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Consultative meeting “Strength and resilience of international youth organisations”

European Youth Centre Budapest

21-23 January 2026

REPORT

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Executive summary

This report documents the outcomes of the Council of Europe Youth Department's consultative meeting "Strength and resilience of international youth organisations" held on 21-23 January 2026, at the European Youth Centre Budapest. It builds on the commitment to support youth organisations, recognising their vital role in upholding democratic values and engaging young people in civil society, especially in the context of growing challenges across Europe.

This consultative meeting marked a significant turning point in this effort, reaffirming the Council of Europe's commitment to supporting young people and in seeing youth organisations as pillars of democracy. This event brought together youth leaders, representatives of international organisations, practitioners of the civil society sector and researchers. It aimed at exploring the current reality faced by International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations (INGYOs), examining both their strengths and barriers in relation to their resilience, and generating proposals for institutional support.

Methodologically, the programme has a participatory approach, ensuring input and reflection from all present and building on the expertise of the INGYO representatives. The format combined plenary and panel discussions, interactive group work, and online inputs, allowing for the diverse perspectives of participants and experts to be represented and shared.

The first day of the consultative meeting set the stage for collective mapping of the current state of INGYOs, highlighting trends in organisational management, democratic governance, financial sustainability, and the preservation of institutional memory.

The second day included expert inputs and discussion, introducing frameworks which helped participants analyse resilience strategies under constantly shifting and challenging conditions. Peer learning sessions enabled exchange on successful fundraising models, organisational resilience, digital campaigning, and engagement methods.

The third day provided space for participants to come up with a set of proposals, as participants formed thematic working groups to focus on capacity building, funding and the European Youth Foundation, advocacy, institutional memory, and educational resources.

Throughout the discussions, the main challenges for INGYOs were mentioned as follows: financial instability linked to short-term project funding and heavy administrative burdens; high turnover among volunteers and staff leading to loss of institutional knowledge; the tension between remaining mission-driven and adapting to donor requirements; the shrinking space for civil society and youth activism under restrictive political measures; and the difficulty of long-term volunteer engagement in a precarious context.

As the meeting outlined, the main areas of work for the Youth Department to strengthen the resilience of youth organisations are: reinforcing funding relationships and processes using trust-based approaches; developing targeted capacity building for operational and leadership skills; enhancing advocacy through greater access and participation in Council of Europe structures and proceedings; investing in management capacity and transfer of institutional memory; and improving the accessibility and visibility of educational resources and peer learning tools.

In conclusion, the consultative meeting provided a foundation for renewed action and strategic support by the Council of Europe Youth Department, promoting adaptability, collaboration, and capacity building to ensure the long-term vitality and resilience of youth civil society across Europe. The findings of the consultative meeting will be used for capacity building and other forms of support that the Department will deploy in the next three to five years.

Introduction and institutional context

The Council of Europe youth sector launched a reflection process in 2025 to determine how to support international non-governmental youth organisations (INGYOs) in sustaining their democratic governance, enhancing their role within broader civil society, and improving the effectiveness of their actions. This initiative is rooted in the principle that freedom of assembly and association is a fundamental human right, as established in the European Convention on Human Rights, and serves as a prerequisite for a functioning democracy. The Reykjavik Summit of Heads of State and Government (2023) committed to maintaining a safe and enabling environment for human rights defenders and civil society to functionally operate. This commitment was reaffirmed during the 10th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth in October 2025, which stressed the necessity of integrating youth perspectives into all thematic areas of the Council's work.

Within this institutional framework, youth organisations are recognised as watchdogs and as laboratories for democratic learning where young people practice democratic decision-making, where those under-represented can find their voice. They are unique governance partners for

the Youth Department of the Council of Europe where representatives of youth organisations operate at different levels and represent a wide variety of young people from the Advisory Council on Youth, which co-manages the youth sector together with its governmental counterpart, to the European Steering Committee on Youth. All the main instruments of the youth sector involve youth organisations as key partners and decision-makers. The European Youth Centres organise study sessions in partnership with youth organisations, the youth policy support measures to member States include youth organisations in national deliberations on youth policy development and the European Youth Foundation funds both the projects and operations of youth-led organisations exclusively, so that they can contribute actively to the priorities of the Council of Europe in the youth field and the development of their areas of interest.

Despite their vital role, the conditions for youth civil society to act in accordance with their mission have worsened. The access to funding is limited, in a context where they are still recovering from COVID period consequences. They are facing many challenges, due to the multiple crises, the shrinking space for civil society, the war and humanitarian crises, climate changes at devastating levels, the social crises affecting young people disproportionately in many countries, to quote just a few. For some years now, the shrinking of the space available to civil society has been of growing concern to the Youth Department and its co-management partners. In addition, the multiple crises that our continent witnesses have had effects on the resilience of civil society organisations, including and even especially those of young people.

Many organisations are navigating a difficult dilemma between maintaining professionalised engagement in policy advocacy and project management while still serving as community spaces for activism and meaningful relations. The high pressure to deliver results has led to significant issues regarding volunteer and staff burn-out, requiring more regular and specific support to ensure these organisations can sustain their operations and democratic principles. Consequently, the consultative meeting was organised to consult with a diverse group of representatives to translate these challenges into concrete forms of institutional support.

The meeting pursued the following objectives:

1. Engage in a reflection on the state of the art of organisational needs among international youth organisations, especially in relation to

- organisational management, including management of volunteers, internal procedures, management of information, project management and fundraising;
- democratic governance, including leadership, engagement with member organisations, democratic decision-making arrangements;
- strategy development and advocacy, including how to develop and implement missions and strategies, how to carry out actions to support certain causes, including towards institutions like the Council of Europe.

2. Develop ideas and propose forms of support international youth organisations and networks could benefit from in relation to the three mentioned areas (support may include capacity building, mentoring, pairing of organisations, educational tools, funding, among others).

3. Make proposals for the elaboration of a training curriculum for capacity building activities to be organised by the youth sector of the Council of Europe starting from 2026.
4. Create an understanding of the mutual support that international youth organisations and the Council of Europe can offer each other for their respective and common objectives.

Participants

The consultative meeting involved twenty representatives of international youth organisations and networks. The participants hold leadership roles either in the boards or in the secretariats of organisations and they brought a great variety of different perspectives, such as student organisation, rural youth, minority groups, political and exchange organisations. Some organisations are members of the European Youth Forum, others not. The meeting also combined the participation of organisations that have operated for many years, with the insights of organisations set up on the international level only recently.

Together with members of civil society organisations, the meeting gathered representatives of the statutory bodies of the Council of Europe and researchers on youth issues. The list of participants can be found in the Appendix I.

Programme overview

The consultative meeting began on the 21 January 2026 at the European Youth Centre in Budapest with an opening address and a round of introductions. The first day focused on mapping the current state of international youth non-governmental organisations through a reflective exercise. Small working groups analysed organisational management and democratic governance to identify shared trends. These groups later presented highlights regarding financial precariousness and the loss of institutional memory.

The second day opened a panel discussion on organisational resilience. Researchers introduced the helpful frameworks to describe the reality international youth organisation operate in. The BANI framework (brittle, anxious, nonlinear and incomprehensible) was presented to attempt at explaining the perception of a world that seems fragile and breakable, permeated by mental health struggles and at a constant state of reactivity to the next emergency, meanwhile it's harder to predict what is coming, building up to a rather incomprehensible reality. This framework is particularly relevant to analyse the organisational adaptations that need to be considered to build a greater resilience towards the challenges faced by international youth organisations. In this context the panellists offered an interpretation of resilience in that is not only about surviving the current challenges but about possessing the transformational capacity to change the structural mechanisms of oppression, discrimination and hinderance of the work of international youth organisations.

The sessions further explored dilemmas such as the tension between delivering services for funders and remaining true to a core mission, the tension between advocacy and safety, meaning that speaking up on current issues can lead up to become target of derogatory narratives and put at risk the opportunity to continue to operate.

During the afternoon, participants led peer learning spaces to share practices on fundraising and digital campaigning. The good practices discussed were:

- Models and tools for resilient youth NGOs, with contributions by YFJ, WOSM and CDNEE
- Fundraising for youth NGOs, with contributions by RYE and MIJARC
- Internal and external outreach and engagement, with contributions by OBESSU
- Digital campaigning and mobilization, with contributions by FYEG

The day concluded with an overview of the Council of Europe's political architecture and the support instruments for international youth organisations of the Youth Department, notably in respect to policy and advocacy, programme of activities, educational resources, research and funding.

The final day focused on generating concrete proposals for action over the next three to five years. Participants formed thematic groups to address capacity building, educational resources, youth perspectives and advocacy in the Council of Europe, memory and the transfer of knowledge within the organisations, funding and the European Youth Foundation. Finally, the meeting was officially closed by the words of Nina Grmusa, the Chairperson of the Advisory Council on Youth, who highlighted the unique power dynamics within the Council of Europe and the role of youth organizations in driving institutional change. Nina thanked the participants for their trust in the institution as *"it is the only way we can make this work more relevant and suitable for what we need because it is there to serve us right"*.

Strengths and challenges of the youth organisations

The meeting provided extensive space for to reflect and share about the mission, the work, the challenges and the strengths of the represented organisations. Participants identified their primary strength in the depth of their established networks and institutional recognition. Many organisations have a long history that provides legitimacy within their thematic fields. They possess a motivated and value-driven membership base. This human capital allows groups to achieve results with few material resources, because their operational success is rooted in creativity and innovation.

Other strengths mentioned by few participants also include the ability to engage in an innovative way with technology. Some networks have developed elaborate digital knowledge management systems. These systems use online platforms to coordinate volunteers and maintain archives. Finally, dedication was mentioned among the underlining strength and as the base for resilience. Dedication to the commitment to democracy and human rights, to act as a megaphone for right holders as well as dedication to European cooperation and building networks of international solidarity and mission driven organisations.

Systemic financial pressures undermine these strengths through a common trend that was found in the structural shift from stable, membership-based funding models to a near-total reliance on short-term, project-based grants. Membership fees now often represent less than ten to twenty percent of total budgets. This creates severe financial instability that manifests in cash flow problems, when there are significant gaps in funding between project cycles and in a widespread sense of unpredictability, that make long-term financial planning and organizational development nearly impossible, since organisation never know if essential project grants will be renewed despite high-quality applications.

Adding to the challenges, grant management creates a heavy administrative and reporting load, and this burden consumes a disproportionate amount of staff and volunteer time. In the current funding landscape, there are very limited funding schemes dedicated only to youth organisations. This entails youth organisations compete with other civil society organisations and also with consultancies. The dependency on the project cycles fosters a precarious professional landscape, where staff members jobs are linked with the life of the project and stability within the international youth organisations is endangered. Organizations face a constant internal tension between acting as community spaces for activism and being professionalized service providers for donors. This funder logic can sometimes force organizations to move their mandate away from their original scope just to secure survival.

There is a decline in long-term volunteer availability. Post-COVID cohorts often lack a consistent habit of long-term volunteering as the organisations reported an increased tendency of young people to participate to short-term activities rather than becoming members. Economic and academic pressures limit the time that can be dedicated to organisations. A significant leadership deficit exists because fewer people are willing to take on high-responsibility roles. Potential leaders are often intimidated by heavy administrative burdens and high accountability. High turnover rates lead to a constant loss of institutional knowledge during transitions. Additionally, the pressure to deliver professionalized results in this precarious and unstable context, has severe consequences for the individuals involved. The constant pressure to implement projects, write grants, and manage reporting with *"too much to do and too few people"* has led to chronic volunteer and staff burnout.

Many organisations struggle to define the line between the strategic roles of volunteer boards and the operational roles of paid staff. This lack of clarity can lead to friction, inefficiency, and board members becoming overwhelmed by daily operations. A vicious circle exists where national-level budget cuts prevent national organizations from paying their membership fees to international umbrellas. Consequently, the international bodies struggle to provide the services their members require. Internal challenges also involve fragile institutional memory as high turnover rates lead to the loss of knowledge during board transitions, and many groups have reported that they rely on one or two individuals as the living memory of the body. Knowledge is often stored in un-organised digital drives rather than formal archives.

The shifting political landscape adds external pressure as the civic space shrinks through attacks and delegitimisation campaigns against youth groups. Public narratives claim these NGOs are too political or waste public money. This has led to a strategic uncertainty regarding how outspoken organizations can be without jeopardizing their safety or their funding. The rise of "foreign agent laws" in certain regions induces a state of constant crisis for human rights defenders even before the laws are officially enacted. Additionally, some governments have begun replacing independent youth structures with government-run NGOs or utilizing advanced surveillance to track and monitor young activists. The shrinking of civic space is also linked to the defunding of the welfare state. When basic needs like public transportation or education are not provided, young people are forced to prioritize survival through multiple jobs, which leaves no time for the long-term volunteering that traditionally sustains these international networks.

Proposals for further action

The final day of the consultative meeting focused on gathering proposals for a three-to-five-year plan to strengthen international youth organisations through concrete measures to be undertaken by the Council of Europe Youth Department. To prepare for this work, an in-depth presentation of the Youth Department possibilities for support measures was made.

Participants divided into working groups to formulate proposals in respect to funding through the European Youth Foundation, capacity building, advocacy, institutional memory, and educational resources.

European Youth Foundation and funding

In the context of the reform and its roll-out, the participants proposed to:

- Reinforce the trust-based partnership between the European Youth Foundation and the beneficiary organisations as a result of the EYF reform.
- Propose ways in which grantee organisations can assess the impact of projects funded and make that visible.
- Reconsider the purpose and organisation of field visit to grantee organisations, and reinforce their supportive function.
- Continue to assess the impact of reporting on international youth organisations which until 2025 put a lot of pressure on the organisations that received funding, and make adjustments in this process as needed.
- Explore the use of AI in applications and reporting and produce guidance as to how AI can help applicant organisations in their proposals.
- Provide to youth organisations guidance on how to apply for grants, what the application should refer to, tips for applying.

Building further on the specificity of the European Youth Foundation as donor, participants proposed EYF to organise a conference on funding for youth.

The participants also identified several learning needs in relation to funding and management of projects:

- How to secure long-term funding in youth organisations.
- Financial planning in youth organisations: how to start from the organisations and not from donor funding cycles, covering how to balance professional approaches and requirements with the mission of the organisation.
- How to channel/express the mission of the organisation into something that raises the interest of the donors.
- How to have a funding strategy and related budgets.
- How to make management of projects and of finances more youth friendly.
- Have a space of exchange and peer-learning for youth civil society.

Capacity building

As part of the process surrounding the consultative meeting, the Youth Department anticipated the potential need for additional training opportunities later in the year. With this in mind, participants were invited to submit proposals outlining their organizations' specific capacity building needs. This approach allows the Youth Department to design and offer

relevant training sessions that directly address the priorities and challenges identified by the participating organizations, ensuring that any future training can be tailored to maximize its impact and usefulness for the youth sector. The main proposals for future capacity building include:

- Focus on operational, financial, and strategic sustainability for international youth organizations.
- Highest priority: specialized training for board members/high-level staff covering human resources, leadership, and complex financial management; keeping in mind the time availability restrictions of this target group, the proposals advanced the idea of having shorter trainings in presence, combined with online meetups.
- Suggested combination with external assessments and mentorship to identify specific developmental gaps and have consistent support in a prolonged time span.
- Training to help translate organizational vision into sustainable budgets and funding strategies.
- Proposal to create peer-learning spaces for sharing successful practices and NGO wisdom about internal financial responsibility and sustainability.
- Questioning relevance of traditional session formats and e-learning for today's youth, the group proposed to have collaborative spaces to jointly design new methodologies and provide mutual support.

Advocacy in the Council of Europe framework

The adoption of the Council of Europe Reference Framework on a Youth Perspective by the 10th Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth has the potential of enhanced advocacy possibilities in the framework of the Council of Europe for international youth civil society, which builds on the opportunities offered by the programme of activities of the European Youth Centre, particularly the study sessions which can connect the youth organisations with other sectors and services of the Council of Europe.

The group proposed:

- Reflecting on the quality standards for the youth participation of young people in other sectors of the Council of Europe in the framework of the implementation of the youth perspective.
- The preparation of study sessions should also consider the possibilities of direct access to political actors.
- Either adding an extra day to the Info days of the European Youth Foundation organised in the Brussels twice per year, focused more on political and policy developments in the Council of Europe and ways the organisations can engage or a similar kind of activity online or offline.
- The existing training course on advocacy can be seen as an additional offer for international youth organisations to support their capacity building. It can also support the organisations to better understand how they can use the Council of Europe standards in advocacy at local and national level.

The group also discussed the particular situation of young human rights defenders and the rather frequent attacks on youth civil society organisations. There were discussions about possibility to further develop a legal support system for young human rights defenders, to further explore the Private office procedure on human rights defenders with the Council of Europe and explore the connections with the Conference of INGOs to voice the concerns of youth civil society.

Institutional memory

The collective ability of youth organizations to sustain and transmit institutional memory was identified as an area requiring strategic attention. Participants emphasized that high turnover rates among members and staff pose challenges for preserving organizational knowledge, practices, and culture.

The group addressing institutional memory proposed moving away from fragmented digital platforms toward intentional memory management. They sought to replace digital dumping grounds with organized systems that support handovers and reporting. Specific proposals included:

- Creation of alumni networks and knowledge transfer systems between generations.
- Participants requested expert coaching on archiving practices and guidance on distinguishing essential data.

Peer learning between organizations was highlighted as a critical tool for improving these internal processes.

Educational resources

The meeting also highlighted the importance of strengthening educational resources tailored to the evolving needs of youth organizations. Participants expressed the need for tools and materials that are practical, adaptable, and easily accessible for staff working within time constraints. It was proposed that existing educational resources, particularly those produced by the Council of Europe, should be made more visible and user-friendly, through centralised portals and visual guides. One proposal involves creating a centralized platform to make the outputs of different study sessions accessible to all organizations. This would allow for the sharing of guidelines, manifestos and any product developed across the networks. Participants suggested using social media and follow-up emails to remind busy staff of available resources. They also recommended investigating ways to match organizations with experts from the trainers' pool in a data-compliant manner. These efforts aim to ensure that institutional knowledge remains accessible despite high turnover within the sector.

APPENDIX I

Further information on the practices shared on day 2.

The European Youth Forum (YFJ) Academy:

To strengthen the resilience of youth organisations amid shrinking civic spaces and rising political hostility, the **YFJ Academy** served as a capacity-building program designed to move beyond reactive survival. The event was structured around 3 learning paths: **Reimagining youth engagement, Rethinking organisations and culture and Reclaiming change and space**. These paths were shaped based on the realities youth organisations face: increasing political pressure and shrinking civic space, reduced funding and access to decision-making processes, growing burnout, and the difficulty of sustaining inclusive and values-based internal cultures. The Academy combined expert-led sessions with peer learning and reflection, enabling participants to gain practical tools, share experiences, and strengthen connections across the membership.

APPENDIX II

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

NAME	ORGANISATION
LOUIS BRAU	European Students' Union (ESU)
PANAGIOTIS CHATZIMICHAIL	Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU)
CINTA GONZALEZ SENTIS	Federation of Young European Greens (FYEG)
JAN FIALA	European Non-Governmental Sports Organisation Youth (ENGSO YOUTH)
CRISTINA DEBU	Service Civil International (SCI)
PHILIP POLLÁK	United for Intercultural Action
HEDIN RAGNFRED INDREGÅRD	European Law Students' Association (ELSA)
TJANA ŠAKIĆ	CONNECT INTERNATIONAL
BO LEVE SÖSEMANN	Youth of European Nationalities (YEN/JEV)
AIKATERINI KARANIKA	Rural Youth Europe (RYE)
FILIP JANKOVIĆ	Co-operation and Development Network Eastern Europe (CDNEE)
MEDEA PAVLIASHVILI	International Movement of Catholic Agricultural and Rural Youth (MIJARC EUROPE)
DEBORA STRIANI	Young European Federalists (JEF Europe)
YLVA SÓLEY THORSDDOTTIR PLANMAN	Nordic Youth Association (NordYouth)
MAXIMILIAN HOMAN	International Falcon Movement – Socialist Educational International (IFM-SEI)
HIBA LATRECHE	Forum of European Muslim Youth and Student Organisations (FEMYSO)
KAJA KACZKIELLO	Erasmus Student Network (ESN)
ANDRA DEDIU	World Organisation of the Scout Movement (WOSM)
BERANGERE DAILLY	European Forum for Youth with Lived Migration Experiences (VOICIFY)
STEPHANNY ULIVIERI	Youth and Environment Europe (YEENET)
MARGIT BARNA	

PREPARATORY TEAM

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MARTINA ROTA	European Youth Forum
ANDREEA SCRIOSTEANU	European Youth Forum

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COUNCIL OF EUROPE SECRETARIAT

RUXANDRA PANDEA	Education, Training and Cooperation Division
Yael OHANA	Education, Training and Cooperation Division
CHIARA GULLOTTA	Education, Training and Cooperation Division
BEATRIZ MELO	Education, Training and Cooperation Division
MARA GEORGESCU	European Youth Foundation
VASILIKI TSAKLIDOU	European Youth Foundation
PETER ZELENKA	European Youth Centre Budapest

APPENDIX III

Daily programme

Tuesday, 20 January 2026

Arrival of participants

Registration

19:00 Dinner in the European Youth Centre in Budapest

Wednesday, 21 January 2026

9:30 Opening of the Consultative meeting, with:

- Balint Molnar, European Youth Centre in Budapest
- Mara Georgescu, European Youth Foundation
- Yael Ohana, Education, Training and Cooperation Division

9:45 Context and purpose of the consultative meeting

10:00 Getting to know each other

11:00 Break

11:30 The state of International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations (INYGOS) (in working groups)

13:00 Lunch

14:30 The state of INYGOS (in working groups) (continued)

16:00 Break

16:30 Reports from working groups and reflection on main trends

18:00 Closure of the day

19:00 Dinner out

Thursday, 22 January 2026

9:30 The current context for the work of organisations, with:

- Alice Bergholtz, researcher
- Andreas Hieronymus, researcher
- Björn van Roozendaal, researcher

11:00 Break

11:30 Exploring dilemmas and paradoxes together

13:00 Lunch

14:30 Open Space – practices addressing issues of the Consultative meeting

16:00 Break

16:30 The Youth Department of the Council of Europe, its mandate, role, and possibilities of support for INGYOs

18:00 Closure of the day

19:00 Dinner

Friday, 23 January 2026

9:30 Proposals for further action by the Council of Europe and participants' organisations:

- Capacity building (training resources)
- Funding
- Advocacy and policy
- Educational resources
- Memory of INGYOs

11:00 Break

11:30 Presentation of the working groups

Conclusions of the rapporteur

Next steps and closure of the meeting

13:00 Lunch

Departures of participants