

**Intervention by the Child and Youth Welfare Association (AGJ):  
For a Cross-Sectoral and Multidimensional EU Child and Youth Policy – Even  
in Light of Politically and Financially Altered Conditions!<sup>1</sup>**

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*The EU Commission has started its new term with a change in political priorities. In the ongoing negotiations on the design of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), major changes are emerging that may as well impact EU programmes relevant to children and youth policy. The AGJ takes these developments as an opportunity to emphasise the need for an EU policy for young people that takes into account their diverse needs and realities at different stages of their lives in all policy areas and enables them to participate meaningfully and in a high-quality manner in political decision-making processes.<sup>2</sup>*

Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine and the military escalation in the Middle East raise fundamental questions about stability and security in Europe. Growing poverty, economic insecurity and social inequality are causing increasing division in European society in view of the diverse transformation processes that need to be mastered at the same time. The challenges and consequences of climate change are a growing concern and a burden for people in Europe. Contrary to the hope that strategies based on solidarity could emerge against the backdrop of these challenges, populist, anti-democratic tendencies and group-focused enmity are on the rise in Europe, including questionings of multilateral cooperation in Europa altogether. Democratic structures are coming under pressure in many member states of the EU, while at the same time the space for civil society engagement is narrowing - especially for young people.<sup>3</sup>

Recent reports show that these developments characterise the way children and young people grow up in the EU. Among the issues highlighted in the reports are poverty, exclusion, mental health issues, poor environmental conditions, the impact of digital technologies on the lives and health of young people and the future working world of younger generations. In addition,

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<sup>2</sup> Please see the [Quality standards for the participation of children and young people \(Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Germany\)](#) (BMFSFJ, 2015)

<sup>3</sup> Please see the [Report of the Youth Forum on the situation of youth organisations across Europe](#) (May 2024).

many young Europeans are struggling with problems such as unemployment, housing shortages, financial dependence and view with concern the war in Ukraine, climate change, and social cohesion in Europe.<sup>4</sup>

From the AGJ's perspective, the European Union bears a special responsibility to help shape the current transformation processes in Europe and worldwide, taking into account the diverse life situations and concerns of the younger generations. Through its policies, it should create prospects for young people and strengthen their social and political participation for a cosmopolitan Europe characterised by solidarity and justice. With the drafting of the new MFF the EU is setting the course for long-term political developments. This is the time to draw attention on its impact on young people on the European as well as the national level and throughout all policy areas.

### **1. The EU Commissions new political mission: opportunities and challenges for youth policy**

Ursula von der Leyen has been re-elected as President of the European Commission with a strategic plan for the conceptual strengthening and reformation of EU policy. Based on the assessment that Europe is in a time of rapid transformations, threat and great instability and uncertainty, von der Leyen has set a more political and policy-driven course for the Commission for the 2024-2029 legislative period to strengthen the EU's competitiveness, security, preparedness and resilience in all policy areas. By investing in digital innovation, research and development, the EU, its member states and its citizens are to be strengthened in their global economic position.<sup>5</sup> The EU should become more resilient to crises (pandemics, climate change, geopolitical instability). This involves strengthening civilian and military mechanisms in order to be able to respond more quickly and in a more targeted manner to threats in the future, as well as promoting social justice, equal opportunities and good job opportunities. It also means that the EU must prove itself against autocratic and authoritarian global players with regard to its values and the democratic and constitutional characteristics of its member states.

The Child and Youth Welfare Association (AGJ) embraces the idea of a more policy-driven and guideline-oriented steering of EU policy. The introduction of a new body of the EU Commission, the Youth Advisory Board is also to be welcomed. It could be an opportunity to

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<sup>4</sup> The UNICEF report [„The State of Children in the European Union 2024. Addressing the needs and rights of the EU's youngest generation“](#) (February 2024), the Eurochild Report: [„Children's Realities in Europe: Progress & Gaps“](#) (November 2024), the [17th Child- and Youth Report \(Germany\)](#), die [TUI-Youth Survey](#) (May 2024) und die [Shell Youth Survey 2024](#) (October 2024).

<sup>5</sup> The importance of these objectives is evident in the numerous references to a series of reports, primarily on economic and security policy, in the guidelines formulated by the Commission President and the mission letters of the new EU Commissioners. In particular the [Niinistö Report](#) on improving Europe's civil and military operational preparedness, the [Draghi-Report](#) on the future of European competitiveness, [the final report of the strategic dialogue on the future of EU agriculture](#) and the [Letta-Report](#) on the future of the internal market.

integrate perspectives of young people into the work of the Commission. However, whether the diverse concerns and perspectives of children and young people will be better taken into account in the future policies of the European Union through this policy approach and whether it will be possible to enable young people to grow up in a socially just, democratic and cosmopolitan Europe depends on how the perspectives of young people are taken into account in the concrete design of EU social policy. It is utmost important how the political goals are related to each other, what weight is given to them and how seriously young people are considered in the formulation of overarching political strategies and goals and are also involved in their development.

**In view of the Commission's newly set political goals, the AGJ fears that young people are being considered primarily in terms of their individual resilience and employability in order to foster the goal of increasing Europe's competitiveness and stability, while other important aspects and the independence of child and youth policy are in danger of being neglected.**

## **2. The new commissioners and the division of youth-relevant topics**

The division of responsibilities for the various policy areas in the European Commission has been changed under the renewed leadership of Ursula von der Leyen. In her political guidelines, the Commission President has emphasised the need to coordinate the different departments. The various departments responsible for child and youth policy should also co-operate more closely with each other. If this is going to actually happen, it could provide an opportunity for a more interdepartmental policy that is better able to take into account the interests of young people. The AGJ welcomes the fact that the new EU Commission would also like to explicitly focus on the needs of young people in some other policy areas, e.g. housing policy or combating poverty.

But the fragmentation also raises questions. Depending on how they are embedded in different policy areas, the various topics that are particularly relevant for young people will also be given a specific framing. In particular, the separate responsibility for youth and education shows a clear tendency towards a strong focus on formal education and the acquisition of skills. The Commissioner responsible for education, Roxana Mînzatu ("People, Skills and Preparedness"), has been assigned by von der Leyen with the task of strengthening Europe's human capital. The aim of better integrating young people into the labour market is to be achieved by promoting mobility and vocational qualifications, probably by strengthening the Erasmus+ programme. Glenn Micallef, the Commissioner responsible for youth and intergenerational justice, will primarily be responsible for implementing the EU's instruments for the participation and consideration of young people and their concerns (youth dialogue,

youth check, Youth Advisory Board of the Commission). Here, there is the impression of a very formal concept of political participation. The promotion of experiential spaces and non-formal structures, in which young people can experience self-efficacy and learn democratic skills, is not mentioned in its mission.

Europe plays a key role in broadening the perspectives of young people, providing them with spaces for self-determined growth and independent personal development, promoting their democratic awareness and strengthening social cohesion. The acquisition of skills aimed at enabling participation in social and democratic life takes place particularly in the context of non-formal education in the many different forms of youth work. This is of central importance to society in view of the rise in populism, anti-democracy tendencies and group-focused enmity - especially with regard to global crises and conflicts within the EU. **The AGJ sees a problematic reduction of the concept of education towards formal education through outsourcing of non-formal education from education policy. The AGJ is convinced that children and young people not only need support with regard to skills and labour market adaptability, but also need structures and spaces in which they can experience equal and effective participation, develop in a self-determined way in order to appropriate the world and shape their own future. In view of the AGJ there is a risk that young people could be considered in future EU policy primarily in terms of their individual mobility and skills development for professional qualification - i.e. in terms of the goals of individual employability and increased European competitiveness - and that other decisive dimensions of child and youth policy could be overlooked.**

Von der Leyen has emphasised both in her guidelines and in the mission letters to the new commissioners that the Commission wants to incorporate the perspectives of young people more strongly into its political decisions. The Commission's newly planned Youth Advisory Board emphasises this goal. **The AGJ believes it is urgently necessary for the involvement of the Youth Advisory Board to be clearly defined in terms of content and function and to be equipped with sufficient decision-making powers and resources. Youth associations and councils, and in particular the fields of youth work, should be structurally involved in this body.**

With the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and the European Education Area (EEA), Commissioner Roxana Mînzatu is responsible for two key areas that affect the interests of young people in the EU, but also in national policies in a variety of ways. With the European Social Fund+ (ESF+) as the EU's most important financing and therefore funding instrument for investments in measures and projects in the member states that support

young people and their families in particular in overcoming economic and social challenges<sup>6</sup>, a central financing instrument for German youth welfare structures is also up for discussion in the negotiations on the MFF. The funding objectives here are explicitly equal opportunities, social justice and social participation, as enshrined in the EPSR. These social rights cannot be established exclusively through access to the formal education system and the labour market, especially for young people. **The AGJ sees the danger that the important objectives of promoting social participation, equal opportunities and combating discrimination could be neglected by linking them to the objectives of formal education and labour market integration within the Commission and in the current EU policy strategies.**

Aspects that touch on digitalisation are addressed in the various mission letters with a view to young people either positively - as an important area of skills acquisition for professional qualifications - or negatively - as a problem of protecting children and young people from violence or health damage caused by excessive screen use, etc. The role that digitalisation and social media play for young people, their self-positioning, democracy or political education is hardly ever discussed. **The AGJ believes that digitalisation, as a field of transformation that encompasses all areas of our societies, must be clearly linked to the EU's existing fundamental rights, anti-discrimination and social policies. At the same time, the AGJ considers it particularly important that these transformative processes are designed with special consideration for the interests of young people.**

Although Ursula von der Leyen has set herself the goal of greater internal cooperation within the Commission on youth policy issues for the coming legislative period, it will be a major challenge to develop a cross sectoral children and youth policy that takes into account the diversity of young people's realities in a situation of greater fragmentation of issues between the individual Directorates-General. **To this end, the AGJ believes that the promotion of democracy, fundamental rights, solidarity and social justice must be placed at least equally at the centre of the joint youth policy focus of the EU Commissioners. The AGJ calls for the removal of existing barriers within the Commission, for a holistic view of the needs of young people to be taken and for this to be incorporated into the work of all political departments at EU level.**

### **3. The Multiannual Financial Framework and the restructuring of EU programmes**

The MFF negotiations currently underway are laying down the budgetary foundations, i.e. the financial resources for the various European Union programmes and initiatives for the period

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<sup>6</sup> This is demonstrated by the survey conducted by the Association of German Social Welfare Organisations (BAGFW) in spring 2024 to determine data for the needs-based further development of the European Social Fund. The results are set out in the position paper '[Using the European Social Fund to effectively shape the transformation of society and the world of work in the future](#)'.

2028-2034. It is already becoming apparent that the new MFF is to be comprehensively reorganised. This is primarily based on pragmatic considerations in view of the EU's dwindling financial resources in a rapidly changing global environment. The restructuring is also justified by a stronger alignment of EU policy and its financial instruments with the strategic objectives mentioned at the beginning. Accordingly, there are considerations to combine the many individual specific programmes under the umbrella of fewer funds. This reorganisation may also lead to far-reaching changes in the EU policy and funding instruments that are particularly central to children and young people. **The AGJ sees a risk that certain funding criteria and programme priorities, which are highly relevant for young people and their families, youth organisations and youth work, could be lost in the course of this restructuring or that previously central funding objectives could be reduced to individual aspects.**

It is already becoming apparent that Erasmus+ is to be further strengthened in terms of promoting the acquisition of skills relevant to the labour market (by young people). It is not yet clear whether the "Youth" education area in Erasmus+ will continue to exist in its own right, i.e. whether the Erasmus+ programme will remain as such, or whether it will be e.g. integrated into a larger fund and which financial priorities will be set for the new funding period. The splitting of Erasmus+ into an education and a youth area is double-edged. On the one hand, it could be an opportunity to establish a more independent European policy for children and young people. **However, from the AGJ's point of view, the split also harbours the risk of strategically weakening the youth sector. Young people need a strong and independent Erasmus+ programme.**

The European Solidarity Corps (ESC) is also highly relevant for young people. The ESC focuses on funding social engagement and voluntary services and, in the view of the AGJ, fulfils the function of promoting civil society, social skills, intercultural exchange, social cohesion and values such as solidarity and cosmopolitan attitudes through non-formal learning formats within Youth Work. Both programmes - Erasmus+ Youth and ESC - have a specific justification in terms of youth policy and should not be played off against each other. The new financial framework must also ensure that the policy and funding instruments that are particularly relevant for young people - Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps - are implemented in the context of the youth policy framework, i.e. the EU Youth Strategy and the European Youth Work Agenda. Only in this way can they remain a driving force for the implementation of EU youth policy at both European and national level. **From the perspective of the AGJ, the programme priorities (inclusion and diversity, participation, digitalisation and environmental and climate protection), which were once again confirmed as useful after the interim evaluation of both programmes in 2024, should in any case be retained in the new programme generation.**

Although there are hopes for improvement in light of the criticism that has been expressed for many years regarding some programs, the available information generally raises concerns among many actors in child and youth welfare. They fear that in non-youth-specific policy areas, such as the European Pillar of Social Rights and in the fields of fundamental rights, citizenship, and anti-discrimination policy – all of which are highly relevant for the structures of Youth Work – programs could be reduced, significantly restructured, or even completely abolished. This applies, for example, to the EU programme CERV (Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values), which is important for young people and focuses on fundamental rights issues such as equality, participation, anti-discrimination and the prevention of violence. The European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) programme as a key pillar of European cohesion policy and the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights is currently the most important funding instrument of European social policy and could be financially strengthened under new circumstances (see above). However, the planned centralisation of the structural programmes (ESF+ and the European Regional Development Fund - ERDF) from 2028 on and the introduction of a national programme plan per country also threatens the continuation of regional project funding altogether. This funding has so far based on the partnership principle and a future restriction of the regional focus for youth work and youth welfare in Germany will have serious consequences for social cohesion and, above all, youth social work in many regions.

The planned reorganisation of the MFF must not lead to other essential dimensions of child and youth policy being overlooked. Narrowing down the programmes planned for young people in the MFF to objectives such as formal education, learning and labour mobility can lead to the diverse structural needs and realities of young people falling by the wayside. Even more so, as such a narrow focus would weaken the recognition of young people and their life phase as a whole in terms of an independent youth policy. **In the planned reorganisation of the MFF, the AGJ believes that urgent efforts must be made to ensure that the EU's policy and funding instruments are further developed in a youth-friendly manner. This will also require funding formats for young people, youth associations and youth councils as well as volunteer services that are tailored to their needs. From the perspective of young people in particular, these must be accessible, easy to apply for implementable, and tailored to the needs of young people. Corresponding funding should be easy to find within the funding programmes.**

**Conclusion: It is time for a child- and youth-friendly Europe! The interests of young people in Europe must be considered in all their dimensions and policy areas.** The increased allocation of topics relevant to young people to different Commissioners of the EU Commission can be an opportunity to organise children and youth policy in a more

interdepartmental and holistic way. However, the AGJ takes a critical view of the current orientation of EU policy towards the goal of greater competitiveness, resilience, security and preparedness with regard to the future of European child and youth policy.

Too many young people in the European Union are growing up in poverty and experience social exclusion and discrimination on a daily basis. At the same time, young people in Europe are more politically active today than ever before and are concerned about their future in view of the effects of war and climate change. Nevertheless, their concerns have so far received little attention in political decision-making processes. The division of youth policy issues in the new EU Commission and the planned revision of existing programmes with the restructuring of the MFF could lead to a neglect of central child and youth policy issues and a neglect of the realities of life of many young people in Europe.

- With regard to the concerns of young people, the EU must take all dimensions of the current problems into account in order to enable all young people in Europe to participate in society and civil society and to have a positive outlook on their lives and their future in the face of multiple crises and rapid transformation processes.
- European youth policy cannot be reduced to the individual promotion of young people. Rather, it must include young people as part of society and the youth phase as a special phase of life in all policy areas. This means that, in addition to formal skills, European funding instruments must also focus on structures and spaces for self-organisation, civic engagement and non-formal and political education. Projects to support young people at risk of poverty or affected by discrimination in the sense of the European Pillar of Social Rights and European fundamental rights policy must also be given special consideration in the EU's programmes and funding instruments.
- The consideration of the perspective of young people and the instruments and bodies for their political participation must not be mere symbolic policy, but must open up real **opportunities to shape future EU-policy.**

From the AGJ's point of view, this is the only way to ensure that the EU's policies and programmes address young people not only as future workers or learners in the formal education system, but also as young people with their own perspectives and as active co-creators of a democratic and cosmopolitan Europe here and now, as well as in the future.

Executive Board of the Child and Youth Welfare Association (AGJ)

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