



STATE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION YOUTH DEBATE REPORT 2020

European Student Think Tank
Conclusions from the debate held on 4th October 2020



State of the European Union Youth Debate

Report 2020

Debate held by European Student Think Tank on 4th October 2020

On the 15th September, leading figures from across the European Parliament met to discuss the priorities for the EU in the coming months and years, with President of the European Commission Ursula Von Der Leyen delivering an address on the State of the Union the following day. With issues such as climate change, technology and Covid-19 providing threats and worries on an existential level, and the visceral barriers between European countries appearing through travel restrictions in 2020, the stakes have rarely been higher.

With this in mind, the European Student Think Tank (EST) joined forces on 4th October with Students Against Covid and 8 other organisations to provide a pan-European Consultation on Youth Preoccupations, the results of which can be found in this report. We are grateful to Students Against Covid for hosting the “State of the European Union Youth Debate”, and for the opportunity to discuss the main challenges in the upcoming years.

As might be expected in a year of such turmoil, hardship and change, the young people involved in the debate were on the whole realistic about the limitations of the European Project at the current time. ‘Many challenges threaten our Union’ one wrote, ‘many more old ones keep it from getting stronger, and many new ones place it in peril’. Despite this, they were optimistic, and reaffirmed almost unanimously a commitment to their position as Europeans and European Citizens: ‘this is not a time for retreat but a moment for progress and determination. We must all work together to improve our union’.

But the most positive takeaway from the debate was the reminder that it was ‘our duty’ as young people ‘to fight for that ideal and to make sure future generations have a reason to fight for it as well’. It is a rousing cry not just for the young debaters, but for organisations like the European Student Think Tank and all those like it who continue to give young people around Europe a voice.





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Youth Employment

The protracted battle of the EU against youth unemployment is a [key interest of the EST's](#) and was a recurring topic during the debate, especially given the rise of unemployment levels generated throughout the EU due to the pandemic (See the EST's "[Defining Human Rights in the 21st Century](#)"). Debate participants discussed issues such as the difficulties the youth faces upon attempting to access the labor market: most jobs require experience, which generates a catch-22 situation for those who cannot break into the market due to the lack of experience and therefore have little chance of gaining said experience. Furthermore, today's youth faces unprecedented levels of competitiveness, not only from their peers but also from experienced workers who have been laid off. The young people involved in the debate also emphasized mobility and accessibility gaps, as well as gender-based discrimination of applicants in academic and professional environments.

Despite the heterogeneity of the youth unemployment situation throughout the EU Member States, which precludes the implementation of Union-wide policy on this matter, the Union has previously taken steps to alleviate this situation: in 2013, the European Council [created](#) a youth employment initiative that provides financial support for measures that seek to improve youth employment rates. Among these were the [youth guarantee schemes](#), which aimed to provide young people with work or further education opportunities within 4 months of the scheme's launch. Another incentive in which the youth involved in the debate saw potential was the European Social Fund. Nonetheless, Member States have been [reducing the funds](#) allocated to such initiatives, and so there was a general perception of the EU as lacking the competences to effectively respond to the youth unemployment situation.

Ultimately, the debate participants agreed that, despite past initiatives, there is still work to be done, as evidenced by current data provided by [Eurostat](#). They emphasized the need to adapt education systems to better prepare the youth for the current economy and labor market, as well as to encourage further trust in the skills and the ability to adapt to a position of the youth. The EST also [recently reflected](#) on this. It is worth noting the steps taken in the shape of recent calls of the European Parliament for Member States to fully exploit the Youth Guarantee system by proposing a new binding instrument, rather than the current voluntary one, as well as tackling discrimination and banning unpaid internships, the effects of which remain to be seen.



The Environment and the Climate Crisis

Regarding environmental issues, the young people had a lot to say. In the first place, they identified climate change as a threat but also as an opportunity for the European society and economy. One debater had a profound response to the environmental threat:

“The undeniable effects of climate change will force us to move to greener economies in which new sectors will be developed, creating hundreds of thousands of new jobs. Nonetheless, many workers from different industries will need to be trained and reintroduced into the labor market to make sure no one is left behind.”

In line with this, the European Commission (EC), through its Europe 2020 Strategy, aims to develop a greener economy, where design, innovation, waste prevention and the reuse of raw materials can bring net savings for EU businesses of up to EUR 600 billion. [Additional measures](#) to increase resource productivity by 30 % by 2030 could boost GDP by nearly 1 %, while creating 2 million additional jobs. In addition to this, the Just Transition Mechanism [will mobilise](#) at least €150 billion over the period 2021-2027 in the most affected regions, to alleviate the socio-economic impact of the transition. Likewise, the EC through the Circular Economy Strategy, [is aiming](#) to make sustainable products ensuring that the resources used are kept in the EU economy for as long as possible.

Secondly, the youth pointed out the “bold and exciting” environmental policies set by the Commission, referencing the European Green Deal. Nonetheless, they made clear that “we as young Europeans must keep pushing forward to make sure words turn into actions and change takes place, for is our future which is at stake.” The best example of youth action could be the “Fridays For Future” movement, led by the young Greta Thunberg, which has raised awareness on the importance of protecting the environment. Raising awareness was what led to the EU Parliament to reject the 55% greenhouse gas emissions cut [proposed by](#) the EU Commission to make it 60%, on October 6th. The EST has also contributed to the debate with the publication of the article [“The politics of emissions reduction targets: how targets can fool you”](#) or [“The European Green Deal: How the EU aims to become climate neutral by 2050”](#)

The young people also see the Green Deal as “a good plan for improving the youth employment and the economy“ but they do point out that it may not be useful in the short term. The reason for that is that countries like Poland, heavily reliant on the coal industry, may have problems switching their economies to more sustainable ones. Thus, the Just Transition Mechanism will have to protect these Member States by supporting the transition to low-carbon and climate-resilient activities, creating new jobs in the green economy, [providing technical assistance](#) and investing in renewable energy sources. The EST has recently written about the [Green New Deal](#).

Finally, the youth agreed that protecting the environment and fighting climate change “it's a job for all, not just Youth”. Even if young people mobilise themselves and take action, little would change if the rest of the society doesn't follow. In this regard, the participants proposed some lines of action, such as “linking the EU internal market access to environmental production



standards”, more ambitious than, for example, the current carbon border adjustment mechanism; “investing in a railway network across Europe and in cycling lanes in cities” and “educating youth and adults about environmental issues and to make them socially conscious of their impact on the climate and available alternatives”.



Covid-19 and The EU's Response

As an issue that has shaped and dictated the daily lives of every citizen in every Member State since late February 2020, the EU's response to Covid-19 was an evidently relevant and important issue discussed at the State of the Union. This is also reflecting in the EST's recent publications regarding [Covid-19 and the Meat Industry](#) and the [Educational Impacts of the Virus](#). Despite the EU's response to Covid being regarded as relatively slow, it was agreed that it has stood up to the task of containing and suppressing the virus. The Commission's [recovery fund](#) was noted as a particularly bold proposal, but also a symbolic one, unveiling a new era of European integration. However the potential scope for practical limitation that so often hangs over coordinated European responses was also highlighted, as greater Member State cooperation was seen to be the key to the fund's success. Specifically, intensive work to reduce administrative processes that could delay access to funds was required, as this hampers the efficient functioning of a coordinated EU response. Getting this right was seen to be an imperative feature of the response, as it would serve to more widely demonstrate that the Union could collaborate and approach contemporary problems with a degree of consensus. It was ultimately agreed that the EU's response has given individual European stakeholders pause for reflection, allowing them to learn from past mistakes and approach emergencies with courage.

Across the discussion, a number of other key issues emerged. Firstly, whilst it was clear that the EU recovery fund was considered to be an important tool to boost Member State economies, young people were urged to remember that they have a core role to play in how the post-Covid business landscape is defined. Indeed, emphasis was placed on youth efforts to actively innovate and pursue new entrepreneurial ventures, particularly where these ventures had a 'green', environmentally-considerate aspect.

Secondly, digitalisation was identified as a solution to overcome some current hardships and develop youth skills. It was acknowledged that some sectors such as Spanish tourism would be much more significantly impacted than others such as IT. However, despite the potential for restructuring of economic activity in certain areas, it was agreed that adapting to the current situation and utilising digitalisation as a tool for progress was essential for moving forward.

Third and more broadly, the EU's most important goal was seen to be citizen wellbeing. Although the idea of imposing stricter measures on citizens with more moderate cases was discussed, it



was conceded that most European people have adhered to the protective measures. Ensuring that citizens had access to services that allowed them to adapt to the pandemic was seen as a particularly important issue, with poverty being noted as a consequence of the pandemic. However, it was agreed that ample funding was available to social programs aiming to address this through vocational and professional training.

Finally, a concern was expressed regarding the exacerbation of the North-South division in Europe. Whilst it was agreed that a great deal of work had been done in order to establish a common position, in fields such as health, more homogenous legal and political frameworks were required. This was seen to be emblematic of larger political needs in future years.



Migration

Migration and refugees is a topic that inspires passionate responses, none less so than from young people, and requires decency and compassion to deal with it effectively. This was clear from the State of the European Union debate held by the European Student Think Tank.

The European Union has been making progress on modernising its migration policy, but the European Youth believes more needs to be done by tackling the source and rebuilding a more humane migration policy (see a recent EST article entitled [“The New European Commission and Its Challenges”](#)) for the entirety of Europe that goes further than currently published. The youth are not unaware of the challenges of updating migration policy and have been clear in stating that it can only be done successfully by educating, discussing and engaging with European states, citizens and actors of the potential benefits of migration and refuting misconceptions about migration.

There was a large emphasis on having a bottom-up approach towards migration in terms of integration, both socially and economically, but as well as approaching migration with solidarity and holistic understanding of the struggles refugees go through just to find a safe home. This was balanced with the understanding that economic migrants also need to be thought of, and that laws regarding their journey are not clear enough. Migration laws, as the policy, need to be brought forward into the modern day and not focusing solely on humanitarian refugees but also those who are choosing to come and contribute to European society.

Adapting migration policy to the twenty-first century cannot be done through imposing ideology or forcing it upon others, as the youth notes, but only can be done through a fair, transparent discussion and by providing clearer legal pathways that take into account the actual experiences of those who are fleeing their home countries and on what they need as well as how they can best integrate.

Ultimately, the sentiment was that the current Dublin system is not working and the Commission’s proposal needs to go further. Europe can take the challenge of migration and reap benefits from it, but it will require intense discussions, changing perceptions and action from all levels of society, not just the youth who are leading the way. The New Pact on Migration and Asylum [offers](#) further progress, and we look forward to further discussions on its effectiveness.



Other Challenges and Conclusion

The breadth of both the discussion and the ideas that these young people had was astounding, and also covered the Rule of Law, Education and Human Rights. One debater had a strong verdict on the threats to the Rule of Law in the EU:

‘The disregard for democratic values and basic right are a threat to the very existence of the Union and it is up to all of us to demand from our leaders an unwavering and critical response towards those who disregard the very basic principles of our Union’

Recent articles on [Digital Human Rights](#) by the EST and Bulgaria’s [anti-corruption protests](#) by the Institute for a Greater Europe, one of the partner collaborations in this debate shed further light on such issues. Calls for better digitalised education and a focus on young people acquiring digital skills also ensured that technology dominated this debate.

Finally, several debaters were very worried about populism and nationalism and their impacts on human rights, arguing that ‘people should advocate more deeply for their protection by imposing new inclusive laws’.

All in all, the standard of debate was extremely high this year, and the responses profound, well-reasoned and thoughtful! The European youth is conscious about the essential role that will play in the upcoming years. The voice of all young is to be integrated. For it, the European Student Think Tank is committed to enhance unity in diversity and to leave no one behind in the debate of the future of Europe.

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