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## NextGenerationEU as a (more) youth friendly Europe?

Ewa Krzaklewska<sup>a</sup>, Alessandro Martelli<sup>b\*</sup> and Ilaria Pitti<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Institute of Sociology, Uniwersytet Jagielloński, Krakow, Poland;* <sup>b</sup>*Department of Sociology and Business Law, University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy.*

\* Alessandro Martelli, Department of Sociology and Business Law, University of Bologna, Strada Maggiore 45, 40125, Bologna (Italy); [a.martelli@unibo.it](mailto:a.martelli@unibo.it)

Ewa Krzaklewska is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Sociology of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. Her research interests include topics related to youth and youth policy, i.e. the processes of entering adulthood, educational mobility and migration, as well as the sociology of families and gender equality. She has recently edited a volume on impact of COVID-19 on youth transitions (with F. Tillman, A. Stepelton, H. Williamson, Council of Europe, in print) as well as ‘Mobility, Education and Employability in the European Union: Inside Erasmus’ (with D. Cairns, V. Cuzzocrea, A. Allaste, for Palgrave, 2018).

Alessandro Martelli is Full Professor at Bologna University – Department of Sociology and Business Law. He conducts research on transformations of social needs and of welfare systems, covering issues such as Europeanization and multilevel governance of social policies, with a specific attention to policies against poverty, transition to adulthood, work/family reconciliation. He is one of the Editors of ‘Autonomie locali e servizi sociali’, a four-month scientific journal devoted to welfare issues (‘il Mulino’ Publisher). Among his recent works, the chapter ‘Youth Participation and Mediation Practices: Issues of Social Learning’, (with S. Volturo), in Z. Bečević, B. Andersson (eds), *Youth Participation and Learning. Critical Perspectives on Citizenship Practices in Europe*, Springer, Cham, 2022

Ilaria Pitti is Senior Assistant Professor at University of Bologna (Italy) and Vice-President of ISA’s RC34 ‘Sociology of Youth’. She conducts research on youth conditions and youth participation, with a focus on non-institutional forms of youth engagement and youth cultures. She has recently published the edited volume ‘Young people’s participation: revisiting youth and inequalities in Europe (with M. Bruselius-Jensen and E. K. M. Tisdall for Policy Press, 2021) and the article ‘Liminal participation: young people’s practices in the public sphere between exclusion, claims of belonging and democratic innovation (with A. Walther and Y. Mengilli, for Youth & Society, 2021).

## NextGenerationEU as a (more) youth friendly Europe?

In many countries across Europe, youth conditions and intergenerational inequalities have frequently remained at the margins of political interest and a residual topic in discourses on welfare and in social policies. Difficulties in transitions to adulthood and issues of social inclusion of youth have, for long, been conceived as problems to be addressed largely by acting on families rather than through policy measures addressing young people directly. In this scenario, the NextGenerationEU plan promises and requires a change of approach, defining youth inclusion as a strategic priority, identifying young people as main actors in their lives and in society, and imagining a more youth inclusive and equal future for Europe. Focusing on Italy and Poland – two countries distinguished by a relatively weak social inclusion of young people and a familiarised approach to youth policy - the article retraces the main traits of the condition of youth in the two national contexts and reflects on what ideas of youth and of youth futures emerge in the national implementation programmes of the NextGenerationEU.

Keywords: youth; youth policies; NextGenerationEU; Italy; Poland

### 1. Introduction

*A new impetus for European Youth*, as the European Commission titled its 2001 White Paper on youth, corresponded to an intention of renovating efforts for improving young people's lives<sup>1</sup>. In December 2021, the European Parliament and the Council of Europe have declared 2022 as the European Year of Youth, following the decision to name the overall programme of recovery and resilience out of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis as NextGenerationEU. In the EU perspective, the European Year of Youth aims at 'shining a light on the importance of European youth to build a better future – greener, more inclusive, and digital. With plenty of opportunities to learn, share your vision,

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<sup>1</sup> This article is the result of the collaborative work of the three authors. Specifically, Alessandro Martelli has written the introduction and section 2.1, Ilaria Pitti has written sections 3.1, 4.1 and the conclusion, and Ewa Krzaklewska has written sections 2.1, 3.2 and 4.2.

meet people and engage in activities all over Europe, the European Year of Youth is the moment to move forward with confidence and hope in a post-pandemic perspective<sup>2</sup>.

Considering these two events, this article analyses the condition of youth of Europe in the last two decades and reflects on how this 20 years period can be interpreted. What evolutions can we observe by looking at young people's life trajectories and youth policies? What specific considerations can be drawn on the wellbeing of young generations?

Answering these multifaceted questions implies, first and foremost, identifying the main issues at stake.

Parallel to the great socio-economic transformations occurring after the World War II, and under the developing era of globalisation, neo-liberalism has constituted a political and cultural discourse widely informing public and private action in Western countries, and has strongly influenced the meaning and the concrete evolution of youth transition, (re)shaping the risks and the ideas of inclusion of social systems between education, training, work and welfare policies (Ellison, 2021). In the Central Eastern Europe, the socio-political transition from socialism, followed by the entrance to the European Union, created new conditions for youth development, marked by uncertainty but also raising hopes and ambitions (Mach 2003; Leccardi et al. 2012). In both contexts, the widespread reaction to the economic crisis started in 2007/8, still influenced by neo-liberal winds, has been that of austerity, worsening the condition of weaker groups of population, and of young people among them.

At the EU level, only in 2017 the adoption of the Pillars of Social Rights has changed this trend, and its solidarity code has been recalled in the Next Generation Eu and its Recovery and Resilience Plan. Its effects and duration as a core principle of next European policy programmes, however, have to be observed and tested in the future.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://europa.eu/youth/year-of-youth\\_en#content](https://europa.eu/youth/year-of-youth_en#content)

In a still largely neo-liberal political and economic landscape, the Covid-19 pandemic has beaten European societies and their population, producing damages starting from the health dimension, but quickly and extensively affecting also other everyday life spheres in terms of economic, psychological and social problems. The impact has been more evident for certain groups such as young people, because of their over-representation in activities and labour market sectors severely hit by the pandemic, impact on social relations and well-being, as well as functioning of programmes, institutions and organisations supporting young people from vulnerable groups (Krzaklewska et al. 2023 forthcoming). The impact has been particularly evident in relation to education, where barriers and inequalities have increased (Ellison, 2021).

Socio-economic transformations occurred differently, and with different social implications, from country to country, hence having different impact in shaping youth transitions. This is due to the varying degrees of economic development and solidity across Europe, but also to the distinct settings in terms of public policies and of multi-level governance between national and local levels. Within the European space, youth policies tend to mirror the general structure of national welfare policies, which in turn are connected to national and local economies and labour markets, and so policies addressing young people's needs reveal distinct configurations of themes, priorities, resources, and approaches among European countries (Antonucci et al., 2014). In broad terms, pertinent literature distinguishes a Bismarckian tradition producing familiarised rights (where young people's social protection largely depends on their family), from a Beveridgean tradition based upon individual rights (where young people are considered as adults for what concerns their social rights). Given one or the other, scholars look also to the possibility of coupling of one of the two logics with selective, rather than encompassing strategies of integration into the labour market (Chevalier, 2016). Regimes of youth transitions (Walther, 2006) shed light on the relevance of the four worlds of European welfare (Continental, Mediterranean, Anglo-Saxon and Nordic) even when they apply to youth, but at the same time underline the existence of more varieties of youth social citizenship

according to national settings in the field of social assistance and of labour policies (Chevalier, 2016 and 2018).

When dealing with what we call ‘youth’, a further aspect must be pointed out: the wide range of ages it encompasses. The main horizons in youth policies, that is empowerment, employment, belonging and engagement have to be understood, planned and managed according to ages and in relation to countries’ specific conditions and arrangements.

A final, but significant remark is about the importance of enriching the analysis on policies by including the expectations and the agency of young people themselves. Here it is relevant to see autonomy as different from independence (de Singly, 2000), even if in a frame of well-being it is necessary to combine them. Paying attention to the structure/agency relation means valuing the complex combination of factors pertaining both to the supply side, that is the institutional regimes (the ‘normal’ path a young man or woman refers to) and to the interplay between cultural and social degrees of freedom for young people to aspire and to pursue their desires (Walther, 2006). Moreover, we must observe carefully links and possible divergence between youth’s and institutions’ point of view. In other words, we have to try to “making it count” investing in a Social Europe that is meaningful for young people’ (Ellison, 2021).

The EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 is based on the logic of engaging, connecting and empowering young people, and adopts a transversal perspective according to which policy decisions’ impact on young people must be verified across several fields, ranging from education to employment, from health to social inclusion and social participation.

Focusing on EU Youth Strategy and on NextGenEU, are we looking at the beginning of a new, more friendly season for youth? How much does European policies influence national youth policies? Is it convenient to see youth policies as a specific policy sector or rather as a transversal attention towards young people to be ensured in all policy areas? These questions will be addressed hereinafter with specific reference to Italy and Poland.

## **2. Twenty years of EU youth policies: an overview**

### ***2.1 Evolution of EU youth policies***

The last twenty years have been characterised by the growing importance of youth agenda and by the emergence of a coordinated approach to youth policy on the European level (Denstad 2009; Williamson 2009; Klatt 2020). Importantly, the White paper aimed at putting ‘to the fore’ the challenges that young people face in particular socio-economic situations and in the condition of the prolonged and more winded transitions to adulthood. Indeed, the principle of youth policy being responsive to hardship that young people as a vulnerable population face seem to be guiding the different policy documents that followed the White Paper. The White paper also mapped the fields of youth policy – such as youth participation, youth employment, education, social inclusion<sup>3</sup>. Additionally, the White paper distinguished between policy areas where Open Method of Coordination (OMC) applied, on a voluntary basis (‘youth-specific areas’) and those where youth issues should be considered (‘youth-relevant areas’). Indeed, in the following years the European coordination of youth policy has strengthened, and youth policy came to the fore as desired by White paper, to some extent proving the effectiveness of the OMC in influencing national policies, finding synergies with different programmes (e.g., Youth in Action, Erasmus+), engaging multiple stakeholders, as well as young people through structured dialogue (Klatt 2020). Also, the European Youth Pact, which in 2005 was reintegrated into Lisbon strategy marked here an important development, strengthening the role of youth policy and extending the fields of actions (Denstad 2009; Williamson 2009). The socio-economic circumstances marked the developments of youth policy – with financial crisis strongly impacting the EU Youth Strategy (2010-2018), thus asking for the promotion of active citizenship, social inclusion and solidarity, as well as for the improvement of the situation of young people in education and labour market (Council of the European Union 2009).

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<sup>3</sup> Mobility as an important area within youth policy coming to the debate with Green Paper on Learning mobility in 2009, even if the Erasmus programme as an exchange programme for higher education students was established in 1987. In 2008, the first recommendation in the youth field was adopted in relation to the mobility of young volunteers in the EU.

The Strategy, like its current successor, maps youth field very widely, indicating 8 areas of action: Education and training, Employment and entrepreneurship, Health and well-being, Participation, Voluntary activities, Social inclusion, Youth and the world, Creativity and culture. This wide scope of ambitious policies indicates to the adoption of youth mainstreaming principle (Denstad 2009), but on the other side points to a more symbolic role of strategy mobilising existing funds for improving young people's situation.

The high levels of youth unemployment post financial crisis of 2008 suggested the need for a renovated approach and resulted in the establishment of the Youth Guarantee scheme in 2013, which was an important tool for securing transitions to labour market from education, and which – also thanks to mobilised financial resources – has become a widely implemented scheme accelerating policy developments in several countries. A new target group in policy appeared – the 'NEETs', pointing to vulnerability of some young people, but also basing the policy on issues of labour market integration (Eurofund 2012). Nonetheless, there are developments of seeing young people as more diversified group having age, gender, ethnicity, family status, etc which impacts their social situation and social rights. The current strategy (EU Youth strategy *Engaging, Connecting and Empowering young people 2019-2027*) continues the efforts regarding the European cooperation in the youth field, coming back to the White paper priorities of youth participation, but also pointing to the problem of social inclusion of young people.

Finally, the developments of policy also highlight changing perspectives of 'youth' issues as well as changing importance of different policy areas as results of external circumstances, taking more into account the perspective from young people's point of view (i.e., current EU youth goals were formulated by young people). We notice also changing perspectives on the subject of policy, with a stronger attention towards young people's agency and social rights. Moreover, in front of life course transformations, and the prolonged youth transition, while White paper addressed young people from 15-25 years old, the EU Youth strategy 2009-2018 pointed to wider age range of 13-30 years, including diverse groups of young people with potentially different needs.

## *2.2 NextGenerationEU*

Within the framework defined by the European policies for youth, NextGenerationEU occupies a peculiar position: while it has not been conceived as a youth policy in a strict sense, the plan entails an ambition to ‘repair and prepare’ Europe for future generations (European Commission, 2020a) and, in this perspective, it has meaningful implications for youth.

NextGenerationEU is the ambitious plan for the post-pandemic recovery of Europe approved by the Council of Europe on July 21, 2020. The plan, which is intended to be a temporary recovery package, aims to heal the immediate economic and social harm caused by the coronavirus pandemic, while also seeking the long-term goal to make Europe greener, more digital, more resilient, and better prepared for current and future challenges (European Commission, 2020a).

The recovery package will be funded by borrowing funds from financial markets on behalf of the Union (i.e., Eurobonds). With a total of 806.9 billion euros set aside to support Member States through new investments and reforms, kick-start the EU economy by incentivizing private investment, and address the lessons learned from the crisis, these funds are aimed at helping Member States to ‘emerge stronger from the pandemic’ and to ‘design a Europe that works for everyone’ (European Commission, 2020b)<sup>4</sup>.

The NextGenerationEU budget is internally distributed between various measures responding to the mentioned short- and long-term goals.

To mitigate the immediate impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the EU economy and to ‘ensure the recovery is sustainable, even, inclusive and fair for all Member States’ (European Commission, 2020c), about 50 billion euros are allocated to directly tackle the socio-economic

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<sup>4</sup> NextGenerationEU’s budget builds on top of the EU’s long-term budget for 2021-2027 and, combined with the latter, will provide more than 1.85 trillion euros to the Union’s hardest-hit regions (European Commission, 2020c).

damages of the crisis through the REACT-EU program. These resources are expected to be disbursed based on GDP losses and the relative prosperity of Member States.

To achieve the long-term goals of a greener, more digital, more resilient, and better prepared Europe, NextGenerationEU foresees the implementation of a Recovery and Resilience Facility. This measure offers financial support to Member States for investments and reforms in relation to four main priorities:

- green transition: to head towards climate neutrality by accelerating the reduction of emission, investing in sustainable mobility, restore biodiversity and promote circular economy;
- digital transition and productivity: to foster the digital transformation of all economic or social sectors, including public services by building and deploying cutting-edge digital capacities;
- fairness: to prevent growing inequalities, ensure support from all parts of the society and contribute to social, economic and territorial cohesion by adopting measures to ensure equal opportunities, inclusive education, fair working conditions and adequate social protection;
- macroeconomic stability: to boost growth potential and support the economic transformation by improving the quality of public finances.

The Recovery and Resilience Facility, which has a budget of 723 billion euros, is NextGenerationEU's largest initiative. This indicates that the use of the budget is only partially tied to the pandemic crisis and is instead linked to the attainment of broader goals. As posited by the European Commission, 'relaunching the economy does not mean going back to the status quo before the crisis but bouncing forward. We must repair the short-term damage from the crisis in a way that also invests in our long-term future' (European Commission, 2020c).

In this perspective, in the following paragraphs the analysis will consider what is the space for young people in the future traced by NextGenerationEU, looking at the national recovery and resilience plans elaborated by Italy and Poland against the backdrop of youth policies and youth conditions in the two countries. The selection of Italy and Poland derives from an ambition to compare two countries distinguished by different youth conditions, but also characterised for a welfare system

largely based on a familistic model. The comparison of these two countries allows to analyse how the general framework of NextGenerationEU is adjusted to the national specificities, cultural ideas on youth and approaches to youth policies.

### **3. Italy and Poland as different nuances of the familistic model**

#### ***3.1 Youth conditions and youth welfare system in Italy***

Literature on youth in Italy steadily underlines that, from a comparative perspective, young Italians encounter more difficulties than their European peers in reaching autonomy and independence (Cuzzocrea et al., 2020).

Youth unemployment represents one of the country's main unsolved problems. Having reached a peak of 31.6% in 2014, youth unemployment levels (15-29 years old) have gradually decreased in the last years, but they remain steadily above the 20% (Eurostat, 2022a). As youth experiences of the Italian job market are increasingly marked by flexible forms of employment, longer transitions to stable and continuous positions, and lower salaries, young Italians encounter difficulties in becoming independent. Young Italians are amongst the latter in Europe to leave the parental household and build an autonomous family: in 2021, the average age of a young Italian leaving the parents' house was 29.9, while the average age of women at the birth of the first child was 31.3 (Eurostat, 2021). The related dimension of housing needs and policies has a place, even if underdeveloped, in the Italian agenda: the budget law for year 2022 has confirmed housing measures for young people, consisting of rental subsidies and, for under36, a first-home purchase support scheme (through a previously established guarantee fund).

Statistical data also show that the risk of experiencing long-term unemployment is three times higher amongst Italian youth (15-29) (9.6%) in comparison to the EU average (3.2%). Asked to find their way towards adulthood in an unwelcoming social scenario, young Italians (20-25) unsurprisingly express lower levels of satisfaction about their jobs (rate of 'high satisfaction': 11.5%)

and financial situation (23.5%) in comparison with their peers in Europe (respectively 16.6% and 26.3%; Eurostat, 2021 – data refers to 2018). Young Italians' lower levels of satisfaction also with their overall life situation (24.7%; EU 27 average: 29.7%) and personal relationships (33.3%; EU average: 46.3%) testify to the existential impact of the prolonged process of social peripheralization experienced by young people in Italy. On this point, the Italian context is also characterized by a record level of young NEET; a condition that in 2021 concerned the 23.1% of the country's youth population (15-29; EU average: 13.1%) (Eurostat, 2021). Higher than the EU average is also the rate of young people (15-29) at risk of poverty or social exclusion (29.9%; EU average: 25.1%) (Eurostat, 2021).

While often blamed of being responsible for their own marginalization and accused of being unable to commit to work, of lacking drive and ambition and of being too much at ease with a condition of dependency from their family of origins, young people in Italy have been described by several scholars (Bazzanella & Buzzi, 2015; Rosina, 2021) as a social group systematically left behind by the country's policy interventions. Policy analysts agree that institutional interventions for youth in the country are, in fact, a marginal policy area in the Italian political agenda (Martelli 2014).

Although coordinated by government (currently through the Department of Youth Policy and Universal Civil Service), youth policies in Italy are mostly enacted through the active involvement of local authorities, of the Third Sector and of youth organizations. While this has allowed an adjustment of policies to specific local needs and assets, the absence of a national youth plan has often resulted in fragmented interventions largely influenced by contingent priorities, local resources, and individual sensitivities of policy makers and practitioners (Colombo, 2019).

In terms of forms and scope of the interventions, youth policies in the country have also been deeply influenced by a familistic approach to welfare (Léon & Pavolini, 2014; Meo et al., 2021) and a paternalistic idea of youth (Wallace & Bendit, 2009; Loncle et al., 2019). On the one hand, the underdevelopment of Italian youth policy has been linked to a tendency towards (over)responsibilisation of families as welfare providers, which does not concern only the youth

policy sphere (Naldini & Saraceno, 2022). On the other hand, the priorities set by Italian youth policies often reveal a problematic idea of youth which emphasize an image of young people as subjects ‘in danger’ and ‘dangerous’ (Maurizio, 2015). Indeed, for long youth policies in Italy have considered young people only as subjects at risk in relation to education, work, social exclusion, and deviance.

While, in the last decades, EU influence has given new impulse to institutional intervention on youth providing funds, broadening the spectrum of actions and actors, and mainstreaming a positive idea of young people as resources to be cherished, Italian policies appear to still lack of a clear vision for the future of younger generations (Rosina, 2021).

### ***3.2 Youth conditions and youth welfare system in Poland***

Poland does not have a youth strategy that consolidates on the state level the aims of the policies in regard to support for younger generation. In the post-communist Poland, the youth policy has been decentralized and of the cross-sectoral approach, even if there was a point in which a youth strategy was outlined (‘The State Strategy for Youth for 2003 – 2012’), it has never become a central guidepost for policies. Nonetheless, there seem to be an agreement on the priorities for youth policy with employment, education and social inclusion remaining central areas for interventions, even if the documentation of the strategies and its achievements is marginal and scattered.

The entrance of Poland to the European Union in 2004 marked some transformation in regard to youth policy formulation and practice. Already before accession, Poland started to participate in European youth programmes (such as Erasmus, Youth in Action or European Voluntary Service). This marked a Europeanisation trend regarding educational and participatory aspects of youth policy. Nonetheless, the beginning of 2000s in Poland was marked by difficult labour market situation, with youth unemployment above 40% in 2002 (Eurostat, 2011), and dropping significantly only after 2005 due to the huge migration wave around EU accession, when about 2 million of Poles migrated to EU countries, among which high shares of young people, with good educational credentials (Grabowska-

Lusińska & Okólski, 2009). The Polish labour market was not able to absorb the large numbers of young skilled workers created by the massive access to education started in 2000. Youth unemployment dropped finally after 2005-2006, but rose again after the economic crisis. What was characteristic was a precarious character of work for young people – in 2012, 66% of young employees (15-24) had a temporary contract (Eurostat, 2021). On top of that, level of salaries was not satisfactory and young people were forced to move for job search - in 2012, the unemployment was 26.5%, and 8% of young people were long-term unemployed (Eurostat, 2021). Then, a report *Młodzi 2011/Youth 2011* (Szafraniec, 2011) stirred the debate around youth issues in Poland and in particular uneven development on regional level, nonetheless this did not translate to strategy on the political level. The general strategy 'Poland 2030. The third wave of modernity' (2013) included an aim 'to create proper conditions for a good life of the young generation', which recognized as well the impact of global economic crisis. Poland joined the European efforts for establishing Youth guarantee with widely accessible instruments of Labour Market Activation policies – which could be seen as an individualised solution to inefficiencies of labour market, aiming at raising qualification of individuals, providing with trainings and subsidence, without intervening at the structural level.

As of today, youth unemployment (for those between 15-24 years old) equals 12% - and it actually remained below 10% in 2019 dropping from more than 25% at start of the decade); the risk of long-term unemployment is very low (2%) and NEET indicator (11%) is at the level of EU average (Eurostat 2021). The improved conditions at the labour market impacted positively the precarious situation of young employees, and the share of young people with temporary contracts dropped from about 66% to 49% in 2021 (Eurostat, 2021). The improving situation at the labour market caused low initiative in the specific field of labour market policies for young people, even if wider policies such as raise of minimum wage impact also young employees.

In regard to specific youth issues, housing situation of young people is on the political agenda. In 2021, the estimated average age of leaving the parental home for young females in Poland was 27.6 and males - 30, while the European average was about 2-3 years lower (Eurostat, 2021). Policies

directed at this area are very costly and usually of low efficiency, thus governments are rather reluctant to intervene. Nonetheless, the programme Housing for youth (*Mieszkanie dla młodych*) was implemented in 2014-2018, and from 2022, the new programme subsidizing the buyer contribution to the mortgage/loan is launched, this time without age limit, thus abandoning youth field in a sense.

#### **4. National Translations of NextGenerationEu**

The present paragraph analyses Italian and Polish implementation of the NextGenerationEU Plan in relation to youth. In this perspective, the analysis focuses on the national implementation plans and explores discourses on youth produced in these documents according to three following main research questions: How young people are described in the plans? Which themes are explicitly or implicitly connected to youth (and how)? And from which themes youth remain excluded (and why)? Discourse analysis has been conducted looking for keywords' (i.e., young people, youth, new/young generations) occurrences and associations with specific words and themes.

##### **4.1. Italy**

Following the recommendation specifically received by the country from the EC in 2019 and 2020, the Italian National Plan for Recovery and Resilience (hereafter PNRR) identifies youth as one of its 'horizontal priorities'. The 6th pillar of the NextGenerationEU is thus substituted with a transversal attention to generational equality which, together with gender equality and territorial cohesion, is presented as a prime concern and aim throughout the plan's 6 missions<sup>5</sup>.

Young people, thus, are extensively mentioned in the 273 pages document. The word 'young people' (*giovani*) appears 47 times, the adjective 'youth' (*giovanile*) is used 18 times and the expression 'new generations' (*nuove, giovani or prossime generazioni*) appears 11 times. As a reference, the word 'old people' (*anziani*) is mentioned just 19 times.

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<sup>5</sup> The 6 missions are: '1 - Digitalisation, Innovation, Competitiveness, Culture and Tourism'; '2 - Green revolution and Ecological Transition'; '3 - Infrastructures for a sustainable mobility'; '4 - Education and Research'; '5 - Inclusion and Cohesion' and '6 - Health'.

The plan does not use a specific age range to describe young people but the different reforms associated to youth cover a range that goes from 15 (i.e., interventions for school-to work transitions) to 35 (i.e., interventions for young couples and young entrepreneurs). However, as also programs generically targeting students (i.e., school digitalization) and initiatives supporting families with children are presented as interventions for youth, the boundary between childhood and youth is blurred.

Mentioned often with other ‘vulnerable groups’ (i.e., women, people with disability, children, and the population of the South of the country), young people are also associated to the roles of volunteers, graduates, researchers, doctors, entrepreneurs, and founders of new households and described as ‘resources’ and ‘talents’ to be cherished and activated.

As one of the three horizontal priorities, young people are mentioned explicitly in relation to all the themes touched by the 6 missions of the PNRR and all reforms are ‘evaluated on the basis of the impact that they will have in recovering youth potential’ (PNRR, 2021). However, young people’s ‘centrality’ and ‘identity’ vary in relation to the themes.

In terms of ‘centrality’, most reforms explicitly targeting young people are concentrated under missions 1 ‘Digitalisation, Innovation, Competitiveness, Culture and Tourism’, 2 ‘Green Revolution and Ecological Transitions’, and 4 ‘Education and Research’. Missions 3 ‘Infrastructures for a Sustainable Mobility’, 5 ‘Inclusion and Cohesion’ and 6 ‘Health’ are those where young people’s visibility is lower. The different centrality granted to youth under the missions relates to an understanding of young people as mostly students, jobseekers, and workers that permeates the entire plan. Indeed, young Italians many difficulties in coping with the transitions from school to the job market (i.e., high levels of school dropout, NEETs, and youth unemployment) appears to be a recurring topic thorough the text and so reforms’ potential impact on youth is discussed mostly - if not exclusively - in terms of job opportunities. This emphasis on the occupational dimension limits the full assessment of the missions’ real and potential meaningfulness for youth (e.g., health reforms’ effects are discussed in terms of educational and job opportunities in the medical area rather than in terms of wellbeing).

In terms of ‘identity’, the document sets two prevailing narratives on youth. The first emphasizes young people’s vulnerabilities and describes them as subject in need for help. This narrative emerges especially when the position of Italian young individuals in school or work is discussed. The second narrative presents young people as key actors in a process of rejuvenation and innovation of the whole country. This kind of discourse prevails when the role of young people is discussed in relation to the themes of digitalization, environmental sustainability, urban regeneration, and public innovation. For example, the plan to promote a generational turnover in public offices by increasing the employment of young graduates is presented as a ‘an ambitious project of transformation of the country’ (PNRR, 2021). Similarly, the engagement of young volunteers in a campaign aimed at improving the Italian population’s digital skills is presented as an ‘occasion [...] to recover the historical delays that penalize the country’ (PNRR, 2021).

#### **4.2 Poland**

The Polish National Plan for Recovery and Resilience ‘Krajowy Plan Odbudowy i Zwiększania Odporności’ (KPO 2021) addresses youth in some specific topics rather than sees youth as a ‘horizontal priority’. The 6th pillar of the KPO (‘Policies for next generations’) is mostly addressed through measures in relations to labour market (‘employees for the modern economy’) and digital transformation (adapting schools and skilling of workers in digital era). Also, the demographic change in relation to ageing society is in the KPO directly linked with the topic of youth, noticing the shrinking labour force and need to activate diverse groups of potential employees (e.g., mothers with small children under 3 years old) as well as to assure matching of skills to the needs of labour market. Important to add is that KPO suggests family allowances (500+ programme) as the main programme supporting life conditions of young people, indicating for familiarisation model of youth policy.

The document indicates young people or young generations in relation to selected themes– compared to Italian plan the word youth (*młodzież/młodzi*) appears less often in the 519 pages document. The word ‘young people’ (*młodzież*) appears 14 times, the adjective ‘youth’ (*młode >>osoby<<*) is used

15 times and the expression ‘generations’ (pokolenie) appears 8 times. Otherwise, students (*studenci*) and pupils (*uczniowie*) are very present (over 80 and 100 hits) indicating dominating educational perspective on youth.

Differing age range is proposed in programs and interventions, both recalling legal youth age of 18, but also age of participation in education, or expected completion of educational, professional or housing transition. For example, vocational centers target youth in between 14-24 years old. Young people roles are mainly linked to education and labour market (e.g., potential medical doctors, talented youth), as well as house ownership. The plan also notices young people in institutional care, young researchers, young unemployed (NEET), or youth from marginalized regions.

When it comes to particular policy topics that the PNRR addresses in relation to youth (‘centrality’), these are education, employment and housing. The digitalization as a horizontal priority in Polish plan is linked to education and upskilling of young people, but also to adapting the educational/vocational system to current needs. Improving labour market relevance of skills plays into employability principle (the word ‘competences’ is used numerous times in the PNRR) – here the activity concerns primarily modernizing vocational education through opening of Industry Centers of Competences (*Branżowe Centra Umiejętności*). Finally, in regard to supporting housing transitions, young people are directly indicated as a target group needing support next to families with multiple children. Young people are not directly mentioned in relation to health – even if this is a political priority area according to Polish youth, before combatting unemployment, combatting climate change and tackling poverty and inequality (European Union 2021). In the KPO they are seen only as possible future doctors.

In terms of ‘identity’, the document mostly positions young people as current or future participants of the labour market (e.g., pupils needing digital skills), important from the perspective of social capital investments. In this regard, education is seen instrumentally as directed to tackling wider societal problems, e.g., investments in medical programs or vocational training responding to digital and climate challenges. In general, we may say that KPO is not positioned as a programme for

supporting future generations but rather the society as a whole - 'every one of us will benefit for it' (KPO website). Importantly though, young people or future generations are positioned as those facing consequences of climate change: 'Energetic transformation and abandoning of coal will positively impact clean air and thus create better conditions for future generations' (KPO 2021: 55).

## **5. Conclusion**

Against the framework traced by the European program, the two national plans develop differently when analyzed considering specifically youth policies. Two main differences and two convergences can be highlighted between the texts.

A first difference concerns the visibility of youth throughout the plans. Choosing youth as one of its horizontal priorities, the Italian plan gives quite a relevant visibility to young people and youth issues throughout the text. On the contrary, the youth issue appears less central in the Polish national plan. This difference seems to largely mirror the different magnitude of the difficulties experienced by young people in the two countries.

A second difference has to do with the diversification of approaches to youth policies. While Italy opts for a transversal attention to youth in all the interventions foreseen by the plan and assess each mission's impact on young people, Poland elaborates measures targeting specific youth needs. Both approaches entail some risks: while the Polish strategy risks of losing the bigger picture by focusing only on conjunctural themes and problems, the Italian attention to youth risks of remaining only a good intention, due to the complexity of monitoring and assessing each measure's impact on youth.

Next to these differences, it is also possible to notice a convergence between the plans when it comes to the connection between youth and the topics of employment and digitalization. In both national plans, young people's problems are mainly discussed in terms of difficulties in transitions from school to work, while digitalization is described as both a challenge and an opportunity that mainly concerns young generations. A further convergence can be deduced from a common missing

point: both in Italy and Poland youth are not directly considered as subjects experiencing poverty or social exclusion, even if in 2020 (Eurostat, 2022b) the share of 15-29 y.o. at risk of poverty or social exclusion is close to 20% in Poland, and close to 30% in Italy. Maybe this can be a consequence of a political and cultural perspective that in both countries still frame young people as demi-citizens strongly defined from their families for what concerns life chances.

Beyond these comparative notes, the analysis of the Italian and Polish national implementation plans against the framework of the NextGenerationEU program also inspire some reflections on the state of youth policies in times of global challenges.

When asked to what issues should be given priority to, young Europeans – and Italian and Polish one among them - have identified tackling poverty and inequality, combatting climate change, lowering unemployment, improving population health and wellbeing, and increasing access to education and training as their priorities (European Union 2021). In this perspective, young Europeans seems to believe that the most important challenges that would impact their wellbeing are not only ‘youth issues’, but more general, wider or even global challenges, such as climate change and poverty.

Against these young Europeans’ perspectives, NextGenerationEU provides a largely coherent and significative reply: the European plan, in fact, is guided by an ambitious intention to guide Europe in coping with these global challenges and, in this light, its pillars and approach seems to widely acknowledge young generations’ interpretation of current times’ priorities. However, when looking at the national implementation, we can notice a double downplay of the European plan’s ambitions.

First, while attention to global challenges such as climate change, digitalization or health is maintained in the national translations of the European program, the interpretation of these new priorities is often ‘bended’ to the old discourses, approaches and problems (concerning young people) that distinguish the country. Taking, for example, climate change, while this global challenge is interpreted as a question of intergenerational justice in the European plan, the transition to a greener society is mainly presented as an opportunity for creating new jobs for young people in the national

plans. While an adjustment of supranational policies is necessary to consider the many differences that distinguish European's member states, an excessive adjustment or a scarce acknowledgment of the priorities set by the European document can turn NextGenerationEU in a toothless policy regarding youth condition, particularly where a reductive path-dependency is at work.

Second, even if the national plans include topics that are relevant to young Europeans, for some important priorities younger generations' role is minimised. Young people's role is often reduced to that of current or future jobseekers and their 'positioning' toward some themes is not fully assessed. In the case of poverty or health, for example, national plans do not properly conceive young people as potential touched by risks of poverty or illness; while in the case of climate change and inequalities, young people are not fully acknowledged as strategical actors in achieving a fairer and greener society.

In conclusion, trajectories of young people seem still highly dependent from national contexts, but, at the same time, the recent years have shown a renovated effort of the European Union towards the development of a social Europe that is meaningful for young people (Ellison, 2021). A definitive farewell to neo-liberal horizons and a further extension of the idea of social Europe applied in the Pillars of Social Right could also make room to new understandings of young generations' wellbeing and role in and for the European society.

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