

20th "Social Monitoring and Reporting in Europe" conference,
Lovenjo di Menaggio, Italy
(October 5-7, 2026)

Life Satisfaction: Historical Trends (1973-2024) and Generational Shifts (1895-2005) across Europe

Marc Callens & Dries Verlet

Marc.Callens@Ugent.be
Ghent University, Public Governance & Management (Belgium)

- Life satisfaction (8 European countries, long term)
 - ▶ Time: Age, Period (1973-2024) & Cohort (1895-2005)?
 - ▶ Social stratification (gender, education)?
 - ▶ Macro-economic impact (gdp, unemployment)?
 - ▶ Period effects (Covid-19, Eighties economic crisis)?
 - ▶ Generational change (BabyBoomers, GenZ)?
- Contextual analysis
 - ▶ Eurobarometer survey data (1973-2026)
 - ▶ Macro-economic series (1973-2024) added
 - ▶ Hierarchical Age-Period-Cohort regression
- Results
 - ▶ Belgium (Flanders only, BE*)
 - ▶ + 7 European countries: DK, NL, IRL, GE-W, GB, FR, IT

- RQ1. Life satisfaction: what is the relative impact of
 - ▶ A. **Age, Period & Cohort (time)** ?
 - ▶ B. Gender & education (individual level) ?
 - ▶ C. **Gdp & unemployment rate (country level)** ?
- RQ.2 How important is the effect of the **Covid-19 crisis** on life satisfaction compared with the effect of the early **eighties economic-crisis**?
- RQ.3 Is life satisfaction **lower** among members of **Gen Z and/or Babyboomers** than among members of other generational cohorts (1895-2005)?

► Databases combined:

- › Repeated Cross-Sectional Eurobarometer surveys (1973-2026, GESIS)
- › Yearly Country-specific Macro-economic series (1973-2024, UN)
- › $n = 611\ 711$

► Response: a single item on life satisfaction (Range = 3)

"How satisfied are you with the life you lead?"

- o Very satisfied (4)
- o Fairly satisfied (3)
- o Not very satisfied (2)
- o Not at all satisfied (1)

► Random Intercept Cross-Classification Regression

► Results in % of Range (Relative Range, RR)

Average Life Satisfaction by Country (1973-2026)

Country	1973-2026
1. DK	3.58
2. NL	3.39
3. BE*	3.24
4. IRL	3.22
5. GB	3.18
6. G-W.	3.07
7. FR	2.88
8. IT	2.76
EU-8	3.16
RR	27%

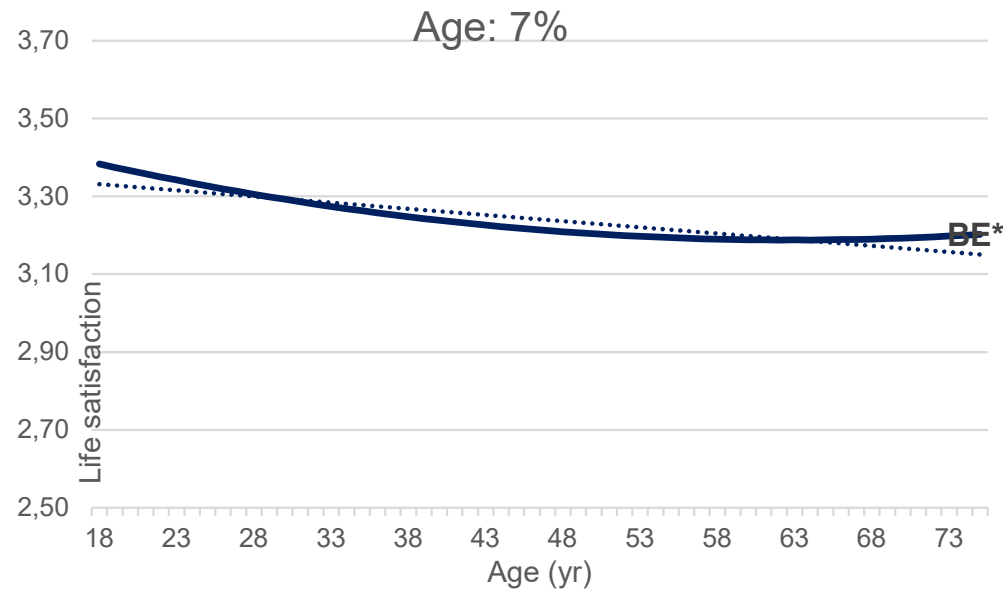
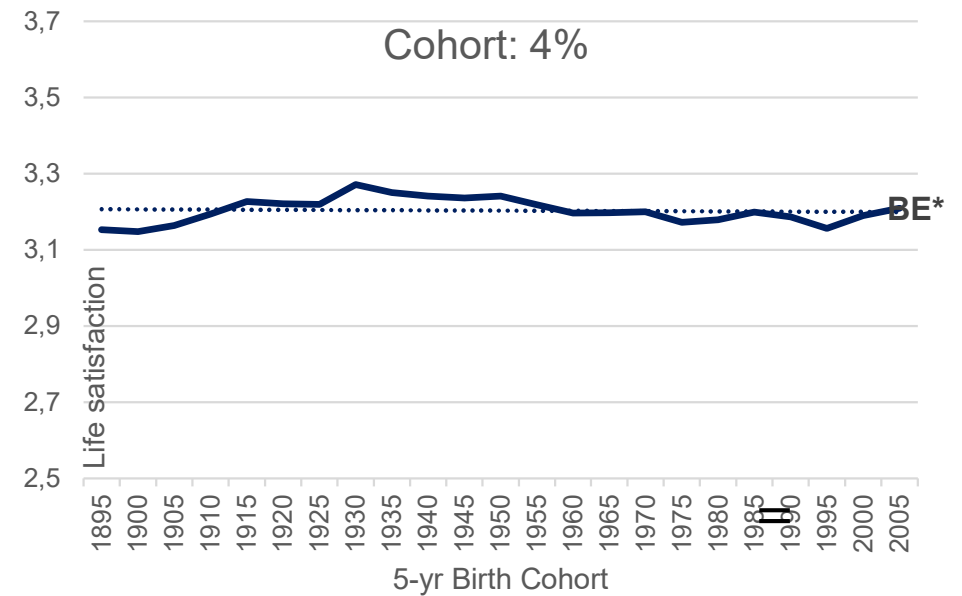
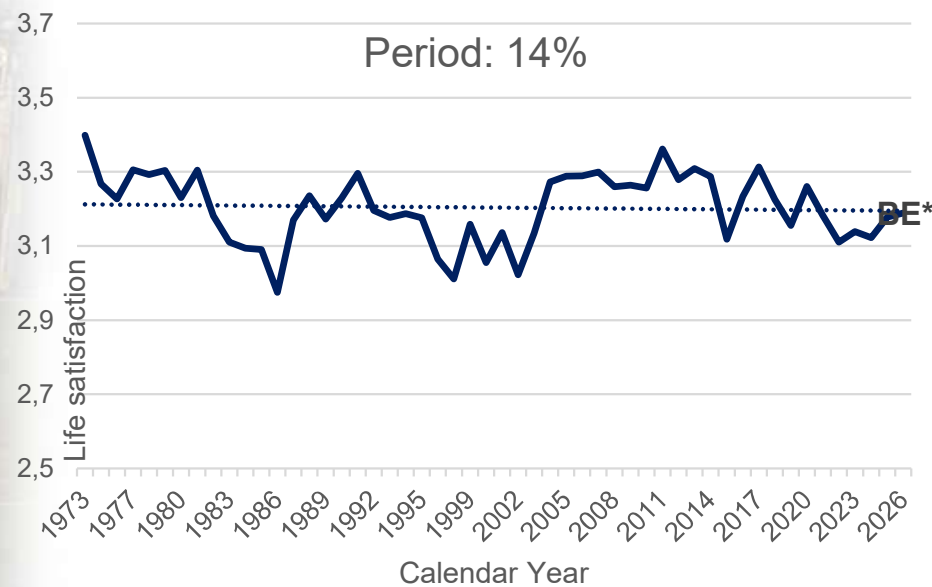
1A. Life satisfaction: Age, Period & Cohort

Three components: Age = Period - Cohort

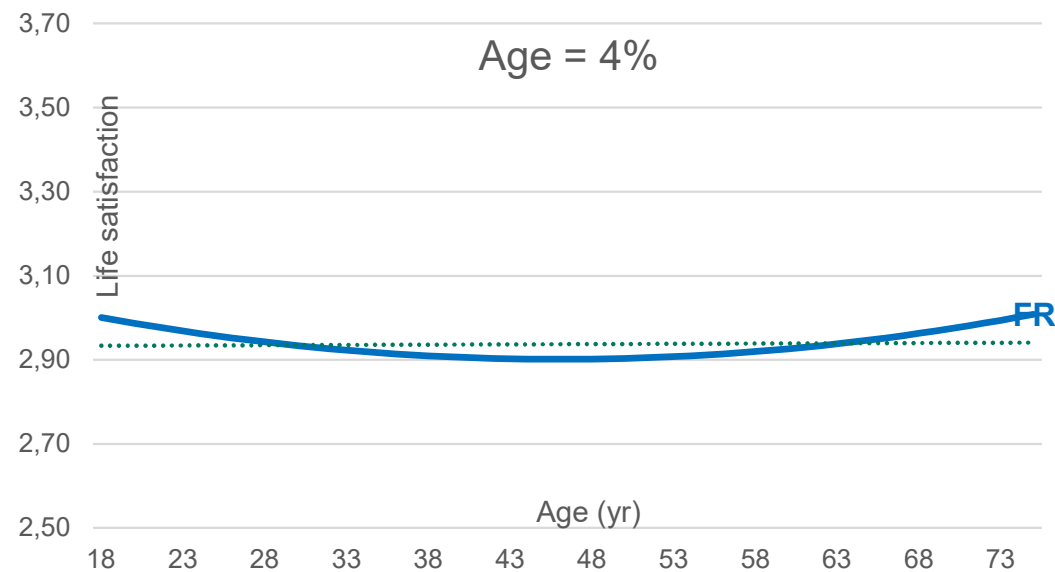
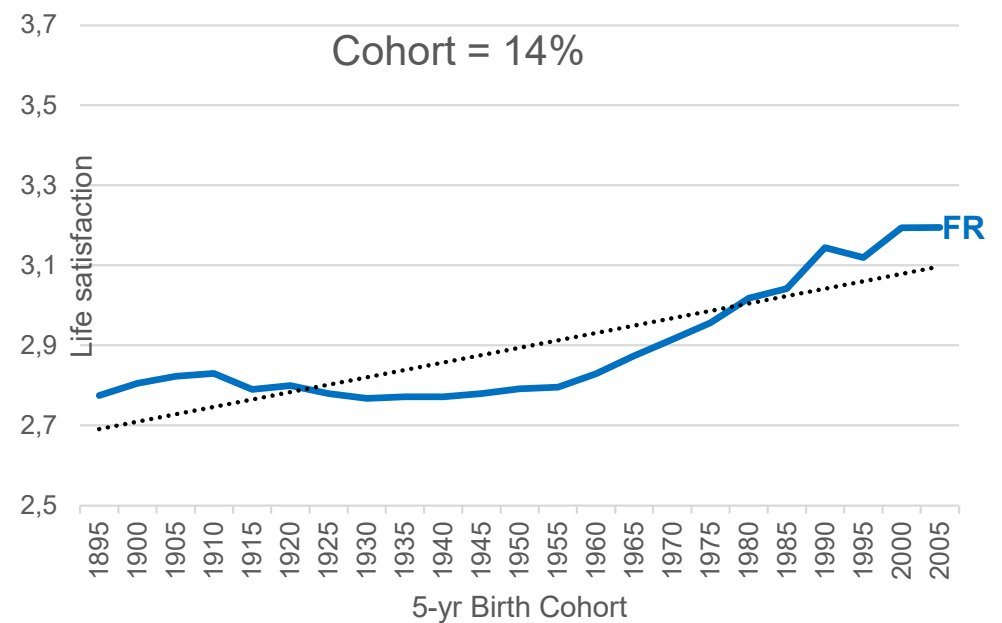
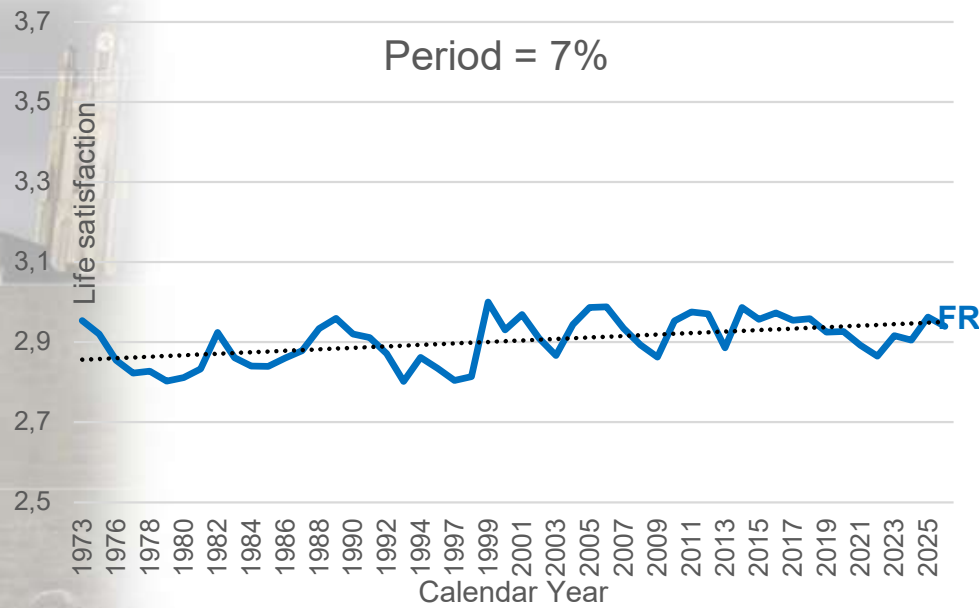
Each component is related to a specific type of theory:

- Age (life cycle)
 - ▶ Age-related developmental changes (e.g., health)
- Period (historical time, trend)
 - ▶ Cultural, economical and other changes unique to a specific time period (e.g., covid-crisis, economic crisis)
- Cohort (generation) (Ryder, 1965)
 - ▶ A birth cohort experiences cumulatively the same kind of social experiences;
 - ▶ Formative years are important (e.g.; media type)
 - ▶ Shared experiences across life course

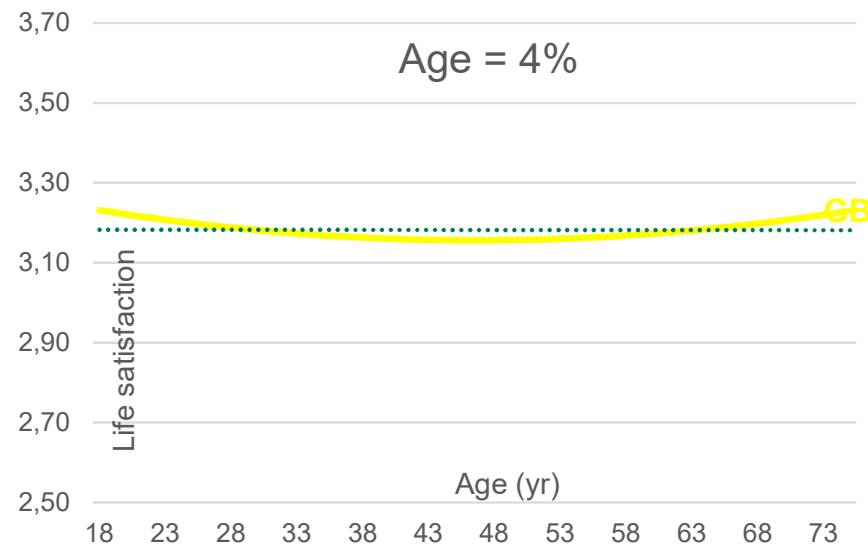
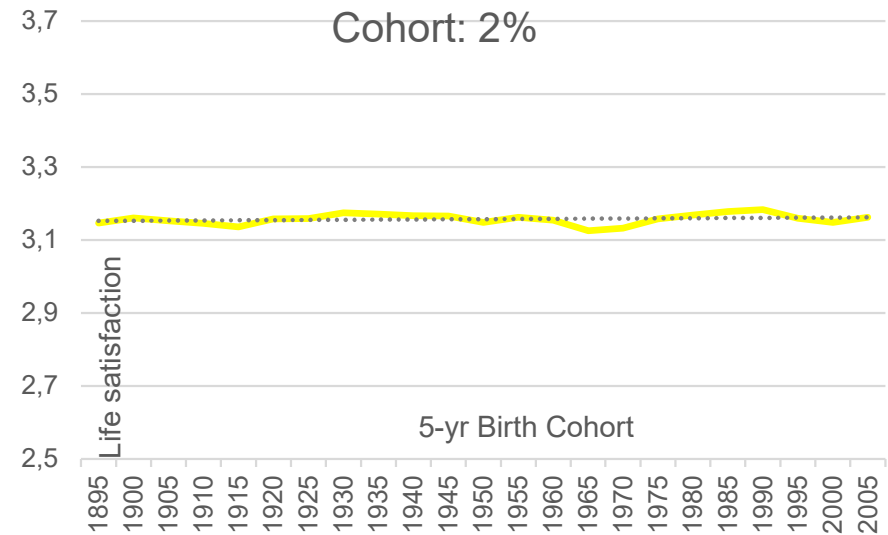
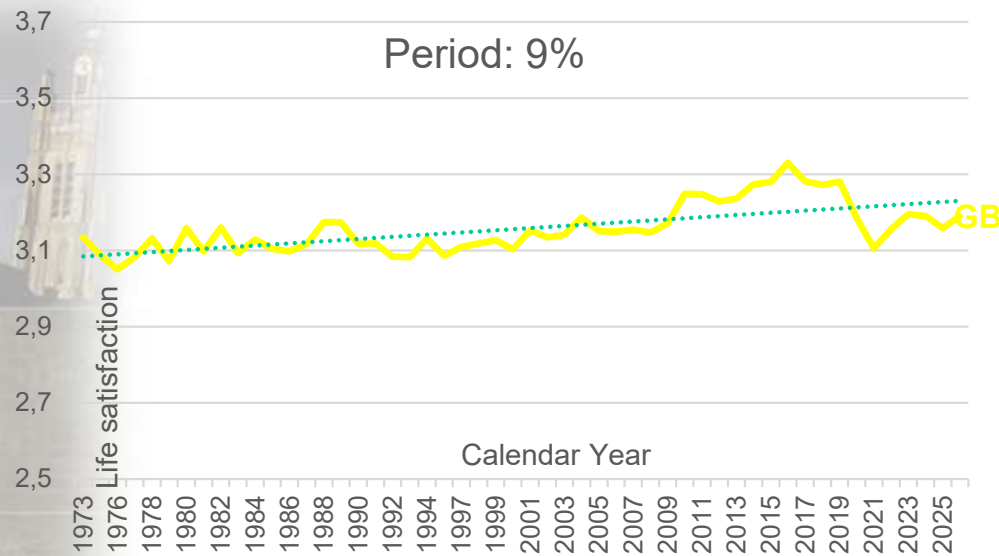
Belgium* (APC-profile, in RR)



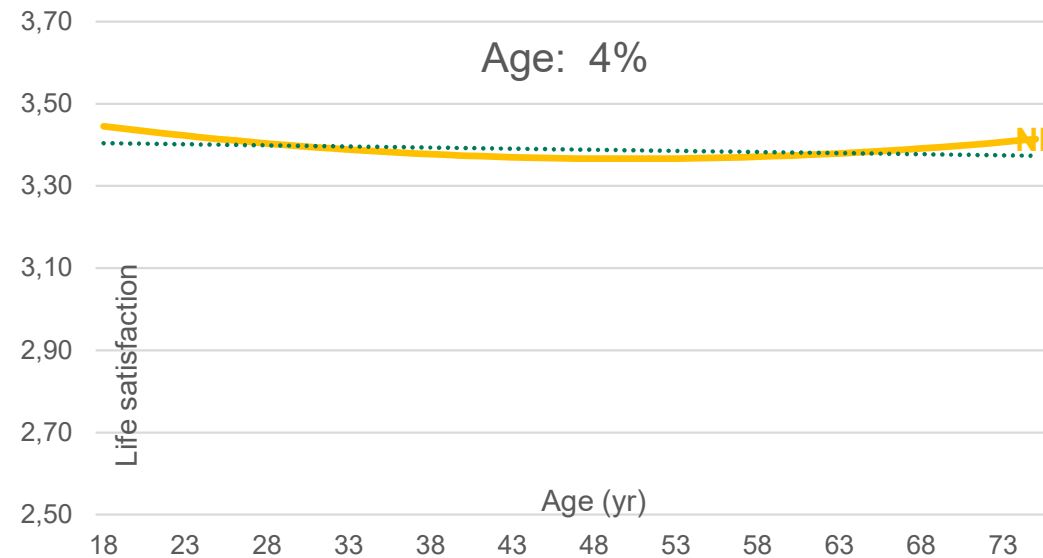
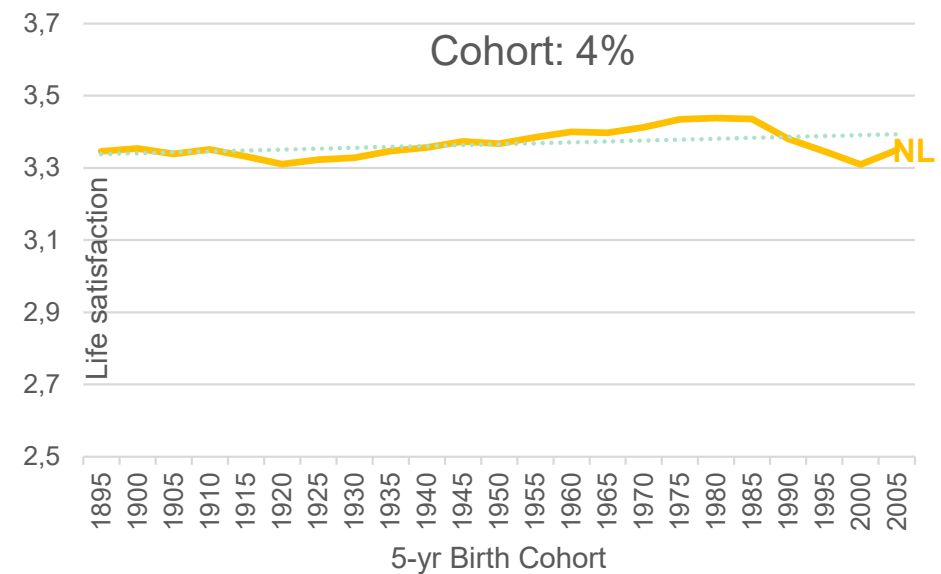
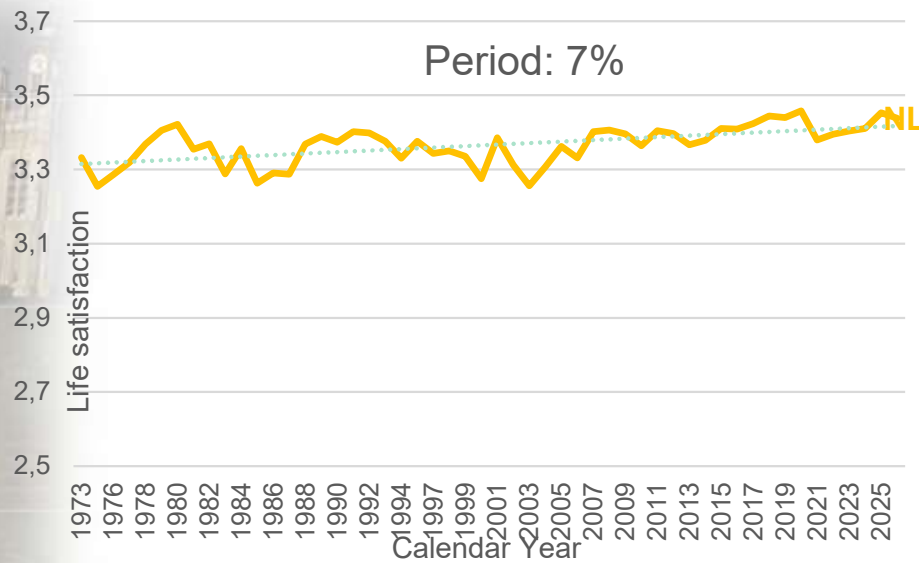
France (APC-Profile, in RR)



Great-Britain (APC-profile, in RR)



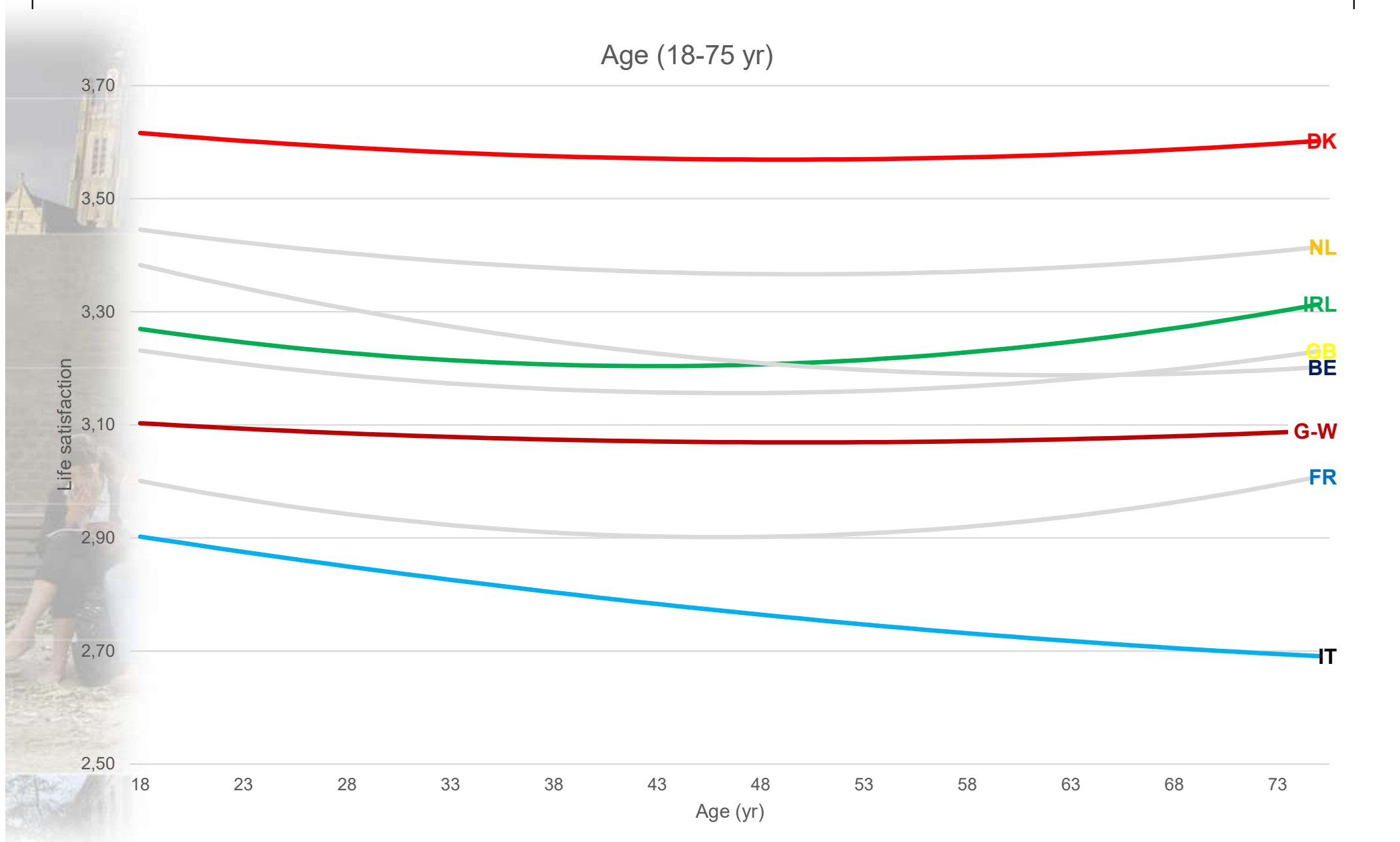
Netherlands (APC-profile, in RR)



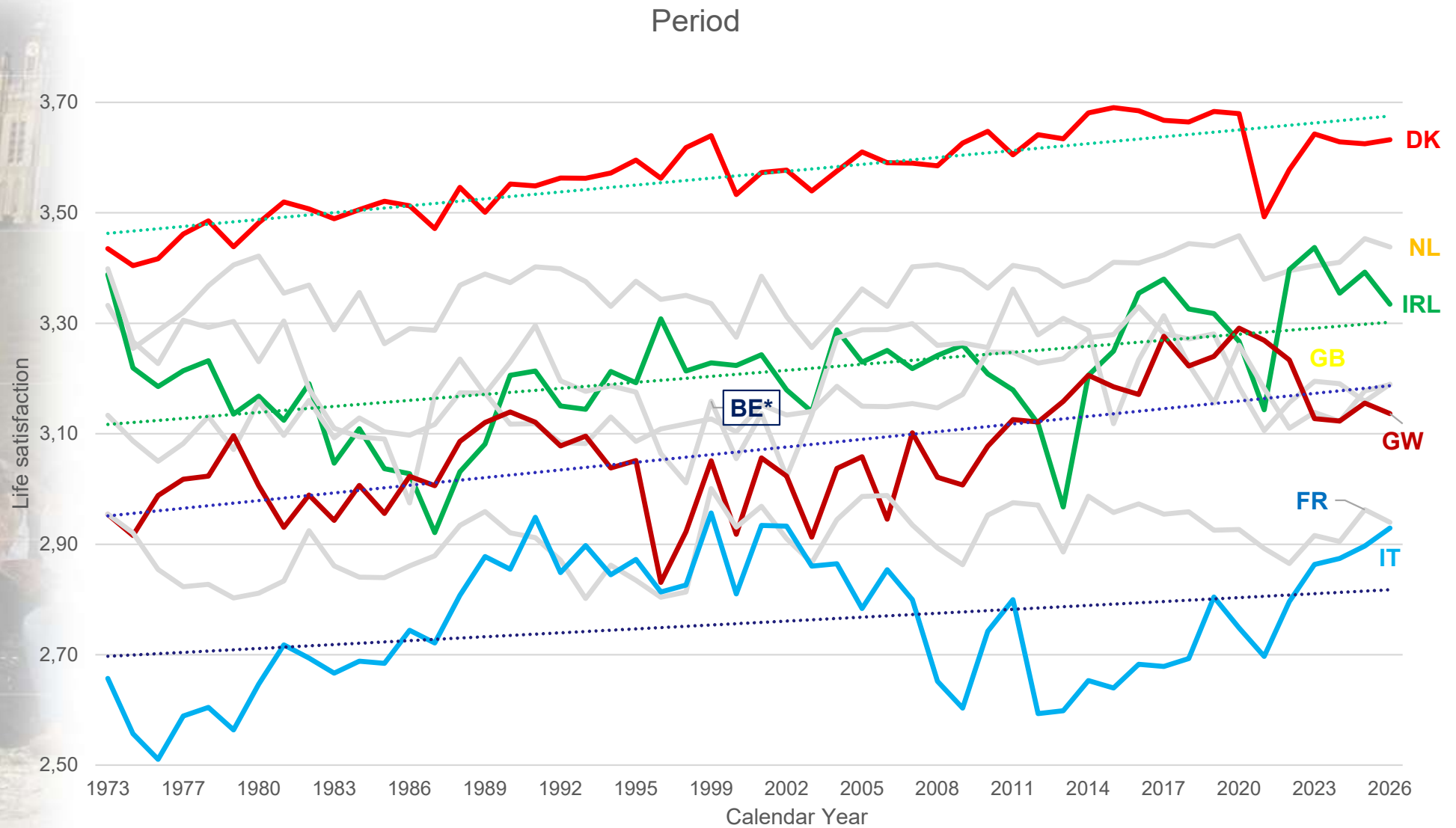
Age, Period and Cohort (8 countries, RR)

RR (in %)	Age	Period	Cohort	Time
1. DK	2	10	2	13
2. NL	3	7	4	14
3. BE*	7	14	4	25
4. IRL	4	17	2	22
5. GB	3	9	2	14
6. G-W.	1	15	3	19
7. FR	4	7	14	24
8. IT	7	15	5	27
EU-8	4	12	4	20

Age (8 countries, 18-75 year)

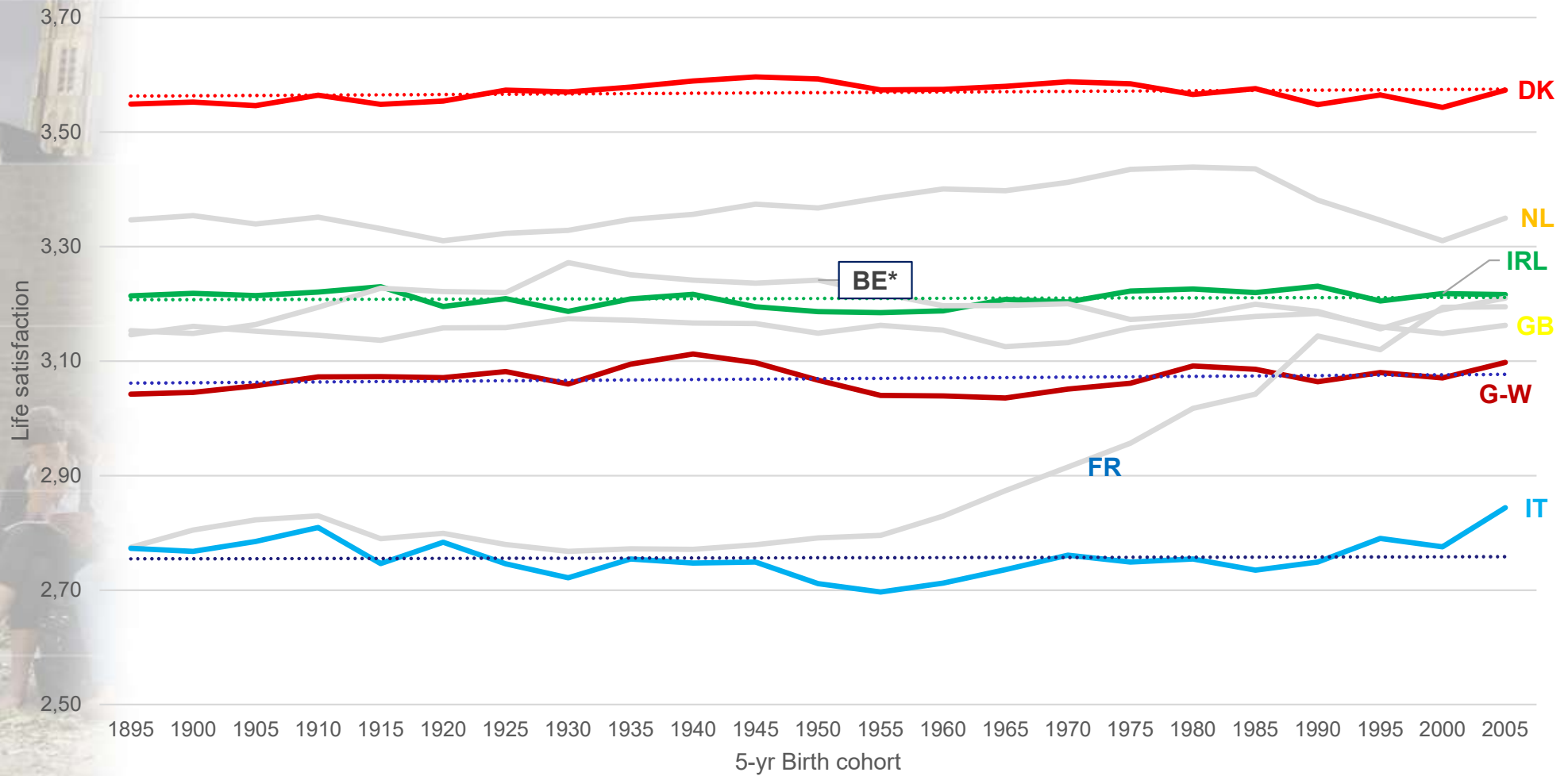


Period (8 countries, 1973-2026)



Cohort (8 countries, 1895-2005)

Cohort



Age, Period and Cohort across countries (RR)

RR (in %)	Age	Period	Cohort	Time
1. DK	2	10	2	13
2. NL	3	7	4	14
3. BE*	7	14	4	25
4. IRL	4	17	2	22
5. GB	3	9	2	14
6. G-W.	1	15	3	19
7. FR	4	7	14	24
8. IT	7	15	5	27
EU-8	4	12	4	20

1C. Life satisfaction: Period & Economics

- *Increased prosperity and life satisfaction?*
- Absolute utility theory (e.g., Hagerty and Veenhoven, 2003)
 - ▶ Positive effect
 - ▶ More needs are fulfilled
- Relative utility theory (e.g., Davis, 1984):
 - ▶ No effect
 - ▶ What matters is the relative position (others; the own past), not the absolute standard of living
- *Unemployment rate and life satisfaction (e.g., Clark and Oswald, 1994; Di Tella et al., 2003)?*
 - ▶ Considerable negative effect
 - ▶ Both for unemployed and employed people (insecurity)

RQ. 1.C. Relative Impact of Gdp & Unemployment (Beta)

Country	Ch_gdp_cap		Unempl_rate	
	B	p	B	p
1. DK	0.000		0.007	
2. NL	0.000		-0.003	
3. BE*	0.000		-0.014	**
4. IRL	0.000		-0.012	***
5. GB	0.000		-0.004	
6. GE-W.	0.000		-0.024	***
7. FR	0.000		0.009	
8. IT	0.000		-0.006	

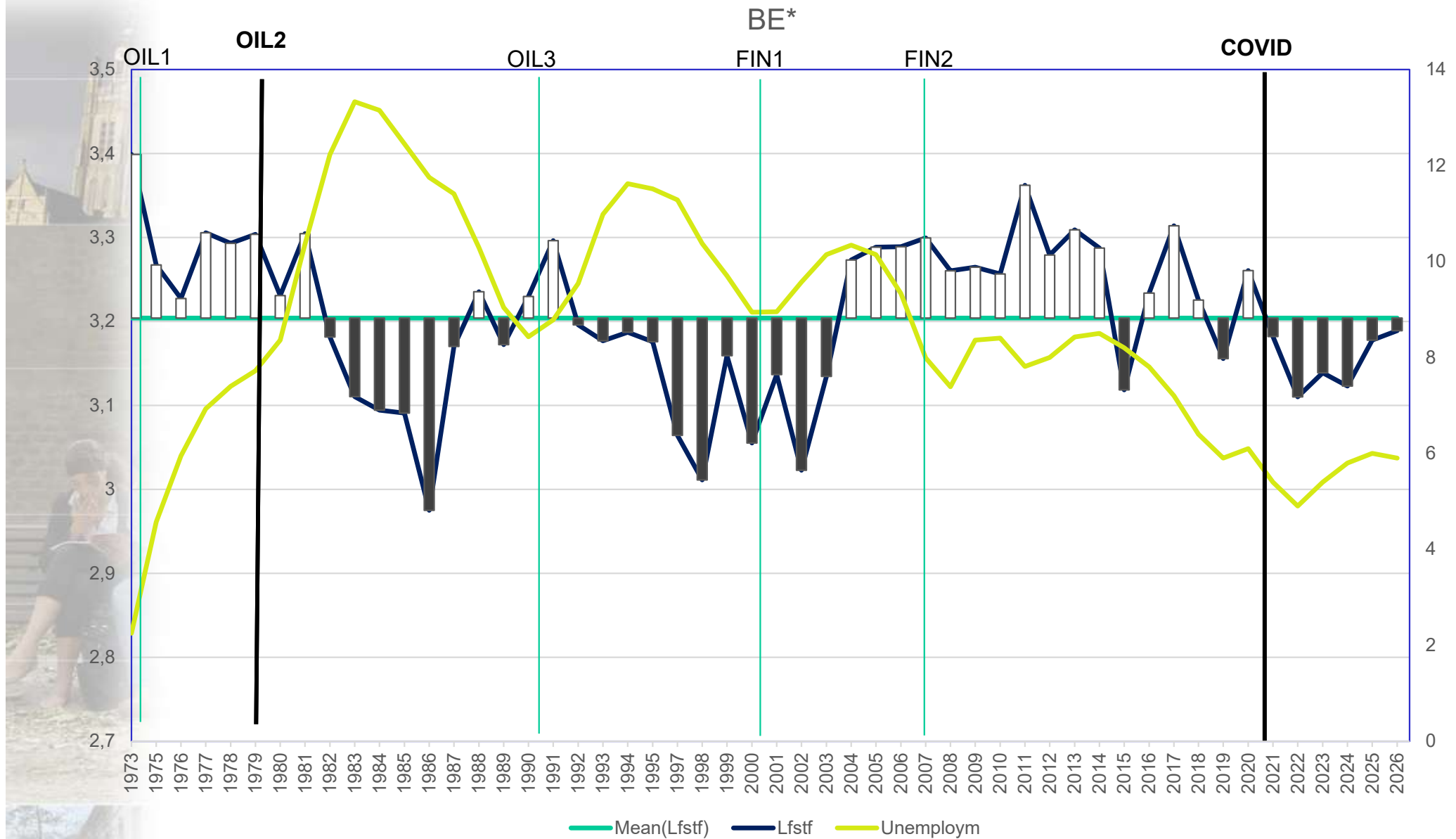
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

RQ2. Life satisfaction: Period & crisis

- Several severe (economic) crisis in the past 50 years
 - ▶ *Les glorieuses trentes* (1945-1975)
 - ▶ Oil crisis (1973-'74): high inflation
 - ▶ Global recession (1981-'86): inflation and unemployment
 - ▶ Global financial crisis (2007-2008)
 - ▶ Covid-19/Ukraine crisis
 - ▶ ...
- Covid-19 health crisis (2020-2022)
 - ▶ High direct impact on health and mortality
 - ▶ Isolation measures had a high negative impact on the economy and mental well-being



Period effects (in dev.) & unemployment rate (in %), BE*



Short-Term: Covid-Crisis (8 countries, in RR)

RR (in %)	Covid (2021) ref = 2017-'19	Now (2024-'26) ref = Covid (2021)	
1. DK	-6	5	Recovered
2. NL	-2	2	Recovered
3. BE*	-2	-1	Worse
4. IRL	-7	7	Recovered
5. GB	-6	2	Partially Rec
6. GE-W	1	-4	Worse
7. FR	-2	1	Partially Rec
8. IT	-1	7	Better
EU-8	-3	2	Partially Rec

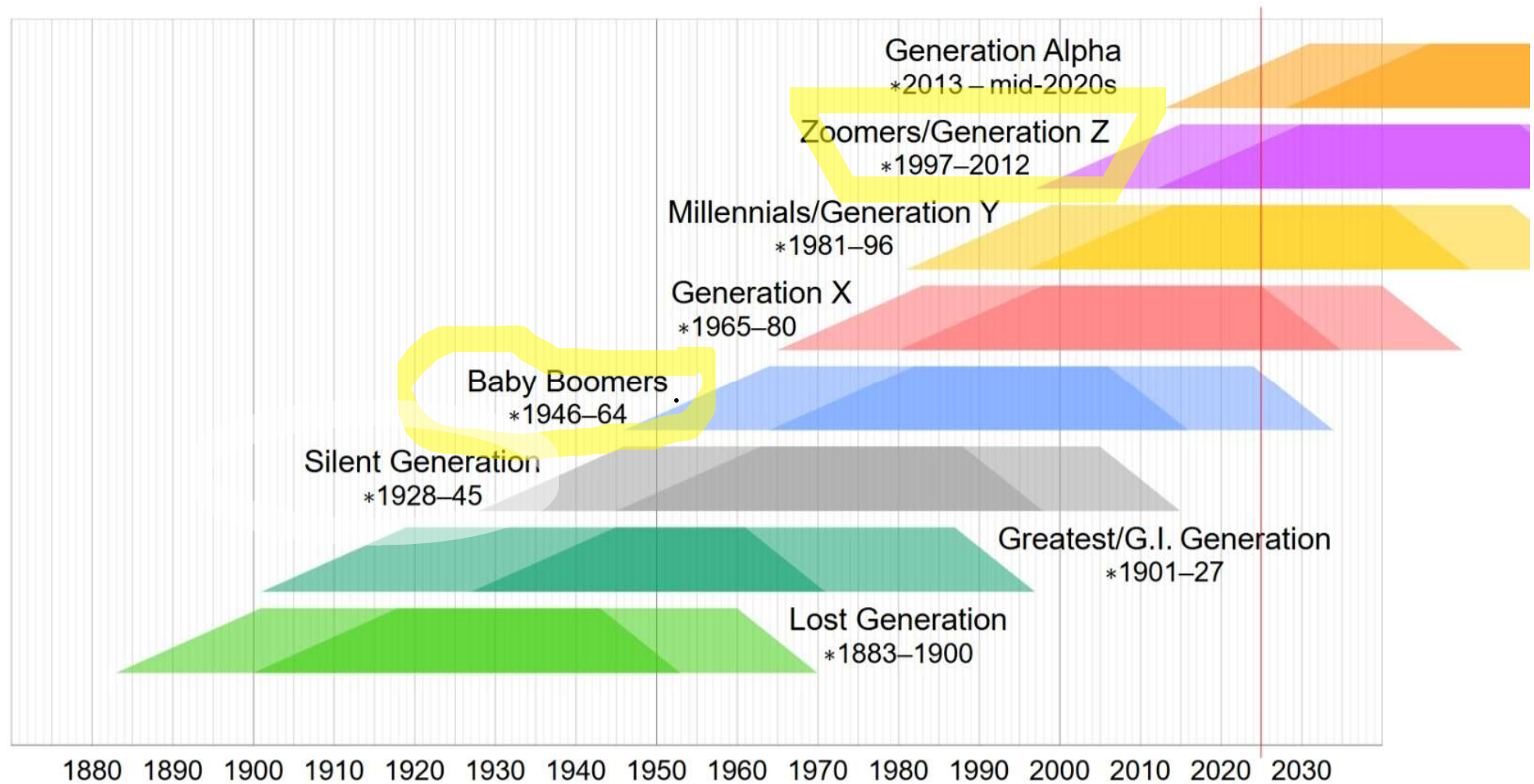
Long-Term: Eighties vs. Covid (8 countries, in RR)

RR (ln %)	Eighties (1983-'86) ref = LT-average	Covid (2020-'22) ref = LT- average	GAP Eighties - Covid
1. DK	-2.1	0.5	-2.5
2. NL	-2.2	1.5	-3.7
3. BE*	-4.5	-.7	-3.9
4. IRL	-5.1	2.0	-7.1
5. GB	-1.7	-.3	-1.4
6. GE-W	-2.9	6.5	-9.4
7. FR	-1.8	-.3	-1.5
8. IT	-2.0	-.3	-1.7
EU-8	-2.8	1.1	-3.9

RQ3. Cohort heterogeneity?

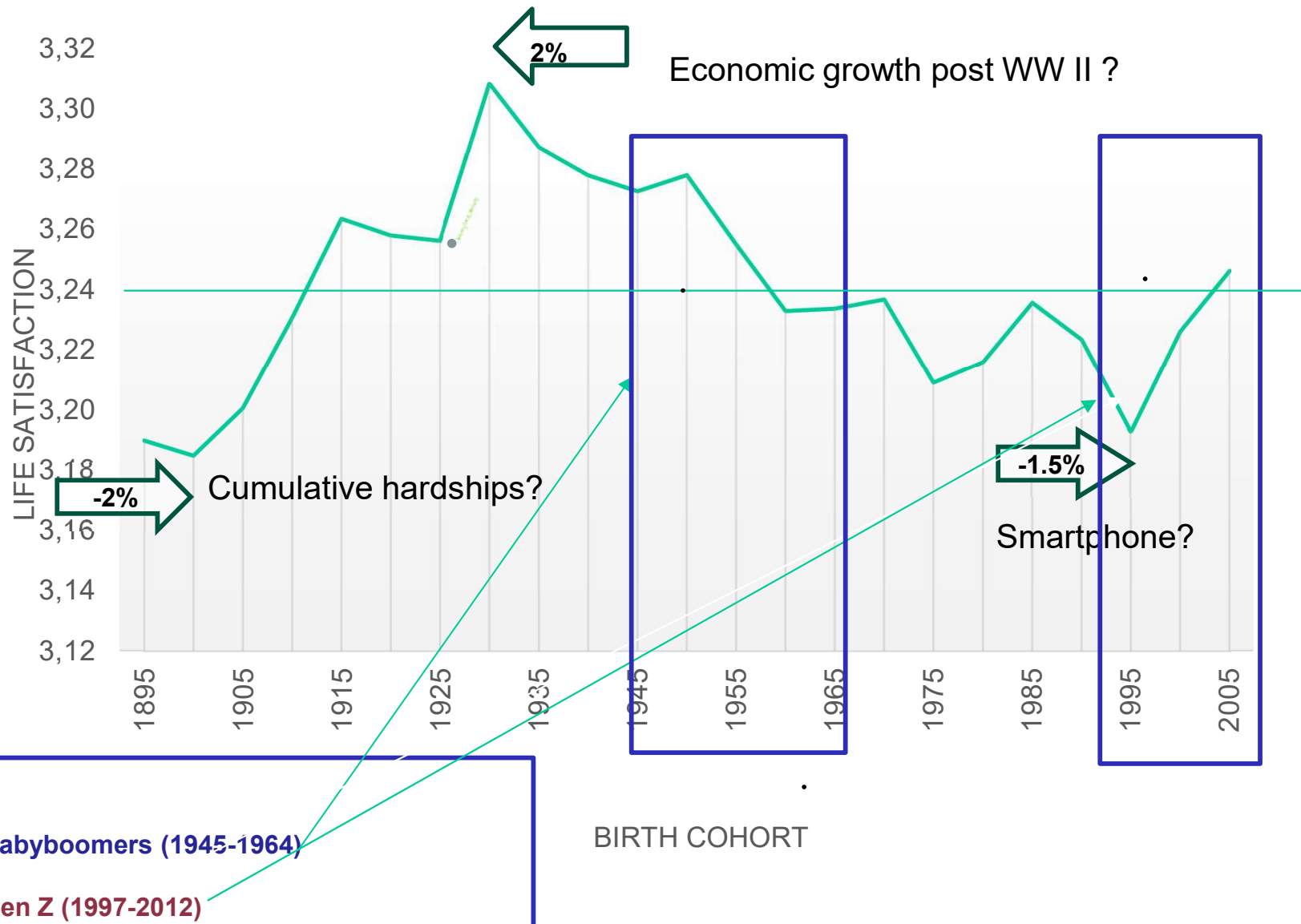
- › *Haidt* (2024): lower SWB for **Gen Z** because of the negative effects of smartphones during their formative years
- › *Easterlin* (1987): lower SWB for **baby-boomers** because large cohorts experience more competition

Cohort: "a" classification

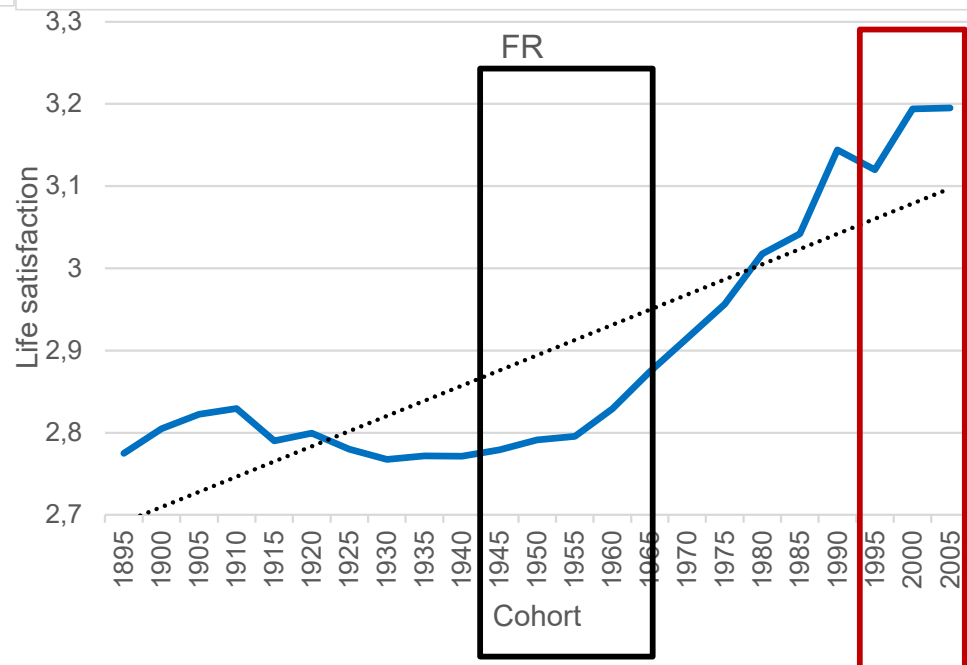
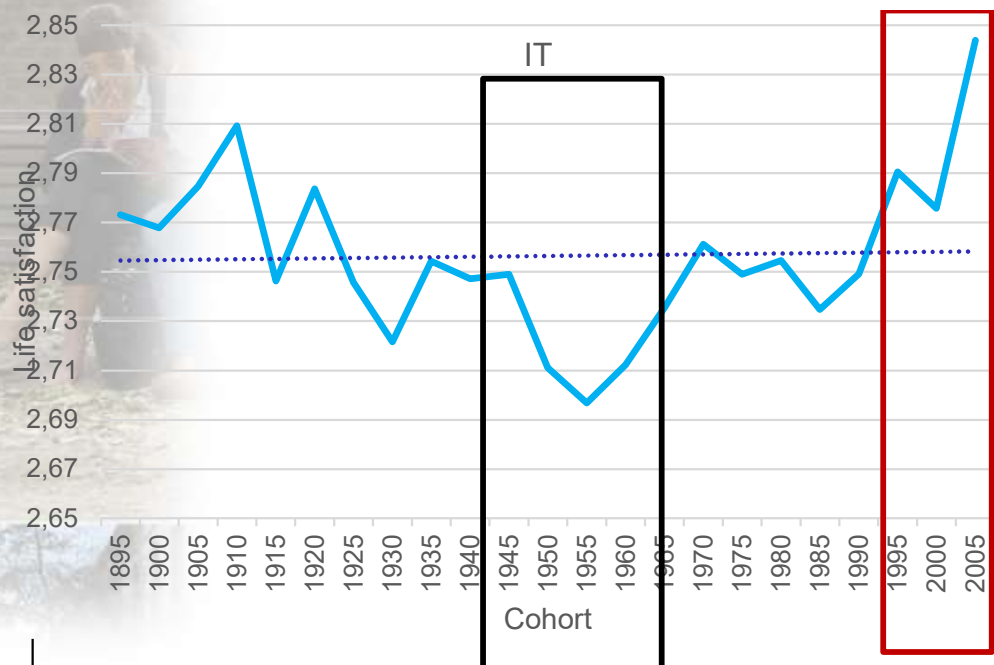
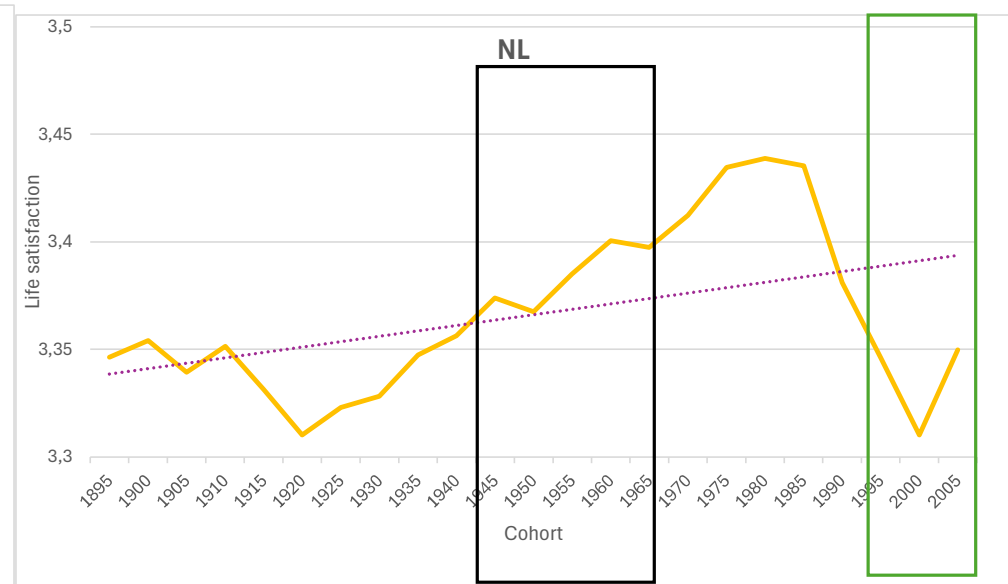
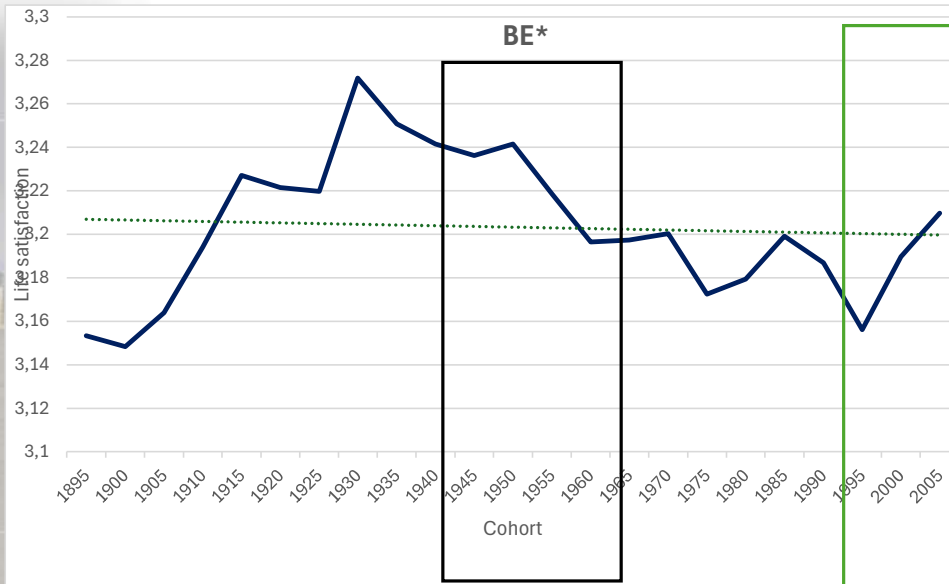


Source: Cmglee based on Pew Research Center

Cohort Effects (BE*, 1895-2005, RR)



Cohort Effects (BE*, NL, IT, FR)



- Considerable international heterogeneity
- But also some consistency:
 - ▶ Period dominates cohort effect, except in France
 - ▶ - effect of Unempl. Rate (in high period variance countries)
 - ▶ + effect of Education in all countries
 - ▶ no effect of GDP & almost no effect of gender
- Country > Period > Educ. > Un. Rate > Cohort/Age
- Covid-19 vs. 1983-1986 economic crisis
 - ▶ ST: V-shaped effect for Covid-19 crisis
 - ▶ LT: '80s crisis deeper, longer and present in all countries
- Babyboomers & GenZ
 - ▶ No consistency
 - ▶ Small to zero effects

- Role of other cultural and societal factors ?
 - ▶ Fear, resilience?
 - ▶ Country-specific adaptation mechanisms?
- Methodological issues
 - ▶ Sensitivity-analysis of HAPC-models
 - ▶ Age-selectivity of youngest and oldest cohorts?
- Further analysis
 - ▶ Stratified APC-profiles (gender, education, *age*,...)
 - ▶ Interaction effects
 - ▶ Regional analysis (NUTS1 level)
 - ▶ Additional covariates
 - ▶ Additional countries (3- or 4-year cohort approach)