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Motion

Concerning the Institutional Neglect and Mischaracterisation of the National Youth Forum of Bulgaria

Signed by: National Youth Forum of Bulgaria (NYF)

Co-signed by: Croatian Youth Network (MMH), 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)

Introduction and Context

National Youth Councils have long served as vital platforms for the democratic participation and representation of young people across Europe. They bring together diverse youth organisations, build common positions through internal democratic processes, and carry those positions into policy-making at local, national and European level, providing a unified voice and fostering inclusive decision-making.

In many countries, and especially where National Youth Councils are not anchored in law, the youth council is the only structured channel through which the needs and concerns of young people reach the government. When the youth council is shut out, young people are shut out.

Meaningful participation depends on continuous dialogue and on access to the rooms where decisions are made. At European level, this principle is increasingly built into how institutions work: through the EU Youth Dialogue, through the Youth Policy Dialogues that the President of the European Commission has asked every Commissioner to hold, and through the commitment to check new policies for their impact on young people. National authorities should be moving in the same direction, not away from it.

The Situation in Bulgaria

Over a period of weeks, the National Youth Forum of Bulgaria (NYF) has been excluded from consultation, publicly delegitimised by the responsible Ministry, and left out of a revised Law on Youth. In a series of events and meetings over the course of September - November 2026, government officials repeatedly undermined the work of the National Youth Council, at home and abroad, for example, failing to include the National Youth Council in consultations and drafts around the new national Youth Law. Taken together, these events show a deliberate institutional stance, not an isolated misunderstanding. In particular:

1. **Exclusion from the public consultation.** The Ministry of Youth and Sports held a public consultation on planned amendments to the Law on Youth. Neither the NYF nor its member organisations were invited, although they have worked with the Ministry for years and actively help it reach young people across Bulgaria. The NYF and its members attended regardless and stated on record that excluding youth organisations from consultation on the law that governs them is unacceptable.

2. **Delegitimisation at different instances.** At a conference dedicated to Youth Affairs, despite the fact that the NYF chairs the National Working Group of the EU Youth Dialogue and takes part in all of the Ministry's consultation and policy-making processes, the Ministry's Youth Policy Directorate questioned the legitimacy of the NYC. When it comes to amendments to the Law on Youth, the Ministry showed no intention of recognising NYF as the National Youth Council in law, or of creating any such structure.

3. **Evading written follow up communication.** The European Youth Forum wrote to the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Bulgaria reaffirming that the NYF is Bulgaria's recognised National Youth Council and a full member of the European Youth Forum since 2015. The letter highlighted the NYF's democratic legitimacy, its role in representing Bulgarian youth organisations nationally and in Europe, and the Ministry's

own recognition of its status in the 2023 Memorandum of Cooperation.

4. **Public mischaracterisation and spreading disinformation.** At a hearing of the National Assembly's Committee on Youth and Sports, the NYC status of the National Youth Forum was questioned by the Ministry and it was stated that the NYF cannot represent Bulgarian youth, although NYF published an official position setting out its democratic structure, its membership and its record in the youth sector in which it is recognised as the NYC.

5. **A new draft Law on Youth that ignores the sector.** Despite the European Youth Forum's letter and the reaction across Bulgaria's youth sector, the Ministry launched amendments to the Law on Youth. The new text disregards years of input and cooperation with the sector. It contains no chapter on a National Youth Council and ignores the recommendations from the European Youth Forum's letter.

The European Youth Forum recalls:

- The 2023 Memorandum of Cooperation between the Bulgarian Ministry of Youth and Sports and the NYF, in which the Ministry recognised the NYF's role;

- The NYF's status as a full member of the European Youth Forum since 2015.

Concerns

The NYF's case is not unprecedented among the National Youth Councils in the European Youth Forum's membership. Across Europe, a pattern of democratic backsliding is visible at national level: youth councils and youth organisations are mischaracterised in order to damage their reputation and cut their access to decision-making. In such cases, international recognition and the solidarity of the European youth movement are often what keep National Youth Councils at the table when national safeguards fail.

The European Youth Forum is deeply concerned that:

- A democratically constituted, internationally recognised National Youth Council is being publicly delegitimised by the very authorities responsible for youth policy;

- Describing a platform of member organisations as "just one NGO" misrepresents what a youth council is, and denies young people's right to organise and choose their own representation;

- The stated refusal to recognise any National Youth Council in law opens the door to a false youth representation selected or controlled by government rather than by young people themselves;

- Youth organisations were excluded from effective consultation on the very law that governs them;

- Recognition granted in the 2023 Memorandum of Cooperation has been withdrawn in practice, showing that recognition resting only on the goodwill of the government of the day is fragile;

- Pressure on youth representatives in European structures shows that national delegitimisation also weakens young people's voice at European level.

- The misinterpretation of the National Youth Forum of Bulgaria directly affects the image and daily work of its members' organisations.

- The way that the lack of appropriate legislations and shrinking of youth civic spaces affect the operation and daily work of the youth organisations in Bulgaria.

It is unacceptable for public institutions to treat their own civil society in this way. Mutual recognition within the youth movement is not enough: national and European institutions need clear and universal mechanisms through which youth councils are recognised and protected, and through which their seat at the table in youth-related decision-making is permanent and prioritised.

Calls to Action

Recognising that the treatment of the National Youth Forum of Bulgaria is one instance in a series of cases affecting National Youth Councils across Europe in recent years, the European Youth Forum expresses its full solidarity with the NYF, reaffirms the NYF as the National Youth Council of Bulgaria, and calls on:

The Bulgarian National Institutions to:

1. Take the necessary steps to recognise the NYF as the National Youth Council of Bulgaria in the legislation and regulations governing youth policy, including the Law on Youth;

2. Recognise the role of the National Youth Council as a key partner of the State on matters concerning young people, youth policy and youth organisations, and honour the commitments of the 2023 Memorandum of Cooperation;

3. Include the proposals for amendments of the National Youth Council of Bulgaria and the network of youth experts in the current procedure for amending the Law in Youth;

4. Invite the NYF and youth organisations to a debate and consultation before the National Assembly's Committee on Youth and Sports to present their positions.

European Institutions to:

1. Monitor the treatment of youth civil society, and of National Youth Councils specifically, in the civic space chapter of the annual Rule of Law Report and in the implementation of EU civil society and democracy commitments;

2. Set, in the successor to the EU Youth Strategy after 2027, a clear standard that Member States recognise independent, democratically constituted National Youth Councils and involve them in all youth-related legislation and policy;

3. Raise the situation in Bulgaria with the Bulgarian authorities, including through the

European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education and the Commissioner responsible for youth;

4. Ensure, through the Council of Europe's Joint Council on Youth, a review of how member states implement Recommendations Rec(2006)1 and CM/Rec(2022)6, including in Bulgaria.

European Governments to:

1. Formally recognise, in law the independent National Youth Council in their country, defined by democratic, membership-based criteria rather than by government designation;

2. Implement the Youth Check and guarantee timely, structured and meaningful consultation of National Youth Councils and youth organisations on all legislation affecting young people, with written feedback on how input was used;

3. Establish explicit legal safeguards protecting NYCs from administrative obstruction, financial coercion or public discreditation and the creation of parallel youth structures controlled by government;

4. Recognise and support the key contributions of NYCs through providing stable core funding to National Youth Councils, free from political conditions;

5. Respect the independence of youth representatives nominated to European and international bodies, and ensure transparent nomination procedures.

The European Youth Forum and its Member Organisations to:

1. Support Member Organisations facing institutional delegitimisation, political exclusion or legal pressure from national authorities;

2. Establish regular monitoring of the legal recognition, funding and consultation of National Youth Councils across Europe;

3. Express public solidarity with the NYF and with any Member Organisation facing similar pressure, and raise such cases in the EU Youth Dialogue and in dialogue with Council Presidencies.

Endnotes

Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the role of national youth councils in youth policy development

Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)6 on protecting youth civil society and young people, and supporting their participation in democratic processes

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







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