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Youth and democracy: the changing face of youth political engagement

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Summary

Studies show an increasing disengagement from conventional political participation in recent years by young people. Findings suggest they vote less, membership in political parties is declining, and they distrust political institutions. What is the reason for this decreasing political commitment? According to different surveys, increasing unemployment rates among youth, an increase in precarious jobs and job insecurity, and ever more difficult transitions from school to work could contribute to young people's apparent disillusionment.

However research indicates that young people have not disengaged from democratic and civic behaviour, their democratic values are apparently still strong. Young people engage today in different forms of democratic activities appropriate to their own understanding of democracy and citizenship, in a society in which they feel marginalised from the political process. The recent demonstrations, protests or riots in many European countries could be seen as young people's answer to a political system that they feel does not give them their share of power and full citizenship. Young people have found other ways to make their voices heard.

Local and regional authorities can play a role in enabling young people to have their voice heard in decision-making processes by contributing to the elimination of sources of disillusionment and offering young people possibilities for real participation as proposed by the Congress' Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life.

¹ L: Chamber of Local Authorities / R: Chamber of Regions
ILDG: Independent and Liberal Democrat Group of the Congress
EPP/CD: European People's Party – Christian Democrats of the Congress
SOC: Socialist Group of the Congress
ECR: European Conservatives and Reformists Group
NR: Members not belonging to a political group of the Congress
NPA: No political affiliation



Youth and democracy: the changing face of youth political engagement

RESOLUTION 346 (2012)²

1. The social and demographic structure of European societies is changing: people are living longer and population levels are declining owing to lower fertility rates. Thus, in the future, youth will become a minority in an ageing society, their influence within the democratic system will decrease, and youth-related subjects and needs may lose weight in political debates and the decision-making process. This perceived political marginalisation could lead to political frustration and distrust among young people.

2. Young people are also facing frustration owing to their increasingly difficult transitions to work and adult life. Integration into the labour market is one of the key development tasks on a young person's way to autonomy and independence. However, the labour market has changed radically, having lost flexibility and jobs, and requiring ever higher qualifications. Integration into the labour market for young people has become all the more difficult and, since 2008, youth unemployment has increased substantially owing to the current economic crisis. High qualifications are no longer a guarantee for finding work and access to the job market is not only difficult for young people who lack general or vocational education, but also for those holding higher education degrees.

3. The experience of unemployment, job insecurity and precarious social integration can lead to demotivation, low self-esteem, psychological distress, physical health symptoms, increased alcohol consumption, criminal behaviour, a downgrading of aspirations or resignation.

4. Young people's interest in conventional political participation, such as voting in elections, has declined over recent years due to increasing disenchantment and cynicism. However, this does not mean young people are no longer interested; they still engage in democratic and civic behaviour and they still believe in democratic values. They engage in different forms of democratic activity appropriate to their own understanding of democracy and citizenship. Young people still identify with their society and they are still prepared to engage: the important issue is to make their voice heard.

5. Newer, more informal ways of participation are preferred, such as the Internet, issue-based participation like signing petitions or spontaneously attending demonstrations, and consumer activism such as making shopping decisions based on political considerations. The new technologies and online social communities, such as Facebook and Twitter, offer young people vast opportunities for personal politics and for mobilising for political action across communities and borders.

6. Children and minors do not enjoy full political and civic rights. For example they do not have the right to vote in most member States leading to an under-representation of this group in parliaments, both national and regional, and local councils. Young people are thus marginalised from the political process, being treated more as "political apprentices" than "political agents". If young people do not feel they are an active part of the political process, they will find other ways to make their voices heard. The recent demonstrations, protests or riots in many European countries can be seen as young people's answer to a political system that does not really give them their share of power and full citizenship.

7. Young people should learn about democracy and participation in educational institutions such as schools. For this reason education for democratic citizenship has to become a central aspect of education. They also learn about citizenship through the non-formal education they receive elsewhere, such as in local youth clubs and civic organisations, and through participation in local and regional youth councils and parliaments. This is where young people get to know what participation in democracy means: through electing class representatives, meeting with local

². Debated and adopted by the Congress on 17 October 2012, 2nd Sitting, presented by H. O Bozatlı, Turkey (R, EPP/CD) on behalf of E. Ampe, Belgium (R, ILDG), rapporteur.

politicians and engaged local citizens, working in community-oriented service projects or sitting on youth parliaments in the local community.

8. Young people want to make their voices heard and to play a real role in decision making in their societies. The best way to achieve this is to strengthen their social integration by sharing economic, social and political power with them and giving them full citizenship and full access to jobs. Due to the proximity to citizens, it is at local and regional levels that this can best be achieved.

9. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe therefore invites local and regional authorities to:

a. ensure that young people completing compulsory education can secure a suitable offer of education or training in a school, college or work-based training – along the lines of the United Kingdom’s “September Guarantee” process – in order that they may develop skills adapted to the labour market and thus facilitating their access to it;

b. co-operate with and support local businesses which offer jobs, on-the-job training or work experience to develop work skills and increase the employability of young people, in particular disadvantaged youth;

c. support youth entrepreneurship through adequate funding conditions and access to business incubators, by integrating entrepreneurship into school curricula and training programmes, and by co-operating with local business partners;

d. offer opportunities to young people to enter into a structured dialogue with local and regional authorities and to participate in politics and policy making by setting up joint decision-making mechanisms, mirroring the Council of Europe’s co-management system, in the form of joint councils composed of elected local/regional councillors and youth representatives;

e. introduce local policy on voluntary activity, while guarding against such voluntary activity being used as a substitute for paid employment, to enable young people to develop personal and professional skills;

f. raise awareness of the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life and ensure its implementation.

10. The Congress recalls its proposals to local and regional authorities relating to improving the employment prospects of young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods contained in paragraph 9 of its Resolution 319 (2010).

11. The Congress invites the member States of the Council of Europe to include some young people in their national delegations to the Congress, both as full and substitute members.

12. The Congress invites the Co-ordinator of the European Local Democracy Week to propose that a future edition of the Week be devoted to youth, youth participation and promoting young people’s access to human and social rights.

13. The Congress welcomes the increased commitment of the European Union to lowering youth unemployment figures, as seen in the statement of the members of the European Council of 30 January 2012 and in particular the European Commission’s Youth Opportunities Initiative.

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RECOMMENDATION 327 (2012)³

1. The youth unemployment rate has increased substantially since the start of the economic crisis in 2008 and in some Council of Europe countries this rate is currently over 50%. However, this is not the full picture as some young people who have left education do not even appear in labour market statistics, the so-called NEETs (neither in education nor in employment or training).
2. The longer young people are unemployed, the more difficult it becomes to gain a foothold in the job market. Young people are at serious risk of social exclusion and poverty.
3. In times of economic crisis, when job offers decline and qualification requirements remain high, access to the job market becomes increasingly difficult especially for young people who lack general or vocational education. Learning and knowledge, however, are not always recognised with formal certificates and this is the case with competences gained through non-formal education. The knowledge and skills acquired through non-formal learning are obviously important in the fight against youth unemployment and must, as such, be recognised.
4. The changing demographic structure of European societies will result in youth becoming a minority in an ageing society, their influence within the democratic system will decrease, and youth-related subjects and needs will lose weight in political debates and the decision-making process. This perceived political marginalisation could lead to political frustration and distrust among young people.
5. Young people's political engagement is taking on new forms of citizenship and their participation is through the Internet, signing petitions or spontaneously attending demonstrations. These are forms of participation which are open and accessible to all young people, including those under the legal voting age, which in most European countries is 18.
6. Bearing in mind the above, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe recommends that the Committee of Ministers invite member States to:
 - a. strengthen the political influence and participation of young people through the offer of more citizenship rights, for example by investigating the possibility of lowering the voting age to 16 as proposed in Resolution 1826 (2011) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe;
 - b. implement Resolution 1828 (2011) of the Parliamentary Assembly on reversing the sharp decline in youth employment;
 - c. implement Resolution 1885 (2012) of the Parliamentary Assembly on the young generation sacrificed: social, economic and political implications of the financial crisis;
 - d. promote the recognition of competences made in non-formal educational settings and venues as advocated in Committee of Ministers Recommendation Rec(2003)8 to member states on the promotion and recognition of non-formal education/learning of young people.

³. Debated and adopted by the Congress on 17 October 2012, 2nd Sitting, presented by H. O. Bozatli, Turkey (R, EPP/CD) on behalf of E. Ampe, Belgium (R, ILDG), rapporteur.

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EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM⁴

A. Introduction

1. Participation of young people in democratic life is one of the most important topics of youth policy in Europe and due to the proximity of local and regional authorities to citizens, is most effective at these levels. In addition, the local level can be seen as a testing ground for youth participation and social innovation at higher levels. In recognition of this fact, the Congress adopted in 1992 the European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life. To celebrate its 10th anniversary, a conference on “Young People – Actors in their Towns and Regions” was organised to evaluate progress in the field of youth participation over the previous ten years. The result was the revision of the Charter adapting it to the challenges facing young people in the ever-changing society of that time.

2. The year 2012 sees the 20th anniversary of this Charter and, in view of the apparent increasing disillusionment of young people with political life, and indeed society as a whole, symbolised by the participation of many young people in demonstrations across Europe, it is time to review again the state of youth engagement in Europe and to ask the question: what is going wrong?

3. To reply to this question, the general situation of young people in European societies must be examined before attempting any interpretation or evaluation of the political interest and participation of young people in Europe today.

B. The situation of European youth in an ageing society in crisis

i. The social and democratic implications of an ageing society

4. The social and demographic structure of European societies is facing serious changes. Higher life-expectations, ie ageing, and lower fertility rates, or a decline in the population, are being observed in most European countries. The 15 to 29 age group represents just a fifth of Europe’s general population today with a projected share for 2050 of not more than 15%. These projections indicate that the old age dependency ratio⁵ will nearly double and the number of economically inactive people over 65 will represent more than 50% of the number of 15-64 year olds.

5. Thus society is reshaping and younger generations in particular are facing economic and social changes. Youth will be confronted with a higher burden of financial transfers to the older generations and when they become a minority in an ageing society, their influence within the democratic system will certainly decrease. Youth-related subjects and needs may not carry as much weight in political debates and the decision-making process. This perceived political marginalisation could lead to political frustration and distrust among young people. Local and regional authorities must act now to save young people from becoming what some sources are calling the “lost generation”.

ii. The increasing importance of education and training

6. Education and training have gained importance in today’s knowledge-based economy. The globalised economy requires a highly skilled work force which can continuously adapt to the labour market through lifelong learning. This trend is reflected in the growing number of young people enrolled in tertiary education or holding higher education degrees, a percentage which has never been

⁴ This explanatory memorandum (adopted by the Current Affairs Committee on 20 March 2012) is based on a study prepared by the Council of Europe consultants Prof Dr Helmut WILLEMS, Dipl. Soz. Andreas HEINEN and Dipl. Päd. Christiane MEYERS from the University of Luxembourg’s Integrative Research Unit on Social and Individual Development (INSIDE), which is available upon request from the secretariat.

⁵ The dependency ratio is an age-population ratio of those typically not in the labour force and those typically in the labour force. The old-age dependency ratio is the ratio of the number of elderly persons at an age when they are generally economically inactive divided by the number of persons of working age.

higher, and the increase in numbers of young people completing secondary education. European young people are prepared to meet the challenges of the globalised labour markets in the 21st century and are ready and willing to invest in good education and qualifications.

7. Local authorities can help young people secure sufficient suitable education and training provision. In the United Kingdom, the “September Guarantee” scheme has been introduced which is an offer, by the end of September, of a suitable place in education or training to young people completing compulsory education. The scheme is operated at local level; local authorities must agree with their partners – especially schools and colleges – how the process operates in their area. The aim of the scheme is to ensure that every young person has the opportunity to gain skills and qualifications that help them progress to higher education, work and adult life.

8. However, higher qualifications do not automatically lead to an easier and more secure integration into the labour market. Young people are faced with the paradoxical situation that although they are on average better qualified than older employees, their chances of securing a position corresponding to their qualifications have lowered compared to earlier generations.

9. In the Azores (Portugal), internship programmes with a training component have been introduced for university students, for those completing technological courses, for young graduates and those holding Masters’ degrees. During these courses, all interns receive at least the minimum legal regional salary. The programme is said to be very popular with companies, which use it both for training and as a selection process, and it is attracting ever more candidates. Although the costs of the internships were originally met by the Regional Government, since 2010 companies have been contributing 25% of the interns’ remuneration, an obligation which did not lead to a drop in take-up.⁶

10. Two more important factors explain the difficult transition to the labour market: the recent economic crisis that has led to many job losses and companies’ changing recruitment policy from a reduction in permanent job contracts to an increase in fixed-term contracts. These trends have exacerbated dramatically young people’s transition to a stable job.

iii. Changing transitions from school to work and higher risks

11. The Council of Europe’s Revised European Social Charter underscores that “everyone shall have the opportunity to earn his living in an occupation freely entered upon” and that everybody has the right to work. For young people, taking up gainful employment is considered to be a crucial step in their personal development and in forming their identity. It is an important basis for securing one’s livelihood, participating and positioning oneself in society. In modern societies, integration into the labour market is one of the key development tasks on a young person’s way to autonomy and independence. However, the labour market has changed radically, it has lost flexibility, jobs are being lost and demands for ever higher qualifications are being made, all of which make integration into the labour market increasingly difficult for young people. On the individual level, it is first and foremost a lack of academic qualifications or the low education level of a minority of young people that lead to difficulties. The opportunity to gain access to stable employment is considerably reduced for young people with low or without any academic qualifications; but it has become difficult even for an increasing number of highly qualified young people.

12. Youth transitions to work and adult life are more difficult today: it takes longer to establish independent households; many young people even in their twenties are economically reliant on their families and their social networks. These failing transitions with repeated phases of unemployment lead in many cases to a decrease in motivation, aspirations and in the hope for a better future.

iv. A generation between unemployment and precarious jobs: the increase in youth unemployment in Europe

13. One of the key indicators to describe the problematic situation of young people is the rate of youth unemployment. Until 2007, youth unemployment remained quite stable and even declined for most European countries. However, since 2008 youth unemployment has increased substantially. The number of young unemployed varies from country to country, from 8.5%⁷ in the Netherlands, 19.7% in

⁶ Promoting Youth Employment, Peer Reviews 2011-2012, Assembly of European Regions.

⁷ Eurostat, Youth unemployment, 2011 (Q4).

Turkey, 45%⁸ in Croatia, to 51.5%⁹ in Spain and 58%¹⁰ in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although the current economic crisis is leading to job losses amongst all generations, there is evidence to show that young people in the 15-24 age bracket have suffered a disproportionate share of job losses. It should also be borne in mind that this is not the full picture as some young people who have left education do not even appear in labour market statistics, the so-called NEETs (neither in education nor in employment or training).

14. Hampshire County Council (UK) runs a scheme entitled Internship Plus, an employment and training programme for care leavers who are Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET). The Internship Plus programme recognises that young care leavers are a particularly vulnerable group. The scheme's 3 partners are: Hampshire County Council, Catch 22 (a charity training provider), and the University of Winchester, each contributes its competences. The scheme offers: a paid (national minimum wage, plus expenses, plus holidays) 12-18 month contract of employment; a preparatory programme certified by Winchester University; a nationally recognised qualification; and significant additional pastoral care. The initiative is proving to be successful, to date, 29 young people have received certificates from the University of Winchester; 16 young people have experienced paid employment; and 12 youths are currently employed.¹¹

15. The longer young people are unemployed, the more difficult it becomes to gain a foothold in the job market, the greater the risk of social exclusion and poverty. Thus, long-term unemployment (that is permanent unemployment for at least 12 months) is another indicator to measure the extent of difficulties and problems facing young people. ILO data show that long-term unemployment has increased significantly in most European countries since 2008 and that young people are more affected than older people. In most countries, the long-term youth unemployment rates surpassed those of adults. In Italy young people are 3.5 times more likely to be unemployed for at least one year compared to adults. Similar substantial differences between young people and adults (ratio greater than 2.0) exist in Greece, Hungary, Slovakia and the United Kingdom.

16. In times of economic crisis, when the job offers decline and qualification requirements remain high, access to the job market becomes increasingly difficult especially for young people who lack general or vocational education.

17. Although a high level of education does not protect against unemployment, it is considered a key requirement for a successful entry to the labour market. People with lower secondary education qualifications are nearly 3 times more at risk of unemployment than people with higher education qualifications.¹² There is evidence, however, that an increasing number of highly educated young people is hit by severe unemployment owing to the recent economic crisis. Many are experiencing precarious transitions as they have difficulties in finding jobs that match their qualifications, expectations and needs thus decreasing the protective effect of tertiary education.

18. Statistics do not reveal the proportion of young people employed in insecure or precarious jobs. Conditions such as job security and a fair salary play an important role in the analysis of young people's transitions into the labour market. Non-standard work forms have increased over the past decades and today, young people entering the job market often do so on fixed-term contracts or temporary agency work. In many cases, young people with diplomas start their professional career with one or several internships, some of which are remunerated, others not at all. Many non-standard jobs pay on average less than standard jobs and as young people often start their careers with low-paid jobs, they face the highest risk of in-work poverty.

19. Young people are concerned to a much higher degree by unstable and temporary employment than the older workforces. This high offer of non-standard jobs can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, more flexible arrangements may facilitate the entry of young people into the labour market. On the other, these arrangements can lead to persistent unemployment as well as to social and financial insecurity. During economic recession, those on fixed-term contracts are the first to go. Young employees are doubly affected as, being the last in, they are usually the first to be fired.

⁸ Presentation by Dr Maša Magzan, Zagreb School of Economics and Management at the Young Citizens Conference I held on 2 and 3 June 2011, accessed from the "Youth speaks out on youth unemployment" website (www.you-speak.eu).

⁹ EU Employment and Social Situation, Social Europe, Quarterly Review, June 2012.

¹⁰ World Socialist Website "Staggering levels of youth unemployment in the Balkans", 23 August 2011.

¹¹ See footnote 6.

¹² EU Youth report, European Commission, 2009, p. 29.

20. Entrepreneurship is a means of being active in the labour market and receiving an income and can be rewarding for young people as it enables them to be creative and innovative thus realising their full potential. Unfortunately, the absence of support from educational and governmental structures and the lack of finances and other resources mean that this sector is often too difficult to enter for most young people. In the region of Krapina-Zagorje (Croatia), from 2007 to 2008 the region ran the HOMER project, financed by the EU. The programme aimed to reduce the skills mismatch by linking education and the labour market, ensuring the employability of young people and promoting entrepreneurial activity in schools. Outcomes included the establishment of a “career corner” in 2 secondary schools and a mentoring scheme with local businesses working with students. This led to 4 new programmes of study being developed in skills shortage areas (physiotherapy, plastering, waiting on tables, and air conditioning installation). An e-learning programme for entrepreneurship was set up which has resulted in 5 new virtual companies being established.¹³

v. Coping with insecurities and risks – reactions of young people

21. The experience of unemployment, job insecurity and precarious social integration can lead to de-motivation, low self-esteem, psychological distress, physical health symptoms, increased alcohol consumption, criminal behaviour, or “cooling out” (the downgrading of aspirations or resignation).

22. Different young people have different reactions and coping strategies including: frustration and passive apathy; compromising adaptation and increased investment; and active or even hostile rebellion against the formal institutions of the transition system. The influences on these coping strategies range from the socio-political culture and structures of a country to their educational resources and social background. Some young people disengage from the formal transition system and become de-motivated. Others, however, redefine concepts of learning, working and dealing with risks and uncertainties and move into a win-win situation. One reaction is to return to or remain in the education system, extending the educational career, enhancing job prospects through higher qualifications and postponing job-seeking until later.

C. Social and political participation of young people

23. In his book “Bowling alone” (Putnam, 2000) Robert Putnam identified a general decline of social capital, political interest, civic engagement and participation in Western democracies. His analysis of the American society has been widely accepted as a valid description of the problems and challenges of European democracies as well, but has also led to a critical re-evaluation of the European participation culture.

i. Distrust and low political engagement in established forms of politics

24. Traditionally, political participation is measured by voting turnout, membership in political parties, interest in politics and trust in political institutions. Many studies show a decline among young people of these more conventional forms of participation.

25. International and European studies show that the voting rates at national elections vary hugely across OECD and European countries. The OECD has noted a general trend to declining voter turnout in the last generation.¹⁴ An analysis of the elections since World War II in west European countries shows a clear downward trend in turnout for some countries (Portugal, the Netherlands, France, Austria, Finland, Italy, United Kingdom), whereas most countries (except in Scandinavia) register ups and downs.

26. Young people are less likely to vote compared to older people in nearly all the OECD countries.¹⁵ A recent study on young people in the European Union shows that two out of ten up to the age of 30 stated in 2010 that they hadn’t voted in a political election at local, national or EU level in the past 3 years.¹⁶ The European Social Survey (2010) shows that 37% of young people didn’t vote at the last national elections. Voter turnout for those aged less than 30 years is significantly lower than for all voters of which only 23% didn’t vote.

¹³ See footnote 6.

¹⁴ OECD (2011a). *Society at a Glance 2011: OECD Social Indicators*: OECD Publishing.

¹⁵ Fieldhouse, Tranmer, & Russell, 2007; OECD, 2011a, p. 96.

¹⁶ The Gallup Organisation, 2011.

27. In spite of these trends, research shows that young people still think that voting is the most effective way to participate. In second and third places they rank media attention and work in NGOs before working for a political party. Signing petitions and participating in demonstrations is effective for one out of 3 young people. The great majority of young people do not consider illegal and violent protest an effective way to participate.

28. Different factors have an effect on the willingness of young persons to vote: low political interest, insufficient information on and knowledge of politics and institutions; and a negative perception of the political system. A high number of young people in European countries say they are not interested in politics. Gender has an influence, young males declaring a greater interest in politics than young women. Available statistics lead to the conclusion that European young people are in general apparently distant from politics.

29. The European Values Study (1990-2010) shows young people in many European countries are less interested in politics now than in 1990, especially those from some east European countries (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Hungary) and from Norway. In some central European countries (Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Austria) interest is still at a very high level, whereas in some countries where interest was low 20 years ago the figures have increased (France, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Romania).

30. Another set of indicators is the level of trust young people have in different societal and political institutions. Findings from the European Social Survey (2010) suggest that young Europeans have little trust in politicians with 53% saying they don't trust them. Political parties are also judged very negatively by youth: 51% think they're not trustworthy. On the other hand, the majority of young people show a relatively high trust in many civic and democratic institutions (national parliament, European Parliament, the legal system). The most trustworthy institutions in the eyes of young people are the United Nations and the police.¹⁷

31. As far as membership in a political organisation (political party, trade union) is concerned, diverse political cultures exist in European countries. In the Scandinavian countries, the percentage of membership in a political organisation is still very high at over 40%, whereas these percentages drop to under 10% for many west and east European countries. On the whole, statistics show membership in political organisations over recent decades has declined for most European countries. Generally, the youngest age group is less likely to be member of a political organisation than the older generation.

32. Most of the traditional indicators show a general decline in conventional forms of political participation in European countries and lower political participation is observed among the younger generations. "Overall, European societies are plagued (...) by political disenchantment, increasing cynicism and political alienation."¹⁸ "In general, the youth has an idealistic understanding of politics (...): Politics is seen as a way to solve international problems, social conflicts and to create a better world. On the other side cynical attitudes were visible".¹⁹ The prime motives to engage in politics are idealism and feeling responsible, ie through real involvement in policy-making, the biggest obstacles to political engagement are lack of time and the lack of openness of structures and processes.

33. Some young people feel quite simply that today's political strategies no longer respond to their needs. From this, it can be understood that democratic institutions are important but they do not function in practice without the active participation of citizens. Local and regional authorities have the advantage of being closest to citizens and thus are better placed to enter into a genuine dialogue and partnership with the people living in their territories. In this way, their policies can be truly democratic, relevant and effective because they are based on their young citizens' needs. Thanks to this participation, young people can experience a feeling of ownership of democracy. The co-management system used in the Council of Europe's Youth Sector, where young people and government representatives sit down around the same table to take, together, decisions that are grounded in the reality of young people, is a model of participation which should be emulated in all

¹⁷ A detailed description of the findings of the European Social Survey comparing age groups and countries can be found in European Commission. (2009). *EU Youth Report*. Belgium.

¹⁸ Stolle, D, & Hooghe, M (2005). Inaccurate, Exceptional, One-Sided or Irrelevant? The Debate about the Alleged Decline of Social Capital and Civic Engagement in Western Societies. *British Journal of Political Science*, 35(1), 149–167.

¹⁹ Political Participation of Young People in Europe - Development of Indicators for Comparative Research in the European Union, EUYOUNG Study, Institute for Social Research and Analysis, 2005.

local and regional councils/parliaments. The Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life is an instrument that promotes co-management and, if used extensively across Europe, will enable young people to contribute to the construction of inclusive and prosperous societies, exercise their right to democratic citizenship and realise their full potential as active citizens of society.

ii. The changing nature of young people's political participation

34. Despite their decreasing conventional political participation, young people in Europe still engage in democratic and civic behaviour and they still believe in democratic values. They have their own views on politics, society and social problems and engage in different forms of democratic activities appropriate to their own understanding of democracy and citizenship. Young people still identify with their society and are still prepared to engage: the important issue is to get one's voice heard.

35. Many authors emphasise the changing forms of citizenship emerging among youth. Young people are not politically apathetic: recent research shows that they practice various new forms of civic citizenship and engagement. Young people practice more "engaged citizenship"²⁰ and "cause-oriented activism".²¹ These new forms are based on young people's values, identities and lifestyles which are increasingly diverse. Today, young people's civic and political engagement is issue-based and oriented towards public policy. The politics young people are practising are more personalised, individualised and informal. Young people prefer horizontal forms of participation like the Internet, issue-based participation like signing petitions or spontaneously attending demonstrations, and consumer activism like making shopping decisions based on political considerations. They are also forms of participation which are open and accessible to young people under the legal voting age, which in most European countries is 18.

36. These individual forms of participation are attractive for young people because "they do not demand long-term commitment and do not endanger the integrity of the individual by imposing ideologies or demanding loyalty to an organisation's aims and methods".²² Young people know these forms are not always effective, yet they are individual statements of their political positioning that reflect their ideals, values and interests.

37. There is a broad discussion about the role of Internet and the new communication technologies in civic engagement and political participation of young people: some see young people as "digital natives" who are the first to engage in new forms of participation by the usage of social media, some show that online and offline participation activities are linked. Others point out that web-based participation instruments are often not targeted at politically unengaged young people but are designed for those who are already politically engaged. The digital technologies can have a positive influence on political knowledge and activity if young people have the skills to use them, they can, however, also widen the gap between different social classes. The new technologies are of interest to policy-makers as they offer a new way of reaching out and involving young people, for example through online consultations and questionnaires. Online social communities, such as Facebook and Twitter, offer young people vast opportunities for personal politics and, as was observed during the recent demonstrations in different countries (Indignados, Geracao a Rasca, etc), for mobilising for political action across communities and also across borders.

38. There are as many young members of civic organisations as there are in the 30-49 year old group. Results of the recent Eurobarometer survey confirm that a quarter of young adults in the EU had been involved in an organised voluntary activity in the year prior to the survey, however, they prefer to be members of associations where they can develop their personal interests and spend time with their peers (sports, leisure activities). National contexts have a strong influence on the participation of young people in associations. People from south and east European societies are less active in associations and groups than in the Nordic countries, in particular Sweden.

39. The higher self-expression values of young people also have an effect on their participative behaviour. As higher educated young people are more likely to develop post-materialistic and self-

²⁰ Dalton, R J (2008). Citizenship Norms and the Expansion of Political Participation. *Political Studies*, 56(1), 76–98.

²¹ Norris, P (27-28/11/03). *Young People & Political Activism: From the Politics of Loyalties to the Politics of Choice?* Young people and democratic institutions: from disillusionment to participation, Strasbourg. Retrieved from <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Acrobat/COE%20Young%20People%20and%20Political%20Activism.pdf>.

²² Spanring, R (2008). Understanding (non-)participation: meanings, forms and reasons. In R Spanring, G Ogris, & W Gaiser (Eds.), *Youth and political participation in Europe: results of the comparative study EUYOPART* (pp. 55–85). Opladen: Budrich.

expression values, which some consider are the basis for more 'engaged' citizens, educational inequalities and probably also socio-economic inequalities will have an important influence on young people's forms of political participation. Young people with a low level of education will more easily adopt anti-democratic attitudes, such as authoritarian leadership styles.²³ They are doubly disadvantaged with regard to the development of democratic behaviour as they are less educated and less socially integrated.

iii. Low political influence for young people in an ageing society

40. In most European countries the older generation has full political citizenship without age limits. This is not the case for children and young people under 18 who usually do not have the right to vote which results in an underrepresentation of this group in parliamentary democracies. While most countries make efforts to raise the representation of women and ethnic minorities in democratic institutions – the Congress' rules of procedure require a participation of at least 30% of the underrepresented sex – they do not want to give children and young people or their representatives the right to vote. Young people are thus marginalised from the political process, being treated as 'political apprentices' rather than 'political agents'. Often the political system offers young people possibilities for participation but this is limited and defined by the establishment. If young people do not feel they are an active part of the political process, they will find other ways to make their voices heard. The recent demonstrations, protests or riots in many Council of Europe countries can be seen as young people's answer to a political system that does not really give them their share of power and full citizenship.

41. There is much controversy about the lowering of the voting age: some sources stating 16- and 17-year-olds lack political maturity, others claiming this age group is more committed to voting and that introducing the vote from 16 would increase voter turnout in the future. Austria passed a law lowering the voting age to 16 in 2007; in the Vienna Region, it had already been lowered to 16 in 2005. Statistics show that in the Vienna regional elections of 2005 and 2010, not only was the turnout of 16-17-year-olds higher than the 18-20 age group, but that those having first experienced voting at 16/17 years had a higher turnout second time around, ie in 2010, than those who were 18-20 years old.²⁴

42. It is interesting to note the low number of parliamentarians under 30 years of age, which perhaps epitomises countries' reluctance to fully involve young people in the political process thus enabling a generational change in politics. The percentage of members of parliament aged 30 or less is 0% in France, Malta, Cyprus, Greece and Liechtenstein, 6.7% in the Netherlands and climbs to 8.9% in Estonia.²⁵ Perhaps this is one of the reasons for a decline in conventional forms of political participation: young people have no real role to play and those in power can be considered too far removed from the reality of young people's lives.

D. Fostering integration, sharing power, offering responsibilities – towards a greater political participation of the young generation

43. The UN Charter on the Rights of the Child declares that all children and youths are born with civil, political, social and economic rights. Their entitlement to act as citizens, to participate and to be involved in democratic decision-making does not depend on their future contributions to society. They are seen as competent social actors, able to make important contributions to the family, school, neighbourhood, local community and society.

44. Although a lot is being done already, the reality of youth participation within representative democracies is not promising. As already seen, young people's voting turnout, political interest and trust in politicians are decreasing dramatically, low interest and frustration is mainly focused on conventional forms of political participation, and alternative forms of social and political engagement are mobilising more and more young people. In recent years, new forms of societal participation for children and young people have been developed at the municipal level in particular, but there are also various participation opportunities in schools, youth organisations and youth work.

²³ Roudet, B (2009). Youth participation as a factor in democratic values. *Coyote*, (14), 35–38.

²⁴ ZEGLOVTS (2011), Vote at 16: turnout of the youngest voters – evidence from Austria, paper to be presented at the ÖGPW (Österreichische Gesellschaft für Politikwissenschaft), 2 December 2011, Salzburg.

²⁵ Youth participation in the making, Youth Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth, Manfred Zentner.

45. Educational institutions, first and foremost schools, play a predominant role in the development of democratic identities and participatory activities, providing learning environments where young people learn about the premises and characteristics of politics. To establish and strengthen a culture of democratic participation in all areas of life, education for democratic citizenship has to be a central aspect of education in schools and universities. However, young people also learn about citizenship through the non-formal education they receive elsewhere, such as in youth clubs and local civic organisations. This is where young people get to know what participation in democracy means: through electing representatives, meeting with local politicians and engaged local citizens, working in community-oriented service projects or setting up a youth parliament in the local community. Non-formal education is part of the general education and vocational training opportunities on offer to young people. “Learning in and from youth work forms the basis for active citizenship, cultural expression, self-development into confident adults, for a European civil society, political participation, health and well-being, social inclusion”.²⁶ The knowledge and skills acquired through non-formal learning are obviously important in the fight against youth unemployment, and must, as such, be recognised.

E. Conclusion

46. “Youth deserve our full commitment – full access to education, adequate healthcare, employment opportunities, financial services and full participation in public life.” What Ban Ki-moon, United Nations Secretary-General, says about the desired role of youth in modern societies can be taken as a starting point for the definition of new measures and strategies of social and political integration of young people.

47. Young people want to make their voices heard and to play a real role in decision-making in their societies. The best way to achieve this is to strengthen their social integration by sharing economic, social and political power with them and giving them full citizenship and full access to jobs.

48. No young person should be left alone with the challenge to integrate into the labour market and to find a decent job. Local and regional authorities especially should regard this as a moral and social obligation and should do more to support companies to offer jobs, on-the-job training and other training courses to support young people.

49. Society and politics must offer more opportunities to young people to gain experience in social and political participation as well. It is crucial that young people’s perspectives and ideas be taken seriously, that decision-making processes be transparent and comprehensible. This presupposes sustainable participation structures, for example co-management structures instigated by local and regional authorities.

²⁶ Pathways 2.0, towards recognition of non-formal learning/education and youth work in Europe, Working paper of the partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth.