



Recommendations and Takeaways

2nd 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. Additionally, it also aims to enhance the democratic legitimacy of the EU by offering valuable recommendations to the 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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Introduction

Four months after the 2019 European Parliament elections, 26 young leaders as well as experts from 9 European countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Montenegro, Poland and Slovakia) gathered in Bratislava, Slovakia for discussions on EU citizens' engagement. Committed to strengthening a European Union that represents 'diversity', 'unity', 'freedom and privilege' and 'opportunity' (among other values), participants of the 2nd Transnational Reflection Group Meeting engaged in 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 conversation on what kind of Europe we want with MEP elect, Miriam Lexmann, and Lívia Vašáková, the Economic Team Leader at the Representation of the European Commission in Slovakia. They also discussed how to get the EU that its citizens want with State Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of Slovakia, František Ružička, and Thibault Muzergues, Europe Program Director at the International Republican Institute in Bratislava. Representing the governmental and non-governmental, political and economic, and regional and European perspectives, all panellists identified a number of key issues to consider regarding the present and future state of the European Union (EU). Our participants went on to use those as a starting point to assess, in each of the topics, the challenges and opportunities at all levels (the EU, Member States and societies), and to form recommendations using both top-down and bottom-up approaches. Three themes in particular emerged as cutting across the various topical areas.

Firstly, participants emphasized the need for EU-wide solutions and the harmonisation of certain policies and systems across the Union. Those were: to increase quality of education and social support systems, to bridge the East-West divide and to counter the issue of talent drain some of the EU countries have been facing.

Secondly, they emphasized a need to shift certain paradigms of understanding of the market, so as to respond to the world of today and tomorrow. From education and training through to labour laws and social welfare, the participants felt very strongly that there is a need for more flexible approaches and frameworks, on the EU and national levels.

And finally, the participants expressed the need for the EU to keep encouraging its citizens' involvement in policymaking on areas that concern them.

Education and opportunities for youth

Challenge 1: Gap between skills needed for the job market and knowledge from the educational system

- There is a lack of institutional flexibility (rigid schemas 2+1; 2+2, etc.) as well as in terms of curricula, which does not respond, and seems unable to adapt, to current developments, new challenges and market needs;
- There is also rigidity in the approach to education as such, with a focus on learning information instead of doing, which leads to a lack of skills and problem-solving attitude;
- Interdisciplinary focus is lacking too; in today's complex world, mastery of more than one skill is needed;
- Students are not motivated to participate in vocational training;
- Finally, teachers are not sufficiently trained to enrich the courses to make them respond to market needs, and to unleash/support the development of the right skills among the students.

This gap has two serious consequences: wasted talent and passivity. Students are not given the opportunity to develop their skills and passions, not least because the education systems face the difficulty to even identify the talents and skills needed for the market of today and tomorrow. The lack of soft skills and vocational training leads not only to the lack of a start-up mindset and the ability to do well in the job market, but also to a lack of active citizenship and involvement in public affairs.

◀ Recommendations:

1. Encourage a more flexible curricula responsive to market needs by fostering cooperation with businesses:
 - Dedicate more funding/resources to promoting the internship mobility scheme within Erasmus+ (internship schemes are more important than university exchanges);
 - Develop a pan-EU platform linking businesses offering paid internships with universities;
 - Support a pan-EU student job fair, organised in each country, where core businesses and start-ups would present the internship schemes, employment opportunities, and skills required for both;
 - Recommend higher education institutions to include courses run solely by non-academic staff to enhance skills needed for the market of today;
 - Develop a funding scheme for local authorities to organise job fairs in their regions with local employers and start-ups.
2. Invest more resources into education and promotion of the EU and its programmes:
 - Fund the development of 'how-to' materials for young people participating in Erasmus+;
 - Develop an EU-wide 'Model European Union' (similar to Model UN) supported by the EU where young talents from all EU countries could participate free of cost. Alternatively, the 'MEU' could be added to different types of higher education institutions based on their area of expertise (for example, future teachers from all EU member states would simulate a corresponding EP committee, or the drafting of a legislative proposal related to education, in which all - the EC, EP and Council - could be simulated). As an additional element, the EU could offer a possibility to meet with the corresponding representatives of the institutions;
 - Dedicate more funding to developing more interactive materials in each EU language for teachers to use when educating about the EU.
3. Promote soft skills and entrepreneurship among young people:
 - Add a coaching/mentoring element to Erasmus+ schemes where students would have an opportunity to communicate and learn from professionals from across the EU. The professionals'

participation would be on a voluntary basis and could be a part of the EU-wide online platform linking businesses and higher education institutions;

- Organise a start-up competition for young people to come up with new business ideas;
- Dedicate more resources to promoting the EU funding schemes for young entrepreneurs;
- Encourage higher education institutions to include previous experiences in volunteering and/or civic participation in their entry requirements, and to promote volunteering and civic participation within their activities.

4. Promote vocational training at earlier stages of education

5. Encourage interdisciplinary approaches:

- Invest more resources into promoting Erasmus Mundus degrees and encourage more interdisciplinary programs within the scheme.

6. Encourage and promote schemes for teachers, and educators' education and mobility:

- Invest more resources into promoting teachers' exchange programs;
- Dedicate resources for business-teacher exchanges to encourage teachers to gain practical experience in the field, transposable into teaching materials for students;
- Create an online platform of interactive teaching resources for teachers in different areas.

Challenge 2: Loss of investment into talent (linked to East-West divide)

- Countries with lower standards of living invest into education of specialists (doctors, etc.), who subsequently leave to use their skill(s) for higher wages elsewhere - this leads to a loss of people as well as investments into those people.

< Recommendations:

1. Create an independent EU body responsible for:

- providing regular updates on data on employability in different sectors, employability of graduates of higher education institutions and level of salaries and wages in different sectors and countries
- visualisation of gap between graduates and market needs in specific fields in each country
- independent rating of all higher education institutions' quality, and subsequent development of rating of degrees (e.g. bronze masters, silver masters, gold masters) to improve transparency between the quality of education in different countries and to identify the best universities and programs in the EU;

2. Include financial and investing skills in early stages of education in order to encourage a focus on further sources of income than one's daily job:

- Develop funding schemes for local authorities and education institutions to invest into vocational training such as finance/investment courses;
- Encourage the creation of a platform for businesses and financial experts to offer training or coaching for young people on the matter.

Challenge 3: Inequality of opportunities

- Less advantaged groups have worse access to quality education

< Recommendation:

- More resources need to be invested into schemes that support quality education for talents from less-advantaged social groups.

Environment and sustainability

Challenge 1: Lack of awareness of environmental issues and impact

- According to EU wide polls, sustainability is the number one concern - however, in some Eastern countries the issue is much less prominent. There is limited accessibility in these countries to both the message and the technology to tackle sustainability issues.

◁ Recommendations:

- Make it part of EU policy and communication targeting rules to focus on engaging people in various difficult-to-reach regions outside the capitals;
- Create tenders for communication on sustainability issues;
- Promote alternative ways of transport, as well as research in fields such as e-cars
- Improve accountability and transparency of sustainability-related actions within the EU;
- Integrate sustainability into the education system; provide citizens with useful information, not just facts and figures.

Challenge 2: Disruptive impact of transformation of coal regions

- Certain countries and regions including Brandenburg, Saxony, and North Rhine-Westphalia in Germany, Silesia and Lower Silesia in Poland, and Trenčín in Slovakia rely too much on heavy, 'dirty' industry - however, transforming those regions can have a destructive impact on the workforce.

◁ Recommendations:

- Provide workers with viable alternatives, as well as with information on those alternatives (e.g. seminars);
- Provide financial subsidies to close mines/power stations;
- Bring forward solutions to replace coal as source of heating (e.g. funding schemes);
- Coordinate the process with macro-level energy policy moving to renewables;
- Transfer workers from coal industry to renewable industry;
- Provide sufficient opportunities for workers to re-train, especially in new technologies.

Challenge 3: Lack of progress on current and future climate change agreements

- With the US pulling out of the Paris Agreement completely and several states (though none of the EU Member States) not sticking to agreed-upon targets, it seems the Agreement has already lost a lot of its authority;
- The progress on any new agreements is incredibly slow;
- There is also a risk of a distracting narrative being created - if we only focus on personalisation of sustainability we ignore the biggest issue, which is the corporate emissions accounting for the vast majority of greenhouse gas emissions.

◁ Recommendations:

- Make provisions of sustainability enforceable (a mention in the Paris Agreement for example is not enough). This needs to be done in cooperation with international organisations such as the United Nations, using environment as policy instrument, but striking a balance between pressure and intervention;
- Set up a dispute resolution mechanism;
- Aim for high-level sustainability measures;

- Introduce a carbon tax on producers; in more 'developed' member states with a higher GDP per capita the tax is higher, which creates incentives for production to move to lower tax regime, boosting GDP per capita and creating an equilibrium seeking process.

Challenge 4: Wasting time and funding available for achieving sustainable goals

- EIB issues €500 billion of green targeted investment bonds per year (equivalent to 5% of the euro area's GDP); in addition, the ECB declares it is ready, as part of its bond buying programme, to stabilise the EIB bond price in secondary markets if it falls below a certain level. This gives serious ammunition - not just lip service - to targeting climate change and could kick start green led investment growth in the currently stagnating economic environment.

< Recommendations:

- Mobilise the political will – if it was there, the €500 billion in EIB 'green' investment bonds could be achieved tomorrow using existing treaties/structures.

Challenge 5: Biodiversity loss and deforestation

- Deforestation and the loss of biodiversity is an alarming, but not unsurmountable issue. Many creatures are in danger of extinction, but at least 30% of the endangered species are not yet imminently endangered; the time to act is now;

< Recommendations:

- Expand oversight of European habitats/species at risk (birds are currently only being tracked);
- Standardise tracking indicators and data collection to allow for analysis and identification of trends and at-risk area/species;
- Make deforestation a top priority and create viable mechanisms to put pressure on the relevant actors - deforestation in countries such as Brazil demonstrates the need to be united in enforcing change through stalling trade agreements or even boycotting countries;
- Work towards a total abolition of single use plastics.

Challenge 6: Future increase of climate migration into Europe

< Recommendations:

- Research into future climate migration needs to be conducted, focusing on:
 - Where is the next wave of refugees coming from?
 - What changes (e.g. desertification, rising sea levels) are going to drive this?
 - Specifically, which ones are high risk to drive refugees to Europe?
 - In which area/effects do we have high a probability to mitigate destitution so that refugees aren't created in the first place?

EU as a global actor

Challenge 1: Lack of unity among EU Member States:

- There is currently no potential for a common foreign and security policy, as the Member States' positions diverge too much.
- As a consequence, the EU cannot act as a true, consolidated global actor.

Individual leadership by visionary statesmen, and the gradual development of a true European identity could help foster a greater understanding as well as consensus among the European constituents as to why it makes sense to cooperate as a true political power, in Europe and globally. The basis for this identity is already laid and that it needs to be further fostered by education, information and knowledge exchange.

< Recommendations:

- First and foremost, EU Member States should focus on finding political alignment among themselves. The European institutions should emphatically support this;
- In addition, there should be a check-up point to clarify the EU's political vision: where do we want to go institutionally?
- Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) should be the rule for all policy areas in the Council of the European Union;
- To strengthen and safeguard liberal democracy, Member States should establish a new instrument monitoring the rule of law, as an alternative to article 7;
- Specific attention should be paid to supporting the rule of law and freedom of press in Bulgaria and Romania;
- The EU should focus on supporting democracy of the Western Balkans rather than on purely economic development;
- Finally, the EU should kick-start initiatives to enhance European identity, including:
 - Increase the accessibility of EU politics to 'bring the debate to the pubs';
 - Foster EU education from early ages;
 - Introduce EU-wide exchange on the high-school level;
 - Support an Interrail pass for all 18-year-olds;
 - Create more transparency in EU legislation;
 - Incorporate NGOs more closely to EU-level policymaking

Challenge 2: Lack of EU military capacities:

- There is a difference between a global actor (i.e. an economically powerful entity) and a global power (i.e. an actor that also possesses the military means to enforce its interests). Whilst the EU is definitely a global actor, it lacks the military might to also be considered a global power.
- Creating a European Army is taking a very long time, not least due to the lack of consensus; whenever the EU takes three steps forward, it takes two steps back. In the meantime, the EU is having to rely on NATO and other bodies for its safety.

< Recommendations:

- The EU should work on a European Army that is fully compatible with NATO, but that enhances its international credibility;
- It should steadily integrate the national armies to build capacity for non-military interventions;
- Its geographical scope should focus first and foremost on its immediate neighborhood (Eurasia, Africa, the Mediterranean);
- In time, the EU should become a security actor and protecting power that can credibly defend its interests abroad.

Challenge 3: Lack of EU global vision and outlook:

- The EU needs politicians who have the common European interest in mind, rather than the individual nations' interests. Those leaders would not stand in the way of common European positions in the future (e.g. migration or civil intervention), which would further strengthen the EU's image in the world.

< Recommendations:

- The EU should establish itself as a global voice for freedom and a 'Democracy Ambassador';
- The EU should build global alliances based on common political values: with the US, Canada, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand;
- The EU should establish itself as a Global Environment Ambassador.

Migration, external and internal security

Challenge 1: Migration remains a divisive issue:

- The cultural perceptions of migrants differ across the Union – some are positive, but mostly they are negative or at least getting less positive (Brexit for example worsened the situation for EU and non-EU migrants alike);
- Integration of migrants remains difficult. Despite the basic understanding that migration is beneficial for the labour market, public discourse on the issue is dominated by fear and prejudice (largely related to terrorism and job security) fueled by misunderstanding; two groups can co-exist but not understand one another;
- There is a widespread sense of dissatisfaction of the way EU has dealt with the issue, especially the lack of EU's competence and coordination on the matter (e.g. the quota system). This leads to a desire to disconnect from the non-EU migration issues altogether.

◁ Recommendations:

- Uphold a strict procedure to obtain asylum status in the EU, including identifying a specific area to live in, process of reporting to an asylum officer, and an evaluation of the assimilation progress;
- Set up a clear information flow on the issue; beyond dealing with migration itself, the EU needs to better communicate its efforts, actions and accomplishments. Debate on migration needs to be widespread, including schools and universities.

Challenge 2: Terrorism remains a key concern of citizens:

- Terrorism in the EU has always been conducted through unpredictable attacks, which leads to constant fear, and, by extension, the fear and distorted perception of the Islam and Muslims;
- The seemingly uncontrolled flow of migrants contributes to terrorism. However, the invasion of privacy through monitoring and data that is being used to combat that blurs the line between security and privacy. In addition, a possible leak of personal information (e.g. air passenger data) can lead to terrorist attacks;
- The influence of external actors on migrants (e.g. from Libya or Syria) coming into the EU needs is not considered in its complexity and not all the actors and countries that have leverage in conflict regions are involved to the extent that they should be.

◁ Recommendations:

- Establish strict border controls; the Schengen area either needs to work on the open border principle, or not exist at all. In addition, there should be a higher exchange of expertise and information on border control as well as a special task force;
- Establish strict control of the Mediterranean Sea also, with more ships and guards dedicated to rescue missions;
- Dedicate more financial support for refugee camps and their establishment in non-EU states;
- Discuss the viability of and alternatives to military interventions in regions of chaos, accounting also for external threats coming from countries such as Russia or North Korea

Employment, social affairs and inclusion

Challenge 1: Financial, social and economic inequality

- Social mobility within education systems and the labour market is low in some parts of the Union, not least because of a lack of trust in and understanding of social mobility;
- Equal opportunities, gender balance and inclusion in the workplace too are lacking;
- Discrimination in the workplace remains a challenge;
- The urban-rural gap is widening, and the ongoing gentrification and displacement of low-skilled workers continue to divide societies across the Union

< Recommendations:

- First and foremost, the EU should lead on the issue by ensuring more diversity within its own institutions;
- Financially incentivizing equal hearing would also help;
- EU funds need to be better allocated and monitored (for example, there is a lack of resources for medical students to travel and thus progress);
- Finally, the EU should explore experimental ways of having a dialogue with its citizens – for example, it could launch Policy Lab Initiatives, using design methodology to design policies; it also needs to ensure that policy dialogue will be based on the needs of the end-users.

Challenge 2: Changing labour market:

- A change of paradigm and perspective on labour from the policymakers and the population is needed;
- There is a lack of understanding and legislative framework covering the gig-economy;
- The skills and qualifications obtained through the current education systems do not match the needs of the labour market.

< Recommendations:

- Get citizens more involved in shaping the labour market of the future – in policymaking, through co-ops (especially the precarious class), etc.
- Increase individual and structural cohesion within the EU; more harmonization of the EU labour markets is needed;
- Ensure that mutualised social services are available for the new industries;
- Dedicate more resources, spaces and services to education – to language courses, Erasmus program, dual education, etc. At the same time, put EU-wide in place to check the use of educational resources and their relevance for the labour market;
- Standardise educational systems across the EU further, especially the higher education institutions; foster university partnerships/checks to raise the standards of education throughout the EU;
- Increase pan-European cooperation, for example through establishing European Universities and European Professorships, and setting up a free online language learning program accompanied by campus learning and services.

Challenge 3: Inadequate housing and social welfare policies:

- There is a problem with housing in many parts of Europe; at the same time residential housing also stands for almost 30% of Europe's CO2 emissions. We need to start seeing housing not just as a purely infrastructural, but also as a social and environmental issue;

- Social safety nets are not adequately provided in some parts of the EU – from family planning through child allowance standards to pensions systems;
- There is a lack of understanding of non-linear business models and their potential.

◁ **Recommendations:**

- Put social issues firmly on the agenda and put people over companies;
- Establish a common EU citizenship policy;
- Harmonise pension systems across the EU;
- Create child allowance standards throughout the EU based on an average wage in each Member State;
- Agree on a Green New Deal for Housing with a social focus – create European Community Housing Fund and build affordable and high-quality green housing;
- Dedicate resources to research and innovation in green and social sustainable housing, to regional and municipal initiatives that build new houses, and to initiatives that put more public power into housing.



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