



EESC info

European Economic and Social Committee

A bridge between Europe and organised civil society

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EDITORIAL



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Dear readers,

As spring blooms in Brussels, I want to take a moment to reflect on [Your Europe, Your Say!](#) (YEYS), the EESC's flagship event for youth, which welcomed almost 140 young people from all EU Member States, the candidate countries and the UK. It was not only a meeting of young people, but also a space for dialogue, collaboration and action. It showed that in the EESC, young people are taken seriously and given the opportunity to help shape the next EU Youth Strategy.

This year's theme, *Meaningful Connections, Active Participation and Democratic Engagement*, was more than just a theme. It reflected young people's experience of being heard and of

having the opportunity to step up and develop their ideas. Something that makes me especially hopeful is that this year's edition of YEYS attracted a strong interest not only from young people from the Member States, but especially from candidate countries and Ukraine, showing that their hearts beat in the EU.

Over two days, the participants worked on developing 17 proposals, with topics ranging from healthcare to digital awareness to youth opportunities. Through a vote, three proposals were chosen: *Go big or NO home*, exploring the increasingly difficult housing market, *Think before you click: make privacy sexy again!*, on digital-awareness and *Nothing about us without us*, encouraging young people to use their voice.

These three proposals show one thing: our young people want to shape the future. They want to use their voice and their passion to change the status quo. YEYS allows them to learn and to connect with other young people who are just as passionate as them. Once again, the participants have shown me that they understand the issues that shape the future and strive to improve the lives of people not only from the European Union, but from all around the world.

The EESC has been advocating for young people for years. The Committee was the first EU institution to introduce the EU Youth Test, a policy impact assessment tool designed to ensure that young people's perspectives are considered in EU policymaking. Young people are directly involved in the consultation process on the EESC opinions that are selected for their relevance for young people. The Youth Test is now one of the 48 initiatives nominated for the [European Ombudsman 'Award for Good Administration'](#), under the category 'Excellence in diversity and inclusion'.

In 2023, the EESC set up the Youth Group, initially envisaged to coordinate the EESC's youth-related initiatives, its mission today goes beyond its formal mandate. In this issue, Youth Group president Nicoletta Merlo writes about the group's ambition to become a hub where young people's concerns, ideas and proposals can be heard and transformed into concrete policy recommendations.

We understand that young people are the future. We must not forget that they are our present too.

This is why I am very happy that this month's newsletter will shine a spotlight on youth. We are taking a closer look at YEYS, bringing you the messages of our young speakers and members, while giving the floor to key issues facing the next generation. By exploring housing insecurity, political and civic education, the growing gender gap in support of far-right parties, intergenerational fairness, and the mental health of young people, we highlight the defining challenges for the generation, as identified by the YEYS participants themselves.

Looking ahead to May, we invite you to experience this spirit of engagement firsthand. The EESC will host an open-door, festive celebration for Europe Day, offering an opportunity to discover the workings of the Committee and learn how complex debates are turned into opinions. We hope to welcome you there.

And last but not least, I am happy to announce this year's Connecting EU seminar, the EESC's flagship communication event for civil society communicators. It will take place on 6 and 7 July at the University of Sofia, Bulgaria. Entitled *In defence of European values: the power of civil society*, the 2026 Connecting EU seminar will focus on Europe's ability to uphold its core values as its economic priorities shift and pressure on democratic trust and civic space intensifies – and on how civil society can defend them. Mark your calendars and join us in Sofia this July!

DIARY DATES

4 May 2026

[How can civil society organisations actively improve financial literacy](#)

9 May 2026

[Europe Day 2026](#)

11 May 2026

[Enlargement and EU Climate Policy](#)

18 May 2026

[Public Hearing on the “Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness”](#)

28 May 2026

[Boosting the role of the EIB and national promotional banks for growth and industrial policy](#)

3 June 2026

CoR-EESC joint event: Single Market Strategy

4 June 2026

[Mainstreaming water resilience in the EU budget](#)

10 June 2026

The Second Annual All-Island Stakeholder Forum

11 June 2026

Delivering intergenerational solidarity

17-18 June 2026

EESC plenary session



THE SURPRISE GUEST

In the past 10 years, Seku M. Condé, journalist, editor and presenter at the Slovenian public broadcaster RTV Slovenia, has never missed a single edition of the EESC youth event *Your Europe, Your Say!* (YEYS). As our surprise guest, he writes about how YEYS has changed over the years, which moments have stayed with him and why he keeps coming back to

the event which he says feels different and undeniably sincere, offering a rare opportunity for its young participants to be truly heard.



SAYING YES TO YEYS

By Seku M. Condé

'You are never too young to lead, and never too old to learn.'
— Kofi Annan

There are conferences you attend once, maybe twice, and then forget. And then there is *Your Europe, Your Say!*—which, at least for me, has become something closer to a ritual. Ten years of returning to Brussels each spring changes your perspective. You stop seeing it as just another event and start recognising it as a living story—one that grows with every new generation of young Europeans stepping into the room. It is also a reunion with an exceptional organising team, many of whom have, over the years, become friends.

When I first attended YEYS almost a decade ago, the atmosphere felt slightly experimental. The idea that teenagers could sit in the same space as policymakers and meaningfully contribute to discussions seemed

ambitious, if not a bit idealistic. Not that I hadn't been to similar conferences before—but too often, those ended with young people presenting great ideas, policymakers nodding politely, and little real follow-up. YEYS, however, felt different. It was energetic, a bit chaotic, but undeniably sincere.

Over the years, I have watched the conference mature—much like its participants. Workshops became more focused, and the outcomes more concrete. It was no longer just about giving young people a voice; it was about making that voice count.

At one point, the conversations shifted noticeably. Sustainability and global responsibility moved to the forefront. Climate change was no longer just one topic among many—it became central. The tone changed as well. Participants grew more assertive, more urgent. They were no longer asking for a seat at the table; they were demanding action. They saw their future quite literally under threat—from heatwaves, pollution, and rising emissions.

One moment, however, has stayed with me more than most. I remember speaking with participants from the United Kingdom not long after the Brexit referendum 2016. They were discussing the future of the European Union—yet many of them had been too young to vote in the referendum that would shape that very future. 51.9% of voters had made a decision that would define their path, largely without them. At the time, it felt like just another interview. Only years later did I fully grasp the weight of that moment.

Then came the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced YEYS, like so many events, into a virtual format. I was skeptical. Could the same intensity survive through screens? Surprisingly, it did—just in a different way. The discussions became more introspective, focusing on resilience, mental health, and the fragility of systems we once took for granted. It marked a turning point, not only for YEYS, but for how young people perceived their place in Europe.

What strikes me most after all these years is not how much YEYS has changed, but how consistently it delivers something rare: authenticity. Every year, a new group of students walks into the room—slightly unsure, often nervous—and within hours, they are debating, disagreeing, collaborating. By the end, they are no longer just participants—they are contributors, colleagues, even friends.

Perhaps the most important milestone is also the least visible: the quiet realisation, repeated year after year, that young people are not the future of Europe—they are already part of its present.

As a journalist, I have covered events across the world, in places where young people rarely have the luxury of being asked about their future. That is why I hope every 'YEYS-er' understands how rare this opportunity is. Not because the conference is perfect—it isn't—but because it evolves. It listens. And, most importantly, it reminds us why participation matters.

Ten years in, I no longer attend YEYS just to report on it. I return because it continues to surprise me. And in a world where cynicism comes far too easily, that might be its greatest achievement.

Seku M. Condé has been a journalist, reporter, editor and TV presenter for RTV Slovenia, Slovenian public broadcaster since 2007. He mostly covers themes related to Global South, human rights, discrimination, sustainability. He was the only Slovenian reporter and one of the few worldwide reporting from West Africa during the Ebola outbreak in 2013–2016 epidemic.



ONE QUESTION TO

Cyberattacks are no longer rare: one fifth of EU businesses report incidents with serious consequences, including data loss and service disruption. We asked Miroslav Hajnoš, rapporteur of the EESC opinion on [Cybersecurity Act](#), why cybersecurity must be treated not only as a technical or regulatory issue but also as a foundation for trust in the digital economy.



CYBERSECURITY - A NEW FRAMEWORK OF TRUST IN THE DIGITAL ECONOMY

By Miroslav Hajnoš

Cybersecurity is becoming a cornerstone of the European Union's digital market. Recent data show that more than one fifth of EU businesses have already suffered cybersecurity incidents with tangible consequences, including data loss and service disruption. At the same time, the wider adoption of cybersecurity measures points to growing awareness of systemic risks in the digital environment.

This development reflects a broader transformation. Cybersecurity can no longer be understood merely as a technical or regulatory matter. As emphasised by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), it must be regarded as a key component of economic security and geopolitical resilience in the European Union. The smooth functioning of the digital market increasingly depends on trust, and that trust is directly linked to the ability to protect data, systems, and supply chains.

In the digital marketplace, users often lack the ability to judge how secure products and services really are. This information asymmetry makes cybersecurity not a background function, but a central mechanism for trust-building. In this context, the European cybersecurity certification framework plays a crucial role. Its purpose is to ensure that digital products and services meet harmonised security standards across Member States, strengthening confidence in the single market.

The EESC underlines that certification must be practical, transparent, and usable under real business conditions, particularly for cross-border operators. The principle of 'one certification valid everywhere' should become the norm, reducing market fragmentation and supporting the competitiveness of European companies.

Another critical issue is the security of supply chains. Cyber risks increasingly originate not within a single organisation, but across interconnected networks of suppliers and partners. Cybersecurity must therefore be addressed as an ecosystem challenge. At the same time, regulatory measures must remain proportionate, predictable, and sensitive to the capacities of small and medium-sized enterprises, which form the backbone of the European economy.

Human capital also plays a decisive role. The EESC highlights that cybersecurity resilience depends on skills, training, and organisational culture. Strengthening digital literacy and raising public awareness are therefore essential components of the overall framework. A well-informed society is more resilient by default and better able to reduce systemic vulnerabilities.

In this regard, civil society organisations play a unique and indispensable role. Working at the intersection of institutions, markets, and citizens, they translate complex policy frameworks into practical realities. In cybersecurity, their role goes beyond awareness-raising: they help ensure that policies reflect the lived experiences of businesses and individuals, improving both legitimacy and effectiveness.

For businesses, cybersecurity is increasingly becoming a matter of competitiveness. Companies that can ensure data protection and communicate their security practices clearly are better positioned to build customer trust and strengthen their market position. By contrast, cybersecurity incidents lead not only to financial losses, but also to serious reputational damage.

The future of the digital market will therefore not be shaped solely by technological innovation, but also by the ability to build and sustain trust. Cybersecurity is evolving into a comprehensive framework that connects regulation, economic performance, and communication. In the digital economy, one principle remains fundamental: without trust, there is no functioning market.



TO THE POINT

Despite recent progress, discrimination, violence and exclusion remain a daily reality for many LGBTIQ+ people in Europe. It is no longer enough to set ambitious goals; we must ensure they are properly implemented. Rights must be meaningful in practice, not only on paper, writes Juliane Marie Neiiendam, rapporteur of the EESC opinion [Union of Equality: LGBTIQ+ Equality Strategy 2026-2030](#)



UNION OF EQUALITY: TURNING COMMITMENTS INTO REALITY FOR LGBTIQ+ PEOPLE

By Juliane Marie Neiiendam

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) welcomes the European Commission's 'Union of Equality: LGBTIQ+ Equality Strategy 2026-2030' as a vital step towards ensuring that everyone in the European Union can live freely, safely and with dignity. At a time when fundamental rights and democratic values are under increasing pressure, reaffirming this commitment is more important than ever.

Despite progress in recent years, discrimination, violence and exclusion remain a daily reality for many LGBTIQ+ people across Europe, particularly for trans, non-binary and intersex persons, and in environments where civic space is shrinking.

Against this backdrop, in its [opinion on the Commission's strategy](#), the EESC stresses that the key challenge is no longer only setting ambitious goals, but ensuring effective implementation. Rights must be meaningful in practice, not only on paper.

European courts are playing an increasingly important role. Their rulings clarify rights and make them directly applicable across Member States. In doing so, they create a concrete push for implementation and help ensure that fundamental rights are not only written in law but respected in people's daily lives.

The EESC calls for stronger monitoring, enforcement and accountability, and reiterates the importance of adopting the long-awaited Horizontal Equal Treatment Directive to close existing legal gaps. It also stresses the need to safeguard civic space and respond firmly to discriminatory practices, including by countering misinformation and strengthening awareness of intersectional discrimination.

Our opinion highlights the essential role of social partners in promoting inclusive workplaces. Through social dialogue and collective bargaining, they can help translate legal protections into concrete improvements in working conditions. The EESC calls for practical support, training and guidance—developed together with civil society—to advance fair recruitment, career progression and safe working environments, and to support gender transition at work.

The EESC underlines the need for inclusive and competent healthcare, including mental health support and gender-affirming care, as well as a binding ban on conversion practices.

The EESC supports that legal gender recognition should be based on self-determination, in line with fundamental rights. It also calls for stronger EU support for safe and inclusive schools, including comprehensive sexuality education and teacher training, to ensure that all young people can learn in an environment free from fear and discrimination.

More broadly, the opinion underlines the link between equality and social conditions. Many LGBTIQ+ people face higher risks of poverty, housing insecurity and exclusion, particularly those experiencing multiple forms of discrimination. Addressing these inequalities is essential to achieving real and lasting inclusion.

Looking ahead, the EESC addresses emerging challenges, including artificial intelligence and online hate, to ensure that new technologies do not reinforce or create new forms of discrimination. It also promotes inclusion in culture, sport and public life, recognising the importance of visibility, participation and dignity in all areas of society.

Ultimately, the EESC calls for a renewed and collective effort to turn commitments into tangible change. A true Union of Equality requires not only political will, but sustained action – ensuring that LGBTIQ+ people across Europe can fully enjoy their rights in everyday life.

EESC NEWS



CIRCULAR ECONOMY FOR EUROPE'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Accelerating the transition to a circular economy is essential not only for sustainability and competitiveness, but also for strengthening Europe's strategic autonomy. This was the central message of the [annual conference of the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform](#), a joint initiative of the European Commission and the European Economic and Social Committee, held on 22-23 April.

The event brought together policymakers, businesses, civil society and regional actors to exchange views and contribute to the upcoming Circular Economy Act. This initiative aims to create a single market for secondary raw materials, boost the availability of high-quality recycled materials and stimulate demand across the EU.

Speakers stressed the urgency of action in the context of climate challenges, geopolitical uncertainty and resource dependency.

'In times of instability, circular economy is not a choice, it's a necessity. Dependencies have a cost, as oil shocks keep reminding us. Circularity means reclaiming value, strengthening resilience, and building Europe's economic autonomy', said **Jessika Roswall**, Commissioner for Environment, Water Resilience and a Competitive Circular Economy.

'The strong cooperation between the European Commission and the European Economic and Social Committee is at the heart of this platform. It reflects a shared conviction: that Europe's transition to a circular economy cannot be delivered by institutions alone. It must be shaped, challenged and owned by those who make our economy work every day', said **Séamus Boland**, EESC President.

Author of the 'Report on the Future of the Single Market' and the President of the Jacques Delors Institute **Enrico Letta** highlighted that without a strong circular economy, Europe risks increasing its reliance on external suppliers for critical raw materials.

Despite progress, Europe's circularity rate reached only 11.8% in 2023, underlining the need to scale up efforts. The European Commission has set a target to double this rate by 2030 as part of its industrial strategy.

Discussions also explored synergies between the circular economy and the bioeconomy, focusing on local value creation, resource efficiency and resilience. The conference reinforced the importance of cooperation between institutions and stakeholders to deliver a competitive and fair circular Europe. (ks)



EESC HIGHLIGHTS URGENT NEED TO PROTECT THE EMOTIONAL HEALTH OF EUROPE'S YOUNG PEOPLE

Emotional health is becoming one of the defining challenges for Europe's next generation. Rising levels of anxiety, depression and suicide among young people reflect mounting pressures linked to social media, cyberbullying, loneliness, economic insecurity and the lasting effects of recent crises, it was highlighted at a high-level debate held by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) at its March plenary session.

The emotional well-being of children and young people was in the focus of the three-part flagship debate that brought together EU institutions, international organisations, civil society and youth representatives. The discussions underlined the growing urgency of protecting emotional health through prevention, safer digital environments and stronger community-based support. While health policy remains a national competence, the EU plays an increasingly important role through prevention, digital regulation and cross-sector cooperation.

Opening the debate, EESC President **Séamus Boland** stressed the need to confront stigma and silence surrounding mental health: 'For me, what is crucial is that this debate helps to bring the topic of emotional health and suicide out of the shadows; it is imperative that we destigmatise and demystify issues surrounding mental health. Communities, families and civil society organisations play a key role in those efforts.'

Discussions highlighted the scale of emotional distress across Europe, alongside significant inequalities in access to support. Long waiting times, limited child-specific services and weak early-intervention systems disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, including LGBTQI+ young people, migrant children and those in rural or low-income communities. The World Health Organization and UNICEF have repeatedly warned that mental-health conditions are rising fastest among young people.

Institutional speakers acknowledged growing awareness but uneven implementation across Member States. Calls focused on stronger prevention, improved digital literacy and child-centred services, while recognising the links between emotional health, education, inclusion and culture. Cultural initiatives were highlighted as effective tools to strengthen resilience, alongside EU-level actions such as the comprehensive mental-health approach and new measures against cyberbullying.

Participants also addressed emerging digital risks, warning of escalating online harms, including deepfake abuse that overwhelmingly targets young women and girls. Several speakers cautioned against re-institutionalisation, calling instead for community-based, person-centred care, early identification and

school-based support. Investment in psycho-education, safer online environments and better regulation featured prominently.

In closing, the EESC called for closer cooperation between EU institutions, Member States and civil society. Emotional health spans education, social policy, labour markets and digital regulation, requiring coordinated and sustained action. Members reaffirmed that safeguarding the emotional well-being of Europe's young people must remain a political priority. (lm)



THE EU INSTITUTIONS AND ALL RELEVANT ACTORS MUST TEAM UP TO ENHANCE CIVIL-MILITARY COOPERATION

The EESC is placing a very heavy stone at the heart of the EU's military mobility debate, noting that the European institutions must join forces with all relevant stakeholders to make the European Union safe and ready to act, both in times of crisis and in times of peace.

The EU is currently facing a paradox: it has built the world's most sophisticated single market, where goods cross borders quickly and seamlessly. However, when it comes to moving the tools and assets of its own security, there are still obstacles, both literal and bureaucratic.

'Further action and stronger civil-military cooperation are needed. This is not optional – it is the only way forward, and it must be built on trust and transparency', said EESC President **Séamus Boland** during the debate held at the EESC March plenary. 'Military mobility is not about tanks on highways – it is about trust between soldiers and civilians, between governments and transporters. We either build that trust, or we risk breaking under pressure'.

Mr Boland added: 'this is not a job for governments alone. It is a job for all of us: the policymakers who write the rules, the military planners, the companies that build the networks, the transport operators who move more cargo in a week than some armies do in a year, the workers who keep everything running, the medics who must be on alert, the drivers who deliver, and above all, the citizens who depend on all of them'.

Along the same lines, **Maja Bakran**, Deputy Director-General of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport (DG MOVE), confirmed the need to join hands at all levels. She referred to the proposal [Military Mobility Package](#), which was presented by the European Commission and High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in November 2025 to ensure that troops, equipment and military assets can move swiftly across the EU.

By adopting the [opinion](#) drafted by **Tomas Arvidsson**, the EESC provides an essential contribution in order to overcome the barriers to military mobility.

Military mobility is the backbone of European independence. It is not only the concern of generals and defence officials, and it must be made possible through three key angles: infrastructure, social respect and borders. (mp)



HOUSING CRISIS – EESC RECOMMENDS TAKING BOLDER MEASURES

The EESC is continuing to monitor the housing emergency and has adopted a new opinion to press the EU institutions to take urgent action.

Drawn up by **Thomas Kattinig** and adopted at the March plenary session, the opinion [*Tackling housing scarcity through affordable, sustainable and family-oriented housing policies*](#) urges the European Commission in particular to adopt far more ambitious measures to address the structural housing crisis.

‘Housing is a fundamental right,’ said **Mr Kattinig** during the plenary session. ‘Europe must curb speculation, protect people from energy poverty and invest in affordable, sustainable homes for families and future generations.’

In the exploratory opinion, requested by the Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the EESC welcomes the *European Affordable Housing Plan* presented by the European Commission in December 2025. However, it is of the view that the Commission must act swiftly to present the announced initiatives and even stronger measures, including:

- better framework conditions;
- a right to adequate and affordable housing in EU primary law;
- a fundamental reform of the energy market design;
- sufficient funding; and
- a stronger focus on young people, families and sustainability.

The Committee criticises the lack of clear land-use and spatial planning guidance, the risks of urban sprawl and of climate backsliding and the insufficient role given to cities, regions and local authorities.

In addition, it calls for an effective rural development strategy and proven tools, with a mandatory percentage of subsidised, affordable housing. (mp)



SOCIAL SERVICES FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES: TOWARDS GENUINE INCLUSION AND INDEPENDENT LIVING

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has warned that persons with disabilities across Europe continue to face segregation, inadequate services and barriers to legal capacity.

It has called for binding EU legislation, stronger monitoring and better use of EU funds to make

community-based living a guaranteed right rather than an aspiration.

At its March 2026 plenary session, the EESC adopted [an exploratory opinion](#) on how to ensure social inclusion and independent living for persons with disabilities through high-quality, specialised social services. In the opinion, the Committee sets out a clear roadmap to close the gap between commitments and reality, building on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD), the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030, and years of civil-society advocacy.

Grounded in Articles 12 and 19 of the [UNCPRD](#), the Committee stresses that equal recognition before the law and the right to independent living are inseparable. Without full legal capacity, people cannot genuinely choose where and with whom they live. Despite ratification of the Convention by all Member States, many continue to rely on institutional models that limit autonomy and participation.

During the plenary debate, rapporteur **Pietro Barbieri** thanked the Cypriot presidency for requesting the EESC to draft the opinion, which had allowed the Committee to shed more light on this issue.

'Unfortunately, there is still a long way to go: data indicates growing segregation. To break this vicious cycle, we need binding measures, starting with the European Union funds, and the adoption of Article 12 of the CRPD, from safeguards to decision-making support, Mr Barbieri added.

Although independent living is a key priority of the EU [Disability Strategy](#), the Committee highlights a persistent implementation gap. Institutionalisation remains widespread, while political inertia, limited accessible housing and inconsistent reforms slow progress. The opinion also warns against 'trans-institutionalisation', where smaller settings reproduce institutional practices without restoring control or decision-making.

A lack of reliable, harmonised data across the EU further hampers monitoring and accountability, allowing setbacks to remain hidden. The EESC calls for improved data collection with the involvement of disabled people's organisations (DPOs).

To address these shortcomings, the Committee urges EU funds to stop financing segregation, calls for mandatory national de-institutionalisation strategies and stresses the need for a binding EU directive to give effect to Article 19 of the UNCPRD. Genuine inclusion, it concludes, requires accountability, partnership and a firm shift towards person-centred, community-based support that enables persons with disabilities to live with dignity, autonomy and full participation. (Im)



EESC URGES EU TO SHARPEN STRATEGIC FORESIGHT AND PREPARE FOR DISRUPTIVE FUTURES

The EU should take a bolder approach to long-term planning, with stress-tested scenarios and a stronger role for civil society

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has welcomed the European Commission's 2025 Strategic Foresight Report (SFR) but is urging the EU to take a far more ambitious approach to long-term preparedness.

In its [opinion](#) on the SFR, the EESC warns that the report remains too close to existing political trajectories and does not sufficiently consider possible external disruptions, the EU's innovation gaps, internal institutional challenges and the costs of delaying EU enlargement, which could all potentially reshape Europe's future.

'Strategic foresight should primarily support sustainable and inclusive well-being as part of the European social model. At the same time, it should take into account the current fragmentation of European capital markets, which severely constrains the efficient flow of capital to firms of all sizes, limiting innovation for SMEs and microenterprises', rapporteur **Philip von Brockdorff** said.

The EESC also calls for a more structured role for organised civil society in the EU's foresight cycle.

In its opinion, the EESC has called for a much sharper strategic edge and has issued several specific recommendations, such as moving beyond simply projecting current trends and instead exploring a range of alternative futures, including disruptive and pessimistic scenarios, while being more transparent about its methods and assumptions.

It recommends that the European Commission should address areas where the EU is lagging behind global competitors and where regulation may hinder innovation, warning that failure to do so risks weakening Europe's position. Strengthening the Savings and Investments Union is crucial to improving capital flow, especially for SMEs, alongside the creation of EU-wide resilience metrics to support better policymaking.

It also calls for greater attention to smaller businesses and less-developed regions, a more strategic approach to labour migration given demographic decline, and an examination of the EU's own governance systems in light of technological change and potential enlargement. Finally, it stresses the importance of incorporating detailed scenarios on climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, including the costs of inaction and potential regulatory responses.

The Strategic Foresight Report is the EU's annual examination of global megatrends and long-term developments likely to influence the EU up to 2040. (II)



THE EU'S ELECTRICITY GRIDS MUST BE STRONG, SMART AND SECURE

The EESC says that the European Union needs a sustainable, secure and affordable energy supply and that it must be seen as a public good for EU prosperity, economic and social development and competitiveness.

In the [opinion](#) adopted at the March plenary session and drafted by **Thomas Kattnig**, the EESC stresses the economic importance of the energy system, as mentioned in the Draghi report. Energy prices play a pivotal role in overall inflation; therefore, it is essential to lower network costs to avoid further increases in grid tariffs.

‘Europe needs strong, smart and secure electricity grids,’ said **Mr Kattnig** during the plenary session. ‘They must be organised as a public good that guarantees security of supply, sustainability and affordability.’

In the opinion, the EESC underlines that grid development should be well coordinated with the current requirements arising from renewable energy integration as well as with the targeted energy mix and the structure of electricity generation.

The EESC also adds that it is essential to prioritise the efficient use of existing grids, placing optimisation before expansion, supported by flexibility solutions.

More specifically, the EESC supports expanding decentralised energy generation, which can lower the pressure on the grid – and so reduce the need for grid expansion – and increase public acceptance of the energy transition.

At the same time, the EU needs better coordination on electricity grids. This is why the EESC calls for stronger EU coordination in grid governance while maintaining Member States’ responsibility for planning and oversight as the costs of grid expansion, congestion management and stability are primarily borne by the Member States.

The Committee also underlines the importance of accelerating the digitalisation of electricity networks and ensuring that network development plans align with national energy and climate plans (NECPs). (mp)



[HOW EUROPE CAN SUPPORT ITS BIOTECH SECTOR](#)

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has adopted a new [opinion](#), urging the EU to accelerate biotechnology development, warning that Europe risks falling behind global competitors while patients face delays in accessing

new treatments.

The opinion responds to the European Commission’s recent proposals under the European Biotech Act, aiming to streamline biotech regulation, promote large-scale investment, and support innovation. While expanding rapidly worldwide, much of the investment and production in biotechnology is taking place in the United States and China. According to the EESC, this is the result of long-standing structural weaknesses. ‘We must address gaps in venture capital and speed up clinical trials to ensure patients benefit sooner from innovative medicines,’ said the EESC rapporteur of the opinion, **Joan Roget Alemany**.

The impact goes beyond industrial competitiveness. Dependence on external suppliers creates risks for supply and resilience whereas delays in innovation mean that patients in Europe may wait longer to access life-saving treatments. To address this, the EESC calls for a stronger European biotech ecosystem linking research, investment and production.

A central issue is funding. To encourage growth, the EESC supports a two-year 'capital booster' financial pilot to attract private investment. At the same time, it calls for closer links between universities, research centres and industry to ensure scientific breakthroughs reach the market. Targeted incentives for innovation should further support investment.

On regulation, the EESC identifies complexities and inconsistencies across Member States as a major obstacle. To reduce delays and make the EU more attractive for innovation, it proposes clearer and more harmonised procedures. Moreover, the Committee backs regulatory sandboxes to test new technologies, if they are aligned across the EU and consider 'social acceptability'.

The EESC stresses that speeding up innovation must not weaken safeguards. Biotech applications should continue to undergo strict checks before reaching the market. The Committee further supports a digital by default approach, including the use of artificial intelligence in clinical trials, when clear rules are in place and human oversight is maintained. It also highlights the need to strengthen clinical trials in Europe. Prevention should play a larger role, alongside more inclusive approaches to ensure access for all patient groups.

The Committee is assertive that simplification must not become deregulation. Protections for workers, the environment and health and safety must be maintained. To support the public's trust in biotechnology, the EESC calls for better communication and dialogue to ensure citizens understand both the benefits and the risks. (gb/je)



[EESC CALLS FOR BALANCED SIMPLIFICATION OF EU DIGITAL RULES TO BOOST COMPETITIVENESS AND PROTECT RIGHTS](#)

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has welcomed the European Commission's proposals to simplify the EU's digital rulebook, stressing that simplification must strengthen competitiveness without weakening fundamental rights, social standards or legal certainty.

In its [opinion](#) on the Digital and AI Omnibus, the EESC underlined that cutting red tape can bring immediate relief to businesses, administrations and citizens, but warned against lowering existing safeguards, particularly those enshrined in the GDPR and the AI Act.

'Companies, workers and consumers need clear, coherent rules that reduce compliance risks and administrative burdens, without lowering standards in substance,' said rapporteur **Heiko Willems**. He added that fragmentation, duplicative requirements and unclear definitions continue to hamper innovation and growth.

A key priority is to clarify and harmonise core definitions across EU digital legislation, including personal data, data holder and placing on the market, in order to reduce legal uncertainty.

The EESC also called for clearer rules on anonymised and pseudonymised data to support innovation, while ensuring strong protection of personal data and respect for data minimisation principles. It emphasised the importance of ensuring access to personal data for legitimate purposes, such as protecting workers' rights and health and safety.

On the AI Omnibus, the EESC reaffirmed its support for a risk-based and proportionate approach that enables innovation while safeguarding fundamental and workers' rights.

Co-rapporteur **Angelo Pagliara** stressed the importance of involving workers' representatives whenever AI is introduced in the workplace, ensuring full respect for consultation rights and robust oversight.

The EESC also welcomed plans to reduce administrative burden through a genuinely interoperable EU single entry point for reporting obligations under NIS2, GDPR, DORA, eIDAS and CER. Such a system would allow companies to reuse information, submit reports in English and benefit from streamlined procedures, easing compliance while strengthening cybersecurity and resilience.

Finally, the EESC recognised the need to ensure a simplified regulatory framework for SMEs and small mid-caps, while at the same time stressing that such simplified regimes must apply only to genuinely independent companies, in line with EU definitions, to prevent misuse. (II)



[TRANSPORT – EESC URGES THE COMMISSION TO MAINTAIN A CLEAR SIGNAL FOR ZERO AND LOW-EMISSION CORPORATE VEHICLES](#)

The EESC urges the European Commission to maintain a clear and credible long-term signal in favour of zero-emission vehicles. At the same time, when used primarily in an electric mode, low-emissions vehicles can act as a short and mid-term enabler of alternative fuel infrastructure and support industrial adaptation.

In the [opinion](#) adopted at the March plenary session and drawn up by **Corina Murafa Benga**, the Committee assesses the European Commission's proposal on *Clean Corporate Vehicles*.

In the EESC's view, the proposed Regulation should prioritise zero-emission vehicles but also recognise the transitional role which low-emission vehicles can play by supporting industrial adaptation in the short and medium term, preserving quality jobs and maintaining the European automotive sector's competitiveness.

This approach provides companies and workers with the time needed to invest, innovate and reskill, facilitating an orderly transition towards full electrification while safeguarding Europe's industrial and social fabric.

The EESC takes note of the proposed EU-wide, demand-side approach to clean corporate vehicles. However, it underlines that national targets should not be lower than what the market is already delivering, must not turn into company-based targets when the Regulation is introduced, and must be accompanied by an effective roll-out of supporting charging infrastructure and adequate capacity of the electricity grids, to safeguard business competitiveness.

The Committee also calls on Member States to consider tax incentives for decarbonising corporate fleets, including by removing direct and indirect advantages for fossil-fuel company cars.

National tax frameworks for corporate vehicles remain one of the most powerful demand-side levers. Aligning company car taxation, benefit-in-kind rules and depreciation schemes with the Regulation's objectives can speed up purchasing decisions, influence vehicle use patterns and support timely fleet renewal. (mp)



WTO MINISTERIAL IN YAOUNDÉ: LIMITED RESULTS BUILD A PLURILATERAL MOMENTUM

From 26 to 29 March, the EESC took part in the World Trade Organisation's 14th Ministerial Conference in Yaoundé, Cameroon. Mira-Maria Danisman, Chair of the EESC International

Trade Follow-up Committee, reports on a conference that delivered few concrete results.

By Mira-Maria Danisman

The 14th WTO Ministerial Conference in Yaoundé, Cameroon, brought together WTO members and stakeholders at a time of rising geopolitical tensions and increasing fragmentation in global trade. The objective was clear: to take stock of the multilateral trading system and push forward long-overdue reforms. Yet despite modest expectations, the meeting delivered few concrete outcomes – highlighting once again how difficult it has become to move the WTO forward.

At the centre of the discussions was the WTO reform process, which many had hoped would be politically endorsed and launched at ministerial level. The reform agenda aims to tackle fundamental challenges – from decision-making and dispute settlement to the scope of WTO rules. While there was broad agreement on the importance of a predictable, rules-based system, members failed to converge on the way forward. As a result, the file returns to Geneva, with no clear timeline for progress. Disagreements on the e-commerce moratorium – particularly on the length of its extension – further complicated the negotiations and contributed to the stalemate.

Where multilateral efforts stalled, plurilateral initiatives continued to move ahead. Progress was made on e-commerce, investment facilitation, and domestic regulation in services, reflecting a growing shift towards 'coalitions of the willing.' At the same time, the interim dispute settlement mechanism (MPIA) expanded its membership, now covering around 60% of global trade and helping to keep dispute resolution functioning

despite the paralysis of the Appellate Body.

Discussions also touched on topics such as agriculture and systemic imbalances, but – as in previous ministerials – these issues remain politically sensitive and largely unresolved.

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) delegation was actively engaged in Yaoundé, exchanging with a broad range of stakeholders. It stressed the need to preserve a strong multilateral trading system while ensuring that trade policy supports sustainability, social standards, and economic resilience. The delegation also highlighted the key role of civil society in fostering transparency and trust, both of which are currently in short supply.

Looking ahead, the path to the next ministerial remains uncertain. Advancing WTO reform will be critical, but equally challenging. In the meantime, plurilateral initiatives are likely to continue shaping the agenda. Rebuilding trust among members will be essential if the WTO is to regain momentum.



EUROPE DAY LIVE AT THE EESC ? EXPERIENCE EUROPE LIKE NEVER BEFORE!

On 9 May, the Committee will once again mark Europe Day alongside other institutions across the European Union, celebrating the anniversary of the Schuman Declaration, a historic milestone that laid the foundations of European integration.

On this occasion, the EESC is opening its doors to the public! We invite you to visit the EESC's Jacques Delors building in Brussels on 9 May from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., and discover the Committee's work and its unique role in representing organised civil society within the European Union.

We have prepared a rich programme. Across the building, thematic stands will present the EESC's priorities and its 2026 opinions. A puzzle-based discovery activity will allow you to explore them by collecting stickers and completing a visual puzzle, giving you a chance to get to know the EESC's work first-hand! Our members will be there to share their expertise on a wide range of EU-related topics.

Your presence will help bring Europe closer to its citizens and make this day a truly engaging and memorable experience for all!

Don't miss out on Europe Day – be part of it!

Additional information: [Europe Day 2026 | EESC](#)



[VOTE NOW FOR THE EESC YOUTH TEST AT THE EU OMBUDSMAN AWARD](#)

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has been nominated for the 2026 European Ombudsman Award for Good Administration with its Youth Test initiative.

The Award recognises projects from EU institutions, bodies and agencies that have made a tangible difference in the lives of citizens. This year, 48 initiatives are in the running. The Youth Test is nominated in the category *Excellence in diversity and inclusion*.

Please find the full list of nominated projects [here](#).

The EESC's Youth Test reflects the Committee's long-standing commitment to bringing young people into EU policymaking. As the first EU institution to introduce this tool, the EESC ensures that young people's perspectives are actively considered in selected opinions, with direct involvement in consultations on issues that affect them.

Public voting is now open until 15 June 2026 (midnight CET).

Vote here: [Award for Good Administration 2026](#)

The most popular project will be chosen by public vote. Category winners will be selected separately by the EU Ombudswoman and announced at a ceremony in June. (gb)

NEWS FROM THE GROUPS



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[SUPPORTING YOUNG EUROPEANS TURN AMBITION INTO ENTREPRENEURSHIP](#)

By Jean-Michel Pottier, EESC Employers' Group member

Almost 40% of young Europeans dream of becoming entrepreneurs. This ambition represents a major opportunity for Europe's competitiveness, innovation and social cohesion.

At EU level, financial support, mentoring, high-quality incubation and training programmes can provide a solid foundation for young entrepreneurs, but these efforts must be supported by a stable and predictable regulatory framework.

Entrepreneurship must also be nurtured through education and vocational training. Entrepreneurial thinking should be embedded across learning pathways, from schools to lifelong learning, and applied not only to business creation but also to social, cultural and sports initiatives. In this context, dual education and apprenticeships play a key role by combining theory with practical experience. Many successful craftspeople and SME owners in Europe started their careers this way.

Access to finance remains one of the main barriers for young entrepreneurs. Tailored grants, micro-finance and capitalisation instruments are crucial, but funding alone is not enough. Strategic guidance and sound project evaluation are essential to strengthen business viability and reduce risk. While most Member States already offer personalised support schemes, these measures should be scaled up and more widely adopted at EU level.

Targeted strategies to promote self-employment and female entrepreneurship show strong potential for job creation. Inclusive support must reach all young people who wish to start or take over a business, helping to reinforce equal opportunities and social cohesion.

In addition, closing the digital divide, improving access to technology and developing AI-related skills are vital for innovation and competitiveness. Supporting SME internationalisation through mobility, networking and expanded programmes such as Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs, will also help young business leaders access new markets.

By creating the right conditions today, Europe can empower young people to turn entrepreneurial ambition into sustainable business and therefore a prosperous economy.



WHAT IS YOUTH WITHOUT A FUTURE?

By the EESC Workers' Group

Youth has always been a complicated period to navigate, including studying, entering the workforce, and becoming independent. These challenges, shared across generations, have long made young people more vulnerable in the face of economic and societal instability.

However, the accumulation of unresolved crises has created a perfect storm. The financial crash, the climate emergency, the pandemic, the development of AI and ongoing geopolitical tensions have not come in isolation, they have overlapped and reinforced one another. For many young people, crisis is no longer an exception but just their normal daily life.

As a result, the traditional milestones of adulthood, including stable employment, affordable housing, and financial security, are increasingly out of reach. Precarious work replaces long-term careers, rent consumes most of the income, and the promise that each generation will live better than the last feels broken.

This situation has profound societal consequences. This is why we need to support young people and create a youth friendly society where they can thrive. Delivering quality jobs, and affordable housing and cost of living is the only way we can give our youth their future back. A society where our bodies age, but our lives

are stuck in temporary contracts, where life milestones remain unachievable, and where young people get old without being allowed to transition to adulthood, is not viable.



FROM LARNACA TO THE ENTIRE EU: ANNITA DEMETRIOU SETS OUT CYPRUS? PERSPECTIVE ON CLIMATE, SUSTAINABILITY AND FOOD SECURITY

The EU needs a long-term vision that takes greater account of geographic specificities. Sustainable water management and food security must become top priorities, with food security and biodiversity going hand in hand.

By the EESC Civil Society Organisations' Group

These are some of the main messages from a [conference](#) organised by the Civil Society Organisations' Group of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) on 22 April 2026 in Larnaca. They must be considered in light of global uncertainties and growing risks to food supply chains, as well as the upcoming EU strategy for islands and coastal communities.

The conference, held under the patronage of the Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the European Union, focused on climate adaptation, food security and biodiversity, particularly from the island dimension. It also emphasised the importance of civil society, and in particular the EESC, in informing EU policies that are more efficient and that can be successfully implemented.

In his opening remarks, **Cillian Lohan**, President of the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group, outlined the objectives of the conference: 'Our conference is not only about identifying challenges – which islands like Cyprus are often the first, fastest and most affected by – but also about exchanging solutions, learning from each other and strengthening cooperation between local, national and European actors.'

Mr Lohan highlighted the importance of communities' ability to adapt, transform and thrive, even under pressure, in other words – resilience, explaining that 'policies alone are not enough to build resilience. People – farmers, researchers, local authorities, cooperatives, consumers and civil society organisations – need to be empowered to work together.'

The issue of resilience was also addressed by **Annita Demetriou**, President of the Cypriot House of Representatives: 'Resilience depends not only on the design of policies, but also on their effective implementation and the cooperation of all stakeholders. For real impact, we need synergies between different sectors and institutions.' The genuine involvement of all stakeholders, including civil society organisations, would be crucial for the success of policies.

Ms Demetriou spoke about the legislative and parliamentary efforts of the Republic of Cyprus in this sense, emphasising that climate change, water scarcity, food insecurity and biodiversity loss are closely intertwined global challenges that no single country could tackle alone. She concluded by calling for greater European solidarity and the full integration of the 'island dimension' into EU policies, encouraging participants: 'We must transform our shared challenges into concrete opportunities for sustainability, resilience and long-term prosperity.'

Ms Demetriou invited the Cypriot members of the Civil Society Organisations' Group to present the outcomes of the conference to the House of Representatives' Agriculture Committee.

Andreas Gregoriou, Permanent Secretary of the Cypriot Ministry of Agriculture, Rural Development and Environment, said: 'Water resilience is no longer just an environmental concern – it is a strategic priority for Europe's climate adaptation, food security and economic stability. From the perspective of Cyprus, strengthened EU policies must also reflect the specific realities of island and water-scarce regions, while promoting sustainable resource management and biodiversity. Building resilient agri-food systems is essential not only for sustainability, but for ensuring long-term security and stability across the European Union.'

The conference featured the presentation of two recent EESC opinions entitled [EU Water Resilience Strategy and European Climate Resilience and Risk Management Integrated Framework](#) and [The Island Dimension in European Cohesion, Competitiveness and Sustainable Development Policies](#), both of which were prepared at the request of the Cyprus Presidency.

The event brought together around 100 representatives from institutions and civil society from across the 27 EU Member States. Participants stressed that cohesion, competitiveness and sustainability policies in particular need to take greater account of geographic specificities. Resilient communities require healthy ecosystems, fair incomes for producers, resilient local supply chains and responsible consumption. Future policies should value quality and sustainability of food supply, not just productivity.

The findings of the conference will feed into the work of the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group, whose [work programme](#) focuses, among other things, on the promotion of the sustainable agenda and building resilient communities. The event's conclusions and recommendations will be published on the EESC website soon.

IN FOCUS: YOUNG PEOPLE



PUTTING YOUNG PEOPLE AT THE HEART OF EU POLICYMAKING

EESC's Youth Group aims to be a hub where young people's concerns and ideas can be heard and transformed into concrete policy recommendations, writes its president Nicoletta Merlo

By Nicoletta Merlo, President of the EESC Youth Group

My professional and personal journey has always been closely linked to one core belief: young people must have a say in decisions that shape their present and their future. This objective underpins the work of the EESC Youth Group, created in July 2023 to strengthen youth participation and to better reflect young people's realities, priorities and expectations in the Committee's work.

Today, the Youth Group's mission goes beyond formal mandates. Alongside overseeing tools such as the EESC Youth Test and supporting youth-related EESC initiatives, we aim to be a hub where young people's concerns, ideas and proposals can be heard and transformed into concrete policy recommendations. Listening to young people across Europe — including from neighbouring and candidate countries — and translating their voices into the EESC's work remains a priority.

The year 2026 will be particularly significant. The Youth Group will hold regular meetings with thematic debates and take part in major moments such as European Youth Week and Council Presidency Youth Conferences. Some topics identified for this year include the responsible and safe use of AI, combatting disinformation, and the cooperation with candidate country youth organisations. These milestones will also seek to contribute to the next EU Youth Strategy to be adopted in 2027.

Our ambition is clear: to ensure that youth perspectives are not consulted only occasionally but embedded permanently in how EU policies are shaped — today, and for generations to come.



YOUR EUROPE, YOUR SAY 2026: YOUNG EUROPEANS SPEAK OUT ON THEIR PRIORITIES FOR THE NEXT EU YOUTH STRATEGY

100 young participants in the European Economic and Social Committee's (EESC) top youth event *Your Europe, Your Say!* called on the EU institutions to pay far more attention to their housing needs, challenges in the digital world and their potential in political and social life. Their proposals will feed into the EU's next strategy for young people.

'Go big or NO home', 'Think before you click: Make Privacy Sexy Again' and 'Nothing about us without us', were voted as three best proposals among 17 created by more than a hundred young people who took part in the **17th edition of *Your Europe, Your Say!* (YEYS)** on 19 and 20 March 2026 in Brussels.

The three winning proposals reflect the top concerns and priorities that young people consider to be crucial for the next EU Youth Strategy. They address the acute housing problem in Europe, challenges of living in a digital world and the feeling of not being heard by politicians.

The event brought together almost 140 participants, including secondary school students and their teachers, as well as young adults associated with youth organisations. Over one and a half days, the participants took

part in interactive workshops, teambuilding activities and collaborative discussions, creating a dynamic youth assembly focused on **meaningful connections, active participation and democratic engagement**.

‘At the EESC, we believe that young people must be at the heart of shaping Europe’s future. Creating spaces where they can meet, exchange ideas, challenge perspectives and build solutions is vital’, stressed **Séamus Boland**, EESC President.

At the YEYS opening plenary, speakers shared insights from their social and political activism and the challenges they had faced. **Carolin Hochstrat** of *The Democratic Spin* advised young people never to let anyone persuade them that they are too young to speak out on important social issues. She urged them not to wait for others to affirm that they are ready to take action, reminding them that perfect readiness does not exist.

Boris Gurzhy from Junior Enterprise, urged young people to make their voices heard themselves, rather than simply waiting to be invited to participate in decision-making processes. ‘European politicians, from the Commission and Parliament, talk a lot about young people, which is great, but they do not really talk to them. So, it is up to us. It is up to young people to take the initiative, reach out, and participate in EU decision-making processes’, he said.

MORE ON THE THREE WINNING PROPOSALS

In the closing session, YEYS participants selected three proposals by vote, solidifying their priorities.

The first proposal **‘Go big or NO home’**, focuses on housing and calls for stricter oversight of tourist apartments to help safeguard local community life. It includes ideas for regulating tourist apartments, renters’ rights regulations and guaranteed affordable student housing.

The second proposal **‘Think before you click: Make Privacy Sexy Again’**, aims to increase media literacy in the public sphere by introducing it as a school subject, labelling AI-generated content and improving digital conditions through an EU-funded app.

The final proposal, **‘Nothing about us without us’**, tackles the feeling among young people that their voices go unheard. It suggests developing an AI-based digital platform offering information on the EU and targeting underrepresented groups, such as migrants, to foster their engagement and enhance communication among young people.

All the proposals will be passed on to the European Commission to inform its work on the next EU Youth Strategy, due to be published in March 2027.

Marija Hanževački, EESC Vice President for Communication, indicated that the proposals would be reflected in the future EESC opinion on the next EU Youth strategy and the EESC’s advisory work, including through the implementation of the EU Youth Test and advisory work of the Youth Group.

Ingrid Bellander Todino, Head of the Youth and Volunteer Solidarity Unit in DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, further pledged to focus on the proposals and recommendations formulated as part of the European Commission’s work on the next EU Youth strategy.

A recap on YEYS 2026 is captured in the event’s [wrap-up video](#).



A MESSAGE TO YOUNG PEOPLE: YOU ARE NOT TOO YOUNG TO GET INVOLVED

Be architects of Europe's present, not just its future, and join forces with other young people to make your voice heard! These were the words young activists and speakers Carolin Hochstrat and Boris Gurzhy left with 2026 YEYS-ers in Brussels. If you missed their speeches at *Your Europe, Your Say (YEYS)*, Carolin and Boris recap their messages in EESC Info.

Carolin Hochstrat: Young people are often introduced with the phrase: '*You are the architects of Europe's future.*' And while well-intentioned, I'd push back on that framing – because you are not only the architects of tomorrow's Europe. You are already part of Europe today. That was the foundation of my message to the YEYS participants, built around three core ideas.

First: when people tell you that you're too young, they're wrong. You are already a member of society, already shaping the communities around you. The idea that engagement starts at some future threshold, when you're older, more experienced, more credentialed, is a myth. You are already here, and that means you are already relevant.

Second: discomfort is a signal, not a warning. If you want to change the status quo, you have to challenge it. And challenging the status quo is unsettling, for you, and for those around you. But when you notice that people are reacting, that something is shifting, that emotions are being stirred, that's not a sign to stop. That's a sign you're on the right track.

Third: you will never feel fully ready, and that's okay. There is no perfect moment to raise your voice or take your seat at the table. What matters is that we need your voice. Your generation's issues deserve space in policy rooms, not as a footnote to older agendas, but as central concerns in their own right.

It can feel daunting. But we are fighting together for a stronger Europe, and that is worth stepping beyond your comfort zone!

Boris Gurzhy: My message to the participants of YEYS 2026 was simple: make your voice count by joining forces with others. At a time when demographic change is reshaping many European societies, it is more important than ever that young people are not only heard, but are actively involved in shaping the future.

In my opinion, the most effective ways to take part in public discussion and create real impact is through organised civil society. That is why I encouraged participants to look closely at the opportunities already available in their city or country: youth organisations, student-led initiatives, NGOs and other spaces where young people can come together around shared ideas and concerns.

These experiences allow young people to meet each other, learn from one another, develop responsibility and strengthen their collective voice. They show that participation is not only about speaking up once, but about building communities that can be heard consistently and effectively.

Explore what already exists and get involved. And where such opportunities do not yet exist, create them yourselves. It does not have to be a Junior Enterprise; it can be any form of organised youth initiative. What matters is that young people come together, take ownership, and make their perspectives visible in society.

Carolin Hochstrat is a political communicator and Co-Founder of *The Democratic Spin*, a strategic communications consultancy for democratic impact. In her work, she advises institutions and democratic actors on how to translate complex policies into narratives that resonate with younger generations in a digital public sphere. She has gained professional experience in the European Parliament, the German Bundestag and in political journalism. Alongside her advisory work, she is an EU content creator engaging young Europeans online.

Boris Gurzhy studies Business Administration and Statistics at Humboldt University Berlin. He joined a Junior Enterprise in his first year in university and later became involved with Junior Enterprises Europe (JE Europe), a network representing 35,000+ students across 325 Junior Enterprises in 16 countries. He now serves as Treasurer & Head of Public Affairs at JE Europe, representing young entrepreneurs at European institutions.



DANGERS OF ‘YOUTH-WASHING’: MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE SHOULD NOT MEAN HAVING ONE TOKEN YOUNG PERSON IN THE ROOM

How do we move away from ‘youth-washing’, where youth participation primarily produces a photo-op, rather than dialogue in which young people contribute effectively? The youngest EESC member, Laure Niclot, set out the prerequisites for the meaningful engagement of all young people, and not just the privileged few.

By Laure Niclot

Opportunities for youth participation at EU level are multiplying: youth dialogues with Commissioners; an EU youth dialogue soon entering its 12th cycle, which makes it the widest youth participation mechanism on the planet; participatory initiatives organised by different institutions (such as the EESC’s *Your Europe Your Say*); and even a direct advisory board to Ursula von der Leyen made up of young people.

Youth participation, in its institutional form, is there for youth organisations ready to make their voices heard. But once we have put in the work, time, and energy to contribute, what happens next? How are young people actually taken into account?

Too many youth participation experiences simply result in nice photos of young people next to politicians, along with empty promises. While any exercise in participation is valuable – because it allows young people who never thought they would set foot in an institution to experience what policy-making is and realise that

they have every right to contribute – we have to underline how dangerous it might be to let ourselves slide towards ‘youth-washing’. If we let the initial experience of policy participation be more of a communication exercise than one of dialogue, how are we going to continue to ask young people to contribute to the institutional game, or simply to vote?

And let’s be honest: youth organisations, like all NGOs, are underfunded and understaffed. We do it because we believe in the value of defending youth rights, of defending our right to live in a world that’s worth hoping for, and of defending our liberties and freedoms in the face of authoritarianism. As those who will enjoy (or suffer) the consequences of the decisions we make today, I’d say we have earned our seat at the table.

So how do we step away from youth-washing and create the conditions for meaningful engagement?

I would say three ingredients are key here, including structural follow-up (which requires the necessary means) and actual representation.

Structural follow-up means organising forms of youth participation not as one-off events but as tools that are there to support meaningful, long-lasting contributions. In that regard, the EESC’s youth test is one of the best examples in the EU. And of course, to support that, we need to ensure that young people are supported, both technically and financially.

Because youth participation that only allows the representation of socio-economically privileged young people is definitely not satisfactory: there is no such thing as ‘youth’, but rather ‘individual young people’. Young people come from rural and urban areas; they are pupils, students, young workers, or somewhere in between; they come from different socio-economic backgrounds and have different migration- and gender-related experiences; their voices echo the diversity of our societies. We need to make room for all young people, and that means not just having one token young person in the room.

Youth participation is one of the ways we can open the door for the next generation of decision-makers. Let’s be careful to keep these doors actually open for all, and not feed the idea that contributing is meaningless unless you’re already in a position of power.



[A YEYS VISIT TO A KYIV CLASSROOM UNDER RUSSIAN BOMBS](#)

Like every year, EESC members visited secondary schools participating in *Your Europe, Your Say!* (YEYS) to help students and teachers prepare for the event. In mid-March EESC member Michael McLoughlin went to Ukraine to meet the students and teachers from Lyceum 49 in Kyiv. Although half of the visit took place in the school basement as bombs and missiles rained on the Ukrainian capital, the spirit of young Ukrainians remained undeterred.

By Michael McLoughlin

Lyceum 49 is a school in central Kyiv very much focussed on the French language and an obvious candidate for participation in *Your Europe Your Say*. However, it's possible staff and students had more on their mind than the European Economic and Social Committee on the morning of 16 March. As it happened this morning marked the first missile and drone attacks on Kyiv in about six months following many weekend alerts. Material actually fell on Maidan Square in the centre of the city.

The school visit literally began during one of the many air alerts that morning, with students running between the shelter and the classroom. The students, however, were unflappable and actually in good spirits. Starting out in the basement shelter we discussed the possible opportunities for young people in Ukraine in the future, a recurring theme. Naturally the level of political, financial and defence support for Ukraine was a point of interest.

After a while we were able to move back to a normal classroom environment, which happened to be adorned with plenty of UK-related material on the walls – it was the day before Saint Patrick's Day! This actually helped make some visual points about free movement and Schengen. Students naturally wanted to know my views on Ukraine and Kyiv, which were at their best in the spring sunshine.

With air raid alerts and attacks in the city centre, it was not a normal day in Ukraine, but unfortunately it wasn't abnormal either. However, it was a testament to all involved and the spirit of 'business as usual' that we had a successful visit and afterwards the city got on with life in the streets, coffee shops and with traders and buskers getting on with life in the same spirit. I would particularly like to thank **Alyona Morozova** and **Oleksandra Balytska** for their help and assistance, both of whom, of course, went on to join us for the event in Brussels!



[ARE YOUNG EUROPEAN MEN MORE LIKELY TO VOTE FAR RIGHT THAN YOUNG WOMEN?](#)

Although research on the gender gap in young people's political preferences is still limited, recent studies suggest that far-right parties in Europe attract substantially more support from young men than from young women, with noticeable differences among countries. In a pessimistic scenario, a deepening divide in political values could affect everyday social relations – shaping how people form and maintain relationships, potentially increasing loneliness and making it harder for some to find a partner. EESC Info discussed this trend with Đorđe Milosav, postdoctoral researcher at the University of Bergen, whose work focuses on gendered patterns in politics.

Your recent article highlights a significant divergence in far-right support between young men and women. Could you briefly outline the core findings of your research and how this gender

gap compares to historical trends in youth political engagement?

In our [recent article](#), we find that far-right parties in Europe are attracting noticeably more support from young men than from young women. In 2024, support among young men in Europe reached just over 21%, compared to about 14% among women of the same age group.

It's important to note, however, that this gender gap isn't the same everywhere. When we looked at countries individually, the pattern varied: the gap appears quite large in Spain and Poland for example, more moderate in Germany and Italy, and seems to be nonexistent in Sweden and the Netherlands.

This is an area of very active research, and there's still a lot to understand. For example, in ongoing work with co-authors, I am exploring whether economic shocks affect young and older men (and women) support for far-right parties differently, and whether the importance young people place on their gender identity in this context plays a role in shaping their political choices.

Beyond just voting numbers, are there specific ideological shifts that you have observed in how young men versus young women interpret far-right narratives? Are there particular issues where this generational and gender divide is most pronounced?

It's still difficult to draw firm conclusions, as research in this area, specifically focusing on the younger cohorts, is still relatively limited. What we do know for instance is that sexist attitudes are an important factor in explaining support for far-right parties in Spain (see paper [here](#)). As men are more likely to have sexist attitudes, they might find far-right parties promoting such stances more appealing. We also know that young women, on average, tend to hold more progressive or liberal views, which may make them less receptive to far-right narratives. A recent study for example points that the gender gap among Generation Z is particularly pronounced on affirmative action issues and anti-discrimination policies such as gender quotas in politics and school reforms for less gender-stereotypical teaching (see paper [here](#)).

If this trend persists, what are the long-term consequences that you see, in particular when regarding democratic stability and social cohesion in Europe?

If we take a more pessimistic view, growing differences in attitudes between young men and women could lead to wider social effects. For example, stronger polarisation might make it harder for people to form and maintain relationships, potentially affecting family formation, increasing loneliness, and lowering the overall quality of personal relationships.

Over time, these shifts could also influence broader demographic patterns, such as birth and divorce rates. If these trends become widespread, they could weaken social cohesion which in turn may pose challenges for the long-term health and stability of democratic systems. As research is still developing, much of this remains uncertain.

As academics and members of civil society, we need to approach these issues with care and avoid scapegoating any group in the process.

In your working paper with Hanna Bäck and Emma Renström, you explore the role of male influencers in combating misogyny and reducing intergroup threat. Could male influencers serve as a bridge in digital spaces that currently amplify polarising narratives?

Our initial hunch is that the answer to this question is yes, but our results paint a bit of a bleaker picture. In our working paper, we conducted a survey experiment where participants were shown the same message (an Instagram post) from a hypothetical male influencer, but we varied how his political background was described. What we found is that this background mattered: people were more likely to say they would like or share the post when the influencer was presented as being politically aligned with them. So, left-leaning respondents responded more positively when the influencer was described as left-leaning, and the same pattern held for right-leaning respondents when the influencer was described as right-leaning.

What's striking is that this happened even though the message itself was identical in all cases. In other words, *who* delivers the message matters much more than what is being said.

At the same time, we didn't find evidence that these messages changed people's underlying misogynistic attitudes. Taken together, I think this hints at a broader point: gender issues are highly politicised today, and messages about them can act as signals of political identity, rather than simply being evaluated on their own terms.

Dorđe Milosav is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the [SUCCESS project](#) at the University of Bergen. Previously, he held a postdoctoral position in Political Behaviour at Humboldt University of Berlin and received his PhD in Political Science from Trinity College Dublin. His current work is looking at gendered patterns of political attitudes and behaviour among both voters and politicians in Europe.



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INTERGENERATIONAL FAIRNESS: AGE-WEIGHTED REFERENDUMS COULD GIVE YOUNG PEOPLE MORE SAY OVER LONG-TERM DECISIONS

Young people are often told their political turn later will come later. But they are the ones who will live longest with the consequences of decisions taken today. When political choices risk causing long-term harm and cannot easily be reversed, democratic safeguards such as intergenerational commissions and age-weighted referendums may be needed to ensure that concerns and interests of young people are not sidelined, says Nicola Mulkeen, Lecturer in Political Philosophy at UK's Newcastle University, in an EESC interview.

Your research highlights the significant risks that ageing demographics pose to democratic processes. Could you explain the specific mechanisms by which an older electorate can systematically disadvantage younger generations?

In ageing democracies, older people make up a larger share of the electorate and they also tend to vote in higher numbers. This gives them more power to shape election outcomes. Politicians are usually most responsive to the groups that are largest and most able to influence public debate. The result is a political system that can become skewed towards the interests of older voters while younger people's concerns are

more easily delayed or ignored.

This would be less troubling if the decisions made under these conditions were easily reversible. Many are not. If a government delays climate action because the immediate political costs seem too high, younger generations will live with more extreme weather and deeper insecurity. If biodiversity is destroyed, the damage to ecosystems and food systems may be impossible to repair. If a government borrows to avoid present sacrifice, younger people will be left paying the bill through higher taxes, weaker services, and less freedom to respond to problems of their own. When military conscription is imposed, it is the young who are required to train, prepare to fight, and perhaps die.

So, it is not enough to say that young people will have their political turn later. By then the damage might already have been done. Some harms cannot be undone. Others can only be reversed at very great cost. Younger people are therefore not just temporarily less powerful. They are the ones who will live with the consequences the longest when they had the weakest voice.

In your paper, you propose age weighted referendums and intergenerational commissions as a dual mechanism for addressing intergenerational tensions. Could you explain how these solutions could work in practice?

My proposal is aimed at political decisions that may cause significant long-term harm and are difficult to undo. The idea is to create stronger electoral safeguards in exceptional cases where younger and future generations will carry the weight of those decisions.

In practice, the first safeguard would be an intergenerational commission, or commissioners working across government departments. This would be an independent public body made up of experts and youth representatives. Its role would be to identify laws or policies that create serious long-term risks of harm. The aim is to bring these cases out of the ordinary election cycle, where short-term pressures dominate, and to make their long-term implications clearer.

If the commission judged that a proposal created a serious risk of harm or injustice, it could trigger a targeted age-weighted referendum. One example would be a government deciding whether to approve major new oil extraction or delay climate action. In that case, everyone would still vote, but younger people's votes would carry greater weight because they are the ones most directly exposed to the long-term consequences. The point is to level things up. Younger people are often politically weaker even though they may have more at stake in long-term decisions.

Beyond your proposed reforms, what other policy interventions, whether at EU or national level, do you see as most promising for rebalancing intergenerational equity? Are there examples from member states that you'd highlight as models worth scaling?

Beyond age-weighted referendums and intergenerational commissions, the most promising interventions are those that make long-term thinking part of ordinary democratic decision-making. No single reform can solve the problem. What is needed is a broader approach that improves the political standing of younger people, strengthens legal protections for future generations, and makes governments answerable for the long-term effects of their choices.

Some reforms can easily be introduced. Civic and democratic education is one. If younger people are to participate meaningfully in public life, they need knowledge and institutional support. Expanding youth

representation also matters. Introducing youth quotas in legislatures could help address the current imbalance. Judicial review also matters where governments adopt laws that threaten the basic conditions future generations will need, such as climate stability.

There are already useful examples. Wales is often highlighted because its Well-being of Future Generations Act encourages public bodies to consider long-term consequences. At EU level, the appointment of a Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness suggests these questions are receiving more serious attention. Germany's 2021 Constitutional Court ruling on climate policy is a really important example because it recognised that governments should not be free to pass harmful burdens on to younger and future generations. None of these examples is a complete solution, but they show that democratic systems can be redesigned to take longer-term responsibilities more seriously.

Your work focuses on structural reform, but we have seen that social change also requires a shift in attitudes. What do you see as the most effective ways to build intergenerational solidarity rather than framing this as a zero-sum conflict between age groups?

I think it's really important not to frame intergenerational fairness as a conflict between the young and the old. The deeper problem is that many political systems are structured for the short term. They respond to immediate pressures and electoral demands more easily than to long-term risks. This means that they often fail to give proper weight to young people. If we want to build intergenerational solidarity, we need to move away from the language of trade-offs.

One of the best ways to do that is to recognise that properly investing in younger people is not a loss for older generations. In ageing societies, younger generations will be central to sustaining the institutions and services on which everyone depends. They will make up a large part of the workforce, support public finances, and provide care. So, investing in education, healthcare, and work opportunities for young people should be seen as a way of strengthening society. It is not about favouring one group over another.

***Nicola Mulkeen** is a Lecturer in Political Philosophy at Newcastle University. Her work sits at the intersection of politics, philosophy, and economics, with a particular focus on intergenerational justice and institutional reform for younger and future generations.*



[EESC's 1991 SUPPORT FOR ERASMUS: SETTING THE DIRECTION FOR YOUTH MOBILITY](#)

Long before Erasmus became a household name, the EESC was arguing that Europe's future depended on its young people. Its 1991 opinion, which advocated youth mobility and informal learning, helped set a course that still shapes EU education policy today. By throwing its support behind early European exchange initiatives, the EESC helped lay the groundwork for what would become Erasmus+, one of the most successful European programmes, which has so far enabled more than 15 million people to study and train abroad, writes EESC member Miroslav Hajnoš.

By Miroslav Hajnoš

In 1991, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted the opinion *Youth for Europe* (SOC/206). In this opinion, the EESC emphasised the importance of youth mobility, informal education and the active involvement of young people in building Europe. These ideas may sound obvious today, but at the time they represented a strong and necessary push towards a more people-centred European project.

In this opinion, and in the opinions that followed, the Committee played an important role in supporting and legitimising early European initiatives such as Erasmus. In a political environment where not all Member States were convinced of the value of expanding such programmes, this support sent a strong signal to the European Commission. It demonstrated that investing in young people, education and mobility was not only beneficial but necessary for the future of Europe.

The early 1990s were a time of major political and social transformation in Europe, and the Committee was already thinking ahead, identifying key priorities that would later become central pillars of European integration.

The EESC SOC/206 opinion already pointed to a broader vision of Europe.

That vision was simple but powerful. Europe should not be defined only by institutions, legislation or economic cooperation. It should be experienced by its citizens, especially by young people. The Committee therefore supported initiatives that enabled exchanges, cross-border cooperation and voluntary activities. These experiences were seen as essential for fostering mutual understanding, strengthening European identity and preparing young people to actively participate in society.

Importantly, the Committee also recognised that learning does not happen only in classrooms. It highlighted the value of non-formal and informal education, acknowledging that skills such as adaptability, intercultural communication and civic engagement are often developed outside traditional systems. This perspective was ahead of its time and continues to influence European policies on education and youth today.

Another crucial aspect was inclusiveness. Even in 1991, there was a clear understanding that European programmes should not be limited to a privileged few. The Committee supported measures to ensure that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds could also benefit from mobility and exchange opportunities. This commitment to inclusion remains a cornerstone of EU programmes.

Looking at the impact today, it is clear how important this early direction was. Erasmus+ has become one of the most successful European programmes, contributing to education, social cohesion and a stronger sense of European identity. It has enabled millions of people to study, train and gain experience abroad, shaping generations of Europeans.

In the recent opinion on Erasmus+, led by EESC members **Nicoletta Merlo** and **Katrīna Leitāne**, this effort clearly continues. The Committee calls for stronger youth participation, dedicated funding for youth, and more inclusive access, especially for disadvantaged young people. It also emphasises the importance of policy development as a key tool to empower young Europeans and ensure their active role in shaping society.

From 1991 to today, one thing is clear: youth is not just a topic; it is a strong and essential part of our European civil society. And as the EESC President has said, if civil society is the heart of Europe, then youth

is the energy that keeps it beating.

Without the early vision and support of institutions like the EESC, it is difficult to imagine Erasmus in its current form. We would certainly not be speaking about more than 15 million participants who have benefited from it over the years.

This shows that the direction set more than three decades ago was the right one. It also reminds us that strong and forward-looking policy decisions can have a lasting impact. The Europe we are building today stands on these foundations, and that is precisely why we can approach the future with confidence.



CHILDREN – A MINORITY WITHOUT PROTECTION

In their book 'Kinder - Minderheit ohne Schutz' (Children - A minority without protection), nominated for the 2025 German Non-Fiction Prize, Aladin El-Mafaalani, Sebastian Kurtenbach and Klaus Peter Strohmeier explore the widening gap between an ageing society and younger generations. Children's and young people's interests, they argue, carry little political weight and remain inadequately protected. Klaus Peter Strohmeier sets out the case for granting children minority protection status in an interview with *EESC Info*.

Your book argues that children constitute a 'minority without protection' in an ageing society. Can you give some specific examples of how the current political and economic structures systematically disadvantage children?

In our society, we witness a structural disregard for children and their families on a daily basis. Modern society is functionally differentiated and individualised. In an adult world geared towards efficiency and functionality, children are viewed as 'disruptive factors'.

This has created a demographic and democratic imbalance. Children are a demographic minority without political representation. They themselves have no right to vote, and their parents constitute only a minority among those eligible to vote. Some of them, moreover, have no citizenship and none of the rights that come with it. With half of the electorate being over 53, politics is primarily geared towards the status quo and the interests of older people.

This imbalance also has fiscal implications. A growing proportion of Germany's federal budget is spent on subsidising pensions, which in turn diverts necessary investment funds away from future-oriented sectors such as education, climate protection and infrastructure.

The interests of children and young people carry no political weight. During the coronavirus pandemic, for example, children were hit hardest with the school closures, even though they had the lowest risk to their health. The introduction of compulsory military service is also currently being negotiated in Germany without

consulting young people.

You argue that parents cannot be trusted proxies for children, much like men historically failed to champion women's rights. Given that the electorate is aging rapidly, what concrete steps would you propose to ensure democracy truly includes the youth?

We propose a three-step approach that goes beyond simply lowering the voting age, with the aim of effectively involving children and young people in our ageing democracy.

The first step is the establishment of 'Future Councils'. These would have to be attached to every parliament and consulted prior to political decisions to promote future-oriented policies. A further step is the introduction of a so-called 'generational clause', whereby every fundamental political decision must be transparently assessed for its consequences for future generations. A final step is to strengthen local participation. Children and young people should be consulted in their immediate environments, such as their neighbourhoods or schools, and be given genuine opportunities to be heard and to have a say.

You propose introducing formal minority protection status for children. Beyond symbolic recognition, what legal or institutional mechanisms would this entail? How would such protections change decision-making in areas like budget allocation, urban planning, or education policy?

A legal minority protection status for children would go beyond symbolic recognition and the appointment of powerless 'Children's Advocates'. The explicit inclusion of children's rights in the basic law, for example, would provide judges and politicians with clear legal guidance when weighing up different interests, much like the enshrined equality of women.

In terms of participation in legal proceedings, minority rights could create a legally binding substantive dimension that makes the protection of educational opportunities and natural resources enforceable.

Protection for minorities would also make it possible to exert a binding influence on the allocation of resources. Through this, resources relevant to the future, such as investment in education, would have to be treated as a priority, rather than being lost in the battle for resources with the older generations.

Introducing minority protections would be a structural reform, but we have seen that social change also requires a shift in attitudes. What do you see as the most effective ways to build intergenerational solidarity?

Children need adults who care about them; the more, the better. Solidarity between generations cannot grow solely through legislation; it emerges and flourishes through interaction and social relationships. The key here is to mobilise existing potential and create new opportunities.

One idea would be to engage the baby boomer generation. This generation had an exceptionally high birth rate, which could make several experienced adults available as a 'resource' for each child. The baby boomer generation possesses enormous social and professional skills, as well as education, good health and time. They can be recruited as personal mentors or mentors for children in childcare centres and schools. Government agencies could, for example, provide targeted information on volunteering opportunities upon retirement and create incentives such as tax-free fees or vouchers. By placing the needs of children at the centre in this way, demographic ageing can become an opportunity.

Another possibility would be the large-scale expansion of community centres in neighbourhoods. Through this, schools and nurseries can become multifunctional hubs within the neighbourhood and the local community, where young and old, children, parents, grandparents and neighbours can meet and support one another. Former professionals from trades or the cultural sector could use their skills to get involved in schools and childcare centres. Children need adults to thrive and develop healthily. The more of them there are, the better it is for the children and for our society.

Klaus Peter Strohmeier, born in 1948, is a sociologist and Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the Ruhr University Bochum. He is one of the co-authors of 'Kinder – Minderheit ohne Schutz' (Children – A minority without protection).



THE EUROPEAN YOUTH PARLIAMENT: CIVIC EDUCATION BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Civic education looks very different when it is led by young people themselves. In this interview with *EESC Info*, European Youth Parliament's Ali-Maeve FitzGerald explains how the EYP approaches civic education differently, focusing on participation, practice and peer-to-peer learning rather than theory alone.

As a youth-led organisation, you see firsthand how young people's relationship with politics is evolving. What major shifts have you noticed recently, particularly in the level of interest and in the methods that spark meaningful engagement?

I believe that we are seeing a resurgence of young people who want to be involved and actively participate in politics. However, we are also seeing division and polarisation growing amongst young people and political ideologies.

Social media has made it increasingly easy to mobilise large groups of people, particularly the younger generation, with issues they are deeply passionate about, giving them access to political information beyond your traditional school textbooks. However, we can also see how the echo chambers of polarising opinions on social media can further sow division amongst young people, and the risks of misinformation and disinformation in the growing age of generative AI.

Because of our representation in 40 countries across Europe, our events bring together a huge diversity of young people, opinions, and backgrounds. We are seeing that engagement is increasingly issue-driven, with the youth wanting their actions to have tangible impact, no longer satisfied with just being a part of the conversation.

Because of this, civic spaces like the [European Youth Parliament](#) are increasingly vital. We are a non-partisan platform for civic education, intercultural encounters, and the exchange of ideas – run by young people, for young people. Our mission is to inspire and empower a young generation of informed, open-minded, responsible, and active citizens who shape society and drive impact.

Annually, we bring together over 25,000 young people, creating a space where bridges across divides can be built, young people can become informed about the world around them, and how they can take a real seat at the table, and not just be heard.

The approach by the European Youth Parliament goes beyond traditional school curricula by using non-formal learning methods. In your experience, is there a specific 'missing piece' in standard school civic education, and do you have an idea how this could be changed?

I think that the major 'missing piece' in standard school civic education is that it remains largely theoretical. Young people learn about political systems, but not how they can play a role in these systems, or, indeed, change them. The model of a classroom, where students sit and listen to a lecture, leaves them disengaged and passive in shaping civic society.

This is what sets us, the European Youth Parliament, apart. We operate in committees of young people, at each of our 400+ events a year, assigned a key topic or issue in the world today, and are tasked with consensus-building to prepare a resolution of solutions that can be presented to decision makers as the young people's voice for change.

What is often missing in civic education is practical skill-building: how to have constructive debate, how to build consensus with opposing views, and how to navigate complex disagreements and deliberate. These stand as core democratic skills, but not something that can be taught from a textbook.

Young people need skill-based learning, and this is what we aim to develop at our events. We focus on giving young people the platform they need to develop skills in critical thinking, media literacy, public speaking, and much more. We aim to fill the gap in traditional civic education curricula, by taking the knowledge and skills gained in the classroom into the real world, and equip young people with the skills and tools they need to be active citizens.

Peer-to-peer learning is a core strength of the European Youth Parliament. Why do you think young people connect so strongly with learning from their peers? And how can this approach best complement, rather than replace, formal civic education in schools and universities?

Peer-to-peer education is successful because it creates a genuine, relatable, and engaging environment. When you are learning from people your own age, it feels accessible, and the traditional hierarchy of teacher and student is broken down. It allows you to be honest, open, and question your own opinions. It shifts the role: young people are no longer passive, sitting in the back of a classroom, but being active contributors to discussions and decision making, giving them a powerful sense of ownership.

It also is a hugely successful model of integrating intercultural learning. It is no longer theory, but practical: what better way to learn about the history of Europe than to find yourself in a room with young people from every country in Europe, what better way to learn geography than travelling to our events, held in every

corner of Europe, in regions you might never otherwise dream of seeing? It brings culture, history, geography, and civic education to life. We are truly by young people, for young people.

Yet, we don't aim to replace formal civic education, but believe we perfectly complement it. Inside the classroom, you learn foundational knowledge, and we build the bridge by offering an open forum for youth to develop soft skills like leadership, adaptability, communication, and teamwork. We rely on schools and Universities to support our aims by giving young people the fundamental knowledge, helping us in hosting our events, and pushing their students to take part actively in our events in order to translate their knowledge into action.

Looking five to ten years ahead, what would 'success' in political and civic education look like to you? Are there specific gaps you'd like to see addressed, whether in school curricula, funding, or how the public perceives these issues?

In the future, I believe that success would be seeing civic education recognised as essential, and not optional, for development. This doesn't necessarily mean a fundamental restructuring of our education systems, nor do I see that as feasible, but we do need stronger support for organisations like the European Youth Parliament that are already effectively doing this work in non-formal peer-to-peer civic education. We are volunteer-driven, so what we need most of all is stable, long-term funding to achieve our mission, not just short-term, project-based support, so that we can continue to grow and make our work accessible to young people from all backgrounds and corners of Europe.

Accessibility is key. Success in ten years would mean that participation in civic society and active citizenship initiatives like ours would be available to everyone, not limited by geography or socioeconomic status. It would also mean a shift in public perception, when youth engagement can be seen as valuable and constructive, and where young people, in turn, feel heard and represented at all levels.

Importantly, success would mean stronger partnerships with European institutions, such as the EESC. We see the European Youth Parliament as a bridge, and a platform to connect young people with policymaking spaces. Success for me would be when this bridge is fully recognised and supported, and when young people can not only understand how to influence policy that will shape their futures, but are uplifted and actively given the opportunity to do so.

Ali-Maeve FitzGerald *is a member of the European Youth Parliament's (EYP) International Youth Board of Volunteers, and holds the portfolio for the promotion of sustainability in the EYP network. Ali joined the EYP in Ireland in 2018 and since then she has been volunteering at various events, contributing to youth engagement, policy dialogue, and sustainability initiatives across Europe. Alongside her work in the EYP, she is a research scientist with a focus on women's health and cancer. Ali-Maeve is passionate about empowering young people to engage with scientific, environmental, and societal challenges.*



THE HOUSING CRISIS IN EUROPE IS MOST ACUTELY FELT BY ITS YOUNG ADULTS

In the last 15 years, average house prices in the EU have more than doubled, while incomes have not kept pace. The housing crisis has hit young adults in cities hardest: in some countries, they have to spend 80% of their median wage just to rent a two-bedroom apartment. This has forced many into living arrangements they would not otherwise choose, writes Marie Hyland, research officer at Eurofound and co-author of Eurofound's report on the housing struggles of Europe's youth.

By Marie Hyland

As highlighted by Eurofound's [recent report](#), Europe is facing an unprecedented housing affordability crisis, one that disproportionately impacts young people. As housing costs continue to outpace income growth, the dream of independent living is slipping further out of reach for many young people who are, as a result, living for longer in the parental home. The consequences are far-reaching, affecting opportunities for education, employment; decisions around fertility and relationships; as well mental health and well-being. Addressing this crisis is not just about bricks and mortar; it is about securing the future of Europe's youth and, by extension, the continent's social and economic stability.

The Scale of the Crisis

Since 2010, average house prices in the EU have surged by 55.4%, while rents have risen by 26.7%. These increases have far outpaced income growth for many groups, creating a gap that is particularly acute for young people. In some EU member states, house prices have more than tripled. Urban centres, where employment opportunities are concentrated, have seen the most dramatic increases in housing costs. For young people, this means that living independently is increasingly unaffordable—even for those in employment.

The situation is further exacerbated by the shift in housing from a basic need to an investment vehicle. Investors and corporations play a dominant role in many urban housing markets, leaving individuals and families competing for a limited supply of affordable homes. The European Commission has recognised the urgency of the issue, creating a dedicated portfolio for housing under Commissioner Dan Jørgensen, establishing the Housing Taskforce and launching the European Affordable Housing Plan. These developments signal a growing political will to address the crisis, but the road ahead remains challenging.

Who Is Most Affected?

Across a range of metrics, young adults are hit hardest by the housing crisis. They are more likely to experience housing insecurity, to be overburdened with housing costs and to live in poorer-quality or overcrowded dwellings compared to older cohorts.

The housing crisis in Europe is also unevenly distributed across geographic areas—it is most acute in urban centres and tourist hotspots, where demand outstrips supply and prices are driven up by limited space and high demand. Indeed, cities are at the epicentre of the affordability crisis, and, across the EU, young adults are more likely to live in cities due to the concentration of job and education opportunities. In many member

states, a young person on a median wage would struggle to find a property to rent or buy in urban areas. For example, in Bulgaria, Ireland, Poland, Portugal, and Spain, over 80% of a young person's median wage would be required just to rent a standard two-room apartment in an urban centre. Moreover, the price per square metre is significantly higher for smaller properties, making downsizing an ineffective solution to the lack of affordably supply.

Evidence also shows that the crisis is reshaping household formation. Many young adults are staying in the parental home longer than they would prefer, delaying relationships, careers, and family formation. Survey data from Czechia, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden reveal a stark mismatch between young people's preferred and actual living arrangements. Far more are living with friends, relatives, or parents than would choose to do so, while far fewer are living with partners or alone than wish to be. This mismatch is not just a personal inconvenience—it is linked to negative outcomes such as mental health struggles, career limitations, and delayed parenthood.

Policy Responses and Recommendations

A multifaceted approach is needed to tackle the housing crisis. Key recommendations include:

- **Increasing Affordable Housing Supply:** In tight housing markets, supply-side solutions—such as building more affordable starter homes—are more effective than demand-side measures such as supports for first-time property buyers. The existing stock of vacant and underused buildings offers considerable untapped potential to increase supply, albeit often requiring significant renovations.
- **Regulating Rents and Tenure Security:** Rent regulation and policies to increase tenure security must balance the needs of incumbent tenants with those of newcomers, particularly young people.
- **Tenure Neutrality in Fiscal Policy:** Governments should treat renting and owning equally in fiscal policies to avoid distorting the housing market.
- **Youth Participation in Policymaking:** Young people should be actively involved in shaping housing policies, including innovative concepts like collaborative housing.

Finally, it is important to avoid creating a fragmented policy landscape, where piecemeal measures conflict or overlap. Instead, a cohesive, long-term strategy is needed to address both the immediate and structural challenges of the housing crisis.

The housing crisis facing Europe's youth is not insurmountable, but it requires urgent and coordinated action. Policymakers, civil society organisations, and the private sector must work together to increase the supply of affordable, quality housing.

Marie Hyland joined [Eurofound](#) as a research officer in the Social Policies unit in 2023. Her research focuses on issues related to housing, the social implications of the green transition and the socioeconomic situations of vulnerable groups. Prior to joining Eurofound, Marie spent several years as an economist at the World Bank, where her research covered women's employment and economic empowerment, private sector development and the economics of climate change. Marie holds a PhD in Economics from Trinity College Dublin. During her PhD studies, she was a visiting Fulbright scholar at the University of Maryland.



ARE WE FAILING THE NEXT GENERATION? THE NEED TO STRENGTHEN QUALITY OF CHILD AND ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH CARE ACROSS THE WHO EUROPEAN REGION

Suicide is the leading cause of death among young people aged 15 to 29 in the World Health Organization European Region, which spans 53 countries across Europe and Central Asia. At the same time, one in seven children and adolescents under 19 lives with a mental health condition, and the numbers are rising. Yet despite this growing burden, one in five countries still lacks a dedicated policy for child and adolescent mental health. In its latest report, the World Health Organization calls for urgent action to strengthen mental health care for young people.

By Jennifer Hall, Ledia Lazeri and Joao Breda, WHO Regional Office for Europe

Mental health is an integral part of our well-being and general health, and impacts on our ability to learn and be part of a community. Yet across the WHO European Region, it is estimated that one in seven children and adolescents live with a mental health condition, and far too many continue to struggle in silence.

According to WHO's recent report, [Child and youth mental health in the WHO European Region: status and actions to strengthen the quality of care](#), there is a pressing need to act fast to strengthen mental health supports for children and young people.

Mental health is worsening over time

Since 2010, children and young people aged 0-19 years old living with a mental health condition has increased by one third (34%). Of particular concern is the increase in the percentage of children and young people living with anxiety conditions, which has almost doubled since 2010. Females, older adolescents and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to report negative outcomes.

Suicide remains a major public health concern

Suicide is the leading cause of death for young people aged 15-29 years old. However, on a positive note, suicide rates among children and young people have decreased since the year 2000.

Environments are not adequately supporting the mental health and well-being of young people

The environment within which we live profoundly impacts our mental health and well-being. An emotionally supportive environment can strengthen brain development and social and emotional skills, setting the ground for a child to thrive across their lifespan.

However, environments contain many stressors for today's youth. Approximately half of children and young people are exposed to adverse childhood experiences (such as abuse, neglect, war), school satisfaction is decreasing over time and one in five report no social support. Online environments also contain potential stressors, including limited regulation, exposure to cyberbullying, and addictive design features.

Countries are not adequately equipped to respond to these growing needs

One in five countries across the WHO European Region lack a policy or plan for child and adolescent mental health, and data on child and adolescent mental health is scarce.

Despite calls from young people for services to be delivered in community-based settings that are free from stigma and easy to access, child and adolescent mental health services remain primarily based in hospitals and inpatient settings, with one in four countries lacking community-based outpatient services. Only one in three countries report having school-based services.

The workforce is not adequate to meet the population's increasing needs. For each psychiatrist, there are 76 000 children and adolescents (inclusive of those with and without mental health conditions).

The type of care received varies greatly depending on where a child or young person is based

Existing data show huge variations in the types of treatment received (e.g. medication and psychosocial interventions), the type of service (community-based, hospital-based), the cost of accessing services, and treatment rates between countries. A child or young person's access to treatment, and the quality of care they receive, may completely differ depending on where they live.

There is a need for action

Every child and young person requiring mental health support has the right to access high-quality care.

WHO Regional Office for Europe is actively working towards this through the WHO European Programme on Quality of Child and Adolescent Mental Health care, an innovative workstream hosted by the WHO Office on Quality of Care and Patient Safety in Athens in collaboration with the WHO European Mental Health and Well-being team, supported by the Government of the Hellenic Republic.

Under this workstream, WHO has developed the first [WHO quality standards for child and youth mental health](#), hosted an annual Autumn School for Ministry of Health nominated experts, set up a young researchers forum with over 700 members, and has published over 10 scientific publications. With partners, WHO has also co-developed proposed actions to strengthen quality of child and youth mental health care, some of which are below for consideration by governments:

- Adopt a “mental health in all policies” approach to ensure that national actions plans and strategies jointly call for higher-quality mental health services.
- Develop and implement evidence-based standards, protocols, and clinical guidelines to standardize care.
- Engage young people and communities meaningfully in co-designing services and policies that better meet their needs.
- Invest in a stronger child and youth mental health workforce.

A whole-of-society approach to strengthening the quality of child and youth mental health care can foster supportive environments and services that enable children and young people to thrive, contributing to a more resilient population and a better future. Behind every number is a young person with hopes and potential, and the future health and prosperity of our societies depend on how well we respond to their needs and their right to high-quality care.

*The WHO report was developed under an innovative WHO Regional Office for Europe workstream dedicated to strengthening quality of child and youth mental health care, hosted by the WHO Athens Office on Quality of care and patient safety in collaboration with the WHO European Mental Health and Well-being team and supported by the Government of Greece. The article authors **Jennifer Hall**, **Ledia Lazeri** and **Joao Breda** are staff members of the WHO Regional Office for Europe. The authors alone are responsible for the views expressed in this publication and they do not necessarily represent the decisions or the stated policy of the World Health Organization.*



EUROPEAN YOUTH WEEK 2026: EESC HIGHLIGHTS MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION

As part of European Youth Week 2026, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) highlighted its long-standing commitment to meaningful youth participation through direct engagement with young people and a range of concrete policy tools designed to strengthen their influence on decision making.

A key moment of the EESC’s contribution was the interactive breakout session 'Meaningful youth participation in action!', held on 24 April as part of the official programme. The roundtable brought together more than 40 young participants to reflect on how youth engagement can move beyond consultation and lead to tangible impact at local, national and European levels.

The discussion highlighted concrete tools and pathways developed by the EESC to support youth engagement, including the [EESC Youth Test](#), which integrates youth perspectives into EU legislative processes, and the [Youth Delegate to COP initiative](#), enabling young people to contribute directly to international climate negotiations. Youth organisations are also actively involved in the EESC’s work through platforms such as *Your Europe, Your Say!*, the Liaison Group, the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform, and Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law country visits, as well as through cooperation with youth organisations from EU candidate countries.

Young leaders and experts already shaping policy shared their experiences during the session, including President of the EESC Youth Group **Nicoletta Merlo**, former EESC Youth Delegate to COP **Sophia Wiegand**

and youth participation experts **Bruno António** and **Françeska Muço**. Discussions focused on access to decision-making spaces, the barriers young people continue to face, and the difference between meaningful and tokenistic participation. Participants underlined that genuine involvement requires early engagement, clear roles, long-term support and visible follow-up.

Taking place from 24 April to 1 May under the theme 'Solidarity and Fairness', European Youth Week 2026 offered an opportunity to reaffirm that youth participation at the EESC is a core, long-term institutional priority.

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