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ESDN Youth Network Policy Note

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Resilience 2.0: Developing a coherent global vision for Europe - asserting Europe's position as a strong, stable, and trusted worldwide partner, based on a clear strategic concept

Introduction

In 2020 the European Sustainable Development Network established the ESDN Youth Network, which is funded by the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Climate Action, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety.

Its yearly on-site event, the **ESDN Youth Workshop 2026**, took place on **12–15 August 2026** in Vienna at the Austrian Ministry for Agriculture and Forestry, Climate and Environmental Protection, Regions and Water Management, brought together more than 42 UN Youth Delegates and National Representatives on Sustainable Development (SD) from 31 European countries to discuss issues most relevant to them.

The overarching theme of the Workshop was **"Resilience 2.0"** as described in the **2025 Strategic Foresight Report - European Commission**. Four of the eight areas of action mentioned in the report were dealt with in more detail according to a ranking carried out by the ESDN Youth Network:

- Supporting sustainable and inclusive well-being
- Strengthening democracy as a common good
- Developing a coherent global vision for the EU
- Strengthen long-term economic resilience

Over the four days of the Workshop, Youth Members heard input from experts on all of these topics and were given ample opportunity to discuss these topics and issues with one another.

The main goal of the Workshop, apart from providing a space for Youth Members to exchange ideas with one another, was to produce a policy document with recommendations on the topics covered throughout the Workshop. This was done by the Youth Members working in smaller groups on five different issues. This Policy Note focuses on Core Issue 4. The other Policy Notes are available separately, as well as in one complete document.

- **Core Issue 1: Reimagining education - coupling education reform with future-oriented labor market and social policies**
- **Core Issue 2: Strengthening democracy as a common good: countering polarization, supporting community building and safeguarding democratic standards**
- **Core Issue 3: Strengthening long-term economic resilience -increasing the ability to deliver sustainable and inclusive growth (circular economy and a resilient labor market)**
- **Core Issue 4: Developing a coherent global vision for Europe - asserting Europe's position as a strong, stable, and trusted worldwide partner, based on a clear strategic concept**
- **Core Issue 5: Sustainable and inclusive well-being**

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Developing a coherent global vision for Europe - asserting Europe's position as a strong, stable, and trusted worldwide partner, based on a clear strategic concept

Europe is at a crossroads of its own making. For decades, Europe could claim — often with good reason — a form of moral high ground: democracy, human rights, environmental ambition, social protection, solidarity and rule-based governance. These are not secondary features of the European project. They are written into its treaties and have shaped the way Europe presents itself to the world.

The difficulty is that Europe increasingly struggles to live up to the model it has spent decades promoting. Power politics has returned, economic dependencies have become geopolitical leverage, and Europe is being tested not only by systemic rivals but also by partners and allies whose interests do not always coincide with its own. At home, slower productivity growth, high energy costs, demographic pressure and an investment gap estimated by the Draghi Report at €750–800 billion per year have turned competitiveness into an existential question.

This exposes an uncomfortable contradiction: Europe fears that defending its standards will make it less competitive yet compromising them has not necessarily made it more powerful.

The transatlantic tariff settlement made this tension visible. Faced with US pressure, Europe prioritized predictability and de-escalation, accepting a 15% tariff ceiling on most EU exports while removing remaining tariffs on US industrial goods, even if safeguards were later added. The episode raises a broader question: how willing is Europe to use the economic weight of its Single Market when pressure comes from an ally?

The same dilemma exists at home. Europe does need to simplify. Fragmentation and regulatory complexity impose real costs on businesses and weaken the Single Market. However, simplification can easily blur into retreat when substantive standards are weakened in the name of competitiveness. Cutting unnecessary bureaucracy is sensible. Competing by progressively lowering the standards Europe once presented as a strength is not. Otherwise, Europe risks becoming less distinctive without becoming more competitive.

Meanwhile, strategic dependencies remain acute. Europe still relies overwhelmingly on China for several critical raw materials. The lesson from Russia should be clear: dependencies that look efficient in normal times can become strategic liabilities overnight.

On the other hand, Russia also proved that Europe could act. After the invasion of Ukraine, the EU rapidly reduced its dependence on Russian gas and moved towards a legally binding phase-out. That adjustment came at a significant cost: the energy crisis exposed European consumers and businesses to sharply higher prices, while some countries temporarily increased coal use to secure supply. In addition, it also laid bare the risks of excessive dependence and reinforced the case for diversifying supply, accelerating renewables and strengthening Europe's own energy resilience. When urgency, political will and solidarity align, dependencies once treated as unavoidable can be broken remarkably quickly.

This is the resilience Europe now needs: not the absence of costs or difficult trade-offs, but the capacity to absorb them and adapt. Not self-sufficiency and not isolation. Strategic autonomy should mean retaining enough economic, industrial, technological, energy and political capacity to make our own choices — and enough resilience to withstand the consequences when others dislike them.

Europe does not lack power. It has the economic scale of its Single Market, regulatory influence, technological capabilities, trade leverage and strong alliances. What it too often lacks is the willingness, cohesion and institutional capacity to use these assets strategically.

Europe has teeth. It is simply too often reluctant to bite.

The question is, therefore, not whether Europe possesses power, but whether it has organized itself to use it.

A coherent global vision should begin with one objective: preserving Europe's capacity to make its own choices. That freedom of action rests on five mutually reinforcing foundations: economic scale, strategic diversification, institutional capacity, credible values and democratic legitimacy.

Policy Recommendations: Economic Scale - Turning the Single Market into European Power

Europe's ability to act globally begins with its ability to function internally. The Single Market should no longer be understood only as an economic achievement. In a world increasingly shaped by continental powers, it is also strategic infrastructure for European power.

Yet its scale remains partly theoretical. Companies operating across the Union still face different administrative processes, reporting systems, registration requirements and interpretations of common rules. These costs are particularly damaging for SMEs and scale-ups.

Europe cannot expect its companies to scale globally if it does not allow them to scale continentally.

Streamlining should therefore become a core component of European competitiveness. However, simplification must not become a synonym for deregulation. High environmental, social, safety and consumer standards can provide certainty and a level playing field. The real target should be duplication, inconsistency and unnecessary procedure.

The guiding principle should be simple: regulate once, comply once, report once.

Information already lawfully held by public authorities should not repeatedly be requested. Mutual recognition should be the default where equivalent requirements have been met. Cross-border procedures should increasingly be digital and interoperable.

At the same time, deeper integration should not mean harmonization for its own sake. European action should focus on areas where fragmentation creates clear costs, prevents companies from reaching scale or weakens resilience — particularly in services, capital, energy and digital markets.

Therefore, we recommend to:

- **Make** "**regulate once, comply once, report once**" a guiding principle of Single Market policy, removing duplicative requirements and expanding interoperable digital procedures.
- **Prioritize integration where fragmentation prevents European scale**, especially in services, capital, energy and digital markets.
- **Simplify without deregulating**, targeting administrative burden while protecting substantive environmental, social, labor, safety and consumer standards.

A coherent global Europe cannot be built on a fragmented economic foundation.

Policy Recommendations: Strategic Diversification - Interdependence without dependency

Strategic autonomy should not mean retreating from the world. Europe cannot — and should not — produce everything itself.

The objective should instead be to move from passive dependence to managed interdependence: remaining open while ensuring that no single external actor acquires disproportionate leverage over European choices.

Diversification, therefore, means more partnerships, not fewer.
Europe should broaden its economic and strategic relationships across Africa, Latin

America, Asia and the Indo-Pacific without simply replacing one dominant supplier with another. Resilience comes from alternatives.

However, these partnerships must also be genuinely reciprocal. Relationships designed primarily to secure European resources or markets will not be politically sustainable. European resilience should create value for partner countries through local processing, infrastructure, skills, technology cooperation and employment.

This also requires accepting that partners have their own interests. Europe should seek cooperation rather than expecting political alignment on every issue.

Therefore, we recommend to:

- **Identify and reduce excessive strategic dependencies** before crises occur, using sector-specific diversification strategies and contingency planning.
- **Build partnerships around shared value creation**, ensuring that European access to resources and markets also strengthens local economic capacity in partner countries.
- **Develop a broad portfolio of trusted relationships** without creating new dependencies, because an important partner should never become an irreplaceable one.

Strategic autonomy should mean the freedom to remain open without becoming vulnerable to coercion.

Policy Recommendations: Institutional Capacity - Building a Union able to act

Economic scale and diversified partnerships are of limited value if the Union cannot translate them into timely political decisions.

Unanimity in foreign policy exists for understandable reasons. Foreign policy touches the core of national sovereignty, and consensus strengthens the legitimacy of common action.

However, consensus and unanimity are not the same thing.

A political system should seek consensus. It does not necessarily need to give every participant a permanent legal veto over every decision.

This matters particularly in foreign policy, where timing is often part of substance. A response delivered months after an event can have a fundamentally different impact from one delivered when the event occurs.

This does not justify moving all foreign policy to qualified majority voting. Instead, the EU should explore differentiated decision-making, matching the decision rule to the sovereignty implications of the decision concerned.

Military and defense decisions should continue to require unanimity. Conversely, there may be areas — such as certain sanction decisions, human rights positions, implementation of previously agreed strategies or civilian measures — where the costs of repeated paralysis outweigh the additional legitimacy created by unanimity.

We deliberately do not establish an exhaustive catalogue in this policy note. Such a distinction requires detailed legal and political analysis, and we stand ready to develop it further. Our purpose is to advance the principle: Europe should examine where unanimity genuinely protects essential national interests and where it primarily makes collective action vulnerable to blockage.

Existing treaties already provide some flexibility, including constructive abstention, specific cases of qualified majority voting and the possibility of extending QMV to additional CFSP areas through the Passerelle Mechanism, itself requiring unanimous agreement.

Therefore, we recommend to:

- **Review CFSP decision-making systematically**, identifying where unanimity remains indispensable and where QMV could improve effectiveness.
- **make fuller use of existing Treaty flexibility**, including constructive abstention and existing QMV provisions.

- **Preserve a culture of consensus without creating a culture of veto**, recognizing that the possibility of a vote can strengthen incentives for compromise.

Institutional reform must also be accompanied by stronger coordination between the Council, Commission, EEAS and High Representative. A Union that decides faster but acts incoherently will still fall short of strategic capacity.

Policy Recommendations: Credible Values - Power without losing purpose

The ability to act is not enough. Europe must also be clear about what its power is for.

Realism is indispensable in a more confrontational geopolitical environment. However, realism cannot mean treating democracy, human rights, international law and multilateralism as principles that matter only when defending them is cost-free.

European values should be strategic anchors rather than convenient rhetoric.

Selective application weakens European credibility and the rules-based order on which the Union itself depends. The same principle applies internally: Europe cannot credibly demand respect for democracy and the rule of law abroad while ignoring serious breaches at home.

Article 7 TEU has a specific role here. It should not be used to overcome ordinary political disagreement, but it should be applied consistently where the legal conditions concerning serious threats or breaches of the Union's foundational values are fulfilled.

Nor should a values-based foreign policy mean subordinating every external instrument to geopolitical calculation. Development cooperation, support for effective multilateralism and principled humanitarian action remain part of the distinctive role Europe seeks to play internationally.

Therefore, we recommend to:

- **Develop a more coherent foreign-policy framework**, better connecting diplomacy, security, trade, development and economic security.
- **Apply European principles more consistently at home and abroad**, including the rule of law within the Union and international law in relations with both allies and adversaries.
- **Remain a strong supporter of effective multilateralism**, sustainable development and humanitarian action, by playing a lead role in supporting the UN80 initiative and ensuring that the Special Representatives of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict, Violence against Children, and Sexual Violence in Conflict receive an adequate amount of funding to remain viable and execute their duties effectively.

Values without capacity risk becoming rhetoric. Capacity without values leaves Europe with power but no distinctive purpose.

Policy Recommendations: Democratic Legitimacy - Resilience Begins at Home

Europe's freedom to act ultimately depends on whether its citizens consider European cooperation worth sustaining.

The current picture is more complex than a simple rise in Euroscepticism. Trust in the EU and identification with European citizenship remain significant, even as Eurosceptic and radical political forces have gained ground across several Member States.

These realities are not contradictory. Political disaffection is unevenly distributed and tends to deepen where citizens perceive the costs of integration more clearly than its benefits, or where European institutions seem distant from the problems dominating everyday life.

European identity, therefore, cannot be built through communication alone.

Communication matters, particularly when citizens do not recognize the role European action plays in mobility, infrastructure,

consumer rights, energy security or employment. However, policies that do not improve lived experience will not become credible simply because they are explained better.

European identity must be supported by both a shared narrative and a shared experience. Solidarity is central to that experience.

The Ceuta crises illustrate the challenge. In both 2021 and 2026, European institutions expressed support for Spain and recognized the shared nature of the EU's external borders. Yet national reactions were not always equally aligned, revealing how formal European solidarity can coexist with domestic political reflexes pulling in the opposite direction.

Common European rules are only as resilient as the willingness of Member States to uphold them when political pressure rises.

Internal divisions also create vulnerabilities to external manipulation. Foreign actors do not need to invent European tensions if they can exploit existing ones.

Therefore, we recommend to:

- **Put citizens' lived experiences at the center of policymaking**, connecting European action more clearly to affordability, opportunity, mobility, security and quality of life.
- **Make solidarity more predictable** and European benefits more visible, replacing improvised responses with clearer shared responsibilities.
- **Invest in democratic resilience and European identity** through civic education, exchanges, youth participation, media literacy and stronger resilience to foreign information manipulation.

A European identity should not replace national identities. Its strength lies in allowing them to coexist within a wider political community. Nor should it require citizens to believe that the Union is always right. A resilient political community is one in which criticism of European institutions can coexist with a sense of belonging to Europe itself.

Conclusion: Freedom of Action as European Power

A coherent global vision for the EU requires more than a foreign-policy strategy. It requires a theory of European power.

That power should ultimately be measured by freedom of action: the ability to cooperate by choice rather than dependence, to respond before the moment for action has passed, to defend principles when doing so carries a cost and to retain democratic support while doing so.

Five foundations make that possible: economic scale, strategic diversification, institutional capacity, credible values and democratic legitimacy. None is sufficient alone.

A fragmented Single Market cannot generate Europe's full strategic weight. Diversification without reciprocity creates new dependencies. Institutional capacity without legitimacy risks alienating citizens and Member States. Values without power become rhetoric; power without values loses its purpose.

The objective is, therefore, not maximum autonomy, maximum centralization or maximum regulatory ambition. It is European freedom of action.

Simplification should not mean abandoning ambition. Integration should not mean centralizing every decision. Qualified majority voting should not mean abolishing national sovereignty. Strategic partnerships should not mean creating new dependencies, and realism should not require Europe to abandon the principles that distinguish it.

Europe should no longer be satisfied with claiming the moral high ground.

It must build the economic depth, strategic resilience, institutional agility, political credibility and public trust required to stand its ground.