

Opening remarks to Seanad Éireann Committee on the UK's Exit from the EU

David Garrahy

Head of Policy and Advocacy, European Youth Forum.

Thank you to the Senators for your invitation here today. I'm representing the European Youth Forum, which advocates for the common interests of tens of millions of young people from all over Europe through our members, 104 different youth organisations. I'm also an Irish person that's lived and worked in Brussels for the past 8 years, with a profound appreciation for what's changed in this period, especially for young people.

Another Irish person who lived in Brussels in a time of great change was Peter Sutherland. By launching the first Erasmus programme in 1985, he launched one of the EU's great success stories.

Now, with a yearly budget of over €2 billion, 10% of all European students go overseas during their course. IN the period 2014-2020, it will provide opportunities for over 4 million Europeans to study, train, gain experience, and volunteer abroad. 56% of Irish young people now access higher education, due in no small part to EU funding for higher education infrastructure. My secondary own school in County Clare benefitted from one of the programmes that is now part of Erasmus+ and in 1994 I visited the European Parliament in Strasbourg on a school trip. Speaking (or gesturing!) to other French, German and Spanish 14-year olds brought home to me the vastness of Europe and its many different cultures and approaches to the world.

Of the 4 million Erasmus students, 1 million will meet their long-term partner during Erasmus. Erasmus is a way for Europe to get to know itself, something that must be renewed every generation. Young people in the UK recognised this, and the number of UK students on Erasmus increased by 115% between 2007 and 2014. The 23 June result put all this at risk.

The knock-on effects on Irish young people will be significant. Irish young farmers seeing their markets disappear, Irish students wanting to go to their nearest University across the border, Irish citizens in Northern Ireland who will find it harder to exercise their rights as EU citizens.

I spoke at a British Chamber event in January 2016, and at that time I stated what I still believe, that there are no "up-sides" for young people in the UK's leaving the EU. Young people in the UK are profoundly pro-EU, and 73% of 18-24 year olds and 61% of 25-34 year olds voted remain. It was the overwhelming votes of the over-65's that swung the referendum in favour of leave.

So much is uncertain and depending on the outcome of today's election and the EU-UK negotiations. However a few undeniable knock-on effects stand out:

- The future economic effect (especially in the case of an exit without an agreement) could be very severe in both Ireland and the UK, with young people always the first to be hit by unemployment.

- The common standards and laws that protect young people from harm both online and in real life will be brutally unpicked, with potential impacts on safety and cross-border cooperation.

- Young farmers could be hit with export tariffs of between 40% and 80% to the UK, where we export 43% of our beef and dairy produce.

- The future for cross-border exchanges and access to higher education across the border, as well as the mutual recognition of qualifications.

- Cross-border cooperation – will young people grow up defining those across the Border as “other”. What about the rights of Irish (and therefore EU) citizens living in Northern Ireland?

In early January - Minister Zappone hosted a forum on the impact of the UK's exit from the EU on children and young people. Employment and protection of young people were the highest concerns. Other key issues are peace in our island and continuous dialogue between communities.

Ireland has one of the youngest populations in Europe, with one-third aged under 25, increasing every year. Across Europe, under 25's are called “Generation Maastricht” – since this Treaty was signed nearly 25 years ago, they have lived mostly without borders. Coincidentally, our own border with Northern Ireland became more free at this time due to the peace process. As Heaney once described his young generation, they have “intelligences as brightened and unmannerly as crowbars”. It is now our role to enable “Generation Maastricht” to take a crowbar to division, separation and divisiveness and continue to enable them to live together.