

Symposium "The future of young people's political participation: questions, challenges and opportunities"

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

19 September 2019 (16:30 - 17:45):

"Trends and dilemmas: Invisible & non recognised forms of political participation of young people"

In my short input I want to tackle the following topics which are crucial when thinking about ,invisible' or ,non-recognised' forms of political participation:

- various ways of youth engagement, which are considered being ,less traditional'
- socially, politically and legally accepted or non-accepted ways
- politically correct and non-correct ways of youth engagement
- formal and non-formal ways of expression and participation
- young people's involvement in populist/extremist ideologies and violent groups.

These forms of political participation stand in contrast to what is largely understood as political participation of young people (see also literature review of Marina Galstyan for EU-CoE Youth Partnership, August 2019):

- traditional/conventional involvement in institutional politics (elections, campaigns, referendums and memberships in political parties...)
- non-traditional/non-conventional engagement (petitions, demonstrations / manifestations, new social movements, protest activities, strikes, boycotts....) or
- civic engagement (in associative life and in communities, voluntary work....).

In many cases the boundaries between these different forms of political participation are blurry, at least between less-, non-recognised and non-traditional forms, depending on the position one takes when analysing these forms and also the political, social and cultural status quo of a society.

In this regard some questions:

- is a tag or a graffiti art and expression of the will to political participation or vandalism?
- is squatting a house violence and malicious injury of property or political participation and occupancy of unavailable housing space?
- is blocking a transport of nuclear waste criminal or environmental engagement?
- is bunking off school while participating in the Fridays for Future movement legally and politically acceptable and expression of environmental and political engagement or is it civic disobedience which needs punishment?
- is the rescue of refugees in the Mediterranean, notably by commissioning rescue ships, illegal action supporting human traffickers or is it a provocative act, out of human responsibility
- is radical action and even violent resistance against tyranny legitimate political participation or simply criminal terror and illegal?

These questions to random examples show how sometimes boundaries to legal non-traditional forms are blurry, depending also on the situation in a given country and if you take the perspective of a young activist, a policy maker, a police man, a teacher, a parent, a house owner, a refugee or others.

It sounds paradox to say that these forms of political participation are often considered being ‚invisible‘ simply because they are delinquent and illegal, not in line with the mainstream society. Since these forms of expression are indeed very visible and affecting the public one should speak about socially and politically ‚non-recognised‘ or ‚non-accepted‘ forms of political participation.

The first question in this regard is: what is political? It means in general terms formulating and exercising any kind of influence, arrangement and assertion of demands, aims and objectives in private or public life.

Accordingly political participation is „any activity that shapes, affects, or involves the political sphere....Beside legal forms of political participation some activities carried out with the intention of influencing society and/or the political sphere are considered illegal“ (EU-CoE Youth Partnership Glossary).

„The private is political“ was a slogan of new social and women’s movements in the 70-ies of the last century and meant that individual thinking and action taking impacts the political sphere. Consequently, even less visible examples of (individual) ways of expression of (young) people’s feelings, opinions and voices (as the ones chosen above) can be considered being political participation. Art, profane and sub-cultural activities are obvious means in this respect, also individual issue-focused engagements.

So far, the answer to what political participation is seems to be simple: if individual or collective actions are based on democratic values and human rights we talk about (legitimate) political participation or politically correct participation which finds is largely recognised and accepted, even if sometimes radically expressed (see currently the Fridays for Future movement which asks for *system change*, not climate change). But it is not always such simple to judge.

What is about non-recognised forms of politically non-correct participation of young people with populist, nationalistic and far-right extremist ideologies and sometimes violent groups?

Isn’t the engagement in such groups the wish to have a voice (I quote from the information flyer to the symposium on political participation of young people) „in a changing world of economic tensions, crisis of democratic institutions, digitalisation, social media, fake news and other manipulations of the public opinion“?

Doesn’t it conform to the main characteristics of youth participation as defined by research (see literature review):

- young people don’t trust in democracy as political system?
- they are unhappy with traditional policies and current living conditions?

Consequently the ways of expression are similar:

- non-traditional forms of participation are increasing
- important role of local and regional participation
- boundaries between on- and offline communication are disrupted
- boundaries between social and political, private and public are removed.

And isn’t the wish, reason and motivation of these young people the same as it is in other youth groups: to be part of a community, to test and sometimes to break rules and to play and to have fun?

Political participation of young people in favour of populist, nationalistic and far-right ideologies happens legally, in traditional / conventional (elections etc) and non- conventional forms (manifestations, protests...) and it happens in illegal, non-accepted and non-recognised, often

criminal and violent forms (against migrants, refugees and minorities, against objects and symbols etc).

As for the conventional forms I want to remind on the recent results to the European Parliament: Besides both traditional political blocks, conservative and social-democratic parties, two winners gained ground: progressive, green and liberal parties with close to 24% on the one side and populist, nationalist and right-wing political parties, on the other side, who got, together with other EU-sceptical parties, nearly 25 % of votes. Even if young(er) people particularly supported green and progressive parties (1/3 in Northern and Western Europe) the share of voters for right-wing parties does not largely differentiate from overall turnout, in particular in the group of 25 to 35 years old.

With regard to non-traditional and non-recognised forms of political participation of right-wing young people the use of specific codes, symbols, outfits and styles as tools for identity building in their sub-cultures, including music, is again similar to other sub-cultures, often even borrowed from those. And, they use and participate in youth work similar activities like summer and weekend camps, outdoor and sport activities, hooliganism, music festivals, graffiti competitions, and social networks which attracts also other young people.

What remains as *the* difference between both forms is the issue of values, the rooting in democracy and human rights on the one hand side and in authoritarianism, nationalism, group focused enmity and xenophobia on the other hand.

What is the role of youth work and of youth organisations in countering these forms of political engagement of young people for far-right ideologies?

In the recent „OFFENBURG TALKS: YOUTH IN EUROPE“ on „Nationalism, Populism & Far-Right Ideologies among Young People and the Role of Youth Work“ (2-3 Sep 2019) we discussed not only phenomena of far-right extremism and xenophobia but also what the role of youth work should be in countering these forms of engagement.

In a nutshell, it was considered consensus that youth work needs

- to offer sustained dialogue with young people and to talk with, not over them and to learn from them
- to get out of the bubble of middle-class, mainstream youth work and to reach out to more groups of young people, in particular those on the edge or ‚at risk‘
- to listen to the concerns of young people and to explore how they feel about their place and position in society
- to become more proactive while providing spaces for free and critical thinking, questioning and challenging while promoting human rights and citizenship
- to make these concerns subject of joint reflection and make them public in their communities, thus providing alternative narratives
- to establish progressive alliances with progressive and democratic forces in related social and political spheres.

Youth work can not save the world, but it can help to

- build social norms, develop empathy, promote emotional intelligence, empowerment
- foster inclusion, democratic values and norms, community engagement and build resilience
- offer ‚exit strategies‘ for young people caught up in right-wing extremism.