

ADVISORY COUNCIL ON YOUTH (CCJ)

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English only

Statement by the Advisory Council on Youth (CCJ) on International Youth Day

Well into the second year of the Covid-19 pandemic, we now have confirmation that young people have been the most affected by the fallout resulting from the pandemic, experiencing a serious impact on their mental well-being, career/studies, and their economic situation.¹ They are suffering greater from loneliness² than older people, and young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds³ and from LGBTQ+ communities⁴ have experienced a significant decrease in life satisfaction. At the same time, public debate around these and other issues that young people have been facing throughout the pandemic has either been offset or delayed, or it has yielded insufficient, unrealistic, or ineffective solutions. **On this youth day, the Advisory Council on Youth would like to reflect on how young people have been both heavily stereotyped and underrepresented in the debate about their own needs.**

In the public sphere, young people are habitually shown as both “a vicious, threatening sign of social decay” and “our best hope for the future”.^{5, 6} In other words, youth serves as a canvas onto which society projects “the terrors of the present, the errors of the past, the prospect of a future”.⁷ Common negative tropes involving young people state that young people are dangerous,⁸ immature, and at the same time victims in need protection.^{9, 10}

There is a consensus, though, that stereotyping is problematic when stereotypes set the parameters for what societies deem to be acceptable behaviour,¹¹ which can lead to discrimination and degradation of certain groups. On that note, the Advisory Council on Youth reiterates that *CM/Rec(2007)2 on media pluralism and diversity of media content* states that

Member States should encourage public service media to play an active role in promoting social cohesion and integrating all communities, social groups and generations, including minority groups, young people, the elderly, underprivileged and disadvantaged social categories, disabled persons, etc., while respecting their different identities and needs. In this context, attention should be paid to the content created by and for such groups, and to their access to, and presence and portrayal in, public service media.

With this in mind, we want to highlight that **the debate around young people during the coronavirus pandemic reproduced the negative tropes.** Regardless of the issue at hand, throughout the crisis, young people have been treated like “pigeons of the public realm, only remarked upon for their mental health or when they leave litter in a park”.¹² May we also add that it is known that young people, for their part, are aware of the negative stereotyping directed against them,^{13, 14} which begs the rhetorical question: To what extent does this add to the promotion of participation in democratic life, social cohesion and intergenerational solidarity?

Finally, all of the above is reflected in the access to debates and decision-making on how and on what terms resources are distributed. **Youth voices have been notoriously underrepresented in the debate about coronavirus measures as well as in planning the post-corona recovery period.** This further perpetuates the notion of young people as individuals without agency, without ideas, which either need to be disciplined or taken care of. As noted by Zoe Williams, “when you’re not considered a stakeholder, you’re a nuisance.”¹² On that note, to say that young people are active on social media is true, however, it oversimplifies and even misconstrues the factual observation that despite social media activism, young people have not been more present in the mass media and have not been more included in participatory decision making. (That Fridays for Future activists are now invited to high-level panels often serves as a

straw man to say that young people *are indeed participating*. Rather, these are exceptions that confirm the rule.)

On this youth day, **we invite you to pause for a second to ask yourself** to what extent these common stereotypes of young people inform your thinking and work? To what extent are you really aware of and considering young people's perspectives and letting them co-decide on things that matter to them? To what extent do you consider young people as stakeholders in their own right? Everything short of that is tokenism and manipulation and poses a problem for democracy.

Publishing statements like these each year seems more like a self-reassuring exercise than anything else. Yet, the Advisory Council on Youth remains committed to reminding you to:

- 1) include young people in defining problems and finding solutions;
- 2) actively seek young people in places where they are;
- 3) provide spaces in the public sphere (yes, the traditional, mass-media public sphere) for young people to talk both about and for themselves;
- 4) aim for diversity at all levels, and include the perspectives of young people of different ages, socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnic groups, genders;
- 5) include young people in formulating the youth policies that are needed to help our generation to recover from the pandemic.

The opinions expressed in this statement are those of the Advisory Council on Youth and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Council of Europe or its member states.