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Bringing down barriers to youth participation: adopting a lingua franca for local and regional authorities and young people

Current Affairs Committee

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Summary

Why are young people not seizing the opportunities proposed by political institutions, including local and regional authorities, to have their voices heard? There is an apparent paradox of youth participation: while political institutions place greater emphasis on its promotion, young people seem to reject the opportunities on offer, as the decline in their election turnout and recent protest movements suggest.

This report, which summarises the findings of recent youth research, illustrates that political institutions and young people are just not talking the same language: young people have created a new “vocabulary of citizenship”, they are mobilised by specific issues linked to their concerns and interests which, in their eyes, are not dealt with by the policies being adopted by democratically elected representatives. Political institutions, on the other hand, seem still to consider voting as the only relevant instrument of participation, political activity and consultation. Real citizen participation is only achieved, however, if citizens are able to influence decision and policy making.

The draft resolution proposes measures that will ensure that young citizens and elected representatives have opportunities to enter into dialogue in order to strengthen the links between them. These exchanges will also help to dispel any misunderstandings about each party’s motivations and needs. It also proposes that local and regional authorities adopt the new culture of communication being widely used by young people, thus enabling this group to participate effectively in policy and decision-making procedures, to bring their concerns and needs to the table, while using the tools which they favour. It is in this way that the barriers to meaningful youth participation will be brought down.

Bringing down barriers to youth participation: adopting a lingua franca for local and regional authorities and young people

RESOLUTION 386 (2015)^[2]

1. There is an apparent paradox of youth participation in contemporary society: political institutions are placing greater emphasis on its promotion while young people seem to reject the opportunities on offer, as the decline in their election turnout and recent protest movements would suggest.

2. Young people's distrust of politics could threaten European democracy which, to a certain extent, is being undermined by a weakening of its institutions' and policies' legitimacy among young citizens. For them, this legitimacy can only be recovered when their voices are heard and their participation in decision-making processes is ensured.

3. Young people's rejection of politics can be seen as a symbol of the society which they feel has betrayed and alienated them – they have been hardest hit by the crisis, facing high unemployment and difficult transitions to adulthood. Participation is crucial to the development of young people's sense of responsibility for community life, helping them to acquire democratic citizenship skills, and more importantly empowering them to take active charge of their lives and communities. Hence, they are motivated to express their needs through new practices of civic involvement although these are sometimes perceived as anti-political or a-political.

4. Unfortunately, when it comes to (re)-establishing dialogue between young people and political institutions, misunderstandings and difficulties in communication abound. The two sides speak different languages: young people have created a new “vocabulary of citizenship”, whereas the authorities still seem to consider voting as the only relevant instrument of political activity and consultation. What's more, authorities tend to see “youth” as a transition to control and manage, policies being aimed at guiding young people through their transition to adulthood, placing them in a subordinate position and perceiving them as something “in the making” rather than full citizens.

5. Young people are increasingly mobilised by specific issues, more closely linked to their (personal) interest in a given issue than to a general interest in politics and daily experiences. They choose to be involved in collective forms of civic and political action characterised by lower levels of formality and perceived as less binding and “labelling” than parties, preferring to effect small, profound changes through their daily interactions. Young people are increasingly active in civic associations, charities, NGOs and voluntary activities. In addition, Internet and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have drastically changed youth participatory behaviour and political action, updating traditional actions, like sending e-mails to politicians, or offering new ones, like protesting through mail bombing. Local and regional authorities should promote strategies that help to tie these new acts of participation to the conventional participatory paths.

6. However, due to their scale of action and the tools used, many practices are scarcely visible or are classed as incivility with the result that young people are not only failing to make their voices heard but also are being misjudged. In addition, youth abstention from the institutional places of politics feeds a vicious circle of self-marginalisation: if young people do not vote, subscribe to political parties or trade unions, or do not stand in elections, their position will be considered as less politically relevant by politics and politicians.

7. Local and regional authorities' vocabulary of youth participation can be described as too narrow. Authorities tend to see young people as a homogenous group, placing teenagers and thirty year olds on the same level. They do not take properly into account differences in socio-economic backgrounds and other forms of social disadvantage. In addition, the tools of participation they propose is limited mainly to voting, standing for election or public consultation.

8. Municipal and regional youth councils are valuable instruments of youth consultation however some do not offer young people the opportunity to participate meaningfully in decision and policy-making procedures. It would be useful to analyse municipal and regional youth councils' characteristics, powers and activities to see how these can be fully utilised to promote real youth participation in decision and policy-making.

9. Finally, local and regional authorities tend to limit youth participation to issues that “concern young people directly”, keeping the “big issues” to the “grown-ups”, presupposing that young people are not interested in the economy, environmental issues, health and educational policies, etc.

10. The Congress welcomes the setting up of its ad hoc group on the participation of young people and awaits its conclusions on how the Congress can promote a structured dialogue with young people from across Europe and their participation in its work.

11. The Congress reaffirms its intention to pursue the fruitful co-operation its Secretariat has established with the Council of Europe's Directorate General of Democracy, in particular the Youth Department, on promoting youth participation and suggests the organisation of a joint conference on youth participation so as to promote dialogue between its members and young people.

12. In view of the above, and in order to create optimal conditions for achieving the meaningful participation of young people, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe urges local and regional authorities to implement its recommendations contained in Resolution 346(2012), Resolution 319(2010) and Resolution 259(2008)[\[3\]](#), and in particular to:

a. mainstream the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life in all aspects of their youth policy making;

b. in co-operation with young people in an open and transparent process, and within a reasonable time frame, create a platform for structured dialogue, for example by setting up joint decision and policy-making bodies;

c. encourage wider knowledge among young people of democratic practices, for example by introducing citizenship, human rights and democracy education, including on how political systems work, in schools within their competence and giving school pupils the opportunity to practice democracy by setting up joint school councils, consulting them on the running of the school;

d. hold debates between local and regional elected representatives and children and young people in order to strengthen links between them and dispel misunderstandings;

e. organise joint training activities for elected representatives, local/regional government staff and young people to break down misunderstandings and to promote a participation-friendly community culture;

f. engage in dialogue and consultation of young people from disadvantaged areas.

13. The Congress reiterates its invitation in Res 346(2012) that the national delegations include some young elected representatives as both full and substitute members.

14. The Congress also draws attention to its Resolution 207(2006) on young people and new information and communication technologies: a new opportunity for local democracy whose provisions it encourages both local and regional authorities to implement. In addition, in view of the limited participation tools offered by local and regional authorities, the Congress invites the

latter to provide training in ICTs for their elected representatives and staff to increase the use of those tools favoured by young people.

15. Furthermore, in order to strengthen the linkages between young citizens and political authorities, the Congress invites local and/or regional authorities to use the methodologies and tools, referred to in Congress Resolution 394 (2015) on E-media: game changer for local and regional politicians, as a means of mobilising young people and increasing their participation in decision and policy making.

16. Investigate, in the case of regions with legislative powers, the possibility of lowering the voting age to 16 in regional elections.

Bringing down barriers to youth participation: adopting a lingua franca for local and regional authorities and young people

recommendation 376 (2015)[\[4\]](#)

1. If citizenship is the result of both participation and inclusion in a certain societal system, it can be said that the crisis and the connected risk of personal immobility and social invisibility are eroding young people's citizenship that is their possibility to understand themselves, to act and to be recognised as full members of society. Young people's rejection of politics can be seen as a symbol of the society which they feel has betrayed and alienated them, while the new practices of civic involvement they use for expressing their needs are sometimes perceived as anti-political or a-political.

2. Young people give shape to their personal idea of citizenship and on how to engage in society on their own from their experiences in the home, friendship groups, school and neighbourhood. Schools are a place where everyday citizenship issues should be addressed and where political systems and participation can be learnt. In addition, they represent a space where it is easier to reach the more marginalised groups of the youth population.

3. Young people have been hardest hit by the effects of the economic and financial crisis. Negative trends in the labour market, increased competition for jobs, increasingly insecure work contracts, protracted and complicated life trajectories, as well as inadequate social protection hinder youth transitions to adulthood. Civic and political engagement, as well as socio-economic inclusion are elements of citizenship that cannot be separated.

4. Young people are increasingly making use of Internet and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as instruments for participation however access to computers and to the Internet is still defined by income or education, but also by the geographical area of residence, eg urban versus rural areas. In order to promote a culture of communication based on the use of ICTs, equal access to the Internet is necessary.

5. Finally, in order to understand the meaning of the new forms of expression of youth involvement, it is of paramount importance to explore the crisis of the more conventional forms of involvement.

6. The Congress refers to its recommendation to the Committee of Ministers to invite member States to strengthen the political influence and participation of young people through the offer of more citizenship rights, for example by investigating the possibility of lowering the voting age to

16 as proposed in Resolution 1826 (2011) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

7. In light of the above, the Congress recommends that the Committee of Ministers invite member States to:

a. introduce, in schools within their competence, citizenship, human rights and democracy education, including on how political systems work;

b. introduce school students to the responsibilities and opportunities of participation at an early stage of their lives by implementing a system of school joint management boards, which would constitute spaces for dialogue and consultation;

c. ensure policies are adopted which give young people access to their social rights, such as employment, housing and social protection by making more resources available to those institutions working on youth-related issues at various governmental levels, for example youth ministries;

d. reduce the digital divide by ensuring equal access to the Internet in all areas, both urban and rural;

8. The Committee of Ministers may wish to invite the Joint Council on Youth (CMJ) to consider:

a. undertaking a mapping exercise of existing legal frameworks, structures and practices of participation of young people in decision-making processes at local and regional levels;

b. organising jointly with the Congress a conference on youth participation so as to promote dialogue between Congress members and young people;

c. exploring the current offers of youth participation in political parties and trade unions at local, regional, national and European levels in order to define the state of youth political participation in Europe.

9. Finally, the Congress requests that the Committee of Ministers invite member States to consider making voluntary contributions to help finance its efforts to promote the participation of young Europeans in its work through a new mechanism for structured dialogue and their continued active participation in the sessions.

Bringing down barriers to youth participation: adopting a lingua franca for local and regional authorities and young people

Explanatory Memorandum^[5]

1. Introduction

1. The Congress' report on "Youth and democracy: the changing face of youth political engagement"^[6] examined the reason for the apparent paradox of youth participation: while political institutions are placing greater emphasis on the promotion of youth participation, young people seem to reject the opportunities on offer, as the decline in their electoral turnout and recent youth protest movements testify. This report was commissioned in order to investigate how this discrepancy can be resolved, and focuses its attention on the pivotal role played by local and regional authorities in determining the nature and extent of youth participation within contemporary society. By examining young people's and institutions' "vocabularies of citizenship", it will analyse the cause of misunderstandings and difficulties in communication between these two actors. It will also cite some examples of effective dialogue between young people and local and

regional authorities and ideas for promoting youth participation within different fields of political action, ie representative, direct, participatory and counter democracy.

2. The paradox of youth participation: the increasing institutional commitment to youth participation versus the apparent growing political disengagement of young people

2. Over the past two decades, young people's social, political and civic participation has gained increasing importance on the institutional agenda at different levels. The Council of Europe and the European Union continue to stress the relevance of youth participation for the promotion of social inclusion and for a greater legitimacy of democratic institutions.^[7] This increased attention to promoting youth participation can be explained by the growing concern felt by these institutions in the face of young people's apparent waning interest in conventional politics and participation methods.

3. Conceived as offering young citizens the rights, means, opportunity and space necessary to take active and meaningful part in decision-making processes and to engage in activities which aim to create a better society, participation has become a core theme of European youth policies. In 1992, the Congress adopted its "European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life", subsequently revised in 2003, which remains a relevant and important tool for promoting youth participation today. The Charter highlights the importance of youth participation in local and regional life for democracy as part of policies that promote civic participation and active citizenship, a "youth dimension" in all policies, different forms of consultation of young people and of their representatives, and the involvement of young people from the most disadvantaged segments of society. This participation is crucial to the development of young people's sense of responsibility for community life, and helps them to acquire democratic citizenship skills, and more importantly empowers them to take active charge of their lives and communities.

4. As the 2012 report found, over the years, young people's distrust of political processes has found alternative modes of expression. Abstentionism has been accompanied by an upsurge of protest movements involving especially the younger cohorts. Since 2005, demonstrations and riots have in many European countries reflected an open conflict between young people and society.

5. These different expressions of young people's distrust of politics could threaten European democracy which, to a certain extent, is being undermined by a weakening of its institutions' and policies' legitimacy among young citizens. As a result, there is a new awareness amongst States of the need to revitalise the overall democratic system, as it could be argued that the already existing institutional mechanisms are failing to reach growing numbers of young people.

3. The changing situation of young people in times of economic crisis: a key to understanding youth participation today

6. To understand contemporary youth participation and how to promote a new dialogue between young people and democratic institutions, the main transformations affecting youth in contemporary society and the effects of the crisis on their life expectations and opportunities must be examined. As the 2012 report

found, young people's apparent disengagement can be explained by their current worsening life perspectives.

7. Many studies have found that paths to adult life have today become increasingly complex and demanding for many young people, resulting in a reduction in economic inclusion and social protection. Negative trends in the labour market, increased competition for jobs, increasingly insecure work contracts, protracted and complicated life trajectories, as well as inadequate social protection hinder youth transitions to adulthood. Some groups of young people, those who experienced various forms of social disadvantage before the crisis, such as migrants, young people with disabilities and members of the various minorities groups (eg religious, ethnic and LGBT), are particularly penalised.

8. If citizenship is the result of both participation and inclusion in a certain societal system, it can be said that the crisis and the connected risk of personal immobility and social invisibility are eroding young people's citizenship, that is their possibility to understand themselves, to act and to be recognised as full members of society. Young people's rejection of politics can be seen as a symbol of the society which they feel has betrayed and alienated them, they are motivated to express their needs through new practices of civic involvement although these are sometimes perceived as anti-political or a-political.

4. The importance of the local level for shaping young people's future participation habits

9. Their precarious situation undoubtedly offers an explanation for young people's growing dissent and distrust toward politics and its institutions. It also underlines why it is important to increase their civic and political participation as that is the means by which young people can make their voices heard and win back a central place in contemporary Europe, including on an economic and social level. For European, national, regional and local institutions, it is only by hearing young people's voices that they can recover the political and social legitimacy they seem to have lost in young people's eyes.

10. Seen from these perspectives, the importance of (re)establishing dialogue between young people and political institutions is crucial for both parties. This, however, is easier said than done as they seem to speak different languages when it comes to defining youth participation and how it should be practiced. To move forward, therefore, the first step should be to identify the misunderstandings and difficulties in communication encountered by local and regional authorities when aiming to promote youth active citizenship, but also to examine the difficulties they have in grasping contemporary youth engagement.

11. Many studies have highlighted the relevance of the local level for the development of political and civic attitudes among the younger generations, showing that young people's "political thinking and acting takes place within the spaces of home, friendship groups, school and neighbourhood".^[8] At these levels of their existence, young people begin to give shape to their personal idea of citizenship, learning both from social institutions and experimenting on their own on how to engage in society. The lessons learnt are then translated to the broader national and/or transnational levels with similar modalities and goals. Thus, the local conditions in which young citizens grow up can positively or negatively affect their path towards an active involvement on the basis of the quantity and quality of the available opportunities for participation. This puts a particular onus on local and regional authorities which de facto have the crucial responsibility of being the first institutional actor in the process of youth socialisation to civic and political participation.

5. Different languages? Comparing young people's and institutions' understanding of youth participation

12. So why are young people not responding to the participation opportunities offered by local and regional authorities? What are the “vocabularies of citizenship” and why are there so many misunderstandings? Which is the right or the best vocabulary to use to empower young people? And is there a solution to these misunderstandings?

5.1 Young people's vocabulary: is it too broad?

13. Research indicates that young people's scepticism towards institutions is leading to new innovative forms of public commitment, to a new “norm of citizenship”, ie a new definition of what constitutes a good citizen among the younger generations. Contrary to popular belief, young people are not idle and disaffected, they have created a new “vocabulary of citizenship” which shows its full potential at the local and regional levels, despite it often suffering from a lack of recognition and support from local and regional political institutions (see sub-head 5.2).

14. This new vocabulary is distinguished by a shift from the so-called “citizen-oriented political practices” to a new “cause-oriented participation” where the political involvement of young people is increasingly mobilised by very specific issues. The choice of how and when to participate is more closely linked to the (personal) interest in a given issue than to a general interest in politics, and the daily experiences of the individual gain a determining role in shaping her/his participatory behaviours. This is the case, for example, of the project “[Value Life](#)”, an anti-gun and knife crime active citizenship community initiative promoting crime prevention and youth empowerment, which was started in the Gladesmore Community School, Tottenham (United Kingdom) by nine students as an answer to the loss of two friends through gun crime.

15. Such cause-oriented participatory practices reflect the diversification of the political interests of today's youth, challenging the idea that the younger generations are apathetic and inactive subjects, and foster new ways of doing politics. The main tools of participative democracy, such as elections, political parties' programmes, no longer echo the single-issue logic of contemporary youth's participatory practice, which is better suited to other kinds of activities, such as petitions and referenda.^[9] Examples exist which illustrate the commitment of young people to expressing their position on specific issues, for example the June 2011 referendum in Italy on the management of public water and nuclear energy which assembled a quorum thanks to the mobilisation of young people.

16. This shift of importance away from the collective motivation linked to membership of political parties or trade unions towards individual motivations has changed young people's relationship with traditional political models based upon a juxtaposition between “right” and “left”: they now choose to be involved in collective forms of civic and political action characterised by lower levels of formality and perceived as less binding and “labelling” than parties. This, along with the general lack of trust in politicians and parties could explain the growing participation of young people in civic associations, charities, NGOs and voluntary activities, many of which – especially at the local level – are founded and managed by young people, deal with an array of issues – from welfare, to environment and animal protection – and share a common interest in improving the living conditions in a certain territory through innovative practices and ideas. These forms of participatory democracy offer young people the opportunity to challenge and develop information, views and suggestions. An interesting project is the “[Poznej Prahu jinak!](#)” association, established in Prague (Czech Republic), through which three friends help some of Prague's homeless people to become city guides and to earn a small living.

17. Young people seem thus to be attracted to those forms of participation that offer room for the individual dimension and that answer their need for flexibility such as associationism, but also to Internet and Communication Technologies (ICTs). The relevance of the Internet and new media should not be underestimated. The Internet, social networks and discussion forums have drastically changed youth participatory behaviour, also at the local level. Thanks to a broader, more immediate and less “expensive” use of the information provided by new media, ICTs have contributed to a de-hierarchisation of the access to information.^[10] New media have facilitated the development of new politically-defined social networks, for example interest groups which are characterised by their capacity to rally subjects around specific causes. Especially among young people, the Internet has changed the repertoires of political action, offering the possibility to update traditional actions, like sending e-mails to politicians or signing petitions online, and to experiment with new ones, for example protesting through mail bombing or creating apps to promote political consumerism. ICTs can be of interest to policy makers as a way of reaching out to young people through online consultations or questionnaires or for awareness-raising campaigns. The project “foodsharing.de” is an example of ICT-based youth participation at the local level. Launched in Cologne (Germany) in 2012, this youth-managed web initiative has created a space for the exchange or donation of food, a website and an app allow people to communicate to those who live nearby, to whom they donate food.

18. Thanks to ICTs, youth civic and political participation is today expressed through activities of engagement located on the border between the public and private spheres. Often defined as “everyday participation”, this kind of involvement reflects a contemporary tendency toward seeking “to effect small, profound change through their daily interactions, rather than shift grand narratives”.^[11] This trend is detectable predominantly among the young people who search alternative spaces and methods to express their political ideas by moving towards local, intimate and informal settings and by enhancing the political potential of their everyday activities. Small choices and gestures are combined with individuals’ local and daily life and integrated into their personal life-style. Everyday engagement is expressed through consumer behaviour relating to food, clothes, and services, for example going vegan, or boycotting certain brands responsible for, say, exploitation or animal cruelty. Everyday participation is “hidden” in even smaller behaviours and gestures in personal life-style: recycling, favouring bicycles over cars, wearing a specific T-shirt, listening to a particular kind of music, all of which can be charged with political meaning.

19. In general, young people’s new vocabulary of citizenship bears witness to their willingness to be effectively involved in the (re)definition of the contemporary European society, however the way in which they conceive and practice participation is not completely risk free. The strong civic interest and the vast potential for political engagement testified by these new forms of engagement can be applauded, however they can be a factor for increased political marginalisation. Firstly, due to their scale of action and the tools used, many of the practices of engagement are scarcely visible, which limits their capacity to make young people’s voices heard, for instance, some cultural activities, eg music festivals, artistic installations, promoted by youth activists are completely unknown even if they are highly innovative. Other actions of youth involvement run the risk of getting negative visibility, leading to misunderstandings especially between the younger and the older segments of the population, who may interpret these new ways of doing politics as signs of incivility. This is the case of graffiti which is confused with vandalism, but also of some political uses of public spaces that are not acceptable to local institutions and the population. Moreover, some new forms of youth participation are inaccessible to some youth groups, for example some political consumerism practices can be particularly expensive. Similarly, access to computers and to the Internet is still defined by income or education, but also by the geographical area of residence (eg urban versus rural areas).

20. This increasingly focused youth participation contributes also to the potential loss of an overall vision. On a micro-level, there is an obvious risk that sporadic and hyper-specialised youth participation could limit the development of a constant political behaviour among young people, as well as affect communication between youth activists, youth-led projects, organisations and associations that might be more effective and visible if they worked together.

21. On a macro-level, single-issue participation could be an obstacle to the flourishing of a comprehensive political framework among youth, that is of a “generational” vision^[12] able to put young people’s issues at the centre of authorities’ attention. At the same time, despite its highly political meaning, youth abstention from the institutional places of politics feeds a vicious circle of self-marginalisation: if young people do not vote, subscribe to political parties or trade unions, or stand in elections, their position will be considered as less politically relevant by politics and politicians.

22. Overall, the new forms of youth participation appear to be based on a broad definition of citizenship that in some cases can become too broad: these activities of engagement run the risk of having low political efficacy if they are not in some way connected with conventional political involvement.

5.2 The institutions’ vocabulary: is it too narrow?

23. So what does “youth participation” mean for the authorities responsible for the promotion of youth active citizenship at the local and regional levels? When considering the target group, the tools available for institutional youth participation programmes, and the issues open to young people, some common mistakes are apparent that limit institutional activities’ capability to attract young people, to strengthen their civic and political attitudes and to recognise the way they participate in society.

24. With regard to the target group, a recurring limitation of many local-led youth policies promoting youth participation is their focus: they are often aimed at a rather indistinct and vaguely specified target. These policies frequently address “young people” without any further specification, spanning wide age ranges that place teenagers and thirty year olds on the same level. Policy makers and institutions should remember that “youth” is a broad and heterogeneous reality. One method to involve young people in public policy making may be effective for one group of young people but totally irrelevant to others.

25. Beyond age differences, many local policies for young people do not take fully into account differences in socio-economic backgrounds and other forms of social disadvantage experienced by young people (eg disability, being part of a minority group). Again, many policies aimed at fostering active youth citizenship appear to overestimate the homogeneity of the youth condition, forgetting that youth political participation cannot be separated from the problems of social exclusion and economic inequalities. However, interventions overly or exclusively focused on particularly disadvantaged youth groups can produce or sustain existing processes of stigmatisation and social exclusion, favouring only a partial involvement of these young individuals. In other words, the creation of ad hoc programmes aimed at fostering the civic and political inclusion of these young people can easily produce an opposite outcome.

26. A further problem in many institution-led youth projects is posed by the proposed tools of involvement. Studies have found that institutional youth participation projects are based on a very limited range of instruments of representative democracy. Within the institutional scenario, young people commonly have the opportunity to exercise their rights of political citizenship only by voting, standing for election or by being involved in some form of public consultation. Each of these methods has amply demonstrated its deficiencies: the age limits for participation, poor and ineffective advertisement, complex and unattractive language, the limited consideration of the views expressed by young people. These are just some of the limits of these instruments of engagement which manifestly fail to attract the youth interest.

27. Many local and regional authorities’ youth participation policies still seem to consider voting as the only relevant instrument of political activity and consultation as a sufficient tool of political involvement, adopting an obsolete framework for understanding and fostering democracy. Institutional interventions on young people’s civic, social and political involvement are scarcely receptive to the target group and their more innovative ways of participation (see paragraph 5.1), thus limiting the inclusion of many young people. Traditional and formal participation tools are especially deficient when it comes to involving the most disadvantaged and excluded groups of young people, and they appear inadequate to deal with the societal transformations due to migration and globalisation.^[13]

28. Finally, many of the institutional activities aimed at promoting youth participation are based on the promotion of a single form of participatory instrument, neglecting the dynamic relationships between the various engagement activities and their overlapping boundaries.

29. Beyond the specific focus and tools of youth projects, it seems that institutional activities are less attractive and effective because of the limited issues on which young people are invited to express their opinion. Young people are often kept out of the “big issues” and only mobilised around very narrowly defined subjects, such as sport or the redevelopment of public spaces (eg parks, streets, former industrial buildings). Although these issues are relevant to young people’s daily lives, the containment of active youth participation to such narrow topics implies an “external” definition of what matters to young people that confine them within specific “precincts”. Many projects claim to engage young people on issues that “concern them directly”, forgetting that the economy, environmental policies, health and educational policies, and several other issues are all of direct interest to young people too.^[14] For these reasons, institutional youth participation programmes often result in “peripheral actions” that mostly engage young people in non-essential issues as far as their changing life conditions are concerned.

30. Thus, the institutional vocabulary of citizenship can be said to be too narrow to fully encapsulate young people’s civic engagement, resulting in an obsolete and distant language for the younger generations. Furthermore, it could be argued that the paradigm at the basis of many institutional youth policies accords only a partial recognition of young people as active citizens.

5.3 Local and regional authorities’ perception of young people

31. Research shows that many public youth policies appear to be guided by a so-called “youth development model”, a theoretical-methodological approach to young people based on the idea that the latter is something “in the making” and not something that “already is”.^[15] Youth is essentially perceived as a transition to control and to manage. The main purpose of public policies based on this model is to guide young people in their transition from youth to adulthood, managing any potential problematic behaviour. In this model, young people are placed in a subordinate position to adults and conceived as subjects that need to be guided, monitored and controlled. With regard to participatory politics, the youth development model has fuelled the widespread idea that young people are not “full citizens”, but “citizens in the making” who need to be guided through strict socialisation strategies.

32. As a result of this idea, many policies aimed at promoting youth participation restrict young people’s mobilisation to rigid programmes that do not take into account the ideas, needs and innovation expressed by youth. These policies consider young people as “apprentices of citizenship” who do not yet have the adequate knowledge and the necessary skills to decide on how to participate and in what. According to Hart,^[16] this often results in activities of mere “decoration” and “tokenism”^[17] that have little to do with real democracy.

33. Therefore, local and regional authorities’ perception of young people prevents them from seeing youth as partners in governance who have valuable experience as competent citizens.

6. Speaking the same language

34. From the above, a strong relation can be perceived between the apparent lack of participation of young people on the one hand, and the prevalence of ideological and practical limitations of what is recognised and proposed as youth participation by institutions on the other. Despite these manifest difficulties, local and regional authorities often effectively involve young people in public life through the implementation of a

range of innovative activities aimed at mitigating or overcoming the limits of the traditional tools of participatory democracy.

35. Many local and regional authorities use the already quite consolidated tools of children's and youth councils, boards or parliaments. Although they don't usually have decisional power, youth councils have been developed as official advisory bodies and can sometimes play a lobbying role towards decision makers. They are a valuable means for learning democratic culture and citizenship. These instruments of youth participation have proved to be highly effective when the participants are accorded a real opportunity to implement concrete actions and to have a say on issues that directly affect them or their communities. They will not be meaningful, however, unless they promote true participation and not tokenism. In the United Kingdom, the "Lewisham Young Mayor" is a project which enables young people, politicians, council officers and partners to work together to develop ideas and address issues of concern, thus enhancing young people's active participation in local democratic processes and governance. Democratically elected by their peers, the young mayors inform the work of the mayor, the municipal council and other decision-making bodies and oversee their own annual budget.

36. The project "[Young Inspectors](#)", sponsored by Dorset County Council (UK), focuses on the co-management of local services and brings marginalised young people together to evaluate and influence local services. Through the project, young individuals from different social backgrounds are trained to inspect and evaluate local youth services such as libraries, youth centres, information and advice centres, sexual health services and leisure centres. The local authority has improved or modified these services based on the young people's findings.

37. Recognition of the role of young citizens as an integral part of the local community can also be found in recent experiences of youth participatory budgeting. In Lille (France), Brighton (United Kingdom), Trofa and Condeixa-a-Nova (Portugal), and Colle Val d'Elsa (Italy), where young people have been entrusted with the management of a share of the local budget, with allocations of up to 25 000 euros to local projects.

38. Through other projects, local and regional authorities have demonstrated their willingness to reach out to young people by adopting youthful approaches to communication. Internet and social media – such as Facebook and Twitter, but also other tools such as blogs, wikis or virtual worlds – are now a commonly used tool for combining bottom-up Internet activism with the top-down structures of political decision making. In Finland, the Koordinatti Development Centre of Youth Information and Counselling Work and Ponsi Interactive Ltd set up a project named "[Channel Initiative](#)" involving more than 140 local authorities. An online platform has been created that gives young people the opportunity to make their voices heard. Through this platform, local decision makers and institutions can consult young people on their opinions.

39. In spite of local and regional authorities' growing interest in youth participation, the promotion of projects within the main contexts of young people's everyday lives is still rare. Schools, for example, are undoubtedly involved in educational and formative initiatives that also deal with the topic of civic and political engagement, but examples of real participatory projects within schools are still very limited. Among them, it is worth mentioning the significant initiative of the Finnish Youth Co-operation – Allianssi, which involved student councils of several comprehensive schools and upper secondary schools in the organisation of European shadow elections in May 2014.

40. In many other cases, the collaboration between institutions and young people starts from the "bottom", that is from the young people themselves and from local associations that, in developing their civic engagement initiatives, initiate a fruitful dialogue with local and regional authorities. A good example is the collaboration between a group of young people and a local authority (Region de Bruxelles Capitale) on the "[Extreme Team](#)" school in Brussels (Belgium). Their passion for parkour led a group of young men to create a recreational centre where they teach this sport to children, providing also general education on healthy and unhealthy behaviour (eg nutrition, drugs, alcohol).

41. Beyond these examples of direct communication between young people and institutions, it is also important to underline the central role played by local associations and NGOs in improving communication between young people and authorities. The objective of enhancing the dialogue between young citizens and local elected representatives was at the basis of the project “Débatte” of the “Karuur vzw” association, which sponsored the organisation of public debates between policy makers and young citizens in 130 Dutch towns. The initiatives stimulated the participation of children and young people in local management and administration by challenging both young people and local authorities to organise participatory events and to get engaged in effective and direct communication on issues of mutual concern.

42. Associationism has proven to be a particularly effective instrument of involvement for those who experience different forms of social and personal difficulty. Although even associations and organisations have limited capabilities of involving the more marginalised segments of the society, their flexible and informal strategies can help to attract some less “reachable” segments of the youth population. Local authorities and associations in “Barrio de la Mina” of Barcelona (Spain) have worked together to promote the integration of Roma youth. The project “Polydor” involved young people in the restoration of a building that has been turned into a sports and cultural centre where activities aimed at reducing the number of educational drop-outs and harmful behaviour (eg drug use) among Roma youth have been implemented. So far, the project has created a safer environment for local inhabitants, as well as enhanced the social cohesion between Roma and non-Roma residents within the district.

43. Lastly, an interesting civic engagement and social inclusion project involving young people with disabilities in Bologna (Italy) has opened a café where the staff are all young deaf-mute people. The “Senza Nome” is a successful example of the integration of people into their local community, as well as a good instrument to enhance the social knowledge of deaf-mute people’s languages and experiences.

44. The afore-mentioned examples have different goals and are grounded in different paradigms of civic and political participation but they all provide successful practices of youth engagement at local and regional levels. These participation projects can be seen as effective attempts to go beyond mere consultation practices and the sporadic involvement through elections to instigating direct and effective “communication” between young people and local and regional authorities. Several lessons can be learnt from these good examples. First and foremost, within these projects the essential condition of participation is fully achieved: the effective and balanced^[18] sharing of power and responsibilities among the actors of a given society or community. These examples demonstrate the willingness of local and regional authorities to effectively share their powers, promoting real participation of young people who are not perceived as a problem to be solved or contained, but as a resource to be promoted and, in a sense, “used” for the wellbeing of the whole community. Likewise, the young people, showing their ability to act politically in their local worlds by promoting their own initiatives and taking part in those proposed by institutions and associations, demonstrate their willingness to collaborate and to accept the responsibilities connected to the status of citizen.

45. The success of these co-operation projects appears to be tied to a positive dynamic of mutual empowerment of the actors involved. In other words, these projects have demonstrated the ability to support and achieve the engagement of all interested actors by starting a process through which young people, associations and institutions themselves take the role of reciprocal collaborators in the promotion of public affairs.

46. A second lesson concerns the transformation of young people’s everyday environment into a “political space”. The neighbourhood, school, streets, the local library and park become political contexts where young individuals can exercise their citizenship rights. This enables the young participants to discover citizenship and political participation in their daily actions and worlds, bringing them progressively closer to that political sphere they usually perceive as absent or distant.

47. To get closer to young people, the aforementioned projects also adopt a “youth language” (eg graffiti, on-line platforms), but in contrast to many other youth participation initiatives, these experiences do not consider young people as “citizens in the making”, who should be kept out of important political issues because they are “not yet ready”. In other words, the use of youth language does not preclude the involvement of young people in broad and relevant issues (eg local budget and urban planning). Moreover, the use of social media is not limited to mere consultation, but provides a basis for real and tangible actions, connecting the virtual and real spheres.

48. The implementation of a path for youth participation over a longer period of time provides undoubtedly higher possibilities for success. Long-term projects become part of the common practice of a community, producing not only immediate practical changes, but also cultural transformations in the long run.

49. Lastly, many of these good practices help foster inclusion. Real participation can occur only if the initiative attempts to involve those who are unable to participate or do not seem interested in being engaged. Some of the examples presented try to overcome this challenge, which is undoubtedly more complex where the social fabric is less homogeneous.

7. Conclusions

50. The 2012 Congress report concluded that young people’s scepticism and distrust towards traditional participative institutions does not necessarily mean that they are disinterested in politics and democracy, on the contrary, they want to be involved in society, a fact that can be seen by their participatory behaviour. They are, however, often staunch critics of the political system and disengaging from traditional democratic and political institutions.

51. Local and regional authorities play a pivotal role in determining the extent and nature of youth participation in democratic life as they represent young people’s daily environment. The local political context can be an important connection between young people and participation, awakening and supporting their desire for activism. The examples of youth civic and political activation here undoubtedly show how young people find ways to participate in local contexts, their everyday experiences inspiring innovative forms of involvement.

52. Although local and regional authorities are sometimes receptive to, recognise and accord value to young people’s civic and political expressions, very often these institutions seem to have difficulty in managing and promoting a positive relationship with their young citizens. Their particularly out-dated and narrow “vocabulary of democracy” does not motivate young people to engage in the activities promoted by these democratic authorities. The younger generations challenge these activities as symbols of a society that limits and hinders their transition to autonomy and independence. To rekindle young people’s interest in participation, local and regional authorities need now, more than ever, to redefine their understanding of youth participation on four levels.

53. Firstly, that of space: local and regional authorities should endeavour to promote participation within the context of young people’s everyday lives. This means, on the one hand, to (re)discover the political and civic potential of schools, libraries, neighbourhoods, streets, parks. On the other, there is an urgency to promote a fruitful dialogue between young people and institutions through virtual spaces.

54. Secondly, that of forms or styles of youth participation: local and regional authorities should remain open to the new expressions of civic and political interest of the younger generations and refrain from considering voting as the only “real” way to be engaged and to have a say in society. Conventional representative democracy tools and approaches are increasingly unable to attract young people’s attention and will lose even more attractiveness if they do not link up with the unconventional participation activities widely adopted nowadays by young people. Local and regional authorities should work towards the

development of a link between such democratic behaviour and traditional long-term participatory processes, thus elaborating a “tangible interface between the different concepts of democracy”.^[19]

55. Thirdly, that of contents or themes: local and regional authorities should widen the spectrum of the issues of youth participation in order to include also those topics that are usually considered “for grown-ups” and, in so doing, truly recognise young people as fully legitimate citizens.

56. Lastly, local and regional authorities must revise their list of actors of youth participation: they must urgently ensure that all voices are heard by fostering a more effective engagement of the more marginalised youth, but also a widening of the range of local actors responsible for the promotion of youth participation.

[1] L: Chamber of Local Authorities / R: Chamber of Regions

EPP/CCE: European People’s Party Group in the Congress

SOC: Socialist Group

ILDG: Independent and Liberal Democrat Group

ECR: European Conservatives and Reformists Group

NR: Members not belonging to a political group of the Congress

[2] Debated and adopted by the Congress on 20 October 2015, 1st sitting (see Document CG/2015(29)7FINAL, explanatory memorandum), rapporteur: Malcolm BYRNE, Ireland (R, ILDG).

[3] [Resolution 346 \(2012\)](#) on Youth and democracy: the changing face of youth political engagement; [Resolution 319 \(2010\)](#) on Integration of young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods, [Resolution 259 \(2008\)](#) on Integration and participation of young people at local and regional level.

[4] Debated and adopted by the Congress on 20 October 2015, 1st sitting (see Document CG/2015(29)7FINAL, explanatory memorandum), rapporteur: Malcolm BYRNE, Ireland (R, ILDG).

[5] This explanatory memorandum is based on the document prepared by the Council of Europe consultant, Ilaria Pitti, and on the research study, commissioned by the Congress and the EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership, by the Finnish Youth Research Network. These documents are available from the Secretariat upon request. A full bibliography of sources quoted in this explanatory memorandum can be found in the documents.

[6] CG(23)9FINAL, Resolution 346(2012) and Recommendation 327(2012).

[7] The future of the Council of Europe youth policy: AGENDA 2020, adopted at the 8th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth, Kyiv, Ukraine, 10 – 11 October 2008; Committee of Ministers Resolution CM/Res(2008)23; Congress Recommendation 128(2003) on the Revised European Charter on the participation of young people at local and regional life; EU Youth Strategy 2010-2018.

[8] Harris, A., Wyn, J. (2009), “Young People’s Politics and the Micro-territories of the Local”, in *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 2: 327–344.

[9] Norris (2003) specifies this distinction is not “water-tight” because, for example, “political parties can organise mass demonstrations, and elected representatives can be contacted by constituents about specific policy issues and community concerns, [...] new social movements often adopt mixed action strategies which combine traditional repertoires, such as lobbying representatives, with a variety of alternative modes such as online networking, street protests, and consumer boycotts” (Norris 2003: 4).

[10] This is particularly true in relation to status, to class and to age hierarchies. In comparison with the past, information is indeed less managed by those who hold the power, by the richest classes or by the adults.

[11] Vromen A., Collin P. (2010) "Everyday youth participation? Contrasting views from Australian policymakers and young people", Young: Nordic Journal of Youth Research, 18 (1), 97-112

[12] Similar to that developed during the '60 by the baby-boomers.

[13] For example, a growing number of young people living within European Union have no right of vote despite actually being active citizens of their local communities.

[14] See the Revised European Charter on the participation of young people in local and regional life European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life, every policy and intervention has a "youth dimension".

[15] Every youth policy subtends an educational intent and fulfils a socialisation function toward the new generations: James A. (2011), *To Be (Come) or Not to Be (Come): Understanding Children's Citizenship* in «Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science», 1: 167-179. Therefore, through the development and implementation of specific policies, a society expresses its specific ideas of youth (James & James 2008).

[16] Children's participation: from tokenism to citizenship, Roger Hart, ISBN: 88-85401-05-8, March 1992.

[17] In Hart's words: "decoration [...] refers, for example, to those frequent occasions when children are given T-shirts related to some cause, and may sing or dance at an event in such dress, but have little idea of what it is all about and no say in the organising of the occasion. The young people are there because of the refreshments, or some interesting performance, rather than the cause. The reason this is described as one rung up from 'manipulation' is that adults do not pretend that the cause is inspired by children. They simply use the children to bolster their cause in a relatively indirect way [while] tokenism is used to describe those instances in which children are apparently given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about the subject or the style of communicating it, and little or no opportunity to formulate their own opinions".

[18] The redistribution of power through participation should always be balanced. If it is true that there can be no real participation without a delegation of power from institutions to citizens, it is also true that the institutional delegation should not result in a reduction of the authority's responsibility over a certain issue. In this case, the participation becomes a choice of convenience through which the institution tries to get rid of the political and/or economic burden of a given decision.

[19] Kiilakoski, T., Gretschel, A. (2013), "Challenging Structured Participation Opportunities" in *Perspectives on Youth: European Youth Partnership Series under the topic "2020 – what do YOU see?"* - <http://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/1017981/7110731/PoY1-full.pdf/0da8d1d9-2886-4f13-a42b-ad5ad4ff6e69> [Accessed September 2014].