GLOBAL YOUTH AND POST-PANDEMIC FUTURES

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From climate hazards and COVID-19 to protests for racial justice and the rise of identity politics – the past year has left a mark on the young generation.

The effects of the pandemic particularly affect young people, they exacerbate existing inequalities and could reduce the productive potential of an entire generation, the International Labour Organisation has warned.

At the same time, younger generations are pleading for the recovery plans to be in line with climate commitments, seeking to make sure that no-one is left behind and the voice of youth is heard.

Although seven in 10 young people said they feel uncertain about their future, with 40% saying the future feels more uncertain than a year ago, according to a recent poll, 76% of young respondents feel positive about their future and 91% want to make the most of what comes next for them beyond 2020.

This event report looks into the key issues that will shape the future of the next generations in a post-pandemic world.
There can be no return to business as usual after the pandemic and no amount of economic pressure should force us to compromise on people’s health and the health of our planet, Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius said in an interview about the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic and young people’s demands for a greener future.

He spoke to EURACTIV ahead of ViacomCBS and EU40’s ‘BEYOND 2020 - Global Youth: voices and futures!’ virtual summit.

**How does the Commission want to make sure that young people don’t fall victim of the recession that might be looming post-COVID?**

Young people deserve all possible opportunities to develop their full potential to shape the future of the EU and to thrive in the green and digital transitions. However, we also know that young people often face a difficult start in the labour market, and this has been emphasised by the pandemic.

Our package on youth employment support, skills and vocational education and training that we

**INTERVIEW**

Sinkevicius: ‘There can be no return to business as usual’ after the pandemic

By Alexandra Brzozowski | EURACTIV.com
presented in July 2020 is specifically designed to help the next generation of Europeans to get on the jobs ladder. Its initiatives build on the Commission’s ambitious recovery plan which provides significant EU financing opportunities for youth employment so that all Member States can invest in young people.

The Commission also proposed on 1 July 2020 to reinforce the Youth Guarantee. The new Youth Guarantee will reach out to young people, supporting them in developing skills and gaining work experience, in particular those relevant to the green and digital transitions. We are also urging Member States to step up youth employment support through NextGenerationEU and the future EU budget.

The overall ambition is that member states invest EU funding of at least €22 billion in youth employment. For example, the EU can help fund start-up grants and loans for young entrepreneurs, bonuses for SMEs hiring apprentices, training sessions to acquire new skills needed on the labour market, investments in digital learning infrastructure and technology.

### Young people often face barriers to political engagement, now with the crisis, even more, do you acknowledge that a growing number feels ‘disconnected’ with the current political environment?

Young people are keen to participate in democratic life. A majority of them votes in elections, in addition to joining new forms of participation or online debates. For instance, young people significantly contributed to the increased voter turnout in the last European Elections in 2019.

According to our Eurobarometer surveys, three out of four young Europeans are engaged in organised activities, one in three has already been a volunteer, and among their top priorities for the EU we find, protecting the environment and fighting climate change, better education, and fighting poverty and inequalities.

Yet, many challenges prevent them from realising their aspirations and full potential. These challenges are primarily linked to an uncertain future, due to societal changes such as artificial intelligence, demographics, inequality, disinformation or populism.

These challenges require young people to be extremely resilient and to have the knowledge and skills that make them fit for their personal and professional development and for their role as citizens in society. This is especially challenging for young people with fewer opportunities.

### Will this be a generation of lost opportunities?

We know that the current COVID-19 crisis and its social and economic consequences are hitting young generations hard. They have already been facing unemployment and demographic challenges over the last decade in some EU countries. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic makes youth engagement especially challenging. Mental well-being has dropped disproportionally compared to other age groups.

Though heavily affected by this crisis, young people have displayed great resilience and came up with solidarity initiatives on an impressive scale. Whether doing grocery shopping, sewing masks or creating online educational materials for children, young people engaged in the European Solidarity Corps are determined to support those in need.

The EU had to find powerful tools to respond to the pandemic and at the same time fuel the twin green and digital transitions. This is how we came up with a historic new Multiannual Financial Framework, and with NextGenerationEU. These instruments will channel more funds than ever before into education, culture, research and innovation through different EU programmes over the next seven years.

One criticism has always been that the EU institutions need to change their communication approach towards younger generations. Do you feel they are currently doing a good job?

I’ve always believed in the power of honest, two-way communication. Europe should not only be the transmitter of news and information but should also be the receiver, the one that listens to what Europeans think. I know it is a hard task trying to reach the younger generations, but also older people and people living in Europe’s distant regions.

To answer your question, yes I think there is a synchronised effort from all EU bodies to organise more events involving the young, connect with them through social media platforms and generally interact with them much more intensely than in the past. Is it enough?

I think we can certainly learn and improve more. I am now hosting a series of dialogues with Europeans from many member states – mostly young people – are participating. I am astonished by the knowledge and sensitivity I have noticed, by their

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desire to make Europe a better place to live in.

This truly motivates me and I appreciate the fact that even without meeting them in person, I can still discuss with them and hear their concerns. I am looking very much forward to invest more in building trust by visiting people, taking the time to meet them. I think at the end of the day that’s what really counts if we want to build a relationship that lasts.

The young generation is demanding the transformation of our European societies, particularly in terms of sustainability (we saw this in the climate protest). How does the Commission want to make sure that it involves young people in those processes?

We reach out to young people in a number of ways. I take this very seriously myself, and in fact, the first stakeholder group I met as a Commissioner was a delegation of young people from around the EU. Before COVID-19 struck, my services ran some very successful participatory workshops with groups of young people, with their suggestions filtering back to central services. And we reach out collectively as a Commission. In December last year for instance, the Commission launched the Climate Pact and invited everyone to participate in climate action and build a greener Europe.

But it’s clear that we need to do more. It would help, for instance, if we had a register with the interested youth groups to which public consultations can easily be sent and shared. We could do more to invite them to meetings as observers or proper participants, and we are looking into that.

And at the Commission level, we are committed to the two-year ‘Future of Europe Campaign’. It was due to start in May last year, but again, we had to delay because of Covid. We are still fine-tuning, but it should launch this summer. That will include an in-depth reflection on exactly this question, finding ways to ensure that there is greater representation of more diverse voices in our policy planning and delivery.

So the will is there. But we’re still working on the means.

In retrospect, younger people were enthusiastic to get behind the Commission’s European Green Deal, the public, politicians and industry promised to do its part. Are you concerned that it will be more difficult to turn the aspirations into actual action?

It’s true that the real test for the European Green Deal will be how much we manage to translate its ambitious aspirations into real action on the ground, and how much it manages to trigger a profound and systemic change in the way we produce, consume and live our lives. This will depend on all actors in society.

We are realistic. It won’t always be easy. We know that some sectors still need to be convinced. There are hearts and minds to move, and large sums of money need to be redirected away from activities that harm the planet towards those that heal it.

But at the same time, I am optimistic that we can do this. We have the knowledge and technology. There are existing solutions that work and that need to be scaled up. We know it makes social and economic sense, and more and more businesses, industries, decision-makers and citizens of all generations are getting on board every day.

But do you think we will see a return to old habits after the pandemic due to economic pressure?

The pandemic did see some unsustainable habits return – increased consumption of single-use plastic packaging, littering and use of personal cars for example. But at the same time, it brought a new understanding of how much we depend on our natural world – for our health and the resilience of our societies. Lots of people took up healthy habits such as cycling and started rethinking their consumption patterns and values.

And with countries and the EU unlocking unprecedented funds to rebuild our economies, there is clearly a momentum to build healthier, more resilient and sustainable societies.

There can be no return to business as usual, and no amount of economic pressure should force us to compromise on people’s health and the health of our planet.
As digital skills have become more essential in the labour market, especially for young people, there is an increased urgency to tackle the inequalities of the digital divide caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, policymakers say.

Young people have been disproportionately hit by the economic fallout from the pandemic. Youth unemployment stood at 15.4% across the EU in April 2020 but has already risen to 17.8% in December 2020. In contrast, the general unemployment rate rose only by 0.9% from a year ago.

According to a recent international research project, 60% of young people surveyed believe they will struggle financially in the future, while 76% believe their generation will be better educated than previous generations.

However, students, teachers, and employees all over Europe were forced to switch to digital solutions in order to resume their activities safely while healthcare systems were bracing for the recurring waves of COVID-19 infections.

In January, the European Commission called on member states to invest in equipment and training to mitigate "inequalities between children" that came to the fore due to the increased use of distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.


"While the momentum of
digital transformation in Europe soared, providing an opportunity for member states to amplify the integration of digital technologies in their recovery strategies, the risk of growing inequalities persisted, and still persists today,” Kaili said.

Asked what the EU should do to avoid growing inequalities through the digital divide among Europe’s younger generations, Kaili said that “among the many areas that need our attention, appropriate and robust infrastructure, digital equipment, digital content, and tailored digital skills are central to mitigate risks of growing inequalities in the EU”.

“This is particularly important for the younger generations who will be called on to be the most resilient in the aftermath of the pandemic, and we need to equip them for the next challenges,” the Greek MEP added.

According to her, growing inequalities go beyond the region or location, but have also to do with the income level and gender, which is why “a holistic approach with cross-sectoral investment – from networks and infrastructure to the upskilling of educators – is necessary and must reach far and wide, to the most remote regions of the EU”.

Asked whether she thought the pandemic has taught us anything about the specific skills that the executive should prioritise in terms of Europe’s future growth, Kaili pointed towards digital literacy, computing education, programming languages and gamified coding as some examples that educational systems around the EU may integrate, “not only in their curricula but also in the way in which knowledge and content are delivered to students”.

Data-intensive technologies such as AI and early experimentation with robotics and incubated, baseline engineering can not only make the learning environment more stimulating and fit for the future, Kaili said.

“The job market of the future is very different from what our generation was educated for and the advent of AI means that jobs which require knowledge will give way to jobs that require creativity,” she added.

"Already now, if you ask them what is their dream job, they would reply ‘influencer, computer scientist, digital artist, Youtuber or more recently… Tik-toker’”.

“Currently, having power means having access to immense data. In the future, having power will mean to know what to ignore,” she said, adding that the new European Skills agenda could be the right tool to make sure that the young generation has a safety net in the post-COVID era and legal certainty with clear rules of the online space and marketplace will be essential.

Kaili also stressed that she believes people should be supported and given alternatives if they choose to live offline or if they do not have the digital skills to be online, but we should also look into the psychological impact of always being connected.

“We need to understand and control better the effects of new tech for users, workers, children, as it might mean that we need to develop new skill sets in parallel to the digital skills and a more creative and problem-solving mentality,” she added.

“However, the most important aspects of EU’s strategy should be to translate fundamental rights and principles into the digital era, to remain human-centric and trustworthy in respect of the quality of citizens lives,” she added.
Today’s youth have been deeply impacted by 2020 but remain resilient, positive and committed to working towards a better future.

As the world continues on its path of unparalleled social, political and financial uncertainty, we wonder, what will the future offer the youth of today? Deprived of previous years’ opportunity and seemingly infinite prospects of travel, study and work, what do the young adults of 2020 now dream of? At the same time, as a society we ask ourselves, how can we empower young people to take control of their lives in the face of such disruption? Where do we begin in creating the right support structures to enable the next generations to flourish?

These are the questions that inspired ViacomCBS, parent company of MTV, Nickelodeon, Paramount and Comedy Central, and EU40, the Network of young Members of the European Parliament, to partner and seek long term systemic action, with only one goal: empower today’s youth.

‘One out of three citizens in the European Union is 30 years of age or less, it is pivotal to include their perspective for the future.’ said Alessandro Da Rold, Managing Director at EU40. ‘By bridging the gap between the civil society, different organizations and the young politicians of our network, we hope

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not only to inspire young people to speak up and change their realities, but also gain insights and learn about the numerous virtuous success stories that the youth put together, in times of need’.

This process began with insights. ViacomCBS launched a global study to discover how the events of 2020 have shaped young people’s plans, beliefs and attitudes for the future: Beyond 2020: Global Youth – Voices & Futures. Surveying more than 8,000 young people aged 16-24 across 15 countries (Argentina, Australia, Brazil, China, France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Netherlands, Portugal, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, UK, USA), young adults were asked for input on many different topics from health, climate change, politics and social issues, to travel, finance and relationships.

Whilst the study discovered a civilly active generation who felt deeply impacted by the events of 2020, compelling them to value stability and security more than ever before, the findings unearthed some fascinating insights on their resilience, and their strong will to change the future for the better.

**TAKING ACTION TOWARDS A PROMISING FUTURE**

Young people feel a strong sense of responsibility to contribute to the solution and society’s recovery. Many confirmed to have begun to pivot and take action towards a more promising future, and just over half (55%) of the global youth saying that they are hopeful about seeing positive changes in the way we live over the next 10 years.

However, young people are not idealistic dreamers. They demonstrated a strong sense of realism and consciousness that positive change does not come easy: 70% of respondents agreed “I feel uncertain about my future”, but more young people feel positive about their future, with 76% replying “I feel positive about my future” and 72% believe they “feel prepared to deal with whatever life throws at me”. Overall, young people are driven and know that they have the potential to make the world a better place, as 84% agreed, “My generation has the potential to change the world for the better”.

**CLIMATE CHANGE SHOULD BE HIGH ON THE WORLD AGENDA**

Despite all the very important issues and challenges the year 2020 has seen, a key priority for young people remains the environment and the impact of climate change. In fact, when asked what the most important priorities for society to work on in the next 10 years are, the environment was top of the list for our global 16-24s.

But young people are also the strongest voice fighting globally for a real change in society. From demonstrations to inspiring acts of civilism, their individual commitment to contribute to the fight against climate change goes from recycling to being prepared to change travel habits. Three quarters of young people believe that “People will be more likely to choose environmentally friendly vacations” and an astonishing 39% agree, “I won’t fly due to the impact on the environment”. Overall, young people demonstrate once more to be responsible and motivated to positively impact the environment, but feel the need for high-level support from their communities to be able to drive real change.

**SOCIETY NEEDS TO INCREASE SUPPORT FOR MENTAL HEALTH**

One of the most relevant areas according to the young respondents was mental health. Indeed, this issue no doubt continues to worsen with consecutive lockdowns, especially for young people who long for more freedom and socializing. Young people believe health in general will experience the most long-lasting impact, with 75% of 16-24s globally agreeing that in particular “Mental health will be a major problem for society”. There is also widespread recognition that mental health will increasingly become a priority, as 83% agreed, “There will be more openness and acceptance of mental health issues”. Our youth acknowledge the significant and highly serious impact of mental health on individual and collective wellbeing.

The study sheds light on the responsible global citizens our youth are today, and highlights that whilst they are driven and hopeful, they need commitment from institutions, industry and general society to feel they can create lasting positive impact.
Despite their concern for stability and disrupted plans, the study found a strong sense of conscious optimism and an excited generation to make the most of what comes next.

“Beyond 2020 uncovered key insights into how global youth perspectives and attitudes are shifting as a result of the uncertainty and change we all experienced in 2020,” said Christian Kurz, Senior Vice President, Global Insights. “This is the first step in understanding the topics that mean the most to our youth, which is where we must begin to work together to build a positive society that nurtures their ambitions and priorities.”

All this is incredibly relevant... Therefore, we couldn’t sit on it! This is why we are tackling these important findings by bringing together a variety of players, during the digital event ‘BEYOND 2020 – Global Youth: voices and futures’ organized by ViacomCBS and EU40 in partnership with EURACTIV on 2nd February (register here). We will be discussing youth’s core issues with politicians and public figures, young activists and changemakers, to explore these key findings, exchange experiences and understand concrete next steps. The virtual event will bring together EU politicians and officials from the European Parliament, European Commission and Council, industry stakeholders, trade associations, NGOs, youth associations, environmental associations, policy think-tanks and consultancies, with the aim to inspire and drive collective action.

Aware of the significant work to be and increasing vulnerability of today’s youth without concrete support systems, ViacomCBS and EU40 remain dedicated to taking forward the important work carried out and, through multi-stakeholder collaboration, to driving positive long-term action for the next generations.