



*European Economic and Social Committee*

**SOC/589**  
**Next EU Youth Strategy**

## **OPINION**

European Economic and Social Committee

**Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions:  
Engaging, connecting and empowering young people: a new EU Youth Strategy**  
[COM(2018) 269 final]

Rapporteur: **Michael McLOUGHLIN (IE-III)**  
Co-rapporteur: **Adam ROGALEWSKI (PL-II)**

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Section responsible	Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship
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Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions)	116/4/2

## 1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

- 1.1 The EESC welcomes the EU Youth Strategy for 2019–2027 (hereafter Strategy) and in particular the creation of the EU Youth Coordinator as a part of it.
- 1.2 The Committee believes that, being cross-sectoral in its nature, the Strategy should be more connected with existing EU programmes, such as Erasmus+, the Youth Guarantee and the European Solidarity Corps.
- 1.3 The EESC believes that, for the Strategy to deliver, it should focus on the three following objectives:
  - The cross sectoral approach, taking a holistic view of young people and their needs and rights;
  - The new EU Youth Co-ordinator should primarily lead on cross-sectoral work and be a senior position;
  - The EU Youth policy should be included in the European Semester process to focus more on delivery, particularly in cross-sectoral areas.
- 1.4 The EESC believes that the scope of the Strategy should be extended by action aiming at protecting, supporting and equipping young people with rights, knowledge and skills to face global challenges such as digitalisation, climate change and the rise of populism.
- 1.5 The EESC recommends that the Strategy have high-level aspirations for cross-sectoral work regarding other relevant EU policy areas including employment, education, health, migration and equality.
- 1.6 The Committee recommends that the Strategy pays more attention to employment issues affecting young people, particularly in terms of the discussion on the future of work as well as other social issues such as mental health, equality and education.
- 1.7 While agreeing with the Commission that the Strategy should promote democracy, the EESC believes that it should also promote a broader civic engagement, including voting, volunteering, youth-led NGOs, workplace democracy and social dialogue.
- 1.8 The Committee is convinced that youth involvement in decision-making processes should be promoted beyond one-off events. Moreover, in further developing the Youth Dialogue, the role of youth voluntary organisations and National Youth Councils needs to be improved and additional avenues utilised. The EU institutions should take the lead in this regard, with the EESC being at the forefront of institutions enhancing youth involvement at EU level.
- 1.9 Increased spending on youth work along with long-term investments in public services need to be encouraged, especially where there have been cuts in public services.
- 1.10 The Strategy needs to reflect a rights-based approach, for example drawing on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child where relevant.

- 1.11 The Strategy needs to give more attention to young women and girls, young LGBTIQ+, young people with disabilities and young migrants and refugees.
- 1.12 Greater upward convergence should be required amongst Member States in relation to youth policy, and national plans covering similar areas should be required to facilitate this. The Indicators process, which began in the last strategy, needs to be strengthened to achieve this
- 1.13 The EESC suggests that the EU Youth Portal should use as many online tools as possible with reference to current youth engagement.
- 1.14 While welcoming the specific, new EU Youth Strategy, the EESC strongly recommends youth mainstreaming throughout the work of all the different directorates-general (DGs) of the European Commission.

## **2. Background**

- 2.1 The proposed Strategy is the third framework proposed by the EU focusing on the young population in Europe. The new Strategy focuses on three areas of action: Engage, Connect and Empower, as opposed to the eight fields of actions in the EU 2010-2018 Youth Strategy: employment and entrepreneurship, social inclusion, participation, education and training, health and well-being, voluntary activities, youth and the world, creativity and culture.
- 2.2 The most important changes in the new Strategy comprise: creation of the EU Youth Coordinator, replacing the Youth Structured Dialogue with the EU Youth Dialogue, and the dilution of a series of previous objectives into cross-sectoral trends which aim at opening channels of communication between young people and policy makers.
- 2.3 As in the previous strategies, the Youth Guarantee is not included in the Strategy and is a part of the European Social Fund +.
- 2.4 In the field of the Strategy many initiatives exist at both national and EU level. Considerable work is done under Erasmus+, the Youth Guarantee, the Youth Employment Initiative and the European Social Fund. Other relevant areas referred to are the Agenda for Skills and the European Solidarity Corps. At the same time, other policies have a major impact on young people in what is referred to as cross-sectoral areas (for example transport, social affairs, health, external action and agriculture). In addition, Member States all have their own approaches to youth policies and to other issues impacting on young people.
- 2.5 Youth issues are embedded within the European Pillar of Social Rights, the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals and others.

- 2.6 The EESC has already adopted many opinions related to youth issues, such as the opinions on the Youth Employment Initiative<sup>1</sup>, the Youth Guarantee<sup>2</sup>, the European Solidarity Corps<sup>3</sup> or more recently on an EU framework for quality and effective apprenticeships<sup>4</sup>. It has also assessed, from a civil society perspective, the implementation of EU policies for youth employment in a selection of six Member States, and mainly of the Youth Guarantee.
- 2.7 In the EESC's youth-led hearing organised for this opinion huge uncertainty was expressed by young people. They felt a lot of pressure and little acceptance of those who take a different path or those who leave school early. Some young people spoke of having to start thinking about pensions as teenagers. The transition to work remains a challenge and there was dissatisfaction about discrimination against young people in terms of pay when doing the same work, simply based on age. Housing and transport were critical issues too, along with digitalisation and problems with recognition and validation of skills gained through non-formal learning.

### 3. **General comments**

- 3.1 The EESC welcomes the Strategy. It believes that it should be a comprehensive plan that leads to effective desired results and provides added value for young people, adding up to more than the sum of its parts and being more effective than a collection of different actions. The EESC believes the Strategy should be more connected with existing EU programmes such as Erasmus+, the Youth Guarantee or the European Solidarity Corps.
- 3.2 The notion of a holistic approach to policy issues has gained ground in recent times and is common at the EU and Member State level. This is welcome, as it recognises that social problems may not always fit into neat administrative categories. However, breaking down the traditional departmental roles, budgets and cultures is immensely challenging and there is a need to ensure that a holistic approach does not become some sort of panacea when an issue is too difficult, or policy-makers simply do want to take other options.
- 3.3 The EESC considers that implementation of EU youth policy should be more visible and sustainable at EU and Member State level if it is to be properly evaluated, for instance within the European Semester and Social Scoreboard.
- 3.4 Overall the proposed Strategy needs to have a more rights-based approach. This is an important area, as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (which does not of course cover all those in the youth category) is designed this way and provides for regular reviews of states' performances using agreed metrics. The proposals are strong on the nature of youth work itself and the role of the voluntary sector; this is of critical importance, as there are new, more instrumentalist approaches to "work with young people", evident internationally.

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1 [OJ C 268, 14.8.2015, p. 40](#)

2 [OJ C 271, 19.9.2013, p. 101](#)

3 [OJ C 81, 2.3.2018, p. 160](#)

4 [OJ C 262, 25.7.2018, p. 41](#)

- 3.5 The EESC believes that the Strategy should aim to promote real upward convergence between Member States in the field of youth policies. This is particularly the case, as considerable EU funding (e.g. Erasmus) is provided for all Member States. In other areas of EU funding there is a co-financing approach which promotes convergence and a greater EU-wide common approach. The Committee believes there is much to be learnt here for the Strategy.
- 3.6 While agreeing with the Commission about the crucial role of youth workers and their unique benefits to young people in their transition to adulthood, the EESC stresses that the quality of youth work largely depends on the financing of public services. In some Member States, due to cuts in the public sector and pay freezes, not only has the quality of the work of youth workers deteriorated, but there are also many unfilled vacancies in this sector. Therefore, the EESC calls for more investment in public services.
- 3.7 Notwithstanding this, the Commission rightly points out that Member States must dedicate their own resources to youth policies. In this regard, the proposals on tracking funding are most encouraging but need to encompass the work of Member States and other cross-sectoral policy areas. The EESC believes that tracking should be conducted with the involvement of social partners and civil society organisations at all levels.
- 3.8 The Committee agrees with the Commission that there is a need for Member States to explore innovative and alternative forms of democratic participation. However, the EESC strongly believes that more support, including financial support, is needed for existing ways of societal engagement such as volunteering, youth councils, participation in civil society organisations, trade unions or works councils. Young people being the future of Europe, they should be encouraged to participate in local and European elections as well as to be active in all forms of civic and political engagement.
- 3.9 The EESC believes that, within the scope of the Strategy that focuses on three areas of action: ENGAGE, CONNECT, EMPOWER, the last action should be extended by tasks aiming to protect and support young people and equip them with skills to face global challenges such as digitalisation, climate change and growing populism. Since one of the EU's priorities is to "protect" its citizens, the Committee believes that young people, similarly to the adult population, should also be included in this priority. Young people should also benefit from the concept of "digital justice" promoted by the EESC<sup>5</sup>, which aims to protect European citizens from the negative aspects of the digital revolution or within the wider framework of the "just transition" endorsed by the ILO.

#### Young People and the world of work

- 3.10 Although the Strategy should be clear and not include numerous objectives, the Committee believes that the current Strategy should dedicate more attention to social and employment issues affecting young people, particularly in terms of the discussion on the future of work. These include, inter alia, digitalisation, platforms, fragmentation and casualisation of the labour market, which are particularly affecting young people.

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<sup>5</sup> [OJ C 237, 6.7.2018, p. 1](#)

- 3.11 Working and studying becomes a daily routine for many young people. For this reason, the EESC believes that future EU youth policies should promote workplace democracy by, inter alia, promoting social dialogue and protecting the employment rights of young people. Young people on the labour market should be treated in the same way as the adult population, particularly in terms of receiving the same minimum wage<sup>6</sup>, access to pensions and protection against precarious employment contracts (zero hours) as well as unpaid traineeships or bogus self-employment. The voice of young people should also be heard in society and in their workplaces. Moreover, young people's participation in workplace representative structures (trade unions and works councils) should be more strongly encouraged, as is the case in some countries, which have special youth representative councils in workplaces.
- 3.12 Some young people are also parents and EU policies, such as a new directive on work-life balance, are relevant for young people combining work with education and looking after their relatives. Due to the digitalisation of workplaces, young people will undoubtedly be in a different employment situation than their parents. The EESC suggests that more attention should be given to social and employment policies in the Strategy, given the importance of labour market policies for the lives of the young generations.
- 3.13 The labour market is of particular importance because in many countries young people were those most affected by unemployment in the years following the economic crisis of 2008. Although the unemployment rate among young people decreased, the number of young people without jobs was almost double the number of those in work<sup>7</sup>. In many instances recently created jobs are of lower quality or give lower access to permanent, full-time employment contracts than those before the crisis (e.g. temporary contracts, zero hours contracts).

#### Young People's Education and Health

- 3.14 The Strategy aims to make the voice of unrepresented youth heard by politicians. In order to achieve this, further action is needed to get the young people who are further from the labour market and the educational system integrated into society. Despite a slight improvement in the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), 10.9% of people aged 15-24 and 17.7% of youth between 25-29 years were still trapped in this situation in 2017. The improvement of skills and competences has a positive impact on the employability of young people, yet this factor alone is not going to determine the growth of employment. Such disengagement has a significant impact on young people's lives and aspirations, as it can lead to poverty and social exclusion. Also, public authorities bear a cost for not getting the NEET population into education or employment, which is estimated by Eurofound (2012, 2014) at 1.2% of national GDP. The NEET population is also more likely to be supportive of extremist and xenophobic ideologies.

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<sup>6</sup> [OJ C 125, 21.4.2017, p. 10](#)

<sup>7</sup> [OJ C 125, 21.4.2017, p. 10](#)

- 3.15 Article 4 of the European Pillar of Social Rights on active support to employment states that: "Young people have the right to continued education, apprenticeship, traineeship or a job offer of good standing within 4 months of becoming unemployed or leaving education. The Youth Strategy should contribute to the realisation of this principle, especially in promoting the building up of civil society and social partner alliances for the design and follow up of the different policies undertaken in this regard. Special attention should be given to outreach strategies for getting those young people who are further from the labour market back into employment or education."
- 3.16 The European Youth Strategy should therefore deploy a pan-European strategy to reach out to these groups. Close cooperation among national authorities, European social partners, national youth councils and the youth sector is key to the success of this endeavour.
- 3.17 Young people generally spend a large amount of their time in full- or part-time education and this is another area where there are limited competences at the EU level, other than ensuring that "everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market", as stated in the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights. Again this is an area that was covered by a dedicated pillar of the previous Strategy.
- 3.18 The area of young people's mental health is central to youth work and to any professional interaction with young people. Generally, health is a competence of the Member State, but mental health is an aspect of public health, where the EU has competence, so it should be prominent in the cross-sectoral work envisaged under the Strategy. Therefore special attention needs to be paid to issues such as anxiety, depression and suicide rates among young people.
- 3.19 There are more and more examples of best-practice working with young people at Member State level. Similarly, youth work has been shown to have a positive impact on young people's mental health. The EESC believes that the area of young people's mental health needs more attention in the Strategy.
- 3.20 Similarly, many national policies focus on young people's physical health. There are a number of issues of concern in this field. Increasingly childhood and youth obesity is seen as a cause for concern, as well as substance misuse and legal highs. Although Member States may still take quite divergent approaches, a cross-sectoral approach to young people's issues cannot ignore these issues and needs to engage with them, based on the relevant powers of the EU. These areas were dedicated pillars of the previous Strategy and it is important that a strong focus is maintained on them in cross-sectoral work.

### Equality

- 3.21 There is a strong link between youth work, youth policy and equality. There has been considerable action by the EU in this field and all Member States have legislation in place. Nonetheless, there are still many instances of discrimination that young people encounter, such as in housing, and services that they rely on more than others such as public transport. Equality



laws can often be more focussed on older people. There are nine universal grounds outlawing discrimination in EU Member States. We need to ensure that young people subject to this type of discrimination are adequately covered by the EU Youth Strategy. While there are a number of groups, we would highlight the following, which are in need of greater attention in the document.

- young people with disabilities
- young migrants and refugees
- young women and girls
- young LGBTIQ+.

3.22 Many EU policies relating to young people have recently been focused on radicalisation. However, integration needs to be part of a broader range of measures offered to young people and this needs to be emphasised in the Strategy. It also fits naturally into youth employment programmes.

#### 4. **Specific comments**

4.1 The EESC welcomes the creation of a new position of EU Youth Coordinator, who should hear young voices and influence the cross sectoral dimension of youth policy. The emphasis should be on the latter. The coordinator should also encourage and facilitate a similar process at Member State level and thus should join any Commission presence at Council meetings.

4.2 The proposals for National Action Plans in the field of youth are also very welcome. There is a need for clear targets, monitoring and progression in supporting young people. The EESC strongly endorses the Commission's thinking that greater linkage is needed between funding and National Action Plans.

4.3 The move from a Structured Dialogue to a more inclusive Youth Dialogue is most welcome. However, more inclusion is needed, which could be achieved by broadening the type and nature of organisations involved and adding further groups. Youth voluntary organisations and National Youth Councils should still be central to this work as they are close to young people and have immense experience.

4.4 Consolidating the European Youth Portal as a digital single entry point for young people to engage with the EU is welcome, but special attention should be given to the availability of this portal through free internet connection and access to computers, especially for disadvantaged youth groups in the Member States. The Commission also needs to keep track of the constant movement in social media platforms amongst young people.

4.5 The proposals indicate that young people have an advantage as regards technological change. However, it should also be noted that there are digitally excluded young people too. Those working with young people also need to be aware of both the positives and the negatives (e.g. mental health issues and fake news challenges) of young people's technological engagement.

4.6 While mobility is a core European value and central to the youth programmes, it can have downsides, particularly in countries where there is emigration, population decline or a "brain

drain" or "work force drain". However there may be potential to ameliorate this issue availing of the new migrant and refugee population in Europe.

- 4.7 The EESC considers the Commission's proposals on validation of informal and non-formal learning valuable. It would be encouraging to see some developed templates in the youth field and elsewhere.
- 4.8 Fortunately there are now more youth events involving the EU institutions, so that an evaluation of them all would be worthwhile. It should also be checked whether greater synergy could be achieved among them. The structured dialogue has the advantage of being ongoing rather than one-off. Ongoing involvement of young people in decisions which affect them should be the priority and it is important that this happens in all policy areas, not just youth policy. Institutions carrying out one-off events should move towards ongoing involvement of young people in their work.
- 4.9 The Committee believes that a strong role for independent youth information is important in an era of fake news and excessive reliance on online tools. The relationship with trusted adults should remain a key feature of youth work and youth policy.
- 4.10 In the view of the ESSC, the Strategy, along with other policies aimed at the young generation, should be an important tool to tackle anti-European sentiments and populism among the young population.
- 4.11 While welcoming the specific, new EU Youth Strategy, the EESC strongly recommends youth mainstreaming throughout the work of all the different directorates-general (DGs) of the European Commission.

Brussels, 18 October 2018

Luca JAHIER

The president of the European Economic and Social Committee

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