

Danube Youth Position Paper

Danube Youth Council |
European Union Strategy for the
Danube Region (EUSDR)



Introduction

The Danube Youth Position Paper contains the views and comments of the Danube Youth Council (DYC) on the EU Youth Strategy 2021–2027 and its interim evaluation. Its structure responds to the three pillars of the Strategy (engage, connect, empower) from the perspective of the young people of the Danube Region, based on the personal experiences of the Council's members. The document places particular focus on the specific characteristics of the macro-region, as well as on the functioning and role of the Danube Youth Council.

The Danube Youth Position Paper is a document written and adopted by the members of the Danube Youth Council. It is important to underline that the document reflects the views of the Council's members.

The document looks closely at how existing youth councils function and how effectively young voices are included in regional and macro-regional strategies. It also raises key issues, such as participation in democratic life, access of young people to cross-border programmes, and the continuing challenge of brain drain. These topics are explored not only as policy matters, but as real experiences that

shape the everyday lives of young people along the Danube.

Young people along the Danube are already engaging, connecting, and empowering their communities but the system does not always let that energy land where decisions are made. Building on the EU Youth Strategy and its interim evaluation, this paper turns our lived experience into clear steps the EUSDR can implement now. From earlier involvement through Youth Test/Youth Check pilots to practical access to mobility and volunteering. Hence, this paper looks at the EU Youth Strategy and compares the effectiveness of its framework.

The EU Youth Strategy (EUYS) 2019-2027 serves as the framework for European cooperation on youth policy. Its core mission is to "Engage, Connect, and Empower" young people. The strategy is built around 11 European Youth Goals, which were developed in a dialogue process with young people across the continent. These goals address a wide range of issues, from mental health and well-being to quality employment and a sustainable green Europe.¹

The EU Youth Strategy's overall objectives are to:

- ♦ enable young people to be architects of their own lives, support their personal development and growth to autonomy, build their resilience and equip them with life skills to cope with a changing world;
- ♦ encourage and equip young people with the necessary resources to become active citizens, agents of solidarity and positive change inspired by EU values and a European identity;
- ♦ improve policy decisions with regard to their impact on young people across all sectors (notably employment, education, health and social inclusion);
- ♦ contribute to the eradication of youth poverty and all forms of discrimination and promote the social inclusion of young people.¹

An interim evaluation of the EU Youth Strategy, published in early 2024, provides a comprehensive look at what has been accomplished, what is happening, and where improvements are needed.²

This paper will comment on the Strategy, the interim evaluation and discuss from a youth perspective.

Pillar 1: Youth participation and democracy (Engage)

The interim evaluation shows effectiveness in increasing youth involvement and youth participation across all countries. The involvement of youth in policymaking was enhanced (EU Youth Dialogue) as well as strategic cooperation to encourage participation and active citizenship (Interim Evaluation).² Nevertheless, there is the encouragement from EUYD to enhance the mechanisms for implementing the recommendations into policymaking, forwarding information. At the same time, while the outreach through formats such as EUYD works fine, outreach to more marginalised youth, rural areas, disadvantaged backgrounds, youth with disabilities, are still hardly reached.³ This limits the equal participation, limits opportunities for active

involvement, participation for disadvantaged groups and excludes again crucial voices in policymaking and advisory positions. Through the cooperation with civil society organisations, grassroots organisations, municipalities, the strategy can reach a diversified group of youth, increasing awareness for its objectives and barrier free access to participation and involvement. It would be particularly important for the young people of the Danube Region to support and involve youth living in rural areas in the youth dialogue, ensuring that they can also participate in discussions with decision-makers and that their voices are represented. In the European Union, the three countries with the highest proportion of rural population are all

part of the Danube macro-region—namely Slovakia, Slovenia, and Austria.⁴

To ensure youth perspectives in policymaking processes the European Commission is piloting the EU Youth test and youth check. EU youth text is an assessment tool ensuring youth's contribution in deciding on new policies. The Youth check on the other hand begins much earlier: ensuring the youngs people involvement in the design of EU policies.⁵

While the EU Youth Dialogue has improved participation across countries, the interim evaluation also highlights the need to strengthen the mechanisms that translate youth input into decisions. Especially timely feedback on recommendations and clearer routes into policymaking cycles.² We propose making youth input earlier (problem-framing) and trackable (written replies, timelines, status updates) within EUSDR governance so participation moves from ad-hoc consultation to structured co-creation.

The Danube Youth Council represents a significant step towards young people in the Danube Region. While its establishment is a positive sign, its effectiveness is often limited. Young people are involved, but their influence on major policy decisions can be very limited. The council's visibility is also a major challenge. Many young people, particularly those not already involved in youth organizations, are unaware of its existence or its purpose. We believe this partly coming from the novelty of the Council itself, as it was only established in 2022, as well as from the fact that the system of macro-regions still enjoys relatively low visibility both among the general population and among young people. Limited collaboration with other youth councils and youth organizations also contributes to this, which can similarly be attributed to the organization's recent establishment.

However, this limits its reach and a true representation of the diverse youth population in the region. This partly stems from the fact that each country can be represented by 2 young people in the Danube Youth Council, which may draw criticism as it does not necessarily reflect the full profile of the youth in each country. A clearer mandate (who responds, by when) plus proactive outreach with civil society organizations (CSO) and municipalities would broaden representation and increase the likelihood that youth advice shifts policy choices.

Important assets of the Danube Youth Council are the documents and projects created by its members: both the Vision Paper and the essays on brain drain are publicly accessible.⁶ These were designed as timeless papers, addressing issues that remain relevant in the long term and serving as a reference point for stakeholders of the macro-region when considering the perspectives of young people. By presenting these at the Annual Forums, decision-makers and stakeholders of the macro-region were able to gain insight into the views of the young members of the Danube Youth Council.

It is important to note that the members of the Council carry out their activities on a voluntary basis, while typically being university students or working full-time, just as in the case of any other youth council. The Danube Youth Council, however, cannot be compared to the functioning of a national youth council, which usually involves a significantly larger number of young people, has a considerably higher membership, and therefore achieves a much broader outreach.

A major challenge for the Danube Youth Council regarding the involvement of the EUSDR Priority Areas is that in many cases these areas require specific expertise, special

permissions, and deal with complex topics, all of which make it more difficult to involve young people. It may be worth considering shifting from thematic involvement to a more horizontal approach in the future.

When comparing the Danube Youth Council to other macro-regional youth councils, both advantages and disadvantages can be identified in its structure and functioning. A positive aspect is the diversity of the young people in the Danube Region: the Council brings together members from more countries than any other macro-regional youth council, which allows for an exceptionally wide range of perspectives to be brought into the joint work. A characteristic of the region, however, is the large geographical distance between the member states, and the fact that each country is represented by only two young people, which makes physical meetings more difficult.

An important difference compared to the Baltic Sea Region Youth Forum is that the Danube Youth Council is characterized by a top-down structure, whereas the Baltic Sea Region Youth Forum follows a bottom-up approach. We believe that, although in general youth organizations benefit most from and are most effective when based on bottom-up initiatives, in the case of a macro-regional youth council—where members usually serve a two-year mandate and the work is carried out on a voluntary basis—there is a need for the type of funding and support that the Danube Strategy Point provides for the Danube Youth Council.

While "Guidance Papers for Youth Participation" exist, the actual inclusion of youth in regional strategies often fall short.⁷ Youth are frequently consulted on specific projects but are not always part of the long-term strategic planning. This could be due to the voluntary nature of their mandate and 2

year mandate mechanisms. At the same time, in our view, neither a shorter nor a longer mandate would necessarily bring clear advantages. With a shorter mandate, a disproportionate amount of time would be consumed by onboarding processes and repeatedly restarting the cooperation with the Priority Areas, making it difficult to carry out longer-term projects. On the other hand, a longer mandate would hinder renewal and the inclusion of fresh perspectives from new young members. It should also be noted that for young people, two years is already a very long time: university studies, job changes, new internships, or even moving to another country are all very common in the lives of 18–29 year-olds. For this reason, it is not advisable to plan with mandates longer than two years. An important step forward in the functioning of the Danube Youth Council is the establishment, at the initiative of its members, of a mechanism for the exclusion of inactive members, which was done in June 2025.

Overall, however, it can be said that the establishment of the DYC represents a huge step forward in terms of youth participation in the region, since the Danube Youth Council genuinely provides its members with opportunities to meet decision-makers connected to the macro-regional strategy—particularly through participation in the annual forum and through joint work with the Priority Areas. Youths often bring wide ranging, or very specific expertise on certain topics, which should be considered, as they represent youths as a specific target group in the region but also future expertise and knowledge, as well as professions in the region. This is an asset which should be considered more often, strengthening engagement and involvement.

As another structure for youth participation in the EUSDR, complementary to the Danube Youth Council, the Danube Youth

Organisations Network (DYON) should also be mentioned. Although DYON is not yet fully developed, it can be said that the initiative fills an important gap: we believe it is necessary for youth organizations of the region to be brought together into a network. This organization can address the gap that the Danube Youth Council cannot fill due to its lack of legal personality: since DYON is composed

of organizations with legal personality, they can apply for various projects as nonprofit entities, form consortia, and have an impact on the young people of the region not only at the level of policy-making, but also in the field of youth work. The collaboration of NYC and DYON can be a fruitful cooperation in the future.⁸

Pillar 2: Cross-border cooperation and mobility (Connect)

There is a lack of awareness among young people about programmes such as the Visegrad Fund and Interreg, as well as language barriers and limited financial and institutional support. Volunteering services are not known, even though numerous volunteering opportunities throughout the Danube Region. (often supported by European Solidarity Corps)⁹. Also here, challenges of awareness and access persist.

Information about opportunities is not always easily available to all young people, and support for volunteers, particularly in less-developed areas, can be limited. It is also important to acknowledge that in rural areas, young people often face specific challenges that may prevent them from travelling and accessing available opportunities.

Those challenges may be financial (in)dependency, family responsibilities, societal pressure which is often higher in smaller areas. Voluntary work is often not recognized in the countries of the Danube Region, particularly by the older generations. In Eastern Europe, due to generally poorer economic conditions, young people are often forced to work instead of engaging in voluntary activities. There is a need for greater support for volunteering, with additional resources, particularly in rural areas and disadvantaged

regions. This support should not only be financial, but also aim to promote a long-term change in perspective. A positive aspect is that within Erasmus+ programmes, all types of activities provide some form of additional support for disadvantaged young people.

The Erasmus programme is well known in the countries of the Danube Region. This is almost entirely due to the university-level Erasmus+ programme, which has gained significant recognition and popularity in every country, and is considered one of the most well-known programmes across Europe. However, the other opportunities offered by Erasmus+—such as Erasmus+ Internships, Erasmus+ for Entrepreneurship, Erasmus+ youth exchanges and trainings, as well as programmes available in secondary education and vocational training—are far less widely known. The flow of information about these programmes is very limited, and in many cases not all available resources are being used to promote them. The general perception still persists that the Erasmus programme is exclusively available to university students.

There is a clear alignment of the EUYS and programmes, such as Erasmus + and European Solidarity Corps. Nevertheless, better promotion of opportunities through a diverse outreach strategy, media and tools are needed

, for greater reach of target group. The European Youth Portal is one of the top 10 visited website from Europe.eu, which the European Commission sees as a big achievement. Various information for youth and people working with youth is available on the website offering tools, information, and guidance on opportunities.¹⁰

To turn Cross-border cooperation & mobility from “just available” to genuinely accessible in the Danube Region, we need to pair existing EUYS-aligned offers (Erasmus+, Interreg, European Solidarity Corps) with smarter outreach and earlier preparation. Persistent barriers mean many young people never find or cannot use opportunities and volunteering

pathways remain under-known despite strong ESC presence. A practical fix could be:

- diversify communication and guidance via local CSOs/municipalities and schools while more deliberately leveraging the European Youth Portal as a clear “front door” with localized Danube content;
- build readiness in the school system through neighboring-language and culture modules, short exchanges and simple step-by-step guidance that demystifies applications. Together, these steps could broaden participation beyond already-engaged youth and ensure mobility and volunteering become realistic options for first-timers from smaller towns and disadvantaged backgrounds.

Pillar 3: Improvement of skills, work opportunities (Empower)

The EU Youth Strategy has positively influenced youth-related policies in Member States and provided valuable support for youth organizations and practitioners. It has also helped improve the quality and recognition of youth work.

An important problem in many countries of the Danube Region, and more generally in Eastern Europe, is that, unlike in Western Europe, youth organizations working with young people have very limited access to funding. They can almost exclusively rely on European Union resources, and in most cases, even the operational costs must be covered through project financing. In the long run, this often leads to youth work being pushed into the background, while continuous project writing and project management come to the forefront, as these organizations are under constant financial pressure. Since civil society organizations working with youth are the primary actors responsible for channeling

young people into public life and ensuring youth participation, it is therefore crucial that the resources necessary for their functioning are secured in the long term.

Another important challenge for youth organizations, particularly in the Eastern European countries of the Danube Region, is that far fewer types of funding are available compared to their Western counterparts, while cooperation with the private sector is practically nonexistent. As a result, programs that are particularly important in the region, such as Erasmus+ and the Visegrad Fund, face massive oversubscription in these countries, leaving many high-quality organizations engaged in genuine local youth work without access to funding.

Youth which are Neither in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET) are a significant number in the Danube region. While the EU has set a goal to reduce this rate,

the reality is that many young people in the region lack tailored support. Projects like "Back on Track" funded by Interreg are attempting to address this by providing mentorship and digital training to rural NEETs. However, these are often small-scale, project-based initiatives that don't yet have the widespread, systemic reach needed to make a substantial impact compared to similar, more established programs in other parts of Europe.¹¹

Youth in rural areas of the Danube Region face a multitude of challenges, including limited access to education, training, and employment opportunities. They often lack access to the digital infrastructure and connectivity that are taken for granted in urban centers. However, projects such as "PATHS" (Personalized Approach to Territorial Life and Career Support) are piloting new models of career guidance in smaller and rural areas to address these issues.¹²

Under Pillar 3, Empower, the Danube Strategy should turn promising pilots into systemic

support so young people can build skills and find quality work where they live. The EU Youth Strategy has improved the quality and recognition of youth work but many young people in the region still lack tailored, sustained help. Pilots like "Back on Track" (mentoring + digital

training) and "PATHS" (personalised career guidance in small and rural areas) show what works, yet they remain limited in scale, and rural youth continue to face gaps in training offers, employer links, and even basic connectivity.

To counter this EUSDR actors should prioritise multi-year funding to scale proven models, forge employer partnerships for paid placements, bring mobile guidance and outreach to smaller towns, and recognise competences gained through volunteering and youth work in recruitment and education pathways.

Conclusion

This paper examines the achievements and challenges of the European Youth Strategy. As the strategy enters its second half of implementation, a mid-term evaluation reveals a stronger involvement of young people, particularly through the European Youth Dialogue. However, both the evaluation and our own observations within the Danube Youth Council highlight significant challenges in providing opportunities to a broad range of young people in the regions.

There's a notable lack of information, outreach, and dedicated commitment, especially regarding funding, as youth and youth organizations are often overlooked. To address this, closer collaboration with civil society organizations, grassroots initiatives, and local municipalities is essential. These partnerships can empower and engage young people at various levels—nationally, across the EU, and within macro-regions like the Danube.

The DYC sees great potential in collaborating with organizations and networks, such as the Danube Youth Organisations' Network and other macroregional and national youth councils. Regarding the DYC's own establishment, it's a highly valued development, though its purpose, roles, and tasks may need further refinement. Despite being founded only three years ago, the DYC has successfully built visibility both within and outside the strategy, a commitment it aims to continue strengthening and expanding.

Recommendations

As members of the Danube Youth Council, we would like to offer specific recommendations to better achieve the goals of engaging, connecting, and empowering young people in the Danube Region:

- ♦ As direct and systematic influence on policymaking through EU Youth Dialogue is still limited, there is the need to look for root causes, address the issues and find solution in order to improve;
- ♦ Strengthening communication and outreach, create clearer channels for recommendations to reach policymakers;
- ♦ More awareness raising and barrier free access to participation and to make use of opportunities;

- ♦ Inclusion and increased visibility of a diverse group of youth is still needed, more awareness on disadvantaged youth;
- ♦ Youth mainstreaming can be enhanced through communication channels and stakeholders;
- ♦ Increase outreach to marginalized youth, including those from rural areas, disadvantaged backgrounds, and youth with disabilities;
- ♦ Work towards ensuring youth in rural areas have access to participation in regional governance and youth dialogue;
- ♦ Diversify outreach strategies to improve awareness of cross-border programs (Erasmus+, Interreg, Visegrad Fund, ESC);
- ♦ Providing better promotion through local CSOs, municipalities, schools, and the European Youth Portal;
- ♦ Improve accessibility of volunteering opportunities, especially for youth in rural areas and disadvantaged regions;
- ♦ Recognize skills and competencies gained through volunteering and youth work in education and recruitment pathways;
- ♦ Work towards a long-term and stable funding for youth organizations to allow them to carry out meaningful youth work beyond project-based financing.

Danube Youth Council specific recommendations:

- ♦ Closer alignment of Danube Strategy with EUYS, greater engagement, use the tools and channels available to raise awareness, show, promote opportunities more often in EUSDR countries;
- ♦ Broaden representation in the Danube Youth Council through proactive outreach with civil society organizations and municipalities;
- ♦ Encourage collaboration between NYC and the Danube Youth Organisations Network to strengthen regional youth engagement and policy impact;
- ♦ Make youth input earlier in the policy cycle (problem-framing) and trackable (written replies, timelines, status updates);

- ◆ Shift participation from ad-hoc consultation to structured co-creation.

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