

YOUTH POLICY DIALOGUE WITH HR/VP KAJA KALLAS

“Ally with Youth in EU Foreign Policy”

We are a group of 25 young community builders from the EU and around the world. On March 6, we had the opportunity to meet with HR/VP Kaja Kallas for the first Youth Policy Dialogue of the mandate. Our discussions centered around four key themes:

- The EU and its geopolitical priorities
- Peacebuilding & Conflict Resolution
- Human Rights & Democracy
- Global & Climate Diplomacy

This document aims to draw preliminary action proposals to foster youth involvement in EU foreign policy. Additionally, we explore ways to engage all youth in policy-making processes. This is an evolving document that will serve as a foundation and be further developed through other dialogues and youth engagement processes.

Reflections and topic background

Our world is facing an unprecedented polycrisis. International cooperation is not just important- it is crucial. But real solutions must put young people at the center.

With youth populations rising globally,¹ young people are not only the leaders of tomorrow but the changemakers of today. Our voices, ideas, and energy are critical to driving meaningful action.

Youth are often confined to passive roles, limiting the fresh perspectives and leadership potential they could bring. Despite comprising a significant portion of the global population, young people are notably underrepresented in political arenas. Globally, less than 6% of parliamentarians are under 35 years old, and less than 3% are under 30. The average age of parliamentarians is 53, highlighting a significant age gap in legislative and decision-making bodies.² Even when opportunities exist, not all young people start with the same access to resources or skill levels, making participation unequal. Additionally, marginalized communities remain underrepresented, further narrowing the diversity of voices and risking excluding critical viewpoints from decision-making and policy implementation processes.

Currently, marginalized communities, including Indigenous groups, racialized populations, and low-income individuals, face systemic barriers to accessing EU programmes, funding, and decision-making roles due to bureaucratic complexity and insufficient outreach.³ Young people also miss early engagement opportunities, weakening the transfer of knowledge in policymaking, governance, and cultural preservation, while many are expected to fill internships and advisory roles without proper compensation, limiting who can afford to participate and creating a system that is inherently elitist and exclusive.

There is insufficient funding for youth-led initiatives, limited grassroots engagement, and a lack of global idea-sharing. Additionally, many young people remain unaware of the opportunities open to them to address climate change.

Furthermore, the existing opportunities are threatened by the current conflicts- from Eastern Europe to the Middle East, from Latin America to Africa - and Europe's role in peacebuilding and conflict resolution has never been more vital. The European Union has long stood as a beacon of democracy and human rights, but to truly lead in these turbulent times, the EU must become not only a mediator of peace but also a proactive architect of security and justice.

Furthermore, young people are particularly vulnerable to misinformation and disinformation, which can distort their understanding of global issues and weaken trust in institutions. The misuse of social media

¹ Youth Development Index 2023, The Commonwealth (2024)

² Parliaments are getting (slightly) younger according to latest IPU data, *Inter-Parliamentary Union*, 2021

³ Gender and Underrepresented Groups in research, innovation, education, culture, youth, and sports, *The Western Balkans Info Hub*

can lead youth to believe false narratives, limiting informed participation in policymaking. On the other hand, by strengthening media literacy, fact-checking initiatives, and transparent communication, social media can transform access to information, ensuring that youth can be informed and understand policies and laws that affect them.⁴

Human Rights, Democracy, climate action, peacebuilding and conflict prevention mechanisms, as well as multilateral initiatives that include youth, are vital to ensure a shift from the current international crisis towards a more sustainable and inclusive future for all.

Set of proposals

1. Meaningful youth participation and empowerment

Youth voices are often sidelined in decision-making processes and frequently confined to passive roles, limiting the fresh perspectives and leadership potential they could bring. Existing mechanisms for youth engagement sometimes lack real influence or follow-up processes. Furthermore, youth perspectives are often ignored or tokenized in policymaking due to a lack of structured and specialized engagement mechanisms.

Action proposal

We support the meaningful participation of young people by ensuring that youth perspectives are included in policy-making and decision-making work. There's a need to empower youth with leadership roles by including them in official government or institutional delegations and decision-making bodies.

We encourage ensuring meaningful youth participation through structured, impactful, and continuous engagement mechanisms.

How:

- By institutionalizing regular and transparent youth policy dialogues at local, national, and international levels, integrating youth recommendations into policy processes.
- By establishing follow-up processes to ensure that youth consultation leads to concrete actions as well as a tool to monitor the state of advancement of the implementation of such proposals.
- By providing youth advisory boards with decision-making power on all major policy areas, including climate, economy, finance, security and digitalization.
- By including youth delegates or representatives in negotiation processes, official institutional delegations, and policy-making work.
- By creating youth practitioners' networks connecting young professionals and experts in specialized fields.
- By providing training and intergenerational mentorship for youth to maximize their impact and ensure capacity-building and knowledge-sharing among youth and between youth and institutions.

2. Access to information and equal opportunities

The multiple barriers that young people face in accessing opportunities, initiatives and decision-making roles do not ensure an equal representativeness of youth in such contexts. Young people also miss early engagement opportunities, weakening the transfer of knowledge in policymaking, governance, and cultural preservation. It is crucial to ensure that all youth have equal access to opportunities.

Action proposal

We suggest streamlining access to EU programmes and funding with simplified application processes, targeted outreach, and stronger representation for underrepresented groups.

We encourage the EU to take all the necessary measures to ensure that all young people are prepared to successfully engage and contribute in decision-making spaces.

We encourage fostering adequate and equal access to leadership and mentorship programmes for youth, as well as formal and informal education activities, such as peer-to-peer training, to ensure capacity-building and knowledge-sharing among young people and between youth and institutions. Equally, it is

⁴ IRIS, Media Literacy and the Empowerment of Users, *European Audiovisual Observatory*, Strasbourg, 2024

important to ensure that youth are equipped with the key competencies for life-long learning and active participation in every sector of society.

How:

- By using simplified language in application processes for jobs, internships, and training programmes, ensuring that eligibility criteria are clear and inclusive. Consider using different languages to ensure access to marginalized communities and indigenous groups.
- By providing accessible training programmes, mentorship, and peer-to-peer learning initiatives for youth.
- By developing a comprehensible and easy-to-access digital platform where youth can easily find and apply for training, funding, international conferences, and job opportunities, such as the EU Alumni Platform.
- By promoting youth-friendly policies in recruitment, such as flexible experience requirements, recognition of informal learning, unpaid labor, and volunteering positions as valuable experience.

3. Equitable access to financial support and funding

Funding remains one of the biggest challenges for meaningful youth participation in decision-making spaces and processes as well as a barrier to building a society where youth can flourish. Many youth-led initiatives struggle to access funding due to complex application procedures and accreditation processes. Furthermore, the lack of trust from financial institutions and the unpaid or undervalued work of young people leads to unsustainable engagement, therefore causing the underrepresentation of youth from different backgrounds.

Action proposal:

We suggest the EU provide institutional, technical, and financial resources to youth-led organizations, ensuring equitable access to information and support. This empowers young leaders at both local and global levels to effectively combat different challenges and drive innovative solutions.

How to:

- By developing youth-friendly grant schemes with simplified applications, flexible eligibility criteria, and dedicated funds for youth-led projects. A good example is the EU Youth Empowerment Fund as a youth co-led initiative to finance youth projects.
- By promoting adequately paid internships, fellowships and job opportunities for young people instead of unpaid voluntary roles. In addition, recognize unpaid labor or volunteering positions as valuable and meaningful work experience.
- By recognizing the time and expertise of young people by compensating them for their work with, for example, honorariums or stipends.
- By establishing monitoring mechanisms to ensure that youth-focused funding is equitably distributed and effectively used also by ensuring transparent and equitable access.

4. Include youth in peace-building and conflict-resolution processes

Peacebuilding and conflict prevention are essential to foster stable, sustainable, and flourishing societies. In the current global landscape, where conflicts and geopolitical tensions seem to prevail, the role of young people in promoting peace, conflict-resolution initiatives, and disarmament campaigns is vital. Furthermore, there is a general misconception that the young do not have the required knowledge and expertise to have a say in military or conflict resolution decision-making work. Despite the adoption of the Youth, Peace, & Security (YPS) Agenda, youth often remain excluded from official peace negotiations, disarmament efforts, UN Security Council sessions, and decision-making on conflict resolution.

Action proposal:

We encourage the integration of youth into peace processes by recognizing their role and value as peacebuilders, ensuring their participation in conflict resolution, and implementing the UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace, and Security.

How to:

- By establishing youth peace advisory councils within international and national peace missions.
- By meaningfully including and engaging with youth representatives and delegates in official peace negotiations and conflict resolution processes.

- By investing in youth-led disarmament initiatives and community peacebuilding projects, also in collaboration with UNODA (UN Office for Disarmament Affairs) and other entities in activities such as #Youth4Disarmament.
- By developing capacity-building programmes for youth to engage effectively in mediation and post-conflict recovery, particularly by engaging with youth-led organizations to initiate community dialogues to address local disputes and foster mutual understanding.
- By supporting youth-led advocacy strategies that can raise awareness about issues such as violence, inequality, injustices and conflicts.

5. Youth engagement in strategic thinking and crisis management

Youth are often seen as future leaders rather than active participants in current political decision-making. Excluding young people from strategic decision-making in crisis response, despite being heavily impacted by global challenges like pandemics, climate change, and conflicts, weakens policies designed to address youth-related concerns, especially in conflict-affected regions.

Action proposal:

We encourage the recognition and institutionalization of youth participation in crisis management, preparedness, and peace & security policies.

How to:

- By establishing youth crisis response task forces within governments and international organizations, one could provide a new perspective on how to tackle, manage, and prevent a crisis for young people.
- By creating youth-driven early warning systems for conflict prevention and disaster response.
- By including youth delegates and representatives in national security councils and emergency response teams.
- By supporting youth-led research on security, resilience, and crisis prevention strategies.

6. Unlock the potential of youth through entrepreneurship, art, and culture

Youth lack funding and resources; many young entrepreneurs, particularly in EU partner countries, lack access to investment, funding, and international collaboration opportunities that could foster cross-border collaboration. Youth artists often do not see their work recognized or acknowledged. Creative behaviors and perspectives can bring new ideas and points of view that should be more valued.

Action proposal

We suggest the establishment of startup funding corridors and investment programmes that connect European Union investors and startups with youth-led businesses in partner countries, fostering a transition from aid-based relationships to investment-driven partnerships.

How to:

- By launching a Global Youth Innovation Fund to provide financial support to youth-led startups and cultural enterprises, similar to the EU Youth Empowerment Fund but focused on entrepreneurship. Including this in the next YAP 2027 (Youth Action Plan) could help institutionalize the fund.
- By creating an EU-Partner Countries Startup Investment Programme that facilitates cross-border investment.
- By encouraging cross-cultural art initiatives (on themes like geopolitics, democracy and human rights), involving young artists from around the world, to allow young people to express their voices on current global issues and ideas for a common future.
- By implementing youth business incubators to support young entrepreneurs with mentorship, funding, and market access, as well as connecting these hubs with already-existing ones (e.g., Global Shapers Community).
- By fostering public-private partnerships to scale youth-led businesses globally.

7. Support mobility and training programmes

Due to the growing interconnectedness of today's world, youth mobility is essential. Yet, it remains limited due to financial barriers, visa restrictions, and a lack of accessible cross-cultural exchange programmes. Erasmus+ initiatives need to be strengthened and amplified.

Action proposal:

We encourage the preservation and- ideally- expansion of mobility and training programmes for youth, including Erasmus+ and Erasmus Mundus-style opportunities for EU and non-EU countries, as well as cross-cultural art and skills initiatives that could foster knowledge-building and knowledge-sharing across countries and communities.

How to:

- By increasing funding and accessibility for youth mobility programmes beyond Europe. This includes strengthening partnerships with universities and schools in and outside the EU as well as with non-formal institutions that could provide informal training and skills-development initiatives.
- By further urging the European Commission to strengthen negotiations with non-EU partners, for its full reintegration into Erasmus+, building on the original EESC statement.
- By simplifying VISA processes for young people participating in training and mobility programmes, also by offering support and guarantees.
- By providing financial support for marginalized youth to access international education and training

8. Prevent democratic backsliding through youth engagement in democratic life

Democratic backsliding threatens political stability and weakens institutions, often leading to restrictions on civil liberties, media freedom, and the rule of law. In many cases, marginalized groups, including youth, women, and people with disabilities, face systemic barriers to political participation, from legal restrictions to social and economic disadvantages. This limits the inclusion of diverse perspectives in decision-making processes lacking transparency, democracy, and representativeness.

Action proposal:

We welcome the launch of an EU Democracy Programme for marginalized youth with mentorship, funding, and peer-to-peer learning, prioritizing the participation of youth from non-democratic and transitioning countries.

How to:

- By establishing a youth democracy fund to support civic engagement projects.
- By re-integrating civic and democratic education in primary school programmes.
- By pairing young people from democratic and non-democratic countries to exchange experiences and best practices, also providing support and guaranteeing protection for youth coming from non-safe environments.
- By developing intergenerational mentorship programmes connecting young leaders with policymakers.
- By increasing youth representation in national and EU democratic processes, and supporting youth-led organizations and initiatives that promote democratic values and democratic participation.

9. Prevent and fight disinformation and fake news

Disinformation and fake news undermine trust in institutions, polarize societies, and weaken democracy. The rapid spread of false information, especially on social media, manipulates public opinion and distorts facts, making it harder for citizens to make informed decisions. This challenge is particularly dangerous during elections and crises, where misleading narratives can fuel division and instability. Young people are more vulnerable to online disinformation due to the use of social media, while fact-checking initiatives often lack financial support and youth involvement. Combating disinformation requires media literacy education, fact-checking initiatives, and stronger regulations on digital platforms to ensure transparency and accountability in information dissemination.

Action proposal:

We encourage the establishment of an EU fact-checking youth hub and funding of independent Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to strengthen fact-checking, media literacy, and hate speech prevention, as well as new regulations and tools to recognize the trustworthiness of a source and information.

How to:

- By creating a network of young fact-checkers trained to identify and counter mis/disinformation.
- By implementing media literacy programmes in schools and youth organizations as well as offering accessible courses to young people to recognize mis and disinformation, strengthening partnerships with relevant institutions like UNESCO.
- By providing funding for independent media organizations to support transparent reporting.
- By supporting youth-led awareness campaigns on disinformation and digital safety also in social media.
- By developing AI-driven tools and platforms to detect and flag fake news in digital spaces and social media.

10. Strengthening Youth Engagement in Defence and Security Policy

Young people play a critical role in shaping discussions on defense, security, and global stability. When it comes to physical security or cybersecurity, meaningful engagement in these areas requires institutionalized mechanisms for inclusion, capacity-building, and structured follow-up. Despite the increasing recognition of young people's potential as agents of peace and security, their formal involvement in defense and security policymaking remains limited. The lack of institutional mechanisms for youth participation in these critical areas contributes to a detachment between policymakers and youth, who feel less represented and do not consider investing in defense and security a priority.

Action proposal:

We encourage the establishment of structured platforms and mechanisms that facilitate meaningful and sustained engagement of youth in defense and security policy discussions and decision-making processes. This initiative aims to harness the insights of young people, ensuring that policies are more inclusive, representative, and effective.⁵

How to:

- By organizing regular Youth Policy Dialogues, following the example of the one with HR/VP Kaja Kallas and other Commissioners, and initiating regular forums and consultations where young individuals can directly engage with policymakers to discuss topics of their interests, including defense and security issues. These dialogues should meaningfully engage youth from diverse backgrounds across the EU and partner countries.
- By strengthening consultation and engagement with youth within EU Delegations, including the appointment of trained youth focal points whose responsibility is youth engagement, and ensuring youth engagement is systematic and well-resourced.
- By incorporating youth into conflict analysis processes and ensuring their meaningful participation in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of EU programmes.
- By implementing initiatives that educate young people about defense and security matters, equipping them with the knowledge and skills needed to contribute effectively to policy discussions. This includes seminars, workshops, peer-to-peer activities, and mentorship programmes.⁶
- By supporting youth-led research and initiatives, providing funding and resources for youth-driven projects, and exploring innovative solutions to security challenges.

11. Prevent NEET and early leaving from education and training

In 2023, 11.2% of 15–29-year-olds in the EU were neither in employment nor in education and training (NEET). Education is a fundamental human right, yet many people face barriers to accessing quality learning opportunities due to economic hardship, geographic location, disability, or discrimination. Unequal access to education deepens social inequalities, limits job prospects, and hinders democratic participation.

Action proposal:

We stress the need for new policies that ensure access to education, infrastructure development, and support for at-risk youth to prevent early school leaving and NEET status. Reforming the education system, adapting to the new needs and requirements, as well as facilitating access to the labor market, can prevent the rise of NEET numbers.

⁵ Moreno Vegas, Euro Defense, From Margins to Mainstream: The Critical Role of Youth in Security Policy (2024)

⁶ NATO, Defence Education Enhancement Programme (DEEP) (2025)

How to:

- By developing youth guarantee schemes providing job placements and re-training opportunities.
- By addressing more investments and funds into the education infrastructure to make schools and training centers more accessible, also by providing online learning opportunities.
- By providing mentorship support for youth at risk of dropping out of school and skill learning activities.
- By training the trainers and educators to equip young people with socio-emotional skills and coping strategies to protect against stress and aspirations, regardless of their background.
- By launching a UN-EU Education Equity initiative to ensure equal access to quality education, especially for marginalized communities and conflict-affected regions.

12. Advancing Human Rights and strengthening the protection of Human Rights Defenders

Human Rights Defenders (HRDs,) including youth activists, journalists, and civil society leaders, face increasing threats, harassment, and legal restrictions in many countries, limiting their ability to advocate for fundamental freedoms and democracy. Youth human rights defenders contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, placing human rights at the core of sustainable development. By doing so, they are assisting States in their responsibility to leave no one behind. For this, they need to be protected and respected. The EU is committed to systematically consulting youth in policymaking thanks to the establishment of EU Youth Sounding Boards and by enhancing the visibility of youth activists in the #OurVoiceOurFuture campaign.

Action proposal:

We encourage the meaningful inclusion and engagement of young people in human rights actions and human rights councils.

How to:

- By further enhancing the visibility of youth activists not only through online campaigns but in in-person meetings with policymakers.
- By developing a youth-led monitoring mechanism to track human rights violations and provide real-time reporting to international bodies.
- By implementing an accountability mechanism for violations of human rights and human rights defenders.
- By integrating human rights education into schools and youth programmes to empower future generations of defenders.

Conclusion

The action proposals and the “*how to*” outlined by the 25 youth participants in this document are the result of the Youth Policy Dialogue with HR/VP Kallas and reflect a collective vision for a more inclusive, impactful, and youth-centered approach to EU policymaking.

However, meaningful engagement cannot be a one-time exercise—it requires sustained dialogue, structured follow-up, and concrete actions to turn commitments into lasting change as highlighted by the participants who focused on a youth-centered and action-oriented approach to draft these proposals.

To build on the momentum of this dialogue, it is essential to highlight that this is the starting point of a longer process to meaningfully engage, empower, and connect young people in the EEAS work as part of the Youth Action Plan.

The need **to establish a mechanism for continuity and dedicated spaces for youth to be informed, empowered and** contribute to EU policies reflects the value that youth engagement has for the EU. **Ensuring that youth perspectives are not only heard but also implemented will strengthen the trust in the EU institutions and enhance the effectiveness of policies addressing world challenges.**

We are confident this dialogue and its outcome will evolve into a structured, recurring process, where young people remain engaged as valuable partners in shaping the EU’s external action. With the institutionalization of youth participation at all levels, the EU set a global precedent for inclusive governance where youth voices are integral to decision-making.

Signatory participants

1. Aïshael - Haiti
2. Erik - Brazil
3. Trisna - Indonesia
4. Cristina - Italy
5. Ismar - Bosnia and Herzegovina
6. Manu - Belgium
7. Zion - Republic of Korea
8. Sonal - India
9. Adrian - Belgium
10. Paulema - Liberia
11. Vladlen - Ukraine
12. Zara - United Kingdom
13. Mpilo - South Africa
14. Agnes - Hungary
15. Kadidjatou - Benin
16. Shohista - Uzbekistan
17. Yvette - Kenya
18. Davide - Malawi
19. Nico- Austria
20. Ngawang- Kingdom of Buthan
21. Ana Maria - Syria
22. Tiana - Canada
23. Maria Irene - Colombia
24. Tomas - Argentina
25. Nicholas - Germany /USA