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Subject: Empowering young people for political participation in the democratic life in Europe
- *Policy debate*
[Public debate pursuant to Article 8(2) CRP [proposed by the Presidency]]

Following consultation of the Youth Working Party, the Presidency has drawn up the attached discussion paper as the basis for the policy debate among Youth Ministers at the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council meeting on 18-19 May 2015.

**“Empowering young people for political participation
in the democratic life in Europe”**

Presidency Discussion Paper

Introduction

Political participation is at the heart of European democracies, and elections remain the key instrument for citizens to make their voice heard in politics. A low and falling voter turnout may undermine the democratic legitimacy of a government. One of the dangers is that below average participation rates of young people may reduce the motivation of governments to include young people in the decision-making process or to truly reflect their needs. This in turn is likely to translate into young people being less willing and able to participate in politics.

However, at the same time evidence suggests that youth political participation has changed rather than declined, young people finding new ways of participating and channeling their concerns and interests.¹

The Presidency is of the opinion that the opportunity to experience political participation in their own environment and at local level from an early age is crucial for young people to become active citizens. The ministerial debate aims to jointly reflect on possible solutions and best practices on how to increase the political participation of young people in the democratic life in Europe.

¹ Cammaerts, Bart et al. (2014): The Myth of Youth Apathy: Young Europeans’ Critical Attitudes Toward Democratic Life, in: American Behavioral Science, Vol. 58(5), pp. 645-664.

Participation in democratic life is considered a fundamental right recognised in Article 10.3 TEU of the Lisbon Treaty (2009) and an inherent part of the European citizenship provisions: 'Every citizen shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union.' Besides this, when focusing more specifically on young European citizens, Article 165 of the Lisbon Treaty states that one of the aims of EU action should be geared towards: 'Encouraging the participation of young people in democratic life in Europe.'

State of Play

Falling voter turnout is a common trend in Europe and young voters abstain more than the general population. Total electoral turnout has declined in all national elections in EU Member States, from an average of 83% in the 1980s to 65% in the last elections recorded. This phenomenon is related inter alia to youth absenteeism, in that decreasing turnout among young people translates into absenteeism later in life.²

Also in the European Parliament elections since 1979 voter turnout has declined in every election. In 2014 only 28% of under 25 year olds were voting, compared to the turn-out rate for the whole population which was 42.6 %.³

According to Eurobarometer, 79% (EU27 average) of the respondents (aged 15 to 30) indicated that they would not consider standing as a candidate in a political election at some point in their lives.⁴

² Bouza Garcia, Luis (2013): Addressing Youth Absenteeism in European Elections, available at: http://www.youthforum.org/assets/2014/02/YFJ-LYV_StudyOnYouthAbsenteeism_WEB.pdf

³ Results of the European Parliament elections, available at: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/election-results-2014.html>
Post-election survey 2014, Socio-demographic Annex, available at: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/eurobarometre/2014/post/post_ee2014_sociodemographic_annex_en.pdf

⁴ European Commission (2013), Flash Eurobarometer No 375, European Youth: Participation in Democratic Life, available at: http://ec.europa.eu/youth/library/reports/flash375_en.pdf

The divide between the democratic institutions in Europe, their representatives and political parties and Europe's young citizens seems to be growing. However, it is debatable whether this signifies a decline or rather a transformation of young people's political participation in society.

For instance, it is noteworthy that on the one hand young people are often underrepresented in public offices, their concerns are frequently side-lined in politics and they are less likely to participate in elections. Yet, on the other hand, young people are more likely to believe in democracy and that voting is an effective mechanism to influence decision-making than other age groups⁵. They are even the most likely to hold ambitious or idealist notions on what democratic participation should look like. Finally, young people are also overrepresented in issue-specific, more ad-hoc and campaign like forms of political participation⁶, for example, demonstrations and strikes, initiating or signing a petition, joining pressure groups, volunteering time and donating to a cause or a charity, boycotting a product, participating in social media surveys etc. This points to complex patterns in the political participation of young people. Research shows that for many young people, political participation starts with proximity, first and foremost at the local level. The local or regional level is where young people get a chance to see the direct impact of their involvement and participate in a small-scale democracy.⁷

⁵ EACEA (2013a): Political Participation and EU Citizenship: Perceptions and Behaviours of Young People, available at: <http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/youth/tools/documents/perception-behaviours.pdf>

⁶ Sloam, James (2013): 'Voice and Equality': Young People's Politics in the European Union, in: West European Politics, Vol. 36(4), pp. 836-858.

⁷ Cammaerts, Bart et al. (2014): The Myth of Youth Apathy: Young Europeans' Critical Attitudes Toward Democratic Life, in: American Behavioural Science, Vol. 58(5), pp. 645-664

The role of the Youth Sector in promoting the values of democracy

Frustrated by their social and political marginalization that has been exacerbated by the public policy responses to the financial crises, young people increasingly resort to protest politics (like demonstrations) but also to political extremism or violence⁸. This illustrates why achieving higher levels of youth participation in conventional political processes is so important.

The declaration adopted by EU education ministers at their informal gathering in Paris on 17 March 2015⁹ highlighted the importance of efforts to prevent and tackle marginalisation, intolerance, racism and radicalisation and to preserve a framework of equal opportunities for all. The declaration stated the following: “Children and young people represent our future and must have the opportunity to shape that future. We must combine our efforts to prevent and tackle marginalisation, intolerance, racism and radicalisation and to preserve a framework of equal opportunities for all. We must build on children and young people’s sense of initiative and the positive contribution they can make through participation, while reaffirming the common fundamental values on which our democracies are based.”

In this context, it is important to stress that the youth sector and youth work plays an important role in ensuring cohesive societies, especially through contributing to personal development, promoting the values of social inclusion, cultural diversity, active citizenship and providing a peer-environment based on respect and tolerance. Youth work plays a key role in reaching out to all young people, including the marginalised and those not in employment, education or training.

⁸ Sloam, James (2013): ‘Voice and Equality’: Young People’s Politics in the European Union, in: West European Politics, Vol. 36(4), pp. 836-858.

⁹ Declaration on Promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non discrimination through education.

Structured Dialogue proposed solutions

In order to further explore how to encourage young people to be more active in taking part in the democratic life of our countries, 220 young people and policy makers from across Europe came together at the EU Youth Conference “Empowering young people for political participation in democratic life in Europe” in Riga on 23–26 March. Joint recommendations were produced as a result of three days of plenary sessions and workshops at the conference, taking into account the suggestions made by more than 40 000 young Europeans who participated in the broad consultation process under the Structured Dialogue¹⁰, carried out four months prior to the conference in Riga. These "Joint Recommendations" are set out in the Annex to this note.

Delegates suggested various actions to be put in force at local, regional and European levels: creating a culture of participation at school; involving young people in political decision-making; enhancing policy makers’ engagement and commitment with young people; strengthening the role of youth work for the political empowerment of all young people; developing youth-friendly tools for political participation, as well as further developing direct and local democracy.

The Structured Dialogue is a unique participatory process that allows young people from across Europe to express their views on a broad number of issues entering in a direct dialogue with policy makers. The Presidency highly values the outcomes and the active participation of young people and policy makers.

¹⁰ As described in the Council Resolution on a renewed framework for European Cooperation in the youth field (2010-2018), “the structured dialogue with young people and youth organisations serves as a forum for continuous joint reflection on the priorities, implementation and follow-up of European cooperation in the youth field”.

Ministerial debate

The Presidency would like to make further progress in identifying possible solutions and best practices on how to encourage and prepare young people for political participation in the democratic life of Europe. In this context, Ministers are invited to reflect on the following questions:

1. Which are the most urgent actions to be put in place at all levels to achieve greater political participation of young people in traditional democratic mechanisms (such as elections)?
 2. Which are the most urgent actions to make mainstream politics more appealing and engaging for young people, as well as to raise overall youth interest and readiness to have an active role in the democratic life of Europe?
 3. What specific actions are needed to engage with young people that might be vulnerable to extremism and potentially radicalisation?
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**Joint Recommendations of the EU Youth Conference
(Riga, 23-26 March 2015)**

In the framework of the EU Youth conference, youth representatives, together with representatives from Member States have gathered to reflect on solutions to empower young people for participation in political processes.

Create a Culture of Participation At School

- 1) Member States should introduce and support a framework in educational institutions, such as students councils or other student initiatives that enable and ensure the engagement of students to take part in the decision-making of the school system. Other forms of civic engagements such as volunteering should also be recognised by the educational institutions in order to stimulate a culture of participation.

- 2) Member States should further develop or include civic education in the curricula at all levels of formal education, bringing a local, national and European perspective. Formal education providers must include non-formal learning methodologies to encourage critical thinking and enable young people from all backgrounds to develop attitudes and values to participate actively in the society.

CULT Committee is invited to advance the civic education discussion in the European Parliament.

Involving young people in political decision-making

- 1) In order to further involve young people in democratic life, Member States and local authorities are invited to implement pilot programmes starting at local level, where voting age is lowered to 16, accompanied by the adequate preparation, including quality civic education.
- 2) By implementing transparent, sustainable and collaborative structures and providing financial support, authorities on the local, regional and national levels should ensure full participation of youth NGOs in decision making processes of the policies that affect young people.

Enhancing policy makers' engagement and commitment with young people

- 1) European Commission and Member States should put in place a framework to engage policy makers, providing them with all the necessary tools to involve young people and youth organizations in developing, implementing and evaluating the policies that affect them through shared decision-making.
- 2) Policy makers on all levels, should continuously perform an open political culture of communication using multiple youth targeted methods in order to increase transparency and accountability of the policymaking process.

Strengthening the role of youth work for political empowerment of all young people

- 1) The crucial role of youth work for fostering a political participation which is based on the values of diversity, human rights, democracy and on critical thinking, should be strengthened and socially and politically recognized by the European Commission and Member States. Therefore, youth work should be provided with the necessary resources, support structures and formal recognition.

- 2) EU institutions and Member States are encouraged to put up cross-sectorial initiatives and long-term partnerships at all levels with youth workers and non-governmental organizations, with the aim of transferring knowledge and developing political participation competencies of all young people, especially those with fewer opportunities.

Developing youth friendly tools for political participation

- 1) To ensure access of young people to information and opportunities to experience online tools for political participation, Member States should ensure that trainings on the existence of such tools are provided for teachers and other professionals working with young people.
- 2) Private and public organisations should involve young people in the development, implementation and monitoring of online tools for youth political participation., To ensure recognition of young people's participation and sustain their involvement in political processes, online tools should be complemented by offline methods and have a follow-up phase in which decision-makers reflect on how young people's contributions were taken into account.

Developing local and direct democracy

- 1) Member States and youth organisations should acknowledge and make better use of alternative forms of young people's political engagement (e.g. arts, sports) aiming to enrich the debate and decision-making processes.
- 2) Member States, local or regional authorities should encourage the establishment and the strengthening of local and regional youth councils or other equivalent youth platforms that should be open, inclusive and sustainable in order to enable young people from all backgrounds to participate and be involved in decision-making processes in accordance with the *Revised European Charter on the Participation of young people* in local and regional life (Congress of Local & Regional Authorities, Council of Europe).

Increasing synergies and cooperation between different actors

- 1) In order to involve young people in political processes and to enable easy and sustainable collaboration between all relevant stakeholders, the EU institutions and Member States should develop or improve coordinated cross-sectorial communication at all levels.

 - 2) We call on the European Commission to set the ground for a progressive implementation of a youth impact assessment of all EU policies. This should involve all relevant stakeholders to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of policies affecting young people's lives, thus increasing the attractiveness of political participation for young people.
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