

## Youth Partnership

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



**Chairmanship of the Czech Republic**  
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**Présidence de la République tchèque**  
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## Symposium

# 'Youth Policy Responses to the Contemporary Challenges Faced by Young People'

Prague, Czech Republic

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**Pillar 2: SOLIDARITY and Democracy**  
**Theme 3: Participation and expression**  
**Teasers**

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## What are we talking about?

This theme looks at the rights, means, support, opportunities and spaces young people have for making their voice heard and having an influence on issues that concern them. This could refer specifically to **political participation**, but also applies in a broader sense, in terms of young people having the possibility to have a say in all matters that concern them.

This theme explores the idea of youth expression and the granting or securing of 'space': public spaces where young people can express themselves, **spaces for assembly and association** and also **spaces for creativity and artistic expression**.

The indicative practices here are programmes for youth creativity or support to youth participation at different levels, mostly in relation to spaces for democratic participation and freedom of assembly.

*Uneven opportunities for direct formal political participation in voting*

*Increase in digital opportunities*

*Increasing generational rupture*

*Growing importance of narrowly defined issue politics (such as BREXIT, migrants and refugees, populism)*

## Young Voices

Young people as fully legitimate citizens with rights and responsibilities

Both formal and informal structures which capture the views and concerns of young people

Youth representation in elected bodies

### How do young people conceptualise and access power?

While research recently commissioned by the EU is to focus on this issue through the H2020 PARTISPACE project (<http://partispace.eu>) which will document young people's views of participation and their social spaces of action), few results have yet been reported. What is clear, however, is that the digital world will be one of the arenas in which youth envision political power to be active.

Youth participation is a key issue for the Council of Europe. Through its Youth Department, the organisation has been a key reference in Europe in the development of [pedagogical resources](#) to support democratic citizenship education and training. The Council of Europe train young 'multipliers' every year that are actively engaged at local, national and European level, to use a rights-based non-formal education approach in the activities organised by the youth organisations.

### **How is the teaching of active citizenship best achieved in both national curricula and youth sector advocacy?**

*[It is worth exploring school curricula on two fronts: 1. Pedagogic style and the presence of a citizenship component 2. The substantive content. The normative dimension of what is taught is of interest, particularly where a country has had a 'difficult' past for example Germany, but also in the ways that other countries see their history through the lens of being innocent victims of aggressive ideological powers.]*

## Political Participation

Formal participation through election and referendum voting

Volunteering for political parties and political groups such as Greenpeace and Amnesty

### Dissatisfaction with contemporary political structures?

Over the last decade, there has been strong interest in identifying, rectifying or explaining youth disengagement from politics and numerous explanations have been postulated for such disengagement. As identified in the European Commission's (2015b) recent report, *Their Future is Our Future: Youth as Actors of Change*, 'The young are dissatisfied with our current democratic systems that tend to exclude them from decisions affecting their lives now and in the future'. Feelings of powerlessness and marginalisation among youth voters, whereby there is a perception that political systems are closed to young people, are resulting in few opportunities for youth to intervene effectively with the political process (Henn, et al., 2002; Henn and Foard, 2014).

### Low youth turnout in elections and party membership

Figures from the European Social Survey indicate that voter turnout in preceding national elections was over 17 per cent higher for older respondents than for the younger cohort sampled (EACEA, 2013b). Overall, when examined in the context of electoral behaviour, in terms of voting patterns and levels of party membership, evidence in the area of youth participation in formal politics suggests that there is a spiral of decline in both membership and activism in modern parties (Bennie and Russell, 2012). Such evidence may suggest that young people are politically disengaged and often disenfranchised (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Harris, 2009).

The Council of Europe Youth Department strongly engages young people and youth organisations in its work. Known as [co-management system](#), representatives from youth non-governmental organisations sit in committees with government officials and together they discuss and decide on the priorities of the youth sector and make recommendations for future budgets and programmes of the organisation.

The European Union has a permanent consultative process that aims to engage young people in decision-making related with youth policy: the Structured Dialogue is organised into 18-month cycles and each cycle focuses on a different thematic priority (set by the Council of Youth Ministers). It is made up of one main event, the EU Youth Conference organised by the member State currently holding the EU presidency. The current 2016-2017 cycle (Dutch, Slovakian and Maltese EU Presidencies) focus on **"Enabling all young people to engage in a diverse, connected and inclusive Europe."** **The Structured Dialogue is one the seven pillars of the 2010-2018 [EU Youth Strategy](#) (that itself is built in the framework of this consultative process).**

### **What should be the minimum voting age for local and national elections and referenda?**

*[For example, in the UK there is a growing debate about reducing voting to age 16, this occurred in the Scottish referendum on independence but not in the Brexit referendum]*

**Is there a growing crisis in low levels of youth political participation?**

*[evidence suggests that young people are less likely to be sure of who/what to vote for as well as less likely to vote compared to older generations]*

**Space for Assembly and Association**

Availability of physical spaces, indoor and outdoor which are explicitly for young people

Digital fora

The turn to alternative outlets for participation

One of the most in-depth studies to examine youth participation in democratic life across the EU (EACEA, 2013a) found that young people are stakeholders in the European democratic system. They express ideas and preferences, and defend diverse interests. There is no crisis of democratic participation amongst youth across Europe and neither is there major disenchantment with political issues and concerns on the part of young people (EACEA, 2013a). There is a high level of youth interest in politics, but how that interest translates into participation is changing. Young people opt more for the informal politically relevant processes, such as activism or civic engagement, which according to Global Network for Rights and Development (2015) is a deep concern that can influence the quality of democratic governance, challenge the representativeness of the political system and lead to the disenfranchisement of young people. This view is echoed by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance who state that the ‘relative under-representation of youth the national political scene has a critical impact on the quality and, importantly, the legitimacy of domestic democratic governance and contributes to the further political marginalization of youth’ (International IDEA 2008: p.10).

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe also has extensive work related with the participation of young people at local and regional level. The [Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life](#) (May 2003) is an important advocacy reference for fostering cooperation between local authorities and the youth sector in Europe. Together with the Manual: Have your Say! (that is a tool to educate and act towards participation at local and regional level), it has strongly contributed for the creation of new spaces for participation, including the organisation of consultative processes for policy development and the creation of local youth councils.

One of the [2016-2017 strategic priorities](#) of the Council of Europe’s youth sector focus is on supporting young people and Member States in increasing the participation of young people in democratic processes. Through the [European Youth Foundation](#), the organisation provides financial support to youth activities at local and international level. Through its Erasmus+ (Youth in Action) programme, the European Commission supports financially youth participation projects, including policy dialogue initiatives ([Key Action 3](#)). Innovative ideas are welcomed and valued by existing funding opportunities.

**How does the digital revolution represent both an opportunity and a threat to political participation?**

*[this is an area where technology and use are moving fast. Digital media can be used pro-actively such as*

*when young people coordinate actions using social media. But there is also the threat of manipulation by sinister actors as is alleged in the Brexit referendum and the US election where demographic targeting can have a direct influence in the same way as an aggressive targeted advertising campaign]*

## **Space for Creativity and Expression**

Supportive environment to explore difficult political, ideological and moral issues without feeling threatened

A tolerance of intolerance – the need to respect freedom of speech

The importance of individual respect – treating opposing views as legitimate positions to be discussed and debated

The right to participation is intrinsically linked with the right of expression. In a globalised world where many young people choose to engage online rather than offline in discussions related with current challenges that Europe is facing, it is important to promote digital literacy and human rights online. The [No Hate Speech](#) Movement (Council of Europe), a youth-focused initiative that fights online hate speech and promotes human rights initiated in 2012 has been prolonged until the end of 2017. The campaign contributes to the implementation of the Council of Europe's Action Plan on Building Inclusive Societies.

### **Is it unacceptable for young people to discuss views which are openly intolerant?**

*[should lines of acceptability be drawn and if so where, in regard to the free speech – censorship continuum?]*

### **How should the youth sector (including youth organisations and youth work providers) react to young people expressing overtly racist, sexist or other highly polarised and extreme views?**

*[When there is a 'no platform' policy what are the risks in denying a voice rather than directly opposing it? On the other hand, do we risk legitimising extreme views by giving them space?]*

### **Is it always desirable to increase the level of engagement that young people have in politics and civic processes even when this may result in engagement with radical, violent or extreme movements?**

*[how comfortable are we to set a normative expectations on 'good' and 'bad' forms of engagement?]*

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