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REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

on the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy (2019-2021)

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1. Introduction

EU cooperation in the youth field started in 2002, providing a policy framework for the EU youth programmes implemented since 1988. The 2019-2027 EU Youth Strategy[1] is the third generation framework. It is based on a dual approach: (a) mainstreaming youth-relevant initiatives across policy areas and (b) addressing the 'Engage. Connect. Empower' core areas in the youth sector. This EU Youth Report 2021 evaluates progress towards the objectives and priorities of the EU Youth Strategy for 2019-2021. It covers the first EU triennial Work Plan for Youth under the current EU Youth Strategy, spanning two Council Presidency Trios.

2. What is it like to be young in Europe today?

As the accompanying Staff Working Document on the situation of youth[2] indicates, youth access to opportunities, regarding education, employment, mobility and democratic participation, improved leading up to the end of 2019, until the COVID-19 pandemic hit. The pandemic resulted in a discontinuity of education, training and other learning activities, loss of employment and career opportunities, social isolation and mental health issues.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic: young people in Europe were increasingly mobile and connected but with educational and socio-economic inequality gaps

Approximately 86 million young people lived in the EU-28 in 2019[3] (one in every six was between 15 and 29 years-old). The share of young people in the total EU population between 2010 and 2019 decreased by 1.8 percentage points (the highest contractions were in the Baltic and Eastern European regions), confirming a long-term trend of contraction in the size of the youth population. In parallel however, youth migration within and into Europe has accelerated since the 1990s.

In 2019, one in three young people in the EU reported having stayed abroad for at least two weeks for studies, training, work, exchanges or volunteering[4]. Over 40% of young people who considered going abroad for learning or volunteering, but never did, declared not having the necessary financial means, or reported family, personal or work-related reasons.

In recent years, up until the COVID-19 pandemic, European economies were on a path towards recovery from the economic crisis. However, in 2019, over 5 million EU-28 inhabitants between the ages of 15 and 29 were still unemployed (6.3% of all young people aged 15–29, or 11.1% of the youth labour force). Between 2015 and 2019, youth unemployment rates decreased in all EU Member States but always remained more than twice as high as general unemployment. In 2020, in the context of the pandemic, young peoples' unemployment rates in EU-27 increased from 11.9% in 2019 to 13.3%. It takes longer for

[1] As adopted by the 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. 1–22.

[2] Definitions of young people vary but age range 15-29 is often selected for statistical purposes at EU level.

[3] When not specified, the data used in this report is extracted from the Eurostat online database: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database. In this context young people are defined to be between 15 and 29 years old.

[4] 2019 Flash Eurobarometer 478 How do we build a stronger, more united Europe? The views of young people. This question excluded mobility of tourism or living with one's family abroad.

young people to stably integrate into the labour market and vulnerable groups remain disadvantaged in the working environment.

Young people are involved in many forms of civic and political participation. These include civil society organisations and social movements or engagement in non-institutionalised forms of participation such as the youth-led global climate movement "Fridays for Future". They also value voting as an important channel of democratic participation: over two thirds of young people in the EU have voted at least once in local, national or European elections. The increasing trend was confirmed during the 2019 European Parliament elections[5]. Young people also have a fairly or very positive view of the EU and tend to trust the EU more and feel satisfied with how democracy works at national and European level than older adults.

The use of the internet is an essential component in young people's lives in EU-28, 90% used it on a daily basis and 45% were engaged in e-learning activities in 2019. Digitalisation has created many opportunities for interaction, learning and participation but has also come with challenges related to digital skills and the digital divide, as well as potential exposure to harmful content and contact. Young Europeans, especially people in rural and remote regions and with lower levels of formal education, consistently report limited use of the internet to interact with public authorities, engage in e-commerce and the collaborative economy. Challenges include, connectivity, broadband access and availability of digital devices. As digital equipment and an internet connection have become indispensable for learning, the associated costs of education have exacerbated inequality.

The COVID-19 outbreak has led to: the acceleration of digital trends and a strong negative impact on education, employment and mental health

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected and put unprecedented pressure on education and training systems worldwide and across the European Union. Restrictions have caused major changes to teaching and learning and to communication and collaboration within education communities. These restrictions have had an impact on learners, their families, teachers, trainers, researchers and institution leaders, as well as on community professionals who support education and youth.

Learning has often been made more difficult due to the lack of close interaction with educators and fellow learners, less detail and delays, Physical and emotional well-being has been compromised, with schools and universities unable to offer structured activities or access to facilities and support services. The socialising dimension of education have been heavily affected and many youngsters have experienced feelings of isolation, anxiety and depression. Furthermore, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have been more likely exposed to stressful home environments.

The pandemic has highlighted pre-existent socio-economic inequalities in children's learning opportunities at home. Entire groups of learners, including those from remote and rural areas, migrants and refugees, young people with special needs and other disadvantaged backgrounds, have risked being excluded from online teaching and learning. Many families and learners have lacked the necessary competence, resources and equipment to cope with

[5] Of the youngest age category (i.e. the 16/18-24 age group) 42% indicated they voted, compared to only 28% in 2014. The increase was also notable for the 25-39 age group (up from 35% in 2014 to 47% in 2019). Older voters nevertheless continue to turn out more strongly than younger ones. European Parliament, The 2019 post-electoral survey, p. 22

distance learning; this was a major concern for those who would normally receive targeted learning support, subsidised meals, or access to a variety of extra-curricular activities and mentoring.

In short, while closures of educational institutions have affected the learning progress of all learners to some extent, the switch to remote learning has had a disproportionally negative impact on those who were already at a disadvantage, increasing the likelihood of at risk learners dropping out. After a steady decrease of the share of young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs) in previous years, in 2020 these numbers have returned to the 2017 level (13.7%). A first evaluation of available evidence also points to a rise in the level of social exclusion over the past year. Young people and children emerge as those most at risk, especially when already disadvantaged. The medium- and long-term effects of this disruption are not yet clear, but it may affect future rates of early school-leaving and the level of skills acquisition and learning outcomes.

In addition, COVID-19 is having an unprecedented impact on young people's mental and emotional health, which was already a concern prior to the pandemic. It is dramatically transforming their interpersonal relations, and triggering feelings of serious concern and apprehension. Children, adolescents and young adults have been extremely affected by disruptions of family and social ties, and the economic crisis provoked by lockdowns has hit young Europeans in particular[6].

COVID-19 has aggravated pre-existing inequalities between young Europeans in the labour market compared to the rest of the working population. While unemployment rates increased for all age groups in 2020, the increase was more substantial for young people. Comparing youth unemployment rates in 2019 and 2020 shows that the declining trend between 2013-2019 was reversed in 2020 in all youth age groups.

The sectors most affected by the crisis have been those where most young Europeans work (e.g. retail, hospitality, food services). Young women in particular are likely to be affected because they are employed in these sectors at higher levels than young men. Those in stable jobs where telework is possible were less impacted by unemployment than those with precarious employment contracts, especially in sectors where telework is not possible.

As most young people use social media to access information (65%, Eurobarometer, 2019), media literacy was supported by the Commission to help young people tackle disinformation including on COVID-19. When confronted with news regarding the pandemic in 2020, young Europeans responded by trusting scientific sources of information the most, followed by national' governments[7] webpages. Young people have managed to show great resilience and have also been involved in the mitigation of the pandemic's impact. Many have been engaged in volunteering and intergenerational support.

[6] OECD, 2020. Youth and Covid-19. Response, Recovery and resilience. OECD, 2020. ILO, 2020. Covid and Youth. Impacts on Jobs, Education, Rights and mental Well-being. ILO, 2020. Eurostat, 2020. Being young in Europe today – health. Statistics Explained. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Being_young_in_Europe_today_-_health#Life_expectancy_and_mortality_rates. Accessed on 19/03/2021

[7] European Parliament Eurobarometer, "Uncertainty/EU/hope. Public opinion in times of covid-19", conducted in Oct 2020

3. Insights from the youth sector

Youth organisations and organisations active in the youth work area are contributing to a number of European policies such as education, inclusion, health and employment. They are also key partners in the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy. The 2019 'Study on the landscape of youth representation in the EU'[8] reported that the EU youth sector is generally growing, and that traditional youth structures such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and networks continue to play a key role. These structures are increasingly using online methods for outreach, even before COVID-19. NGOs often combine online social media with 'on the ground' physical engagement, such as engagement with schools, youth work, and recruitment at gatherings.

The Commission is closely monitoring the situation of the EU youth work sector via dedicated instruments such as the COVID-19 Knowledge Hub launched in 2020 in partnership with the Council of Europe. Analysis conducted by the Hub highlight that 70% of organisations were unable to maintain more than 20% of their activities, almost 60% of them had to rethink how they operated and how to move to digitalisation and over 85% were forced to cancel one or more events because of the pandemic. The effects on youth representation, including severe limitations on physical engagement, still need to be further assessed.

The 2021 'study on youth work in the EU'[9] focused on the needs of youth workers at grassroot level and existing public policies against the background of the pandemic. It indicates that the current situation has heightened the need for further resources to offset additional costs or to compensate for budget shortfalls, and for greater access to digital infrastructure and material. Stepping up the use of the potential of digital tools for youth work would be instrumental to foster young people's knowledge of digital technologies and awareness of the potential risks associated.

4. Progress towards the overall objectives

The Commission's approach to achieving the objectives of the EU Youth Strategy reflects the growing aspirations of young people to engage and contribute to making our societies more inclusive, resilient, green and digital. Young people strive to connect, exchange and cooperate across Europe and beyond. Ensuring young people and the youth sector has been at the core of the implementation of the Strategy.

The years 2020 and 2021 have been atypical in terms of international youth exchanges and cross-border volunteering activities, with the pandemic severely affecting the implementation of youth-mobility projects. Addressing the impact of the pandemic on children and young people has therefore been high on the Commission's agenda since the outbreak. Over the last year, the Commission adjusted instruments such as Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, to respond to these disruptions by offering alternative solutions, especially digital ones, to their activities.

[8] https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/57e87ca0-900d-11ea-812f-01aa75ed71a1
[9] https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/5a8beedc-f0e1-11eb-a71c-01aa75ed71a1

Similarly, the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy has been strongly impacted by the pandemic in the years 2020-2021. Some actions planned in the EU Work Plan for Youth 2019-2021 had to be modified, rescheduled or even cancelled. Youth mobility projects were severely disrupted by the pandemic.

Increasing equal access to opportunities for young people – education, training, learning, employment prospects

The EU has developed many activities for and with youth in the past three years, through financial programmes in support of policy priorities and with the general objective of increasing equal access to opportunities for young people. **"Creating opportunities for youth"** was also the common theme of the Trio of EU Council Presidencies **Romania-Finland-Croatia** from January 2019 to June 2020.

Erasmus+ and the **European Solidarity Corps** support learning mobility, volunteering and democratic engagement, with invaluable opportunities for young people to broaden their perspectives, develop new skills and strengthen their sense of belonging to the EU. With an increased budget compared to the 2014-2020 period and the inclusion of new dedicated actions, the new programmes for 2021-2027 are powerful tools to tackle many challenges faced by our younger generation. Based on lessons learned from the previous programme, Erasmus+ 2021-2027 has become more inclusive and accessible, while continuing to support lifelong learning and innovative education and training in Europe and beyond.

In light of the pandemic, it is as essential as ever to reduce structural barriers to learning and skills development affecting young people's employment prospects and participation in society. The Commission Communication **on achieving the European Education Area** by 2025[10] seeks to further enrich the quality and inclusiveness of national education and training systems and to remove barriers to cross-border learning. The new **European Research Area Communication[11]** focuses on the upskilling and reskilling of researchers to ensure employability and effectiveness. Synergies are promoted between higher education and research, building on the European Universities initiative supported by Erasmus+, complemented by Horizon 2020/Europe. The Commission is also co-creating together with stakeholders and Member States a **European Strategy for Universities**[12], which will focus, among others, on supporting young talents. The Commission is preparing a **Council Recommendation** on **a European approach on micro-credentials**, to increase the use and recognition of short learning courses by formal and non-formal learning providers.

The adoption of the new **Digital Education Action Plan[13]** supports the deployment of digital technologies needed for education and training, and equipping all citizens with digital competences. The Commission has proposed in August 2021 a **Council Recommendation on blended learning** to provide better support to schools and learners affected by the digital shift

[10] https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area_en

[11] https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/strategy/strategy-2020-2024/our-digital-future/era_en

[12] Provisional name

[13] https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/digital-education-action-plan_en

of the pandemic among others through additional learning opportunities and targeted support to learners facing learning difficulties.[14]

Visual: Achieving the European Education Area

Contributing to improving the employability of young people and supporting the youth goal **Quality Employment for All** has been a strong priority. The Council **conclusions on young people and the future of work**[15] identified remedy measures to the precarious working conditions faced by young people such as responsive social security, education and training systems, promoting lifelong learning, ensuring smooth school-to-work and work-to-work transition, as well as equal access to quality jobs for all youth.

The **European Skills Agenda**[16] is boosting upskilling and reskilling, in line with the needs of the recovery. To build back better from the new economic downturn triggered by the pandemic, with a heavy impact on young people, the Commission adopted the **Youth Employment Support**[17] package in 2020. The Youth Employment Support – A Bridge to Jobs for the Next Generation is built around four strands: a reinforced Youth Guarantee[18], a future-proof approach for vocational education and training, a renewed European Alliance for Apprenticeships and additional elements supporting youth employment. The reinforced Youth Guarantee strives to ensure that all young people under the age of 30 will receive a good quality offer of either employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving education.

The new **European Social Fund Plus** will also remain important for investing in people, including investments in support of youth employment. In addition, the fund will support

[14] Proposal for a Council Recommendation on blended learning for high quality and inclusive primary and secondary education, COM/2021/455 final
[15] OJ 2019/C 189/05
[16] https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223&langId=en
[17] https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=22829&langId=en
[18] https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1079&langId=en

education and social inclusion measures for young people with a focus on those in a vulnerable or disadvantaged situation.

By the end 2021 the Commission will launch an evaluation of the 2014 **Council Recommendation on the Quality Framework for Traineeships** which urges EU countries to improve the quality of traineeships, in particular the learning content and working conditions, in order to ease the transition to work.

An overview of the main EU actions during the first phase of the EU Youth Strategy, structured according to the three pillars, follows below.

Engage

Strengthening young people's democratic participation

Strengthening young people's democratic participation and providing dedicated youth spaces in all areas of society is also key to maintaining a vibrant civil society in Europe. The Trio of EU Council Presidencies Germany - Portugal – Slovenia (July 2020 - December 2021) have chosen **"Europe for YOUth - YOUth for Europe: Space and Participation for All"** as a common theme in connection with the European Youth Goal 9 "Space and Participation for All". This is also the topic of the eight Cycle of the EU Youth Dialogue.

The Council **conclusions on fostering democratic awareness and democratic engagement among young people in Europe**[19] reflect the ideas and opinions gathered at the EU Youth Conference in October 2020. At the event young people from all over Europe discussed topics with political leaders and developed concrete demands on how the European Youth Goal #9 "Space and Participation for All" could be implemented.

The **Council conclusions on strengthening the multi-level governance** promotes the participation of young people in political and other decision-making processes at local, regional, national and European levels[20]. The Council conclusions invite Member States to empower young people through education and training, youth-oriented information, feedback, non-formal and informal learning and youth work. The conclusions also invite the Commission to organise peer learning activities (an activity on a rights based approach to youth policies took place in June 2021) and to build knowledge and capacity on youth participation in decision-making processes at multiple levels.

At the initiative of the Romanian Council Presidency, the 2019 Council Resolution established new guidelines on the governance of the **EU Youth Dialogue**[21]. A methodology was developed for working groups to design their local, national and European dialogues. The involvement of researchers in the cycle (supporting the preparation of consultation toolkits or analysing youth contributions) has been a great asset for improving the quality of these processes, and could prove key to improving the outreach in the post-COVID-19 context.

Over 56,000 young people from all over Europe took part in the seventh Cycle of the Youth Dialogue focusing on the topic 'Creating Opportunities for Youth' which was built on the achievements of the previous dialogue, notably the adoption of the EU Youth Strategy and the

[19] OJ 2020/C 415/09
[20] OJ 2020/C, https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8766-2021-INIT/en/pdf
[21] OJ C 189

European Youth Goals. The Council **Resolution on the outcomes of the 7th Cycle of the EU Youth Dialogue**[22] adopted in May 2020 presents the main recommendations of this cycle.

The **revamped version of the Commission's European Youth Portal** launched in 2020 includes a dedicated section on the EU Youth dialogue process. The Portal is used for the publication of online consultations, such as the **survey of the eight cycle of the EU Youth Dialogue.** This survey launched in Spring 2021 aims to understand young people's views on the topic of "Space and participation for all"[23]. Over two thirds of the 8 500 respondents felt they have no or little influence on public policy and political decision making, and expressed the need for more spaces for participation and for citizenship education. A **Flash Eurobarometer** will also be launched in the last quarter of 2021 to survey young people's participation in social and civic life and collect their ideas about the future of Europe.

The EU actively promotes **youth participation in policy-making globally,** building on the experience of the EU Youth Dialogue. The Regional Youth Cooperation Office for example, is a joint inter-governmental initiative of the six Western Balkan candidate and potential candidate countries aiming to promote the spirit of reconciliation and understanding between the youth in the region through intra-regional youth exchanges and cooperation. In 2021, the Commission also launched a call to establish a **Youth Sounding Board** for International partnerships to create a space for the meaningful involvement of young people in the EU's international cooperation policy. The selected 25 board members will contribute to making EU action more participatory, relevant and effective for young people in EU partner countries.

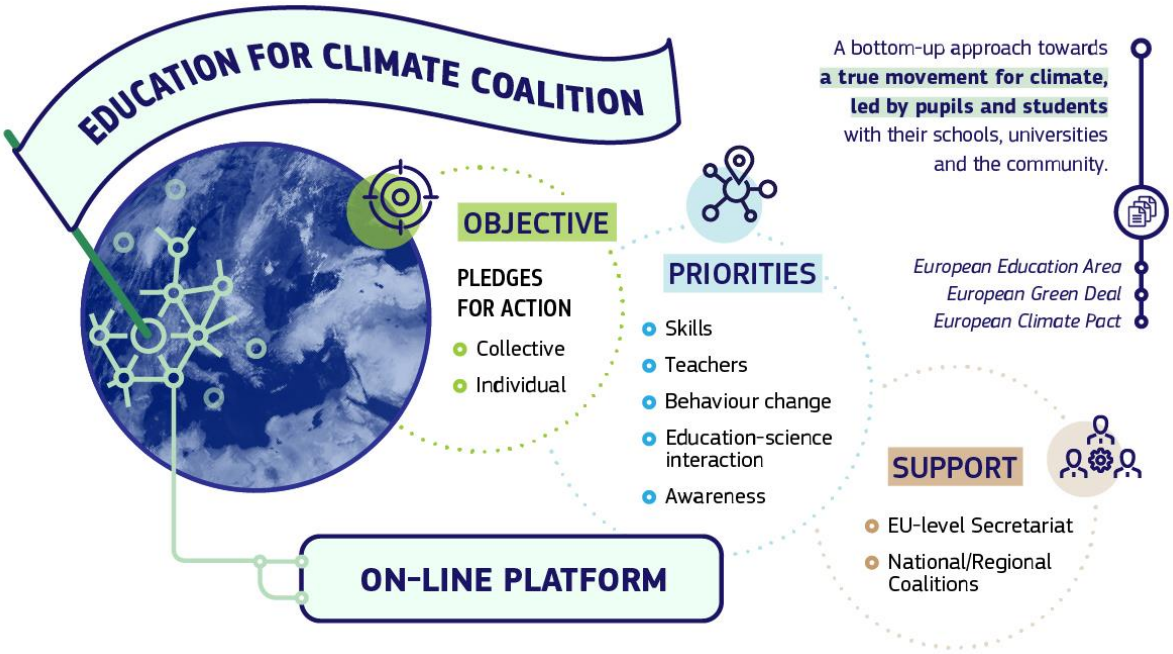
Supporting the fair green transition

The EU Youth Strategy contributes to achieving the objectives of the **European Green Deal** by supporting its call for an inclusive and just transition, including areas identified by young Europeans as ones that matter most to them: protecting the environment and fighting climate change. Since 2019, civic participation and engagement by young people, in particular through the global climate movement, shows the importance young people assign to tackling climate change and achieving climate justice.

The **green dimension has also been integrated as an overarching priority in the new Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps programmes**. In line with the European Green Deal and in response to young citizens' growing concerns on the deteriorating state of the climate and environment, the Commission is implementing and preparing a number of initiatives. The **European Climate Pact** was launched in 2020 to connect people from all walks of life, including youth, to improve their understanding of the challenges of the green transition, to invite all Europeans to participate and benefit, to develop solutions big and small and to trigger and scale up positive change.[24] Following the adoption of the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, the Commission is preparing a **Council Recommendation on encouraging cooperation in education for environmental sustainability,** first step in helping EU countries to cooperate on this topic. A dedicated youth engagement campaign on nature and biodiversity will be implemented in the run-up to the UN Biodiversity Conference. The **Education for Climate Coalition**, a bottom-up initiative for a climate-neutral society led

[22] OEUJ 2020/C 212I,
[23] https://ec.europa.eu/eusurvey/runner/EU-YOUTH-DIALOGUE-8TH-CYCLE
[24] COM(2020) 788 final

by pupils and students with their schools, universities and community includes pledges for concrete action.



Connect

Mobility activities heavily impacted by the pandemic

The COVID-19 outbreak had a strong impact on many Erasmus+ learning mobility experiences. One quarter of the students on mobility at the time had to cancel their experience abroad and return home[25]. The number of learners who started a mobility abroad[26] in 2020 was half the number of learners who started one in 2019.

Over the last year, **the Commission has supported organisations and individuals participating in the Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps programmes**, addressing adverse effects of the pandemic such as serious restrictions to physical mobility. The Commission has set up mitigating measures, such as the possibility to replace planned physical activities by virtual ones, enabling blended activities or the possibility to postpone projects, with the safety and protection of participants as key objectives.

The Commission has also taken targeted actions to assist Member States in their efforts to mobilise support for distance learning, in particular digital solutions. **Two extraordinary Erasmus+ calls were launched in August 2020 to support "digital education readiness" and "creativity"**, including for the youth sector, each providing €100 million to respond to educational COVID-19 challenges through collaborative projects.

Mobility opportunities in the 2021-2027 programmes

[25] Survey conducted by the Erasmus Student Network, March 2020

[26] Erasmus+ data, concerning mobility experiences abroad in higher education or vocational education and training for at least one month

The 2021-2027 Erasmus+, European Solidarity Corps and Horizon Europe programmes offer plenty of opportunities for young people and young researchers to connect and experience exchanges, cooperation, cultural and civic action in a European context.

With an almost doubled budget, the new **Erasmus+ programme** offers reinforced and new opportunities for transnational learning mobility and cooperation for all sectors of education and training, introducing mobility opportunities also for school pupils. **DiscoverEU**, a recent successful pilot initiative that gives 18-year-olds the opportunity to discover Europe through learning experience abroad, has been integrated into the Erasmus+ programme. The action does not only offer 18-year-olds a travel pass but also encourages connection and cultural dialogue among young people across Europe. Erasmus+ now includes youth participation activities that provide more possibilities for young people outside formal education and training to take an active role in civic and democratic processes at local, regional, national and European level.

The new **European Solidarity Corps** will allow young people to help address societal challenges through volunteering or by setting up their own solidarity projects, including volunteering in the humanitarian aid field across the world as of 2022.

The Commission is preparing **a review of the 2008 Council recommendation on the mobility of young volunteers across the EU** to further support opportunities for mobility and volunteering. This review is relevant and timely in the context of the pandemic and its emerging priorities (health and safety of volunteers, inter-generational solidarity), and explores new forms of volunteering including digital or blended volunteering. Removing obstacles to cross-border mobility, including those of legal or administrative nature, has been identified as a key area of cooperation for Member States under "Connect". The revision of the Council Recommendation has been based on the outcomes of an expert group, a dedicated study, an evaluation and a public consultation organised throughout the years 2019-2021.

Empower

Promoting social inclusion and recovery

Several EU actions focus on the development of an **inclusive approach** with specific measures for disadvantaged children and youth such as the **EU strategy on the rights of the child**, the **Child Guarantee** initiative, **Erasmus+,** the **European Solidarity Corps** and the **European Social Fund Plus**, or with measures related to the **inclusion of young migrants and refugees**. The Commission is preparing a **Council Recommendation on Pathways to school success**, targeting disadvantaged learners.

The **EU strategy on the rights of the child**[27], adopted in March 2021, recognises the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has on children and includes targeted actions to foster the promotion and protection of children's rights. The participation of children and young people

[27] COM(2021) 142 final

to EU political and democratic life is also one of the six thematic priorities of this strategy, resulting from the views of more than 10 000 children aged 11-18[28].

Supporting the Youth Goal Opportunities for Rural Youth, the Council **conclusions on raising opportunities for young people in rural and remote areas[29],** adopted during the Croatian Council Presidency, encourage the exchange of best practices in using the opportunities provided by youth-related programmes and policies to improve the employability, mobility and participation of young people. They promote approaches aimed at reducing inequalities between urban and remote/rural areas.

The two **Coronavirus Response Investment Initiatives** (CRII and CRII+) allowed Member States to mobilise and redirect the available resources under the EU cohesion policy funds to address the COVID-19 pandemic including its impact on young people. This EU support was supplemented by the **REACT-EU** (Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe) package of EUR 50.6 billion, which continues and extends the crisis response and repair measures and provides a bridge to the long-term green, digital and resilient recovery of the economy. Member States will use these additional resources to help young people in terms of access to employment, quality education and training and social services.

Quality youth work for all

The European Youth Strategy gave a clear signal on the need to invest, recognise and frame youth work. The Finnish Council Presidency focused on supporting and developing youth work with two sets of Council conclusions. The **conclusions on digital youth work**[30] invite Member States and the Commission to encourage the exchange of best practices, to promote and make use of EU funding instruments, peer-learning activities and research, and to improve digital competences through non-formal learning and training. In the Council **conclusions on education and training of youth workers**[31], Member States and the Commission are invited to carry out further research, to foster the recognition of non-formal learning in youth work and to explore options to further develop the education and training of youth workers.

The **European Youth Work Agenda** was a top priority for the German Council Presidency, which led to the adoption of a Council Resolution followed by the third Youth Work Convention in Bonn. The **Council Resolution**[32] asks the Member States and the Commission to take measures to integrate youth work into existing and future youth policies, recognise the role and the needs of the youth work community and create training, tools, applications and mechanisms with the support of Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps. To strengthen and further develop youth work throughout Europe, the **Bonn Process** aims to align the commitment of different stakeholders in the youth work community of practice.

Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps programmes will further support youth work in particular through **Transnational Cooperation Activities and Networking Activities**

[28] The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee | European Commission (europa.eu)
[29] OJ 2020/C 193/03
[30] OJ 2029/C 414/02
[31] OJ 2019/C 412/12
[32] OJ 2020/C 415/01

among National Agencies, contributing to the strategic impact of the programme and supporting youth work quality development at national and European level.

Promoting a healthy and active lifestyle

The Commission has supported Member States and stakeholders in the improvement of health literacy and the promotion of a healthy and active lifestyle, at a young age, to help reduce non-communicable diseases (such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes and obesity) at a later stage in life. Among EU actions specifically dedicated to the health of young people and children, are Europe's Beating Cancer Plan and the **Joint Action on Health Equity Europe** that joins Member States efforts addressing health inequalities and social determinants. The '**HealthyLifestyle4All initiative campaign** launched in 2021 links sport and active lifestyles with health, food and other policies. Central to the initiative is a dedicated platform to showcase the commitments (pledges) by different stakeholders.

The Joint Action on Mental Health (ImpleMENTAL) will implement a multi-level national suicide prevention programme and a system reform to strengthen community-based services with a specific focus on services for children and young people. To support stakeholders' efforts, the Commission set up a group on 'COVID19 mental health support' within its EU Health Policy Platform[33], and hosted a high-level conference[34] on the mental health impact of the pandemic in May 2021.

5. Main instruments to support cooperation and mutual learning

The EU Youth Strategy has enabled the development of relevant tools allowing strengthened cooperation and exchange of views between the Member States.

Support to evidence-based policy-making

The European tools for better knowledge have become key to supporting youth policy development. The **Youth Partnership between the European Union and the Council of Europe,** besides research on participation, inclusion and youth work, also developed work on the impact of COVID-19 on young people and the youth sector by setting up the Knowledge Hub.

The **Youth Wiki** online platform provides a comprehensive overview of national youth policies in 32 European countries, and includes a chapter on youth work as well as comparative maps.

The **dashboard of youth situation indicators** has been reviewed for the 2019-2021 period by a dedicated expert group[35] which also provided proposals for new quantitative and qualitative policy indicators. The dashboard should now be made operational, notably with a view to better monitor EU spending on youth.

Mutual learning activities

[33] EU Health Policy Platform (europa.eu)
[34] Mental health and the pandemic: living, caring, acting! | Public Health (europa.eu)
[35] Proposal for an updated dashboard of EU youth indicators - Publications Office of the EU (europa.eu)

The Member States expressed strong interest for **mutual learning activities**, as shown by the high number of participants during the reporting period. This increased interest highlighted the advantages in exchanging good practices and reaching common understanding. Expert groups and peer learning activities allowed consensus on solutions and their practical implementation. They have strengthened cooperation between Member States and tackled topics of common interest.

Exchanges at the **expert group on the mobility of youth volunteers** prepared the proposal for a revision of the Recommendation on mobility of volunteers. The **expert group on indicators** came up with proposals to revise the dashboard in order to better grasp the situation of young people. An **expert group on youth work** will kick-off in the last quarter of 2021 as part of the implementation of the Youth Work Agenda.

Mid 2021, for the first time, peer learning activities in the field of youth policies were organised. A **peer learning activity on non-vocational qualifications for youth work** at the initiative of France in June 2021 focused on the recognition of competences and qualifications of youth workers in view of facilitating cross border exchanges and mobility. Member States agreed on the need to further support youth work exchanges as well as the formal and non-formal education approaches to provision and recognition of non-vocational qualifications to youth workers.

There was also a **peer learning activity on the rights based approach in youth policy** at the initiative of the Portuguese presidency in June 2021. Discussions highlighted the need to mainstream the youth dimension across different policies, to step up the use of digital technologies, to promote the right-based approach and to engage young people and other stakeholders. A **peer learning activity on volunteering mobility** is foreseen to happen by the end of 2021 at the initiative of Estonia, to discuss the work on the review of the Council Recommendations on volunteer mobility and the establishment of national civic schemes.

Future National Activity Planners (FNAPs)

The **Future National Activity Planners (FNAPS)** introduced in 2019, allow Member States to share their priorities in line with the EU Youth Strategy on a voluntary basis. As part of the FNAPs, the Commission surveyed Member States in 2019 and in 2021 to gather information on their youth policy priorities regarding the implementation of the European Youth Goals and cooperation needs in line with the EU Youth Strategy. **21 Member States shared their plans in 2019[36] and 18 Member States offered FNAPs updates in 2021[37].**

This contributed to an increased transparency on national youth priorities and identification of common needs. It is recommended that these surveys should be conducted at least once in every Cycle of the trio Presidencies with options for countries to update their FNAPs when the need arises.

In 2019, the three main common challenges for youth policy listed by the responding countries in the FNAPS were 1) the need to increase youth participation, 2) access to quality

[36] https://ec.europa.eu/eusurvey/runner/FNAP

[37] https://ec.europa.eu/eusurvey/runner/FNAPSurvey2021

education and professional development, and 3) the development of digital skills and media literacy.

In 2021, the responses strongly focus on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people. Two thirds identify youth **mental health** as the major challenge. Obstacles regarding **professional growth and young people's unemployment** remain highly ranked. Member States also express the need to focus more on **employability and acquiring skills**, especially for those with fewer opportunities or living in socially excluded areas.

- **Engage**

Supporting the **EU Youth Dialogue** to include diverse voices of young people in decision-making processes, followed by the need to encourage **inclusive democratic participation** in society and democratic processes, and the development of **opportunities for 'learning to participate'** are priorities for European cooperation in the FNAPS 2021 (as in 2019).

Transnational cooperation activities[38] under the Erasmus+ programme have been identified by Member States as their preferred cooperation tool for this area, followed by **expert groups** and **peer learning.** Collaboration between the trio of EU Council Presidencies, the Commission and the European Youth Forum on the 8th cycle of EU Youth Dialogue is showcased in the FNAPs as an example of good practice.

- **Connect**

Under this area, two main cooperation topics for the future are identified by Member States in their FNAPs: 1) enabling access for all young people and youth workers to **cross-border mobility and volunteering opportunities** with special attention to youth with fewer opportunities and 2) sharing best practices and further work on effective systems for **validation and recognition of competences** gained through non-formal and informal learning.

In 2021 the transnational cooperation activities under the Erasmus+ programme were mentioned as the most preferable tool for cooperation by 60% of the responding Member States.

- **Empower**

Two thirds of the replies from the 2021 FNAPs exercise confirmed **quality youth work** as the most relevant topic for cooperation, followed by the need to implement the **European Youth Work Agenda**. In this core area, priority is given to the use of **peer learning focused on policy development**, chosen by more than half of the respondents.

Dialogue with stakeholders

The **EU Youth Strategy Platform** was launched in 2019 to facilitate participatory governance and the coordination of the strategy's implementation, in both real and virtual settings. It brings together representatives of the EU institutions, Member States, National Agencies of Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, youth organisations, local and regional authorities as well as other stakeholders. The Platform builds the basis for a regular

[38] Transnational Cooperation Activities (TCA) encompasses a range of events which enable Erasmus+ National Agencies to collaborate and share best practice across Europe, and aim to improve the quality and impact of the programme at a systemic level.

civic dialogue, gives stakeholders a greater role in coordinating the implementation of the strategy and offers opportunities to exchange information on activities and results. The Commission has mobilised this platform during the pandemic to allow exchange between stakeholders on information and evidence on the pandemic impact on the youth sector.

The first **EU Youth Coordinator** was nominated in June 2021. The role is to reach out to young people and youth organisations and listen to their concerns. The aim is also to help increase the internal cooperation between different EU policy areas having an impact on youth, and to strive for the youth perspective to be taken into account in relevant EU policies.

Monitoring of funding on youth: EU programmes and funds

Monitoring of EU spending on youth is part of the transparency on EU action approach supported by the Strategy. The accompanying Staff Working Document on the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy reports on the past multiannual financial framework activities in 2019-2020, but also presents the opportunities for funding on youth under the new 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework combined with the temporary recovery instrument, NextGenerationEU. The opportunities for funding under this framework include the new **Erasmus+** programme with a double budget to offer even more funding opportunities in the field of youth, the **European Solidarity Corps,** the **Youth Employment Initiativ**e, the **European Social Fund Plus** and **Horizon Europe.**

Communicating the EU Youth Strategy

In 2019, communication material was developed in several languages in order to communicate on the Strategy, particularly on the internet and through social media.

The **European Youth Portal**[39], which is the one-stop-shop reference multilingual portal for young people in Europe, now offers a broad range of information on the EU Youth Strategy. With the help of the network of **Eurodesk** and **Eurodesk Brussels Link**, the Portal provides inter alia youth information on opportunities for mobility and exchange projects and on democratic participation activities in policy areas such as employment, human rights or peacebuilding.

6. Conclusions and future outlook for EU cooperation on youth

Looking back at the first three years of implementation and despite the disruptive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021-2027 EU Youth Strategy has shown that it provides a **strong and impactful roadmap** to foster cooperation between EU Member States and support youth policies both at EU and national level. The youth sector could rely on the instruments developed over the last years, as well as on key European youth programmes, to implement the strategy.

The **EU Youth Dialogue has succeeded in bringing together young people and policy-makers** to discuss ideas and feed into youth policy and to boost young people's involvement

[39] https://europa.eu/youth/home_en

in the democratic process by ensuring that their voices count. There were efforts to reach out to more young people, particularly from various backgrounds and profiles. However, the **outreach to young people from different backgrounds, beyond the traditional representation, can be further improved**. The inclusion and diversity strategy of the new Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes will provide a solid framework to step up actions towards this objective and encourage new forms of participation, designed to boost the involvement of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The European Social Fund Plus places a special focus on supporting youth NEET and other disadvantaged or vulnerable young people.

The EU also appears to be a **source of inspiration for other regions in the world** when it comes to developing policies, programmes and initiatives for young people. Processes inspired by the EU Youth dialogue were set up outside the European Union, to engage with young people, such as within the Eastern partnership countries.

The opportunities for young people and the youth sector offered by the EU youth programmes remained popular and attractive, even during the pandemic. The **co-creation[40] approach** implemented by the Commission to build the new programmes in the field of youth allowed the introduction of flexibility measures during the pandemic to fit the needs of the youth sector. The Commission could therefore take rapid action to support the sector in adapting to new challenges such as reduced physical mobility, and digital and hybrid formats.

Yet, the pandemic has also underlined the importance of reflecting on the role of democracy in society and has highlighted **the key role of civic education, media literacy, awareness of disinformation and youth work** to promote the active participation and engagement of young people. The massive shift towards online education and digital youth work has emphasised the need for **quicker reforms, capacity-building, teacher and youth worker training, skills development, new pedagogies, and increased digital readiness**, but also the fundamental importance of in-person activities for some categories of young people.

The 2021-2027 Erasmus+, European Solidarity Corps programmes and the European Social Fund Plus are apt to respond to the necessary digital and green transformations of the economy and society. The programmes will be more inclusive and encourage positive changes to make the education and training, youth and sport more resilient to changes, in close alignment with the priorities to achieve the **European Education Area** and those of the **Digital Education Action Plan**.

With regards to the future, the Commission is committed to further mainstream youth related issues, as demonstrated by the recent nomination of the **EU Youth Coordinator**. The Coordinator will strive for the concerns of young people to be better heard in EU policy-making and for better synergies and knowledge-sharing between the different policy areas at European level affecting youth.

The Commission is also increasing its efforts in involving youth in key European initiatives. Young people have an active role to play in the **Conference on the Future of Europe**, which addresses relevant issues such as climate change, a stronger economy including the future of work and jobs, education, training and youth policies and the growing importance of digital

[40] The co-creation involved youth stakeholders in the design of the programmes.

technologies. Young people are invited to play an active role in the **new European Bauhaus** initiative, a movement to co-design and co-develop new ways of living and in harmony with the planet.

Despite the diversity of national situations, the Youth Strategy has allowed Member States to identify common challenges and priorities, mainly through the mutual learning activities and particularly in the context of the pandemic.

For the next period, the Strategy's tools could be used towards better engaging, connecting and empowering young people, including **further strengthening youth participatory processes and reaching out to more young people beyond the usual representation**, as well as rolling out the **implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda and the future Council recommendation on the mobility of young volunteers**. The Strategy's tools and instruments could also be used to address specific future challenges including **the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth education, employment and mental health**, particularly for disadvantaged youth, and the increased need for digital youth work.

These current priorities will feed into the new **Work Plan for the triennial 2022-2024** period, which will primarily focus on the **resilience and recovery of youth and the youth sector** in the post COVID-times. EU programmes and funds such as **the Erasmus+, the European Solidarity Corps, Horizon Europe and the European Social Fund Plus can strongly contribute,** as they have been reinforced and adapted in line with recent developments. Furthermore additional funding from **NextGenerationEU** with strong support to many policy fields affecting young people (education, skills, employment, climate, etc.) can have a big impact.

Ensuring that all young Europeans have equal access to opportunities and giving them the necessary support to live, work, learn and thrive remains at the heart of EU youth cooperation and policies. The 2021-2027 EU Youth Strategy is vital to achieve these goals. Setting up this strong policy framework, enabling exchange of knowledge and mutual learning between Member States as well as channelling funding from Erasmus+ and other EU programmes towards the three strategic pillars 'Engage. Connect. Empower' will enable many young people in Europe to reach their full potential, be prepared for the green and digital transitions and shape a brighter and fair future for them.

On 15 September 2021, President von der Leyen announced in her State of the Union Address[41] that the European Commission will propose to make 2022 the European Year of Youth "a year dedicated to empowering those who have dedicated so much to others". The Year will aim to boost the efforts of the Union, the Member States, regional and local authorities to honour, support and engage with youth in a post-pandemic perspective as "Europe needs all of its youth".

[41] https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_21_4701