

Motion

The situation of youth organisations across Europe

signed by: German National Committee on International Youth Work (DNK), British Youth Council (BYC), Belarusian National Youth Council (RADA)

co-signed by: National Youth Council of Moldova (CNTM), Czech Council of Children and Youth (CRDM), Romanian National Youth Council (CTR), National Youth Council of Malta (KNZ), Croatian Youth Network (MMH), National Youth Council of Slovenia (MSS), National Youth Council of Ukraine (NYCU), Flemish Youth Council (VJR), European Union of Jewish Students (EUJS), National Youth Council of Serbia (KOMS), Spanish Youth Council (CJE)

Youth Organisations across Europe are facing an increasingly challenging situation. Political and economic circumstances are leading to shrinking civic spaces and therefore a shrinking chance of youth organisations to fulfil their purpose and represent the voice of young people. Youth organisations - National Youth Councils (NYCs) and International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations (INGYOs) alike - and the whole youth sector are currently being impacted by wars, democratic, rule of law and human rights backsliding and the overall global economic situation. While they are trying to provide spaces for young people where they can live and enjoy their democracy and freedom of participation, these spaces are at risk.

Given the escalating societal challenges, the significance of both the symbolics and stakes of civil society engagement across Europe has become more pronounced, and more specifically that of youth organisations as spaces where young citizens practise their rights and freedoms from early on. However, the enabling space for civil society organisations continues to shrink. The phenomenon of “Shrinking Civic Space” also manifests in the access to funding of these organisations and leads to sharp decline in their operational capacities. These instances not only directly impact the affected youth councils and youth associations but also precipitate cascading effects, as youth councils rely on collaborative projects for a relevant portion of their revenue. Reduced funding directly affects their leeway and leads to young people’s interests being overlooked, less frequently taken into account by governments and policymakers across Europe, thus putting at stake their universal rights and freedoms. This situation raises a strong concern with regards to democracy and fundamental rights, and is becoming an urgent issue that must be tackled on the highest most impactful levels.

Why This Issue Matters Now

The current situation of democracy in Europe has reached a critical point. Europe is witnessing a rise and normalisation of the far right and other antidemocratic ideologies, burgeoning nationalism, threatening the welfare system, social rights and fiscal distributive justice, while conflicts and war are

also threatening the existence of youth civil society in parallel. Many of our fellow NYCs and INGYOs are struggling in these circumstances.

We must note that of the European Youth Forum’s members, some recent examples of how shrinking civic spaces are directly impacting youth organisations include, but are not limited to:

- **In Germany**, the youth organisations of young civil society, which are also represented in the German National Committee for International Youth Work (DNK), are threatened with budget cuts of up to 20% for the third year in a row. The German government justifies the extensive cuts in the federal budget with inflation and rising expenditure (particularly on armaments and the military). In the last two years, the cuts were prevented with great effort. This year, the organisations will again have to wage a campaign with an uncertain outcome.
- **In Flanders, Belgium**, the Flemish Youth Council and Flemish youth work in general is threatened by potential far right participation in the Flemish government after the regional elections of June 9th. Vlaams Belang is currently polling as the largest party and if they are to come true, it would give the party the initiative to form a government. The party wants to cut funding to youth work “camouflaged as extreme left propaganda”, they want a total restructuring of the Flemish Youth Council and the participation of the real Flemish youth who are, according to them, far right nationalists. These plans raise grave concerns for the continued functioning of the Flemish Youth Council and Flemish youth work organisations that could be affected.¹
- **In Croatia**, the Croatian Youth Network (MMH) is a youth-led, non-profit and non-governmental organisation, the largest-in-number alliance representing more than 70 youth NGOs and has been advocating for youth rights since 2002. Nevertheless, the Government, led by the same right-wing party for three mandates now, persistently refuses to appoint them the Croatian National Youth Council status. Instead, the ruling party has recently elected a National Youth Advisory Board to impose their youth wing

¹ Vlaams Belang, 'Vlaanderen Weer van Ons: Verkiezingsprogramma' (24 March 2024), 82-83.

members as legitimate representatives of youth in Croatia. MMH is systematically excluded from decision-making processes and serious efforts are continuously being taken to exclude or discredit them. The EUYD implementation co-funding from the sectoral State Office has been cut in half, from 20 to 10%. National grants in the field of youth are repeatedly insufficient and inadequate considering the evidence-based needs of youth. The occupancy of democratic spaces and the new Government formed in May 2024 being a coalition of the predominant right-wing party and a far-right party raises fears not only of civic-space shrinkage but even more the degradation of democracy and human rights in Croatia.

- **In Türkiye**, the space for civil society is at a serious risk of shrinking again due to a new draft of the 9th Judicial Reform package including the punishment by imprisonment for individuals or entities conducting or commissioning investigations against Turkish citizens; institutions, or foreigners in Türkiye at the direction of a foreign state; organisation's strategic interests or instructions that are against the state's security or internal or external political interests. Based on the suggested law, lots of activities in various areas including economic, cultural, technological, public order and public health, infrastructure, energy will also be accepted within the concept of internal or external political benefits of the State. Therefore, activities carried out against such benefits may also constitute the subject of the crime which is considered as an attempt to silence NGOs, media and other sectors. Prior to this law, with the devastating earthquakes in south-eastern Türkiye in 2023, the funding had been focusing on humanitarian aid rather than the rights based movements. Although young people took active roles in disaster response, right based youth organisations have been disproportionately affected by this decrease of the financial support despite the hard work of GoFor to allocate more and specified funds for youth organisations.
- **In Belarus**, the situation exemplifies the acute challenges faced by youth organisations in restrictive political environments. The Belarusian National Youth Council (RADA), representing the collective voice of young Belarusians, operates under severe constraints due to the authoritarian nature of the current regime. Despite its significant role in advocating for youth rights and democratic values, RADA faces continuous governmental suppression, including restrictions on assembly, expression, and association. The political climate in Belarus has led to systemic efforts to undermine and discredit independent youth organisations, limiting their capacity to function effectively and represent the interests of young people. This stifling environment not only hampers the development of youth participation and civic engagement but also endangers the broader democratic fabric within Belarus and ultimately puts in danger the enjoyment of human rights of all young people in Europe. The resilience and determination of RADA amidst these adversities highlight the critical need for international support and solidarity to safeguard and empower youth organisations in Belarus and similar contexts across Europe.
- **In Ukraine**, in the context of the full-scale Russian invasion against the country, the main threat is the existential survival of the National Youth Council of Ukraine (NYCU), as well as the country in general. While NYCU represents young people of youth-led organisations in Ukraine, the government does not recognise them as a structure. From this perspective, NYCU has no chance of receiving public funding which results in them being dependent on grant support of international partners and donors. A similar situation with the rest of youth NGOs which receive a very low chance to keep a sustainable work in these conditions and are actually on the verge of survival. The government prioritises supporting Ukraine's defence forces over the youth sector due to the war. While discussions about Ukraine's recovery occur in intergovernmental forums, the government lacks transparency and structured dialogue with the National Youth Council of Ukraine. There is little investment in youth or institutional support for youth organisations. Young people should be actively involved in shaping the country's future.
- **In Spain**, the Spanish Youth Council (CJE) was created by law in 1983 and changed its legal form in 2018 due to the intent of right-wing political parties to close CJE. After strong civil society support and significant political will to

save CJE from most political parties, there is still today a right-wing political party in Spain (VOX) that includes in their political measures for elections the intent to close CJE, reduce youth participation spaces, and cut funding for youth organisations. Additionally, in Spain, youth affairs fall under regional competence, and there are regional youth councils in most regions. Regional youth councils have been suffering from a lack of political and economic support, as well as some intentions to close regional or local youth councils.

- **In Georgia**, youth organisations face significant pressure from the government, which hampers their ability to function effectively and engage young people in civic activities. Beyond the “foreign agent law,” which stigmatises and imposes stringent regulations on NGOs receiving foreign funding, these organisations are subject to political harassment, surveillance, and legal threats that create an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship. Government-controlled media often portrays independent youth organisations negatively, labelling them as unpatriotic or foreign-influenced, further eroding public trust and making it difficult to mobilise communities. Complex registration processes, burdensome reporting requirements, and frequent audits add to the administrative challenges, draining the limited resources of these organisations and hindering their operations.
- **In the United-Kingdom**, the recent insolvency announcement of The British Youth Council (BYC) after over 75 years of existence, umbrella for over 200 youth organisations underscores how crucial funding is for a thriving civic space of youth organisations.

Comparably, INGYOs increasingly struggle to find financial means as supranational and national funding schemes for youth organisations are decreasing. Their situation is unequivocally linked to the struggles of National Youth Councils. With the budgetary constraints anticipated in the next Erasmus+ programme cycle (2028-2035), the financial landscape for youth organisations is set to become even more challenging and unpredictable. These conditions result in precarious working condi-

tions, financial instability and failure in guaranteeing the rights of the youth workers to stable working conditions. Many INGYOs and NYCs rely on funding from Erasmus+ and the EU Youth Dialogue for the sustainability of their structures, as the majority of them do not receive any other structural funds. Youth organisations of marginalised and underprivileged groups such as LGBTQI+, Roma and Traveller, Refugees and people of colour are particularly highly affected on a structural level in the youth sector in terms of available funding. They already struggle to get proper funding for their organisations and their situation is only getting worse with the current anti-democratic tendencies.

As an example, from an INGYO within the European environmental movement, there have been notable reports of heightened restrictions imposed on young climate activists. Authorities have restricted their participation in decision-making forums and implemented legal and regulatory obstacles, including stringent permit prerequisites and the criminalisation of certain organisational practices. Furthermore, authorities have been vested with enhanced powers to detain and prosecute young environmental advocates. Moreover, young activists encounter challenges in securing resources such as financial support and legal aid. Experts observe that these strategies are frequently employed by corporations and their allies to sow discord within communities, divert attention from key issues, and undermine collective action. It is important to note that criminalisation does not happen in isolation. Experts say that deploying such methods is often used as a form of escalating tactics deployed by corporations and their allies to divide communities, distract leaders and weaken social movements.

Therefore, urgent action is needed to safeguard the future of youth participation and democracy-building efforts across Europe. The preservation and continued existence of youth civil society is at stake in Europe. **Confronting these challenges collectively as Europe’s youth is necessary in order to safeguard the rights and freedom of young people across the continent and avoid their breaches.** The current challenges in accessing funding faced by youth organisations in Europe effectively put in danger their right to freedom of assembly and association.²

2 Article 11, European Convention on Human Rights, Article 12 EU Charter of Fundamental Rights

The European Youth Forum set in its 2024-2029 Strategic Plan that, by 2029, we want “sustainable and inclusive funding for youth organisations” and that we want to achieve it by “raising awareness among the institutions about the crucial role and value of the youth organisations, and advocate for increased funding for International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations and National Youth Councils that are facing financial constraints within the European financial framework”. By 2029 we also want “National Youth Councils and International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations to be recognised as the representatives of young people and treated as equal partners in the decision-making processes on different levels by stakeholders and institutions” as well as “The civic space of young people to be protected, fostered and supported.”

The European Youth Forum has therefore committed to “advocate and follow-up on mechanisms and instruments in order to ensure the role of National Youth Councils and International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations as representatives of young people in decision making processes” and to “provide support and facilitate mobilisation when member organisations are not recognised or the action or decision of decision-makers jeopardises their functioning”.³

- **The current developments in the youth sector make these strategic aims and commitments of action more relevant than ever.** In light of the closure of BYC the Advisory Council on Youth for the Council of Europe released a statement reiterating the importance of funding for youth organisations and the pivotal role they play in “defend[ing] and promot[ing] the core values of the Council of Europe: Democracy, Human Rights and Rule of Law.”⁴ Now more than ever, we need to work on the strategic aims we set and come together as youth organisations across Europe. Our accumulated voices articulated by the European Youth Forum can have a lasting impact to stop the worsening conditions for youth organisations.

What we call for

A) Internal action

The European Youth Forum, in line with its aforementioned Strategic Plan, commits to:

1. **Joint Advocacy Efforts:** Collaborative lobbying initiatives to amplify our collective voice and advocate for the preservation of youth council structures and funding.
2. **Strategic approach:** A clear strategic and collaborative approach by the European Youth Forum (YFJ) and its member organisations to elevate this issue as a significant pan-European concern, fostering solidarity and action.
3. **Collaboration with the Advisory Council on Youth of the Council of Europe** to enhance our advocacy efforts and achieve greater impact.

B) External action

The European Youth Forum calls for:

1. All European countries part of the Erasmus+ programme to include NYCs in advisory bodies of National Agencies of Erasmus+, as well as in the governance of the programme at national level and within national funding schemes in the field of youth;
2. The European Commission Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sports and Culture (DG EAC) to establish a bi-annual meeting with civil society representatives of beneficiaries of Erasmus+ at centralised level to discuss challenges and opportunities on the implementation of the programme at technical level;
3. All EU Member States to recognise National Youth Councils as the main implementing partners at national level of the EU Youth Dialogue;
4. All Erasmus+ programme countries - with the oversight of the European Commission - to ensure that Erasmus+ & European Solidarity

3 YFJ Strategic Plan 2024-2029: <https://www.youthforum.org/files/231211-YFJ-StrategicPlan-24-28.pdf>

4 Why We Need Sustainable Funding - Statement on the Permanent Closure of the British Youth Council <https://rm.coe.int/26-03-2024-ac-statement-permanent-closure-by-c-fin/1680af07cd>

Corps (ESC) funds are fairly allocated and reach youth organisations as one of the main stakeholders. Furthermore, that arbitrary allocation of Erasmus+ grants at national level must be avoided;

5. The upcoming European Commission to put forward an ambitious proposal for the next EU budget, the EU Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2035, that includes an increase to the total Erasmus+ and ESC envelope;
6. The European Union to include as Erasmus+ programme countries all European countries that abide to the principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law;
7. The EU and Council of Europe to take a strong stance against the current democratic, rule of law and human rights backsliding across the region. Any sanctions taken upon Member States should safeguard civil society organisations, ensuring the continuation of their daily operations are not affected;
8. The Council of Europe Member States to ensure the ongoing availability of funding for youth organisations across the region through investing further in the CoE Youth Department and its European Youth Foundation - among others through voluntary contributions;

In addition, it is required to address governments and policy makers of countries that have not yet been significantly affected by these challenges to take preventative measures. They must ensure that youth organisations have a robust operational base, are fully funded, and that civic spaces and youth-led democratic organisations are prioritised when distributing funds. Strengthening these foundations now can prevent the contraction of civic spaces and protect the essential role youth organisations play in fostering democracy, human rights, and active civic engagement. By proactively supporting youth councils and organisations, governments can ensure that the voices of young people are heard and that their rights and freedoms are upheld. This is not only a safeguard for the future but also a reinforcement of democratic principles in the present.

Historically, INGYO and NYCs have thrived on mutual support, enabling substantive work through

collaborative projects. However, this dynamic is now increasingly endangered by prevailing political and economic circumstances. **Our mutual solidarity remains crucial but it alone cannot sustain resilient youth work. Within INGYO and NYCs, democracy and participation are not mere concepts but are lived and cultivated through youth engagement.** We are the workshops of democracy.

Together with the voice of the European Youth Forum our concerns can be highlighted more powerful and more impactful to protect our spaces and give adequate representation to young people.



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