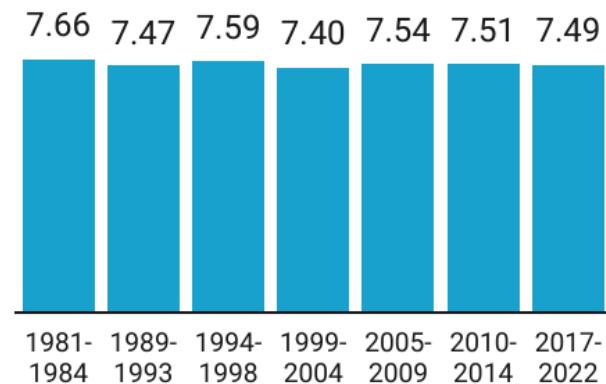
1981-1984	1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
8.01	7.97	7.77	7.65	7.68	7.55	7.64

Denmark

1981-1984	1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
8.21	8.16	8.20	8.24	8.36	8.20	7.90

Finland

1981-1984	1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
7.91	7.68	7.78	7.87	7.78	7.85	7.90

Iceland

1981-1984	1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
8.09	8.02	8.03	8.05	8.01	8.03	8.06

Netherlands

1981-1984	1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
7.70	7.76	7.80	7.88	7.91	7.49	7.61

Norway

1981-1984	1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
7.89	7.68	7.66	7.86	8.03	8.02	8.01

United Kingdom

1981-1984	1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
7.66	7.47	7.59	7.40	7.54	7.51	7.49

Western Europe: General Life Satisfaction (1-10)

Switzerland
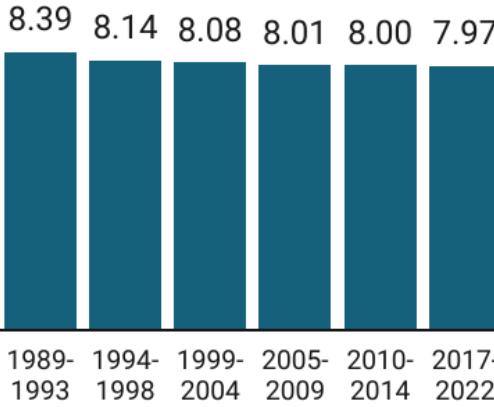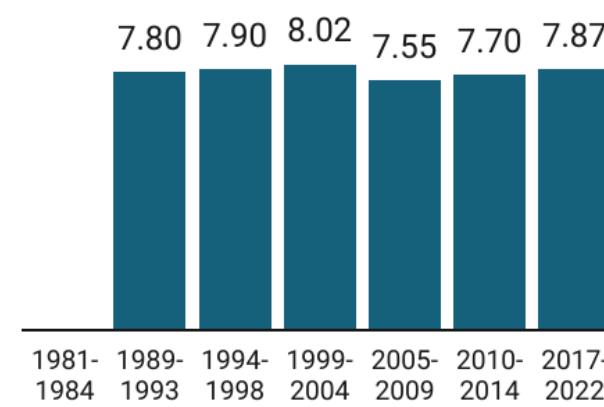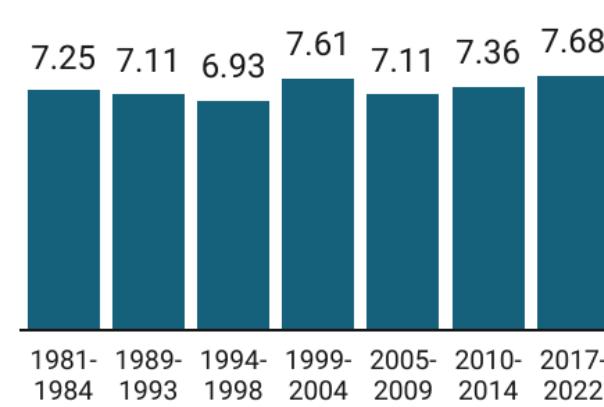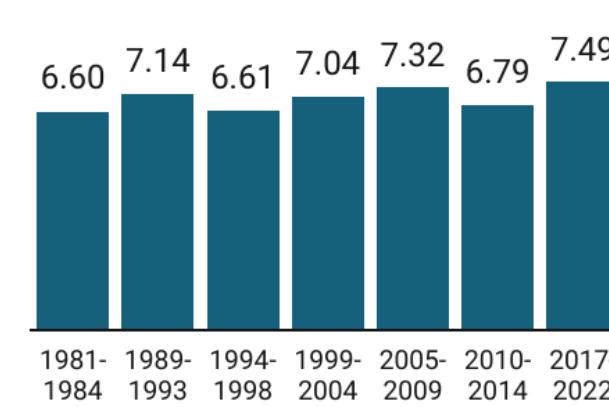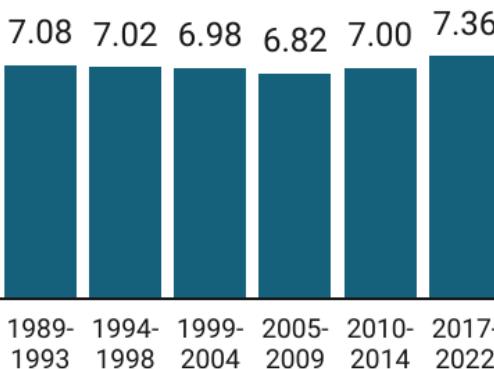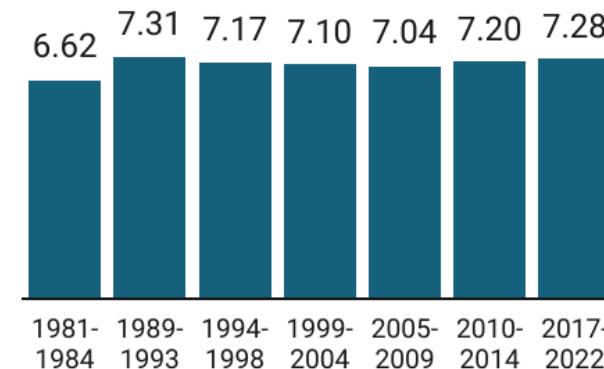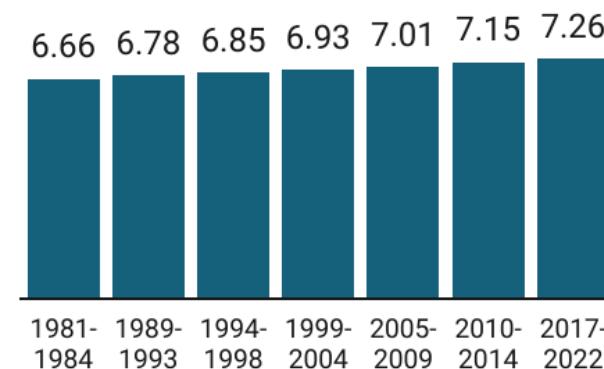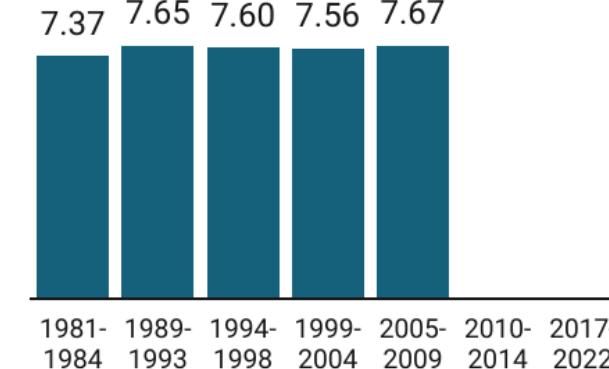
1981-1984	1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
	8.39	8.14	8.08	8.01	8.00	7.97

Austria

1981-1984	1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
	7.80	7.90	8.02	7.55	7.70	7.87

Germany

1981-1984	1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
7.25	7.11	6.93	7.61	7.11	7.36	7.68

Spain

1981-1984	1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
6.60	7.14	6.61	7.04	7.32	6.79	7.49

Portugal

1981-1984	1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
	7.08	7.02	6.98	6.82	7.00	7.36

Italy

1981-1984	1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
6.62	7.31	7.17	7.10	7.04	7.20	7.28

France

1981-1984	1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
6.66	6.78	6.85	6.93	7.01	7.15	7.26

Belgium

1981-1984	1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
7.37	7.65	7.60	7.56	7.67		

Eastern Europe: General Life Satisfaction (1-10)

Poland
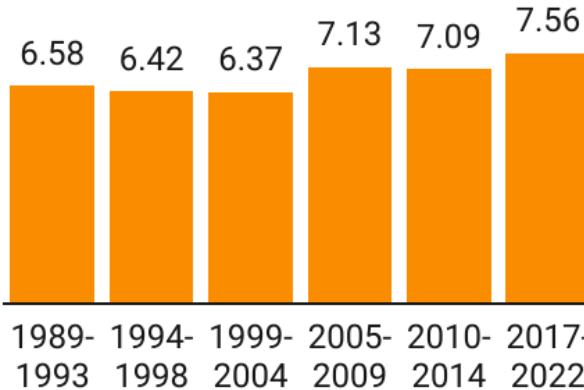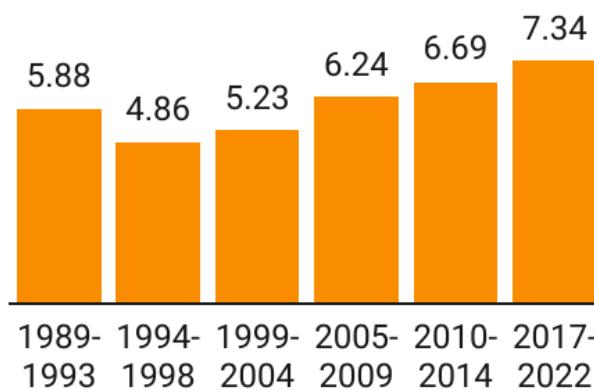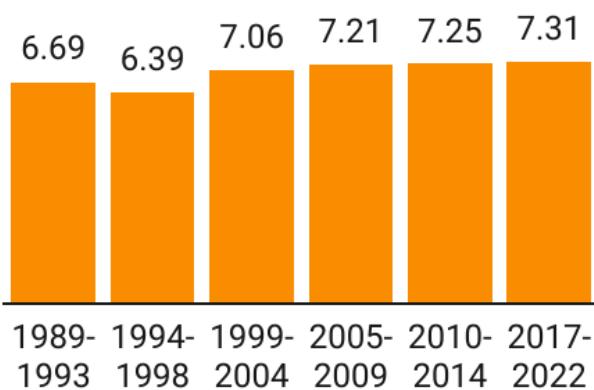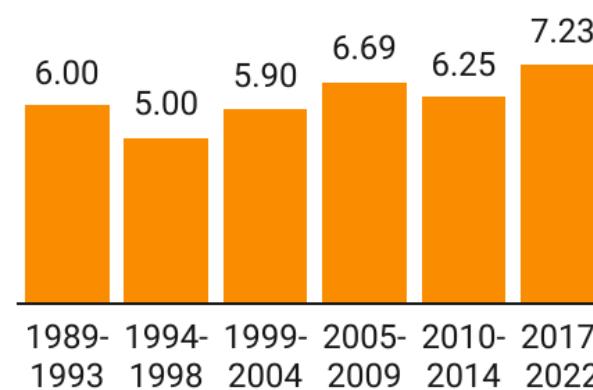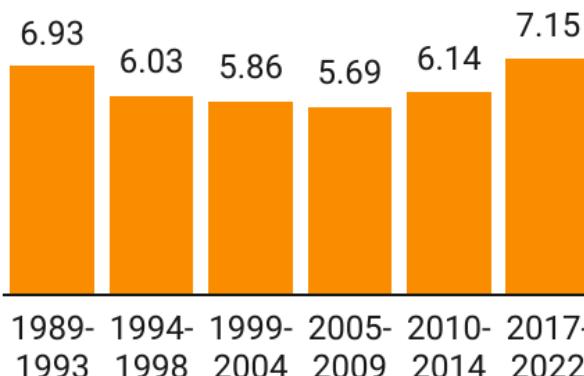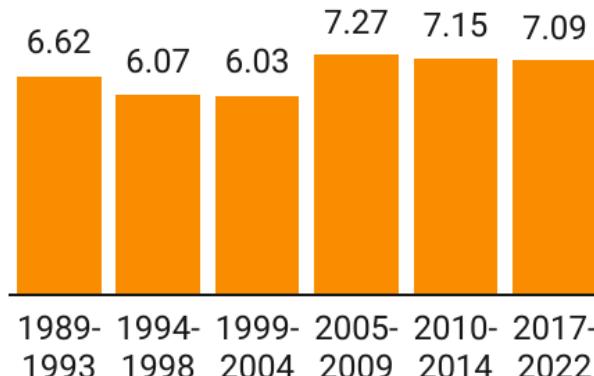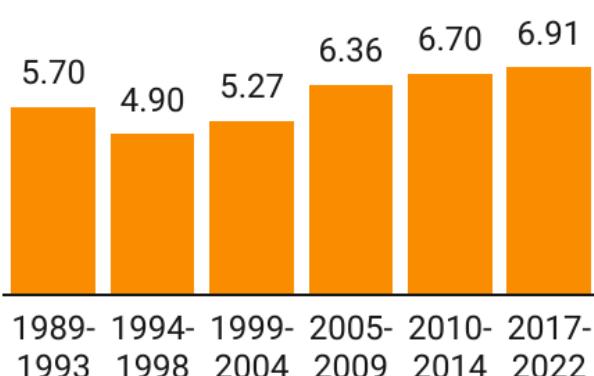
1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
6.58	6.42	6.37	7.13	7.09	7.56

Romania

1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
5.88	4.86	5.23	6.24	6.69	7.34

Czechia

1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
6.69	6.39	7.06	7.21	7.25	7.31

Estonia

1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
6.00	5.00	5.90	6.69	6.25	7.23

Hungary

1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
6.93	6.03	5.86	5.69	6.14	7.15

Slovakia

1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
6.62	6.07	6.03	7.27	7.15	7.09

Latvia

1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
5.70	4.90	5.27	6.36	6.70	6.91

Lithuania

1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
6.01	4.99	5.09	6.45	6.65	6.75

Southern Europe: General Life Satisfaction (1-10)

Bosnia Herzegovina
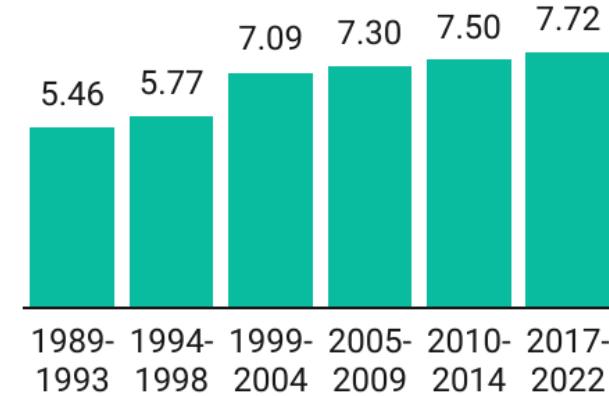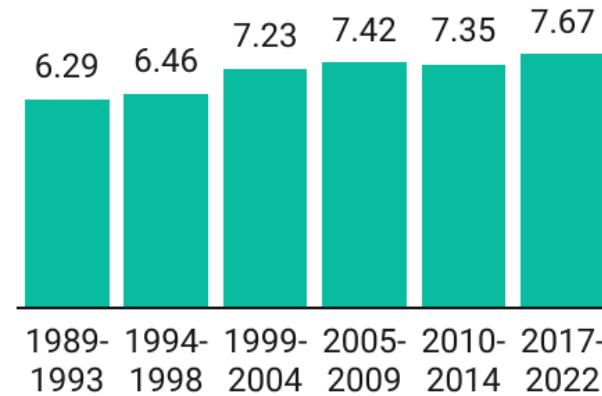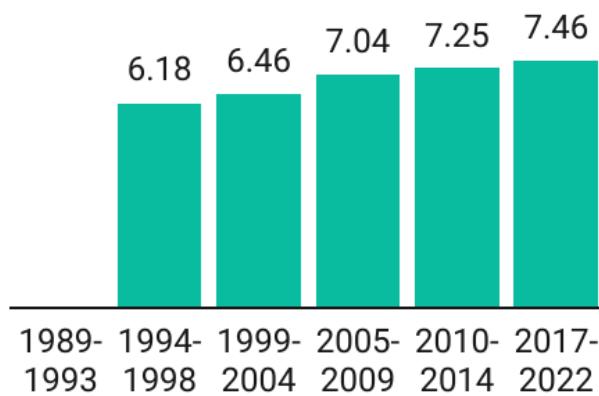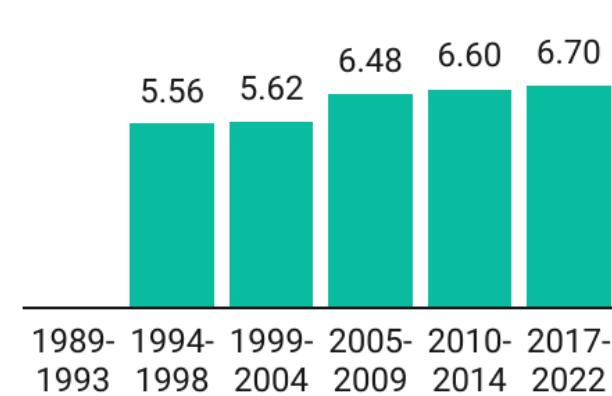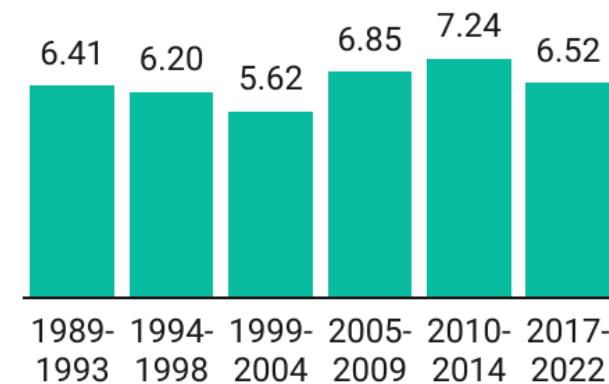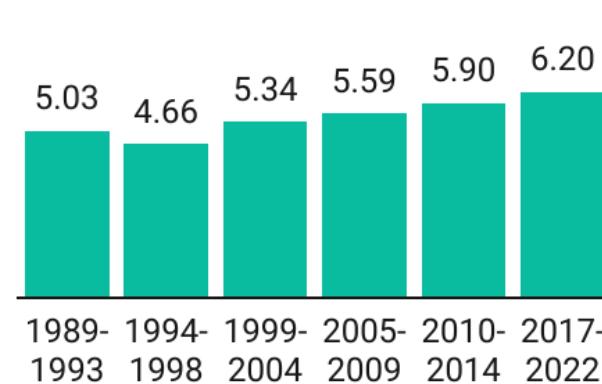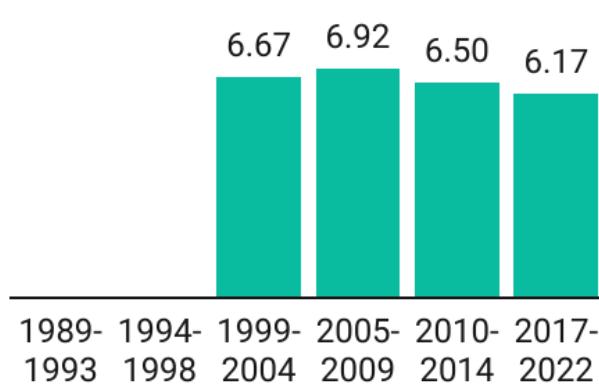
1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
5.46	5.77	7.09	7.30	7.50	7.72

Slovenia

1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
6.29	6.46	7.23	7.42	7.35	7.67

Croatia

1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
	6.18	6.46	7.04	7.25	7.46

Serbia

1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
	5.56	5.62	6.48	6.60	6.70

Turkey

1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
6.41	6.20	5.62	6.85	7.24	6.52

Bulgaria

1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
5.03	4.66	5.34	5.59	5.90	6.20

Greece

1989-1993	1994-1998	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022
		6.67	6.92	6.50	6.17

Age and Period Effects for Life Satisfaction

	North	West	East	South
18-29 years	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
30-45 years	0.074*** (0.021)	-0.053** (0.019)	-0.444*** (0.026)	-0.321*** (0.027)
46-65 years	0.046* (0.021)	-0.182*** (0.019)	-0.758*** (0.025)	-0.595*** (0.028)
66+ years	0.261*** (0.023)	-0.138*** (0.022)	-0.857*** (0.029)	-0.940*** (0.037)
1981-84	Ref.	Ref.	-	-
1989-93	-0.083* (0.029)	0.369*** (0.027)	Ref.	Ref.
1994-98	-0.119** (0.035)	0.071* (0.038)	-0.623*** (0.032)	-0.219*** (0.052)
1999-04	-0.064* (0.031)	0.393*** (0.029)	-0.249*** (0.031)	-0.027 (0.050)
2005-08	-0.020 (0.027)	0.229*** (0.027)	0.486*** (0.028)	0.800 (0.048)
2010-14	-0.295*** (0.039)	0.344*** (0.042)	0.491*** (0.043)	1.146*** (0.063)
2017-22	-0.097*** (0.026)	0.626*** (0.029)	1.051*** (0.028)	1.079*** (0.050)
Cons	8.139	7.531	7.271	6.571
Adj. R sq.	1.74%	4.21%	9.41%	9.00%
N	57,550	78,397	64,194	51,815

OLS models with country fixed effects estimated separately by region to assess age and period effects on life satisfaction.

Age and Period Effects for Life Satisfaction (1)

- **Age Effects:**
  - In the **North**, life satisfaction increases with age, with the 66+ group reporting the highest levels of satisfaction at +0.261 compared to the youngest group.
  - By contrast, in the **West**, there is a steady decline in satisfaction with age: individuals aged 46–65 score –0.182, and those 66 and older –0.138, both statistically significant.
  - The pattern is considerably more pronounced in the East and South, where life satisfaction declines steeply across all age groups. In the **East**, 66+ individuals report –0.857 relative to 18–29-year-olds, and even the 30–45 group is already at –0.444.
  - A similarly sharp age gradient appears in the **South**, where the oldest group scores –0.940 and middle-aged individuals are also significantly less satisfied.
  - Additionally, the **explanatory power of age and period varies considerably**. In the North, age and time together account for just 1.74% of the variance in life satisfaction, suggesting that other individual- or country-level factors dominate. In contrast, adjusted R^2 exceeds 9% in both the East and South, indicating that the observed changes across age groups and historical periods capture a substantial portion of the variation in reported well-being.

Age and Period Effects for Life Satisfaction (2)

Period Effects:

- Period effects further underscore regional contrasts. In the **North**, recent waves are associated with modest declines in life satisfaction, including –0.295 in 2010–14.

- In the **West**, the trend is clearly upward, beginning in the early 1990s and peaking at +0.626 in 2017–22.

- In the East and South, however, the rise in satisfaction is both steeper and more recent. In the **East**, life satisfaction jumps to +0.486 in 2005–08 and climbs to +1.051 by 2017–22. The **South** follows a similar pattern, reaching +1.079 in the most recent period.

- Addressing RQ2, the data point to **convergence in life satisfaction levels across regions after 2010**, even as age gradients remain distinct.

Appendix:

General Life Satisfaction

1 Very Dissatisfied – 10 Very Satisfied

Pooled WVS-EVS Dataset 1981 - 2025

Rank	Country	Mean	N	StDev
1.	Denmark	8.10	8.074	1,859
2.	Switzerland	8.08	8.285	1,753
3.	Iceland	8.05	5.022	1,628
4.	Norway	7.88	6.640	1,748
5.	Finland	7.82	6.944	1,669
6.	Austria	7.81	6.127	2,947
7.	Sweden	7.74	8.566	1,806
8.	Netherlands	7.70	12.160	1,450
9.	Belgium	7.59	7.254	1,894
10.	United Kingdom	7.52	11.683	1,859
11.	Germany	7.29	18.556	1,090

12.	Slovenia	7.14	7.564	2,087
13.	Italy	7.12	10.102	2,102
14.	Portugal	7.05	4.914	1,903
15.	Spain	7.03	15.070	1,884
16.	France	6.98	8.168	2,020
17.	Czechia	6.98	10.854	2,069
18.	Poland	6.89	8.891	2,219
19.	Croatia	6.85	5.168	2,318
20.	Slovakia	6.72	8.105	2,202

21.	Bosnia-Herzegovina	6.66	5.628	2,461
22.	Greece	6.64	5.027	2,160
23.	Hungary	6.38	8.101	2,370
24.	Turkey	6.36	15.203	2,589
25.	Romania	6.29	10.924	2,571
26.	Serbia	6.27	7.673	2,366
27.	Estonia	6.26	7.347	2,213
28.	Lithuania	5.97	5.856	2,459
29.	Latvia	5.91	5.881	2,326
30.	Bulgaria	5.47	7.032	2,574
Total	Europe	6.96	288.275	2,245