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## **"European Youth Forum"**

*Check Against Delivery*  
*Seul le texte prononcé fait foi*  
*Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Plenary session of the European Youth Forum in European Parliament

**Brussels, 23 April 2010**

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

I will gladly answer the three questions raised by the moderators.

You ask how we can support young people in times of high unemployment; assist them in the transition from education to the labour market; and, in general, what can be done to put the crisis behind us.

These questions go right to the heart of the priorities for our youth policy today. Let me take them in order.

**In times of unprecedentedly high youth unemployment rates, should young people receive unprecedented levels of support?**

The short answer is 'yes'.

Youth unemployment rates in Europe are intolerable and young people need all the support we can afford.

In terms of response, the EU has already taken an active role.

Youth has pride of place in Europe 2020, the overall strategy for the Union in the present decade.

The Strategy clearly recognises talented people, their knowledge and skills, as an asset for Europe's future.

It also makes clear that investing in the education, skills, and independence of young people means investing in Europe's future prosperity.

As you know, Europe 2020 spells out three overall priorities:

- Smart growth (fostering knowledge, innovation, education and digital society);
- Sustainable growth (making our production more resource efficient while boosting our competitiveness); and
- Inclusive growth (raising participation in the labour market, the acquisition of skills and the fight against poverty).
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The emphasis on youth is clear in all three priorities and in the flagship initiative called "Youth on the Move".

Against the backdrop of the crisis, "Youth on the Move" aims to improve knowledge, mobility and job prospects of young people.

This is important: in the EU,

- less than one person in three aged 25–34 has a university degree, compared to 40% in the US and over 50% in Japan.
- 1 in 7 young people drop out of school too early; and
- 1 in 5 young Europeans are currently unemployed.
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Those three facts explain the unprecedented prominence of young people among the political priorities of the Union. Now we need to act.

First of all, we are preparing a policy document that will spell out in great detail the actions we will take under Youth on the Move. And we will follow that next year with proposals to strengthen our programmes for young people.

But we can already see what our priorities need to be:

- the promotion of entrepreneurship;
- a better recognition of non–formal learning; and
- a new Youth Employment Framework, to use mobility to increase job opportunities.

In the meantime, the existing Youth Strategy of the EU – called "Investing and Empowering" – has opened a space for cooperation between the Commission and Member States.

Although youth unemployment is higher in some parts of Europe than in others; it is a genuine pan–European challenge that must be tackled also at European level.

National and local responses remain essential and central, but their impact will be a lot larger if they are taken in concert among all the countries of the EU.

National responses should come together as a genuinely European recipe for ensuring that young people are best equipped and empowered to weather the crisis.

Most importantly, I believe that the contribution of young people will be decisive to take Europe out of the crisis. So we also need your ideas about how to design the European response and we will consult with you on the shape of our future programmes.

The challenges that lie ahead are real, but we are determined to ensure that the tools available at EU level are used to the full.

**The second question was about the transition from education to the labour market.**

Transitions are clearly a delicate issue.

You mention the transitions that take young people to their first jobs, but under the new, more flexible labour markets we are likely to face many more transitions during our working lives.

Here the challenge is to make sure that people *stay* in the labour market, with their feet firmly on the jobs ladder.

We have identified three main reasons that make the transition from education to the labour market difficult:

- The mismatch between skills and labour–market needs is reason number one.

Clearly, we need to equip young people with new skills for the jobs of today. We also need to combine the need for flexibility in the labour market with an acceptable level of security, or "flexicurity".

- Another reason is the lack of recognition of prior learning experiences, and of the skills acquired in non–formal learning.

Non–formal education is an important means of increasing the chances to find a job and should be promoted and recognised for that.

- A third reason is insufficient information.

Guidance and counselling are not always available and should be much more tailored to the needs of young people. For instance, I would like to see employment services work more in line with education and social services.

Finally, let us not forget some tangible obstacles to job mobility such as finding a new home, inadequate transportation, and administrative barriers, which can make transitions really difficult even when your next job is waiting for you. These issues cannot be tackled in isolation from each other.

Youth on the Move will address all these issues, notably through the Youth Employment Framework and other actions that will promote non-formal learning.

**The third and last question was more general and was about how to leverage the imagination of young people to get out of this crisis.**

We need to break a vicious circle here; the crisis is disproportionately hitting young people precisely at a time when we need their strength and ideas to get out of it.

Let me mention a couple of areas in which young people can contribute.

- First, there is innovation and entrepreneurship.

In our innovative and rapidly changing economies there should be many opportunities for creative and innovative businesses. Entrepreneurship could be a rewarding career option for many young people.

In this context, why are young entrepreneurs so few in Europe? Entrepreneurship is above all a mindset, this is why we insist in our education policies that the entrepreneurial spirit is promoted in all levels of education.

We should also find better means to support start-ups by young businesspeople; for instance, by providing support services and learning networks.

One idea we've had is called Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs. This is a programme that helps provide on-the-job training for new entrepreneurs, offers networking opportunities across the Union, and assists in gaining market access and identifying potential partners.

- A second area where your ideas would be welcome is how to broaden our the opportunities available to young people.

As I said earlier, behind the European average rate of unemployment, we see great differences among regions and sectors.

So, it should be easier for young people to take their talent and skills where opportunities are.

I'm not thinking only about finding jobs abroad; there are other options, such as an apprenticeship, internship, time spent as a volunteer and other opportunities to invest in oneself.

Youth on the Move will enhance the EU's mobility programmes and help to remove the remaining obstacles to mobility.

This should encourage young people to explore the *European* labour market, rather than just local or national ones.

We must also make the most of existing tools, such as EURES, the European job mobility portal.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I'm convinced that we can attain our policy goals for young people only if we work together with young people.

Towards the end of 2009, I briefly served as Commissioner responsible for youth issues. I saw how essential it was to involve young people in shaping our policies.

The Commission engages with young people through the Structured Dialogue, which means its EU steering committee, the national consultation rounds and EU Youth Conferences, such as the one held last week in Jerez de la Frontera.

And the Structured Dialogue is not the only tool. At the end of March, the Commission adopted the European Citizens' Initiative giving all citizens over 18 – and over 16 in Austria – new opportunities to influence EU policy.

I encourage you to make the most of this new democratic tool and to pursue your commitment in EU policy matters.

I trust that I can continue to count on your constructive contribution.

Thank you.