

The legacy of the European Year of Youth in achievements, initiatives and programmes

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Abstract. The conceptual framework of this article is focused on the overview of the various initiatives and programs related to youth development elaborated as part of the objectives set during the European Year of Youth. The main themes addressed in the article are the role of measures and activities in the field of youth policies, as supporting the consequences of the pandemic and contributing to a more active inclusion of young people in society. The purpose of the desk research was to argue the role of the European Union to respond through encouraging new programs to the youth policies of the member states. The findings of the research outline the constant need and aim of actively involving and engaging young people in the future policies of the EU. Moreover, the review of the various legal acts – resolutions, decisions, programs are reflecting dynamic processes in youth development and providing a normative role to the policies in the member states.

Key words: European Year of Youth, European Youth Strategy, Youth programmes, Bulgarian youth

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1. Introduction

The announcement of 2022 as the European Year of Youth, on 15 September 2021, by the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, during the State of the Union speech, took place after a period of the COVID-19 pandemic and a period of restrictions, having a serious influence on the youth in Europe and Bulgaria. An important initiative in support of the Year was the presentation of NextGenerationEU - a recovery plan with an emphasis on young people ("NextGenerationEU - European Union"). The decision of December 22, 2021 of the European Parliament and of the Council ("Decision (EU) 2021/2316 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 December 2021 on a European Year of Youth (2022)"), reconfirmed and reaffirmed the goals for young people set in the European Union Youth Strategy for the period 2019-2027 ("Resolution on the European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027").

2. Implementation

In choosing the topics that will be highlighted during the European Year of Youth, through various activities of the member states of the European Union, the results of the Eurobarometer study – "Youth and democracy during the European Year of Youth" ("Eurobarometer on the European Year of Youth: Young Europeans are increasingly engaged"), are also of significant importance, held between February 22 and March 4, 2022. Collecting responses from all member states of the sentiments among the young generation, the survey also expresses a trend of general engagement of young people in society (58%) of young people in the European Union are active in societies in which live and have participated in one or more youth organizations in the past 12 months, which compared to a 2019 study shows a growth of 17% percentage points. Bulgarian youth between the ages of 15 and 30, who responded to the conducted research, number 1003 people. It is also interesting to follow how they answered the questions, but here we will highlight some of them. Regarding the topics to be affected during the European Year, the answers with a high percentage among the Bulgarian youth stand out,

namely – improvement of education and training, free movement of students, interns and students (38%) compared to the most selected by the overall youth people answers from the EU- improving mental and physical health and wellbeing (40%); the topic of combating poverty and economic and social inequalities is also of great importance among the respondents (40%). When asked about the expectations of the coming year, nearly 33% of those who answered highlighted the answer - "More efforts for better inclusion of young people in the labour market" ("Eurobarometer on the European Year of Youth: Young Europeans are increasingly engaged"). The announcement of the year also coincides with the presentation of another significant initiative of the EC - "ALMA" ("European Social Fund Plus"), whose abbreviation in English language means - (Aim, Learn, Master, Achieve), and is aimed at the group of young people who do not participate in any form of employment, education or training (NEETs).

In chronological terms, the announcement of 2022 as the European Year of Youth was also accompanied by a series of recommendations from April 2022, facilitating international youth volunteering activities ("Council Recommendation on the mobility of young volunteers across the European Union"), as a result of the active role of young people during the COVID-19 pandemic ("The impact of Covid-19 on youth and on sport").

In the survey Eurobarometer -, "Youth and democracy during the European Year of Youth" for Bulgaria, a small percentage of awareness among young people is observed - 8% of the program "European Solidarity Corps" against the background of the overall awareness of the program "Erasmus +" ' aimed at schools, vocational high schools, non-formal education and cross-sectoral cooperation. However, it is important to note, which is also contained in the EC recommendation, that the role of all instruments such as Youthpass and Europass, in documenting and evaluating the educational results of voluntary activities at the national level, should be supported in the validation of activities on solidarity in the context of the European Year of Youth. Here it is good to note that youth policies in the European Union are national policies and their harmonization at the EU level is not implied. However according to The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and Art. 165, there is a legal basis for supporting legislative initiatives and promoting the exchange at the level of youth workers, trainers and young people, and through Art. 166, it is possible to support the policies related to vocational training, in addition to the national policy of the Member States, through various forms of exchange ("Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union").

The active role of the European Parliament in the direction of accompanying activities - trainings, seminars and aimed at young people and training young people, is important to be mentioned in this context of the European Year of Youth. Along with the regularly held youth meeting - (EYE) in Strasbourg and gathering young people from all member countries, the "Ambassador Schools Program" and the Euroscola, the "Charlemagne" award for youth projects, it is also worth mentioning the presented, in September 2022, a new portal for youth news and initiatives - "Youth Hub" ("Youth Hub"). Other initiatives - "Have your say", "Youth Network Event" of the EP and Youth Outreach Unit of Directorate-General for Communication, which gained popularity, are aimed at youth trainers working in non-formal education and teaching on topics of European and active citizenship, with three editions held in 2019, 2020 and 2022. In its last edition - "Meeting of trainers from formal and non-formal education" in November 2022, it aimed to find the contact points between classroom methodologies and the projects of various non-governmental organizations to be able to respond to the needs of young people. Most of the representatives of various secondary schools were also participants in the "Euroscola" program of the European Parliament. It is important to emphasize that the role of the European Parliament in youth policies is consistent and has its advocacy role towards the member states. In support of youth policies, the European Parliament over the years expresses its opinion through various resolutions - for example, on "Empowering European youth: post-pandemic employment and social recovery". ("Texts adopted - Empowering European youth: post-pandemic employment and social recovery - Thursday, 17 February 2022"). Within the framework of the decision of the European Year of Youth, Parliament insisted on the participation of youth organizations at all preparatory stages and advocated for the empowerment of young people, in order to acquire knowledge and skills, for activities to deal with the challenges after COVID-19 ("DECISION (EU) 2021/2316 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 22 December 2021 on a European Year of Youth (2022)").

Information campaigns, brainstorming, and research during the European Year of Youth was supported by an operational budget of EUR 8 million through the Erasmus+ program and the European Solidarity Corps supported by the European Parliament and adopted by the Council of the European Union. Initiatives from various coordinators - governmental and non-governmental youth organizations, EU institutions, were presented and are available on the specially initiated web page ("What is the European Year of Youth? | European Youth Portal") to the European Youth Portal. One of the initiatives of the European Commission was "Policy Dialogues" ("Policy dialogues | European Youth Portal") - meeting 12-15 young people to talk with each of the 26 commissioners within 2 hours. Many of the activities within the Year were continued in 2023 due to the various safety measures in the member states in 2022 and the postponement of the planned activities. There were

194 meetings, conferences, and youth initiatives held in Bulgaria. Within the Eurodesk network, 142 activities and 147 online sessions were held to support young people ("Eurodesk's 2022 Overview is here!"). A highlight among the activities in Bulgaria is the National Youth Conference "Project for the Future" held by the "Youth Policies" Directorate of the Ministry of Youth and Sports in March 2023. The final event was intended to summarize the results achieved during the year and to provide an opportunity for open dialogue on the topics of green policies and education, youth health – mental and physical, prevention against aggression, violence and various forms of addictions, empowerment – young people in the decision-making process and youth work.

The various activities aimed at and for young people, youth workers within the framework of the Year, have reached 171 million Europeans - and by the end of January, there are 12,500 activities registered on the European Youth Portal page in over 70 countries. In this context, among the activities that were initiated are those in solidarity for Ukraine, as well as the participation of Ukrainian participants in the "Erasmus +" program and its key activities, in the program "European Solidarity Corps" was encouraged through additional guidelines.

The prioritization and placement of youth topics in policies, the search for their impact and an active role are reaffirmed most insistently and critically by the adopted resolution of the European Parliament - "The European Year of Youth 2022 Legacy" from November 24, 2022 ("Texts adopted - The European Year of Youth 2022 Legacy - Thursday, 24 November 2022"). In it, with particular importance, topics about the methodology are set, which would be important for the inclusion of young people, for their hearing throughout the EU; the question of the contribution of the Year is raised, but not through the number of activities carried out, but through adopted, committed policies for young people in the member countries. In the implementation of the activities and the initiation of new plans in the European Year of Youth, I would like to point out a strong emphasis in reaffirming the importance of young people in the implementation of the EU's external activities, namely the plan adopted at the end of 2022 - "Youth Action Plan for engaging young people in EU external action" from the Council of the European Union ("Youth Action Plan in EU external action – Council conclusions (28 November 2022)"). Thus, through the empowerment of young people, the determination of resources, their active role in new activities is sought, in commitment for a more inclusive and sustainable future.

3. Conclusions

In addition, the data extracted from the responses to one of the questions in the Eurobarometer ("Eurobarometer on the European Year of Youth: Young Europeans are increasingly engaged") regarding the awareness among young people in Bulgaria for mobility and stay abroad require more follow up activities on local level ; we will note that the new initiative- action from the program "Erasmus +" - "DiscoverEU" has a low awareness of 9%. Supporting and debating the well-being of young people in Bulgaria and investing in them through youth work, exchange programmes, volunteer initiatives in line with the framework of the European ones can bring more involvement on a national level. Here it is relevant to note that the initiative was launched in 2018 and was inspired by young people from Germany. In it, on a quota principle of participation, the national agencies under the "Erasmus +" program select projects and participants to explore Europe by awarding a travel railcard. In this context, the recommendations of the European Parliament in the aforementioned resolution and appeal to the Commission and the member states are relevant and imperative - to implement the active inclusion of young people in the debate on Europe, to implement modules for global citizenship and EU citizenship in the future activities.

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