

Motion

Safeguarding Independent National Youth Councils and Guaranteeing the Stability of Youth Policy in Europe

signed by: Croatian Youth Network (MMH), Lithuanian Youth Council (LiJOT), National Youth Forum of Bulgaria (NYF)

co-signed by: Cyprus Youth Council (CYC), Forum des Jeunes (FJ), National Youth Council of Malta (KNZ), National Youth Council of Serbia (KOMS), National Youth Council of Slovenia (MSS), Portuguese National Youth Council (CNJ), Spanish Youth Council (CJE)

Background and Context

The independence of National Youth Councils (NYCs) across Europe is under immediate threat, prompting urgent action at the highest political levels. The 10th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth (Valletta, October 2025) explicitly recognised the critical role of NYCs in strengthening democratic participation, particularly in contexts where civic space is shrinking. Ministers reaffirmed their commitment to fostering youth participation through both the Council of Europe and national initiatives, emphasizing that respect for young people's democratic rights is fundamental to democracy.

These concerns are grounded in reality: NYCs have long served as vital platforms for the democratic participation and representation of young people across Europe. They bring together diverse youth organisations, providing a unified voice and fostering inclusive decision-making. However, in recent years, many NYCs have faced significant threats to their independence and recognition. In some cases, governments have attempted to create or designate parallel structures in order to weaken or replace NYCs, as has been seen in Croatia, Serbia, Ukraine, and Poland. Beyond the creation of parallel structures, NYCs face multiple forms of interference including ambiguous legal frameworks enabling deregistration threats, leadership co-option, media disparagement campaigns, and financial pressure tactics such as funding delays or exclusion from national and EU programmes based on legal status disputes. Such developments undermine young people's ability to be effectively represented and jeopardise democratic youth participation. Without immediate safeguards and clear policy frameworks, democratic youth participation across Europe faces systematic dismantling.

The last comprehensive study addressing NYC independence was conducted over two decades ago associated with the YFJ's 2001 policy paper.¹ Since then, Europe has witnessed significant shifts in political culture and funding priorities, yet the systematic examination of NYCs' independence has remained largely absent. Recent research (2024-2025) from the "Independence of Youth Councils" project, involving youth councils from more than 20

European countries, has revealed that independence challenges have evolved and intensified, requiring urgent policy attention.

The consequences are profound: when NYCs are denied legitimacy or resources, young people lose access to essential participatory mechanisms, limiting their ability to influence public policies that affect their lives. This contributes to the shrinking of civic space, democratic backsliding, and the exclusion of young people from political processes. Moreover, youth participation often remains symbolic rather than substantive: NYCs are frequently invited to policy consultations but granted minimal influence over decisions, diminishing trust in participatory mechanisms and undermining effective policy outcomes. Research from the European Youth Forum (YFJ) has repeatedly shown that meaningful youth participation leads to more resilient democracies and better policy outcomes. Yet young people remain significantly underrepresented in parliaments, party structures, and decision-making bodies, facing barriers to electoral participation as both voters and candidates, while civic space continues to shrink.

Youth research provides a critical foundation for evidence-based youth policy, ensuring policy decisions are informed by robust data, analysis, and the realities young people face. Research also reveals that internal challenges compound external threats to NYC independence. Some cases of centralised leadership structures, insufficient transparency, and weak accountability mechanisms can erode trust and organisational resilience. Furthermore, the persistent underrepresentation of diverse youth demographics, including rural youth, minorities, and LGBTIQ+ communities, limits the inclusivity and legitimacy of youth councils. These internal governance gaps must be addressed alongside external protections to ensure NYCs function as genuinely representative bodies.

In response to these multifaceted challenges, the Council of Europe has adopted a Resolution on the Reference Framework on a Youth Perspective, which provides a model for integrating youth perspectives across policymaking areas that concern young people. This framework aims to develop more forward-looking and future-proof poli-

¹ <https://www.youthforum.org/files/2001-independent-NYCs.pdf>

cies that reflect young people's needs and respond to current and future challenges.

This motion seeks to safeguard NYCs, ensuring their recognition, independence, and stability as indispensable actors in the youth policy ecosystem. By reinforcing their role, the motion addresses current challenges facing European democracies and strengthens the participation of young people in civic life.

Policy and Political Context

The role of National Youth Councils is already acknowledged in several key policy frameworks. At the European Union level, the EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 (Council Resolution 2019/C 189/01) explicitly encourages Member States to involve NYCs in all phases of the EU Youth Dialogue, granting them a leading role in National Working Groups. Similarly, the Council of Europe's Recommendation REC(2006)1 calls on its member states to respect the specific nature of NYCs, recognise them as partners in youth policy development, and ensure their freedom of expression, autonomy, and access to relevant information. At the United Nations level, youth participation is promoted through the UN Youth Strategy (Youth2030) and the Youth, Peace and Security agenda, both of which stress the importance of recognising independent youth-led organisations.

European Commission Decision C(2025)3967 of 25 June 2025 clearly defines NYCs as independent, representative and youth-led bodies that typically function as umbrella organisations, bringing together a broad spectrum of youth organisations and local and regional councils, as well as individual young people so that they can ensure that the diversity of needs and interests of young people, and the challenges they face, are effectively represented, making them essential contributors to inclusive discussions on youth policies.

The Council of Europe's co-management system has demonstrated that collaboration between member states and young people builds more democratic and inclusive societies, with NYCs serving as essential partners in this proven model. The forthcoming European Charter on the participation of young people in local and regional life further emphasizes supporting youth councils at all governance levels.

The principles outlined in the International Organisation of Youth Councils' Decalogue reinforce these concerns, emphasising the need for legal recognition of NYCs as official partners in policy-making, independence from government interference, and guaranteed public funding complemented by diverse resources. By aligning this motion with the Decalogue's vision of transparent governance, internal checks and balances, and inclusive membership, we ensure that our collective demands reflect a shared European consensus on safeguarding democratic, sustainable, and youth-led structures. These principles are further substantiated by findings from the "Independence of Youth Councils" project's comprehensive research, including collected recommendations from working groups conducted in May 2025, which documented persistent patterns of legal ambiguity, financial precarity, and political interference across European contexts.

Despite these commitments, implementation across Europe remains inconsistent. While some governments actively support and fund NYCs, others have undermined their legitimacy or limited their access to decision-making spaces. Therefore, responsibility lies with multiple levels of governance: national governments must ensure institutional support and recognition, the EU and Council of Europe must enforce their existing commitments, and the UN provides an overarching framework to promote youth participation globally.

Strategic Alignment

This motion directly aligns with the European Youth Forum's Strategic Plan 2024 - 2028 and its Policy Programme. The Strategic Plan emphasises strengthening democracy, safeguarding civic space, and ensuring youth organisations operate free from political interference. It commits to advocating for NYC and International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations (INGYO) recognition and mobilising when their legitimacy is threatened.

Furthermore, the Policy Programme underlines the importance of durable and resilient democracies, calling for the recognition and safeguarding of independent, democratic youth councils at all levels. It also highlights the need for sustainable funding mechanisms to ensure that youth organisations can thrive. This motion is therefore not an isolated

demand, but a strategic reinforcement of YFJ's long-standing priorities on democracy, participation, and youth rights.

The Council of Europe Youth Sector Strategy 2030 has identified key guiding principles including strengthening democratic participation, enlarging civic space for young people, broadening access to rights, and improving recognition and quality of youth work across Europe. These principles align with safeguarding the independence and stability of NYCs.

Recommendations

The European Youth Forum adopts the following recommendations:

- Calls upon all Member Organisations to actively support and amplify the voices of NYCs facing political pressure or attempts to undermine their legitimacy.
- Urges Member States to formally recognise and provide sustainable funding for NYCs, ensuring their independence and self-governance.
- Calls upon Member States to establish explicit legal safeguards protecting NYCs from administrative obstruction, financial coercion, or public discreditation, particularly when expressing dissenting opinions or challenging government policies.
- Encourages governments to engage proactively with NYCs in youth policy development, ensuring meaningful dialogue and genuine inclusion in decision-making processes.
- Strongly insists that governments guarantee the role of NYCs in the EU Youth Dialogue, as outlined in the EU Youth Strategy 2019 - 2027.
- Urges Member States to support young people's democratic rights in electoral processes and to promote their participation in democratic decision-making, both as voters and as candidates, as affirmed in the Final Declaration of the 10th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth.
- Calls on the Council of Europe and the European Union to monitor and respond to cases where NYCs face threats to their recognition, autonomy, or functioning.
- Encourages the development of youth research as a foundation for evidence-based youth policy, ensuring that decisions concerning NYCs are informed by robust data and the realities faced by young people.
- Urges NYCs to strengthen internal governance through transparent decision-making processes, decentralised leadership structures, strong accountability mechanisms, and proactive outreach to underrepresented youth groups, ensuring genuine inclusivity, democratic functioning, and improved recognition and quality of youth representation across all levels of governance.



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