

Position Paper

# The future of the Erasmus+ Programme

## Contents

<b>Background</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Key demands</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Objectives of the programme</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Actions of the programme</b>	<b>8</b>
I. Centralised Actions	9
I.I. Civil Society Cooperation in the field of Youth - youth operating grants	9
I.II. Key Action 3 - European Youth Together	10
I.III. Key Action 2 - Partnerships for Cooperation in the field of youth & Capacity Building in the field of youth - European NGOs	10
I.IV. EU-Youth Dialogue grants for National Working Groups	11
II. Decentralised Actions	11
II.I. Key Action 1 - Youth exchanges	12
II.II. Key Action 1 - Mobility projects for youth workers	12
II.III. Key Action 1 - Virtual exchanges in the field of youth	12
II.IV. Key Action 2 - Partnerships for Cooperation	12
<b>An ambitious and youth-inclusive vision for the Erasmus+ Programme</b>	<b>14</b>
I. Governance of the Programme	14
II. An Erasmus+ Programme beyond the EU	14
III. Accessibility and Inclusion	15
IV. Sustainability	15
V. An Erasmus+ Programme that works for young people	16

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## Background

Since its inception, the Erasmus+ programme has transformed the lives of countless young people, empowering them with valuable competences and experiences. The programme has served as a cornerstone for the development of active European citizens and youth organisations in Europe and supported the youth civil society all across the continent, including outside of the European Union. It is safe to say that the Erasmus+ programme is the most relevant funding scheme for youth in Europe and that its inception marked a before and after in the livelihoods of young people and European citizens as a whole, including many that are well beyond their youth by now.

The relevance of the Erasmus+ Programme gains a special light in the current context of global democratic backsliding. More often than not, youth organisations face challenges in accessing sustainable funding opportunities. Some governments actively block organisations from accessing public funding, as well as from private or philanthropic sources, in some cases claiming it serves a certain political agenda<sup>1</sup>. An eye-opening piece of data is that of philanthropic funding in the field of climate action and justice; whereas young people have been at the forefront of its advocacy, youth-led climate justice initiatives account for just 0.76% of climate mitigation funding from the world's largest climate foundations across the three financial years of 2019, 2020, and 2021<sup>2</sup>. The Erasmus+ Programme offers youth organisations the opportunity and the resources to organise meaningful educational and civic opportunities for and by young people all across Europe, at a time when the enabling environment for civil society is shrinking<sup>3</sup> and access to meaningful funding opportunities is scarce.

However, there are still areas where improvements can be made to ensure that Erasmus+ appropriately reaches all young people and supports the youth sector. As the representative body for youth organisations and the voice of young people in Europe, the European Youth Forum calls for the recommendations outlined in this paper to be implemented, so as to ensure that the Erasmus+ programme works in

the interest and benefit of young people and youth civil society in Europe. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to identify the areas for improvement in the Erasmus+ Programme as well as the elements that are working adequately and should be continued. More specifically, it aims to bring in the vision of youth organisations and young people to the table in the context of the Erasmus+ 2021-27 mid-term evaluation and Erasmus+ 2014-20 final evaluation, as well as to the upcoming Erasmus+ successor programme negotiations.

Our emphasis remains on ensuring that young people are not marginalised within the EU budget and policies but are instead integrated across various EU policy areas and programmes. In the context of the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) negotiations, the commitment of the EU towards youth should be materialised in a strong reinforcement of the Erasmus+ Programme. This should include both a significant increase of the current budget of EUR 26 billion of the current programming period (far from the EUR 30 billion originally proposed by the European Commission and the EUR 41 billion argued for by the European Parliament), as well as an increase of the commitment of the programme budget for youth to at least 15%, from the current 10%.

1 European Youth Forum (2022) - *Position Paper on Safeguarding Civic Space for Young People in Europe*

2 Youth Climate Justice Study (2022)

3 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2023) - *Protecting civil society – Update 2023*

## Key demands

- Significantly increase the Erasmus+ Programme budget for the 2028-2034 Multiannual Financial Framework period.
- Improve the evaluation process for Erasmus+ grants by...
  - ...ensuring that one of the requirements to hire independent experts assessing Erasmus+ grants in the field of youth is to have experience within the youth sector.
  - ...implementing common trainings for independent experts to ensure understanding of the youth field, fairness and quality in project evaluation processes.
  - ...ensuring that the Evaluation Committee conformed by EACEA and European Commission representatives take into consideration the number of grants allocated to youth organisations at the time of taking the final decisions.
- Reform and improve the governance and flow of information within the Erasmus+ Programme by...
  - ...establishing an Erasmus+ stakeholder group with representative youth organisations and beneficiaries, convening at least twice a year with DG EAC and EACEA to discuss developments in the implementation of Erasmus+ activities funded through direct management.
  - ...including the European Youth Forum as an observer in the Erasmus+ Programming Committee meetings.
  - ...including youth organisations and independent, democratic National Youth Councils in advisory bodies of the Erasmus+ National Agency in their respective countries.
- Improve the access of youth organisations within the Erasmus+ Programme by...
  - ...establishing structural regranting schemes managed by ENGOs in the field of youth.
  - ...establishing an Erasmus+ accreditation at centralised level for organisations applying for actions managed by EACEA - similarly to those for Key Action 1.
  - ...further defining youth organisations within the programme and embed it in the eligibility criteria across the different Key Actions.
  - ...simplifying the programme at all levels, from application to reporting stages, both at centralised and decentralised levels. Ensure that additional simplification measures are put in place for grants targeting grassroots and local youth organisations, including from Key Action 1 or Key Action 2 Small-Scale Partnerships.
- Improve access to the Erasmus+ Programme for all young people in Europe by...
  - ...creating a special fast-track visa category for participants of Erasmus+ (as well as ESC, CERV, and any programme that involves youth) projects.
  - ...taking all necessary steps to involve in the Erasmus+ Programme all willing non-EU European countries that abide by the principles of democracy, human rights and rule of law. This includes the re-accession of both the United Kingdom and Switzerland to the programme.
  - ...increasing the scope of all KA2 actions to ensure the consistent involvement of all non-EU European regions.
- Ensure that the financial guidelines are equally implemented across all Erasmus+ Programme countries, particularly concerning recent diverging requirements from different National Agencies from lump-sum based grants.
- Create explicit definitions of the groups considered as participants with fewer opportunities, to facilitate access to information, targeting and monitoring.

- Addition of inclusivity and sustainability considerations in project budgets - not just as a horizontal priority.
- Increase the top-up for green travel and proportionately align it to the distance covered, maintaining the recent increase for 2024 to the upcoming years.
- Ensure travel costs within grants account not only for distance, but also for accessibility of different travel means depending on the departing point, to ensure appropriate inclusion of youth from rural and remote areas.

### Centralised level

- Ensure that the budget envelope available for the Civil Society Cooperation in the field of youth grants (youth operating grants) managed by EACEA is sufficiently ambitious and that the situation for the 2022 call - when the number of beneficiaries dropped from 90 to 30 - is not repeated again.
- Adapt the first budget category for the youth operating grants managed by EACEA to require 0-2 staff members (instead of the current 1-2).
- Establish a dedicated annual subcall of European Youth Together specific to youth organisations.
- Re-adjust the budget envelope for the Partnerships for Cooperation for ENGOs in the field of youth grant back to EUR 5 million.
- Ensure that the transfer of the funds from the EU Youth Dialogue grants for National Working Groups takes place prior to the beginning of the consultation periods, avoiding further delays. National Youth Councils (NYCs) must be part of all NWGs, to ensure a youth-led vision throughout the process.
- Provide funding for International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations supporting the EU Youth Dialogue process.

### Decentralised level

- Establish new large-scale youth exchanges for organisations that would organise large-scale international events of young people.
- Establish a monitoring system to ensure an appropriate level of inquiry in countries where there is suspicion of arbitrary allocation of Erasmus+ funds.
- Create systematic communication and support for potential and existing grantees, including tailored communication campaigns and trainings for youth organisations.
- Introduced enhanced cooperation not only between National Agencies and EACEA, but also with representatives of beneficiaries. Including international youth organisations and national youth councils.
- Maintain mobility of youth workers as a priority within the Key Action 1 of Erasmus+.
- Remove Virtual Exchanges in the field of Youth in favour of allocating its dedicated budget to other underfunded calls, such as the Partnerships for Cooperation for youth ENGOs.

## Objectives of the programme

Being the main programme that supports the development of young people in Europe, Erasmus+ has an enormous transformative power to help youth civil society in bringing positive change across Europe by providing mobility and educational opportunities for young people. In order to bring about that positive change, the European Youth Forum believes that strong **youth organisations** are at the heart of making sure that key topics are brought forward by and for young people, notably relating to: **democracy, social and economic inclusion, and ecological crisis and systemic change**. These should be at the very core of the objectives of Erasmus+, and mainstreamed accordingly across the priorities of the programme.

**Youth Organisations:** youth organisations play a crucial role in cultivating democratic self-organisation among young individuals, providing them with a valuable platform for personal growth and self-determination. These organisations serve as integral components within the framework of the Erasmus+ programme, offering spaces where young people actively participate in decision-making processes, express their viewpoints, and contribute to shaping their futures. Engaging in youth organisations through the Erasmus+ programme empowers young individuals, establishes meaningful connections, and equips them with the confidence, skills and tools necessary to take control of their lives. Expanding and reinforcing the presence of youth-led organisations within the Erasmus+ context is imperative, as they are instrumental in fostering active citizenship, promoting social cohesion, and instilling a sense of collective responsibility among young people. By enhancing these spaces, we ensure that young individuals have the opportunity to actively contribute to society, playing a pivotal role in shaping a present and future that aligns with their aspirations, values, and needs.

**Democracy:** young people play a pivotal role in safeguarding democracies, advocating for core values such as equality, rule of law and justice, actively contributing to a more peaceful world through their activism. Despite their sustained involvement, there has been a decline in youth participation in institutional politics, evident in diminishing voter turnouts and political party memberships. This detachment creates a cycle wherein political entities are less

motivated to address youth concerns, widening the gap between young people and institutional politics. Furthermore, youth organisations, crucial for safeguarding against anti-democratic tendencies, encounter challenges and a shrinking civic space, particularly impacting youth civil society. In the context of fostering robust democracies that recognise and protect youth rights, the Erasmus+ Programme should play a role by facilitating continuous investment in understanding and trust in democratic systems.

**Ecological Crisis and Systemic Change:** we stand at a pivotal moment in history marked by converging ecological challenges, including the intensifying climate crisis with its detrimental effects on our environment, livelihoods, and human migration. The concerning loss of biodiversity, air pollution, ocean acidification, and the surpassing of planetary boundaries exacerbate these issues. This environmental crisis is intricately connected to our existing economic system, which thrives on ecological degradation. Young people, often excluded from decision-making processes, inherit these pressing challenges, yet they have demonstrated innovative thinking and leadership in advocating for climate action. The Erasmus+ Programme should offer spaces for cross-cultural collaboration and knowledge exchange among youth to address these global environmental issues collaboratively. This necessitates challenging existing economic and post-colonial power structures to fulfil the rights and needs of all within planetary boundaries.

**Social and Economic Inclusion:** A considerable portion of young people in Europe grapples with poverty and social exclusion, stemming from an economic system that overlooks welfare investments and perpetuates unjust wealth distribution, leading to social and economic disparities. Within this context, young individuals often face involuntary unemployment and precarious working conditions, compromising their access to stable, quality jobs and social security protection. Sub-minimum wages further infringe upon their right to fair pay and equal opportunities. The transitions from education to the labour market carry lifelong implications, underscoring the importance of safeguarding quality working and living conditions for everyone. Social exclusion and inequality of young people, rooted

in a lack of understanding and legal recognition of youth rights, hinder access to essential services, contributing to economic inequality, material deprivation, and discrimination. This, in turn, results in uncertainty, marginalisation, and poor mental health. The Erasmus+ Programme emerges as a catalyst for addressing these interconnected challenges by providing opportunities for cross-cultural collaboration, education, and skill-building among young Europeans. Through its initiatives, Erasmus+ should promote inclusivity, equal access to opportunities, and the enhancement of social support systems for young people.

## Actions of the programme

The **current programming period has been characterised by the appearance of multiple crises**, ranging from the COVID-19 pandemic to war in Ukraine, rampant inflation and the rise of authoritarian tendencies across the globe. The COVID-19 pandemic alone has heavily negatively impacted young people and youth civil society across Europe. The closure of educational institutions, and economic consequences of the pandemic have had a substantial impact on young people's lives, and ultimately on their work opportunities, educational outcomes, income, and mental health. Research also underlines that students and young people in general have experienced significant loss of learning, with the quality of remote education being variable<sup>4</sup>. Erasmus+ funded activities and projects were no exception to this. Furthermore, youth civil society was disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which ultimately led to an increase of youth organisations reporting challenges in acquiring foreign funding, including from EU sources<sup>5</sup>.

Youth organisations also report **increasing difficulties in applying for, implementing and reporting Erasmus+ funded projects**. The current Erasmus+ programme introduced a series of centralised calls that multiple actors in the youth sector had long advocated for. This was a much welcome development, bearing in mind that thousands of young people across Europe organised through local and national youth organisations, find representation at European and international level through International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations (INGYOs), or through other national youth organisations with a European dimension. However, the results so far point at a sharp decrease in the number of youth organisations accessing these funds. A recent study<sup>6</sup> commissioned by the CONT Committee further confirms this notion, as it outlines the top 10 most frequently occurring NGOs within Erasmus+ in the 2020-2022 period, none of which is a youth organisation.

The **overall simplification of the programme** has been one of the key demands over the years not only from youth organisations, but also the main representative civil society organisations in the fields covered by Erasmus+, represented through the Erasmus+ Coalition<sup>7</sup>. One such attempt has been the introduction of lump sums, which are a welcome change that should have simplified the process. However, more attention needs to be paid to how this simplification is taking place, as for the moment, the transition is placing a burden on the organisations. For instance, several Erasmus+ National Agencies are currently asking for real-costs or mixed-costs reporting for lump-sum based grants, instead of deliverables, effectively hindering the operational capacity of organisations that already face significant resource-related constraints in comparison to other public sector or for-profit organisations.

**Institutional transparency regarding successful Erasmus+ projects** decreased with the new corporate infrastructure. Until 2020, a PDF document was uploaded in each call's webpage with information such as the organisation's name, the amount of budget for the grants awarded, and the lead applicant's country of origin. Overall statistics were published about the total number of applications, topic overview and country breakdown. Since 2020, this is not publicly available, and the information is uploaded in the Funding and Tenders portal in a way that makes gathering the information tedious and time-consuming, as it requires accessing each funded project individually, instead of the PDF tables summarising all projects that were accessible until 2020.

4 European Youth Forum (2021) - *Beyond the pandemic: The impact of COVID-19 on young people in Europe*

5 European Youth Forum (2020) - *Report on Safeguarding Civic Space for Young People in Europe*

6 European Parliament CONT Committee (2023) - *Transparency and accountability of EU funding for NGOs active in EU policy areas within EU territory*

7 <https://illplatform.eu/what-we-do/erasmus-coalition/>



## I. Centralised Actions

Centralised actions are one of the novelties of the current 2021-2027 programming period, and a response to calls of the European Youth Forum<sup>8</sup> and the European Parliament. They recognise the reality of transnational and European youth work not just in terms of political priorities, but also in the acknowledgement of European NGOs in its structure.

Whereas we welcome the introduction of such actions, it is crucial to ensure that their inception is accompanied by an appropriate evaluation and adjustments to ensure they benefit the youth sector as a whole. Therefore, as an intermediate step to guarantee an appropriate implementation of Erasmus+ grants in the field of youth managed through direct management, **we call upon the establishment of an Erasmus+ accreditation at centralised level, similar to the one of Key Action 1 through indirect management. Furthermore, structural regranting schemes managed by international umbrella organisations in the field of youth should be launched** (similarly to those under the DEAR and CERV programmes), to guarantee that the European Commission fully taps into the potential of INGYOs as key intermediaries to national and local youth work.

Following the steady decrease of youth-lead organisations accessing Erasmus+ funds at centralised level - further outlined below - a review of the evaluation process needs to take place. To ensure that grant evaluation processes do not discriminate against youth organisations - leading to an unfair distribution of funds in any call-, **we call upon the European Commission to ensure that one of the requirements to hire independent experts assessing Erasmus+ grants in the field of youth is to have experience within the youth sector; implement common trainings for independent experts to ensure understanding of the youth field, fairness and quality in project evaluation processes; and ensure that the Evaluation Committee conformed by EACEA and European Commission representatives take into consideration the number of grants allocated to youth organisations at the time of taking the final decisions.**

Moreover, to ensure that youth-lead organisations are able to access centralised and decentralised funds, the European Youth Forum **calls upon the European Commission to further define youth organisations within the Erasmus+ Programme and embed it in the eligibility criteria across the different Key Actions.**

### I.1. Civil Society Cooperation in the field of Youth - youth operating grants

Youth operating grants have been available at centralised level for over 10 years. One of the updates to the grants includes the increase of funding allocated per grant (an increase to a window of EUR 75'000-125'000 from the prior EUR 50'000). Due to delays in the approval of the MFF, the first year when these changes were implemented was 2022, when the increase of the amount per grant was disappointingly not accompanied by an increase in the budget envelope, during the European Year of Youth when numerous youth organisations were also regularly invited to take on extra activities. This was translated into two thirds of the previous beneficiaries losing the grant for the 2022 period, particularly at a time when the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and inflation was still lingering, further exacerbating it.

Whereas the envelope has been raised (from EUR 4 to EUR 8 million) to match the previous number of beneficiaries, the European Youth Forum **underlines how crucial these grants are for the stability and well-being of the youth sector<sup>9</sup> - that struggles more often than not to access structural funding from other sources, and calls upon the European Commission to ensure that such a situation is not repeated again.**

The current operating grants in the field of youth also include a scalability by budget categories based on the number of staff members. The possibility to apply for a higher grant within the duration of the Framework Partnership Agreement allows for organisations to upscale their operations during its duration. One of the definitory characteristics of youth organisations is its high reliance on the work of volunteers, which is why there are cases of youth organisations' operations that are wholly carried by volunteers. These youth organisations would not be

<sup>8</sup> European Youth Forum (2017) - *Policy Paper on the Erasmus+ successor programme*

<sup>9</sup> European Youth Forum (2015) - *Resolution: Better Access to EU Funding for Youth Organisations*

able to apply for the current CSC-Youth call, whereas they might also wish to upscale their operations and further professionalise their secretariat. Therefore, **we call upon the European Commission to ensure that the first budget category for the Civil Society Cooperation in the field of Youth grants corresponds to having 0-2 staff members in the secretariat, instead of the current 1-2.**

## I.II. Key Action 3 - European Youth Together

The European Youth Together grants were launched in 2018, after calls from numerous organisations in the youth sector - including the European Youth Forum - to establish a centralised action grant under the Key Action 3 managed by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). This allowed INGYOs to fund their policy work linked to EU priorities, through grants that recognised their transnational structures.

If we look at the results, in the 2018 call 9/14 (64%) of the organisations that won the grant were either youth organisations or organisations active in the field of youth. However, this number decreased to 2/11 (18%) in 2020 and further to 3/26 (11%) in 2022. If we look at the list of beneficiaries, organisations with a highly limited scope in the youth field

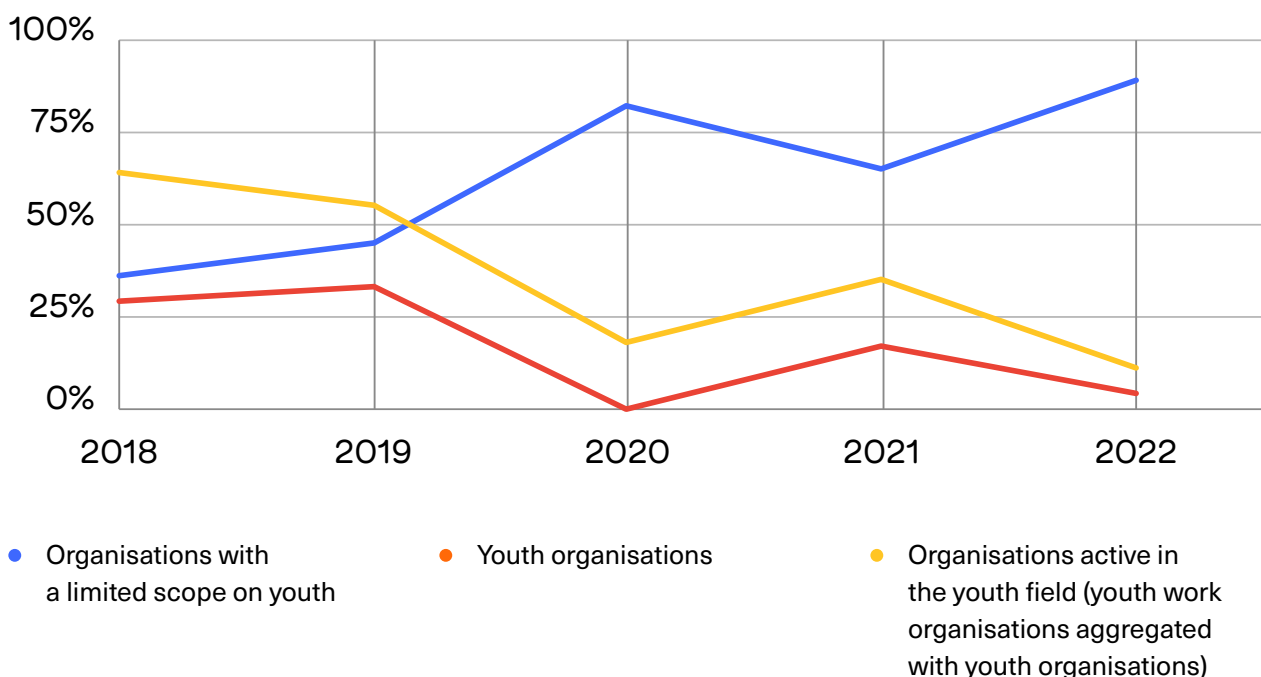
are increasingly winning these grants. Furthermore, the description of the European Youth Together call outlines the need to “support transnational partnerships for youth organisations from grassroots level to large-scale partnerships, aiming to reinforce the European dimension of their activities”. However, the number of youth organisations accessing these funds has steadily decreased, at the same time discouraging them from investing the resources and time needed to apply.

To ensure that European Youth Together grants are successfully accessed by their intended stakeholders - namely youth organisations, on top of the general recommendations for centralised calls listed above **the European Youth Forum calls upon DG EAC and EACEA to establish a dedicated annual subcall of European Youth Together specific to youth organisations.**

## I.III. Key Action 2 - Partnerships for Cooperation in the field of youth & Capacity Building in the field of youth - European NGOs

The establishment of centralised Cooperation Partnerships is another novelty of the current programming period, as a response to calls from the sector for its establishment. However its original

**Percentage of organisations that successfully applied for European Youth Together for the 2018 - 2022 period**



budget envelope amounted to EUR 5 million, and was further reduced to EUR 2 million in 2022. This took place particularly in the year when numerous international youth organisations struggled financially due to the lack of operating funding.

Moreover, the restriction within the Capacity Building in the field of Youth call of the eligible countries to exclusively regions 1 (Western Balkans) and 3 (Southern Mediterranean) limited the possibilities for youth organisations to create synergies and exchange best practices with stakeholders in other European regions such as the Eastern Partnership, and worldwide. Added to the limited capacity of youth organisations to apply to grants coordinated by e.g DG INTPA - due to their sheer size and scope, this is translated into the European Union funding missing the opportunity to tap into the potential that brings connecting youth organisations and civil society across the continent and the globe.

Therefore, the European Youth Forum calls upon the European Commission to **re-adjust the budget envelope for the Partnerships for Cooperation for ENGOs in the field of youth grant back to EUR 5 million - without detriment to other grants in the field of youth.** Furthermore, **a percentage of the budget should be reserved for youth organisations, to ensure that one of the main stakeholders of the youth chapter of the programme is not left aside. Additional funding from the NDICI-Global Europe instrument should be made available in the remaining duration of the current programming period for both Capacity Building in the field of youth and Partnerships for Cooperation for ENGOs in the field of youth.** Last but not least, **the scope of Capacity Building in the field of youth should be extended to cover further regions both in Europe and the world - including the currently included Eastern Partnership region-, while maintaining a level of flexibility in the consortium composition that does not force applicants to always include organisations beyond the Erasmus+ Programme countries.**

#### **I.IV. EU-Youth Dialogue grants for National Working Groups**

The grant duration for National Working Groups (NWGs) has been increased to 3 years, which while being a welcome development, also entails an increased administrative burden. This means it

is important to lever up the total grant amount to structurally enhance the European Youth Dialogue.

Moreover, delays in the transfer of the grants are taking place regularly. Consequently several NWGs are not able to launch the consultation process for their relevant cycle. Without funding, NWGs are not able to provide pertinent input into the EU Youth Conference. Moreover, with the reporting deadline in early September, the implementation time for NWG consultations is shortening, which might impact the consultation outcomes. Therefore, **the European Youth Forum calls upon EACEA to ensure that the transfer of the funds takes place prior to the beginning of the consultation periods, and in any case in time for the NWGs to use them when they are needed, avoiding any kind of delay.** Moreover, as key actors in the process, **INGYOs should receive corresponding funding from the European Commission to support the work they are already undertaking to support the EU Youth Dialogue.** Last but not least, as the main youth representative bodies in their respective countries, **National Youth Councils (NYCs) must be part of all NWGs, to ensure a youth-led vision throughout the process.**

## **II. Decentralised Actions**

The execution of the Erasmus+ Programme primarily adopts an indirect management approach, wherein the European Commission delegates a substantial part of its implementation responsibilities to National Agencies. This strategy aims to bring Erasmus+ in close proximity to its beneficiaries and accommodate the diverse nature of the youth and education sectors. The role of the National Agencies is pivotal in promoting and implementing the Programme at the national level, serving as the intermediary between the European Commission and participating organisations at the local, regional, and national levels.

Whereas the decentralisation allows for National Agencies to remain closer to the realities of young people and youth organisations in their respective countries, **it is also paramount that the financial guidelines and administration procedures are applied equally to all.** Furthermore, **the European Commission should establish a monitoring system to ensure an appropriate level of inquiry - and if**

**necessary subsequent actions - in the countries where there is suspicion of an arbitrary allocation of Erasmus+ funds<sup>10</sup>.**

With regard to communication, both towards applicants and grantees, the role of National Agencies is essential to ensure both that the Erasmus+ Programme reaches to youth stakeholders and to guarantee an effective implementation of the projects. National Agencies should **establish systematic communication and support for potential and existing grantees, including outreach towards youth organisations in the form of tailored communication campaigns and dedicated trainings for specific actions.** Moreover, it is essential that **enhanced cooperation and exchange of information takes place not only among National Agencies and EACEA, including representatives of beneficiaries as well.**

The high degree of bureaucratic and administrative requirements from Erasmus+ grants place a significant burden on organisations, all the more when they are volunteer-lead, as it is the case of the majority of youth organisations at local and national level. This is effectively hindering small beneficiaries from applying for such Erasmus+ funding. **Therefore, administrative processes should be eased for all grants - including application, implementation, and reporting, and particularly for those grants under Key Action 1 as well as Key Action 2 small-scale partnerships, intended for smaller and grassroots organisations.**

#### **II.I. Key Action 1 - Youth exchanges**

Youth exchanges need to continue allowing groups of young people from different countries to gather and collaborate on shared projects for short periods of time. In order to make this action more attractive to young people and youth organisations, **flexibility in the minimum number of participants per country should be introduced.** Moreover, **youth exchanges of a larger scale should be introduced to ensure that youth organisations who would like to organise large-scale international events of young people have the possibility to do so** without the need to apply for a significantly bigger grant (e.g under Key Action 2).

#### **II.II. Key Action 1 - Mobility projects for youth workers**

Youth workers' involvement in Erasmus+ facilitates international networking, fosters skill development, and promotes cultural understanding, empowering them to bring innovative approaches and a European dimension to their local youth work, ultimately contributing to personal and professional growth of young people. Therefore, projects supporting the mobility of youth workers are a prerequisite in order to continue to foster the exchange of good practices, the development of quality youth work and networking opportunities for youth workers in Europe and beyond. As such, **mobility of youth workers should be maintained as a priority within the Key Action 1 of Erasmus+.**

#### **II.III. Key Action 1 - Virtual exchanges in the field of youth**

Virtual exchanges are online activities with the aim of making international learning exchanges accessible without the physical mobility itself. It is important that online components are included in Erasmus+ action in line with the interests and needs of young people. However, numerous young people in Europe, particularly youth from rural areas, from a migration context or from disadvantaged backgrounds, still do not have proper access to adequate computing equipment or affordable and working high-speed internet<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, in order **for young people to fully access the benefits of Erasmus+ learning activities it is crucial that learning mobility remains primarily offline.** Any online components should be complementary elements for instance linked to preparation phases, or to ensure greater inclusivity. Therefore, the European Youth Forum **calls for the removal of virtual exchanges in favour of allocating its dedicated budget to other underfunded calls, such as the Partnerships for Cooperation for youth ENGOS.**

#### **II.IV. Key Action 2 - Partnerships for Cooperation**

One of the main challenges of the Key Action 2 strand of the Erasmus+ Programme was the fact that the application, implementation and reporting

<sup>10</sup> <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,29419293,podejrzenia-nieprawidlowosci-wydawania-pieniedzy-z-erasmus.html>

<sup>11</sup> European Youth Forum (2022) - *Position Paper on Making digitalisation work for young people*

processes were excessively bureaucratic, particularly for local and grassroots youth organisations. As a response to this, small-scale partnerships were introduced, whose goal was to make Key Action 2 grants more accessible through indirect management to smaller organisations. Whereas some organisations managed to benefit from it, the administrative burden remains too high, both in terms of application and reporting process, as well as the incomplete introduction of lump-sum based grants. Therefore, the **European Youth Forum calls for a further reduction of the administrative requirement at all stages of the project, particularly for small-scale partnerships.**

# An ambitious and youth-inclusive vision for the Erasmus+ Programme

## I. Governance of the Programme

While the origin and background of the above mentioned challenges is highly varied, what connects all of them together is the following: should a mechanism be in place to ensure that relevant civil society platforms and Erasmus+ beneficiaries provide regular input and feedback on the functioning of the programme through a specific and dedicated process, numerous shortcomings of the programme would be avoided.

This is how we believe this mantra could be manifested in the programme:

- **European level**

- Establishment of an Erasmus+ stakeholder group per sector (youth, education, sports, ...) with representative civil society organisations and beneficiaries, convening at least twice a year with DG EAC and EACEA to discuss developments in the implementation of Erasmus+ activities funded through direct management. An existing instance of this is the Humanitarian Watch Group (formerly FPA Watch Group) within DG ECHO, which proves the possibility to integrate such structures within the architecture of the Commission<sup>12</sup>.
- Re-inclusion of the European Youth Forum in the Erasmus+ Programming Committee, to ensure that the main youth representative body of youth organisations in Europe is adequately represented and consulted.

- **National level:**

- Inclusion of youth organisations and of independent, democratic National Youth Councils in advisory bodies of the Erasmus+ National Agency in their respective countries, while increasing the transparency on the usage and allocation of Erasmus+ funds.

## II. An Erasmus+ Programme beyond the EU

Active European citizenship does not start on the day of signing a treaty to join a community - it is the result of long-term experiences through education and learning. Erasmus+ is undoubtedly the key programme in Europe that helps young people experience common values and harness the strengths of diversity. In this sense, the overarching objective of the Erasmus+ Programme outlines it is there to "support, through lifelong learning, the educational, professional and personal development of people in education, training, youth and sport, in Europe and beyond". When it comes to youth, one of the specific objectives of the programme refers to promoting "non-formal and informal learning mobility and active participation among young people, as well as cooperation, quality, inclusion, creativity and innovation at the level of organisations and policies in the field of youth".

Following its objectives, it remains clear that Erasmus+ is there for all young people who wish to belong to the European community to take full advantage of its possibilities, be it in the European Union or in continental Europe (or beyond). Currently some actions of the programme allow organisations from beyond the European Union to take part. However, the geographical scope is limited, and currently NGOs from countries from Eastern Partnership countries cannot be involved as partner organisations. As a consequence, young people and youth civil society from those countries do not have the possibility to access precious support pivotal for the development of a flourishing and enabling civic space in the region.

In order to achieve this, we need to:

- Broaden the outreach and impact of Erasmus+ in Europe by taking the necessary steps to involve all willing non-EU European countries that abide to the principles of democracy, human rights and rule of law<sup>13</sup>. This includes the re-accession

<sup>12</sup> <https://voiceeu.org/humanitarian-partnership-watch-group>

<sup>13</sup> European Youth Forum (2023) - *Motion on the Application to associate willing non-EU European countries with Erasmus+*



of both the United Kingdom and Switzerland to the Erasmus+ Programme and all its component elements (including the EU Youth Dialogue initiatives and associated EU Youth conferences and the European Solidarity Corps scheme).

- Create a special fast-track visa category for participants of Erasmus+ funded (as well as European Solidarity Corps, CERV, and any programme that involves youth) projects that require so.
- Increase the scope of all KA2 actions (not just Cooperation Partnerships) to ensure the involvement of all non-EU European countries that abide by the principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law.
- Ensure that the funding funnelled into the youth chapter of Erasmus+ from the NDICI-Global Europe instrument and the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance III (IPA III) is available not only to the Western Balkans region, but also to Eastern Partnership countries.

### III. Accessibility and Inclusion

Firstly, in terms of accessibility and inclusion, having a dedicated priority on the topic has allowed for youth organisations to apply for and implement projects that are explicitly focused on promoting equality and inclusion for all young people in Europe.

However, in terms of its horizontal integration in the programme, we have identified the following improvement points:

- Creation of explicit definitions of the groups considered as participants with fewer opportunities, to facilitate access to information, targeting and monitoring of the outreach of the programme in terms of accessibility.
- Addition of inclusivity considerations in project budgets - not just as a horizontal priority -, for instance for sign language interpretation or additional expenditure considerations to fully integrate the needs of all young participants regardless of the background.

- Participants from rural and remote areas more often than not can only access a limited range of choices in terms of travel options, increasing the travel costs. Therefore, travel costs within the grants should account not only for distance, but also for accessibility of different travel means depending on the departing point.
- Increasing accessibility of both online and offline information sessions of EACEA and National Agencies, through needs assessments prior to the sessions and inclusion of necessary measures for the appropriate inclusion of all participants.
- Adequate reinforcement of financial support to Erasmus+ programme also in the current and upcoming programming period, to ensure that such proposals would be accounted for in the budget.

### IV. Sustainability

The European Youth Forum strongly welcomed the incorporation of green top-ups within the Erasmus+ program as a progressive step towards embedding environmental sustainability not just as a horizontal priority of the programme, but also as an actual practice, thereby contributing to the reduction of carbon footprints associated with mobility. By integrating financial incentives for sustainable travel options, Erasmus+ not only aligns with the broader objectives of environmental responsibility but also empowers young participants to make conscious choices that positively impact the planet. However, as of 2023 top-ups amount to EUR 50, which in most cases is not enough to cover the difference of cost between flights and more sustainable options<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, sustainability can be further mainstreamed throughout the programme not just in terms of travel, but also in other aspects.

Therefore, the European Youth Forum calls upon the European Commission to:

- Increase the top-up for green travel and proportionately align it to the distance covered, maintaining the recent increase for 2024 to the upcoming years.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.greenerasmus.org/>

- Increasing the current 4 days up to 7 days of additional individual support in order to account for extra subsistence costs derived from the additional time.
- Include budgetary incentives to project budgets that guarantee lower environmental footprint of their projects not only in terms of travel, but also accommodation, subsistence, or venues.

## V. An Erasmus+ Programme that works for young people

The current iteration of the programme is characterised by a decreased prominence of what used to be known as the “youth chapter” of the Erasmus+ Programme. In spite of that, Erasmus+ remains one of the key funding programmes for the youth sector in Europe. As such, it is imperative that its own regulation and structure showcases this through the following:

- The inclusion of a dedicated budget line for “youth” within the upcoming new Erasmus+ Programme Regulation.
- The exploration of options for removing co-financing requirements for the youth strand of the programme.
- The operational support to the European Youth Forum as the unique structure at EU level bringing together all strands of youth civil society.
- The inclusion of a more prominent youth chapter of the Erasmus+ Programme in its upcoming iteration.







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