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Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on promoting youth mainstreaming ⁽¹⁾ in policy decision-making processes in the European Union

(C/2023/1342)

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE GOVERNMENTS OF THE MEMBER STATES MEETING WITHIN THE COUNCIL

TAKING INTO ACCOUNT THAT:

1. The series of economic and social crises faced in recent years, together with the global COVID-19 health and climate crisis, as well as the impact of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, among others, have had a profound impact on young people, exacerbating inequalities and violations of human rights, while accentuating the complexity of the challenges that young people in the European Union (EU) face every day. Addressing these challenges forms part of the European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027 ⁽²⁾ and, in particular, of the European Youth Goal #3 'Inclusive societies'.
2. This exposure to successive crises has highlighted some of the pre-existing structural problems of our society. The complexity of the challenges that young people face has become more evident than ever, underlying the close relationship between factors such as access to employment, housing and quality education on equal terms with respect to social cohesion and, socio-emotional well-being, as well as political and societal participation, and the fulfilment of young people's expectations: a European Union of opportunities, where full enjoyment of the right to social justice is guaranteed ⁽³⁾.
3. Combating social exclusion, discrimination and violence of all kinds is a priority goal for the European Union. In particular, the principle of non-discrimination is a fundamental value of the European Union, enshrined in the Treaty establishing the European Community, in Articles 9, 10 and 18 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and in Articles 14, 21, 24, 32 and 33 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights.
4. Europeans aged between 16 and 29 years have a higher probability than the general population of experiencing serious material deprivation. In 2021, the risk of experiencing poverty or social exclusion was higher among 16-to-29-year-olds than in the general population (24.8 % compared to 21.6 %). This trend – a higher risk of poverty or social exclusion among youth – can be seen in nearly half (13 out of 27) of the EU Member States ⁽⁴⁾.
5. Opportunities for living independently continue to be insufficient, taking into account the difficulties that young people in the EU face in gaining access to housing, owing to job insecurity and the high cost of buying or renting, which is unaffordable for a large proportion of young people. Access to decent housing is a basic condition for

⁽¹⁾ In these conclusions, youth mainstreaming is understood as 'an approach that incorporates the perspective and needs of young people in the processes of policy formulation, monitoring and evaluation, as well as in decision-making processes. Mainstreaming ensures that the challenges and concerns inherent to young people are not addressed in isolation but are integrated cross-cuttingly into broader policy frameworks'.

⁽²⁾ 'Improve policy decisions with regard to their impact on young people across all sectors-notably employment, education, health and social inclusion.'

⁽³⁾ According to the Flash Eurobarometer on youth and democracy carried out between 22 February 2022 and 4 March 2022: young people's most common expectation for the 2022 European Year of Youth (EYY) was for decision-makers to listen more closely to their demands and to act on them (72 %), and to support their personal, social and professional development (71 %). Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has reinforced young people's conviction that preserving peace, reinforcing international security and promoting international cooperation is the primary objective of the EU (37 %). The next highest expectations are for the EU to increase job opportunities for young people (33 %), to combat poverty and economic and social inequalities (32 %), as well as to promote environmentally friendly policies and combat climate change (31 %). Young people see not only mental and physical health and wellbeing (34 %), protecting the environment and combating climate change (34 %), but also education and training, including the free movement of learners (33 %), as the main focus areas for the EYY.

⁽⁴⁾ Eurostat. Statistics explained: Young people and social inclusion.

guaranteeing truly inclusive and egalitarian societies, as reflected in a European Parliament resolution ⁽⁵⁾ encouraging the EU to recognise access to decent and affordable housing as a human right, which is an even more pressing issue for young people ⁽⁶⁾.

6. The different forms of violence to which young Europeans are exposed represent another problem that needs to be addressed, with particular reference to the psychological violence linked to misinformation and disinformation and the impact of social networks on mental health. The EU Agency for Fundamental Rights indicated in its 2021 ⁽⁷⁾ report that the rate of physical violence, harassment and cyberbullying was much higher among young people than in other age groups. Furthermore, the report highlighted the fact that LGBTI persons, persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities and young women were especially vulnerable to violence and harassment. This is even more the case when young people are affected by multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination or other disadvantages, as reflected in the Presidency conclusions on the safety of LGBTI persons in the European Union and the European Commission also adopted major strategies and action plans to promote a Union of equality ⁽⁸⁾ ⁽⁹⁾.
7. According to the most recent European Parliament Youth Survey ⁽¹⁰⁾, 55 % of young people in the EU said that they understood little or nothing at all about the European Union. Most of the young people surveyed believed that they did not have much, or any, say over the important decisions, laws and policies affecting them ⁽¹¹⁾. Young people are increasingly turning to non-institutional ways of expressing themselves politically. Such a development can be seen as essentially positive, but it is concerning if it is based on the perception that the European institutions do not provide young people with any possibility of being involved in decision-making processes or of addressing their needs and difficulties. Thus, a comprehensive approach to the challenges affecting young people requires their involvement and participation in public institutions and in policy-making processes, through both non-institutional and institutional forms of participation.
8. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) ⁽¹²⁾ stresses that it is important to carry out an assessment of the impact of the EU policy making processes on young people so as to take into account the needs and expectations of young people and of future generations and to offer a scope of application that includes all policy areas directly and indirectly affecting young people. An assessment of impact goes beyond the traditional area of youth policies.
9. In its resolution on the European Year of Youth 2022 (EYY) legacy the European Parliament ⁽¹³⁾ calls on the Commission to adopt a fully-fledged 'EU Youth Test' to ensure the meaningful engagement, participation and commitment of young people in the preparation of all EU policies, to establish a systematic impact assessment in its proposals to ensure that they promote and reflect the needs of young people and to take mitigating measures if they have a negative impact.
10. In its Charter on Youth and Democracy, the European Committee of the Regions ⁽¹⁴⁾ calls for an establishment of a youth-test mechanism to ensure that all new EU legislation and policy is subject to a youth focused impact assessment, including a consultation with youth organisations on the different levels and youth experts at EU level and the development of mitigating measures in the event that a negative impact is identified.

⁽⁵⁾ European Parliament resolution of 21 January 2021 on access to decent and affordable housing for all (2019/2187(INI)).

⁽⁶⁾ As indicated by 2020 Eurostat figures, all EU Member States showed a higher rate of severe housing deprivation among young people than among the population as a whole.

⁽⁷⁾ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Rights Report 2021.

⁽⁸⁾ Presidency conclusions on the safety of LGBTI persons in the European Union, 9942/23.

⁽⁹⁾ Five equality strategies were adopted in 2020 and 2021 to make progress towards a Union of Equality: the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 (COM(2020) 152 final); the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025 (COM(2020) 698 final); the EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025 (COM(2020) 565 final); the EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation 2020-2030 (COM(2020) 620 final); and the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 (COM(2021) 101 final).

⁽¹⁰⁾ Flash Eurobarometer, Report September 2021.

⁽¹¹⁾ This feeling increases the more distant the sphere of governance under consideration: 53 % feel that they have little or no say over decisions, laws and policies affecting their local area, rising to 70 % for matters affecting the EU as a whole.

⁽¹²⁾ European Economic and Social Committee, EU Youth test (own-initiative opinion), 21 September 2022, SOC/728 -EESC-2022.

⁽¹³⁾ European Parliament resolution of 24 November 2022 on the European Year of Youth 2022 legacy (2022/2953(RSP)).

⁽¹⁴⁾ The Charter on Youth and Democracy. European Committee of the Regions, November 2022.

11. The report on the final outcome of the Conference on the Future of Europe calls for the introduction of a Youth-check of legislation, including both an impact assessment and a consultation mechanism with representatives of young people, when legislation is deemed to have an impact on young people and, as described in proposal 47, 'to ensure that all policy making at EU level is seen through a youth lens'. Furthermore, the report calls for the development of an EU 'Youth Test' of all new legislation and policy to ensure a 'youth focused impact assessment, including a consultation with young people' ⁽¹⁵⁾.

RECOGNISING THAT:

12. As highlighted in the European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027: 'An increasing number of young people lack trust in the EU, and encounter difficulties in understanding its principles, values, and functioning. Democratic deficits in EU processes have also been identified as one of the reasons for rising Euroscepticism among young people' ⁽¹⁶⁾. Nevertheless, according to the Eurobarometer survey on youth and democracy in 2022, young people have some expectations of the EU, such as preserving peace, increasing job opportunities for young people, combating poverty and economic and social inequalities ⁽¹⁷⁾.
13. In the 6th cycle of the EU Youth Dialogue consultations, carried out to give young people a voice in the process of designing the EU Youth Strategy, it became clear that young people had signalled that they felt underrepresented in decision-making processes and had a limited capacity to have a cross-cutting influence on all of the policies having an impact on the challenges they face at local, regional, national and European level. This perception remains present in the recently concluded 9th cycle of the Youth Dialogue, in which young people continue to demand 'appropriate measures to mainstream meaningful youth participation across all relevant policy fields' ⁽¹⁸⁾.
14. In June 2021, the Flash Eurobarometer youth survey indicated that one of the main expectations of young people was for society as a whole and for decision-makers in particular to listen more to their views and to address their needs. 33 % of young people gave such a response ⁽¹⁹⁾.
15. As the statistical evidence concerning ageism shows, age is a major discriminatory factor generating inequalities in our societies, as acknowledged by the World Health Organization ⁽²⁰⁾, and it is of vital importance that this should be taken in consideration when designing public policies relating to young people's issues, in order to protect the values of intergenerational solidarity as a fundamental pillar of social cohesion.
16. The transition from education and training to the labour market continues to be filled with obstacles for many young people in Europe, who face serious difficulties in finding decent jobs that will enable them to fully realise their life projects and have better prospects for the future.
17. Young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) represent a significant proportion of all young people in Europe. In 2021, 13,1 % of all 15 to 29-year-olds (i.e., more than 9.3 million individuals) were NEETs, with wide variations across the EU Member States. Moreover, the European Year of Skills ⁽²¹⁾ devotes special attention to this group.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Conference on the Future of Europe. Report on the final outcome, May 2022.

⁽¹⁶⁾ The Youth Goals resulting from the Structured Dialogue with Youth 2017-2018 state that 'Democratic deficits in EU processes have also been identified as one of the reasons for rising Euroscepticism among young people' and then propose specific measures relating to those deficits. European Youth Strategy, Annex 3.

⁽¹⁷⁾ See footnote 4.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Resolution of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on the outcomes of the 9th cycle of the EU Youth Dialogue, 2023/C 185/04.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Flash Eurobarometer, European Parliament Youth Survey, September 2021.

⁽²⁰⁾ The World Health Organization considers ageism to be the third main cause of discrimination worldwide.

⁽²¹⁾ Decision (EU) 2023/936 of the European Parliament and of the Council on a European Year of Skills, OJ L 125, 11.5.2023, p. 1.

18. Unemployment affects young people to a greater extent and has a major impact on those in situations of social exclusion and those who live and work in at-risk regions across the EU Member States, including outermost regions ⁽²²⁾. This indicates that young people's vulnerability as regards unemployment is exacerbated by the intersectionality of the different forms of inequality that affect them or by the different forms of exclusion that they experience ⁽²³⁾ ⁽²⁴⁾.
19. Education, work, housing and access to quality services are essential rights for all, including those who are beginning a new phase of life in a disadvantaged situation, or facing precarious employment prospects and other cross-cutting challenges that compound those inequalities, with the lack of opportunities reducing their chances of a better life and putting many young people in a weak position from the very start ⁽²⁵⁾.
20. These disadvantages are increased exponentially in the case of young women, LGBTI youth, young people with migrant background, and young people with disabilities.
21. The climate crisis and the consequences of global warming have never been as urgent as they are today, and they are affecting young people's lives in particular. In order not to jeopardise the life chances of young people, structural, long-term and sustainable measures are needed in many policy areas, and they must be specifically targeted at young people facing multiple forms of discrimination or other disadvantages.
22. The upcoming Communication of the European Commission on the legacy of the European Year of Youth 2022, as well as the interim evaluation of the European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027, offer an excellent opportunity for taking stock of past experiences and enhancing existing key youth policy tools ⁽²⁶⁾, and for putting priorities such as the well-being of young people at the centre of policy-making and providing them with equal opportunities to realise their life plans free of violence and with full awareness and enjoyment of their rights ⁽²⁷⁾.
23. The role played by the European Commission's EU Youth Coordinator, enhancing cross-sectoral cooperation and mainstreaming, as well as knowledge development and exchange on youth issues within the European Commission services and working hand in hand with various stakeholders to ensure a coherent communication towards young people, was a major innovation that sprang from the European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027.

CONSIDERING THAT:

24. All young people are a resource to society and all policies and activities concerning young people should uphold young people's right to participate in the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies affecting them by means of meaningful participation of young people and youth organisations. Thus, the European Union, including through its programmes such as Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, should work towards safeguarding the rights of young people, address their challenges and respond to their needs and expectations. In that way, an EU that invests in its own future and preserves its economic, social, and environmental sustainability can be ensured.
25. Young people are subjects of law with all of their potential, capabilities and talents that are essential for any society, and they should be fully incorporated into political processes and decision-making processes.

⁽²²⁾ Eurostat, statistics explained: Youth unemployment, August 2022.

⁽²³⁾ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, COM/2020/152 final.

⁽²⁴⁾ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Union of Equality: LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025, COM/2020/698 final.

⁽²⁵⁾ Recommendation CM/Rec(2015)3 adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 21 January 2015.

⁽²⁶⁾ Instruments as listed in EUYS section 3, Cooperate on the basis of instruments and governance.

⁽²⁷⁾ See footnote 3.

26. The participation of young people is an essential condition for legitimising and increasing the efficiency of any political process, as well as for enabling young people to trust and believe in the European institutions, strengthening the ties that bind them to the identity and values of a Europe that must also commit to the future of its young people.
27. The young people of Europe comprise a complex and diverse population, and that the EU should guarantee that the design of youth-oriented policies takes a rights-based approach that mainstreams a youth perspective, enabling those policies to be truly inclusive and target all young people in all of the diversities that exist throughout Europe.
28. The lives of young people are shaped by policies rooted in manifold policy areas and on different levels of implementation. Hence, only through youth mainstreaming as a priority amongst different policy areas can it be ensured that the specific needs or effects for young people in envisaged policies or programmes are taken into account ⁽²⁸⁾.
29. Those European policies must also focus on well-being, mental health and healthcare, including collective reflection and subsequent political action to protect the role of young people in resource-sharing and their ability to influence decision-making processes from a generational standpoint, through intergenerational cooperation.

THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION IS INVITED TO:

30. Enhance the youth mainstreaming in all policy areas, in line with the European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027 and the EYY, in order to promote the incorporation of a youth perspective in the development of EU policies. More specifically, mainstream a youth perspective in policy design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, applying that view to all areas affecting young people's lives, involving, as appropriate at EU level, the EU Youth Coordinator.
31. Ensure that the Commission's existing Better Regulation tools are used to their fullest, so that impacts on young people are taken into consideration in EU policymaking. Stronger incorporation of youth perspectives in policymaking could contribute to the objectives of an EU youth test.
32. Explore and further analyse the use of a regulatory impact assessment of EU policies on young people. This may include the possible application of an EU youth test. Such a youth test could be understood as an analytical tool that would assess the impact that EU policies have on young people. It could be inspired by models that already exist in some Member States.

THE MEMBER STATES AND THE COMMISSION, PURSUANT TO THE PRINCIPLE OF SUBSIDIARITY, IN THEIR RESPECTIVE AREAS OF COMPETENCE AND AT THE APPROPRIATE LEVELS, ARE INVITED TO:

33. Cooperate in the youth mainstreaming policy in all policy areas, when relevant, in line with the European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027, in order to promote the incorporation of a youth perspective in the development of policies in the EU. More specifically, foster youth mainstreaming in decision-making and policy design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, applying that view to all areas affecting young people's lives.
34. Improve cooperation, including mutual learning, between the European Commission, Member States, youth organisations and other relevant stakeholders, including via existing practices such as peer-learning activities, on the implementation of inclusive approaches in public policies that analyse their impact on young people's lives.

⁽²⁸⁾ 'Reykjavik Declaration – United around our values', following the 4th summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe, (16 and 17 May 2023, Reykjavik).

35. Encourage decision-making that is strongly grounded in evidence and empirical data ⁽²⁹⁾ and recognise that youth mainstreaming, and meaningful youth participation are essential in the development of public policies.
 36. Cooperate in the necessary efforts, together with the relevant stakeholders, to incorporate the youth dimension in the impact assessment and evaluation of policies in the EU in order to improve decision-making processes and enable young people in the EU to play an important role in defining their own future.
 37. Build on the achievements and the co-creative approach of the EYY and continue to generate multi-level engagement involving European institutions, Member States and young people in the EU, emphasising the values of transparency and accessibility, to generate a positive impact on the ties that bind young Europeans to the EU.
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⁽²⁹⁾ Resolution of the Council of the European Union and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on a framework for European cooperation in the youth field: The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027, OJ C 456, 18.12.2018, p. 1.

ANNEX

The promotion of youth policies has been constant in recent years, as shown by the following:

- The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027, with its 11 European Youth Goals, designed for and representing the priorities of young people in Europe before the pandemic.
- The emphasis on young people in the European Pillar of Social Rights, which establishes 20 key principles that are essential for fair and effective labour markets and social protection systems.
- The adoption in 2020 of the European Commission's Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027, which devotes special attention to young Europeans.
- The commitment made in 2020 to apply the enhanced Youth Guarantee, which strengthened broad support for youth employment across the EU, with a more inclusive approach.
- The designation of 2022 as the European Year of Youth, with the goal of enhancing, empowering and promoting new spaces and opportunities for young people to participate and play a leading role in Europe.