

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Directorate General for Research

SUMMARY OF THE PUBLIC HEARING ON YOUTH

Organised by the Committee on Culture, Youth, Education, the Media and Sport

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INTRODUCTION

Mr. Graça Moura, MEP, acting as Committee Chairman, opened the hearing by welcoming the experts and the young people present and said he hoped that the discussion would be fruitful and that many new visions and ideas would be presented. He emphasised that the Cultural Committee of the European Parliament regarded the young as the future and that the opinions of young people are extremely important for the Committee. The European Union has adopted Youth Programmes which have been successful and which not only support mobility for young people but also innovation and creativity. These programmes are an important step in creating a youth policy in the European Union and a consultation procedure has been started by the European Commission in order to lay down the content of a European White Paper in this area. Mr. Graça Moura emphasised that the European Parliament strongly supported such a consultation procedure and that this was the reason why the Committee on Culture had decided to organise the hearing today.

Mrs. Gröner, MEP, Rapporteur on Youth, was very pleased that so many young people from EU Member States and from the candidate countries were present. She stated that the Committee on Culture had started a new procedure by initiating this innovative hearing by which not only academic experts and MEPs participated but also young people and interested citizens. She emphasised the importance of having a hearing before the completion of the White Paper. She therefore hoped that many of the young people present would participate in the debate and express their visions of a future youth policy. The MEPs are reliable and trustworthy partners for young people and they will do the best possible to support their wishes.

She pointed out that it is not the European Union but the Member States and the regional authorities have the main responsibility for youth policy. The European Union supplements Member States' policy, aiming to bring an added value. Mrs. Gröner stressed that the EU had launched a variety of programmes and initiatives for young people to promote youth exchanges and combat youth unemployment, and that the European Parliament had fought very hard to ensure that these programmes, such as Socrates, Leonardo da Vinci, and Youth for Europe received the best possible financial support. A coherent EU policy as regards young people was, however, still missing and the main objective of the White Paper is to develop an integrated approach to tackle the concerns of young people.

Mrs. Gröner thought it would be important to discuss the following questions:

- Do we need a precise definition of young people, for example, specifying a range of ages?
- How do we establish better co-operation between the different European Institutions?
- What can the European Commission do within its own services to emphasise the importance of young people and their problems?
- How can the Council of Ministers for Youth be strengthened?
- Should youth policy become a special article in the Treaty?

Mr. Vale de Almeida, Director, European Commission, summarised in his intervention the background and reasons for elaborating a White Paper on Youth. He talked about the initiatives already taken and about the Commission's future plans. He emphasised that the initiative taken by Mrs. Reding had, right from the beginning, been strongly supported by the European Parliament. He also pointed out that the ways and means the Commission was using were consultation of all parties involved in youth questions, from young people and national local authorities to European institutions, and that the goal was a consensus amongst all the involved parties.

Prof. Dr Richard Münchmeier (Ger), co-author of the Shell Study on Youth 2000, summarised the main findings of the study.

The main problem for the majority of young people in Germany is unemployment and they are very sceptical as regards the possibilities of solving this problem. In spite of this, young people are not pessimistic. On the contrary, they have self-confidence and try to prepare themselves for their future and adult life. Half of the young people have faith in their personal future. Compared with former Shell surveys, more young people today have confidence in the future. There are, however, big differences between different groups of young people. The most optimistic young people are those who have the best education, are supported by their parents and have high self-confidence. The most pessimistic young people are those with fewer qualifications and support. To this group belong young people from former Eastern Germany and children of immigrants.

Young people's ideas about their future lives are focused on job and family life. Family counts as much for them as does a good job. Values like humanity and modernity have high priority in the former West Germany whereas material success, authenticity and autonomy are important values for young people from the former East Germany.

The interest in politics is further decreasing and is related to the fact that young people have less confidence in traditional political life. Most young people are also scarcely interested in the European Union and either do not care or view the EU sceptically. Many young people consider that the European Union supports business rather than the "man in the street".

The study also showed an increasing difference between young people from the former East and West Germany. The young people from former East Germany find their divergences growing. Compared with young people from former West Germany, they find their situation more of a strain.

Sixty-two per cent believe there are too many foreigners in Germany. The researchers elaborating the study warn against interpreting this as a sign of xenophobia. Xenophobia exists, in particular, in the former East Germany. It is not, however, a typical youth problem but a phenomenon that can be equally noted among adults.

PART I

YOUNG PEOPLE'S VALUES AND EXPECTATIONS, THEIR PARTICIPATION IN SOCIETY

Prof. Daniel Bodson, Professor for Sociology at the University of Leuven (B), started by saying that from a sociological point of view, values form part of the central question regarding political and social issues. Young people's position in society is based on values, which allow them to draw various distinctions. Today's values are a social product, they are relative and evolve and are produced by cultures and societies.

Professor Bodson pointed out that young people are a heterogeneous category and stated that family and work are very important for young people. Young people today participate in society and try to find solutions to their problems, rather than protesting against society. When looking at social and political questions, young people are more interested in overcoming dysfunctional matters than in institutionalised politics as such. Professor Bodson mentioned that today's young people want to build links and he saw young people's intensive use of mobile telephones as a symbol of how these links and networks function.

Professor Bodson continued to talk about the body as an expression of young people's 'self'. Aesthetics, through fashion and the media, is becoming increasingly important and is creating one social standard. The body is also for today's youth a particular medium to express discomfort. Anorexia and bulimia have become more and more common among young people. Instead of using violence to communicate their discomfort, it seems that young people are using psycho-symptomatic means such as depriving themselves of food.

Ms. Conchi Gallego, member of the Spanish Youth Council, said that young people had very high expectations of the White Paper and that a true European youth policy is needed. She underlined that it is necessary with a clarification of the Treaties in order to give clear competences to the EU in youth matters. Youth policy at all levels from local to European should be complementary and these should be co-ordinated between the different levels. Ms. Gallego emphasised that young people should participate not only in preparing the White Paper on but should also be involved in all matters concerning them, such as employment policy and policy concerning social exclusion at national, local and European levels.

Young people see themselves not only as European but also as world youth and they are worried about integration and immigration policy and about the respect for human rights, because in these matters politics are coordinated far from them and they have little say. Ms. Gallego concluded by quoting a Spanish publication, which expressed well the issues on youth participation and youth values: "To increase participation through associations between young people of the European Union means opting for a social model in which the citizenship has its rights in an organised way and also ensures democratic participation." (Unauthorised translation by DG IV)

"Apostar por aumentar la participacion activa a traves del asociacionismo entre los jovenes de la Union Europea significa apostar por un modelo social en el que la sociedad civil ejerza plenamente sus derechos de forma organizada y profundice en el modelo de democracia participativa."

Debate

The following participated:

- Pirkko MAHLAMÄKI, European Disability Forum,
- Richard AMALVY, Bureau Mondial du Scoutisme, Directeur des Relations Extérieures,
- Gudrun LANG, Europäische Jugendallianz (D),
- Raimon GOBERNA, Vice-President National Youth Council Catalonia (ES),
- Violet SOEN, Vlaams Platform voor int. Jeugdwerk (B),
- Paul C. WALTON, North-Tyne-Side (UK),
- Rashid MONJER, Jugenderhebungsstelle (Newcastle, UK).

The debate concentrated on the following points:

- There is a need for equal opportunities for young disabled people in education and employment and a more extensive application of the mainstream principle by the EU in its programmes and activities.
- The new youth policy should take into account the specific needs of disabled people and to reduce social exclusion.
- Non-formal education is important but is not the only vector for the basis of the new youth policy, there are in fact many others.
- Who are young people? 18-25 year olds are adults who can vote and this should be taken into greater consideration by politicians.
- The US, EU and Council of Europe should work together to harmonise their ideas and policy on young people.
- Referring to the ageing population of Europe, what is the EU doing to sustain society and ensure that it doesn't die out?
- The EU doesn't consider to a sufficient extent the diversity of cultures beyond the level of individual Member States, i.e. culture of regions and immigrants; decisions should be made taking all cultures and regions into consideration.
- Countries need to learn from each other, e.g. through exchange programmes. Laws should state how young people can benefit from programmes at the European level as is the case in Flanders.
- Young people don't, in fact, participate fully in society, not all have a voice. Youth councils are often symbolic and not totally representative as they do only attract those who are already confident, articulate and self-motivated. We need to find a method to give all young people the knowledge and skills to be able to participate fully in society and not just to create opportunities for those fortunate to have these tools already.
- It is dangerous to generalise about youth across Europe, as there is even greater diversity across the Union than in the earlier example of Germany.

Ms. Sabine Zissener, MEP, expressed her satisfaction as a young MEP herself with the fact that so many young people participated in the debate and expressed many fruitful ideas. Several different aspects of youth policy had been debated and she found that the hearing was an important step in elaborating a European Youth policy.

Mr. Vale de Almeida, director, European Commission, commented on the following points:

- The position of handicapped people in EU policies and their involvement in the White Paper.
- Non-formal education.
- Principle of subsidiarity and decentralisation.

- The Commissions support to young people living in regions.
- Co-operation with organisations like European Youth Forum, Council of Europe and the UN.
- Immigration policy.

PART II

EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL SITUATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE.

Prof. Dr. L.H. Chisholm, University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne (UK), started by saying that she would concentrate on the following three fundamental features of the current situation of young Europeans: 1) the employment aspects, 2) the social situation and 3) the educational aspects. She wished thereby to indicate some of the issues that policy makers will need to confront actively in the coming years.

The Young people's position in the labour market is not encouraging. Youth unemployment rates remain unacceptably high in comparison with general rates and precarious forms of employment such as part-time and low-paid jobs have become more widespread. Young people continue to rate job security highly, but it takes a long time to achieve a stable job. Therefore more and more young people elaborate differentiated education and training strategies to raise their chances in the labour market.

Although young people have made a disproportional contribution to the rise in overall qualification levels in the past twenty years, their earnings had nevertheless declined relative to those of adult workers. One consequence of the increased education level is that about 10 per cent of young people are not able to keep pace, and this group is at real risk of long-term social and economic exclusion. Therefore Professor Chisholm requested new measures to ensure that society does not discard these young people at risk.

The polarisation of young people's life expectations continues. Eurostat had already documented the North-South gaps and Professor Chisholm said that West-East gaps are hardly likely to prove less marked.

Concerning the social situation Professor Chisholm mentioned that young people's lives no longer make a sharp division between learning, earning and living. It is, however, still a fact that although young women may have leapfrogged young men in the educational world, they still are worse off in the labour market. The difficulty of combining career and family has also had the consequence that many young women postpone or cancel having children altogether. Professor Chisholm asked policy makers and employers to take decisive steps to help remove these blockages.

As regards the third issue, education, Professor Chisholm stressed the importance of better and closer co-operation between all involved parties, whether in research, policy or practice. She pointed out that young people spend an increasing proportion of their youth in full-time education and training, and the content and quality of this education, should be the highest possible. She also emphasised the importance of greater understanding and recognition of the value and outcomes of non-formal and informal education. The potential for synergy between schools/colleges, youth work and youth training centres is sadly under-exploited, and Professor Chisholm pointed out that here is an ideal opportunity for focused joint actions under the provisions of the new generation of Community education, training and youth programmes.

Professor Chisholm finished by saying that poor education and qualifications are closely correlated with economic and social exclusion but that good education and qualifications are no guarantee of economic and social inclusion. The quality of initial transitions between education,

training and employment remain an influential course-setter, they no longer guarantee plain sailing for a lifetime. "From the perspective of young people, initial education and training can no longer deliver its side of the contract as conventionally worded. The legitimate social structures of the meritocracy are thus placed in question, whilst individualised and privatised modalities of gaining and keeping advantage are gaining ground. Under these circumstances, what price commitment to intrinsic values? What, indeed, can our societies offer to upcoming young generations to assure the continuity of intergenerational solidarity?"

Ms. Violeta Tchavdarova, National Youth Council of Bulgaria, focused on three points: 1) the mobility of young persons from pre-accession countries, 2) non-formal education and 3) youth unemployment. As regards mobility, Ms. Tchavdarova stated that this is a key element in the promotion of the European dimension and European citizenship. Moreover, mobility is one of the major instruments in combating xenophobia and intolerance, as well as promoting intercultural learning. Great emphasis was put on the need to make it easier for young persons from the candidate countries to benefit from the established mobility programmes. She pointed out that the formalities and visa requirements are a formal barrier to the participation of young people from Central and Eastern Europe in such programmes. She then suggested Member States establish a standard procedure for obtaining visas within the framework of the mobility and Youth Exchange Programmes.

The second area of concern for youth organisations in candidate countries is non-formal education as an organised educational activity, which takes place outside the established formal system. "It is now clear that much of the curriculum of the formal education system would be more appropriately learned through non-formal education. Therefore, we call for more resources to be allocated to young people from pre-accession countries, which would allow them to participate in the youth programmes and benefit from non-formal education."

Ms. Tchavdarova drew attention to youth unemployment, which remains a serious problem in many countries. As a general rule, youth unemployment rates are higher than for adults, and in countries like Bulgaria youth unemployment rates reaches 65%.

Ms. Tchavdarova concluded that governments should make more of an effort "to promote the social inclusion of young people and in particular to dedicate more time and energy to helping those who are not in education, training, or engaged in some other activity".

Debate

The following participated:

- Caspar VAN VLIET, Vereniging 31 (National Youth Council - NL),
- Delphine VAN DAMME, Vlaamse scholierenkoepel (Flämischer Schülerrat) (B),
- Arne BALLIÈRE, ABVV-Jongeren, SP-gemeenteraadslid (Flämische Jugendorganisation und Mitglied des Gemeinderats der SP in Ostende - B),
- Hannah PEAKE, Young Voice, Wales, UK - Initiate for setting up Youth Assembly in Wales),
- Dr. Thorsten MORITZ, Secretary General of EYCE - Ecumenical Youth Council in Europe,
- Sinead TIERNAN, Advisor ETHC (europ. Gewerkschaftsbund),
- Stacey TENCH, South Shropshire Youth Forum (UK),
- Beth MOORE, South Shropshire Youth Forum (UK),
- Dominique RONDÉ, Junge Union (Leverkusen, D),
- Sabine FINZI, Secretary General of European Peer Training Organisation (EPTO),

- Richard AMALVY,
- Erik Meyere, Delegation from NL,
- Alyssa Pitstick, UK.

The following questions and points were raised:

- Can we create a content-based White Paper rather than just a structural overview? What stance will the Parliament take vis-à-vis the Council and Commission?
- We want a social Europe not one just for business interests. Quality doesn't just depend on business but on young people's skills. There needs to be a reciprocal relationship between firms and young people where professional training and balances are achieved.
- Need to relieve economic pressure on young people given the ageing of society. The EU and its young people have to dare to take a responsible attitude on the issue of immigration. "Flexibilisation" of social structures is vital, however, and society as it now exists must encourage young people to not just be individualistic, as there will be increasingly more old people to take care of. It is not just an issue for young people, but they are the ones who will shoulder the economic burden in the future.
- There is a danger that the Member States will sign up to the White Paper and fundamentally agree to it but thereafter not actually implement any of the recommendations. The system put in place should ensure active participation.
- Unemployment among young is indeed a serious problem. However, youth policy should not ignore the increasingly serious precarious situation of young people in jobs where wages are lower and lower. There is a lack of job security and young people have less and less rights in the workplace. How will the Commission ensure that issues won't fall between DG Culture/Education and DG Employment?
- What can we do to prevent the loss of young talent from rural areas? In addition to this braindrain, rural areas have a lack of service provision. For example, in the UK, young people are forced to leave care facilities at 16 unprepared for living independently when other young people in stable family environments on average stay at home until they are 25.
- There is a danger that the voices of many young people won't be heard, especially those in their early teens. Young people must be provided with more information concerning the difference between national and EU jurisdiction.
- Given that the employment market is becoming increasingly Europeanised, what will the Commission do to ensure that there are equal opportunities and smaller or less developed Member States are not put at a disadvantage? How can youth unemployment be reduced? What training programmes are being set up at the European level?
- How much importance is going to be given to citizenship education and antidiscrimination given the heterogeneity of young people in Europe today?

Mr. Vale de Almeida, Director, European Commission, commented on the following points:

- The sharing of competencies at European, national, regional and local level.
- The role of associations and civil society in forming a youth policy.
- Young people's values.
- Citizenship.
- Youth unemployment.

PART III

WHAT KIND OF YOUTH POLICY IN THE EUROPEAN UNION?

Mr. Henrik Söderman, President of the European Youth Forum (EYF), pointed out that the EYF had been strongly involved in the consultation process for the White Paper. This project is important and the EYF has for a long time called for an integrated and co-ordinated youth policy at all levels. In the document "Strategy and key objectives for a Youth Policy in the European Union" which was adopted on 6/7 April 2001, the EYF identified key objectives and proposed methods for implementing them. Mr. Söderman stressed that youth policy should aim to combine all existing measures into one integrated whole. He pointed out that there are some good actions taking place at EU level but they are not well integrated and do not cover all the different aspects of young people's lives. The policy should contain a cross-sectoral youth policy and EYF has listed 21 central goals for such a policy, of which some have been discussed today.

Mr. Söderman said that the mechanism for reaching these goals needs some key changes. The Council of Youth Ministers should be given new tasks and it should draft an annual report on the situation of youth in Europe to be submitted to the European Summit every spring. It should also be allowed to give its opinion before the Council of Ministers makes any decisions that concern the youth.

A European agency should also be created for youth matters with the aim of collecting relevant information and data from the Member States for analysis in order to draft the annual report as mentioned above. He agreed that certain changes would be needed in the European Treaties so that the powers related to youth could be defined more accurately and allow youth policy to develop more smoothly. Mr. Söderman concluded by saying that what was needed was a political mechanism to guarantee flexibility of the new youth policy at both EU and national levels.

Ms. Doris Pack, MEP, referred to some of the issues raised by Ms. Tchavdarova and underlined how important it is for young people in South-Eastern Europe to meet and discuss the past in order to be able to cope with the present and the future. Education is vital for this region and, not least thanks to the efforts of the European Parliament, education has been included in the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe.

Ms. Pack regretted that certain problems have arisen, as regards the funding of the EU-exchange programmes, such as Socrates, Youth for Europe and Leonardo da Vinci, but stated that these were also due to the lack of financial resources in the candidate countries themselves.

Ms. Pack warned against expectations that the adoption of the White Paper would change EU youth policy overnight. The European Union has limited legal competencies in areas concerning young people. The White Paper is designed to serve as a resource of ideas, inspiration and discussion, to show examples of good practice and to encourage the Member States and regional and local authorities to take new initiatives.

Ms. Pack said that, as we all know, immigration is necessary for our economy. The immigrants have to integrate into society, but there must also be obligations from our side. Young people must be prepared to accept the immigrants. Education can play an important role here. Education at all levels, both formal and informal, and for all groups in the educational system, from children to teachers.

In conclusion she opposed the idea put forward by the EYF for establishing a youth policy agency by saying that there already exist several organisations and institutions which can provide the necessary information.

Mrs. Barbara O'Toole, MEP, did not want to encourage the creation of another EU Agency either. She would prefer to encourage events such as this youth hearing. She stressed the importance of young people's engagement in institutional politics and underlined the significance of a fluid channel of communication between politicians and young people. She also emphasised the importance of the White Paper, which she felt should contain subjects like asylum and immigration policy and the demographic changes. She found the picture Professor Chisholm had painted very worrying, but stressed that it was the governments and not the EU institutions that were responsible in these matters.

Mr. Roy Perry, MEP, had been impressed by the ability of the young people present today but was concerned that many young people are alienated from the democratic process and from politics. This is a serious problem; solutions have to be found but there are not easy ones. Education is one and another may be the reform of the EU institutions and of the initiatives they have taken. There is much praise for exchange programmes but surely more can be done. Only very few people have the opportunity to participate, perhaps we should make it compulsory to participate in some form of cross-European activity before a university degree can be awarded. Mr. Perry concluded by suggesting that the European Parliament's contribution should be that young people could use the Parliament's building in Strasbourg, which is only used one week per month. In this way the expenditure on the buildings would be used in a much more constructive way.

Mr. Pedro Aparicio Sanchez, MEP, said that the hearing should be used as a reference and that what he found very stimulating was all the different approaches and views which had been expressed by the young participants. He found it very worrying that young Europeans' level of knowledge is so different and underlined the need for common methods of evaluation of knowledge levels. He finished by regretting that certain Member States are preventing the creation of a common European educational space.

Ms. Dana Rosemary Scallon, MEP, did not think that the Community and the Member States should be too selective in their immigration policy. She went on by saying that "as far as applicant countries are concerned, we must have great sensitivity concerning the fact that most of them have new post-communist constitutions. We cannot impose upon them a constitution that some may feel is in conflict with their constitutions." She finished by saying that "in addressing the demographic imbalance we must be very sensitive that we don't make women feel that they have been forced enter the work place as an answer to a difficult situation without giving them the proper support that they need in this stressful balance of work and family".

Mr. Eurig Wyn, MEP, stressed that not only had this hearing been very instructive for the MEPs, but he also found it important for young people with different nationalities and backgrounds to meet and discuss and learn from each other. He also pointed out that youth unemployment is a very serious problem, but taking into account the principle of subsidiarity, he preferred this issue to be solved at regional and grass-root level.

Ms. Lissy Gröner, MEP, concluded the hearing by thanking all participants, and found, that the outcome of the hearing had been so valuable that it had been worth trying this new approach.

Young people constitute an important part of society and want to live in a Community based on the principle of non-discrimination. She referred to the fact that young people's interests in politics are decreasing. The politicians seem to have been failing and should consider the situation seriously. Ms. Gröner stressed that the institutions have to work together with youth organisations in order to prepare the ground and stimulate future initiatives and new ideas, to make it possible for young people whose voice has not yet been heard in this discussion to be heard through different channels. The White Paper must be a guidance for political actions. She also pointed out some of the objectives of the White Paper in the context of the today's discussion: a democratic European consciousness must be raised; the humane perspective mustn't be forgotten i.e. promoting human rights, combating extremism, xenophobia and violence; and that young people must be prepared to live in a mobile and demanding society. As a final point the *rapporteur* on Youth stated "We want to stop social exclusion throughout Europe, and we must defend this unique social model we have created."