



Co-funded by
the European Union

MAKE YOUR VOTE!

PROJECT NO. 101081335

Call: CERV-2022-CITIZENS-CIV

RECOMMENDATIONS REPORT



EPIRUS
KENTPO NEON

MREŽA
UDRUGA
ZAGOR

FIDU - Federazione Italiana
Diritti Umani ETS
Italian Federation for Human Rights



HEKET
FOUNDATION





Co-funded by
the European Union

Version 1, February 2024
Produced by the YCE & FECE team
Contributions from the project partners

Disclaimer

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

Introduction

The policy recommendations were drafted during the EMPOWER: International Youth Debate activity of the Make Your Vote! project by 34 participants from Bulgaria, Greece, Belgium, Italy, Spain, Croatia, and Poland. The event was held from 5 to 9 February 2024 in Ioannina, Greece, and the main goals were to empower young people through a youth debate in the format of a simulation of a session of the European Parliament (EP) and to create a set of recommendations to policymakers on how to stimulate active youth participation in democratic life.

This document addresses young participant's perceptions and motivation towards active participation and their views on the future of the European Union within four thematic areas: cultural, social, digital and environmental. The recommendation addresses the needs based on factual data regarding the low youth involvement in policymaking and democratic processes, such as in the EU elections.

The document is organised in two sets of recommendations. The first part of the document presents the participant's recommendations to policymakers to stimulate more active youth participation in democratic life of Europe and their communities. The second part of the document presents young people's views and opinions on the future of the European project in above mentioned four areas. Additionally, this document presents statistical data on youth participation, together with analysis on current trends in the field of youth engagement.

Key participants

The key participants who drafted the following recommendations were the 34 young people who participated in the EMPOWER: International Youth Debate. The participants were young people from Bulgaria, Greece, Belgium, Italy, Spain, Croatia and Poland. The participants were picked to participate in this training due to their motivation to be active citizens, to learn new knowledge and skills and to enhance their participation and engagement in the public life of the EU and their local communities. Additionally, representatives from the partner organisations and the involved experts guided participants in drafting the recommendations through a developed methodology.

Data that support the recommendations

The participants in the training, divided into national groups, researched data and statistics on the involvement of young people in democratic processes in their countries and on ways to stimulate youth engagement in democratic life. The research focused on participation in national and European elections.

Each of the national teams identified the data which indicated youth democratic participation, as described below:

- In Greece, 78.6% of the youth are interested, but <50% are engaged (33.1%) in democratic processes.
- In Bulgaria, the young people who participate in democratic life as voters frequently or often are 46%.
- In Belgium, only 23% of youth participated in the 2019 EP elections.
- In Spain, the citizens who participate in national democratic processes are about 70% of the population. However, there is no exhaustive data about their participation in the EP elections.
- In Italy, among young people between 16 and 35 years of age, only about 20% participate in democratic processes such as voting, and only around 15% of Italian young people inform themselves regularly about politics.
- In Poland, the participation rate of young people aged 18-29 in national elections was 27% (2019) & 60% (2023).
- In Croatia, young people (15-30 years) make up ~ 20% of the Croatian population, and in the last EP elections in 2019: ~30% of Croatian voters voted.

On average, around 50% of the EU population voted in the 2019 EP elections (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/300427/eu-parlament-turnout-for-the-european-elections/>).

Since it is approximately estimated that the rising age group of voters are those between 18-39 years of age, it is necessary to keep the attention of the young voters and further increase the democratic participation of this potentially rising voting group of young people. A further increase in their participation in EU democratic processes will foster and ease the involvement of the next generation of young people, as well as expand the citizen's participation in EU democratic processes also in older age groups over a long period.

Additionally, during the training, the participants analysed that the low participation of young adults in the EU democratic processes does not directly reflect their interest to participate – most young people express interest in being more engaged and promoting the participation of other young adults. However, they face several major obstacles, such as extremely limited opportunities to be involved in policymaking, generally high limitations for their voices to be heard and not nearly enough of their needs being addressed. It was clarified and noted that addressing the needs

expressed by young people, for example, this Recommendation report can promote further and increase youth participation in democratic life since young adults are interested in the political processes and contribute to a better future for the European Union.

Main topics of the recommendations

The target group of this Recommendation Report is young adults aged 18-30, citizens of the European Union, including vulnerable groups of young people. Indirect but involved actors in implementing this Recommendation Report are the EU institutions and policymakers, as well as national, regional, and local institutions and policymakers of the EU countries. The Recommendations are grouped into categories. They are supported by the research and opinions of all participants from seven EU countries who were involved in this Recommendation Report design.

This Recommendation Report is designed to address two main aspects:

- How to stimulate youth participation in democratic life
- The future of the EU in terms of social, environmental, cultural and digital aspects

The policy recommendations

Education

- Politics and civil education should be taught in schools as an independent subject in every EU Member State. It should include historical content, political structure of the state, political dynamics, political parties, introduction to the European Union, its institutions and functions, as well as, ways to involve young people in active participation. Interactive educational activities promoting active participation in democratic processes should be included and available at any education level.
- Media literacy should be taught from the primary school to university levels.
- Programmes such as the Erasmus+ should be promoted further, and young people should be encouraged to participate in them to become active citizens.

Examples: simulation activities, voting, debates, visits to institutions, conversations and events with politicians, political project weeks, signals, complaints and petitions.

Youth Strategies

- Creating national policies with unifying principles of the EU youth strategy. National and regional youth strategies are too often not implemented almost at all or not implemented qualitatively. Directives in each EU Member State should be created for this purpose.
- Youth health, sports, culture, and labour market national policies should be in line with EU youth policy.
- Increased financial support for youth internships in third-sector organisations to promote youth readiness for the labour market and democratic involvement.
- Increased opportunities for young people to meet with policymakers and express their opinions on policymaking at any level.
- Increased visibility of the existing opportunities for young people, such as the ESC, Erasmus+, CERV, and other EU programmes and platforms that are sometimes not very visible and acknowledged in society.
- Creating more open spaces and opportunities for young people to be involved in political activism – national youth political parties, spaces that promote EU democratic values and human rights principles, human rights-related voluntarism fairs and vacancies, etc.

Digitalisation and social media

- Eliminate fake news by supporting projects, programmes, and legislations addressing participation.
- Create platforms attractive to young people and containing trustworthy and fact-based information.
- Address media literacy in education to promote constructive dialogue practices among young people.
- Use attractive existing social media platforms, such as YouTube, X, Twitter, Instagram, etc., to promote fact-based content, opportunities for young people to get more engaged in democratic processes, and roles and processes of European and other level institutions.
- Use new and existing platforms to support and amplify the voices of young people to reach their peers from other EU Member States.

Partnerships

- Institutions and policymakers should partner with youth organisations extensively to involve young people in democratic processes.
- Networks, resources and expertise of partnered youth organisations should be utilised to create new and attractive spaces for young people to engage with the various levels of democratic processes.
- There should be increased financial support for the youth organisations and other third-sector organisations that directly work on youth involvement in democratic processes and provide non-formal education for youth and young adults that will promote their engagement
- Promoted and funded partnerships between educational institutions and third-sector organisations.

The outcome of this activity was productive, reflecting the needs that the participants identified to stimulate youth participation. The result of this activity set the plan for the policy recommendation draft document, including the produced content within the next activity, which was drafting policy recommendations according to 4 pillars for a better future for the EU.

The Pillars and the main policy recommendations set were the following:

Social Pillar

The social pillar for a more inclusive Europe includes recommendations on ensuring the protection of human rights in the EU space and on what actions or initiatives would be the most effective to protect vulnerable people. Firstly, there should be equal opportunities and access within the labour market by including minorities, especially marginalised minorities and ensuring support for participation in the labour market. All people should have access and financial support, when necessary, to education, training and life-long learning opportunities. The programs that create employment opportunities should be highly supported. Promoting gender equality within the labour market and workspaces must be done urgently, especially in high-level positions, by providing shared parental leave, introducing standards on flexible working hours, and other actions that would support gender inequality for participation in the labour market. Regarding the labour market, it must be ensured that all employed people receive a living wage that enables them to meet their basic needs and that there is a set of clear standards for what constitutes a living wage, considering the cost of living and other expenses in each EU country and region.

Healthcare must be addressed by reforming the healthcare systems, and it must be invested in healthcare infrastructure to implement healthcare reforms. Such reform should include

considerations of vulnerable people, the use of digital aids, environmental sustainability and dignity within the health sector. Finally, homelessness and housing affordability in many regions of Europe must be addressed immediately – a higher investment in dignifying social housing programs should be implemented, and the creation of more appropriate shelters for homeless people must be secured.

Environmental Pillar

The environmental pillar for sustainability and a greener future includes recommendations on improving the safe and sustainable environment in the EU and on what particular actions and initiatives could be applied. The proposed environmental actions should also address promoting and supporting volunteering, scouting, initiatives, NGOs, innovations, and school campaigns in all environments. The urban, rural and wild environmental areas must be addressed separately but also intertwined.

Regarding urban environments, there should be improved sustainability firstly through investing in and promoting greener public transport, reducing goods consumption, energy-efficient buildings, and decreasing air, light, and soil pollution. More green spaces and corridors should be requested from municipalities to create eco-tourism spaces. An ethical approach towards zoo and circus animals must be promoted (and controlled in the case of animal welfare). Sustainable, local, and organic food production must receive financial support and regulations, while food waste must be managed and controlled more sufficiently. Finally, international and intercity fast trains with improved connectivity between all regions and countries of the EU should be introduced with competitive pricing options compared to less sustainable means of travel.

In rural inhabited environments, the offered infrastructure must respond to the needs of the inhabitants so that the citizens would not be forced to move away from rural areas and that those areas can attract more inhabitants from urban locations. Economic and social support would further ensure that rural areas remain inhabited. Organic and small-scale food production should receive financial support. Land efficiency should be maximised by providing new technologies to small-scale and organic food producers. The approach towards farm animals should be ethical and much more controlled. For example, harmful fur and leather production must be banned, and the animals should have dignified living conditions.

Within wild environments, there is a better balance between humans and nature. The ecosystem must be protected from invasive species, reforestation must be much more restricted, poaching must be better controlled, and fishing areas must not be overexploited. Furthermore, there should be more protected nature areas with limited access to existing natural parks, and, finally, all citizens must receive more achievable education activities about the conduct of the natural environment.

Cultural Pillar

The Cultural pillar for safeguarding the multicultural environment includes recommendations on what activities and initiatives can be implemented to facilitate dialogue and cultural diversity across the EU. This pillar revolves around two main dimensions: the shared EU identity and the local identities of the EU citizens. Firstly, the EU identity should be defined clearly and communicated better, as well as, this communication should reach all citizens of the EU. Cultural exchanges on a large scale should be encouraged and supported to identify commonalities and form the EU identity of citizens. The EU identity should be communicated and promoted globally for the members of our population to be more able to identify as European/ EU citizens in contexts outside Europe.

Importantly, the local identities of the EU citizens also must be protected, including local cultures and local dialects and languages. Projects and events recording and promoting local identities of people must receive financial support, as well as, modern platforms within apps and media can be supported for applying local identity preservation. Finally, the cultural expression of immigrants and other underprivileged people must be empowered and supported to decrease the number of lost identities and cultures.

Digital Pillar

The Digital pillar that aims to ensure a safe and inclusive future in the digital era recommends policies that facilitate safe digitalisation across the EU. Firstly, online safety must be addressed and regulated to a higher extent than so far. There should be education about safety in online spaces, there should be much more frequent control on individuals following the online no-harm laws, and media literacy and “fake news” tackling education should be available for the young population, but also for the elderly population. Secondly, environmental sustainability must be considered when advancing in the digital era – the production and usage of digital devices and cloud storage must be made when considering eco-friendly practices. Furthermore, only safe and environmentally sustainable energy sources should be used for our advancements within the digital world.

There should be provided opportunities for digital innovation (for example, funds and programs that support the use of innovation of digital space within structures that create employment), and created and new potentials for the use of digital platforms (promoted digital/remote employment opportunities, digital creation programs, etc.). These opportunities, including digital technology and tools, should be accessible to everyone, especially considering the underprivileged and vulnerable citizens. Public spaces with digital access should be introduced in underprivileged locations.

Overall, this policy recommendation reflects the strong desire of young people to partake in the EU policymaking process, have their voices heard at the EU level, and have their needs addressed.

Planning and implementation of the recommendations

The Recommendation report must be implemented by involving EU, national, regional, and local authorities, policymakers and stakeholders to propose legislation that is in line with young people's needs and views. It is recommended to implement a top-down approach since we are first addressing the future of the EU and the EU citizens as one Union. The future of the EU depends on our ability to act, persist, and prevail as one Union.

The timeline of implementing this Recommendation report should start immediately regarding the upcoming EU elections on 6-9 June 2024. Furthermore, the timeline for implementing these recommendations must not end after the EU elections but must continue in the long term. The proposed actions are with a long-term vision, which will reach the overall goals over time, with a view to the following EU elections and other democratic processes in the future.

Monitoring and evaluation of the recommendations

The implementation of this recommendation report should be monitored and evaluated over long periods, preferably annually. A more detailed evaluation should be made after each EU election.

The implementation should be monitored by a down-top approach, which means that civil society and local institutions should be the first actors in expressing opinions on whether this Recommendation report is being addressed, to what extent, and to report its success. The data should be gathered regionally and nationally. Furthermore, EU-level monitoring and evaluation should be made in cooperation with national institutions and to account for the data provided by those. The methods used for monitoring and evaluation can include annual data gathered by various levels of institutions and giving opportunities to the EU citizens to express their understanding of the extent of implementation and success of various aspects of this Policy Recommendation. That could be done through services provided by the EDIC offices, by trustworthy statistical data gathering platforms, such as Eurostat, Statista, etc., by providing other attractive means (online platforms, programmes, etc.) for young adults to express their satisfaction with the implementation of this Recommendation report.

The primary success indicator would be data provided by the institutions of various levels about increased young adult participation in the EU democratic actions, such as voting in EU elections, taking place in social action campaigns, participating in programmes and projects related to democratic life, involvement in civil society organisations, participating in local politics and associated activities.

Conclusion

This document with recommendations to policymakers reflects the young participants' views who were involved in the training EMPOWER: International Youth Debate. The recommendations were developed in the context of research, observations and debates conducted during the training. The document focuses on two sets of recommendations. The first part presents young people's opinions and suggestions for stimulating youth participation. The recommendations in this part focus on the need to introduce civil education and politics in schools and to educate young people on media literacy and critical thinking skills to make informed choices and have their voices heard in decisions that directly affect their lives. The recommendations also suggest that national youth policies should be aligned with the European Youth policy, and more opportunities for young people should be provided, such as meetings with policymakers and politicians to discuss matters that interest young people. The participants also discuss the need to increase the visibility of the existing opportunities for young people through the European programs (ESC, Erasmus+, CERV), which can foster their active engagement in democratic life.

The prepared document also analyses young people's opinions in four pillars on the future of the European project. Young people believe that the EU should consolidate its shared identity and, at the same time, protect the local identities and foster the inclusion of migrants and marginalised groups. In terms of social matters, the EU should provide equal opportunities and access to the labour market and expand access to quality health care. Concerning environmental protection and climate change, the EU should promote activism and advocacy and relate the promotion of actions within volunteering and scouting initiatives, NGOs, innovations, and school campaigns in cities and rural areas. Promoting eco-friendly and sustainable use of digital devices marks the digital future of Europe. The participants suggested the creation of digital platforms and tools for unprivileged people as well as training and mobility opportunities to teach digital skills and critical thinking.