

**Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — European cooperation in the youth field  
(2010-2018)**

(2016/C 120/06)

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**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

1. welcomes the fact that the Commission has recognised the importance of improving the development of policies based on facts and solid evidence within the field of youth affairs, and of coordinating the European Union, the regions' and Member States' resources and efforts as effectively as possible in order to achieve youth policy objectives;
2. is particularly appreciative of the Commission's approach, which deems it necessary to react as rapidly as possible — in the area of youth affairs during the period 2016-2018 — through appropriate changes to policy in response to new challenges such as the integration of young refugees or the rise in extremism among young people;
3. in this context, specifically welcomes the benefits of the EU's framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010-2018) in terms of improving cooperation between EU Member States and their local and regional authorities and of opening up and expanding the opportunities and advantages of European integration for young people; therefore urges the Commission to extend the framework beyond 2018 and develop it further;
4. insists that in the future, ensuring equal opportunities, promoting social integration and improving the competitiveness of young people on the labour market, while fostering active citizenship (youth participation), the strengthening of youth work, non-discrimination and intercultural understanding, should remain the key objectives of youth policy;
5. expresses its concern however that the Commission fails to mention the role of local and regional authorities (LRAs) in relation to youth policy, despite it being very obvious that in the majority of Member States — where there are national policies on youth matters — LRAs are, to varying degrees, the competent authorities in this area;
6. appreciates the work of Eurostat to produce and coordinate sets of data relating to a range of factors relating to youth issues;
7. calls on the Commission to systematically assess the territorial impact of youth policy at sub-national level, at least to NUTS 2 level. In order to further strengthen the regions' role in implementing the EU's youth strategy, within the framework of the Open Method of Coordination among EU Member States, considers necessary the development of measurable indicators, of concrete youth-related action plans involving all levels of government and of strong partnerships between youth organisations and public authorities;

8. after consulting stakeholders, considers that while the Erasmus+ programme and the Youth Guarantee are essential tools for achieving strategic objectives, the problems are far more complex and EU action in the area of youth affairs already goes beyond these two effective tools which, though seemingly effective, are actually insufficient, given that the Youth Guarantee is still not being properly applied. With regard to vulnerable young people in particular, there is a clear need for initiatives to support young people coming out of care systems and who, at the age of 18, may find themselves without any kind of oversight to guide them in their transition to adulthood. Consequently highlights the need to make other information on the results of youth policy accessible in an appropriate format, particularly in relation to subjects such as youth unemployment, and social inclusion, amongst other things. This would also help determine whether it would not be appropriate to provide for specific assistance from the European Structural and Investment Funds, as from the current programming period. Given the complexity and magnitude of the challenges at hand, youth policy should be mainstreamed into all EU policies taking a horizontal approach, as these policies can not only seek solutions for the pressing problems faced by young people, but also serve as a launch-pad for generating new economic growth. In addition, the rediscovery of the values of long-standing traditions and occupations may provide new job opportunities. Substantial efforts are still needed to promote the exchange of best practice in youth involvement and youth work between Member States and local and regional authorities. Moreover, the economic case for education and training, which was debated at the meeting of the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council of 12 December 2014<sup>(1)</sup> within the context of the mid-term review of the Europe 2020 strategy, should now be translated into concrete investments in education as part of the EU's long-term youth and growth agendas;

9. is pleased to note that the Commission is improving the provision of information for young job-seekers through the EURES system for exchanging information on job offers and that it has launched the 'Your first EURES job' initiative to support young people seeking employment abroad; welcomes the specific measures it has taken to implement the Council's call, in its Recommendation on a Quality Framework for Traineeships, to extend the EURES portal to traineeships; and calls on the Member States to make more use of the options offered by these instruments;

10. notes with concern that direct political activity (particularly voting in elections) is declining among young people, whose participation is lower than that of older generations, but celebrates the interest many young people show in getting involved as active members of their local community by joining organisations, through online tools (social media) or by volunteering. Thus the Committee is pleased to note that the Commission and the Member States want to use new forms of participation in democratic processes and access to political decision-making as part of the EU's youth strategy; young people should also be given more information on their right to launch and support European Citizens' Initiatives;

11. recommends that, with full consideration of the fact that the Member States are responsible for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems, the Commission assess good practices in Member States and regions with regard to the teaching of political literacy and to the lowering of the voting age and more precisely, the direct or indirect influence that these two elements have on political engagement among young people and their willingness to get involved. The Commission should then share the results of this assessment with Member States and the regions;

12. considers the role of youth and sports organisations that operate in formal settings and provide non-formal and informal educational programmes for active citizenship outside school to be especially important, as they contribute considerably to developing young peoples' participatory skills and to improving the quality of the decision-making process. Therefore considers support for these organisations to be important;

13. also stresses the need to identify and develop a clearer picture of non-structured communities of young people, whose numbers are steadily increasing, inter alia, thanks to responsible use of social media. These communities often include young people who have difficulty accessing opportunities and lack the means to enter into dialogue with the institutions;

14. acknowledges the importance of good quality socio-educational provision and the need to develop the capacity to respond to social, behavioural and technological change. It is also important in this connection to continue supporting the recognition and publicising of non-formal and informal learning in youth work;

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<sup>(1)</sup> Press Release of 3358th Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council meeting  
<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/workarea/downloadAsset.aspx?id=40802190967>

15. is concerned at the fact that socio-educational provision, which is also generally the responsibility of local authorities in several Member States, has been subject to budgetary cuts throughout Europe, while the growing percentage of young people at risk of poverty and exclusion, not to mention the ever-increasing prevalence of unhealthy behaviours and associated rise in the mortality rate among young people, and calls for an increase in these services. There is also a particular need to promote positive lifestyles entailing less drug use, alcohol abuse, smoking and obesity, not least by encouraging physical activity. At the same time it is important to propose active policies to provide young people, either in associations or individually, with opportunities for personal and vocational development so they are in a position to 'create new forms of social relations' (2001 White Paper on European youth);

16. in response to the current migration crisis and within the context of the European Agenda for Migration, calls for directly accessible financial resources for local and regional authorities to allow them to fulfil their obligations where migration and integration are concerned;

17. considers that migration of young people from less well-off European regions or regions worst hit by the economic crisis, undermines territorial and social cohesion and leads to serious demographic challenges. In order to promote growth and job creation in those regions, which is key to averting young people's exodus and the subsequent brain drain, the Committee stresses the need to support, inter alia, interregional partnerships and direct local and regional actions by means of specific measures financed by the ESI Funds;

18. considers the sharing of best practices to be an important tool in cross-sectoral cooperation to support young people, as it enables Member States, local and regional authorities and youth representatives to learn from each other. Moreover, initiatives such as the Euro-Mediterranean Youth Platform and the European Youth Forum encourage dialogue on issues such as promoting lifelong learning and European mobility, policies on education and employment, and equal opportunities for men and women;

19. suggests developing a basic package that each Member State should, where possible, guarantee for young people. This package could focus on access to high speed internet, the option of learning a second foreign language to the equivalent of at least B2 level within the public education system, career guidance and continuous mentoring, the chance of appropriate involvement in volunteering, promoting the preparation for a first job, and flexible and accessible forms of funding in order to carry out studies that offer career prospects. At the same time, calls on the European Commission for action to ensure that all young people in the EU who are interested in vocational training have access to it, and also to have a 'minimum qualifications and skills guarantee', recognised and validated in all Member States, that empower them to access and complete a minimum level of educational attainment, accompanied by the relevant level of appropriate skills backed by proper validation that recognises the added value of activities carried out by young people also in non-formal settings;

20. notes the need to carry out studies in the various European regions in order to have a clearer overview of the situation of young people in terms of housing and the habitability of housing. Indeed, it is particularly necessary in this field to exchange best practice and draw up action plans at local level, given that in many regions there is an oversupply of dwellings, whereas in numerous other regions, the quality of the housing stock does not provide appropriate conditions for young people, and in yet other regions, the extremely high prices exclude young people. It would therefore make sense to draw up, on the basis of the relevant data, appropriate action plans to increase the accessibility of good housing conditions to young people. More specifically, it is proposed that a proportion of public housing be set aside for young people, that mutually-supportive neighbourhoods and co-housing for autonomous elderly people and young people be fostered, and home-buying be supported with low interest rate loans for young people;

21. stresses the need to determine how to face challenges in the area of youth policy, such as the issue of matching skills with employers', production and territorial needs, also in the context of reducing the high level of youth unemployment, equal opportunities for young people who live in small communities, located in peripheral, outermost, island and rural areas that are facing demographic challenges, or furthermore, how to promote professional training initiatives tailored to regional specificities and specific skills and the exchange of good practices in this policy area, not least by attaching greater value to manual occupations; underlines that matching skills with employers' needs is an important factor in youth unemployment and further development of young people's career prospects. Considers that procedures should be put in place to ensure the validation and certification of skills acquired by young people in non-formal types of education and volunteering so they can put them to use in finding jobs. Calls for further attention to be paid to these issues, and for an appeal to be made for corporate social responsibility on the part of businesses so that they empathise with young people, who not only are the workforce of today and tomorrow but also the potential customers for their services and the products and services they supply;

22. considers it necessary that national as well as local and regional youth policy continue to focus particularly on issues such as promoting Europe's founding values of Christian culture, discrimination against young people on the basis of sex, gender, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability and sexual orientation, as well as developing measures that should be taken in this respect, including with regard to issues that are specific to young people from national and ethnic minorities;
23. urges the regional and local authorities concerned to make every effort, in compliance with national legislation and European principles, to maintain educational institutions that teach in the mother tongue of national or language minorities and to set up new ones, and calls on the Member States to provide young people from language and national minorities, given their particular academic situation, with effective training in the official national language, in accordance with the principles of multilingualism and non-discrimination;
24. considers it a priority to launch an urgent action plan to deal with the rising incidence of gender-based violence among young people, stipulating the importance of effective mixed schooling in all EU countries;
25. notes that young people have only limited access to the sources of funding needed to set up a business, pay for accommodation or continue their studies; for this reason considers it important for local and regional authorities to find local solutions that will, on the one hand, help to make the region in question more competitive and, on the other, clearly strengthen equal opportunities among young people;
26. therefore emphasises the need to foster spaces for bringing young people together, run by local actors in partnership with, among others, private stakeholders, who can take the needs of their target group of young people and turn them into opportunities for future employability, for sounding out entrepreneurial skills and promoting active participation;
27. calls on the Commission and Member States to check that young people are properly informed on employment law, employment protection legislation and legislation on volunteering, and that they receive the necessary protection, when they are carrying out paid work or volunteer activities or when they undertake a traineeship or internship in their country of residence or in a Member State other than where they are habitually resident; to this end, proposes that they draw on established networks, such as Europe Direct, Eurodesk or Eures, and on local bodies as the main champions of youth policies in regions;
28. highlights that caution should be exercised with regard to the protection of young volunteers or young people active on the labour market, and calls on regions to examine the opportunities in this area for cooperation on mutual learning and the exchange of best practices. It also highlights the need to boost the social and civil value of volunteering, as in the case of civilian service for young people;
29. believes that it would be advisable to examine how, on the one hand, new, emerging social and community values — such as environmental awareness in connection with sustainable and energy-efficient production, community engagement, support to those in need and enhancing the status of artisan activities — can encourage young people's participation in society and successfully integrate them into society and, on the other, promote and uphold the fundamental role of the family as the primary support for individuals' social and economic growth. It recommends a link and a mention of the family among the new sustainable development goals (UN). Support measures cover families of origin, new families and families in the process of formation. The measures concern protection of the family and support for starting a family and parenting, particularly in regions that are demographically challenged;
30. predominantly rural regions must pay special attention to their young populations — a real strategic asset in these areas — and help ensure they remain committed to the rural environment, they must strengthen their ability to continue to reside in these communities, which are sometimes very small in number, and ensure as far as possible the continuity of agricultural work in these areas using traditional farming techniques (underpinned by adequate training) that are environmentally friendly and respect the principles of the sustainable economy. These practices must be financially viable and economically profitable;

31. believes that the isolated measures adopted by different Member States in the area of youth policy are not always sufficient and that coordination of such measures is often patchy. The Committee thus supports the proposal that greater commitment and further measures are necessary at European level to improve coordination, develop harmonisation and exploit the possibility for synergies — particularly given the fact that young people are more open to mobility and migration — and insists that the revised policy should clearly state the key role of LRAs;

32. deems it necessary to bolster the role of young people in the democratic process, to make their voices heard. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to promote dialogue among young people, building on the involvement of civil society and, in particular, of youth organisations, local authorities — both individually and in associations — informal groups, Europe Direct Information Centres which can contribute to the feedback among young people and institutions, and NGOs, which have always represented the section of the population most open to change and social innovation and capable of driving the renewal of society as a whole. Precisely for this reason, the Committee stresses the importance of extending structured dialogue and lends its support to the new measures put forward by the Commission in this area, in relation to enhancing opportunities to participate both for young people in general and for the organisations that represent them. Finally, points out that in order to achieve these objectives, it might be useful to provide for structured intervention, as was done for the Youth Guarantee with the YEI;

33. emphasises the importance of extending structured dialogue and lends its support to the new measures put forward by the Commission in this area, in relation to enhancing opportunities to participate both for young people in general and for the organisations that represent them; points out that young people in particular expect structured dialogue to meet quality criteria that should be reflected as far as possible in the dialogue process. These include a partnership-based approach to dialogue with each side on an equal footing, and adequate time. Young people should be involved in opinion-forming processes at the various political levels in as many policy areas as possible; the regional perspective of youth participation could be strengthened in relation to the youth employment initiative in particular, in the form of structured dialogue;

34. believes it important to promote the inclusion of young people with disabilities and to develop genuine equal access for those young people to the opportunities provided by the Member States and the regions;

35. highlights the need to give priority, in both EU and Member State policies, to the inclusion of at-risk young people, such as NEETs (young people not in education, employment or training) and to young people from migrant backgrounds, who are more likely to move into this category;

36. believes that, given the extremely serious terrorist threat that Europe is currently facing, along with the political and religious radicalisation that unfortunately is gaining ground among young people, it is a priority — in accordance with the EU Security Agenda — to boost participation and confidence in the institutions, so as to prevent violence, radicalisation and extremism and to guarantee young people the right to live in pluralist communities underpinned by democratic European values, the rule of law and fundamental rights;

37. recommends that European LRAs establish local and regional strategies that clearly address problems and opportunities that are specific to young people, taking into account EU and Member States' youth policies. It should be ensured, when drawing up such plans, to enhance mutual learning opportunities while seeking to ensure that the target group — young people — are involved as widely as possible in designing, implementing and evaluating them and that reciprocal learning is encouraged. At the same time, the Committee underlines that all youth strategies and policies shall incorporate horizontal measures fighting the phenomena of discrimination on the basis of sex, gender, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability and sexual orientation;

38. calls on the European Commission to promote and uphold policies to foster youth entrepreneurship in the cultural and creative fields, in order to create jobs and provide an effective response to all those young people who wish to turn their passions into occupations in the cultural sector.

Brussels, 11 February 2016.

*The President  
of the European Committee of the Regions*

Markku MARKKULA

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