

# Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission  
and the Council of Europe in the field of youth



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## Analytical paper on Youth Participation

The main topic of this paper is young people's involvement in policy and decision making processes; but before considering the state of the art approaches to youth participation it is appropriate to set the stage of political and societal development and to critically reflect on the framing conditions of political involvement in general. Young people are neither to blame for decreasing voter's turnout at elections nor are they the solution of post-democratic disinterest and apathy. To focus on youth in this regard is also rooted in the wish of policy makers to create a youth policy that reflects the needs and wishes of young people themselves, which sometimes seemed harder to reach than others. Alas, youth participation is not a singular element but part of the broader concept of involvement and engagement of people in decision making and shaping their living conditions; but this concept is especially in the so called well developed democracies at stake. Therefore it seems needed to sketch important societal developments as the matrix and background of any participation today.

### Why participate?

Following elections with ever decreasing voter turnouts in Europe that coincide with powerful and sometime radical demonstrations in many countries around the world the question concerning the role of participation in society emerges more and more often. Is participation in the democratic system more than a show-off, is participation in elections the main idea of participation?

By etymology participation roots in the Latin "participare" which itself is a combination of the noun "pars" and the verb "capere"; thus it means to take a part, but the translation is either "parting" or to be part of or to attend something. So it could be concluded, that participation is a reaction to an invitation to be active part in something.

In political sense it implies that someone is being involved in political decision making. And therefore it was for a long time perceived as the engagement of citizens in the political system – as voters, delegates, representatives, activists, protesters or even dissidents. Thus also non-confirming forms to change the (political or societal) system are (sometimes) understood as participation. Nevertheless, the definition of participation is the result of a given power relation in the society. This bears the risk exist that participation

becomes nothing more than tokenism, when the “establishment” is the only instance for determining and thus accepting forms of participation.

The question arises how such involvement in (post-) modern societies can be described and who defines what participation is. Furthermore, having in mind the decreasing interest in elections, it seems appropriate to reflect if participation is still interesting to the people? Colin Crouch (2004) considered the post-democracy as nominal democracy in a neo-liberal society that has all the formal democratic institutions, but which increasingly became hollow, leading citizens to the perception their power to influence decision making by democratic methods is diminishing and thus fostering their withdrawal from these democratic forms.

On the other hand we can observe new forms of (political) engagement from demonstrations and occupations to “clicktivism”, from conscious consumption and boycotts to self-created information in the www.

This variety implies the task to analyse participation not any longer only connected to the political system and independent from the society it occurs in but strongly depending of developments and settings in society beside the political form. Therefore the main changes and phenomenon, which furthermore are interconnected to some extent, in societies have to be considered when analysing participation. One can detect three main drivers, each existing of various elements and all interlinked:

A) Globalisation: network society – power relations – migration – economic development/crisis

B) Individuation: consumer society – self-expression – post-democracy

C) Media: information – education – knowledge – user-created content

Ad A) Globalisation, understood not only as an economic topic, but as a cultural phenomenon indicating the establishment of inter- and multi-cultural societies inside and beyond the nation states, allows new and independent but interlocked options of participating in local and global structures at the same time. The global network society as described by Manuel Castells is a society whose social structure is made around networks activated by microelectronics-based digitally processed information and communication technologies (Castells, 2013) which makes the network society a global society and thus the society model of the globalised world. This leads to new forms of participation on a political level not any longer connected to states, municipalities, regions, or other political entities, but inside the networks. But the definition of societies as networks leads to new power relations parallel to power relations in states – and sometimes completely independent of states. Power in networks is defined as the ability to include or exclude nodes of a given network.

Thus participation is not any longer restricted to formal existing political entities, but through various networks engagement in different parts of the world, from local to global level but most important: networks allow targeted engagement regarding the personal interests.

The drive of cultural globalisation got momentum with migration on the one hand and the development of communication technologies. Migration leads to an increased exchange of and better (and cheaper) communication technologies allow adherence of cultures. Demographic development, economic crises as well as uproars, conflicts and also environmental disasters lead to (supposedly increased) migration. But the nature of migration changed since in mobile societies integration does not imply complete assimilation; and more than one generation of migrants is living between or with more than one culture inside the receiving society. These alterations of feelings of belonging for bigger groups of people with migration background do lead to different wishes of participation in various settings:

- i) in the host country on local, regional and national level as citizen or at least recognised inhabitant, but also
- ii) in the former home country of the family of the person, since the connection is not broken, as well as
- iii) in the cultural community of migrants in the host country but also transnational
- iv) in the network of migrants from that country all over the world.

These various forms of personal involvement and engagement need new possibilities for participation.

Ad B) The second important societal development with dramatic influence on participation is rooted in individuation as described by Ulrich Beck or Anthony Giddens already in the 1980ies. Individuation means that the individual has the freedom and also the obligation to decide on the course of life. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century individuals freed themselves (respectively are liberated) of the restricting bonds of traditional groups like regional background, social class, family or gender that were the defining the framework in which subjects could find their roles. Life courses are not any longer determined *only* by traditional groups and social classes but each and every individual has to make decisions concerning the own life, like education, employment, partnership, lifestyle and more. Thus lifestyles get more important and the creation of the own identity and the own original self is a process that is never finished. These lifestyles serve as new opportunity to create belonging to groups, but instead of the restricting strong ties in the traditional groups lifestyles offer only weak ties. Furthermore every individual has now power over the weak ties in his/her lifestyle network and decides for him- / herself how close one goes into each group.

Following Zygmunt Bauman (2003) even values and attitudes become elements of lifestyle construction and consequently also political participation is no longer just a means for decision making but an instrument for identity creation and group building. Thus ideology-rooted political conviction seems to be out-dated; and attitudes become an element of fashion.

Furthermore in a consumer society every person becomes eventually a product for different markets (Bauman 2009) and the elaborated self-expression is rather a marketing tool than the outcome of identity. Bauman further claims that the real motor of the consumer society is not marketing and production but the individual believe and need to be special. Thus every act of consumption (of products as well as of culture) and activity can be interpreted as investment into the own market value.

Accepting Bauman's considerations one has to analyse the value of various forms of participation for the personal self and for the market value of an individual.

With this step it gets obvious that participation has to serve as a means for self-expression and thus non-traditional forms like conscious consuming, wearing T-shirts, badges or bags and online methods made visible in social online networks gain popularity, whereas the secrecy of a ballot is just the opposite of self expression. Up to date forms of participation have to serve an opportunity to share with others and to gain respect.

If participation can not be used as a method for self-expression it has to have a direct and immediate impact on the "market" – implying that it has to tackle those topics important rather for the individual than for the community. Thus it appears that participation has to bring an immediate benefit to the individual – be it social prestige and market value or direct change of the personal situation.

Ad C) Mass media and information provision have been good ways to control political participation and to invite, involve or exclude certain groups of people of participation, thus many critical media researchers claim that control of media by political regimes was an essential measure to obtain power.

In times of whistleblowers and of user created content in media power relations changed and open new opportunities for informing and thus involving other social groups into political decision making processes. Independent of their actual success and their sustainable consequences, the big political movements starting from 2011 – like the Occupy movement, the Spanish Puerta del Sol demonstrations and also the Arabic spring or the Gezi-Park movements – can be seen as symbols for this new development as, for example, Slavoj Žižek claims.

These movements are also clear indicators for the importance of the micro-electronic communication tools which were used not only to inform but also to activate people and to organise the demonstrations. But these movements were rather the visible peak of the iceberg of new forms of political participations. Especially the mobilisation of boycotts uses online media; and online social networks are popular platforms for clicktivism, which might lead to other forms of (real) participation.

It is obvious that the above mentioned developments in society are strongly connected and not independent singular phenomenon. Considering the above mentioned it becomes clear that participation offers can not focus only on the needs of democracy, on justification of decisions and on hearing the various voices, but they have to reflect new forms of connectivity in networks, global exchange, new forms of belonging in connection with migration as well as self-expression values and new technological forms of information and activation.

### **Why youth participation?**

*‘There is no crisis of participation of European youth, but there is a huge opportunity that awaits taking’  
(EACEA, 2013)*

A common understanding of youth participation among the policy makers is that it presents the opportunity of appreciating democracy, responsibility and ownership. Young people who learn early to deal with democratic values and human rights will later contribute to build up stable democratic and peaceful structures in their countries. The promotion of youth participation is thus of utmost importance to enhance good governance and to avoid disenchantment with politics (Jans, M. and De Backer, K 2002; Doorley, 2006)<sup>1</sup>. The European Governance White Paper (2001) considers (youth) participation as one of its five principles ensuring that young people are consulted and more involved in the decisions which concern them and, in general, the life of their communities, while Article 165 of the Lisbon Treaty (2009) states that one of the aims of EU action should be focused towards encouraging the participation of young people in democratic life in Europe.

Youth involvement in public decision-making has a range of rationales and benefits, not only that it is compliant with Article 12 of the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child, but it provides a platform for the exercise of active citizenship, providing a ‘user perspective’ on the policy issues under consideration (Williamson 2002). The special experiences of young people contribute significantly to achieve political, economical and social progress in their home countries (Golombek, 2002). The notion that youth needs to be prioritized in context of development is not new, however, especially if latter is defined as:

‘A concept which transcends a crude equation with increases in national income, but should consider all aspects of the quality of life, an depends on altering power relationships in society, improving the ability of people to enjoy maximum participation in decision making, strengthening

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Institute for Social Research (2013), *Youth in a time of crisis* First IDIZ-Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Youth Survey, Zagreb

political and economic self-reliance and independence, as well as ensuring the extension of social rights<sup>2</sup>.

Overall European measures and initiatives towards youth have a twofold objective: first, to provide the evidence and sustainability of political commitment to youth policy, and second, to ensure the integration of young people in an enlarging Europe through promoting their employability, participation, and tolerance (Denstad, 2009)<sup>3</sup>. The purpose of youth policy in the European context today is to create conditions for learning, opportunity and experience which ensure and enable young people to develop the knowledge, skills and competences to be actors of democracy and to integrate into society, in particular playing active part in both civil society and the labor market (Denstad 2009). The rights and obligations afforded to young people are considered to be critical if Europe is to achieve its primary political objective of the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world.

Nevertheless, a common understanding of what is meant by youth participation in different circumstances and contexts across Europe does not exist, due to the fact that there is considerable variation in democratic culture, and the way the political system works. Thus, mainstreaming youth participation within the European youth policy framework implies major changes in attitudes both of youth and adults, as well as in policies and social structures, in line with current tendencies expressed in the Resolution 346 of The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities:

“...young people’s interest in conventional political participation, such as voting in elections, has declined over recent years due to increasing disenchantment and cynicism. However this does not mean young people are no longer interested, they still engage in democratic and civic behaviour and they still believe in democratic values. They engage in different forms of democratic activities appropriate to their own understanding of democracy and citizenship.”  
(Council of Europe 2012b)

Recent evidence (EACEA 2013) furthermore highlights that the young people do not feel apathetic, but they do think that the political ‘offer’ does not match their concerns, ideas, and ideal of democratic politics. In order to improve the system’s inclusiveness of young people it is, among other, crucial to understand their motivation - the willingness to participate and feeling of efficacy come from a feeling of being included. The results indicate that young people do not believe that politicians sufficiently address their concerns. Due to a lack of opportunity and political inclusion amongst young people who are systemically excluded (through poverty, unemployment, linguistic, ethnic or social integration, etc.), they argue that ‘democracy should not work better for some than for others as it currently does’. The results also show that the political, social and emotional dimensions of European citizenship, the sense of community and belonging, diversity and otherness, dignity and integration need further discussion, emphasis and knowledge.

Initially, both European institutions, the European Commission, and the Council of Europe, adopted quite different emphases in their position on ‘youth’, and accordingly to youth participation as its cross cutting policy domain, largely reflecting their own different priorities: the Commission promoted programmes that would support learning and qualifications enhancing European economic competitiveness, while the Council promoted training on topics that connected closely to its priorities around human rights and democracy (Denstad 2009). Current debate, however, points to the fact that the concrete measures to facilitate the right to participate in democratic life in the EU were ‘very much focused on providing

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<sup>2</sup> European Youth Forum (2010), Development needs Youth, Brussels

<sup>3</sup> The partnership arrangements between the EU and the CoE in the youth field reflect the convergence of commitment to this agenda, as well as sharing of expertise and resources, where possible, to achieve these ends.

guidelines for the behavior of the institutions of the Union and less so on empowering the citizens' (Closa, 2007: 1053)<sup>4</sup>.

### **Youth participation in the Council of Europe**

Since the beginning of the 1970s' the Council of Europe has been building a common framework for European 'youth policy', and in partnership with the EU, its objectives have been established through a discussion with the member countries and the young people, as well as the procedures and networks of policymakers, practitioners and researchers engaged in implementation.

The Council of Europe Committee of Ministers in its Resolution(98) 6 on the Youth Policy of the Council of Europe (1998) stated that 'to encourage young people's participation in civil society was among the policy objectives and stipulated that the encouragement of new forms of youth participation and organization was one of its priorities'.

The Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life (2008), adopted by the Congress for Regional and Local Authorities in the Council of Europe (CLRAE), perceives youth participation as the right of young people to be included and to assume duties and responsibilities in daily life at local level as well as the right to influence the processes of their lives democratically, and without discrimination.

Current policy towards youth of the Council of Europe is based on the Declaration of the 8th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth (2008): 'The future of the Council of Europe youth policy: AGENDA 2020', where, under the heading "Human rights and democracy", ministers regard as a key priority to promote "young people's active participation in democratic processes and structures and equal opportunities for the participation of all young people in all aspects of their everyday lives'.

### **Youth participation in the European Union**

Among other, in 2001, the European Commission issued the White Paper entitled "A New Impetus for European Youth"<sup>5</sup>, representing a new framework for European cooperation and the first step in setting up a coherent youth policy framework in the European Union. The document identifies youth participation as one of areas where the EU member states were invited to co-ordinate their policies in the youth field. The document was prompted by the worry that there was a 'democratic deficit in the EU' and that young people were among those most affected (Davies, 2009).

In 2009, the Commission presented a Communication entitled "An EU Strategy for Youth – Investing and Empowering – A renewed open method of coordination to address youth challenges and opportunities (2010-2018)"<sup>6</sup>. The EU Youth Strategy<sup>7</sup> is based on a renewed open method of coordination,

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<sup>4</sup> Source: Institute for Social Research (2013), *Youth in a time of crisis* First IDIZ-Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Youth Survey, Zagreb

<sup>5</sup> Commission of the European Communities (2001), *A new impetus for European Youth*, Brussels

<sup>6</sup> Commission of the European Communities, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, The Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions (2009): *An EU Strategy for Youth – Investing and Empowering , A renewed open method of coordination to address youth challenges and opportunities*, Brussels

<sup>7</sup> The EU Youth Strategy was endorsed by the Council through the Council Resolution of 27 November 2009 on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010-2018). This followed the release of the Commission Communication "An EU Strategy for Youth – Investing and Empowering", COM (2009) 200 final, 27 April 2009.

acknowledging that young people have a crucial role to play in meeting the many socio-economic, demographic, cultural, environmental and technological challenges and opportunities facing the EU. It calls for greater cooperation between youth policies and relevant policy areas, and promotes the *social and professional integration of young people* as an essential component to reach the objectives of Europe's Lisbon strategy for growth and jobs, fostering personal fulfillment, social cohesion and active citizenship of young people. The objective of the Commission in terms of youth participation is to:

'Ensure full participation of youth in society, by increasing youth participation in the civic life of local communities and in representative democracy, by supporting youth organisations as well as various forms of 'learning to participate', by encouraging participation of non - organised young people and by providing quality information services'. (European Commission, 2009: 8)

In light of the current crisis, The Council of the EU agrees in its Work Plan (up to the end of 2015) that, among other themes, *Empowerment, with a special focus on access to rights, autonomy, participation and active citizenship within and outside the EU* should be given priority by Member States and the Commission in their cooperation at EU level<sup>8</sup>.

In conclusion, overall motivation of politicians, policy makers, democratic institutions, economy and others to foster participation of young people can be summarized as follows:

- To promote the democratic values of (modern) societies and a sense of citizenship
- To foster social inclusion and integration of young people and their employability
- To support individual development, self-confidence and empowerment
- To manage social, political, economic and cultural changes.

Main arguments to promote youth participation, in context of the European youth policy, are reflected in two major approaches<sup>9</sup>:

- A political approach that sees the greater involvement of children and young people as a means to better mastering the social and demographic challenges that we face
- A normative approach that enshrines youth participation in theoretical democratic reform concepts.

While youth participation has both an instrumental value but is also a value in itself, current debate points to the fact that the above mentioned political documents might be driven by the fear that (young) people may mistrust (current) political trends, arguing that a well-functioning transparent democracy reduces mistrust and guarantees legitimacy, credibility and the operation of democratic systems. The assumption is that increased participation will give citizens a sense of empowerment and confidence in democracies. Another argument is based on the idea that the policy makers are concerned about a possible frustration of young people in terms of their increasingly difficult transitions to work and adult life and – as a consequence – the risk of de-motivation, resignation, individual misbehavior, including negative mental and physical symptoms. Finally, the motivation of policy makers is seen as driven by social and

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<sup>8</sup> Council of the European Union (2014), Draft Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on a European Union Work Plan for Youth for 2014-2015, Brussels (p. 5)

<sup>9</sup> In correspondence to a comparative study on youth participation in Finland and Germany

democratic implications of an ageing society and the fact that young people will be confronted with a higher burden of financial transfers to the older generation and a decreasing influence on democratic systems due to the ratio old - young and the fact that the young will just be a minority in future societies.

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