



## **Report**

# **Youth Policy Dialogue with Roxana Mînzatu, Executive Vice-President for Social Rights and Skills, Quality Jobs and Preparedness**

Can we build a more affordable future for young Europeans? Addressing challenges in housing, work and cost of living

3 March 2026 – 9:30-12:30

Location: The EGG, Brussels



## Introduction

The [Youth Policy Dialogue](#) took place on 3 March 2026 in the margins of the [European Employment and Social Rights Forum](#) at the EGG in Brussels. A total of 15 young participants joined Executive Vice-President (EVP) Roxana Mînzatu to discuss about cost of living and its impact on youth.

The event was moderated by Naomi Lloyd, a TV journalist and experienced event moderator. For this year's edition, DG EMPL also partnered with the LEGO Foundation to organise a one-hour interactive workshop prior to the dialogue, based on the [Build the Change](#) methodology which was tailored to this specific audience.

The dialogue encouraged young people to share their experiences, challenges, ideas and expectations on what the rising cost of living means for them. It also allowed for a timely discussion on some of the key priorities in the EVP's portfolio, specifically the work on the first-ever EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, on European Affordable Housing Plan and the development of a Quality Jobs Act.

For the second consecutive year, the dialogue was organised during the Forum benefiting from the event's high visibility. Additionally, the dialogue's topic was closely aligned with the Forum's main theme<sup>1</sup>, thereby further enhancing its relevance and impact.

The fifteen participants were recruited via DG EAC's participants database, which includes VET representatives, and via the National Youth Councils coordinated by the European Youth Forum.

The participants were selected to ensure balanced representation in terms of age, gender and nationality (nine women and six men aged 21 to 29 and coming from 12 different countries). Their skills and profiles were also considered to foster an engaging and dynamic conversation.

## Summary of the online preparatory meeting(s)

Prior to the in-person event on 3 March, an online preparatory meeting took place on 25 February from 17:00 to 18:00. Before the meeting, all participants received a briefing on the main topic of the dialogue. Agenda points included a round of introductions, an overview of the Youth Policy Dialogue and practical information on what to expect on the day.

The main objectives of the meeting were to ensure all participants were aligned on the concept of the dialogue, answer all their questions, and provide a space for a first touchpoint between the participants, the moderator and the organising team at Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL), and our partners from the LEGO Foundation.

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<sup>1</sup> The main theme of the 2026 edition of the European Employment and Social Rights Forum was '*Social Europe: Empowering people in times of change*'.

Following the preparatory meeting, a group chat was created for easier communication with participants, and a [social media kit](#) was shared to encourage the participants to spread content related to the Dialogue on their channels.

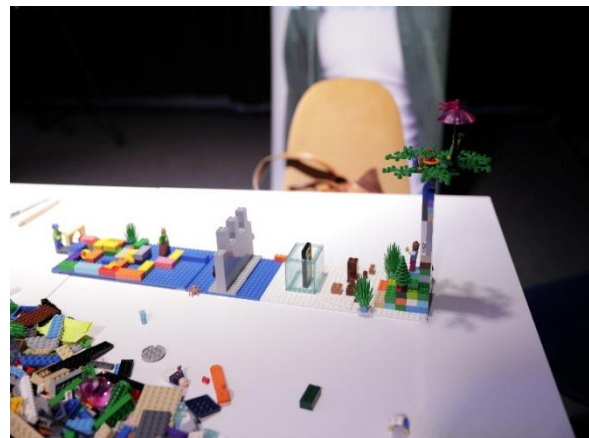
## Summary of the Youth Policy Dialogue

The session took place in the morning of the first day of the Forum and began with an **interactive icebreaker activity**. Participants were asked to stand in a straight line while the moderator read out a series of statements about the cost of living. If a statement applied to them, they were invited to take a step forward. By the end of the exercise, **those who had taken more steps forward were likely to be the ones who had experienced the effects of rising living costs more strongly**. The statements included, among others: reducing social activities because of rising prices, experiencing an increase in rent, relying on family for essential expenses, experiencing challenges to mental wellbeing due to the cost of living. Most participants stepped forward several times, with many nearly reaching the front of the room offering a strong visual representation of how widespread these challenges are among young people.

A [vox pop video](#) recorded during the day provides additional insights into participants' experiences.



Prior to the dialogue with the EVP, participants took part in a **preparatory workshop designed and facilitated by the LEGO Foundation** to encourage reflection on how rising living costs impact on their daily lives, opportunities, and future choices. Through individual and collaborative constructions, they



translated their experiences into visual messages, reflecting financial pressures, uncertainty and the trade-offs faced by their peers.

The models highlighted **several recurring themes, including rural–urban divides, structural barriers to employment, and a shortage of affordable, quality housing**. Some constructions depicted ‘glass walls’ impeding progress, noting that while some individuals possess ‘ladders’, meaning the resources or opportunities to overcome these barriers, not everyone has access to them. Others built a chaotic maze, representing the many struggles they face at the beginning of their professional career. Each table then produced a final LEGO construction combining the individual models created by participants.



After a round of introductions, the dialogue began with opening remarks by EVP Mînzatu. She emphasised the need for continuous and systemic upskilling across all generations, describing a ‘skills revolution’ in which regular investment in training becomes essential for individuals and the EU to maintain their competitive edge.

She also underlined that the cost-of-living crisis is a long-term structural challenge. Housing was highlighted as a key issue, particularly in university cities, where high costs can limit young people’s opportunities. Finally, she noted that the first-ever EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, set to launch this year, will focus on preventing poverty and addressing rising costs in sectors such as energy, transportation and healthcare, which particularly impact young people and rural communities.

Building on the preparatory LEGO workshop, participants shared key insights from their group reflections before moving on to a moderated open-floor discussion about the cost of living. This touched on **labour shortages, the lack of prestige associated with vocational education and training, and the need to improve the recognition and portability of skills across the EU**. The **impact of artificial intelligence** on the labour market was also widely discussed, particularly its potential to reshape entry-level opportunities for young people. Young people shared **concrete examples of how rising costs affected them**, including cutting back on leisure and cultural activities or quality clothing, sacrificing living space and privacy, delaying independence, and being shocked by the rising prices of essentials such as food, transports, heating, and healthcare. Participants also reflected on the role of EU funding in supporting

young people's access to the labour market, emphasising **the importance of infrastructure, housing and job opportunities** in making rural areas more attractive places to live. These topics are explored in greater detail in the following section of the report.

Finally, the EVP delivered the closing remarks, outlining the Commission's next steps including the Quality Jobs Act, the Fair Labour Mobility package, and actions to bolster vocational training, digital education and the forthcoming EU Anti-Poverty Strategy. Placing these efforts in the context of increasing global competition, she stressed the need to reinforce the European social model to ensure that citizens can navigate these transformations without compromising their fundamental rights. She also encouraged young participants to remain politically active at local, national and European levels, underlining that policymaking gaps persist when youth voices are absent.



## Topic(s) of discussion

Below are the **three** takeaways from the discussions held during this Youth Dialogue:

### **1. Strengthening the transition from education to employment**

Participants stressed the need to improve the transition from education to the labour market, particularly by addressing the lack of entry-level job opportunities and restoring the attractiveness and recognition of vocational education and training (VET). Technical professions were described as essential, yet frequently undervalued career paths. Many young people are pushed towards university paths, leaving those interested in vocational careers feeling unmotivated or overlooked. It was suggested that strengthening the recognition and dignity of vocational careers from an early age is a crucial step in ensuring that these paths are seen as proper, well-paid, and stable career options.

Several solutions were proposed, including expanding traineeships and entry-level opportunities, strengthening dialogue between education providers and employers, and using wage subsidies and EU

funding instruments such as the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) to support first-job experiences and facilitate access to quality employment.

Participants also suggested improving financial education in schools to better equip young people to manage housing costs, expenses and career planning.

## **2. Addressing housing affordability and regional disparities**

Housing affordability was widely recognised as a key driver of the cost-of-living crisis affecting young people. Participants discussed potential ways to increase the housing supply and improve access to affordable accommodation. These included simplifying administrative procedures for construction, accelerating the granting of building permits and activating vacant properties through renovation incentives. There was also a call to abolish stricter rules and funds for public housing in large cities. A proposal was made for a European fund dedicated to housing young people, with strict conditions for Member States to ensure support reaches those most in need.

The discussion also explored the potential of smaller cities and rural areas as an alternative to increasingly expensive urban centres. Participants stressed that investments in reliable public transport, digital connectivity and diverse local job opportunities are essential to make these areas attractive places to live and work. Innovative housing solutions were also proposed, such as intergenerational housing and non-commercial ‘third spaces’ where young people can build community and support their mental health.

Encouraging remote work and decentralisation of economic activities were also mentioned as possible ways to support more balanced regional development.

EVP Mînzatu stressed that EU and Member State policies must recognise the willingness of young people to consider rural living, provided adequate infrastructure and opportunities are in place. She underlined that housing and mobility initiatives should empower citizens and ensure equitable access to decent housing, rather than merely connecting young people with job opportunities.

## **3. AI & adapting skills in a changing labour market**

Participants pointed out that AI is increasingly automating tasks traditionally performed by junior employees, reducing the availabilities of entry-level jobs and creating challenges for young people trying to secure their first roles. This shift in the labour market underscores the need for continuous skills development and lifelong learning to ensure that all generations remain competitive.

At the same time, AI was recognised as a potential solution to broader structural challenges. For instance, digital tools could significantly speed up the recognition of skills and qualifications across borders, reinforce the EU’s efforts to modernise the labour market, and boost worker mobility. Additionally, automating bureaucratic processes such as building permits and licensing could increase housing supply and cut costs, showing how technology can promote economic efficiency while meeting social needs.

Participants also highlighted the importance of raising awareness of EU opportunities, including ALMA, to ensure that young people are informed about their rights and the resources available to support employment and mobility.

## Follow-up activities

The three above-mentioned key takeaways will feed into the Commission's work through initiatives such as the Anti-Poverty Strategy and Fair Labour Mobility package, including the Skills Portability Initiative, contributing to affordable housing and rural development, stronger youth employment, and addressing skills gaps in the context of AI and labour market transformation.

In addition, participants were asked to fill-in a feedback survey. Their responses will shape the organisation of future Youth Policy Dialogues.

As part of the post-event communication, DG EMPL has published a video of a vox-pop interview featuring a selection of Dialogue participants.

## Annex

- [Event page on European Youth Portal](#)
- [Event page on DG EMPL website](#)
- EU Employment & Skills post-event post:
  - [LinkedIn](#)
  - [Facebook](#)
  - [X](#)
- EU Employment & Skills vox-pop video:
  - [LinkedIn](#)
  - [X](#)
  - [YouTube](#)
- [Social media kit](#)