

**Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions on the Future of Youth Policy in the EU.
Reflection on youth policy and youth mainstreaming in the context of the European Year of Youth
2022**

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS (CoR),

Introductory remarks

1. aims with this paper to offer a new and comprehensive reflection on youth policy, mainstreaming of youth issues across policy fields and the active participation of youth in building the future of Europe, in the context of the 2022 European Year of Youth, as triggered by Decision (EU) 2021/2316 of the European Parliament and of the Council ⁽¹⁾, and as recommended by the Conference on the Future of Europe. Furthermore, the CoR proposes a strong recommendation on youth mainstreaming, which is one of the targets of the 2022 European Year of Youth;
2. highlights that the COVID-19 pandemic caused many young people to lose nearly two years of educational opportunities, work, mental health and social life. Therefore, the European Year of Youth should not only recognise the sacrifices the younger generations had to make during the pandemic, but should trigger lasting change that goes beyond the European Year of Youth. As society recovers from the effects of the pandemic, engaging young people and understanding their concerns is crucial to move on from the crisis;
3. points out that youth policy and youth mainstreaming are particularly sensitive to territorial and social dimensions, as there are significant inequalities in access to basic services, education, jobs, housing, and in social mobility across regions in the EU, which affect youth in differing ways. Local and regional authorities have important competences in many fields that are relevant for youth policy, such as housing, education, employment, the fight against poverty, discrimination, support for students, youth associations, youth work, cultural and leisure activities, which is why local and regional levels must be better taken into account at all stages of the coordination and implementation of the EU Youth Strategy;

On youth mainstreaming

4. calls for youth mainstreaming and mainstreaming a youth rights-based perspective in policy-making at local, regional, national and European levels, systematically ensuring perspectives of and for youth are taken into account across policy fields. Moreover, youth and youth organisations should be consulted across all policy discussions to consistently apply a youth mainstreaming approach, including in the delivery of national plans for the deployment of Next Generation EU Funding and Recovery Packages;
5. calls on the European Commission to implement an EU Youth Test that would enable the assessment of the impacts that policies have on young people. Before the adoption of all new policies, at least the following three steps should be taken: meaningful engagement with relevant youth stakeholders including experts working on youth and representative youth organisations working on relevant topics, impact assessment of what effect the policies will have on young people and proposed measures that would mitigate the possible negative effects;

⁽¹⁾ Decision (EU) 2021/2316 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 December 2021 on a European Year of Youth (2022) (OJ L 462, 28.12.2021, p. 1).

6. calls on the European institutions, national and local governments to collect youth-relevant data in all policy fields, coherently disaggregated by age. The collection should be conducted in collaboration with youth organisations and policies should be deployed to enhance their data literacy skills, enabling them to access, analyse, and interpret information to design evidence-based advocacy actions and projects to promote change;
7. emphasises the need for youth policy to be built into all EU policies by means of a horizontal approach, fostering cross-sectoral, interregional and cross-border cooperation;
8. calls for measures that will strengthen and empower youth organisations, as strong European youth organisations contribute to civic education, increased knowledge on democracy and more active citizens;
9. regrets that the civil space for youth organisations has been shrinking in recent years and calls for more sufficient and sustainable resources as well as operating funding that fits the structural needs of youth organisations. These must be distributed transparently, which will support a strong youth sector that ensures that young people from all backgrounds can have access to a safe space to participate, engage and grow as active citizens;
10. highlights the importance of European regions and municipalities for the success of the EU Youth Strategy and the contribution they can bring through education and culture to foster an inclusive society for young people and encourages the strengthening of the regional and local dimension of the EU Youth Dialogue;
11. calls upon local and regional authorities to treat youth issues as a constant priority in policy-making and proposes the adoption of a local youth strategy in all local and regional authorities;
12. calls on the European Commission to strengthen the youth dimension in the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes and take further measures to ensure that participation in the programmes is accessible to all groups of young people and that young people are empowered by and suitably supported including in the participation in the programmes; calls on the Member States and on local and regional authorities to promote information campaigns that show young people the personal and professional benefits and the enrichment brought by these programmes, and to promote youth participation in both of them at schools and universities;

On employment and social protection

13. calls for appropriate measures to be taken to ensure young people's rights to stable and meaningful employment with decent working conditions everywhere in Europe;
14. underlines the positive role of entrepreneurial education, social entrepreneurship, and of the social economy in reducing youth unemployment, and calls on the decision-makers on European and national levels to work towards removing barriers for young entrepreneurs, including barriers to become an entrepreneur alongside studies;
15. calls on Member States and on local and regional authorities to promote youth outreach from within the European institutions, and to boost youth mobility between Member States at schools and universities, highlighting personal and professional development opportunities that this mobility generates, as well as the positive experiences that it could have for youth development in Europe;
16. proposes that the European Commission sets supporting, supplementing and coordinating measures aimed at decreasing the level of job insecurity among young people, to facilitate better access to social protection that removes any form of age-based discrimination criteria, on par with older age groups, and end youth minimum wages;
17. recommends strengthening coordination on youth employment policy, especially regarding the implementation of the Reinforced Youth Guarantee by local and regional public employment services;

18. calls for effective banning of unpaid internships in all Member States as part of the European Commission's review of the Quality Framework on Traineeships, and for measures, including the introduction of an EU directive, to ensure that internships, traineeships and apprenticeships are providing a minimum standard of rights concerning the working conditions, notably, access to statutory minimum wages and access to social protection;

19. underlines the importance of decent and affordable childcare to enable parents, including young parents, to (re-) enter the labour market;

20. calls on the Commission and Member States to propose concrete measures to improve the inclusion of young people from all backgrounds in the job market, to fight discrimination and ensure equal opportunities. In this respect, further coordination is needed to improve the outreach to young vulnerable people facing multiple barriers due in particular to poverty, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity, disability, low educational attainment or ethnic minority/migrant background;

21. reiterates the need to 'acknowledge that LGBTI+ youth in Europe is particularly vulnerable, as they are exposed to discrimination, victimisation, stigmatisation and abuse from a young age as they experience difficulties coming out to family and their communities, limited understanding by professional service providers and broader society of LGBTI+ issues, as well as mental, physical and sexual health challenges' ⁽²⁾; calls to this effect for effective measures at European level to fully empower young LGBTI+ people;

22. stresses that the difficult access and high cost of housing plays a significant role in impeding the autonomy of young people, thus rendering education and job mobility difficult as well as reducing the purchasing power of younger generations. Therefore, calls for considering it a priority to take supportive measures, including through the mobilisation of EU funds, aimed at ensuring suitable and affordable housing conditions for all young people in Europe;

23. stresses that many young Europeans have faced a greater risk of poverty and social exclusion due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and calls for EU supporting measures aimed at ensuring that young people are always sufficiently supported in times of crisis;

24. suggests that further coordination is needed to exchange good practices, objectives and indicators relating to fighting poverty, the risk of social exclusion and the social precariousness of young people;

25. points out the critical situation that young refugees face, especially unaccompanied minors, and calls for the adoption of supporting measures aimed at enabling all young refugees, and their families, to have access to basic services, such as education, housing, health, as well as the preservation of their human rights;

On the physical and mental health and wellbeing of young people

26. highlights the importance of access to universal, affordable and high-quality health services, both preventive and curative; insists to this effect on the need to address barriers facing young people with no access to social security;

27. stresses that there is a great need to break the stigma and to recognise the mental health challenges and barriers young people are facing as a result of the pandemic and that immediate action should be taken to address the mental health needs of young people;

28. suggests implementing a holistic approach to mental health by promoting social rights and economic protection packages to address socioeconomic determinants of mental health, with targeted support and provision of basic services and rights for young people experiencing exclusion, discrimination and marginalisation;

29. calls for measures to make mental health support affordable and accessible to all young people, including the most vulnerable. Furthermore, calls for increasing the accessibility and the funding of mental healthcare, making sure that everyone can get the help they need;

⁽²⁾ Union of Equality: LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025 COR-2020-05861.

30. calls for more investment in already existing, bottom-up community building initiatives i.e. youth centres, free and accessible culture and sport activities and support for civil society organisations that work on mental health;

31. calls for an EU Mental Health Strategy that includes measures to ensure the prevention of mental health problems, meaningful empowerment and active engagement of European youth in the decisions taken regarding their mental health, and targeted mental health support at every stage of life;

32. insists on the need to ensure that young people's sexual and reproductive health rights are fully protected, including access to affordable contraceptive and menstrual products;

33. welcomes that the European Commission has established a Steering Group on Health Promotion, Disease Prevention, and Management of Non-Communicable Diseases; calls however to put further emphasis on the situation of young people within the Steering Group;

On meaningful participation

34. reiterates its support to 'promoting the personal development of persons with disabilities, especially children and young people, as with everyone else, through access to art, culture, recreational activities, leisure activities, sport and tourism' ⁽³⁾, as a key element of the wellbeing of persons with disabilities. The Committee stresses to this effect the role of sport in the inclusion of people with disabilities, and 'urges the Member States to promote programmes enabling children, young people and people with disabilities with greater limitations on their participation' ⁽⁴⁾;

35. emphasises that the European Year of Youth 2022 is a great opportunity to encourage meaningful youth participation in democratic life and its legacy should aim to be the structural strengthening of democracy for young people, with an emphasis on the role of representative youth organisations;

36. recommends involving youth in the design, leadership, implementation and assessment of policies at EU, national, regional and local levels that have an impact on young people and in the related formal consultation mechanisms. Further to this, the success and implementation of these initiatives should be monitored to ensure that young people's participation brings tangible results or that there is a clear explanation as to why ideas or initiatives could not be implemented;

37. calls on all competent authorities at local, regional, national and European level to set up youth councils in order to enhance their trust in the functioning of the institutions, and to support reflection, freedom of expression, decision-making and knowledge of democratic principles and individual and collective freedoms;

38. calls for building on the outcomes of already existing participatory mechanisms, such as the EU Youth Dialogue, which provides space for all young people from the EU to voice their opinion on relevant topics and influence legislative procedures working directly together with decision-makers. This process should be further developed and include other EU institutions;

39. calls for measures to support and empower young people to address sustainable development and fight against climate change, and to use their potential for meaningful change in societies;

40. invites Member States to seriously consider lowering the voting age to 16 for all local and regional elections in Europe and calls for producing data and knowledge exchange on the impact of institutional arrangements on youth political participation, for instance on the minimum age to vote and to stand for an election, or on the limitations to the number of political mandates;

⁽³⁾ Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (COR-2021-01679).

⁽⁴⁾ Ibidem.

41. calls for supporting and coordinating measures aimed at developing youth knowledge regarding civic education, to ensure that young people understand decision making in their local communities and are aware of democratic processes and their human and citizen's rights;

42. emphasises the need to ensure that all young people have access to quality information on participation opportunities and promote informed participation, especially when it comes to democratic processes;

On inclusive society

43. supports coordination and exchanges of good practices on the role of gender in educational and employment paths, to identify barriers and to improve the access of women and girls to all educational and professional opportunities;

44. supports gender mainstreaming in public policy at all levels; reiterates also its request that 'local and regional authorities be involved in designing and implementing the EU-level awareness-raising and communication campaign needed to combat gender stereotypes, and stresses the need to pay particular attention to youth, as this is one of the groups that is key to change' ⁽⁵⁾;

45. considers integrating young people from migrant backgrounds into education and social life to be a priority, therefore calls for further coordination and exchanges of know-how and good practices on effective policies with this aim;

46. considers it necessary to strengthen supportive measures aimed at ensuring that young Roma have access to basic services in all EU Member States; The Committee reaffirms to this effect its firm conviction that 'the four key themes identified by the European Commission [in its EU Roma strategic framework] when grouping its objectives — education, employment, healthcare and housing — play a key role in the Roma inclusion process, together with the role played by social services, especially at the local and regional levels' ⁽⁶⁾; furthermore, it urges for significant support to Roma children in order to effectively address low educational attainment;

47. considers that combatting discrimination, racism and other forms of intolerance is crucial in the fight against violent radicalisation and for preventing young people from falling prey to political or religious extremism. In this sense, considers that education and civil society organisations should play a crucial role in transmitting democratic and humanistic values and that a stronger coordination on this area at EU level could be useful to all Member States;

On youth work

48. calls for measures to support quality youth work development at local, regional, national and European level, including further coordination and supporting measures aimed at ensuring a high-quality standard of training for paid and volunteer youth workers, and allocation of sufficient resources to youth work organisations;

49. considers that for the European Youth Work Agenda for quality, innovation and recognition of youth work to be a success, it is necessary to strongly involve local and regional authorities. Further to this, considers it necessary to ensure that sufficient data and common indicators are available, including at local and regional level, to ensure efficient monitoring of the initiative;

50. favours the establishment of a legal framework surrounding the concept of youth work in order to better define what youth work is, clearly state its functions and competencies and give youth workers specific recognition for their work;

51. calls for further recognition and support for volunteering;

⁽⁵⁾ A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 (COR-2020-02016).

⁽⁶⁾ A Union of Equality: EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation (COR-2020-05625).

On education and training

52. calls on Member States and regional and local authorities to ensure universal access to quality education from early childhood on (with special attention to language acquisition) and suggests further coordination and exchanges of good practices on the social inclusion of young people, especially vulnerable young people, in the educational system at all levels as well as on preventing early school leaving;

53. calls for appropriate measures to be taken to further disseminate competence acquisition and recognise the competences learned through non-formal education and informal learning from early childhood on, and to ensure that these competences can be validated when entering or re-entering formal educational paths, employment, etc.; and also calls to encourage transversal skills, that are fitted with the changing nature of employment, to promote language skills, as a priority to increase young people's chances of integrating into the labour market;

54. calls for support for paid and volunteer youth workers and youth organisations as key education providers through non-formal education and informal learning;

55. calls for supportive measures aimed at ensuring that all teachers can acquire and keep up to date on the necessary pedagogical knowledge as well as high level skills, with a special focus on digital competences, and to ensure that their profession is recognised and valued in society, including how it is valorised economically in the job market;

56. supports the creation and further use of existing pan-European platforms for the broad dissemination of educational content and tools in an inclusive and multilingual way, taking into account regional languages;

On digital transition

57. stresses the importance of all young people having access to new technologies and proper equipment that will enable equal access to opportunities for all of them;

58. recommends defining relevant skills and competences as well as standards needed for transition of education into digital form, including exploring and removing potential new exclusion points for teachers/trainers and young people;

59. encourages the development of comprehensive digital competences in education systems for youth, including for competences on how to meaningfully use technology.

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*The President
of the European Committee of the Regions*
Vasco ALVES CORDEIRO
