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**Teenage refugees are the future “workers and geniuses” in Europe, say YEYS delegates**

***Your Europe, Your Say!* (YEYS) lived up to all expectations, as young people from the EU-28 and candidate countries shook things up with their enthusiasm and fresh ideas to help integrate migrants into European societies – the theme of this year’s event.**

The refugee crisis has brought European citizens together in acts of incredible kindness, but it has also stretched European solidarity to its limits, exposing divisions among Member States and troublesome signs of discrimination and discontent.

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) invited a group of outspoken 16 and 17 year-olds from all over Europe to debate what is clearly one of the hottest topics on the political agenda right now… migration and integration!

The debate took place in Brussels back to back with the EESC’s plenary session, which included a high-level discussion with Federica Mogherini, the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security, and Dimitris Avramopoulos, the Commissioner for Home Affairs and Citizenship.

The youngsters explored a range of integration issues, from the role of schools, sporting clubs and cultural outreach in countering discrimination, to the way information about the refugee crisis is communicated, the role of the media and the importance of a well-defined, humane way of handling integration.

After an open and lively debate on ten different proposals, the youth delegates then agreed on three overarching proposals to better integrate migrants, especially children, into European societies:

1. **Media and migrants, media reform using investment from the EU**: ideas to impose stricter guidelines for reporting on migrant issues and other measures to raise awareness and reduce discrimination
2. **Revision of Dublin agreement**: hotspots, faster processing of asylum applications and language and cultural training before allocating refugees across the EU
3. **Education plan, no grading at first, exchange of culture, adjusting at own pace**: easing refugees into the education system, recognising the importance of education for integration

**Voice of reason**

The youngsters showed no signs of being intimidated by the spotlights of the EU political scene. After an introduction to the role of organised civil society in dealing with the migration crisis, the floor was opened up to the visiting teenagers.

## ***“As the voice of civil society, we are eager to ensure that the views, experiences and ideas of Europe’s younger generation on this vital issue are heard,”* remarked Vice-President Gonçalo Lobo Xavier in charge of communication at the EESC*. “We want to see a unified and humanitarian approach to immigration and asylum. Refugees have rights but they also have obligations to respect EU values and social responsibilities,”* he added*.***

This sentiment was echoed in contributions from the young people during the YEYS debate. Members and EU policy-makers were struck by the young ambassadors’ thought-provoking ideas and practical suggestions to promote a more integrated response to the migration crisis.

A UK junior delegate said the EU should make an effort to put together teams of celebrities to promote tolerance of other cultures. His colleague in the winning ‘media and migrants’ proposal said: *“Why not import TV dramas from around the world so Europeans can be more culturally aware, so we don’t just see them as war zones, and we can appreciate the places, feel a loss and be moved to effect actual change and greater respect for the migrants fleeing these countries?”*

A Hungarian delegate said we need open-minded and open-hearted policies to establish sustainable solutions for Europe based on *“democracy and dignity but also on our system of order: order with heart”*.

A Slovakian student said it is very important to integrate teenage refugees because they will be the future generation; *“the workers or geniuses, so we don’t want to deter them”.*

*“Education is crucial for future employment but also for peer interaction and integration in society,”* said a Croatian delegate. Offering a concrete education plan for young refugees, the speaker proposed the idea of integration days for new arrivals so they can *“talk about their culture, cuisine and other customs in their country”.*

One Danish speaker said shared interests are key to getting young refugees involved in local clubs, who can take them under their wings and invite them to occasions. *“It’s a chance for society to welcome refugees and get them more engaged in the community,”* she said, to *“integrate through interests.”*

On a proposal to revise the Dublin agreement, which a Maltese delegate called “limiting”, an idea to create “hotspots” to respond quickly to the refugees’ needs came out of the debate: *“This is a crisis people… so deal with it now!”* she said, adding that Europe is in one Union and should share the responsibility fairly.

A Serbian speaker felt Europe is not making best use of the migrants’ skills and qualifications and that its recognition of qualification needs revising, to be fairer. *“Refugees could be interns in companies and be assigned a mentor with experience to help them integrate, empower them,”* she said.

**First-hand experience**

Some 33 schools – each representing a Member State or candidate country – were chosen randomly and invited to attend this unique annual youth initiative that simulates the work done by members of the EESC.

In addition to experiencing the inner workings of the Committee, and witnessing first-hand how it represents civil society, the youngsters also had the chance to put their thought-provoking questions to political leaders.

 *“You are the envoys and champions of the refugees in your communities. We need you as active citizens to take part in the debate and demystify the myths about migrants and refugees,”* said Pavel Trantina, President of the SOC Section.

*“We had 28 Member States and five candidate country students and observers from Japan here at YEYS. Thanks for a great job. Believe me, we could not have done it better than you,”* said EESC member Eve Päärendson in summing up the day’s events.

EESC member Jose Antonio Moreno Diaz said he was impressed by the proposed solutions to some hard questions, *“even for adults and politicians to answer”*, and he applauded the common sense on display. *“You are the spirit of Europe,”* he concluded.

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