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JUNE 17, 2026

YOUTH PRIORITIES IN THE 2028-34 MFF

POLICY BRIEF & RECOMMENDATIONS

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Debates on the Future of Europe

2025-26 A.Y.

WHY THE MFF MATTERS FOR YOUNG EUROPEANS

"Investing in young people's skills, mobility and education means investing in a more equal, inclusive Europe".
Carina Autengruber, President of the European Youth Forum.

The multiannual financial framework (MFF) is the European Union's spending plan. Established for a period of 7 years, this regulation aims to guarantee the correct use of the EU's expenditure, organising it by categories called headings and establishing the spending priorities. Through this framework, the EU allocates financial resources to programs that support economic growth, social cohesion, innovation, and democratic development across Member States. On 16 July 2025, the European Commission presented its proposals for the next MFF, 2028-2034.

This regulation is key to young people. Investing in European youth is a guarantee for the EU's long-term sustainability. Young people act as drivers of innovation. They must participate in democratic processes and contribute to social transformation. Young people in the EU continue to face structural challenges that hinder their development and ability to contribute to society fully. In March 2026, the youth unemployment rate stood at 15.4%. The NEET rate (young people aged 15 to 29 who are not in employment, education or training) stands at 11.0% across the EU in 2025, with figures ranging from 5.3% in the Netherlands to 19.2% in Romania.

The EU set its target in the European Pillar of Social Rights, establishing 9% as the main goal for 2030. The MFF 2028–2034 will determine whether progress towards that goal accelerates or slows down. Added to this are limited access to affordable housing, growing mental health concerns, and unequal opportunities to participate in democratic processes, amongst other issues. Despite this, youth organisations keep raising their voices and contributing to the current debate about the MFF 2028-2034. The question this document examines is whether the MFF 2028–2034, as currently proposed, provides the structural guarantees necessary to address these challenges, or whether its architecture systematically undermines them.

THE COMMISSION'S PROPOSAL: WHAT'S ON THE TABLE FOR YOUTH

ERASMUS+ AND THE ESC MERGER

Under this new MFF, Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps (including the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps) would merge, allocating a budget of €40.8 billion in current prices. This initiative aims to 'support the implementation of European strategic cooperation in education and training'. Merging into one single regulation, it will combine education, training, youth, sport and volunteering to enhance competences for life and employability while promoting EU values and societal engagement. The program seeks to engage people who have fewer opportunities in order to strengthen inclusion in the EU through a more coordinated and effective approach. The proposal however removes the dedicated Youth Chapter that currently earmarks 10.3% of the Erasmus+ budget for non-formal youth work and youth organisations, pooling all strands into a single flexible envelope.

ESF+ AND THE NRPP ARCHITECTURE

The European Social Fund (ESF+) will be absorbed within the 27 National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs). It works as the main tool for the Youth Guarantee and NEET activation. The plans include cohesion, social and policy, agriculture, fisheries, maritime policy, migration, border management and internal security. This system improves the cohesion between policies and funds by applying a more tailored approach to the different needs of each region and Member State, overall aligned with the EU policy objectives. On the other hand, youth organisations would have to compete with other diverging priorities to obtain funding. Under the current MFF, Member States with above-average NEET rates were required to allocate at least 12.5% of their ESF+ envelope to youth employment measures. The NRPP Regulation contains no equivalent youth-specific sub-target.

THE COUNCIL'S POSITION ON YOUTH PRIORITIES IN THE MFF 2028-34:

The Council still has no common position on the MFF 2028–2034. So far it has agreed only a partial position on Erasmus+, reached on 11 May 2026. Indeed, the headline envelope, the new own resources and the National and Regional Partnership Plan architecture are all still on the table. What shapes everything else is the procedure. The MFF Regulation is adopted under Article 312 TFEU, which requires unanimity in the Council, so any single member state can block the whole package. That one fact explains the slow pace of the talks, and why some leaders are already saying out loud that a 2026 deal may not be within reach. In practice, this means that the net contributors, who are most comfortable with the NRPP model hold effective veto power.

The divisions inside the Council fall along three main lines.

The first is money. The net contributors (Germany, the Netherlands, Austria and Sweden) are pushing back on both the size of the Commission's €1.763 trillion proposal and the new own resources meant to pay for it. No alternative figure has been agreed, which means the ceiling that will eventually cap Erasmus+, the ESF+ and AgoraEU is still wide open.

The second is the structure of the spending itself. On 26 May 2026 sixteen governments, the self-styled Friends of Cohesion (BG, CZ, EE, EL, ES, HR, HU, IT, LT, LV, MT, PL, PT, RO, SI, SK), issued a joint declaration arguing that cohesion, the CAP and fisheries are the only policies actually facing real-term cuts under the proposal, and rejecting the idea of folding dedicated fund lines into single national plans. The part that matters most for youth is their insistence on keeping the ESF+ as a fund. The ESF+ is the main channel for the Youth Guarantee, and once it is absorbed into an NRPP it must compete for the same envelope as agriculture, migration and infrastructure. The net contributors take the opposite view and are comfortable with the NRPP model, so this split between cohesion countries and net payers is really the heart of the architectural fight.

The third line is governance, and it is the one area where the Council has already committed itself in writing. The 11 May partial position pulls control over Erasmus+ back towards the member states. It brings back the programme committee the Commission had wanted to scrap, giving capitals a formal say again; it separates work programmes into "new actions" run by the Commission and "regular" ones that simply continue; and it keeps youth, education and sport in their own articles so none of the three loses visibility. What the Council pointedly did not do was fix a number. It left the Erasmus+ envelope open on purpose, tied to the eventual MFF deal, so the programme's size still depends on the unresolved arguments about the overall budget and the architecture.

For young people the picture is mixed. On governance the Council's instinct is protective: it wants the strands kept visible and distinct, which works in the youth strand's favour. But it has said nothing binding about how much Erasmus+ will receive, and the net contributors' willingness to accept the NRPP leaves the ESF+ and the Youth Guarantee exposed to national reallocation. AgoraEU, for now, attracts no formal Council position and is broadly accepted. The real question for the table ronde is whether the cohesion group's defence of dedicated fund lines will stretch far enough to protect a standalone ESF+, or whether youth funding ends up being settled, with no earmarks, across twenty-seven separate national negotiations.

THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT'S POSITION ON YOUTH PRIORITIES IN THE MFF 2028-34:

The Parliament's interim report engages directly with the architectural risks of the Commission's proposal, seeking to reverse the two moves most consequential for youth: the absorption of ESF+ into the NRPPs and the removal of sector-specific allocation floors within Erasmus+ . It calls for the 2028–2034 MFF to be set at 1.27% of EU GNI, corresponding to €1.789 trillion in constant 2025 prices. This represents a 10% increase (€175.1 billion in constant 2025 prices) compared with the Commission's proposal, to be allocated evenly across the three operational budget headings. The repayment of NextGenerationEU (NGEU) debt, equivalent to an additional 0.11% of EU GNI (€149.3 billion), is to be kept strictly above the MFF ceilings so as not to crowd out programme spending.

The Commission's proposal for the 2028–2034 Erasmus+ programme envisages an indicative budget of €40.83 billion in current prices (€36.2 billion in 2025 constant prices). This figure merges the previous Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) into a single instrument. Parliament's interim report calls for a substantially reinforced budget of €47.39 billion in current prices (€42 billion in 2025 constant prices) for Erasmus+. This represents a €6.56 billion increase (+16%) over the Commission's proposal. The text of the interim report frames Erasmus+ as one of the flagship programmes of the Union, that promotes European values, strengthens human capital and labour mobility, so it is an essential component of the EU's competitiveness and resilience, the priorities of the EU.

The European Commission proposes to integrate the European Solidarity Corps into the new Erasmus+ regulation, creating a single entry point for young people and youth organisations. European Parliament's interim report does not oppose this merger in principle but raises concerns about the potential dilution of funding for specific sectors. In facts, Parliament insists on minimum sector allocations to prevent, as it happened in the previous MFF, funds flowing to higher education mobility actions (primarily student and staff exchanges) rather than to non-formal youth work, volunteering and community-based youth activities, which are the sectors most effective in reaching disadvantaged young people.

Under the proposal, the ESF+ would no longer have a dedicated budgetary envelope, but it would be folded into the NRPPs. The European Parliament calls for the ESF+ to remain a stand-alone ad separate programme and regrets the social dimension of the proposed NRPP Regulation. It proposes a specific envelope of €124.19 billion in current prices (€110.73 billion in 2025 constant prices). This represents a significant increase over the current 2021-2027 ESF+ allocation, which is around €99 billion and also reflects the EP's conviction that the social function of the EU budget cannot be protected with an NRPP envelope.

In particular, the key ESF+ funded youth interventions that the EP seeks to protect are multiple:

a. The Youth Guarantee: the commitment that all young people under 30 receive a quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship or traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving education;
b. Vocational Education and Training: ESF+ funds national-level VET system reforms, apprenticeship frameworks and the accreditation of non-formal learning;
c. Social inclusion of young people at risk: for example, young refugees or young people with disabilities;
d. Non-discrimination and equal access: it enhances measures to ensure that young women, young people from ethnic minorities, and young people with disabilities have equitable access to labour markets and education.

CRITICAL ASSESSMENT:

The Commission's proposal for the MFF 2028–2034 presents headline numbers for youth that are an improvement. The question is whether the architecture delivering those numbers provides the same guarantees as the current MFF. Indeed, the headline numbers for youth in the proposal for the next MFF look generous. Erasmus+ rises to €40.8 billion in current prices, while the Commission emphasizes the importance of intergenerational fairness in its proposal. The architecture for the next proposed MFF however, creates challenges and uncertainties for youth policies. While this proposal commits to funding youth policy, the structure of it makes it more uncertain than before.

1. THE ESF+ DISAPPEARS INTO THE NATIONAL PLANS

The most consequential move in the proposal is the absorption of the ESF+ into the National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs).
By absorbing ESF+ within the NRPP, instruments for youth employment must now compete for the same money as farm payments and border control. The only limit to this is the 14% social floor that applies to the entire NRPP allocation. Thus, while youth policies had specific chapters under the ESF+, it would now only be limited to a 14% floor that is not only targeted to youth policies but also covers every social objective at once and carries no youth-specific sub-target. In the most affected Member States, a 14% social floor covering all social objectives simultaneously offers no assurance that youth employment measures survive the national allocation process.
Under the current MFF rules, Member States whose average NEET rate (young people who are Not in Education, Employment, or Training) rate over the fixed 2017–2019 reference period exceeded the EU average had to dedicate at least 12.5% of their ESF+ allocation to youth employment. This created a clear obligation within the ESF+ Regulation to protect young people in the most precarious situation, an obligation aligned with, but legally distinct from, the Youth Guarantee. However, the proposal of the Commission to include the ESF+ funding within the NRPPs dissolves this protection. At a precarious time for youth employment in the EU, the inclusion of the ESF+ within the NRPP is a bad signal.

2. THE MERGING OF THE EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS INTO ERASMUS+.

The Commission’s proposal merges the European Solidarity Corps into Erasmus+. It also removes the dedicated Youth Chapter that currently earmarks 10.3% of the Erasmus+ budget for the youth field, including youth organisations and non-formal education. It creates a direct issue for youth-led organisations and volunteer-run initiatives, as if this is adopted as such, they would compete for the same money as universities and bigger and better-structured organisations, which makes it more challenging. Similarly, the merger with the European Solidarity Corps is another issue, as it pools everything into one flexible budget with no floor for the youth.
Erasmus+ budget rises to €40.8 billion in current prices. However, once the merger with the European Solidarity Corps is accounted for, the real combined increase over the two current programmes amounts to approximately 30%, while this figure is further eroded by inflation. In that regard, the position of the European Parliament, demanding an increase in funding, is welcomed.

3. A NEW ARCHITECTURE FOR YOUTH FUNDING

Thus, both dynamics reconfigure youth funding. On the one hand, the NRPP model moves control over the ESF+ away from the EU level and down to bilateral exchanges between the Commission and each national government, providing no guaranteed ring-fenced role for regional authorities, local authorities or youth organisations. Moreover, youth organisations would have to compete at the national level with a variety of interests with no guarantee of funding. On the other hand, Member States retain oversight of the Erasmus + programme, although its merging with the European Solidarity Corps would provide more leverage and flexibility to the Commission. Nevertheless, both trends displace the actors who speak for young people.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

1) Maintain the ESF+ as a standalone programme outside the NRPPs, with a dedicated youth sub-target of at least 12.5% for Member States with above-average NEET rates, since the NRPP architecture offers no legal mechanism to stop youth employment measures from being displaced by competing national priorities or absorbed by decommitment.

2) Increase the Erasmus+ envelope in line with the European Parliament's position of €42 billion in constant 2025 prices, with a mandatory minimum allocation ring-fencing the youth strand against both internal reallocation and fiscal pressure from NGEU repayment.

3) Reinstate a dedicated Youth Chapter in the Erasmus+ Regulation guaranteeing at least 10% of the programme budget for the youth field, including youth organisations and non-formal education, and simplify application procedures for small community-based projects so that the youth strand is not crowded out by larger, better-resourced beneficiaries.