



**SYMPOSIUM: "YOUTH POLICY
RESPONSES TO THE
CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES
FACED BY YOUNG PEOPLE"
PRAGUE, 12-14 JUNE 2017**

OPENING REMARKS

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Thank you, Marta. Let me start by welcoming you all here on behalf of the Secretary General.

This is an important event in the Council of Europe's youth programme, an opportunity for us to test and challenge ourselves against the reality in which young people, youth organisations, youth workers and other actors, find themselves on a regular basis.

In the process, we hope to confirm the relevance of our current programme, and gain new insights, indications of where we need to shift and sharpen our focus, so that our activities remain relevant in the future.

I will speak today about the Council of Europe's existing approach – youth policy from the Council of Europe's perspective – and emphasise what we consider to be the key underlying principles.

Now we tend to speak about youth as a homogeneous group. But at the same time we are quick to recognise, indeed celebrate, the diversity of their situations. There is no legal definition of this age group, no accepted categorisation. We proceed on the basis of a social construct.

But what unites this group is the relatively narrow and predictable range of challenges that they face on their journey from childhood to adulthood and autonomy.

Priorities shift but the broad mix of challenges remains today as it was one or two generations ago. And the fact that the challenges remain – that no sustainable solutions have been found – should raise alarm.

So what are the challenges? Youth unemployment, poverty, discrimination, exclusion including from decision-making, reduced access to social and health services, heightened political and social tensions, cuts in youth-policy and youth-work provisions, amongst other things.

As underlined recently by the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers, the executive level decision-making body of our member States, European "societies are at high risk of undermining stability and social cohesion if they allow the current difficult circumstances to create a 'lost generation' of disillusioned and disengaged young people".¹

How can we respond to these challenges?

Youth policy has a key role to play in empowering young people and engaging them in the development of democratic, inclusive and peaceful societies. This is a good starting point.

¹ Cf. Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)4 on youth work.

However, there is no common, accepted definition of “youth policy”. Some countries understand youth policy as anything that affects young people including social protection, gender equality, unemployment, formal education, health, housing, and so on; while others prefer a much narrower definition.

One thing is clear however. National youth policy tends to reflect how a government, or other decision-makers, view young people. And that includes, tellingly, where there is no coherent youth policy.

From the Council of Europe’s perspective, youth policy should be driven by the “opportunity” or the “potential” rather than the “problem”, and aim to “make” Europeans through the use of commonly-agreed standards and values.

This is important because while we recognise that the challenges facing young people help unite them, and should lead to coherent responses, we must not allow those challenges to define them. Young people must not be seen through the prism of a series of problems that needs fixing.

So what standards do we have?

At the Council of Europe, youth policy standards are based mainly on a set of recently-adopted recommendations of the Committee of Ministers, our member States.

These focus on issues such as young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods² – the so-called ENTER! Recommendation; broader issues around access to rights³; youth participation including support to youth organisations; youth mobility and information; and youth work itself⁴.

This last standard, adopted only last month, underlines the value of young people as a resource for building a social and just Europe, and that providing them with structured support is an important investment Europe should make for its present and its future.

Since its creation 45 years ago, the Council of Europe youth sector has been a pioneer in the field of values-based youth policy, associating young people with human rights, the rule of law, and democracy.

And we have evolved our processes to demonstrate this too. In an approach known as co-management, youth organisations and governments have an equal say in determining our programmes and activities.

² CM/Rec(2015)3 on the access of young people from disadvantage neighbourhoods to social rights

³ CM/Rec(2016)7 on young people’s access to rights

⁴ CM/Rec(2017)4 on youth work

This reflects our philosophy of participation and inclusion. And it has helped the Council of Europe, its member States and young people work together to try to build more democratic societies.

It is with this vision in mind that the Council of Europe adopted a strategic framework, Agenda 2020, setting out our youth priorities for the period 2008-2020. And we intend to respond to the new youth policy trends, including what we hear at this Symposium, when developing our priorities until 2030.

In this way, we will try to introduce a more sustainable approach to responding to the challenges young people face.

But whatever our priorities, we are unlikely to change the underlying principles that we advocate wherever youth policy is implemented.

These include involving young people in the formulation and implementation of youth policies, investing purposefully in young people, by empowering them, including by providing funding as necessary.

Youth policy must enable young people to develop their knowledge, skills and competences to play a full part in both the labour market and in wider society.

And youth policy must be evidence based, supported by robust data, to identify and bridge gaps that may exist in the effective delivery of services to young people.

The Council of Europe does not only advocate methodology. We have a programme of support measures for any member State wishing to upgrade its youth policy standards.

The aim of this mechanism is to encourage advice and exchange between governmental stake-holders in Europe on key issues of youth policy development.

The Council of Europe's support can take different forms: multilateral support measures open to all States; bilateral support measures tailored to address an individual States' needs; and standing resources that can be used by any stakeholder on their own initiative.

Thanks to this programme, it is now possible for governments, Ministries and policy-makers to receive targeted assistance from their peers elsewhere in Europe. The Council of Europe, in a way, acts as facilitator of the exchange of good practice. Two weeks ago this happened in Ukraine. In two weeks' time, it will happen in Cyprus.

And finally, let me acknowledge the importance of youth policy co-operation with the European Commission.

The Youth Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe will celebrate its 20th anniversary next year.

Since its inception, the Partnership has gathered and produced a wealth of knowledge relevant for youth policy improvement, in particular on youth participation, social inclusion and youth work, of use to both institutions and our stake-holders.

This symposium will contribute further, and I am grateful to the Partnership team, as well as to our Czech hosts, for having organised this flagship event at this time.

The fact that this Symposium is also being organised in the framework of the Czech Republic's Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers, demonstrates the political relevance of our work in this field.

It highlights the value found in bringing together multiple stake-holders and practitioners, including the European Commission. It demonstrates why youth policy is relevant across any government's agenda in response to the challenges young people, and wider society, face.

So let me conclude on this positive note. I trust that this event will result in a deeper reflection on the challenges faced by young people today, a sharing of good practices on current responses, as well as a strengthening of our co-operation so that we can address these challenges even more effectively in the future.

I wish you every success and look forward to following your discussions closely.