**The EU youth test must be systemic, transparent and meaningful**

**The EESC held a public hearing in preparation for an own-initiative opinion on *The EU Youth Test*. The event provided an opportunity to learn from the experiences of other Member States that have already implemented similar youth test approaches, as well as to consider youth participation in the context of Europe's future.**

In recent years, young people have become more active across multiple policy areas and are calling for change. However, they are frequently excluded from formal decision-making processes. A mandatory youth test would help bridge this gap. The EU youth test would promote youth mainstreaming by addressing their lack of involvement in policy areas that are not typically associated with youth. This test would allow for better policy decisions because those affected by the decision would be able to identify unintended consequences. It would also build trust in the system through participation.

In her opening remarks, **Nicoletta Merlo**, president of the study group drafting the opinion on *The EU Youth Test*, explained that "active participation of youth is essential, not only because it is the European Year of Youth, but also because young people need to be involved, listened to and made part of the decision-making process."**Katrīna Leitāne**, EESC rapporteur for the opinion, continued: "When a flower doesn't bloom, you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower. Our EESC opinion aims to identify those aspects of the existing democratic environment that could be improved to make youth engagement even more targeted and meaningful."

In the first introductory panel, **Baudouin Baudru** from the Secretariat-General of the European Commission illustrated the Commission's initiatives to promote youth engagement in policymaking: "At the Commission level, the EU youth strategy focuses on three core areas of action: engage, connect and empower." Election participation is the most direct way for youth to influence decision-making. More indirect forms of influence are demonstrations, petitions and strikes, as evidenced by the political impact of the fight against the climate crisis.

Other avenues for influence include the European Citizens' Initiative, citizen dialogues and, most recently, the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). "The cross-sectoral nature of youth policy came up strongly in the deliberations during the CoFoE," said **Anna Blackwell** of the European Youth Forum, "The youth test will truly mainstream youth across EU policymaking and give young people the consideration that they deserve." Implementing the youth test would represent a fitting permanent legacy to the EU Year of Youth and a concrete follow-up to the Conference on the Future of Europe's aspirations.

In the second panel, youth researcher **Ondrej Barta** focused on the youth test's potential to burst the EU consultation bubble by fostering intergenerational dialogue and transparency. There are several mechanisms available to young people, but many of them are actually ad hoc mechanisms, such as petitions and strikes. Mr Barta explained that the EU youth test is critically different as it offers continuous and systematic involvement for young people in a tailored, meaningful and transparent manner.

Several speakers in the second panel provided concrete examples and best practices from youth tests already in use in EU Member States. They discussed the benefits and drawbacks of these practices, as well as the objectives to strive for when introducing these tools.

**Jan Raymaekers** of the Flemish National Youth Council explained the Flemish Child and Youth Impact Report and emphasised the need for clear objectives: whetherthe youthtest is a policy instrument, a participation instrument or an impact assessment*.* In creating such a tool, it is important to understand and define what it is expected to accomplish. Furthermore, **Immanuel Benz** of the German Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth illustrated Germany's experience with the youth test and attempting to differentiate between different groups of people's life situations. "The biggest challenge for the youth check is the shortage of time," stated Mr Benz.

Another example was the implementation of a youth test in Austria. **Andreas Schneider**, from the Department for European and International Family and Youth Policies in the Austrian Federal Chancellery, presented the Youth Check, which is now mandatory under Austrian law. "The goal was to encourage decision-makers to put themselves in the shoes of children and young adults," explained Mr Schneider. In addition, **Eleonora Kleibel** from the Austrian National Youth Council explained the weaknesses of this system. She explained that the youth check is a great tool for mainstreaming children's and youth issues, but it cannot replace actual participation of young people, adding that it needs to be carried out at the right time and requires adequate training and information for the institution carrying out the youth check.

Research shows that young people are interested in and want to participate in policymaking. Engagement is evolving. It is more focused on the short term, less organised, and centred around a few key topics. Nonetheless, young people may refrain from participating in any decision-making processes if they believe that their perspective is not reflected in laws and regulations. "Meaningful political participation of young people in all processes is the basis of a healthy democracy", emphasised the last panellist, **Lana Pasic** from the EU-CoE Youth Partnership. It **must be ensured that young people do not lose interest in politics.**

The conclusions of the hearing will feed into an EESC own-initiative opinion on the subject. The opinion will be adopted at the EESC's plenary session in September.