



REINVENTING DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE: YOUTH DOING POLITICS IN TIMES OF INCREASING INEQUALITIES

**Youth Policies across Nine European Countries** 

**NOVEMBER 2017** 

### INTRODUCTION

It is often said that the challenges faced by young Europeans today are unprecedented, from unemployment to job precarity, multiple forms of inequality and exclusion. This is particularly noticeable for youth belonging to vulnerable and marginalized groups. There has therefore been an urgent call to put policies in place that prevent the emergence of a 'lost generation' and empower young people for social and political participation. This policy brief aims to stimulate and inform policy debates on how governments are coping with this challenge. Do existing policies open up spaces where young people in general, and vulnerable youth groups in particular, can have a voice and an influence? This question was examined as part of our analysis of public policies in nine European countries: France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

Our analysis involved a two-track approach, motivated by the knowledge that political activism is hindered by inequality. First, we identified a range of contemporary public policies that are intended to regulate political and civic participation, labour market activism, and social and cultural activism. Second, we ranked countries by evaluating these policies along two axes: their 'participatory dimension' and their 'social inclusion dimension'. The ranking was done on the basis of specific scores from -1 to +1: in respect of the 'participatory dimension', policies given a score -1 are those that give fewer opportunities to young people compared to other age groups or clearly discourage youth participation, while policies given a score +1 are those that encourage youth participation and provide young people with more opportunities than other age groups. Accordingly, in terms of their 'social inclusion dimension', policies given a score -1 are those policies that seem to exaggerate inequalities as vulnerable groups of young people face restrictive treatment; in contrast, policies given a score +1 are policies intended to reduce inequalities, as vulnerable youth groups enjoy positive special treatment. These scores were averaged for every country and eventually allowed us to show which of the nine examined countries are more likely to provide young people with opportunities for participation and decrease the existing inequalities (these are countries with positive scores on both axes) across all policy fields under discussion.

## **EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS**

Voter apathy among young people has long been described as a worrying trend. According to Eurobarometer, the percentage of Europeans aged 15-30 who voted in an election fell from 80% in 2011, to 73% in 2013, and to 63% in 2015. The level of turnout at elections is often seen as an indicator of the health of a democracy (<u>Fieldhouse et al., 2007</u>),<sup>1</sup> especially as it seen as giving legitimacy to political representatives. In this regard, improving young people's access to elections should remain a priority.

Our analysis of the **electoral policies** shows that Greece fares better than the other eight countries in respect to 'participatory dimension' (vertical axis in Figure 1). With its voting age of 17, simple rules for setting up a political party, and automated system of voter registration, Greece is ranked as the country where young people (in comparison to other age groups) have more opportunities for electoral participation than the lowest ranked Italy. The low rank of Italy is related to its policies which do not allow people under age of 25 to vote for the Senate, and people under the age of 40 to be elected into the Senate. Moreover, the rules for setting up new political parties are relatively complicated. Concurrently Germany, Switzerland, United Kingdom, Sweden, France, Poland and Spain have very similar election-related policies which do not open up any specific opportunities for young people in comparison to other age groups. The normative aspect of this question, that is whether countries should lower their voting age and provide young people with more opportunities for political participation, was not part of our analysis. Despite the fact that in Switzerland the general regulations for voting age are very similar to these other countries, there is a significant state initiative for getting the youth out to polling booths, thus Switzerland scores higher. France restricted the age of running for office in the national legislature to those over 23 years old, so therefore it gains a somewhat lower score than Switzerland or the United Kingdom.

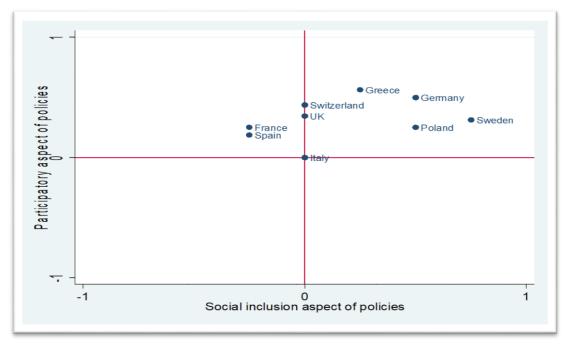


Figure 1. Participatory and social inclusion aspect of electoral policies

The evaluation of the 'social inclusion dimension' of electoral policies (horizontal axis in Figure 1) suggests that establishing accessible and inclusive voting procedures is an ongoing challenge for several of the nine countries studied. France and Spain have the lowest scores because there is a clear lack of or poor implementation of policy initiatives to support the electoral participation of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Fieldhouse, E., M. Trammer and A. Russel (2007), "Something about young people or something about elections? Electoral participation of young people in Europe: evidence from a multilevel analysis of the European Social Survey *European Journal of Political Research*, 46 (86).

vulnerable groups (e.g. people with disabilities). The picture is more positive in Sweden, where several well-established schemes exist. Several countries (Germany, Greece, Poland, and Spain) restrict the voting rights of people with mental disabilities following a general trend - observed in most EU countries - of linking the right to political participation to what is called the "legal capacity" of an individual (FRA, 2010).<sup>2</sup> This means that also young people with special mental disabilities would not be allowed to vote in these countries. Similarly, prisoners are sometimes – depending on the seriousness of the crime – disenfranchised in France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom while no such limitations exist in Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.

Given the problem of low voter turnout, particularly among young people, policy-makers worldwide have tried to work out what would get young people voting in the sorts of numbers they did in the 60s and 70s. While in some countries such as Austria and Argentina, voting at 16 has been seen as a way of inspiring young people, other countries like Estonia have offered e-voting. Evidence from Estonia, one of the leading nations in taking internet voting forward, has shown an appeal to younger people, a lack of digital divide and an appeal to casual voters (<a href="European Parliament, 2016">European Parliament, 2016</a>). What emerges from our analysis is that none of the examined countries uses e-voting in national elections, although France used to allow e-voting for citizens residing outside the country until the June 2017 elections, while Switzerland and the United Kingdom have tried internet-based voting on a few occasions.

The digital divide has often been seen as the main barrier to e-voting. Concerns that parts of the population remain excluded from information and communication technologies have been brought to the forefront. As the digital divide is a problem in the majority of the nine countries studied (except Sweden), some have introduced special programs for increasing the digital skills of vulnerable groups (e.g. France). Other countries, such as Germany, Greece and the United Kingdom use regional policies for encouraging digital education, but invest less in making the existing information easily accessible to people with disabilities and/or ethnic minorities. The Italian National Plan for Digital School (PNSD) was launched in 2015 and has not shown any clear results yet. Overall, while countries have taken initiatives for improving the digital competencies of citizens and diffusing the use of Internet-based technologies, more effort should be put into ensuring that the digital divide fades away and becomes negligible.

In addition to the legal opportunities for participation, academic debate has identified that socialeconomic conditions, such as the level of education or being unemployed, play an important role in youth political activism. Therefore, we have also analysed how the countries under study enhance economic empowerment, prevent and tackle social marginalisation, and preserve a framework of equal opportunities for all.

Our investigation of **labour market policies** suggests that the nine examined countries do not have very many initiatives which open up spaces of participation for young people or improve the situation of the young unemployed. Based on our evaluation of the 'participatory dimension' of labour policies (vertical axes on Figure 2), Switzerland and Sweden score high but Poland gets an even higher score due to its specific youth-focused labour initiatives. The United Kingdom and Spain fare worst among the nine countries as in the context of the recent economic crisis these countries restricted youth opportunities at the labour market (decreased minimum wage and unemployment benefits). The result that Italy, Greece and France and even Germany have a low score suggests that majority of the examined countries the labour market policies do not provide young people with more opportunities than other age groups even though youth unemployment is very high in some of these countries.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> FRA - European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2010), *The Right to Political Participation of Persons with Mental Health Problems and Persons with Intellectual Disabilities*, Vienna: FRA - European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> European Parliament (2016), *Potential and Challenges of E-Voting in the European Union*, Study for the AFCO Committee, Brussels: Directorate General for Internal Policies Policy Department C: Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs.

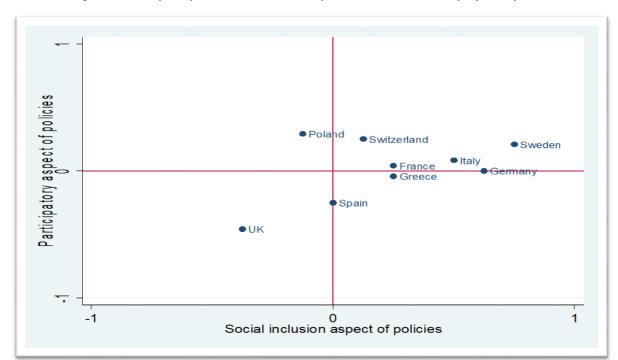


Figure 2. Participatory and social inclusion aspect of labour and unemployment policies

Italy also has introduced labour market reforms (Jobs Act), which has made the labour market more flexible and increased the precarious status of young workers. Yet, Italy fares better than France and Greece, as these two countries have not promoted youth employment to a similar extent. Though Greece performs at a relatively low level, the Ministry of Rural Development and Food adopted a somewhat innovative measure against youth unemployment in cities – it aims to attract young people to rural areas and promote their involvement in agriculture. Crucially, the problems of temporary employment for young people are common in the southern and northern welfare states. Swedish labour policies, for instance, particularly the law of employment protection (LAS), has a principle which states that the last person to be employed is the first person 'to go' in times of work shortages.

In terms of the 'social inclusion dimension' of labour market policies and the extent to which these policies target vulnerable groups (horizontal axes on Figure 2), in the lowest position we find the United Kingdom. The low 'score' is explained by the situation where the policies for claiming out of work benefits for people with disabilities are becoming increasingly stringent and restrictive. Furthermore, there are no visible state initiatives for engaging newly arrived migrants to the labour market. The picture is more positive in Germany where a recently adopted law provides more assistance and help for people with disabilities than the previous legislations in December 2016 (*Bundesteilhabegesetz*). However, the policies for including migrants in otherwise well-working vocational training programs have not been very effective (Enggruber, Rützel, and Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2014).<sup>4</sup> A similar situation can be found in Sweden, where despite special programs for increasing the employment of migrants and people with disabilities, as well as those just released from prison, the difference between the unemployment rate among young migrants (16%) and the general population (7%) has not decreased.<sup>5</sup>

Besides efforts to encourage labour market activism and inclusiveness of the vulnerable groups of youth, governments need to build up their social safety nets in order to support young people systematically in their transition into the labour market. In many cases, the targeting and effectiveness of specialized **social inclusion policies and services** has to be strengthened, especially in order to be able to offer tailor-made support to particularly disadvantaged young people, including people with a migrant background, asylum seekers and refugees. While in Germany, the services of youth welfare

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Enggruber, R. and Rützel, J. (2014), *Berufsausbildung junger Menschen mit Migrationshintergrund*, Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Refer to: http://www.scb.se/contentassets/5a6d6bf5609f42b3ba5d4f02bc255dc2/am0401\_2016a01\_sm\_am12sm1701.pdf

offices are fully available for migrants and asylum seekers, in Greece, Italy and the United Kingdom the services are accessible only to those legally residing in the country.

Also, the analysis of **family policies** calls for the need to reach young people at risk – especially early head start and teen parents and their children. None of the nine countries studied have any special treatment for young people in their family policies – every family with children, including teen parents, are entitled to parental leave as regulated in the particular country and parental benefits according to the general rules. One exception is Spain, where parents under 21 are not required to have made a minimum of social security contributions for receiving benefits.

Moreover, although with some notable exceptions, such as France, **housing policies** targeting young people and particularly vulnerable groups of youth have been limited. Greece, Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom generally fare worst in our nine-country comparison. There are only some *ad hoc* initiatives in Greece, though there are some provisions for vulnerable groups (asylum seekers, victims of domestic violence, single parent families, the homeless and women and children in danger). Young people under the age of 25 do not have any special housing benefits in Germany and Switzerland; the United Kingdom has removed housing benefit entitlement from young people aged 18 to 21 just recently; and in Spain the State Plan of Housing 2018-2021 that is aimed at young people under aged 35 has not yet been adopted. As inter-generational inequalities between 'housing poor' young people and 'housing rich' elders is expected to increase (McKee, 2012),<sup>6</sup> a fundamental re-examination of how housing policies work for young people is required if young people's housing needs are to be met more adequately in the future In some countries (e.g., Spain), problems with housing have led to widespread protests of young people, while segregated urban neighbourhoods are known of low levels of electoral participation.

In terms of **health policies**, our evidence shows that Germany, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland fare much better in our nine-country comparison, as these countries provide children up to 18 years of age inclusive public healthcare services and there are also some special opportunities for young adults. Vulnerable groups are addressed less frequently, and there are also clear differences between the more inclusive Germany and Sweden, and the less inclusive France, Spain and Switzerland. In particular, the evidence suggests that access to healthcare for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers remains a key challenge to be tackled amid repeated calls on governments for the "need to do better" policies. National responses vary in this respect. In Switzerland the rules are restrictive and since 2006, following the tightening of the Asylum Law (LAsi), persons who have been rejected from asylum can only receive very limited emergency aid. In contrast, Sweden – a country with the highest proportion of asylum seekers per thousand inhabitants (at 8.4, compared with 1.2 for the EU as a whole) - has adopted more inclusionary measures for asylum seekers and illegal migrants who are entitled to emergency aid, while all asylum seekers under 18-years-old have the same rights for healthcare as the residents of the country.

Despite the differences experienced in the nine countries in terms of offering opportunities for labour market and social inclusion participation and activism, all countries surveyed have seen a general trend towards inclusionary **cultural policies**. The majority of the countries have initiatives which provide special fares and discounts for young people. Most notably in France, there is also increased interest in cultural education after the terrorist attacks in 2015 and 2016, considering it to be a way of creating a bond of solidarity between young people. Thus, in terms of cultural activism, young people are encouraged to participate and there are also, although to lower extent, many initiatives for reducing inequalities of such participation in all examined countries.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> McKee, K. (2012) 'Young people, homeownership and future welfare', Housing Studies, 27 (6).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> See e.g. European Commission (2015), *Health Assessment of Refugees and Migrants in the EU/EEA*, <a href="http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/health\_food-safety/docs/personal\_health\_handbook\_english.pdf">http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/health\_food-safety/docs/personal\_health\_handbook\_english.pdf</a>

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

# Better empowering young people for political participation

Our research suggests that the policy-makers will need to put more effort into enabling all groups of young people, particularly those in vulnerable situations and with fewer opportunities, to participate in electoral processes. From the perspective of the inclusion of vulnerable groups, electoral rules in several of our examined countries (France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom) which do not allow voting for those with mental disabilities and prisoners rather exaggerate than reduce the existing inequalities of political participation. In the EU as a whole, a number of countries (Austria, Finland, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden) have opted to give persons with mental disabilities the right to vote and to be elected like all other citizens in the spirit of the international and European standards favouring the full participation of persons with intellectual disabilities and persons with mental health problems in the electoral process. Comparing their experience can be useful in order to drive insights on how to promote the rights and full participation of people with disabilities in political life more broadly and the type of support systems required. The evidence on (opportunities for) electoral participation also speaks to the need for developing accessible online youth-friendly tools, narrowing the digital divide, and strengthening the interlinkages between formal and non-formal settings for young participation, such as classical electoral participation and e-voting. Although this is no silver bullet, the experience of Estonia and Switzerland,8 proves that e-voting has the potential to increase the attractiveness of electoral participation for young people and compensate for older people's disproportionate influence on the on-paper ballot.

### More focus on disadvantaged young people

Our cross-country findings on evaluating the inclusionary aspect of policies for labour market and social activism and participation suggest that there is still a need for further development of outreach measures to address vulnerable groups and particularly, young migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Ensuring access to healthcare services and tailor-made social welfare services, including benefiting from family and housing support services, should be central for receiving countries. Supporting effective integration of young migrants from third countries into the labour market is a challenge – as we have seen - not only for Germany and Sweden or Greece and Italy where the highest number of migrants arrive. In the EU as a whole, non-EU migrants have a lower than average level of skills and qualifications. Moreover, two-thirds of highly-educated third-country migrants work in low or medium skilled occupations or simply fail to find a job. Realising fully the potential of vulnerable jobseekers within labour markets can only be made a success if government develop inclusion models and invest in upskilling especially in the context of the refugee crisis and rapid technological change. The new Skills Agenda for Europe<sup>9</sup> is of vital importance.

### Youth concerns are not yet in the DNA of governments

Although the <u>EU Youth Strategy</u><sup>10</sup> calls on governments to embark on mainstreaming a youth focus in a number of policy areas and measures, our analysis shows that a clear youth perspective across and within policy areas is still lacking, most notably in family and housing policies. Young people have been among the hardest hit by the recent economic crisis and this has had mixed results. On the one hand, it has contributed to placing policy initiatives to ease youth unemployment high up the agenda. Yet, while the youth agenda acquired more policy attention, it also became rather focused on the topics of employability as issues of pressing importance. This seems to have overshadowed the need for providing robust social protection and social assistance to help young people stand on their own

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> For Switzerland, see A. H. Trechsel and U. Gasser (2003), "Casting votes on the internet: Switzerland and the future of elections", *Harvard International Review*, 34(4).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> See also, European Commission Recommendation *A New Skills Agenda for Europe: Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness,* Brussels, 10.6.2016 COM(2016) 381 final

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> See <a href="https://ec.europa.eu/youth/policy/youth-strategy\_en">https://ec.europa.eu/youth/policy/youth-strategy\_en</a>

two feet as they transit into difficult labour markets<sup>11</sup>. It's time for governments to refocus youth agendas, break silos, and adopt holistic and transversal policy approaches to youth issues, ensuring that young people are not left to grapple on their own. This is of particular importance to countries of both the European South and North, as our findings show that the difficulties for young people to find sustainable employment are common.

## Youth intelligence and 'benchlearning' for more informed policy-making

Effective mainstreaming requires that governments are able to identify, analyse, and access sound evidence on what works and what does not work for young people and society, that evidence is used meaningfully in the design of policies and programmes that capture the needs, skills and aspirations of young people, and that young people are active agents in evidence creation. Crucially, youth intelligence entails more than just collecting domestic data that can inform the design of youth mainstreaming initiatives and help evaluate the impact youth mainstreaming; it also requires putting your data in a comparative cross-country context. 'Benchlearning' (combining benchmarking and mutual learning among countries) has not yet gained much attention in youth policy (with the exception of issues of education and training <sup>12</sup> and Youth Guarantee implementation by PES)<sup>13</sup>. Yet, it can provide policy-makers and practitioners with useful data on opportunities and solution approaches to improve policy interventions both, within and across national borders. By enhancing policy performance in this way, young peoples' chances for a future in which they can succeed and lead meaningful lives will also improve.

Benchlearning can be useful in order to enable countries to learn from each other based on evidence, understand the meaning of a country's performance gap, and to suggest a possible way of overcoming this gap. For instance, drawing on our sample of nine countries – on issues concerning boosting youth electoral participation - Germany, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Sweden, France, and Poland can try to learn from Greece. The decision of Greek lawmakers to lower the voting age to 17 has been seen - particularly by youth organizations<sup>14</sup> - as a positive development and a step forward for young people's rights to participate in democracy.

Benchlearning can help other countries to understand the context-specific enablers of this reform, and support the development of relevant objectives and related actions for getting there. It can also shed light on why countries, such as Italy, with similar socio-economic context to the situation of young people in Greece (in both countries growing numbers of young people are living on the edge as a result of the recent economic downturn) shows such different policy performances (Italy is a low performer in the area of youth electoral participation vis-à-vis best scoring Greece).

Still drawing on our nine countries surveyed, Greece, Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom can learn from France, which has been able to implement housing policies which are particularly inclusionary *vis-à-vis* the needs of vulnerable groups of youth; France, Spain and Switzerland can build insights from what works best in the more inclusive health policy systems of Germany and Sweden; Greece, Italy and the United Kingdom can learn by looking at Germany, which performs better in the provision of welfare services for young people with a migrant background, and Spain and the United Kingdom can try and learn from the strengths of best performers in youth labour market participation, namely Switzerland and Sweden and - most notably - Poland. Future benchlearning exercises on youth policy issues could offer promising evidence to increase the relevance of the cross-country implications and improve the quality of policy-making, informing national and EU policy-makers alike.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Similar concerns have been raised by national and EU policy stakeholders as part of the interim evaluation of the EU Youth Strategy, see European Commission (2016), Evaluation of the EU Youth Strategy and the Council Recommendation on the Mobility of Young Volunteers across the EU, Final Report.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Refer to European Commission - Fact Sheet, *Investing in Europe's Youth: Questions and Answers*, Brussels, 7 December 2016, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\_MEMO-16-4166\_en.htm

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> European Public Employment Services - PES, Shaping the Future of Europe through Benchlearning.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> European Youth Forum, www.youthforum.org/latest-news/greece-lowers-voting-age-to-17/

### RESEARCH PARAMETERS

EURYKA is a cross-national research project which aims to provide systematic and practice-related knowledge about how inequalities mediate youth political participation in nine European countries: France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. EURYKA has three objectives:

- ▶ To provide systematic evidence on how inequalities are experienced and mediated by young people, exploring the coping mechanisms which are embedded in how they do politics. These coping mechanisms are manifested in multiple forms, i.e. as either political (dis)engagement and contestation online and offline or as (trans-) national democratic innovation and experimentation.
- ▶ To provide evidence on the conditions and causes underpinning youth political participation. This involves an examination of their values, expectations, and behaviours regarding democracy, power, politics, policymaking, social and political participation (online and offline).
- ▶ To make various, novel suggestions to strengthen democratic life in Europe, with particular emphasis on those that are more inclusive for young people and especially those with fewer opportunities.

The project's methodology has three main components:

- A multidimensional theoretical framework that combines macro-level (institutional), meso-level (organizational), and micro-level (individual) factors for explaining youth experience of inequalities and the differential aspects of how young people do politics in Europe.
- A cross-national comparative design that includes nine European countries with different degrees of exposure to inequalities and different policy regimes.
- An integrated methodological approach based on multiple methods of analysis, such as:

*Policy analysis*: Tracking public policies and practices which promote youth participation and inclusion in the nine countries as well as at the EU level.

Political claims analysis: Studying how young people and their particular ways of doing politics are dealt with in the media, as well as the presence of organized youth in the public domain.

Organizational analysis: Investigating youth political participation by examining the networks and (youth-led) organizations that are active in the fields of youth inclusion, participation, national and transnational democratic innovation and experimentation.

Panel survey analysis: Conducting a panel survey in all the nine countries to collect information on young people's values, expectations, and behaviours regarding democracy, power, politics, policy-making.

Experimental analysis: Conducting survey experiments to capture young people's experience of inequalities and their support for social and political change to strengthen democratic life in Europe.

*Biographical analysis*: Conducting biographical interviews with young people to collect information on the individual trajectories of young people since their childhood and how inequalities impact young people's ways of doing politics.

Social media analysis: Investigating youth political participation online and the impact of inequalities on this by examining the use young people make of social media and how digital participation and representation may (or may not) provide the seeds for reinvigorating democracy in Europe.

## **PROJECT IDENTITY**

**PROJECT NAME** 

Reinventing Democracy in Europe: Youth Doing Politics in Times of Increasing Inequalities (EURYKA)

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**FUNDING SCHEME** 

Horizon 2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2014-2020), Societal Challenge 6 – Europe in a changing world: inclusive, innovative and reflective societies", call REV-INEQUAL-05-2016, topic: "Inequalities in the EU and their consequences for democracy, social cohesion and inclusion"

**DURATION** 

February 2017 - January 2020 (36 months).

**BUDGET** 

EU contribution: 2,595,720.00 €.

**WEBSITE** 

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**FURTHER READING** 

EURYKA Integrated Report on Policy Analysis (Deliverable 1.1) prepared by the University of Uppsala project team (Katrin Uba, Elias Collin). Available at the project website: <a href="https://www.unige.ch/sciences-societe/euryka">www.unige.ch/sciences-societe/euryka</a>

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