

Youth Partnership

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



SYMPOSIUM REPORT - "THE FUTURE OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: QUESTIONS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES"

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CRISTINA BACALSO
MEMBER OF THE POOL OF EUROPEAN YOUTH RESEARCHERS

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this work, commissioned by the European Union–Council of Europe youth partnership, are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of either of the partner institutions, their member states or the organisations co-operating with them.

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Introduction

More than 120 people from across Europe explored the topic of youth political participation at the Symposium: “The future of young people’s political participation: questions, challenges and opportunities”, hosted by the Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth (EU-Council of Europe youth partnership) from 18-20 September 2019. The symposium aimed to “create a space for learning and inspiration” for participants who are engaged in supporting young people’s political participation in Europe (EU-CoE youth partnership, 2019a).

This report aims to explore current debates on young people’s political participation, using the symposium as a case study. In an attempt to capture the themes and issues that arose in discussions at the symposium, the aim of this report is to answer the following question: What is the current and future state of young people’s political participation?

To answer this question, the report will do the following:

- Understand the **rationale and background** for the symposium, including the style, approach, and structure, key actors, and institutions involved, to situate with symposium and its participants within a specific social, political, and institutional context;
- Describe and interrogate the **style, approach, and structure** of the symposium, and what it tells us about youth and participation;
- Explore the **five key discussion questions** that the symposium aimed to tackle, namely:
 - I. Why political participation?
 - II. How do young people participate in politics today?
 - III. How can political participation of young people be supported?
 - IV. What are the trends and dilemmas of youth political participation?
 - V. What is the future of political participation?
- In conclusion, reflect on **key themes that emerged** from the symposium, **and what remains to be tackled**, based on the rapporteur’s own reflections.

The EU-CoE youth partnership broadly defines political participation as “any activity that shapes, affects, or involves the political sphere” (EU-CoE youth partnership, 2019b). While this provides a general orientation towards the topic at hand, this definition is debated and challenged, as will be explored later in this report.

This report represents only a snapshot of the debate on young people’s political participation, and makes no claim to the representativeness of the views, opinions, or ideas shared at the symposium for young people at-large in Europe, or the wider European youth sector. It also does not record nor analyse the conversations at the symposium in a systematic way, and instead is a set of overarching reflections by the rapporteur. Nevertheless, the report aims to add to a growing debate about young people’s participation, the role of European institutions,

and the challenges that young people themselves are facing when engaging in politics and political life. In reflection of this, the report also aims to anticipate upcoming trends, and the future of young people's participation in Europe. Future opportunities and challenges may help policy-makers, youth workers, youth educators, and young people themselves – all target audiences for this report – to anticipate and better plan how to support young people's political participation. By providing an overview of the debates and topics at the symposium in this way, this report serves as a tool for future learning and reflection, and hopes to propose new avenues for discussion and debate.

PART 1: Rationale and background to the symposium

The symposium took place within a specific institutional setting, as well as a broader political, social, and cultural context, which gave the symposium its significance. The following section looks at the rationale to the symposium, and the backdrop against which it took place.

Institutional setting

The overall goal of the EU-CoE youth partnership, as defined in the 2019 workplan, is to foster synergies between the activities of the two institutions in the youth field. For the European Commission, 2019 is a transition year with the launching of the new EU Youth Strategy (encompassing the Connect, Engage and Empower priorities), while the Council of Europe, continues to work on its biennial priorities 2020-2021 priorities and prepare for the launch of its 2030 youth sector strategy until (EU-CoE youth partnership, 2019c).

A symposium on young people's political participation is one of the core objectives of the 2019 workplan (EU-CoE youth partnership, 2019c). Young people's political participation is central to the work of both of the partner institutions, providing in part the rationale for the focus of the symposium:

- For the Council of Europe, youth participation in democratic life has been a long-standing priority (including the conclusions of the World Forum for Democracy 2017, the 2018 consultative meeting on the shrinking space for civil society, on the current discussions for a youth, sector biennial priorities 2020-2021 and its strategy until 2030) (EU-CoE youth partnership, 2019c);
- For the European Commission, youth participation currently features as one of three strands in the EU youth strategy, under "Engage" which "aims towards meaningful civic, economic, social, cultural and political participation of young people" (European Commission, 2019a), and in its Erasmus+ programme, which includes "encouraging young people to take part in European democracy" as one of the specific issues that it tackles (European Commission, 2019b).

Political, social and cultural context

The workplan also situates the symposium within a particular political, social, and cultural moment, providing additional impetus for the timing of the symposium:

How do young people engage in political participation in a changing world of economic turmoil, crisis of democratic institutions, digitalisation, social media, fake news and other manipulations of the public opinion etc.? What determines young people's political actions? Many national elections are shifting powers and the upcoming

European Parliament elections call for a thorough examination of these issues, seen from within and beyond the youth field (EU-CoE youth partnership, 2019a).

This rationale is presented in a similar way in the Call for Participants:

Today in Europe we also witness different phenomena, such as a shrinking space for civil society, the rise of right wing populism and illiberal regimes, a changing role of media and diffusion of fake news, a lack of access to rights, the rapid development of digital technologies and the role of civic education. They all have a role in how youth political participation happens. (EU-CoE youth partnership, 2019f):

It was also echoed in the webinar, “Our house is on fire’ – Current debates on youth political participation at a time of change and uncertainty in Europe”. The webinar, one of four in a series¹, was provided to participants in advance of the symposium, to set the stage for the discussions:

Climate change. Brexit. Fake news. Refugee crisis. Right-wing populism. Looking at today’s headlines, we can see that Europe is undergoing a period of momentous change. As Swedish climate change activist, Greta Thunberg, has said, “Our house is on fire” – a statement that might be true in more ways than we care to admit. (Bacalso, 2019)

This interpretation of the urgency of the political and cultural moment is also highlighted in the opening session of the symposium, with the presentation of **Antje Rothemund, Head of the Youth Department, Council of Europe**. She called attention to the fact that while the Council of Europe is celebrating its 70th anniversary since its founding in 1949, it is also concerned by a wider “crisis of multilateralism” – where the European values of human rights, democracy, and

¹ The other webinars are: “Education for social change – the political dimension of youth work”; “Conventional and alternative forms of young people’s political participation”; “What do I care for? Social values of young people compared” and are available at: <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/symposium-2019>

Objectives and results of the symposium:

The aim of the symposium was to:

- offer space and possibilities for participants to share and explore examples of young people’s political participation in a changing world
- empower participants from different fields and levels to address this theme in their work on supporting young people’s democratic values and political engagement
- connect different actors working on these themes, from within and beyond the youth sector, to continue, develop or innovate in relation to that work
- produce knowledge relating to the trends of youth political participation, their reasons and implications.

The symposium also aimed to bring the following outcomes:

- mutual learning, inspiration and motivation for future actions for the participants
- a compendium of good practices and stories of success highlighting the actions to be taken for supporting youth political participation, and analytical papers on young people’s political participation in a changing world
- practical conclusions on how diverse actors can support young people’s democratic values and political engagement.



(EU-CoE youth partnership, 2019a)

rule of law, are being challenged even by some member states. Young people, she noted, are signalling to leaders in protest movements that they have no trust in them, and that they feel that their future is not in good hands. Ms. Rothemund alluded to the movements of the 1960s, where young people were on the streets protesting for more democracy and fundamental freedoms, in this spirit of the time the origins of the European youth sector were laid, which created channels for young people to participate peacefully, not radically.



In his presentation, **Robin Balzeret, Youth Delegate to the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Council of Europe**, encouraged participants to not give up in the face of challenges to democracy: “Youth participation is the most effective way of democratising young people”. (Photo by Bacalso: CC BY 2.0).

Jasna Maric-Krajacic, Policy Officer, Directorate-General Education, Youth, Sport and Culture of European Commission, described some of these participation channels, namely the Structured Dialogue, which is a consultative process implemented by the European Commission that aims to “increase cooperation with civil society and get firsthand input from young people” (European Commission, 2019c). Ms. Maric-Krajacic described how 50,000 young people participated in the last Structured Dialogue, which went on to inform the [EU Youth Goals](#) and were incorporated into the [EU Youth Strategy](#). However she was quick to point out: 50,000 is a relatively small number compared to the total population of approximately 87 million young people today in the EU (Eurostat, 2019). Moreover, she described that while 3 out of 4 young people indicate that they are involved in organised, issue-based activities, citing a recent Eurobarometer survey, nearly one-third of youth-led organisations said that EU funding has not helped them make their organisations more diverse. The challenge, Ms. Maric-Krajacic explained, is how to engage youth from underrepresented groups, whom formal participation mechanisms and organisations have not managed to reach.

Key emerging themes: Rationale and background to the symposium

By looking at the institutional setting, the objectives of the symposium, and the political, social, and cultural context (as defined by the design, framing and introduction to the symposium) we see that some key themes emerge:

- **Challenges to European values & democracy in a legitimacy crisis:** The European Commission and the Council of Europe recognise, with alarm, the challenges to the European project and democracy as a whole at this current moment in time. Through their partnership in the field of youth, they have signalled that young people are integral to the struggle to uphold European values.
- **Youth at the centre of protest movements:** Young people are on the streets in ever increasing numbers, indicating their disillusion with the status quo. While parallels are being made with the 1960s generation, a key difference is that these protests take place within a supposedly well-established and mature European youth sector, with many formal avenues for participation. Yet, young people are, perhaps, preferring the street to the steering committee. How do these protest movements fit with these formal, traditional structures (and the institutional European youth sector) as they exist?
- **Representation: who speaks on behalf of whom?:** While no one is in doubt that young people are politically active, there nonetheless remains the gap of *which* young people are involved, particularly in youth-led organisations and formal participation structures. Diversity and inclusion were identified early in the symposium as key challenges, including for the youth sector.

PART 2: Style, approach, and structure of the symposium

The structure and programme of the symposium were developed in line with the participatory approach, including young people and participants as co-creators, presenters, facilitators and rapporteurs of the sessions. The following section looks at the participatory approach to the symposium, the make-up of the participants and the CUBES process – a key methodology used at the symposium.

The participatory approach to the symposium

A main feature of the programme was that participants were intended to help shape the programme in a participatory way, following the theme of the symposium. This manifested in two ways:

The first is the selection of the topics that were covered throughout the symposium. In the application form, applicants were asked to indicate what issues or questions are most pressing for them as it relates to their work and the theme of political participation. Their answers went on to inform the structure of the symposium, which was made up of five blocks that sequentially built upon each other:

Schematic representation of the symposium programme



Adapted from EU-CoE youth partnership, 2019, *Draft programme: Symposium "The future of young people's political participation: Questions, challenges and opportunities"*

The second is that participants themselves hosted the [workshops and conversations](#) during the parallel sessions. Prior to the symposium, participants were invited to submit their proposals for one 90-minute workshop which they could host, based on an area of expertise, experience, or best practice that they would like to share with others, on a topic related to the theme of the symposium. In total, 27 different workshops were held, on various topics relating primarily to the following overarching themes: *How do young people participate in politics today?*, *Supporting political participation*, and *Trends and dilemmas of youth political participation*. Examples of some of the workshops are given below:

Example parallel workshops hosted by symposium participants

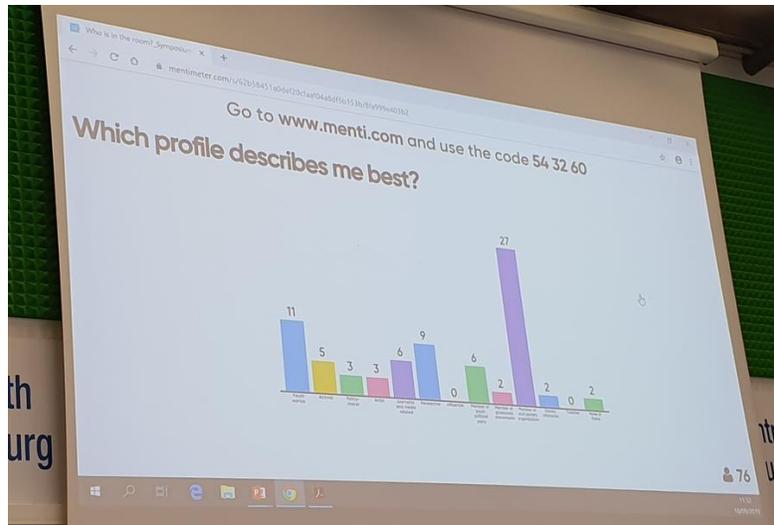
Block	Parallel Workshop/Conversation
<i>How do Young People Participate in Politics Today? – Parallel A</i>	<p>Youth work and political participation of young people: what is the role of youth workers? – Veronique Bertholle, Youth Express Network (France)</p> <p>New Youth Dialogue process – how does it work? How to get engaged? - Eliza Chirila-Pop, Global Shapers Bucharest Hub (Romania), Aleksandra Sawa, National Youth Council (Poland) and Dan Moxon, People, Dialogue, Change (UK)</p> <p>Creative Activism – perspectives from art and online art forms – Paula Alcaraz Martin and Kevin Buckland, artists (Spain)</p>
<i>Supporting Mechanisms enabling young people’s political participation - Parallel B</i>	<p>Conflict Management in Youth-Led Political Organizations – Alba Biosca Alonso, Youth Ambassador for the European Youth Information and Counselling Agency (ERYICA) (Spain)</p> <p>Security Strategies and Methodologies for Human Rights Defenders and Activists – Alice Stevens, Amnesty International (Mexico)</p> <p>Memes for politics - Paula Alcaraz Martin, artist (Spain)</p>
<i>Trends and Dilemmas of Youth Political Participation – Parallel C & D</i>	<p>Examples of participation of young people in rural areas – Gabriel Badr, YPARD (Italy)</p> <p>Invisible and non-recognised forms of political participation – Hanjo Schild (Germany) and Andrea Walker Beyond Skin and Youth service NI (UK)</p> <p>Participation of underrepresented communities – Adam Labaran, Association of Refugees in Portugal and Renata Plachetkova the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs in Czech Republic</p>

Adapted from EU-CoE youth partnership, 2019, *Draft programme: Symposium “The future of young people’s political participation: Questions, challenges and opportunities”*

Make-up of participants

Over [120 participants](#) from Europe and beyond attended the symposium, including young people, young political activists/leaders, members of political organisations and (youth wings of) political parties, representatives of civil society organisations and movements, including youth organisations, journalists and influencers, young artists or activists using other public engagement forms, policy makers in the field of youth, youth workers, educators and teachers, and researchers.

In the opening plenary session, participants were asked to identify which “profile” identifies them best, among a list of profiles (see picture below). The most common profiles selected were: “Member of a civil society organisation” (27), followed by “Youth worker” (11), and “Researcher” (9). “Member of a youth political party” (6), “Journalist or media related” (6), “Activist” (5) were in the middle, while “Policy-maker” (3), “Artist” (3) and “Member of a grassroots organisation” (2) were fewer in numbers. Representatives from the European Commission, Council of Europe Youth Advisory Council, and the European Parliament, as well as from international donor organisations (e.g. Open Society Foundation) were also in attendance.



Participants identify which profiles describe them best, in the opening plenary session of the symposium using the online polling app, Mentimeter. (Photo by Bacalso: CC BY 2.0).

The number of participants who identified as coming from civil society organisations (27), versus those who self-identified as an “Activist” (5) or “Member of a grassroots organisation” (2) echoes a dilemma about engaging “organised” vs. “unorganised” youth.

In her opening address, Ms. Rothmund also acknowledged that the secretariat of the Council of Europe youth sector works with young people who represent formal structures, such as youth organisations, who can then apply to become members of the Advisory Council on Youth. She also asked the participants to reflect on the question “Who can or should represent young people within these forums? Should the Council of Europe change its rules?”

Reflection, Iteration, and Planning: CUBES Process

The CUBES Process was an activity designed by the facilitators, which aimed to have participants “co-create visions on how we want the future of political participation to be: discussing the main values, conditions needed, and the steps [needed to reach that vision].” (Morgado & Martinez, 2019) It invited the participants to think “out of the box”.

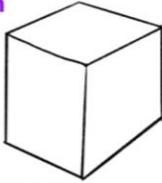
Designed as a team activity with 8-9 people in each “dialogue group”, participants met at various points during the symposium to reflect on specific discussion question and fill out their answers on one side of a cardboard cube. The overall objective of the CUBES process was future-oriented: dialogue groups reflect on their existing values, resources, knowledge, and networks, to build a vision for the future of youth political participation. The iterative design of the activity allowed participants to adjust and amend their vision as the symposium progressed, as knowledge or connections are acquired.

Step-by-step instructions for the participants on the CUBES process

Dialogue groups
Face 1 - EXPLORERS - 15min

Get to know each other around the circle:

- Name and Country
- Organisation/Institution and role in your organisation/institution
- What is your connection to political participation of young people
- Why you participate in politics?

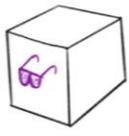


Face 2 - BRAINSTORMERS- 20min

- What are the values do you find essential to shape the future of YPP?

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Dialogue groups
Face 3 - VISIONARIES



Looking at the keywords from your brainstorming,
Describe in one sentence your VISION -
How do we want the future of political participation to be?



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Dialogue groups
Face 4 - DEVELOPERS



Defining the **conditions & support needed** to build your vision
What is needed for it to happen?



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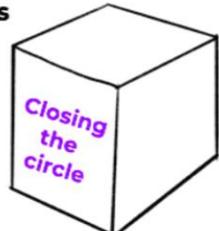
Dialogue groups
Face 5 - Aha!



Please identify the **most relevant** insights you take from the sessions today to build on your **vision**.

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Dialogue groups
Cubes process

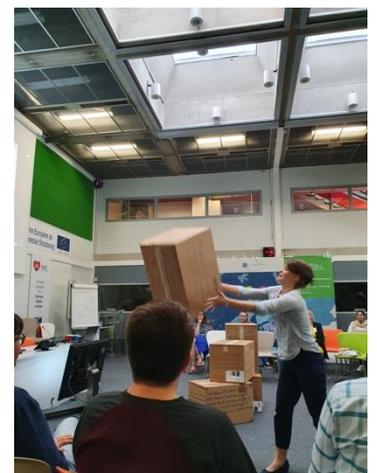


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 European Union

Adapted from Morgado & Martinez, 2019, *CUBES Process*, Facilitators notes: Symposium “The future of young people’s political participation: questions, challenges and opportunities”. *Note: “Closing the circle” was completed in plenary & not in small groups as originally planned.



Left to right: Participants work in their Dialogue Groups to decorate the faces of their cube; Participants stacking their completed cubes in the final plenary session, where they then reflected on the steps necessary to make their vision happen, and contribute one personal commitment that contributes to a step. (Photos by Bacalso: CC BY 2.0).



Key emerging themes: Style, approach, and structure of the symposium

By looking at the design of the programme, the targeted participants, and one of the key methodologies, “the CUBES process”, we see that some key themes emerge:

- **Participation is not only an end, but also a means:** Working and organising an event in a participatory way is just as important as holding a symposium on the topic of participation itself. In the planning and design of the symposium, young people from the Council of Europe Advisory Council on Youth, youth participation structures such as the European Youth Forum, the Junges Europäisches Parlament (JEP) and representatives from youth-led civil society organisations were involved. Workshops and conversations in the parallel sessions were “co-produced”, as participants designed and facilitated them. While much of the symposium was designed and implemented with the participation of young people, it would also be interesting to explore how the traditional conference methodologies used in the symposium (e.g. keynote presentations, panel discussions) could also be changed to more participatory formats.
- **Young people are experts, too:** Participants leading the parallel workshops demonstrated that young people have a wealth of expertise and experience to share, and the keynote presentations and panel discussions could similarly feature even more young people.
- **“Who can or should represent young people?” The dilemma of organised vs. unorganised youth involvement:** “Organised” youth were by far the largest category of participants at the symposium, with participants self-identifying as a “Member of a civil society organisation” more than any other category. This raises a question of whether young people’s participation today is framed by the formal participation through structures, which are developed for this purpose, and if alternative methods of participation, through movements, informal groups and other forums, are accepted as equally relevant. Moreover, it makes us think of how institutions can better reach those young people who are not part of the structures, in order to include them in the decision-making processes, and how institutions can be more open and appealing to those young people.

PART 3: How the symposium answered - Five key discussion questions

Reflected in the structure of the programme itself, the symposium attempted to address five key discussion questions:

- I. Why political participation?
- II. How do young people participate in politics today?
- III. How can political participation of young people be supported?
- IV. What are the trends and dilemmas of youth political participation?
- V. What is the future of political participation?

The following section looks at each question in turn, reflecting briefly on the keynote presentations or panel discussions, outputs from the CUBES process, and other observations.

I. Why political participation?

The symposium opened with the broad question: Why are we having a symposium on young people's political participation? The two opening keynote presentations offer two distinct angles to answering this question.

The first presentation was made by **Marcus Faustini, Agência de Redes para a Juventude, Brazil** (translated by **Renata Peopl, Youth Agency, UK**), who described his experience with the programme "Agência de Redes Para Juventude" (Network for Youth Agency) in Rio de Janeiro, which works with youth and young adults in the favelas to engage in local politics and claim their rights, using creativity and inviting them to see their lives and their contexts differently. This example, of engaging marginalised youth in a context of extreme deprivation and inequality, aimed to underline the point that structures in society cannot be changed without shifting the way of relating with the young people – acknowledging their potential and bringing those who are most impacted by marginalisation into the conversation. Moreover, Faustini's presentation also made clear that participation is about *power* – access to decision-making and resources. Giving platforms to young people is not enough unless there is the possibility for their ideas to have an impact on how decisions concerning them are made.

"A speech in parliament is not participation – participation is choosing where the money goes in parliament. The rest is just performative."

Marcus Faustini, Agência de Redes para a Juventude, Brazil (translated by **Renata Peopl, Youth Agency, UK**)

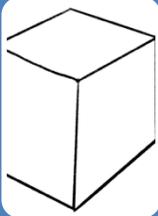
Dan Moxon, People, Dialogue and Change, Member of Pool of European Youth Researchers, UK explored the conceptual challenges with defining political participation. In his presentation, Moxon challenged the idea that there is any way to easily define political participation. Activities like collecting trash, or creating art collectives, do not engage directly in changing policy, but the young people participating in them are certainly taking part in something that impacts their society. Internet memes, a form of digital creation popular with young people, often take a political tone, but is the expectation that they can affect politics?

Notably, Moxon also challenged the notion that all participation can be considered universally “good”. He contrasts the Fridays for Future protests with right-wing, illiberal movements. Arguably, they both involve young people who are using their voice to affect change and create a world in which they want to live in. Therefore when we talk about supporting youth political participation, is it only the participation that aligns with our beliefs that we support?



In his presentation, **Dan Moxon, People, Dialogue and Change, Member of Pool of European Youth Researchers, UK**, compares and contrasts different protest movements and our acceptance of them. Can we say that all youth political participation is unequivocally “good” participation? Where do we draw the line? Adapted from Moxon, 2019, *Taking part in what?*, Keynote presentation: Symposium “The future of young people’s political participation: questions, challenges and opportunities”. Strasbourg, 18 September 2019.

CUBES snapshot: FACE 1 (Explorers), FACE 2 (Brainstormers), FACE 3 (Visionaries)



FACE 1 Explorers: Why do you participate in politics?

- Concerned or outraged by particular issues
- Compelled to influence the society & wider audience beyond themselves
- Making a change they want to see in their surroundings



FACE 2 Brainstormers: What are the values you find essential to shape the future of youth political participation?

- Inclusion, diversity & tolerance
- Respect & openness
- Freedom of speech, rule of law, and human rights
- Education & awareness
- Peace and safety



FACE 3 Visionaries: How do you want the future of political participation to be?

- Empowering
- Meaningful
- Inclusive of all young people
- Ongoing and sustainable (not one-off opportunities)

Completed “Face 3 – Visionaries” cubes, where participants describe in one sentence how they want the future of youth political participation to be. (Photo by Bacalso: CC BY 2.0).



II. How do young people participate in politics today?

A panel discussion, hosted by **Michael Piccinino, European Youth Forum**, explored the various ways in which young people participate politically today, by speaking to representatives of youth political parties, think tanks, media and organisations that engage young people. **Salaado Qasim, Green youth (Finland)** explained there is an increase in young people advocating for environmental issues, though this engagement does not always represent all groups in society. **Tatijana Djuranovic, Radio and Television Cetinje (Montenegro)** described her work with young people and detecting fake news, which she felt is a hinderance to open and democratic political engagement.

George Stavri, Euro-Mediterranean Institute of Geopolitics (Cyprus) discussed engaging young people in electoral politics, in a context where there is pervasive corruption and where many youth are disillusioned with formal participation processes. **Daniel Poli, Internationale Jugendarbeit der Bundesrepublik Deutschland e.V (IJAB) (Germany)** laid out how his organisation works to link decision-makers more directly with young people through e-

participation. His view was that rather than creating new forms of participation, e-participation is a way to supplement existing representative democratic structures, by trying to make decision-makers more accountable to young people.

This theme continued in the parallel sessions, which displayed a diversity of forms of how young people participate. For example, the workshop **“EU campaigning - Elections cases and practices”** – **Laura MacPherson Zieger, Our Future, Our Choice - Scotland (UK) and Gabriella Catalano, Political association Volt Europe (Italy)** explored the role of young people and the formal political participation of voting. While low voter turnout is not a problem that only affects the younger generation, young people have a specific role to play as they inherit the decisions that the older generation votes on (e.g. Brexit).

“New Youth Dialogue process – how does it work? How to get engaged?” - **Eliza Chirila-Pop, Global Shapers Bucharest Hub (Romania), Aleksandra Sawa, National Youth Council (Poland) and Dan Moxon, People, Dialogue, Change (UK)** and **“Experiencing Co-management”** – **Neringa Tumenaite, Advisory Council on Youth (Lithuania)** looked at formal engagement opportunities – consultation and co-management – and describes the extent to which such processes require time, resources, and thoughtful design to be meaningful and sustainable. In contrast, **“Creative Activism – perspectives from art and online art forms”** – **Paula Alcaraz Martin and Kevin Buckland, artists (Spain)** described forms of activism that require little or no money at all (only imagination and ingenuity), being a form of participation that can be accessible to everyone.



Creative activism takes many forms. Left: Pamphlets from EU campaigning initiatives with many young people in the lead. Centre: **Kevin Buckland, climate “artist” and co-director of ArtistNetwork.org, (Spain)**. Buckland performs his one-person show about his participation in an environmental protest: “Disobedience is a privilege, but if you have it, it’s a responsibility in the Anthropocene”, says Buckland. Right: Buckland helps participants paint t-shirts with protest slogans for the Fridays for Future protest on the following day (Photos by Bacalso: CC BY 2.0).

HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE PARTICIPATE IN POLITICS TODAY?

Workshop snapshot: “My Voice Matters” Goda Katkute (Lithuania)

In this workshop, Ms. Katkute presented the work of “Team Europe Junior”, a team of young volunteers (16-29 year olds) in Lithuania who “spread the word about the EU to their peers and raise awareness of how the EU works and what influence it has on our lives”.

A specific initiative entitled “Learn Before You Vote” aims to increase political accountability and youth involvement in politics, positioning young people as “watchdogs” that hold policy-makers accountable. Activities include organising debates around municipal, national, and European Parliament elections; holding workshops and classes on political participation for youth organisations and student groups; and monitoring elected politicians to check whether they have upheld election promises. This includes documenting speeches of candidates and flagging the specific promises they make to the public, so that they can be checked in the future.



The work of “Team Europe Junior” is a novel example of youth political participation, which engages youth across a continuum of political activities – from educating youth on how political processes work, to engaging young people in debates; encouraging young people to vote, but also to play a watchdog role to politicians in between election cycles. Rather than focusing exclusively on voting, which is a one-off event each cycle, “Team Europe Junior” demonstrates that political engagement is an on-going process that doesn’t stop at the ballot box.

Participants also had the opportunity to “map” out their political participation, by listing their own initiatives and projects on a physical and electronic map of Europe. This list will make up a larger directory or “Compendium on the political participation of young people”, which is a key output of the symposium, and is intended to highlight good practices and stories of success.

Merging offline & online worlds. Participants had the chance to list their initiatives and campaigns for the “Compendium on the political participation of young people” using paper, pen, and a physical map of Europe (left), or online. The compendium is a key output of the symposium and is intended to be a resource on youth political participation across Europe. Photo by Bacalso: CC BY 2.0).



III. How can political participation of young people be supported?

A panel discussion, hosted by **Anabella Costache, Funky Citizens (Romania)** explored how the political participation of young people can be supported. The contributions of the panellists illuminate four important dimensions of support, which can be summed up as follows:

- **“Frameworks matter”**: **Anna Rurka, Conference of INGOs** and how tools such as the **“Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process”**, outlining a set of principles for NGO participation in decision-making at local and national levels, can play a key role in contexts where there is shrinking civil space;
- **“Networks matter”**: **Manel Sánchez, European Youth Card Association – EYCA** and how the European Youth Card, with its reach of over 7 million young people across Europe, can also provide a channel for engaging young people (e.g. voting), especially non-organised young people;
- **“Resources matter”**: **Kimberly O’Haver, Open Society Foundations (USA)** and the role that grant-giving institutions can play in supporting all forms of participation which gets young people involved in their communities (and not just traditional human rights instruments);
- **“Security matters”**: **Alice Stevens, Amnesty International (Mexico)** and the importance of protection and safeguarding protocols for young activists and human rights defenders, which involves not only physical security but also digital, health, and traditional/cultural’.

Participants also contributed their own tools, ideas, and experiences regarding how they support the political participation of young people in the parallel sessions. Recognising that participation can be inherently conflictual, **“Conflict Management in Youth-Led Political Organizations” – Alba Biosca Alonso, Youth Ambassador for the European Youth Information and Counselling Agency (ERYICA) (Spain)** and **“Restorative Circles and youth: Strengthening democracy through restorative practice” – Georgios Papadopoulos (Greece)** as methods towards finding common ground, which can be a challenge even among like-minded individuals in a youth organisation. **“Memes for politics - Paula Alcaraz Martin, artist (Spain)** recognised that young people are also drawn to politics through humor and irony, which through digital media can engage a broad set of the population, while **“Artivism: Creative Activism and Guerilla Narratives” – Kevin Buckland, artist (Spain)** emphasised the importance of appealing to people’s emotions in politics, which can sometimes move people to action more effectively than traditional methods.



GIVING THE EU PARLIAMENT THE POWER TO MAKE LAWS



FUND COMPLEX AND COSTLY PARTICIPATION PROGRAMS TO CONVINC PEOPLE THE EU IS DEMOCRATIC

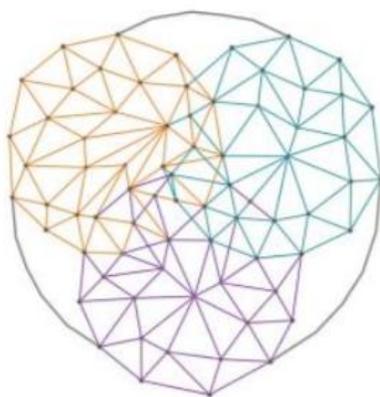


Paula Alcaraz Martin, artist (Spain) led a workshop on creating political memes. Participants were shown an online meme generator that they could populate in the workshop itself and tweet with the tag #memes4politicsSymp19. Left: created by @StephaneMdW. Right: created by @carapankaa.

HOW CAN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE BE SUPPORTED?

Workshop snapshot: Security Strategies and Methodologies for Human Rights Defenders and Activists, Alice Stevens, Amnesty International (Mexico)

In this workshop, Ms. Stevens presented security strategies for human rights defenders and activists in Mexico, many of whom are young people. Using resources from the toolkit, "Community Campaigns: Strategies for Human Rights Defenders" by Amnesty International, Alice Stevens took the participants through a series of exercises where they reflected on their own experience of traveling to the symposium, undertaking a type of "mini-risk analysis".



Holistic Security

- △ Physical Security
Threats to our physical integrity. Threats to our homes, buildings, vehicles.
- △ Psycho-social Security
Threats to our psychological wellbeing.
- △ Digital Security
Threats to our information, communication and equipment.
- Holistic security analysis, strategies and tactics.

Participants were asked to consider various points relating to the context (e.g. How did you communicate before/during the trip? What did you take with you? How did you travel/move around and with whom? How were you feeling? What devices were you using?), and to identify possible security incidents or risks during the course of the trip, relating to aspects such as: your state of mind, your devices, potential allies & contact, who you were with/who you

IV. What are the trends and dilemmas of youth political participation?

Trends and dilemmas of youth political participation were explored over two parallel sessions, in which a few common themes emerged. A popular focus was the engagement of young people from underrepresented groups, highlighted in three separate workshops: ***“Examples of participation of young people in rural areas” – Gabriel Badr, YPARD (Italy), “Potentiate your Practice - Three principles for working with young people and culture” – Marcus Faustini, Youth Agency (Brazil), and “Participation of underrepresented communities” – Adam Labaran, Association of Refugees in Portugal.***

Two workshops were focused on social media and digital participation, where ***“Online activism” – Daniel Poli, Internationale Jugendarbeit der Bundesrepublik Deutschland e.V - IJAB (Germany) and Blerton Zejneli, Democracy Lab (Republic of North Macedonia)*** presented tools and best practice examples of e-participation, while ***“(social) media” – Callum Dineen, UEA Future Leaders (UK) and Juan Carlos Gonzales Perez, Spanish Institute for Youth (Spain)*** presented two divergent views: social media as a positive medium for youth engagement (Perez), and social media as a toxic medium which threatens the wellbeing of young people (Dineen).

Workshops also looked at conventional methods of youth participation, such as where the state leads in creating participation structures, as explored in ***“System lead participation” – Marija Andreevna OHRID Institute for Economic Strategies and International Affairs (Republic of North Macedonia), Zafeiris Sidropoulos, The Network of Youth Engagement in Katerini (Greece) and Oleksandra Iatsura, “Women for the Future” political party (Ukraine).*** This is in contrast to the examples given in ***“Invisible and non-recognised forms of political participation” – Hanjo Schild (Germany) and Andrea Walker Beyond Skin and Youth service NI (UK),*** which can include various types of anti-system or violent actions, or can even be other forms such as participatory action research, as explored in ***“Role of research in Political Participation” – Dan Moxon, People, Dialogue, Change (UK) and Hazal Duran, SETA Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (Turkey).***

WHAT ARE THE TRENDS AND DILEMMAS OF YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION?

Workshop snapshot: Invisible and non-recognised forms of political participation, Hanjo Schild (Germany)

In this conversation, Mr Schild explored the types of youth political participation that is considered “less traditional”, and even in some cases “non-accepted”, “non-correct”, in contrast to what is the conventional understanding of youth political participation, relating to institutional politics, protest activities, demonstrations/manifestations, and civic engagement in associative life and voluntary work. He explained that the boundaries between “accepted” and “non-accepted” forms of participation are blurred, and depends on the context and position one takes (e.g. if you are a young activist, a policy maker, a police man, a teacher, a home owner, a refugee etc.) when looking at these forms, for example:

- Is a tag or a graffiti art and expression of the will to political participation or vandalism?
- 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?

Mr Schild argued that such tensions are important to reflect on when looking at “politically non-correct participation of young people”, namely in populist, nationalistic, far-right extremist ideologies, and sometimes violent groups. Far-right engagement is too the expression of a “wish to have a voice”, and manifestations of a young person’s lack of trust in a political system, traditional politics, and the status quo. Therefore the difference is not the *type* of participation but rather the *values*: one side is rooted in democracy and human rights, while the other is rooted in authoritarianism, nationalism, and xenophobia.

This conversation did not provide any easy answers, but echoes a common theme throughout the symposium, which is the importance of *values* when speaking about young people’s political participation, particularly at a time when democratic values are being challenged in Europe. His presentation forces us to consider that perhaps the central challenge to the future of young people’s political participation is not how to get *more* young people participating, but rather how to ensure that their participation is *democratic, inclusive, and rooted in human rights*.

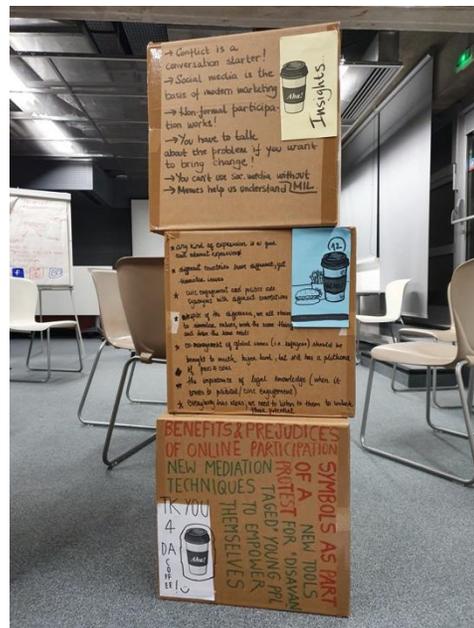
CUBES snapshot: FACE 5 (Aha!)



Face 5 Aha! What are the most relevant insights that you took from the sessions today to build on your vision?

- Significance of art (including memes) for engaging other youth and the population in general - able to capture imagination
- Engaging underrepresented groups of young people as one of the most pressing challenges
- Dialogue & understanding commonalities between people as key to democracy: how to manage conflict, unlock its potential, understand societal problems as others see it

Completed “Face 5 – Aha!” cubes, where participants reflect on their most relevant insights from today’s sessions about trends and dilemmas over the coffee break. (Photo by Bacalso: CC BY 2.0).



V. What is the future of political participation?

The CUBES process was oriented towards the future of political participation in two key ways: first, it asked participants to imagine what their ideal vision is for the future of youth political participation; second, it pushed young people to brainstorm concrete “steps” or actions that need to be done to reach their vision – steps that can be taken by relevant actors/stakeholders, and steps that can be taken by participants themselves. A summary of their visions, and the steps needed to reach them, are given below.

Common themes in the VISIONS

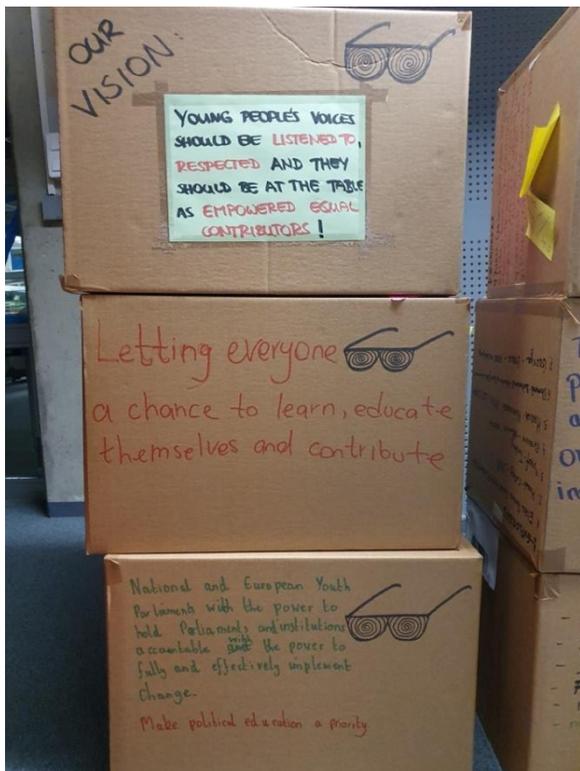
Diversity, Openness, Tolerance, Equality

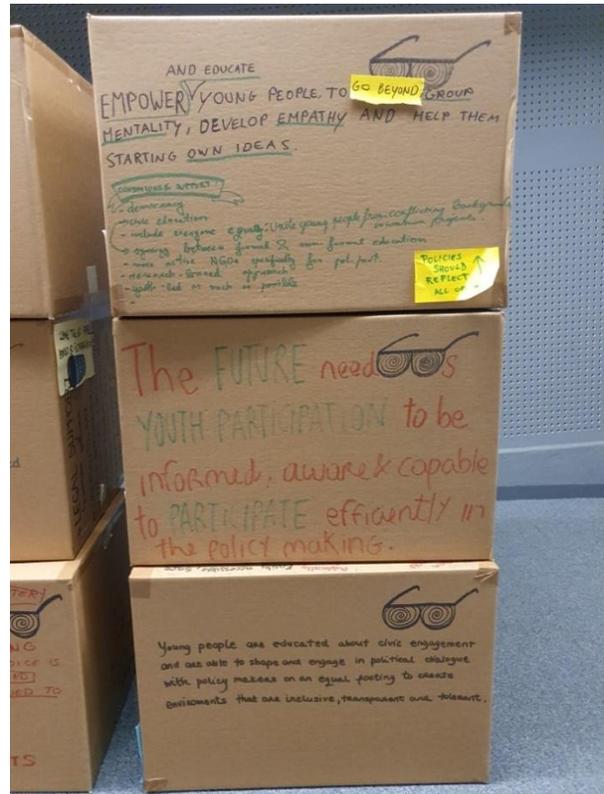
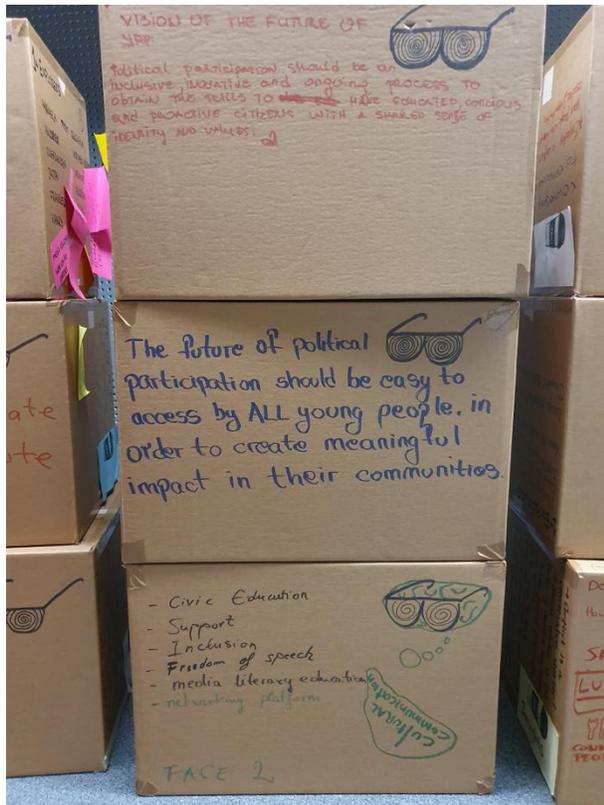
Creative, Imaginative, Engaging

Respect, Empathy

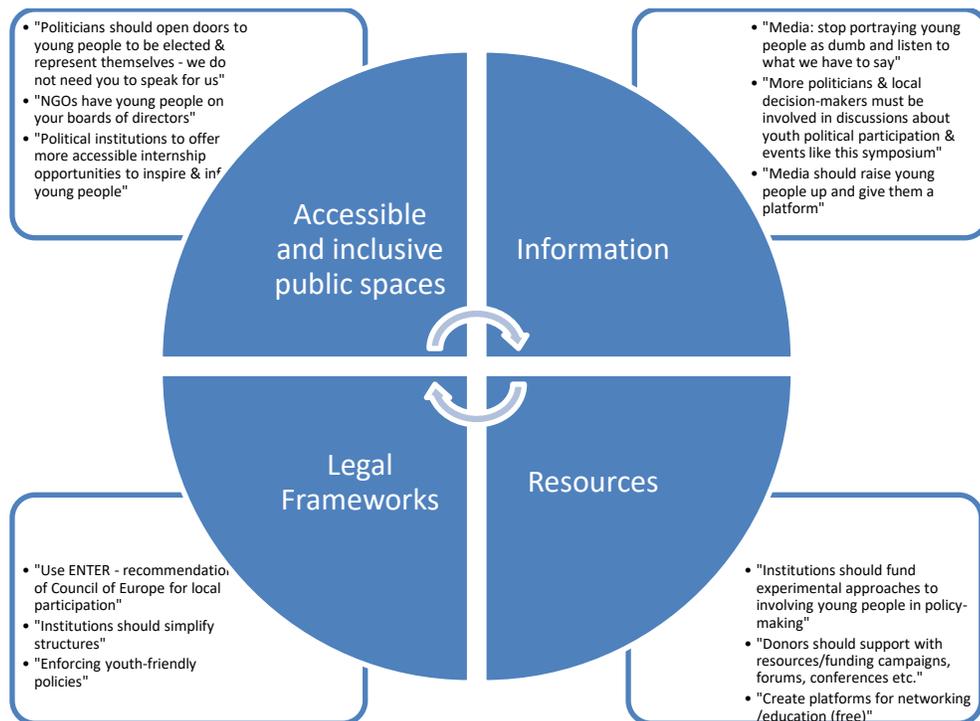
Informed, Conscious

Accountable, Meaningful





Sample of “steps” identified by participants, organised by type of support



Sample of “steps” that participants themselves will take going forward

"I promise to be aware that no one is ever born ready to participate. Its more a mutual learning process"	"Low-threshold project in the districts with kids (getting to know them)"	"Teach media literacy"	"More speaking about these topics with friends"
"I won't be afraid to stand when everyone else is sitting down!"	"Do not wait for another symposium to track good practices, but instead look for them in my daily life"	"Understand the real needs of my community and my capacities"	"Spreading information to youth about NGOs, youth exchanges, seminars that can be beneficial for them, because if they don't know that they exist, they can't join"
"Promote research on youth in non-traditional sectors"	"I can help my friends on the way to getting active in politics and show them that politics is not scary"	"Promote environmental education at school"	"Teach young people accessible digital skills"
"Create a youth council"	"Successfully complete the negotiations with the Land Hessen to implement a Hessian state youth parliament"	"I'll create a textbook/manual for local youth strategies and local youth work in my country (Greece)"	"Conduct more in-depth (qualitative) research about why young people don't participate in politics directly to make evidence-based approach possible"

Closing remarks were provided by **H.E. Ms Meglena Kuneva, Ambassador and Head of the Delegation of European Union to Council of Europe, Mr Matjaž Gruden, Director for Democratic Participation, Council of Europe, Miroslava Dujičová, Steering Committee on Youth, Ms Andrea Ugrinoska, Advisory Council on Youth**, bringing the conversations back into the context of the European project, by reflecting on the prominent role of youth in the two partner institutions – historically and today. In a sombre tone, Mr. Gruden recalled his recent trip to Utøya, Norway, where [69 young people were killed in July 2011](#) by a man with far-right extremist views, which are still prevalent today:

“What does it take to make a democracy? You need institutions, but on their own they don’t work. You need empathy, skills and knowledge [including an understanding of history], and capacity. There is nothing more dangerous to the European way of life than prejudice.”

Mr Matjaž Gruden, Director for Democratic Participation, Council of Europe, reflecting on his recent trip to Utøya, Norway, where a far-right extremist massacred 69 young people attending a youth camp.

Key emerging themes: How the symposium answered: Five key discussion questions

By looking at the five key discussion questions: (*Why political participation? How do young people participate in politics today? How can political participation of young people be supported? What are the trends and dilemmas of youth political participation? What is the future of political participation?*), we see that some key themes emerge:

- **Various forms of participation are considered equally valid and accepted:** From street protests, to youth advisory councils, and initiatives focused on formal participation like voting, to artistic activism and memes, participants showed an appreciation of the contribution that all forms make to a vibrant and healthy democracy.
- **Frameworks, networks, resources, and security matter:** Youth political participation requires a range of supports and stakeholders, which do not necessarily always work together.
- **Unclear what to do with participation that is extremist or illiberal:** Despite a broad consensus in the room on a type of values-based participation (rooted in democracy, human rights, and inclusion), participants were keenly aware that there is a growing chorus among young people who do not believe in the same values, who themselves are also organising.
- **Inclusion of underrepresented groups and calls for diversity:** Ideas for broad engagement of young people no longer seem to suffice. Instead, participants were searching for ideas on how to reach out to underrepresented groups in their communities, understanding that un-engaged youth tend to also be marginalised in other ways.
- **Digital technologies and social media are not the panacea that was once hyped by the youth sector:** Many participants expressed a nuanced view of online participation, which is neither uniformly positive nor negative about its potential for engaging young people in politics. This perhaps bucks a trend in youth programming, which in the last few years has been enamoured by digital tools and solutions.

Conclusion: Key themes of the symposium (and what remains to be explored)

Opportunities for youth political participation

Europe, and the broader world, appears to be in a moment of upheaval, with **youth at the centre of protest movements**, whether it's calling for climate justice, democratic rights, or equitable living standards. In Europe, youth political participation is not a novelty, but rather something which is firmly embedded in its long-established youth sector, supported individually and in partnership by its two main institutions, the European Commission and the Council of Europe.

Within this institutional framework, **young people are experts, too**, leading civil society organisations, heading advisory and local councils, and organising themselves in collective action. Far from apathetic, young people are highly engaged (the 120 participants at the symposium and over 1000 other candidates providing just a small sample), and are political in ways which perhaps were not recognised before.

Artistic activism, including graffiti, theatre, and online memes, all play a role in engaging the average citizen, raising awareness, and building a culture of democracy and accountability – including using humour. Politics is taken seriously by young people, but they don't feel that it needs to be *so serious*. Creativity and imagination are seen as key elements of young people's political participation, both as a tactic to appeal to people's emotions (engaging a wider audience), and as a reflection of a future that they would like to live in: colourful, diverse, free, and open.

These **various forms of participation are considered equally valid and accepted**, as political participation is no longer seen as only direct targeting of policies and politicians – though this still matters. Rather, political participation is also about agenda-setting, and shaping the conversation. Actions that target the "culture of politics" also provide a chance for young people to build awareness of the issues, and shape their own political opinions, which are foundational skills for further political action.

Challenges to youth political participation

Since **participation is not only an end, but a means**, this pushes the spotlight on existing structures and ways of working within the European youth sector, to challenge itself to be more participatory. The symposium was designed and implemented in a participatory way with young people, and it would be exciting to experiment with different or alternative formats that might be more engaging for the young people who are participants, moving away from traditional formats such as plenary sessions or presentations.

The question of “**who can or should represent young people?**” is a key challenge for youth political participation – from who we see leading prominent protest movements on tv, to who sits on youth advisory councils or committees, to who applies and gets to attend capacity-building opportunities like the symposium. In one sense, this relates to the **inclusion of underrepresented groups** (e.g. ethnic, socioeconomic etc.), which was a priority for many participants who **called for greater diversity** in their own organisations, but appeared to lack the tools, knowledge, or networks to put this into practice. Often, the composition of those young people who are most politically active does not mirror the compositions of our societies and a modern Europe.

In another sense, this relates to the dilemma of engaging “**organised**” versus “**unorganised**” youth. While formalisation, such as in a youth organisation, has its benefits (e.g. clearer lines of responsibility, clarity of mandate, sustainability), so does informality (e.g. flexibility, quick responsiveness to issues). Young people are choosing the latter in higher numbers, and it remains a dilemma as to how to engage them in the structures and activities of the broader youth sector, if they want to be engaged at all.

Open questions about youth political participation

We raise three open questions for further reflection:

1. **What is the place of digital technologies in youth political participation, and what is the best way to utilise it?** While many participants expressed a nuanced view of online participation, which is neither uniformly positive nor negative about its potential for engaging young people in politics, digital technologies are not going away. Its role in political participation merits further exploration. How do young people use digital technologies for political participation? What is its impact on engagement? In which ways does online activism affect politics more broadly? These are all themes of which even youth research is only beginning to scratch.
2. **Do our current structures and supports for young people’s participation adequately account for the sustainability of their work in a closing civic space, and for young people’s security?** In a poignant question posed to *Kimberly O’Haver, Open Society Foundations (USA)*, a participant asks what a youth organisation should do when the donor (in this case, OSF), lacks credibility in their country, yet they have very few options when it comes to funding. Here we see that a closing civic space is likely to hit youth organisations the hardest, which themselves are already underfunded. *Alice Stevens, Amnesty International (Mexico)* highlighted the considerations that all activists need to take (including in Europe) to safeguard their security, which also can become comprised in closing civic spaces.
3. **Is the real challenge *not* about declining interest of young people in politics, *but rather* that young people are increasingly drawn to movements that are antithetical to European values?** Participants recognise that democracy (as it is currently configured) is

in a legitimacy crisis. However, they are unclear on what to do with participation that is extremist or illiberal, to which they feel increasing amounts of young people are drawn. Two separate workshops, focused on conflict resolution and dialogue-building, indicate that participants see this as pivotal to their work on participation. Even more fundamental than participation, in communities where dialogue appears to be breaking down building social cohesion is of great importance.

The future of young people's political participation

While the participants at the symposium make up only a tiny subset of all the young people who are politically engaged across Europe, their views, opinions, aspirations, and challenges provide us with a glimpse into the future of youth political participation, which can be summed up in several broad points:

- **DIVERSE:** young people engage in politics in a diversity of ways, including through conventional means of participation, such as voting and membership in political parties or youth organisations, voicing their opinions and influencing decision making processes through formal structures and means of democratic participation and expression. On the other hand, they also participate using alternative channels, digital tools, activism, even civil disobedience. They increasingly engage through youth movements, take part in campaigns and protests, strongly advocating for issues such as climate emergency.
- **SUBVERSIVE:** many young people are not keen to conduct politics as usual and they seek to critique the hypocrisies that they see in the status quo with humour, and irony. This is accelerated by social media and digital technologies, where memes and political satire are the political language of the day. Young people create new things and processes, and are creative in using what exists.
- **INCLUSIVE:** open and pluralistic participation was one of the top priorities for young people at the symposium, who were committed to finding ways to make their organisations and movements more diverse. Participation was also seen as a key method to making our societies more inclusive. If young people use their voice and are listened to, they feel like they belong in their communities. We can anticipate more interest from youth-led civil society in initiatives that specifically target seldom-heard young people, and a greater interest in strategies and frameworks that support this.
- **EMPOWERING:** the Symposium participants, through the Cubes exercise, have also raised the educational and empowering aspect of political participation. Participating requires a certain level of competences but it is also learned by doing. Sharing the power may empower both sides: young people and other stakeholders, as it gives opportunity to perceive things from a youth perspective, to rethink the ways in which they work and to reinvigorate the decision-making.

- **COLOURFUL:** while artistic activism was only represented among a small group of participants at the symposium, its impact was felt in a big way. A one-man play about civil disobedience. Painted t-shirts with protest slogans for the Fridays for Future march. A song written and performed spontaneously by one of the participants about political participation. Young people are moved in an emotional way by the social issues that matter to them, and their artistic expression in turn moves others in society. It will be no surprise to see more of this type of activism in the future.
- **FLEXIBLE:** there is no one right way to do participation. Whether it is sitting on an advisory council, protesting on the street, or painting a mural with a political message, participants at the symposium treated all forms as equally valid, each with its own potential. There exists opportunities for collaboration and cross-over between the methods, and this may be something to watch out for in the future.
- **UNCOMPROMISING ON KEY VALUES:** while young people showed themselves to be exceedingly flexible about the *types* of political participation that are valid, those at the symposium did not compromise on the *values* that they felt political participation should be based upon: democracy, human rights, diversity, and respect. It can be anticipated that youth-led civil society will take up more initiatives that are explicitly values-based in this direction. There will also be a greater need for strategies on how to engage with youth who are drawn to authoritarian, right-wing extremist and/or xenophobic movements, and how to create spaces for free and critical thinking, while being also promoting human rights and democratic citizenship.

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