Adopted by
General Assembly

Brussels, Belgium
13-14 November 2026

Motion

Youth-led protests across Europe: from the streets to the table

A present we can live in, a future worth hoping for

european youth forum

Introduction

Since mid-September, more than 1,700 protests and cases of unrest have been recorded in 31 European countries[1]. Hundreds of thousands of young people across Europe have taken to the streets in school strikes, university occupations, housing marches, general strikes and movements for democracy and accountability.

Their demands differ from country to country, but they share a common question: are there prospects for us to have a good quality of life? Young people are asking for a decent life, and for democracies that are accountable and answerable to them. Many of our Member Organisations are part of these mobilisations, and many more are feeling their effects.

Young people are raising topics that policy-makers have already been alerted to, and some answers are already on the table of national and European decision-makers. As the European Youth Forum, it is our role to bridge the gap between young people's demands and the places where decisions are made. This motion sets out what young people need decision-makers to protect and deliver urgently.

Background

a) A wave of youth-led mobilisation

Young people are at the heart, and at the forefront, of social movements across Europe and beyond. The current wave has two strands that feed into each other. Young people are mobilising for a decent life: for affordable housing, access to quality education, decent work and a cost of living they can manage. And they are mobilising for accountable democracy: standing against corruption, for the rule of law, judicial independence, for free and fair elections, and free press.

The majority of these mobilisations are peaceful.[2] Young people are organising, marching, campaigning and voting to change the societies they live in.

To take one example, Serbia shows what sustained youth-led mobilisation can achieve. Over two years, peaceful, student-led protests for accountability and democracy grew into a movement that brought the highest voter turnout in decades to the polls in October 2026.[3] It is a powerful reminder that when young people organise, democracy wins, and that when young people are included, democracy flourishes. Young people are not disengaged from democracy, we are actively renewing it.

Yet across Europe, young people's mobilisation is too often met with restrictions and disproportionate force rather than with answers.[4] Instead of addressing the root causes for this mobilisation, extremist and anti-democratic political forces are preying on feelings of dissatisfaction that young people are experiencing, while governments, domestic and foreign, instrumentalise mobilisations to serve disinformation purposes.

1 https://acleddata.com/

2 Civic Space Watch. (2026, October 29). Concerns over policing and freedom of assembly during Europe's protest wave. https://civicspacewatch.eu/alert/concerns-over-policing-and-freedom-of-assembly-during-europes-protest-wave/

3 https://www.poliwave.com/rs/gen/elections/2026?office=lower&level=riding

4 https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/10/france-un-experts-appalled-crackdown-student-protests

b) A generation facing structural insecurity

Young people's demands are rooted in their everyday lives. From housing and energy, to food and basic necessities, the affordability and cost of living crises are putting increasing pressure on young people's financial security and independence, in part caused by geopolitical instability and security concerns. Currently, one in four young people in the EU is at risk of poverty or social exclusion,[5] with house prices in the EU rising by 60% and rents by almost 30% between 2010 and 2025.[6] Furthermore, the EU youth unemployment rate is more than twice the overall unemployment rate.[7]

Contrary to recent history, in several European countries, younger cohorts have lower incomes, higher poverty risk and less homeownership than their parents at the same age.[8] Young people are too often blamed for delaying moving out, starting a family or finding a job, as if these were personal choices rather than the consequences of policies designed shortsightedly without future generations in mind. This insecurity is also taking a heavy toll on young people's quality of life, as precarious work, financial pressure, accessibility of education and failure to address the climate crisis, leave many anxious about both their present and their future.[9]

c) A democratic deficit

Many young people are distant from the institutions that make decisions about their lives.[10] Young people are the least represented age group in parliaments, some without the right to vote, are the least recognised in institutional and informal processes, while not being included in the decision-making processes that impact their livelihoods. This distance is not felt equally, as young people facing intersecting forms of discrimination encounter additional structural barriers. Closing this gap requires more than one-off consultations or standalone youth initiatives, where we must make sure young people's voices, experiences, and ideas are part of the decisions that shape our societies.

Free and fair elections, judicial independence and upholding the rule of law need to be maintained. When young people face democratic insecurities and institutions fail to respond, extremist and anti-democratic forces exploit that precarity and instrumentalise dissatisfaction to serve disinformation purposes. Yet their rise is not inevitable. Every Council of Europe Member State has committed to freedom of assembly, freedom of association and the rule of law, and young people are asking them to uphold those commitments.[11] In EU candidate countries, where young people have taken the lead in driving tangible political and societal change, they are also asking that the path to EU membership remain tied to democracy, human rights and the rule of law, with their voices built into the process.

d) Shrinking civic space

There is a fundamental difference between peaceful protest and violence. Young people marching for causes fundamental to their lives, such as affordable housing, access to quality education, LGBTQI+ rights, sexual and reproductive rights, a liveable planet, and a say in their future,

5 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Young_people_-_social_inclusion

6 Eurostat. (2026, October 1). Housing price statistics - house price index. Statistics Explained. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Housing_price_statistics_-_house_price_index

7 Eurostat. (2026, September). Unemployment statistics. Statistics Explained. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Unemployment_statistics#Youth_unemployment

8 https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC144437

9 European Youth Forum. (2024, March 26). Always on standby: How precarious work impacts young people's mental health. https://www.youthforum.org/policy-library/always-on-standby-how-precarious-work-impacts-young-peoples-mental-health

10 https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261884/Young%20people%E2%80%99s%20participation%20in%20the%202024%20European%20elections.pdf/0ea71421-f78b-fa96-f78f-9d16eca79012?t=1740564215425

11 Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (European Convention on Human Rights, as amended) (ECHR) art 11(1).

are exercising a right, and that right must be protected.

Violence through disproportionate force against protesters, has no place in a democracy. It must never become an excuse to silence the peaceful majority. Nor does vandalism, which harms communities and risks drowning out the peaceful voices of young people. Restrictions on demonstrations must not become a way of silencing young people. Defending civic space means defending the right to assemble, offline and online.

Young activists across Europe are being targeted for standing up for democratic values. These are not isolated cases. Civic space also shrinks in quieter ways than force or restriction, and the organisations through which young people organise are particularly exposed to it. Youth organisations are essential democratic infrastructure: they build skills, trust, participation and leadership, and give young people a voice in the decisions that affect them. National Youth Councils, as the independent, democratic and youth-led umbrella bodies of youth organisations in each country, play a vital role in bridging the gap between young people and national governments. Yet they are increasingly constrained by shrinking civic space and unstable funding. Funding youth organisations is funding democracy.

From the streets to the policy table

We, the European Youth Forum, stand in solidarity with the young people across Europe who are mobilising peacefully for a decent life and for accountable democracy, and with our Member Organisations who are part of these movements. We stand with young people in their right to protest peacefully, particularly those targeted for standing up for democratic values.

Solidarity alone is not an answer. Young people are asking for change, and decision-makers hold the power to make it happen. We therefore call on decision-makers to:

- **Protect** young people's rights and their freedom to claim them
- **Deliver** the changes young people are calling for.

a) Protect

Young people's demands are to safeguard their legal rights. Quality education, affordable housing, decent work, access to quality public services, a decent standard of living, a liveable planet, accountable democracy and a say in decisions are rights, and governments and institutions are the duty-bearers obliged to uphold them. To claim these rights, young people must be free to protest, free to organise, and able to hold their institutions to account. We call on decision-makers to protect:

The right to protest. Peaceful protest is a form of democratic participation, not a public order problem. There is a clear distinction between peaceful protest and violence: violence of any kind has no place in a true democracy, and must never be used to attack or delegitimise the peaceful majority or the calls they are making. We call on national governments across Europe to:

- guarantee the right of all young people to assemble peacefully, offline and online, without discrimination;
- prevent disproportionate force, politically-motivated detention and retribution, ensuring

that every case of abuse is independently investigated, and hold those responsible accountable;

- respond to the protests with dialogue and policy change, involving youth organisations.

Young activists and youth organisations. Young people standing up for democratic values, and the organisations through which they organise, must be free to do so without fear. Additionally, across social movements, solidarity between generations has long been a source of strength and support, and it remains vital today. We call on national governments to:

- ensure young people's freedom of association;

- protect young activists, human rights defenders and youth organisations, as well as their supporters and young journalists, targeted for defending democratic values;

- recognise, safeguard, resource and strengthen the independence of youth organisations, particularly National Youth Councils and International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations, free from any form of political pressure and interference.

Accountable institutions. Young people are calling for institutions that answer to us, not only for better policies. Democracy must represent their interests, uphold the rule of law, stand against corruption, independent judicial systems and free and fair elections, and ensure participation shapes decisions rather than following them. We call on:

- the European Union to cover freedom of assembly, the treatment of young protesters and the civic space of youth organisations in its rule of law monitoring, and to keep EU accession firmly tied to democracy, human rights and the rule of law, with young people's voices built into the process;

- the Council of Europe and its Member States to uphold their commitments to freedom of assembly and the rule of law, and to protect young people and human rights defenders.

b) Deliver

What young people are calling for is partly already on the table. When young people cannot afford a home, find decent work or plan for their future, our trust in democratic institutions erodes. Delivering on our rights is one of the strongest safeguards democracy has. Youth perspectives need to be mainstreamed across all policy areas and stages of the policy cycle. It also requires an intersectional approach, one that actively involves the most marginalised young people in decisions that affect them. We call on decision-makers to deliver the following:

Housing. Strengthen the EU Affordable Housing Act[12] to respond to the urgency of the housing crisis faced by young people, giving local authorities the powers and flexibility to act quickly. Call on national governments to put the recently adopted Council Recommendation on Fighting Housing Exclusion[13] into action, including its roadmap for aligning rents with young people's incomes, promoting long-term rental contracts, ending no-fault evictions, and delivering massive public investment in social and affordable housing.

Quality Jobs. Make sure the upcoming EU Quality Jobs Act meaningfully improves decent working conditions for young people, from regulating algorithmic management and protecting the right to disconnect to safeguarding mental health at work. It should set a clear precedent that every job should guarantee a decent life. Moreover, the EU must adopt a Traineeships Directive that effectively improves the working conditions for trainees, including around pay, and ends the unfair treatment and exploitation of young people in the labour market. Gaining experience should never depend on who can afford it in the first place.

Education. Guarantee free and equal access to quality education and lifelong learning for all

12 https://housing.ec.europa.eu/affordable-housing-act_en

13 https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/10/19/a-place-to-call-home-council-adopts-recommendation-on-tackling-housing-exclusion-and-homelessness/

young people, protect education budgets from cuts, and recognise non-formal education and youth work as essential to young people's learning and civic participation.

Public budgets. Protect sustainable investment in civil society, formal and non-formal education, housing, decent work, health, and mental health services, and look for alternative sources of revenue before cutting the public services young people depend on.

The next EU budget. The EU's next Multiannual Financial Framework should ensure sufficient funding for supporting youth participation, climate action, quality youth employment and the promotion of young people's social and economic rights.

Free and fair elections and the rule of law. Protect the integrity of elections, including from disinformation and interference, and make sure every young person can register and vote without barriers. Use the full range of EU and Council of Europe instruments, including rule of law monitoring, to defend judicial independence and the rule of law wherever they are under threat.

Meaningful youth participation. Create processes to consistently mainstream young people's views across all new laws and policies, including by establishing youth test mechanisms at every level of government, as the EU Youth Test can do for EU legislation, so that every new policy is assessed for its impact on young people before it is adopted. Ensure that the next EU Youth Strategy, and national youth strategies, directly respond to the issues young people are raising now, and work with youth organisations to create possibilities for young people to shape decision-making. To make our democracies stronger, bridge the gap between young people and elected politicians by lowering the voting age to 16.

Funding for youth organisations. Youth organisations cannot defend democracy, deliver youth work or represent young people on project grants alone. We call on decision-makers to:

- provide stable, multi-annual core funding for youth organisations across all relevant programmes of the next Multiannual Financial Framework;
- ensure national governments provide stable and accessible funding for youth organisations, including National Youth Councils, that respects their independence.

A liveable planet. Ensure that the universal right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment is embedded in law, and that a just transition centred on climate justice is financed in a way that does not shift the cost onto young people and future generations.

Closing

Young people deserve a present we can live in and a future worth hoping for. We are asking whether our institutions are listening. The causes are clear, and the decisions are on the table. We call on Europe's decision-makers to protect young people's rights and deliver the changes young people are calling for.







Co-funded by the European Union

The European Youth Forum is funded by the European Union and the Council of Europe. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union, the Council of Europe or the European Youth Foundation. Neither the European Union nor any other granting authority can be held responsible for them.