


Progressive Tradition.
European Vision.

Reviving Youth Participation for Democracy

by Victor Negrescu

The simultaneous crises we are living through today, such as the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the energy and food security crises, have also burdened the youth throughout Europe. The impact these crises had and still have on the younger generations should be understood at a deeper level, as it correlates with their specific worldview, perceptions, and approaches, which vary greatly from those of previous generations.

In this context, shaping policies that are tailored to young people's needs and expectations, as well as the decision-making process as a whole, cannot be adequately realized without youth participation, thus offering a reason for the need to identify actions through which we can better involve youth in order to strengthen our democracies.

This is especially important as we are close to the end of the European Year of Youth and now more than ever it is impor-

tant to think creatively, identify innovative solutions, and set ambitious objectives for young people in the EU. According to the European Commission Flash Eurobarometer on Youth and Democracy in the European Year of Youth, conducted between February and March 2022, 72 per cent of young individuals considered that the most important success factor of the European Year of Youth would be if their demands were listened to more closely by decision-makers and if the latter acted on them. These results illustrate the fact that young Europeans do not believe their voices are heard and feel a rift between them and decision-makers.

Therefore, the EU Youth Strategy¹ (2019–2027), prepared by the European Commission, which sets the goal of improving youth civic participation, can be used to draw up a series of ideas that can bring us closer to fulfilling the objective demanded by young people by 2027.

1 European Union. EU Youth Strategy, 2018, https://youth.europa.eu/strategy/european-youth-goals_en

Increasing Youth Participation through Education

When discussing youth civic participation, the role of education should be emphasized. According to the results of the Flash Eurobarometer on Youth and Democracy in the European Year of Youth, more than half of the respondents learned about EU opportunities for youth from school.

Through the important democratic exercise represented by the Conference on the Future of Europe, young people have been encouraged to express their views on how the European project should further evolve, so that the EU can better respond to the citizens' needs. The final report of the Conference, encompassing 49 proposals that include more than 300 measures, contained important recommendations which should serve as an insightful base for developing concrete and adapted solutions. With regard to education, the Conference conclusions stressed the need for the EU to have shared competence at least in the field of citizenship education, as well as to develop a common curriculum on civic education about democratic processes, EU values, and the history of Europe.

Civic education and education for citizenship are key factors which should be further included in European policies and harmonized at the level of the Member States. Encouraging young people to be civically and politically active is an important prerequisite for our democracy, which can only be achieved by providing them with the necessary political toolkit from a young age – and in this way, helping them to gain knowledge in schools about EU institutions and how they function, the EU decision-making process, and the concrete ways through which they can make their voices heard. Formal education is not the only way to translate youth participation into meaningful action. This can also be achieved through non-formal and informal learning, such as volunteering, which can develop social and civic skills and competences.

Through a specific EU agency referring to education for citizenship, the EU can instill from a young age values such as tolerance and respect for human dignity. In this regard, a dedicated EU agency would create synergies at European level on citizenship education and carry on a coordination role for EU resources, methods, and content.

Moreover, citizenship education platforms can be created to act as hubs that complement the learning process. This should be attained through a multi-stakeholder approach, involving all relevant stakeholders, social partners, civil society and local authorities. These endeavors would imply a holistic approach, where civic education and education for citizenship are also included in project-based learning, while teachers across Europe are given adequate and periodically updated resources for this purpose. In order to improve access to this type of training and give it a European dimension, digital education can act as a catalyst.

Young people need to know that their voice is heard and that it can make an impact

In our rapidly transforming world, what we can observe in the younger generation is a preoccupation with global issues, including climate change, racial justice, and gender equality, which mainly stem from globalization and rapid access to information given by the internet and social media platforms in particular. These concerns have often been translated into non-traditional forms of participation, such as social movements, marches, flash mobs, with a high degree of visibility, where young people felt to have contributed to change.

As many as 95 per cent of young people globally used the internet daily in 2021, according to Eurostat data²; harnessing the digital transformation and use of new technologies should be a valuable tool in reaching younger generations.

2 Eurostat. Being young in Europe today – digital world, April 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Being_young_in_Europe_today_-_digital_world#Youth_online:_a_way_of_life

The 2022 UN Annual Youth Forum conclusions³ acknowledged the fact that young people should be given “a seat at the table” as agents of change. Increasing youth participation by involving them in the process, therefore, can empower young people.

Through democratic exercises such as the Conference on the Future of Europe, young people are encouraged to express their opinions and know that their uniqueness is valued and that their voice counts.

Recent data from the European Parliament⁴ shows that in 2019 the highest increase in voter turnout was registered among young people. This is also supported by the results of the Flash Eurobarometer on Youth and Democracy in the European Year of Youth, which indicated that young people consider voting in local, national or European elections to be the most effective way to make their voice heard.

Even so, young people should know that institutions are reflective of their needs. It is therefore necessary to further assess current youth issues when preparing policies and actions that have a significant impact on young people, for instance in the fields of education, volunteering, employment, mobility, and information.

Demographics play an essential part in addressing the issues correlated with youth participation. Young people from disadvantaged communities, from rural, mountain, and isolated areas are especially vulnerable and therefore policies and strategies should be centered on inclusion so that no one is left behind. For these communities more investments are needed at European level.

Enhancing youth participation should be reflected transversally through European policies, taking into account that this is a transformative process, a form of development, through which young individuals develop lifelong competences and skills and become active citizens.

Lessons from and for the CEE youth

All this data brings us to a comparison of the available European information with the trends of beliefs in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). What we notice is that young Europeans from CEE are divided into two active groups that tend to clash. One group is generally progressive, actively campaigning for global issues, and the other feels that they do not have access to the opportunities they would have liked and tend to relate to more nationalistic, anti-globalization views.

This division generates a radicalization of youth participation in societal and political issues and a lack of dialogue that is often exploited by populist parties or leaders from the extreme left or right. Most of the young people today in the CEE were born in already consolidated democracies and do not directly know what happened in the Communist era and how difficult it was for their parents to gain freedom.

Therefore their focus is mainly issue-based. From environmental to migration issues, from gender issues to shared values, depending on the topics, young people get involved and radically defend their views. They take most of the information from social media, they base their trust on other young people or leaders with whom they can relate, and they actively defend their point of view.

What is sometimes lacking is the democratic culture of dialogue and debates, the limited interest in challenging information and trying to identify several sources and critically analyze the data. That is why developing civic education or citizenship education is key. This can be enhanced at national level to have a greater impact, but sometimes ruling parties tend to transform this education into their own propaganda. Civic education can be developed by political parties to promote plurality and diversity, but the capacities are limited. Moreover, it can be developed at local level to enhance ownership, but the effects will be reduced. Finally, civic

3 United Nations. Young People's Meaningful Involvement Vital for Advancing Sustainable Development Goals, Speakers Stress as Youth Forum Concludes, April 20, 2022, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/ecosoc7076.doc.htm>

4 European Parliament. 2019 European elections: Record turnout driven by young people, September 24, 2019, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20190923IPR61602/2019-european-elections-record-turnout-driven-by-young-people>

education might be explored at the European level to give it greater objectivity, but this process can feel like an external intervention.

The reality is that we need an integrated approach unifying all available resources, involving all relevant stakeholders and democratizing the process. In the face of the current challenges and the rising impact of populist ideas, in Central and Eastern Europe it is crucial, in the years to come, to invest in developing democratic education and participation, especially for young people. The resources that we invest today in the younger generation of the region will translate in the years to come into the actual resilience and strength of those democracies and the capacity of the European Union to maintain its democratic values in the future.

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