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# YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN POLICY MAKING

## FINDINGS OF A SUMMARY ANALYSIS OF THE INFORMATION TEMPLATES ON YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN THE EKCYP

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*Vienna, 11/2011*

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## Introduction

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The “indignados” on the Puerta del Sol, the Geracao a Rasca<sup>1</sup>, Stuttgart 21 and not to forget the “Occupants” are symbols of the new movements influencing societies at the beginning of the second decade in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One of the most interesting parallels of the new movements is the political dimension with the simultaneous alienation to party-politics. These new forms of participation bear a resemblance to the “new political movements” of the 70ies and 80ies. Nevertheless it seems that the movements will not sustain as political groups – like their predecessors did. Its impact on European or national politics can also be questioned since until now we can not observe more than mere recognition but not a lot of reaction. The impact of these movements on society might even be very strong – but likely only in the future and not immediate. Do politicians see these actions as participation at all?

Participation of young people in democratic life is one of the most important topics of youth policy in Europe. But participation can be understood in many different ways and its support and implementation might vary considerably between the countries.

In the last years we observed manifold forms of citizen’s participations as reaction on ongoing developments in the various countries: The protests of young migrants in the French Banlieues, the Greek protests, demonstrations following the closing of a youth centre in Denmark, university occupations in Austria, student protests in London, Portuguese and Spanish young people demonstrating against the constraints following the economic crisis and the latest uproars in some cities in the UK. Already the different denotations of these participatory actions show the range of perceptions – and not always are these manifestations of political engagement welcome in the countries. It might be that some are not even planned to be political movements at all (as it holds seemingly for the looting in London) but still are reactions on the social or political situation or have directly connected political consequences.

We can also observe that all of the above mentioned forms of participation are informal ways of getting the voices heard. Are formal or traditional ways of participating in democratic life not anymore interesting for young people? This paper will deal with the question of participation of young people and tries to provide an overview on the situation in Europe. Thereby it will concentrate on participation in society understood as a method to influence one’s living conditions. Participation in (political) decision making processes will be in the main focus but also the concept of participating in social, cultural and economical life will be mentioned in this article.

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<sup>1</sup> With this name the protesters in Portugal were labelled, indicating a “lost” generation that is good educated but has very few perspectives in their own country.

## Data

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The European Knowledge Center for Youth Policy ([EKCYP](#)) offers information on participation structures and the degree of participation in 30 countries. This information is provided by national correspondents according to availability of data in the country. The new designed information templates on participation are already filled in by 18 correspondents and allow comparing the situation in these countries to a certain extent; additionally, information from other studies and researches will be reflected in this article. The EKCYP templates focus on the legal situation in the given country concerning youth participation, the existing structures and organisations for youth participation, young people's membership in NGOs and participation in elections as well as how young people can learn to participate. Furthermore records on youth information are also covered in these questionnaires. Additional data from the European Social Survey (ESS) and from Eurobarometer studies will be presented in this paper.

## Legal situation concerning youth participation

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The offers for participating are manifold in almost all European countries. The new information sheets on participation<sup>2</sup> collected in the European Knowledge Center for Youth Policy prove this. But also the understanding of participation differs between the countries. It appears that the framework of youth participation could not be more diverse in the different European countries.

Following the information available in the EKCYP, in a good part of the European countries laws that guarantee young people's participation or even the involvement of youth in decision making processes exist. In some countries the involvement is granted on national level in others on regional or local level. In most cases the participation is arranged via a national youth council that is normally an umbrella organisation of youth organisations. In some countries participation is granted for pupils and students – but not for young people as such. In other countries participation is granted for all citizens and in that way also for young people. The way how the representatives of the young people are chosen is also very diverse in Europe – in some countries in form of a bottom up cascade of direct votes in others they are appointed by organisations.

Laws providing young people the right to involve in policy making on national level at least in giving advice to the authorities and being consulted regarding youth topics exist among other countries in Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Liechtenstein, Romania or Sweden. On regional, local or municipality's level the participation is granted for example in

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<sup>2</sup> 18 countries provided already the data in the new information sheets.

Belgium (Flemish and German Community), Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Netherlands or again Sweden. Participation is strongly welcomed but its involvement in politics not guaranteed for example in France, Italy or Malta. Different approaches to the right for participation and the degree of involvement can be found in countries with federal structures.

The following table provides an overview about laws on participation. Here we indicate all countries where a law exists that makes it mandatory for young people to be included in policy making and in the decision making process on various levels. It does not indicate differences between youth councils (or comparable structures like youth parliaments) and the way these structures are elected. In some countries it is not mandatory that young people have to be involved in the decision making process – which does not mean that they are in fact excluded. In Slovakia for example, the youth strategy aims explicitly at youth' participation but is not written in law. In Estonia or in Sweden youth participation structures are compulsory set up over the education system, enabling young people to influence decisions in schools and universities but also providing opportunities to get heard on other topics.

Furthermore, it has to be pointed out that the existence of mandatory participation structures on any level does not guarantee that young people's opinion are taken into account at all. It might even be more effective to have no mandatory structure by law but a culture of participation that allows everybody and every interest group to get their opinions heard and respected in the decision making process.

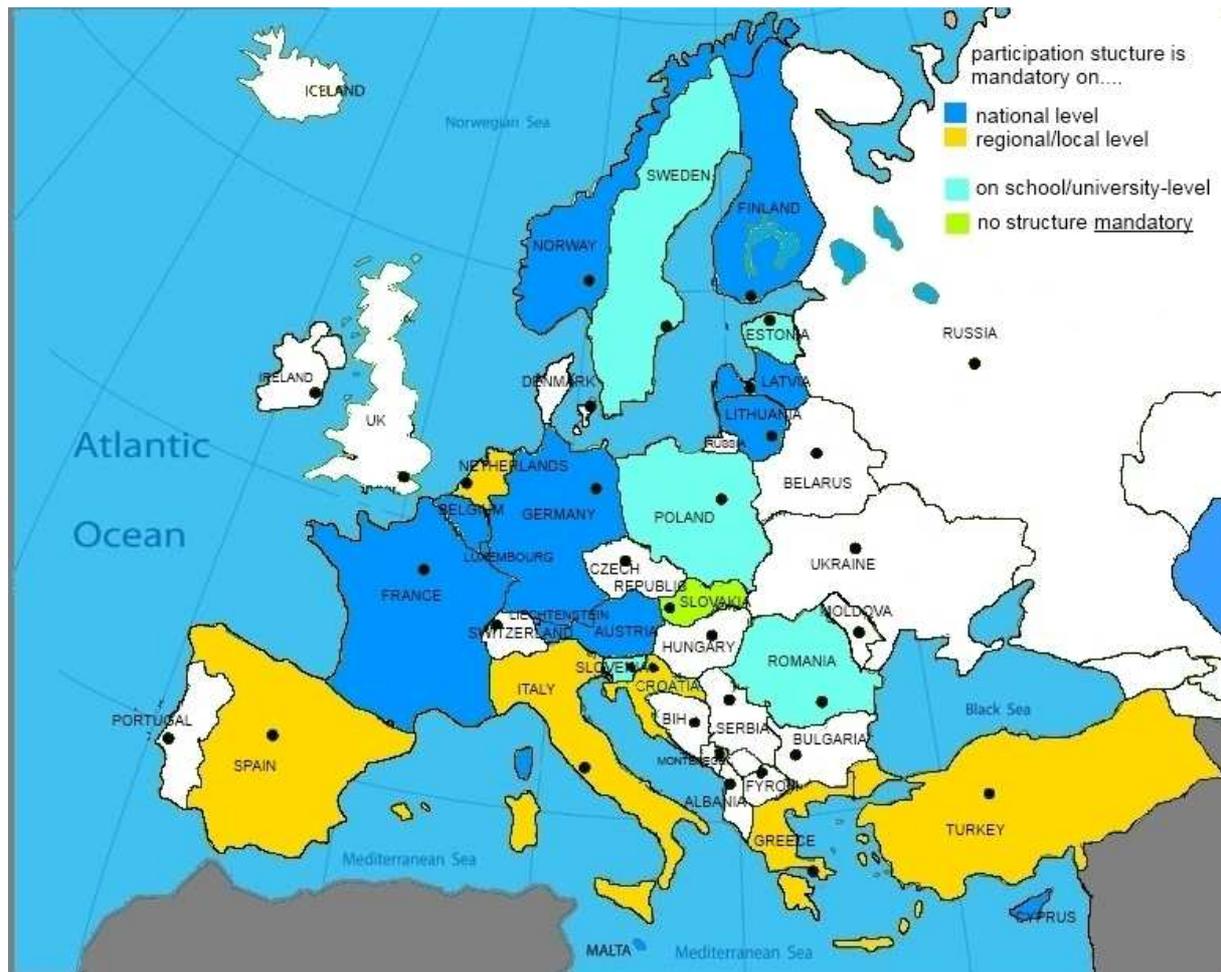
**Tabel1: Existing laws that it is mandatory to enable youth participation on ... level**

	Law on Youth participation - national	Law on youth participation - regional	law youth participation local/municipality
Austria	y	y/n	n
Belgium (Flanders)	(y)	y	y
Belgium (French)	(y)	y	n
Bulgaria			
Croatia	n	y	y
Cyprus	y	n.a.	n
Czech Republic			
Denmark			
Estonia	n	n	n
Finland	y		y

France	y		y
Germany	y	y/n	
Greece	n	n	y
Iceland			
Italy	n	n	y
Ireland			
Latvia	y	y	y
Liechtenstein	y	n.a.	
Lithuania	y	y	y
Luxembourg	y	n.a.	n
Malta	y	n.a.	
Moldova			
Netherlands	for everybody		y
Norway	y	y	y
Poland	n	n	n
Portugal			
Romania	n	n	n
Russia			
Slovakia	n	n	n
Slovenia	n	n.a.	n
Sweden	n	n	n
Spain	n	y	
Turkey	n	n	y
Ukraine	n	n	n
United Kingdom			

The following map gives an overview over the situation in Europe (for countries that are coloured white no information was available in the EKCYP)

**Map 1: mandatory participation structures on different levels in Europe**



## Youth Councils and their rights

As mentioned above in almost all European countries [youth councils](#), boards, parliaments or similar structures exist – independent if it is mandatory to have them installed or not. Furthermore school and university councils or other instruments for pupil's and student's involvement in decision concerning their schools, universities and the education system are in place in most countries in Europe. These representative bodies are established in local (school and university related), municipal, regional and national level.

But not only the structures also their degree of involvement differ. In the information sheets on participation the question on the different councils proved this.

School councils exist in Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Ukraine. These councils have to be involved in decision making on school level, but they can also give advice to educational questions. In most of the countries the schools have to allow those pupils boards or councils.

National, regional or local youth councils respectively boards fulfil two main tasks. First they provide support and information for youth, youth organisation and youth work, but in many cases they have to be consulted if political decisions concerning young people are to be taken. This does not only hold for those countries indicated in the map above but also in Slovakia (following a youth plan which advises local authorities to do so), in Sweden where a youth board is established for that purpose, in Estonia, where the local pupil councils take this task, and in Poland and in Romania where this is done by local authorities on a voluntary basis.

Furthermore (additionally to those countries that are covered by the information in the EKCYP and dealt with above) national youth councils exist in Portugal, Iceland, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Switzerland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Belarus, Ukraine, Russia, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia i Herzegovina and Albania, and they are in a process of creation in Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria and in the Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia. These councils are mainly advocating for young people and supporting youth organisations, their involvement in policy making is often still indirectly (and not as a mandatory consultative body).

Out of that list it becomes evident that in practically whole Europe (organised) young people are represented at different levels by youth councils: Getting their voices heard and involving them into democracy are important issues in Europe.

## **Young people's involvement in the representative democratic system \_\_\_\_\_**

Young people's right to participate is not only defined as the right to be involved in the process of policy making. Young people can also influence politics by voting as much as other groups of citizens, as soon as they are of legal age for joining the elections.

In Austria young people are permitted to all elections from the age of 16. Also in some federal states of Germany and in one Kanton of Switzerland 16 is the legal age for voting – but only on regional level. In all other European countries participation in elections as voter is allowed from the age of 18 (in Italy for voting in the elections for the senate one has to be 25 years of age).

But do young people use their rights of going to the elections or is the popular prejudice of youth being not interested in the democratic system true?

Due to the data protection policy it is for many countries not possible to present concrete data on young voter's participation in elections. Therefore also in the information sheets in the EKCYP this question provides not a satisfying answer. What we learn is that in most

countries youth' participation in elections is perceived as equal as or less than the average participation.

Data from the European Social Survey<sup>3</sup> show that youth participation in elections is in all European countries less than the general turnout of the elections. Table 2 shows that the participation in elections from young people is most similar to the overall participation in Belgium, Poland, Spain, Hungary, Denmark and Sweden. On the other hand in Lithuania, in the United Kingdom, in Latvia, Ireland and in Turkey youth' participation in elections is a lot smaller than the average. One could deduce from these big differences that the accessibility of elections is different in the countries. It would in any case be interesting to investigate the reason why in some countries young people are far more similar to the average population in voting behaviour than in other countries.

From the comparison with the few existing official data available at the EKCYP we can observe a systematic overrating in the European Social Survey. This overrating is stronger with the older age groups than with the youth. This allows deducing the higher willingness of the older generation to give socially accepted answers in surveys than the younger. The difference in the participation rate of youth and average might also be based on different attitudes toward socially accepted answers.

**Table 2: participation in “the last” national election**

	participation <30	participation ≥30	participation total
Austria*	75,1	90,6	87,1
Belgium	88,9	92,7	92,1
Bulgaria	48,0	76,2	72,8
Switzerland	45,7	68,4	64,5
Cyprus	82,6	96,5	93,4
Czech Republic	35,0	62,8	58,0
Germany	64,8	86,3	83,8
Denmark	82,6	95,8	94,2
Estonia	44,0	70,0	64,7
Spain	75,2	83,3	81,8
Finland	71,4	84,7	83,2
France	56,3	81,2	77,6
United Kingdom	38,0	76,4	70,3

<sup>3</sup> The European Social Survey data is available online here: <http://ess.nsd.uib.no/> and can be analysed online as well. The data used for this paper is from wave 4 (2008) resp. wave 3 (2006).

Greece	75,5	90,8	87,9
Croatia	69,5	81,7	78,9
Hungary	72,9	81,5	80,2
Ireland	49,6	85,0	79,3
Israel	50,7	84,0	74,8
Latvia	35,8	69,2	62,9
Lithuania	26,0	54,8	48,6
Netherlands	69,1	88,7	86,0
Norway	65,6	88,7	85,7
Poland	68,0	74,3	72,8
Portugal	60,5	75,3	73,7
Romania	50,3	72,6	67,6
Russian Federation	62,0	77,1	73,9
Sweden	80,2	93,0	91,1
Slovenia	54,9	77,7	72,6
Slovakia	59,0	81,4	77,6
Turkey	54,5	93,2	79,6
Ukraine	63,8	85,5	80,9

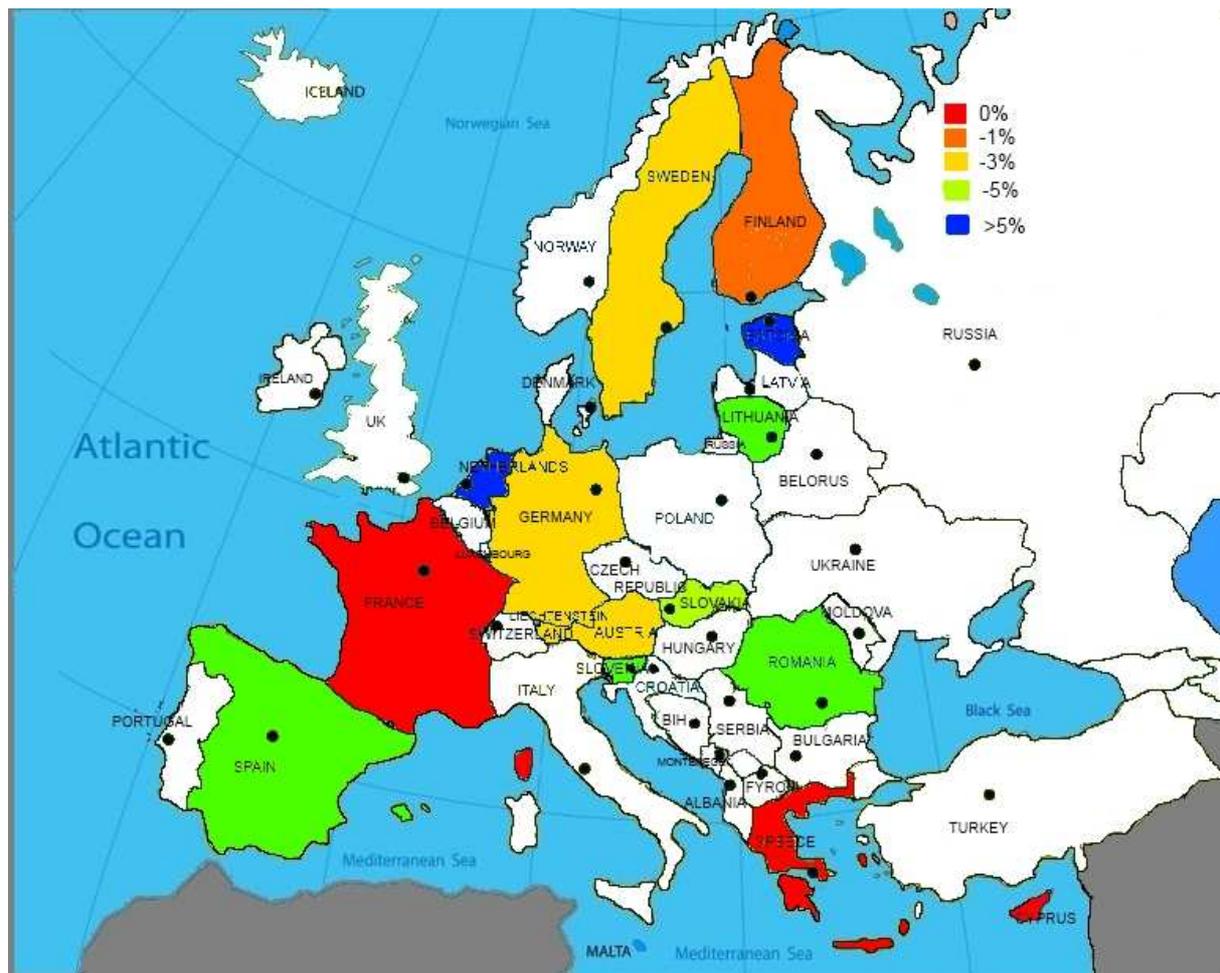
Source: European Social Survey, Wave 4, 2008 (\*data from wave 3, 2006), percentages of the eligible voters.

The results in this research are alike the outcomes of the last Eurobarometer study on young people "[Youth on the move](#)"<sup>4</sup>. In this research the question was about the participation in any election during the last three years. So it also included regional/local and European elections. That study showed that the participation was highest in Belgium, Sweden, Malta and Austria and lowest in Lithuania, Luxembourg – which is interesting taking the mandatory participation (like in Belgium) after registering as a voter in account – and in the United Kingdom.

It is also remarkable to see the outcome of the elections concerning young people's involvement in the representative system – namely as members of the national parliaments. The number of parliamentarians under 30 years of age is not so much an indicator for the country's youth policy but on the approach of the political parties involving young people and enabling the generational change in politics. The percentage of members of the parliament under the age of 30 differs from 0% in France, Malta, Cyprus, Greece and Liechtenstein up to 6.7 % in the Netherlands and even 8.9% in Estonia. In many countries we do not have the information on this question. The following map gives an overview.

<sup>4</sup> Flash Eurobarometer, 319a, Youth on the move, p.17f, 2011

**Map 2: Percentage of member of national parliaments less than 30 years**



Young people's interest in politics seems to be rather low: Data from the European Social Survey 2008 shows that in none of the participating countries more than 12% of the young people under 30 claim to be very interested in politics (exception is Denmark with 17%). It comes not as a big surprise that young people are not very interested in politics<sup>5</sup>, and this did not change tremendously in the last decades. A strong correlation of disinterest in policy with the feeling that policy is difficult to understand can be found, which indicates, that (young) people are not interested in politics because they just don't understand politics and politicians.

But political participation is more than voting in elections every five years or so. The Eurobarometer study [Young Europeans](#)<sup>6</sup> pointed to more possibilities to ensure that young people's voices get heard in the process of policy making. In this study direct contact with politicians and debating with them is seen as the best methods to involve in policy making. Joining a political party was chosen second and participating in lawful demonstrations third. The tendency to so called personal politics is represented by methods like wearing stickers,

<sup>5</sup> The [European Youth Report 2009](#) also mentioned these findings.

<sup>6</sup> Flash Eurobarometer 202, Young Europeans. pp.40, 2007

badges or T-Shirts with socio-political messages or by conscious consumption<sup>7</sup>. The European Social Survey 2008 also analysed these activities of young people. Here signing a petition was the most popular action, followed by boycotting of certain products. Working in a political party was the least interesting form of participation according to this research. Therefore one can observe a shift towards non-institutionalised forms of participation and involvement. It seems that these forms are opportunities for expressing political views for those not yet eligible to vote and for those who show less trust in the institutionalised forms of political involvement. Nevertheless the ESS-data show that both traditional and non-institutionalised ways of participation have interest in politics as prerequisite.

With the new technologies new forms of participation – especially via the internet – develop and are becoming more and more interesting to policy makers who try to offer this way of involvement, too. Online consultations and questionnaires are already quite common methods to get in contact with young people. Beside that, online social communities like facebook offer on the one hand new opportunities for personal politics (by being a new platform for publicity) but on the other hand new tools of communication, information and call to political action.

These new technological forms of participation are already recognised and mentioned in the EKCYP – both top down and bottom up – but might play a more important role for participation in the future.

## **Participation in NGOs**

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One of the main approaches of young people's participation in society is to enable their participation in civil society. Through being members in NGOs especially of youth NGOs young people do not only have opportunities to create their leisure time but to influence their surrounding – be it with actively participating and volunteering or be it with sheer consumption of offered opportunities.

In many European countries the (national) youth councils are umbrella organisations of youth NGOs and therefore are representing not only their member organisations but implicitly also the young people who are members of the youth NGOs. Therefore it is very important to know how many of the young people are involved in any NGO. Furthermore, it is a major challenge for civil society and for (youth) policy to enable and foster involvement of the so called non-organised young people.

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<sup>7</sup> The expression "personal politics" summarises individual approaches to demonstrate the own values and attitudes. The philosophy behind personal politics is that it is not needed to be member of a party or a political movement to show the own opinion, it is enough to live after the own conviction and show it with expressive symbols like clothing.

The [Eurobarometer Study](#)<sup>8</sup> had a closer look on this theme and once more the big diversity among European young people can be observed. The participation in activities of the young people aged 15 to 30 varies between 33% in Poland and 72% in the Netherlands. The EU-average is 52%.

It turns out that in all EU member states (with exemption of Romania) young people participate the most in activities of sport clubs (EU-average: 34%), second most popular are activities in youth clubs, leisure time clubs or any youth organisation (18%). Also activities of cultural organisations (14%) are interesting for young people in Europe. Least popular among young people in the European Union seem to be organisation active in human rights or global development (5%), political parties or organisations (5%) and organisations active against the global climate change (3%). In all cases big differences between the EU member states exist and high activity levels in one field do not indicate a high degree of participation in all the others. So sport clubs have the highest percentage of participation in the Netherlands, youth clubs in Ireland and Luxembourg, cultural activities are most popular in Austria and Slovenia, other NGOs in Italy, human rights in Denmark, political parties in Austria and climate change activities in Ireland.

The relatively low percentages in participating in youth NGOs is an argument for setting up youth councils in the way that they do not represent only their member organisations and the youth participating in these members but try to get the needs and wishes of all young people reflected. Also those youth councils that open up for non-organised youth are in this respect exemplary for involving young people in decision making.

## **Learning to participate**

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The latest developments in Europe and the neighbouring regions indicate that participation is not only organised in traditional ways but very often non-institutionalised forms are chosen. Why do young people decide to choose this way of participation and not one of the many existing ones in the countries? Do youth even know about existing ways of getting their voices heard and participating in society?

Political and/or civic education is in the majority of the European countries part of the curricula in the schools. But the ways this topic is tackled are manifold. For example, the structures of the state and the political system including the electoral system are in some countries elements of other subjects in school like history, ethics/philosophy, political science, law or sociology. Sometimes these topics are the content of special subjects commonly named citizenship or civic education. In again other countries, learning to

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<sup>8</sup> Flash Eurobarometer 319a, Youth on the move, p. 7ff, 2011

participate is seen as a cross-curricular task that is dealt with in different subjects from history to mathematics. Normally the content that should be taught in these subjects covers the countries constitution, the democratic structure of representation, political institutions, elections and voting. The party system is also part of such civic education, but not in all countries electoral campaigns, history and values of parties or the rhetoric of politicians are topic of education since it is feared that pupils might become indoctrinated by the teachers.

If political education is part of a curriculum, it normally aims at pupils between the age of 14 and 18 and – criticised by some experts – therefore it comes often to late for those who would need it the most: early school leavers who often have fewer chances on the labour market and due to missing education not enough knowledge on their rights as citizens.

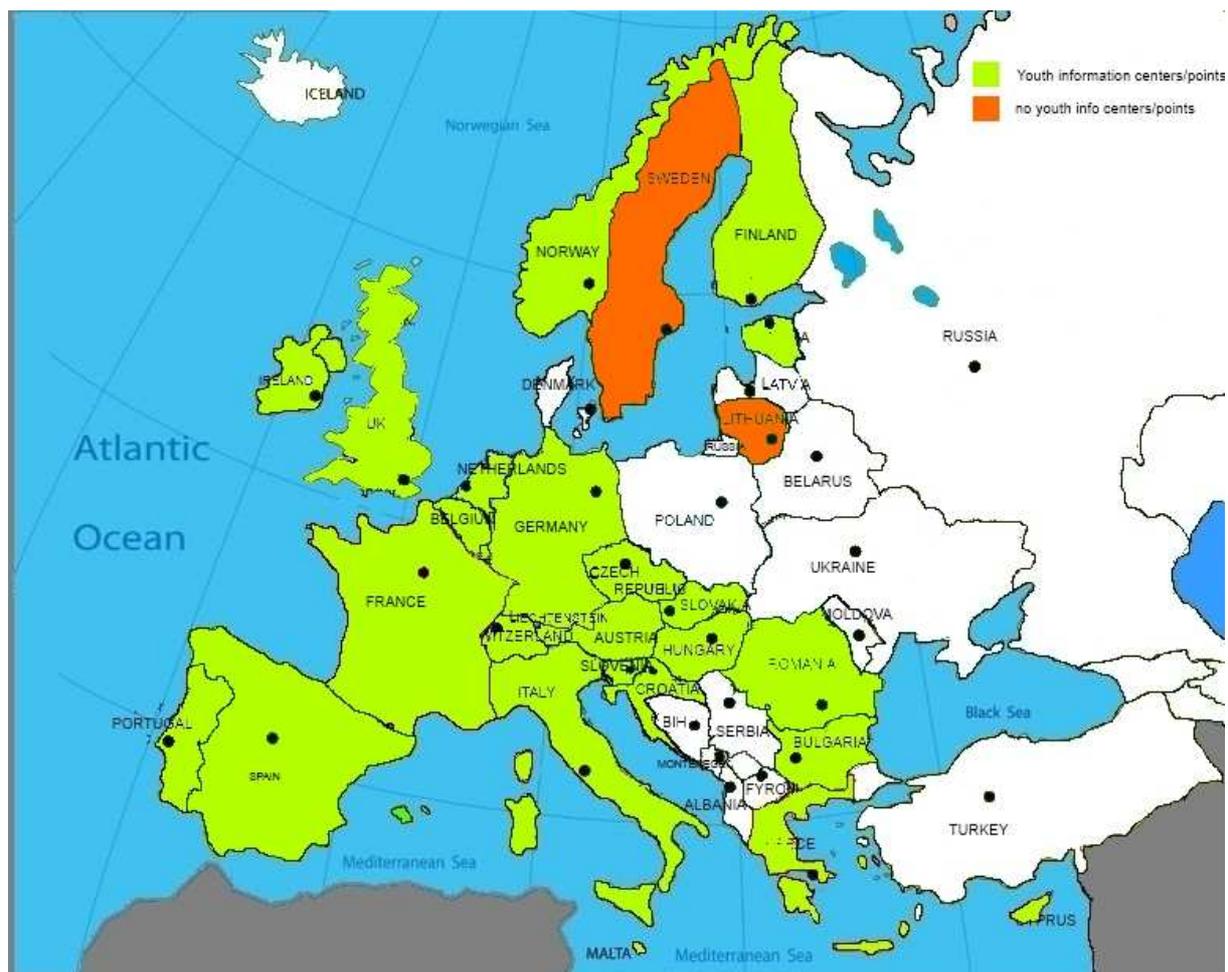
But beside the curricular (or cross-curricular) approach to teach on participation other programmes or projects for learning participation by practising it are present in schools. It is a common approach that democratic behaviour is trained in schools – starting with elections of class, year and school representatives (which can be found in the vast majority of the European countries) to setting up of discussions rounds with politicians, the organisation of test-elections and to direct involvement in the formation of the neighbourhood of the schools.

## **Youth information**

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Beside the formal and the non-formal education system, the setup of youth information might also be important concerning youth participation – not only regarding available information on opportunities to participate in decision making, but also regarding participation in the provision of information itself. In many European countries youth information is seen as a distinct part of youth work and youth policy – even closely related to both.

**Map 3: youth information centres/points in Europe**



Youth information centres and/or youth information points exist in many countries, but not in all. In some countries youth information is not seen as a task that should be fulfilled by a special unit but is embedded in youth work, youth centres or information centres. In map 3 those countries in which special youth information services (centres or points) exist are marked green. But even if no special youth information points exist, it is not implied that young people do not get information at all – but they have to approach other institutions (like a youth club, youth organisations, educational institutions).

Task of youth information is to reach as many young people as possible, so often it is important to offer not only one information-centre but to offer regional structures that make it easier for young people to get in contact with the information providers.

In the information sheet different topics were mentioned that could be of interest in information points. The most often mentioned topic of youth information services are studies/scholarships which is a topic in all countries, also youth exchange and European opportunities for young people are very important. Employment, jobs and trainings are the next themes that are common in European youth information services. Also health related

issues as well as relationship related topics are of importance for young people. Not so often mentioned are social security benefits and consumer rights as topics for youth information.

We can therefore group the mainly provided information into three main groups: education related – job related and mobility related topics.

Beside the proposed topics some themes were relevant. Money and income are important issues in some countries as are leisure time, drugs/prevention and last but not least participation.

But also “problems” (like debts, drug problems etc.) are often topics for youth information, therefore counselling is mentioned in various info sheets as method used in youth information points or centres.

Also the involvement of young people in the creation and delivery of youth information is gaining attention. Most common young people are involved in writing texts and providing photos for information material and publications, but also in direct peer information youth is participating in youth information. This approach can be followed in schools by providing peer information on given topics, or in the internet (e.g. in forums).

## **Conclusion**

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Young people’s participation can be and in fact is more than voting every four years or being a member in an organisation. Trying to change things, expressing affirmation or refusal or even getting involved in decision making happens nowadays often through a-traditional and informal ways. Not always are these new forms of participation accepted by all policy makers. Often participation is defined only by those in power – and cynics say, it is defined by them to stay in power – and those that should be empowered can not choose their own way. But also in the past new forms of participation emerged from initially unaccepted often forbidden or even unlawful ways of protest and where accepted and praised only years after; like the student’s protests 1968. Participation is often, regrettably, if not a tokenism then an invitation to play after the rules of the rulers.

Also given structures for the involvement of youth representatives in political decision making do not guarantee that young people’s needs and wishes are really respected. And not even young people’s legal right to be consulted in youth related concerns does assure that policy makers take youth’ opinion into account. It needs a mixture of both: the openness of policy makers and legal structures – be it laws, strategies or action plans.

But to really involve young people the first prerequisite is to make all possible ways of participation known to the youth. For getting involved – be it in traditional ways or be it in

non-institutionalised a-traditional ways – interest in politics and society is needed as a prerequisite. This interest is not a certainty, it has to be created. Helping young people from an early age in understanding policy and supporting them to make up their minds on political topics influences the interest in politics and thus the participation in democratic life. Learning to participate, learning about democracy, the state, politics and showing the way how to get involved is therefore of outmost importance. In this regard, all forms of information (including institutionalised youth information) on participation have to be easy understandable to make them useful for young people.

With both requisites fulfilled – effective influential structures for participation and information on opportunities – young people will be interested in participating in society and decision shaping. At least they will do so if the topic is interesting for them, or when it has a direct impact on their lives. Therefore a third condition has to be fulfilled: information on impacts of political developments has to be available and understandable.

Provided structures exist and are known and consequences of developments are understood, youth will participate in society and policy making. Then it is task of the politicians to accept young people's approach to participation, try to understand the messages and requests and act to it.

#### Sources:

Information-templates "participation" in the European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy (EKCYP), ESS Round 3: European Social Survey Round 3 Data (2006). Data file edition 3.3. Norwegian Social Science Data Services, Norway – Data Archive and distributor of ESS data.

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European Commission: Flash Eurobarometer 319a, Youth on the move, 2011