



The State of Youth Rights in Europe

21st December 2018

Open letter by outgoing President of the European Youth Forum, Luis Alvarado

Dear Friends,

As the year reaches an end, we not only look back at 2018 but at the two years of the political cycle in the European Youth Forum. It seems fitting to have a reflection out loud of the victories and the still existing challenges that our movement and our sector face in the advancement of youth rights in Europe.

The empowerment of the current and future generations of young people is, and always has been, the key to creating the Europe we want. A Europe that realises the rights of all and leads the way in tackling global challenges. A Europe that deserves the title of most important and innovative political journey in history. Over recent years it has become clear that while the need for European unity and solidarity is just as important now as it was 60 years ago, we must also not shy away from the new challenge of shaking up our 'old' continent to build one that reflects today's realities.

The European Union has hosted a significant piece of the global advancement of youth rights conversation over the last two years, with EU Leaders putting youth high on the political agenda.

Much has been achieved in this space - both thanks to the drive and commitment of our civil society, our organisations and millions of youth activists but also given the social, economic and political context in our Union, and thanks to several dedicated decision-makers leading by example.

With the recent adoption of a new Youth Strategy, the EU has set a clear example in making our generation part of the conversation and shaping our very own strategy. Working with the European Commission has been a fruitful cooperation, reflecting the views of our Member Organisations, representing millions of young voices around the continent, but it is important the key experts and players of

youth participation and representation are at the heart of the implementation of the Strategy!

Of course there is still much more work to be done to incorporate the youth perspective into EU policy-making. Meaningful consultation with young people and youth organisations are crucial to help ensure that programmes such as the European Solidarity Corps or the new DiscoverEU action for the Erasmus programme 2021-2027 are truly accessible to all, have strong educational components and reflect the realities of young people in Europe.

All this needs ambition. And ambition needs to be matched with investment. While we enter the next stage of negotiations on the long-term budget of the Union, we need Member States to deliver on their promises for a more ambitious and inclusive Erasmus programme. Youth organisations are key to engage young people with fewer opportunities as underlined by the European Commission.

We also urge Member States to remind themselves of their proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. Social Europe is the key concerns for citizens, especially young people. We need a credible and committed European Social Fund to ensure sustainable welfare systems and tackle the way to high rate of youth unemployment in Europe.

Lastly, I cannot mention the EU without mentioning Brexit. Our future is at stake and young people should not pay the price. This is a call for responsibility. Let's not waste a generation on this.

If we look at Europe, we need also need to think beyond our Union, going back to our roots of democracy and human rights, upheld by the Council of Europe. It has been a long lasting champion for young people, youth organisations and youth workers. It has also been the space where we could address violations of young people's social and economic rights. Our call for action on the issue of unpaid internships in Belgium towards the European Committee of Social Rights is one example. There will be more actions to end discriminatory practices in the future. We welcome that the European External Action Service and the European Parliament also took an important step this year by banning unpaid internships. A victory for youth rights achieved by years of campaigning efforts from various stakeholders, including the European Youth Forum. We need all institutions and business to follow that path! Not only on the question of internships, we need government and public institutions to uphold the rights of young people. The European Youth Forum will keep holding them accountable.

Coming back to the Council of Europe, I must share some worries. The difficult situation it faces on the budgetary side is putting its fundamental mission and valuable work at risk. We urge all Member States to have a voluntary approach to

address this. We need the Council of Europe to maintain a strong youth sector allowing all young people to unleash their potential. Democracy, Rule of Law and Human Rights should not be treated lightly. We are looking forward to engage with the next Council of Europe Secretary General and hope they will stand for youth rights.

Globally, we have also seen a lot of advancement in the fight for youth rights. We cannot omit the new global UN Youth Strategy, under the leadership of Secretary General Guterres and the special Envoy on Youth, Jayathma Wickramanayake. A warm thank you and the European Youth Forum will continue being a key ally for the work of the UN.

It is impossible not to mention how the conversation on the essential peacebuilding role of the UN is involving young people and youth organisations as actors for peace, via strong UN Security Council resolutions on Youth, Peace and Security. While Europe is a project of peace, we need to question ourselves on what peace means today for a young person and how we can defend that.

The UN plays a major role to defend young people's rights and to promote Sustainable Development, the fight is vital and we need the engagement of all Member States and the leadership of the European Union in those conversations to make change a reality for all young people.

Looking beyond our continent also brings me to Africa and the long lasting partnership existing between the two sides of the Mediterranean. Last year, in Abidjan, youth organisations were clear on how this relationship should evolve: with young people at the heart. Together with our partners, we will maintain this promise.

Thinking globally, we need to consider the biggest challenge of our times: climate change. We need innovation, we need ambition, we need young people and youth organisations part of the conversation. Time is of the essence if we need to shift from a doomed model to a sustainable one that will allow our planet to breathe. This is our global, common and shared responsibility.

2019 is now around the corner.

The European elections are the immediate challenge. For many of us, it will be the first time we exercise this fundamental right of voting. We have heard everything about the youth vote. But young people care and will show it. While in Malta, Estonia and Austria sixteen year olds will also be able to exercise their right to vote, far too many young people are still excluded from politics. A recent

Eurobarometer showed that people would be more likely to vote if there were more young people standing as candidates. If the EU wants to be closer to its citizens and make these upcoming elections an important turning point, more diversity in our European Parliament candidates is essential. The European Youth Forum will be fighting to make sure political parties and candidates do more to engage with young voices in these elections.

We need more spaces to engage. We need more successes like our political festival, the YO!Fest, that we brought to the European Youth Event in Strasbourg. We need these moments, these genuine interactions where young people, politicians, activists, artists and influencers debate and engage on vital issues what will shape our present and future.

If you exclude the biggest “youth generation” in the world, the “Erasmus generation”, the “Millennials” - whatever you call us - from the discussions that shape today’s and tomorrow’s societies, you are going in the wrong direction.

So many debates lie ahead of us: future of work, rethinking power structure, climate change, sustainable development, fighting extremism and nationalism, put an end to harassment, re-design welfare systems, digital revolution and the list is long. These conversations cannot happen without young people.

We also need to be aware of our own responsibility as youth organisations and civil society. We must be ready to make the necessary changes in the way we work and step up our game. We are not just “demanding”, we are part of the solution and we’ll do our fair share.

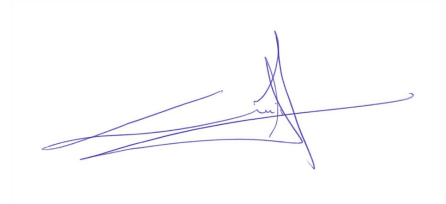
The task might be daunting, but I am confident, as I’ve always been. I am confident thanks to the ambition of millions of young activists we represent, the disruption capacity of thousands of youth organisations, the transformative energy of youth leaders in Europe but also because I know that I leave the European Youth Forum in good hands.

It is clear to me now more than ever that this young generation will be remembered in our history books for truly changing the conversation, disrupting every sector of society, and pushing the transition towards a new era. Thank you to the Member Organisations of the European Youth Forum, to my board of activists, to the staff, to the friends & family along in this adventure. You have all been my teachers, mentors and inspiration during this journey and leading this platform on your behalf has truly been one of the great honors of my life.
#ForYouthRights

I wish all the best to my successor, Carina Autengruber, in leading the biggest youth-led movement in the world. I know she can count on a very motivated Board, the fantastic energy of our Secretariat team and most importantly: your support.

I will pass the European Millennium in Chief mic now. Thank you for everything and I count on you to keep fighting for youth rights, to #youthup Europe and build sustainable societies. It is worth it.

Muchísimas gracias por la aventura and happy holidays!

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Luis Alvarado', written on a light blue grid background. The signature is stylized with several overlapping lines.

Luis Alvarado
President of the European Youth Forum