



Recommendations and Takeaways

1st Transnational Reflection Group Meeting

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EUact Project

The project with an official title “EP Elections and Beyond: Active Participations of EU Citizens at All Levels” is funded by Europe for Citizens Programme, Strand 2: Democratic Engagement and Civic Participation. This project aims to encourage sustained and active engagement of citizens, especially young people, in the decision- making process of the EU. And, to enhance the democratic legitimacy of the EU by offering valuable recommendations to EU policymakers.

A bottom up approach is used, involving young people directly and giving them an opportunity to influence policies in the EU, through:

- conducting focus groups
- drafting policies and practical solutions with young leaders’ involvement
- creating “get out and vote” videos, geared towards young people
- organizing public debates
- introducing our recommendations to EU and Member States policymakers

EUact involves partners from Slovakia, Germany, Poland and Bulgaria:

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Disclaimers

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Indroduction

A group of 36 young leaders and experts from 9 European countries — all committed to contributing to a European Union (EU) that is prosperous, secure and beneficial to all of its citizens — gathered in Bratislava, Slovakia, to engage in a direct policy process by drafting recommendations to European and national decisionmakers and to the business and civic communities. The discussions covered the following topics:

1. Education and opportunities for youth
2. Environment and sustainability
3. EU as a global actor
4. Migration, internal and external security
5. Employment, social affairs and inclusion

The work was inspired by conversations with State Secretary for European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, Frantisek Ruzicka, and the Head of the Representation of the European Commission in the Slovak Republic, Ladislav Miko. Both, representing different levels of decision-making — national and European — provided the group with diverse perspectives. Such exposure allowed the participants to assess in each of the topics the current challenges and opportunities for the EU, Member States and societies. Recommendations were then built by the group, using both top-down and bottom-up approaches.

Three themes re-emerged in most working groups, regardless of the specific area of discussion. First, the group paid special attention to interdisciplinary and intersectoral solutions. Involvement of various level of expertise, private and public sectors, different generations and communities, according to the young leaders can lead to better and more sustainable solutions in the future.

A second tool suggested for more coherence across Europe was to concentrate on the common threats and challenges as unifiers. The participants stressed the need to work together in Europe on areas where all citizens can benefit.

The third common theme was the key importance of good information and knowledge about the EU. It was pointed out as an indispensable instrument to build a better and stronger Europe.

Education and opportunities for youth

Challenges, Opportunities and Recommendations

Challenge 1: Lacking quality education

- Differing educational standards on national and regional levels without EU-wide competencies
- Rigidity in current educational systems unable to adapt to the needs of the labor market and the progress of new technologies
- Lack of civic education, especially in relation to EU values and citizenship
- Deficiency incorporating alternative formats of education such as non-formal education

The failure to address these challenges can lead to the possible collapse of political and value systems in the long-term and, on the whole, the formation of a less open European society.

► Opportunities:

With well thought out and delivered improvements, education in Europe can deliver new opportunities to young people, bring them into more equal standing across regions and societal levels.

To achieve that, the following steps need to be taken:

► Recommendations:

- Create a more unified and adaptive framework for primary and secondary education, preferably by increasing EU competences in the matter
- Building and strengthening the research infrastructure, through EU mechanisms and better Member States cooperation
- On the national level, incorporate a civil society narrative by including inputs from civil society organisations in the social sciences and humanities curricula
- Enact mandatory educational classes about the EU
- Create one main EU-wide online education sharing platform, allowing for e-twinning, involvement by country and EU associations of teachers, connecting teachers, parents and students

Challenge 2: Non-matching skills and lack of prospects for young people

- Mismatch of theory vs practice, with disbalance between soft skills and STEM skills
- Lack of clear framework to strengthen critical thinking among the young
- Disparity between the pace of learning in educational institutions and the needs of employers

The current situation can lead to a generation without the necessary knowledge, practical and public skills, with the danger of economic stagnation and societal fragmentation.

► Opportunities:

There is an opportunity for increased interdisciplinary and intersectoral interaction with information sharing and improved network infrastructure, leading to better prospects for young people.

To achieve that, the following steps need to be taken:

► **Recommendations:**

- Revision of national education, labour and industry priorities to create a coherent relationship between the educational system, the labour market and the needs of employers
- Institutionalise good practices from other Member States, e.g. dual educational programmes, at a broader EU level
- In building more cohesive ecosystems and new policies between educational systems, private and public sectors, there needs to be significant involvement of youth, e.g. a Youth Assembly
- Establishing, by building on the advantages of the existing Erasmus Programme, additional, complimentary and well targeted financial schemes from the EU and Member States, that recognize new realities and assist young people to better access public and private to education programmes ●

Environment and sustainability

Challenges, Opportunities and Recommendations

Challenge 1: Today's European economy is unsustainable

- Lack of recognition of climate change's immediate effects
- Inadequate measurement of development and growth, through GDP, which does not account for environmental effects
- Outdated and sometimes skewed distribution of EU finances
- Deficiency in distinguishing climate refugees as a separate group

Continued unsustainable growth can lead to major environmental, economic, political and societal setbacks in the short-, medium- and long-term for the EU and the global economy.

► Opportunities:

There is a potential to change international trade policies and agreements so that the future of the European and, consequentially, global economy can be more sustainable (e.g. European ban on one time use plastics). In addition, the internal market can become more circular (zero waste driven), especially if the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are incorporated into EU and national agendas as a high priority.

To achieve that, the following steps need to be taken:

► Recommendations:

- EU institutions need to initiate the adopting of an appropriate new measurement for development that internalises environmental social costs
- All new policy proposals and enactments by EU institutions need to account for SDGs. Some conditions have been already set, e.g. within the Common Agricultural Policy
- A circular economy needs to be set up from the individual and community levels up to the national and, eventually, EU single-market levels. Therefore, citizens and local governments can have an active role
- Encourage the use of existing mechanisms for inclusive policymaking where private and public sectors, civil society, youth, national and EU decision-makers have a space for dialogue
- Set up programmes, with EU financial support, to reskill and requalify employees and communities affected by climate change and the shifting economy
- Invest serious sums of EU financing in the transition towards a green economy across Europe

Challenge 2: Lack in understanding of the problem

- There is a sense of a loss of leadership on the environmental agenda by EU, with Member States attempting to escape responsibility
- Disbalance between commitments and the actual setting up of new standards, fast mechanisms and policies on the national and even European levels
- Observed generational gap when accepting, understanding and acting regarding climate change

If sustainability is not understood by decisionmakers for what it is, then their good strategies and implementation for society and businesses may not be possible.

► **Opportunities:**

There is an open space to increase cooperation between academics, private and public sectors, as well as NGOs, to build a real sense of sustainable community.

To achieve that, the following steps need to be taken:

► **Recommendations:**

- Individual citizens and communities need to step-up and actively create sustainable environments around them, rather than wait for a top-down approach
- Environmental and sustainability education needs to be an integral part of formal curricula. Thus, national governments will need to further re-design countries' educational systems
- EU institutions need to continue building understandable and comprehensive guidance mechanisms and policies and help in their implementation with solid financial support, even if this means switching funds from traditionally accepted priorities ●

EU as a global actor

Challenges, Opportunities and Recommendations

Challenge 1: Division within the EU is clearly visible

- Comeback of the nationalist rhetoric in the EU
- Isolationist agenda of US foreign policy

The goal of strong union — through multilateralism — in the global arena has taken a back seat.

► Opportunities:

There are many common threats (e.g. ecological, security) and concentrating on a common response to be heard can be a useful tool to unify the EU in foreign and security affairs. Current globalisation trends also open space for re-thinking the role of great powers in the classic sense.

To achieve that, the following steps need to be taken:

► Recommendations:

- A common EU vision for global affairs should not be further postponed
- The EU should continue to emphasise a value-based approach as its unique selling point in foreign and defence policy
- Strategy at the EU level needs to be designed to systematically aid in fostering European patriotism to counter harmful nationalism. Such steps increase the probability, consequentially, of a more unified foreign and defence EU vision
- At the EU level there needs to be an increase in the number of consultations and overall involvement in the policymaking process, not only with national governments and representatives but especially with academics, civil society and youth

Challenge 2: Institutional and competency hurdles

- The current authority held by EU institutions concerning foreign and defence matters is prohibiting a shift towards the EU speaking with one voice in the global arena
- While there is plenty of bureaucracy, actions are often seen as too small and too late

The current state of EU competences in foreign and defence affairs prevents for the Union and the Member States from taking substantial action in international matters. Consequentially, the legitimacy and strength of the EU is constantly questioned when it comes to global affairs.

► Opportunities:

Foreseeing the benefits of a stronger EU voice in global affairs can promote stronger and more united institutions (e.g. high representative office with more competences).

To achieve that, the following steps need to be taken:

► **Recommendations:**

- EU representation offices' participation in more international organizations and countries, as well as more EU civilian missions in developing regions and conflict zones so that the presence of the EU globally is more visible and credible
- There should be a targeted attempt to reform international organizations so that the EU can have a more active role and powers
- Reform the office of the EU High Representative so that in the global arena the representative is an equal counterpart to the other international leaders (decisionmakers with powers)
- Member States and EU leaders need to take into account the different proposals on how to reform existing foreign and defence policy EU structures and reach an agreement on a reasonable reform plan ●

Migration, internal and external security

Challenges, Opportunities and Recommendations

Challenge 1: Continuous migration flows into/within the EU fuels fears

- With continuous inflows of newcomers and inner-EU migration there are economic concerns about the consequences from cheap labour and brain drain
- Existing fears about an EU where youth are susceptible to radicalization
- Knowledge of — and exchanges with — other cultures are limited, allowing space for prejudices and misconceptions
- Danger that if there are no good forward-looking strategies, Europeanism could be altered into something non-desirable

Fears, based on facts and fallacies, are fueling a possible breakdown of usually tolerant societies and further endangering the future of the EU as a whole.

► Opportunities:

Newcomers are seeking an entry into the EU due to conflict, climate change and the lack of opportunities in their own countries. EU Member States can use this situation as a unifier and together (under the EU flag) contribute towards the improvement of vulnerable regions outside the EU. In addition, migration inflows also can lead to various benefits for the EU and its Member States. If correctly identified, those benefits can add strength to the Union.

To achieve that, the following steps need to be taken:

► Recommendations:

- A considered application and enforcement of policies in the Member States should be ensured through EU monitoring
- Stricter and faster decision-making processes for newcomers need to be encouraged as a priority for all Member States
- EU institutions that deal with migration must be designed with a clear purpose and a mandate so that they can improve impacts
- At the EU level, a coordinated effort will need to continue and increase to better support countries of origin through various tools — financial, capacity-building, sharing best practices, etc.

Challenge 2: Internal security is not up to par

- Too strong of a hold by national authorities over intelligence sharing
- Increase of radicalized elements across European societies
- Constant interferences in elections

If there are no improvements in the internal security within the EU, there is an acute danger for some basic European value-based benefits to be curtailed (e.g. freedom of movement, freedom of expression, etc.).

► Opportunities:

As with other challenges, the common internal security of the EU can be ensured by tackling common problems together. The current concerns are a common threat to all EU Member States.

To achieve that, the following steps need to be taken:

► **Recommendations:**

- At the EU level, a more workable and efficient intelligence sharing mechanism needs to be devised, so the freedom of movement can be protected and not inhibited
- Common EU standards in information gathering, resource usage and sharing will increase the quality of work across the EU and thus, provide better protection and reaction
- The Schengen Area needs to be protected using new available technology with EU standardized guidelines not politicized by Member States

Challenge 3: External security is at risk

- Close proximity to vulnerable states and conflict zones (e.g. Ukraine, Middle East)
- Internal transformations in Turkey
- Far-reaching global actors spreading their influence, e.g. Russia and China
- The US is retracting into a more isolationist posture

The EU is experiencing a period of great geopolitical instability, putting its external borders at risk.

► **Opportunities:**

The geopolitical regional and global developments open a door for the EU to fill a leadership gap, assert itself as one voice credible actor and protect its external borders.

To achieve that, the following steps need to be taken:

► **Recommendations:**

- Well-coordinated and continuous EU political and economic pressure of actors that endanger, through their actions, the external security of the EU
- Deeper EU cooperation (financial and otherwise) and more joint operations with countries and regions on the periphery of the EU

Challenge 4: New threats are on the rise (e.g. hybrid, cyber)

- Disbalance between fast developing new technologies, policymaking and norm-setting
- Lack of understanding the new threats

These threats are capable of potentially bringing down governments and whole systems.

► **Opportunities:**

With more systematized knowledge-sharing, and EU-wide mechanisms to deal with these new vulnerabilities, the mismatch can be mitigated, with common threats serving as unifiers for Europe.

To achieve that, the following steps need to be taken:

► **Recommendations:**

- Enacting EU mechanisms to punish interference and reward (financially) good practices, like building national counter-action institutions, tools and rules
- Increase the competences of institutions that are agile and active across the EU, e.g. ENISA ●

Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

Challenges, Opportunities and Recommendations

Challenge 1: Lack of opportunities for young people

- Education systems are currently struggling to offer future-oriented skills to young people
- Persistently high levels of unemployment among young people

The current situation can lead to a next generation that is alienated and willing to subscribe to alternative political and social perspectives and beliefs.

► Opportunities:

Changes can occur with well-targeted EU funds toward active labour market tools for young people, embracing existing good practices that could be up-scaled.

To achieve that, the following steps need to be taken:

► Recommendations:

- Developing more innovative European active labour market policies for boosting professional opportunities for young people (e.g. paid obligatory internships)
- The EU-wide introduction of a dual education model (like in Germany) to strengthen the relationship between future young employees and employers
- Devise incentives for employers to hire interns and vocational trainees through national and/or EU tools

Challenge 2: “Race to the Bottom”

- The fear that a cheap labour force arriving from outside the EU potentially takes labour opportunities away from young people
- Decreases in wage levels due to alternative workforce supply

If the above fears are substantiated, economic growth is still possible but some segments, like young people, can suffer a decrease of opportunities and a lower income.

► Opportunities:

A common European migration policy can regulate the influx from outside the EU and consequentially address some of the current job challenges.

To achieve that, the following steps need to be taken:

► Recommendations:

- EU monitoring to ensure that national employment conditions for migrant and domestic workers are equal, and that substandard employment conditions or discriminatory mechanisms/ policies are not allowed.

Challenge 3: Lack of cohesion and convergence

- There is still an observable lack of convergence between the Member States, with deepening East-West and North-South divisions

- Socio-economic disparities and gaps within the EU, including wages, access to public services, levels of social mobility and income opportunities

Without more equitable opportunities and conditions, social unrest can be a powerful tool to bring sometimes-unwanted outcomes for Member States and the EU as a whole.

► **Opportunities:**

With the new Multiannual Financial Framework negotiations at hand, different funding schemes can be carefully tailored for closing the gaps.

To achieve that, the following steps need to be taken:

► **Recommendations:**

- Boost entrepreneurship, through EU and national stimulus tools
- Empower trade unions at the national level and interconnecting at EU level to ensure an extra layer of protection in the labour market
- National governments can stimulate consumption among the middle class by supporting the modern welfare state and thus, increase convergence levels

Challenge 4: Gender inequality

- The gender pay gap and glass ceiling in specific industries, as well as in power structures, stand as a stark reminder that, on social grounds, Europe needs much more work

The EU is missing an opportunity to be a global leader is gender equality.

► **Opportunities:**

Use the current struggle to encourage female empowerment and raise the understanding of the problem among women and men, who themselves at times are unaware.

To achieve that, the following steps need to be taken:

► **Recommendations:**

- EU-wide and supported awareness-raising activities
- Strict national policies, encouraged by EU guidelines, to ensure salary transparency

Challenge 5: Lack of integration

- Social, cultural, political and economic integration of both migrants as well as minorities within societies continues to be a persistent problem in the EU

Continuous lack of real integration can possibly manifest itself into other challenges such as unrest, loss of economic opportunities, internal security risks.

► **Opportunities:**

Integration and tolerance are a two-way process between hosts and newcomers. This entails the opportunity of sharing, communicating and learning new things.

To achieve that, the following steps need to be taken:

► **Recommendations:**

- More EU and Member State funds for efficient and compulsory integration (cultural and economic) of both migrants as well as disadvantaged groups in societies ●



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