Where is education in the next Commission’s priorities?

What happened yesterday?

Yesterday, president-elect Ursula von der Leyen announced the composition of the next European Commission, as well as the title of the portfolios, and, implicitly, the priorities of this Commission. The previous Commissioner position for Education, Culture, Youth, and Sport has completely vanished, as the tasks of this portfolio have been scattered among the other Commission portfolios. This begs the question of why is education no longer a priority and what does this actually entail for education across Europe?

More information on the composition and priorities of the new Commission can be found here while you can also follow SOLIDAR Secretary General’s, Conny Reuter, reaction to the European Commission developments.

What does it mean?

The newly created portfolios of ‘Protecting our European Way of Life’ and of ‘Innovation and Youth’ are going to receive most of the responsibilities associated to education.

The responsibilities of Margaritis Schinas (EL), Commissioner for Protecting our European Way of Life, are as follows:

- Coordinating the establishing of the European Education Area
- Making education more accessible and inclusive
- Lifelong learning and crossborder learning
- Coordinating the work on improving the integration of migrants and refugees into society through education
- Migration and Security of the EU

The responsibilities of Mariya Gabriel (BG), Commissioner for Innovation and Youth, are as follows:

- Higher education as well as Research and innovation, including the Horizon Europe programme, the implementation of the European Universities initiative, the development of a European Research Area
- The Erasmus+ programme, together with the priority of tripling its budget
- The establishment of the European Education Area 2025
- Digital literacy and education, including the Digital Education Action Plan
The previously titled Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility portfolio, now rebranded as the Jobs portfolio, continues to be responsible for updating the skills agenda, identifying skills shortage and ensuring reskilling, maintaining the division among skills and competences in the education field, which is replicated by the division of responsibilities among Directorate-General Education and Culture (DG EAC) and Directorate-General Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL).

This will create a need for better coordination among three different levels, as, now, two different Commissioners must coordinate with DG EAC. The previous coordination among DG EAC and DG EMPL has been already strained, but now with two different Commissioners proposing the direction, strategies, policies and budget for education the risk is that many aspects will be diluted or neglected, while action will be taken at a more sluggish pace.

**Why should we care?**

This also reveals how many education priorities from the previous Commission have disappeared. **Adult education and lifelong learning do not feature as responsibilities** of these new Commissioners, setting a dangerous precedent of neglecting a large section of what education means, and fostering an exclusionary view of education, not fit for the requirements of successful social inclusion and participation. With vocational education and training (VET) nowhere to be seen, the new Commission reinforces the view that it somehow represents an inferior education pathway – relegating it from a priority within the field of education to a tool for the industries and businesses to exploit in creating more workers. The drive to fulfil the demands of the labour market is, therefore, allowed to increase at the expense of any social standards guiding VET.

The framing of the new portfolios is alarming as well, given how the battle language that employs the word ‘protection’ coupled with the possessive pronoun ‘our’ creates an unacceptable dichotomy in the field of education. A domain which should be inclusive is reduced to ‘us-them’ dynamics which unfortunately is further linked to migration and refugees, given how, apart from education responsibilities, this new portfolio includes the priorities of migration and border security. This will embolden nationalism, populism and xenophobia in Europe, actually threatening European democracy and values. **Furthermore, the Innovation and Youth portfolio, by the design of its frame, prioritizes only young people within education while using education only for labour market purposes instead of the personal development and the empowerment of European citizens to participate fully in society by being aware of their rights and responsibilities, and by having the skills to be active citizens maintaining the European democracy.** This has been made even more jarring as the responsibilities related to active citizenship have been passed forward to yet another, different Commissioner, Vera Jourova (CZ) and her Values and Transparency portfolio.

The disproportionate focus on skills development for the jobs and the labour market needs runs the risk of influencing the future programming period by facilitating the allocation of funding for education based on meeting labour market demands. This is to put a greater strain on civil society organisations pursuing funding for inclusion, quality education for all and learning mobility, given how these might not be priorities of the following European Commission. Though the shift in priorities affects civil society organisations, more striking is the fact that civil society organisations and the civil dialogue have been neglected as priorities in the future portfolios, with very little to no-mention of them, creating an alarming situation of limited resources and support at a time when the civic space is shrinking.

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**Info Note**

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What are the next steps?

SOLIDAR Foundation decries the organizational structure of the education priorities within the new Commission, the woeful neglect of education and specifically of adult education, VET and lifelong learning, as well as the dangerous exclusionary messages associated with the current portfolios which will only serve as leading to more people not accessing their rights and not achieving accordingly to their abilities. We call on adequate financial resources and a sustainable structure for Europe-wide cooperation for the education sector, given its essential nature for strengthening people’s skills and capacities which is a prerequisite to participate fully in social life and employment. Social investment is seriously endangered by the worrisome developments of the future European Commission which are hampering further European integration and a smooth transition from education to employment in an ever-changing world of work. SOLIDAR Foundation will take active part in the European Parliament public hearings on the proposed Commissioners (by cooperating with the MEPs) with a clear goal to demand the Parliament to review the policy areas and responsibilities covered by this new structure and to take action on the administrative hurdles that the education domain will experience at Commission level and on the way education has fallen between the cracks. Education and lifelong learning must be the priority that deserves a Commissioner who fully understands its importance as well as the potential to prepare citizens for the quickly changing and diverse societies and environments.