

Motion

Non-EU European countries' inclusion in Erasmus+

signed by: Belarusian National Youth Council (RADA), National Youth Council of Moldova (CNTM), National Youth Council of Ukraine (NYCU)

co-signed by: British Youth Council (BYC), European Federation for Intercultural Learning (EFIL), Erasmus Student Network (ESN), National Youth Council of North Macedonia (NYCNM), National Youth Council of Serbia (KOMS), Rural Youth Europe (RYE), Swiss National Youth Council (SAJV/CSAJ), Young European Federalists (JEF Europe)

Introduction

Erasmus+ enables young people, students, professionals, and volunteers alike to benefit from fruitful exchange activities which allow for a better intercultural understanding, increased knowledge transfer, and crucial formal and non-formal educational experiences benefiting the whole of Europe. As youth organisations, we highly appreciate the Erasmus+ programme, which allows us to engage in meaningful exchange activities, learn from each other, connect and create a bond beyond national borders. The programme strengthens our European identity and rallies young people around our shared values built on the principles of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. It enables young leaders from volunteer-based organisations to become responsible, active, and empowered citizens of Europe. It promotes citizenship and helps enhance participation in democratic life within European societies. The learning mobility experiences also contribute to the personal and educational development of volunteers, students, apprentices, and young adults.

However, currently, many countries in Europe that share these principles do not fully benefit from the opportunities offered by Erasmus+. Although countries in Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans, and states such as Switzerland and the United Kingdom are partially integrated into the programme, multiple restrictions prevent young people from these countries from accessing the same opportunities as countries classified as Erasmus+ Programme Countries. This gap creates inequalities and limits the potential for genuine educational and social cooperation at European level.

The full inclusion of willing non-EU European countries—those upholding human rights, democracy and the rule of law—into the Erasmus+ programme is not merely a matter of extending participation; it is a strategic imperative to build a genuinely pan-European educational ecosystem. Today, youth organisations in partner countries—from the Eastern Partnership (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine) to the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro)—as well as in Switzerland and the United Kingdom, remain confined to a narrow set of decentralised actions. They cannot lead large-scale projects, coordinate regional networks or access many centralised calls managed by the European Commission. Such limitations — including the lack of National Agencies, exclusion from Jean Monnet actions or capacity-building for youth structures — translate into a lower level of funding, a more restrictive administrative framework, and reduced participation in high-impact European initiatives. Local institutions can only apply in partnership with EU-based entities, lacking the autonomy and the opportunity to define priorities, coordinate projects independently or align Erasmus+ with national strategies for youth development, education and civic engagement.

A comparative view makes this inequity stark: while Erasmus+ Programme Countries benefit from streamlined procedures, higher grant quotas and the opportunity to shape strategic partnerships, non-EU partners face lower funding ceilings, fragmented administrative frameworks and mandatory EU-led consortia. Such disparities curtail intercultural exchanges, limit youth mobility and erode the capacity of local actors to develop context-specific solutions. They also deprive Europe of valuable perspectives—whether it is the resilience-building work of Ukrainian youth organisations during the war, the democratic activism of Belarusian civil society in exile, or the cross-border innovation hubs that could emerge in the Western Balkans. These structural barriers produce tangible negative effects across non-EU European regions. Although thousands of young people have taken part in Erasmus+ mobilities, projects remain externally led and cannot scale up to meet regional needs. Local ownership is undermined, and outreach to rural, vulnerable, or marginalised communities is severely restricted.

Youth and civil-society organisations in contexts of fragility—whether in the Eastern Partnership, the Western Balkans, or war-affected Ukraine — have played a crucial role in advancing democratic values, driving social innovation, and fostering intercultural dialogue. Yet, without full programme status or a National Agency, they cannot coordinate large-scale partnerships, access centralised funding, or implement long-term strategies for youth development. In Belarus, democratic youth organisations — many now operating from exile — face a double exclusion: politically repressed at home and institutionally sidelined abroad. Nonetheless, their continued inclusion in Erasmus+ is vital for preserving spaces of civic participation and democratic resilience in an otherwise closed environment. In Ukraine, local capacity-building initiatives have proven vital for recovery and civic engagement during wartime, but structural constraints limit their sustainability and reach.

Elsewhere, countries like Switzerland and the United Kingdom—which previously had robust participation—have seen the negative consequences of disconnection from Erasmus+. In the Swiss case, long-standing negotiations have stalled youth access for nearly a decade, though recent developments reported by both the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Swiss Federal Council indicate encouraging progress towards Switzerland's renewed participation in Erasmus+, potentially as early as 2027¹. Similarly, since exiting the scheme in 2020, the United Kingdom has suffered greatly, with several youth organisations being forced to close down and tens of thousands of young people's hopes of studying and participating in non-formal learning experiences abroad dashed, as highlighted by a European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) report on EU-UK Youth Engagement², published in April 2024.

Across all these regions, fragmented access to Erasmus+ not only hinders professional and personal development and fuels brain drain, it also perpetuates regional inequalities—contradicting the programme's core principles of solidarity, equal opportunity, and a genuinely pan-European youth space. Granting every willing non-EU European country- upholding human rights, democracy and

1 <https://www.admin.ch/gov/en/start/documentation/media-releases.msg-id-104716.html>

2 <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/eu-uk-youth-engagement>

the rule of law- full Erasmus+ status—including the right to establish National Agencies, to apply as lead partners in centralised actions, and to benefit from equitable funding—would reverse these trends. It would strengthen democratic resilience in the Eastern Partnership, accelerate socio-economic convergence in the Western Balkans and rebuild reciprocal exchanges with Switzerland and the UK. Above all, it would bridge today’s developmental gaps and unlock the untapped potential of all European youth, forging a more cohesive, innovative and solidarity-driven future.

Conclusions

The European Youth Forum firmly believes that other willing non-EU European countries—sharing our core values of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law—face similar challenges in accessing the full benefits of the Erasmus+ programme. The broader the inclusion of these nations, the greater the opportunity for European youth to evolve into active, engaged citizens, benefiting from a wide array of educational and cultural experiences that they inherently deserve.

With this motion, the European Youth Forum aims to remind all discussion partners—including the European Union and the governments of non-EU countries—that education should never be manipulated for political purposes. Adopting such an approach on a European level will facilitate equitable access to the programme for all eligible countries, ultimately reinforcing a more cohesive and dynamic European youth community.

The Erasmus+ programme should promote the development of projects and exchanges between all youth in Europe. Additionally, the aforementioned principles provide support for the inclusion of willing non-EU European countries into the European Solidarity Corps programme. The European Solidarity Corps enables the engagement of young people in solidary activities and contributes to projects that benefit communities across Europe.

Call for actions

Taking this into consideration, the European Youth Forum calls on European leaders to:

- Support the comprehensive integration of all willing non-EU European countries that respect the principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law—including those from Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans, and other relevant regions—into the Erasmus+ programme, ensuring full access to the Erasmus+.
- Establish or empower National Agencies for Erasmus+ in countries from Eastern Partnership, Western Balkans, Switzerland and UK to streamline the application processes and maximize participation. This is aligned with the European Youth Forum’s call for the inclusion of youth structures in national advisory systems related to Erasmus+ governance^{3,4}.
- Establish a functioning structure that can act as a National Agency for Erasmus+ within the Belarusian democratic society, or formally empower an existing organization representing the democratic forces of Belarus to take on this role, ensuring the inclusion of Belarusian youth in the programme despite the absence of state-level cooperation.

In line with European Youth Forum’s policy, such a structure should also include democratic youth organisations in its advisory and decision-making processes, supporting transparent and inclusive governance even in non-standard national contexts^{3,4}.
- Ensure that, in the process of establishing Erasmus+ National Agencies in non-EU countries, meaningful youth participation is guaranteed, particularly by involving National Youth Councils and youth organisations in the governance and oversight structures of these agencies^{3,4};
- Facilitate independent negotiations for the re-association of countries such as

3 European Youth Forum. Erasmus+ Position Paper. June 2024, p. 14. Available at: <https://www.youthforum.org/files/240719-PP-Erasmus.pdf>

4 European Youth Forum. The Future of the European Solidarity Corps Programme. February 2024, p. 3. Available at: <https://www.youthforum.org/files/250417-PP-SolidarityCorps-A5.pdf>

Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and others into the Erasmus+ framework.

- Ensure equitable resource distribution by advocating for increased funding and support mechanisms that allow all eligible countries to benefit from the Erasmus+ programme.
- Adopt tailored measures to address the specific challenges faced by youth in politically unstable or repressive environments, such as in Ukraine and Belarus, ensuring their continued inclusion and active participation in European mobility initiatives.
- Ensure that all willing non-EU European countries that abide by the principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law are granted full access to the Erasmus+ programme and the European Solidarity Corps programme.
- Urge political actors not to misuse educational issues as a means of political pressure.



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