

**Symposium**

**The future of young people’s political participation: questions, challenges and opportunities**

***Concept note***

From 18 to 20 September 2019 the partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth will organise a symposium bringing together up to 120 participants to explore current tensions, questions, challenges and opportunities regarding the political participation of young people in today’s changing world and create a space for learning and inspiration among actors involved in this topic.

**Why youth political participation?**

Political participation, very broadly understood as people’s activities affecting politics, the government or the state, is a crucial aspect of pluralist democracies. This includes people’s ability to express their political opinions in diverse ways and to be heard, to vote and stand in elections, to engage in civil society organisations or in thematic movements, to demonstrate or protest, to engage in issue-based activism or online activism. Forms of and attitudes to political participation change over time and it is important to understand current trends to be able to adapt support tools and help overcoming barriers to wider democratic participation, which in turn can help strengthening democratic values and attitudes in European societies.

One of the challenges in understanding current developments, difficulties and opportunities in youth participation is that young people are a non-homogeneous group with diverging trends in attitudes and habits:

* While some young people are very engaged politically, others are disinterested or disillusioned and do not participate, possibly because they feel their voice is not taken into account. Is that “youth apathy” or a crisis of democracy as such? In some repressive contexts, obstacles seem to be placed in front of young people to prevent or discourage their participation.
* Among those who engage, some young people choose conventional forms of participation, such as electoral processes or civil society organisations. Other young people choose unconventional forms, including artistic expression or consumer boycotts. Still others opt for illegitimate or even illegal forms of participation, such as destruction of property or violence, signalling a loss of trust in public institutions and democratic processes.
* At different levels, from the local to the European, there are different ways in which young people engage and those may vary from a context to another. Specific approaches, tools, or supports that work at one level, may not be suitable for others.

There is a need to understand better what young people see as political participation today, how they choose to engage or not to engage, and how different actors, such as organisations, movements, etc., can work with young people in appropriate ways to support their political engagement.

**The context**

In today’s societies the forms political participation takes have become more diverse. A rapid expansion of digital technologies offers numerous opportunities for information (and disinformation) to spread and for citizens to be up-to-date with the political life in a given community. Relevant policy fields often have their own specificity. The development of civil society and evolving citizenship education, on local, national but also European level also play a role.

There are numerous challenges that can be observed, influencing political participation. Europe has seen both a surge of right-wing populism and a tightening of political liberties and civil space in some countries that resulted in difficulties for citizens to exercise their participation without restraints. In some contexts corruption remains a major issue, often triggering protests. Awareness of and access to rights are not to be taken for granted, especially for some minority groups. In some communities, the socio-economic conditions lead to participation not being seen as a priority. Both institutional and social media have a key role in disseminating true and fake news, shaping opinions, not least those of young people. The role of European institutions in the political life is at times negatively depicted and perceived.

While forms of participation are varied and constantly evolve, any discussion on participation raises also questions about its underlying values, with the tension between democratic and human rights values and illiberal values being a very important influencing factor also for young people’s participation.

**The youth sector**

There are several aspects to which the youth sector needs to pay close attention to young people’s political participation, for example:

* exploring the role of youth work for supporting young people’s political engagement
* finding appropriate and state-of-the-art approaches for political education
* identifying the forms of support that civil society and in particular youth organisations may need for engaging young people
* identifying new areas for youth research
* devising ways in which youth policy and programmes can support youth political participation.

Furthermore, 2019 is also the year of elections for the European Parliament, and for many young people an occasion to exercise their influence on a key political body of the European Union. Many campaigns relating to encouraging youth to vote are already under way, and the behaviour young people will have in relation to the European Parliament elections may be an indicator for the youth sector across the EU in terms of how much young people engage with European institutions, and in which ways.

The same applies to national electoral and other political processes across the continent.

**Participants**

The symposium may attract participants from different backgrounds and with diverse profiles:

* politically engaged young people, young political activists/leaders
* political organisations and political parties
* civil society organisations and movements
* media representatives, influencers
* policy makers
* youth workers, educators and teachers
* researchers

Symposium participants will be selected both, through an open call and directly invited. The organisers will seek balance in terms of geographical representation and gender, as well as between participants bringing good practices and those seeking to improve or to develop their knowledge and ability to engage with the topic.

**Objectives and results**

The symposium will aim 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 will strive for 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 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.

**Symposium programme**

While the overarching theme is set, a key feature of this symposium is that sessions within the programme will be designed in a participatory way. In the application form, participants will have the chance to indicate what issues or questions are most pressing for them in their work as it relates to the main theme of political participation. The answers will inform the topics that will be covered throughout the symposium. Here come some examples of issues to be explored:

* How do young people engage in political participation in a changing world of economic tensions, crisis of democratic institutions, digitalisation, social media, fake news and other manipulations of the public opinion, etc.?
* What are the trends in young people’s political engagement and the underlying values? How do young people see their own political participation?
* What determines young people’s political actions?
* What is the space for young people’s engagement in civil society and citizen movements?
* What conditions for young people’s political participation may be influenced by the youth sector and how?

**Timeline and venue**

The symposium will start on 18 September morning and end at lunchtime on 20 September 2019. The symposium will be held at the European Youth Centre of the Council of Europe, in Strasbourg, France.

Before the symposium, as an opportunity for learning and exchange, the organisers have foreseen four to five webinars for the participants and the wider public on some key themes of youth political participation. Webinars will last one hour each and will begin in early May.

**Institutional background**

The symposium is organised by the partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth. This programme of co-operation between the two institutions focuses on building knowledge relevant for the youth field in Europe, promoting policy and practice with young people based on the shared values of the two partner institutions and creating synergies between their youth-related programmes. Both the Council of Europe and the European Commission give importance to the theme of youth political participation.

The Council of Europe has had youth participation in democratic life as a constant priority in its work. In 2018, the youth sector of the Council of Europe analysed the consequences of the shrinking space for civil society on youth organisations and movements. Beyond the youth sector, the Organisation has organised several edition of its World Forum for Democracy on topics of current concern, such as populism. Moreover, in the education sector, the [framework of competences for democratic culture](https://rm.coe.int/16806ccc07) offers a useful conceptualisation regarding how young people can learn to “live together as equals in culturally diverse democratic societies”. Finally, the European Court of Human rights issues judgements connected to political demonstrations and action.

In relation to the European Commission, youth participation is a priority in the current EU youth strategy (2019 – 2027: “ENGAGE: Fostering young people's participation in civic and democratic life”) and the Erasmus+ programme. As an example, in relation to European Parliament elections, several projects were supported encouraging young people to vote. The Europe for Citizens Programme aims to foster European citizenship and improve conditions for civic and democratic participation at EU level by funding a variety of projects. The European Citizens' Initiative is a unique and innovative way for citizens to shape the EU by calling on the European Commission to make a legislative proposal once an initiative gathers 1 million signatures.