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Motion

The Situation of youth organisations across Europe

Signed by: German National Committee for International Youth Work (DNK)

Co-signed by: Belarusian National Youth Council (RADA), Committee for National and International Relations of Youth and Non-formal Education Organisations. (CNAJEP), Council of the German-speaking Youth of Belgium (RdJ), Croatian Youth Network (MMH), Czech Council of Children and Youth (CRDM), European Confederation of Youth Clubs (ECYC), Flemish Youth Council (VJR), National Youth Council of Serbia (KOMS), National Youth Council of Ukraine (NYCUkraine), Polish Council of Youth Organizations (PROM), Romanian National Youth Council (CTR), Youth Organisations Forum (GoFor)

Youth Organisations across Europe are continuously 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 democratic, rule of law and human rights backsliding, wars, 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.

Spaces for civil society are increasingly shrinking. In some countries, the situation has moved beyond "shrinking spaces" towards "closing" or even "closed spaces". Given the escalating societal challenges, the significance of civil society engagement across Europe has become more pronounced.[1] Especially the significance of youth organisations as spaces where young citizens practise their rights and freedoms from early on is more crucial than ever. Youth organisations across Europe are facing a growing number of attacks from political groups or the state itself. The phenomenon of "Shrinking Civic Space" also manifests in the access to funding of these organisations and leads to a sharp decline in their operational capacities. These trends not only directly impact the affected youth councils and youth organisations, 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 considered by governments and policymakers across Europe, thus putting at stake their universal rights and freedoms. This situation raises a strong concern with regard to democracy and fundamental rights, and is becoming an urgent issue that must be tackled at 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, among 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 Belarus**, independent youth organisations have been forced to operate in an environment where civic space has effectively closed. Since 2020, systematic repression, the liquidation of civil society organisations and the persecution of young activists have severely restricted the exercise of freedom of association and meaningful youth participation. The Belarusian National Youth Council "RADA" continues to represent young Belarusians from exile, while facing the consequences of political persecution, transnational repression and growing financial insecurity. Operating outside the country creates additional structural barriers to accessing funding, participating in European youth programmes and sustaining independent youth representation. Despite these challenges, Belarusian youth organisations both inside the country and abroad continue to provide spaces for democratic participation and civic engagement. However, their resilience should not be confused with sustainability. The Belarusian case demonstrates why safeguarding civic space must go hand in hand with long-term institutional support, accessible funding and the recognition of independ-

1 EESC (2026): Inclusive Democratic Participation: Promoting Civil Society in Communities

ent youth councils as legitimate partners in European decision-making.

- **In Croatia**, 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 grant MMH the Croatian National Youth Council status. Instead, the ruling party appointed a National Youth Advisory Board in 2026, imposing its own representatives as legitimate voices of young people in Croatia, without ensuring genuine and independent youth representation. MMH is systematically excluded from decision-making processes, while serious efforts are continuously being taken to exclude or discredit the organisation. Croatia currently has no valid National Programme for Youth (NPM), despite the fact that such a strategic document is essential for the systematic development and implementation of youth policies. The previous NPM took five years to develop, while the current process has already been ongoing for more than two years, leaving young people without a coherent national policy framework. Furthermore, MMH has been completely excluded from the implementation of the EU Youth Dialogue in Croatia, despite having coordinated the process for 13 years, until July 2025, when the Ministry took over. There is no regular national-level public call for funding youth organisations, while existing national grants are repeatedly insufficient and inadequate considering the evidence-based needs of young people and the youth sector. The lack of sustainable funding, inadequate institutional support, and the absence of a systematic approach to youth work and youth participation continue to undermine the capacity of youth organisations. The occupancy of democratic spaces and the new Government formed in May 2024, a coalition of the predominant right-wing party and a far-right party, raise fears not only regarding the shrinking of civic-space, but also of the further degradation of democracy, youth participation and human rights in Croatia.

- **In Czechia,** the civic space and operational capacity of youth organisations recently faced a severe threat due to drastic financial cuts proposed for the state budget. The initial austerity measures planned by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports would have reduced the real value of state support to a fraction of its historical levels, forcing volunteer-driven organisations to raise participation costs and risk excluding young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Fortunately, this worst-case scenario was partially prevented following intensive advocacy and direct dialogue between the Czech Council of Children and Youth (ČRDM) and the Minister. However, while this immediate crisis was resolved through active engagement and negotiations, the near-miss remains a stark warning. It highlights the extreme financial fragility and unpredictability that the youth sector faces, where organisations are constantly forced to expend their limited capacities fighting to maintain baseline funding and survival rather than focusing on their core mission of fostering democratic spaces, social inclusion, and active youth participation.[2]

- **In Flanders**, shrinking civic space and increasing financial pressure on civil society are threatening the sustainability of youth organisations and the opportunities they offer to young people. While funding for youth work has remained largely unchanged in recent years, inflation and rising operational costs are putting increasing pressure on organisations, forcing youth organisations to lay off staff. At the same time, budget cuts in the cultural, socio-cultural, environmental and nature sectors further weaken the broader civil society ecosystem in which young people can participate, organise and express themselves. These challenges are compounded by cost-cutting measures that disproportionately affect young people, including changes to housing support, child

2 CRDM (2026): Organizace dětí a mládeže varují před drastickým omezením podpory volnočasových aktivit

benefits and childcare reimbursements, alongside further spending cuts on the horizon.

- **In France,** youth organisations and non-formal education structures face continuing reductions of their funding at both local and national levels. The whole associative sector is targeted by the rising far right,[3] who have asked repeatedly for the suppression of CNAJEP's budget at the national level, and have cut budgets for several youth centers in municipalities where it is in power. This scrutiny over budgetary attribution recently culminated in far right newspaper coverage but also through renewed administrative obligations making it harder for youth organisations to fund their staff members (through a specific grant called "FONJEP"). The shrinking of civic space also directly affects young people's ability to mobilise and exercise their democratic rights. This has recently manifested itself through the use of excessive force by the State during student protests, alongside the disqualification and infantilisation of young protesters, whose capacity to understand political issues and legitimately express their demands has been questioned. Such responses restrict the space in which young people can organise, protest and collectively advocate for their rights and interests.

- **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 Germany,** the youth organisations of young civil society, which are also represented in the DNK, are threatened with budget cuts of up to 20% for the fifth 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 four years, the cuts were prevented with great effort, which is binding capacity in the organisations. Prominently, the state funding framework agreement for the LGBTQIA+ organisation Lambda has been cut for next year, which marks the first big cut of a framework agreement for a youth organisation and is putting young LGBTQIA+ people in Germany in a precarious situation. Additionally, a study by the German National Youth Council analysing the threat from the far right on youth organisations this year showed that 26% of the 201 participating youth organisations suffered attacks that they understood to be far-right motivated within the last 12 months.[4]

- **In Romania**, youth organisations face persistent challenges related to insufficient and unpredictable public funding, limited institutional support and the growing administrative burden placed on civil society organisations. Although the legal framework provides for public funding mechanisms for youth activities, their implementation remains inconsistent.
  In March 2025, the Romanian Youth council (CTR) called on county councils and the local councils of county-seat municipalities to comply with their legal obligation under Law No. 350/2006 to establish dedicated funds for youth activities. CTR also petitioned prefectures to verify compliance, highlighting the gap between existing legal provisions and their implementation in practice. The lack of reliable and accessible funding limits the

3 Alternatives Economiques (2026): Contre les associations, les villes RN passent des menaces aux actes

4 DBJR (2026): "Presentation of the initial findings of the threat assessment"

capacity of youth organisations to plan long-term activities, maintain their operational capacity and ensure meaningful participation for young people across the country. These challenges are compounded by a highly polarised political climate, in which civil society organisations have increasingly been portrayed in public discourse as politically motivated or influenced by foreign interests. At the same time, growing administrative and reporting requirements place additional pressure on organisations, particularly those with limited staff and financial resources. These developments risk weakening independent youth representation and reducing the space available for young people to organise, participate in democratic life and contribute to public decision-making.

- **In Serbia,** youth organisations have been systematically targeted and repressed since November 2024, as they publicly gave support to the newly formed student movement and criticised the government's lack of accountability for the collapse of the canopy of the Novi Sad train station and the subsequent deaths of 16 people. This includes media smear campaigns, criminal police visits to five CSOs including KOMS based upon allegations of organisations using USAID grants to support the "coloured revolution" in Serbia[5], threats to physical safety of staff and young activists, use of illegal spyware against at least 14 students,[6] as well as financial pressure. In 2025, the Ministry of Tourism and Youth withdrew funding for national youth organisations including KOMS [7] with no given explanation. According to KOMS' analysis,[8] ⅓ of recipients of Ministry grants in 2025 were organisations with no online presence proof of activity, suggesting corruption. Repression against youth organisations could also be underreported due to the weakened position of local youth organisations, the decrease in international funding and subsequent reliance on local government funds. This is part of a wider crackdown on dissent in Serbia, as the authorities turn to increasingly violent and illegal methods of repression, leading to what can only be characterised as an already shrunk civic space.

- **In Türkiye**, civic space for young people has narrowed sharply since the largely youth-led protests following the Istanbul Mayor's detention on 19 March 2025. 1,879 people were detained, most of them young, including Youth Organisations Forum (GoFor) representatives.[9] Students faced mass trials and evictions from state dormitories, and social media accounts of 53 youth organisations were blocked[10]. Speaking out internationally carries risk as well: Enes Hocaoğulları, Türkiye's youth delegate to the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, spent 35 days in pre-trial detention in 2025 over a speech in Strasbourg on police violence against young protesters, before being acquitted in February 2026. Since 13 September 2026, operations across 15 provinces have targeted LGBTI+ organisations, including Kaos GL and Young LGBTI+, both GoFor members. Within a week, at least 81 people were placed in pre-trial detention, seven of them Kaos GL board members, and detainees were questioned about the association's foreign funding. Websites and social media accounts of numerous rights organisations, GoFor's included, have been blocked. These pressures compound a structural exclusion. Türkiye has no state-recognised National Youth Council, and the Ministry of Youth and Sports' 2026 budget allocates nothing to one. Rights-based youth organisations are kept out of national consultation and budget processes, and over 80% of them

5 BCSDN (2025): BCSDN Condemns Targeted Institutional Pressure on Civic Initiatives and Civil Society in Serbia

6 European Western Balkans (2026): Opposition and student activists in Serbia targeted with advanced spyware

7 KOMS (2025): Srbija: država koja urušava sistem brige o mladima

8 KOMS (2025): Analysis of the 2025 Call for Proposals by the Ministry of Tourism and Youth

9 Youth Organisations Forum (2025): Report on the Freedom of Assembly and Association Rights, Collective Action and Human Solidarity Facing Existential Threat in Türkiye

10 Youth Organisations Forum (2025): Which Youth? A Review and Monitoring Report on the Last Decade of Youth and Youth Rights Violations in Türkiye within the context of March 19

receive no public funding.[11][12] After the March 2025 protests, at least nine youth organisations critical of government policy were also subjected to retaliatory financial inspections.[13] Meanwhile, the economic crisis falls hardest on the young. Türkiye has the highest NEETs rate in the OECD, at 31% of 18–24-year-olds and 33% of 25–29-year-olds.[14] Young workers put in the longest weekly hours in Europe,[15] often across several precarious jobs. This leaves them little time, income or security for civic participation.

- **In Ukraine**, in the context of Russia's ongoing full-scale invasion, the youth sector continues to operate in an extremely challenging security and financial environment. While cooperation between the National Youth Council of Ukraine (NYCU) and public authorities has significantly strengthened, including new institutional grants and developing its youth participation infrastructure, with new youth councils, youth organisations and other mechanisms to strengthen young people's participation in decision-making, financial sustainability remains one of the key challenges for the youth sector. As the war continues and the security situation deteriorates, a significant share of national and international resources is understandably directed towards defence, humanitarian response and other urgent needs. This has also led to changing donor priorities and increased competition for funding available to civil society organisations. As a result, many youth organisations face increasing difficulties in maintaining stable teams, planning their work in the longer term and investing in institutional development. Strengthening the resilience and institutional capacity of youth organisations therefore remains essential. Meaningful youth participation is particularly important in the context of Ukraine's recovery, European integration, democratic resilience and future reconstruction.

- **In the United Kingdom**, youth organisations and the wider youth sector have struggled following years of austerity cuts that have hit youth provision. This has seen the closure of multiple youth organisations - including those operating at a local, regional and national level - all across the UK who have been burdened with rising costs and an ever diminished pot of funding. One of the organisations hit hardest by this was the British Youth Council, who in March 2024, entered a process of liquidation due to long-lasting financial challenges - challenges which were made worse by the UK's decision in 2020 to exit the Erasmus+ programme. While the British Youth Council was ultimately salvaged and preserved (albeit with the new name of "Youth Council UK" following the decision of its member organisations), saving the organisation required substantial investment and political capital which could have been put to better use. While the National Youth Council remains in place and is in a process of recovery, the wider issue of shrinking civic space still stands in the UK and youth organisations and youth structures like the UK Youth Parliament continue to face challenges and financial uncertainty.[16]

Comparably, INYGOs 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), as well as the proposed 30% cut on AgoraEU,[17] the finan-

11 Youth Organisations Forum (2025): Gençlik ve Sport Bakanliği 2026 Bütçesi Hakkinda

12 Youth Organisations Forum (2025): Türkiye'deki Gençlik Örgütlerinin intiyaç Analizi Raporu 2025

13 Youth Organisations Forum (2025): Report on the Freedom of Assembly and Association Rights, Collective Action and Human Solidarity Facing Existential Threat in Türkiye

14 OECD (2026): Education at a Glance 2026 - OECD Indicators

15 Eurostat (2026): Average usual weekly hours worked in the main job by professional status, full-time/part-time employment and occupation - quarterly data

16 Youth Council UK (2026): Youth Council UK's Executive Board statement on the future of the UK Youth Parliament

17 Civil Society Europe (2026): More than 600 organisations say it clear: Defend AgoraEU, Invest in European Citizens' Future!

cial landscape for youth organisations is set to become even more challenging and unpredictable. These conditions result in precarious working conditions, financial instability and failure in guaranteeing the rights of 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 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.[18] 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.[19]

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.[20]

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".[21]

The current developments in the youth sector make these strategic aims and commitments of action more relevant than ever. In light of the-then likely closure of the British Youth Council (BYC) in 2024 the Advisory Council on Youth of the

18 Bartold et al (2024): Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf? How corporations maintain hegemony by using counterinsurgency tactics to undermine activism

19 The Guardian (2023): How criminalisation is being used to silence climate activists across the world

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

21 YFJ Strategic Plan 2024-2029

Council of Europe published 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."[22] 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;

22 Advisory Council (2024): Why We Need Sustainable Funding - Statement on the Permanent Closure of the British Youth Council

4. All Erasmus+ Programme countries - with the oversight of the European Commission - to ensure that Erasmus+ & 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 make the EU Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2035 more ambitious and stop dismantling ERASMUS+ and the European Solidarity Corps and AgoraEU, instead increase the total amount dedicated to these meaningful and impactful funding schemes for young people;

6. The European Union to include as Erasmus+ Programme countries all European countries that abide by the principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. At the same time, the EU must ensure that independent youth organisations from countries where these principles are systematically violated, including those operating in exile, retain meaningful access to Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps through flexible eligibility requirements and participation arrangements adapted to the realities of repression and displacement;

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;

9. The Council of Europe member states to fully implement the Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)6 on protecting youth civil society and young people, and supporting their participation in democratic processes as well as the Recommendation CM/Rec(2006)1 on the role of national youth councils in youth policy development and the Recommendation CM/Rec(2026)3 on the European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life;

10. Welcoming related Council of Europe developments such as the 2023 Reykjavík Declaration which sets out to include a youth perspective in the organisation's work and decision-making processes; the Reykjavík Principles for Democracy which emphasise the importance of supporting young people's participation in democratic life and decision-making processes. And, importantly, the Resolution on the Council of Europe Reference Framework on a Youth Perspective.

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 civil 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, INGYOs 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 INGYOs 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 powerfully and effectively, helping to protect our spaces and ensure that young people are adequately represented.







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