



EUROPEAN POLICYBRIEF



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

Organizational Opportunities for Youth Involvement

FEBRUARY 2020

INTRODUCTION

The following policy brief is based on the Euryka project's WP3. The aim of the WP3 has been to systematically map this 'supply side' in the nine countries under analysis, and thus to gain a better understanding of the possibilities young people have to get involved politically at the grassroots level. Findings reveal that in each country, a quite extensive field of informal groups and civic organizations are engaged in youth-related issues. Differences are considerable within these fields, when considering funding, organizational structures, activities, communication tools and mobilization strategies. Our interviews present the framework of opportunity at the local level, where young people live, and where they are socialized into political life. The findings show that young people are highly involved in political participation at the local level, and that the cities studied offer considerable opportunities for participation. Most of the cities studied have some formal instance of participation for young people (councils, fora, youth parliaments, etc.) and all the cities have organizations that provide opportunities for young people to participate (like youth wings of political parties), as well as organizations set up and led by young people. In spite of this, and the fact that cities are often actively engaged into promoting youth participation, youth participation in all the cities is limited by significant inequalities: there are some groups of young people who are virtually absent from these circles and who are not being properly reached by these initiatives.

The structure and contours of youth-related organizational fields: main findings of website coding

Organizational fields diverge considerably between the nine countries under analysis. In the first instance, this is true when observing the historical trajectories, given that the field mirrors diverse political transformations. After each of these transformations, new youth organizations have been founded. Related to these observations, the relative age of youth organizations in Northern Europe contrasts with Poland and the Southern European countries.

The organizational fields also mirror the different institutional contexts. In fact, the countries' political structures clearly have an impact on how youth organisations are operating: in federalist countries, like Germany and Switzerland, youth organizations also establish multi-layered structures, whereas in other countries such structures are either more centralized (e.g. Sweden) or less developed (e.g. Poland). In some countries laws impose specific rules for associations, like in Germany and Switzerland, while in others a central "charity register" exists (the UK) that reflects the role appointed to youth organizations. These factors (among others) appear in our data to impact political orientations, organisational structures, how activities are organized and other characteristics of youth organizations across Europe.

However, especially in light of these considerable institutional and contextual differences, other features of the organizational fields are surprisingly similar. This applies to their focus of activities, their beneficiaries and activities, and the ways they try to reach their aims. Recreational activities are central, followed by education. Especially in France, Germany, Greece, and Italy, youth organisations also focusing on promoting democracy. This, along with the promotion of values (e.g. friendship, citizenship, cooperation) and self-empowerment, are also widespread among otherwise unpolitical organisations, like the Scouts.

The youth organizations included in our data offer different forms of engagement. First of all, the high number of youth-led organizations is noteworthy. Almost 26% of all coded websites describe the organization as being youth-led, while this number is lowest in Poland and highest in Greece (which is related to the high number of student groups in Greece). Moreover, in more than 30% of the cases across countries, the youth are actively involved in organizing activities. Just short of 70% of the organizations report that young people are active participants, including Scouts, athletes, and musicians. A little less than 60% of the organizations say they provide services for passive beneficiaries (e.g. soup kitchens, educational programmes, or providing information) or engage in activities for young people (e.g. lobbying for youth rights).

While organizations in all countries seem to target and mobilize young people in quite similar ways, this is not true when taking a closer look at youth beneficiaries. Organizations report making a difference between the young beneficiaries actively engaged in organizational work, and those passively receiving goods and services. For example, both young people in poverty and disabled young people are targeted more frequently as passive beneficiaries across countries. And we find also (a small number of) organizations across countries with very specific target groups, such as victims of abuse or violence, substance ab(mis)users, but also employment related groups. In sum, youth organisations tend to offer active participation to the general youth (sometimes including specific groups explicitly), whereas specific groups are more likely to be targeted as passive beneficiaries by specialized organisations.

This service orientation might be the reason why so many organizations (i.e. more than 80% of the websites analysed) do not mention any political orientation or mission; 9.4% even explicitly say they are non-partisan. This does not mean, however, that they are fully unpolitical. On the contrary, the majority of youth-related organizations across all countries is political in terms of actions. While they do not connect with specific political ideologies, they do portray themselves as issue-driven.

The lived experiences and political actions of young people across the nine cities: main findings of the qualitative study

Interviews suggest that the authorities understand 'youth' as a period of transition and, in that sense, consider that young people have specific needs and grievances such as asserting independence, forming an identity, and transitioning from education into the labour market. Therefore, interviewees identify the lack of affordable housing, difficulties in finding a job (or a traineeship), and lack of spaces for leisure as the main problems affecting youth and delaying their process of asserting independence. Interviewees from Stockholm and Bologna also add isolation, addiction and poor mental health as significant problems. Still, all case studies suggest that stakeholders and organisational actors understand youth as a highly differentiated segment of the population and, thus, consider that the grievances and problems are also very diverse. Interviewees from Cologne, Stockholm, Paris and Geneva stress discrimination based on ethnic origin as an important problem affecting young people and limiting their possibilities for participation. Furthermore, stakeholders in Cologne, Stockholm and Paris express concerns about the spatial segregation in their cities and the stigmatisation of young people from some working-class neighbourhoods.

The general perception among city stakeholders is that young people are not always interested in institutionalised political action, but they are at least interested in issues such as environmentalism and the protection of gender and sexual diversity. There is no unanimous diagnosis when it comes to youth participation: some interviewees argue that the cities offer enough chances and that sufficient numbers of young people are active, while others lament the lack of participation of young people and the absence of diversity in public debates.

In most cases, though, it is clear that participation is different between milieus. One of the main challenges identified by interviewees is to reach those segments that are under-represented in public life: working-class youth, migrants, and young people with disabilities. The role played by inequalities (social, ethnic, gender, academic and even spatial) is a point of dispute. While the majority of interviewees admits that inequalities influence political participation, and recognise that young students from middle-class backgrounds are over-represented in political circles, some of the stakeholders argue this has to do with interest, and that some young people are busy with everyday life and thus have no interest in institutionalised politics. Others stress that inequalities in socio-economic status and in the access to education can explain the low levels of participation of some segments of the population. Furthermore, some of the young interviewees and organisational representatives argue that young people become disappointed because they don't feel taken seriously by politicians and decision-makers. In these cases, youth itself is perceived as a form of inequality.

Most of the interviewees mention the use of social media and digital mechanisms of participation as innovative ideas to increase youth participation; this includes using online chats, Facebook groups, blogs, YouTube channels and Instagram series. Social media is used as a mechanism to reduce logistical hurdles, but also as a way to explore creativity and allow for more horizontal communication. Including information and activities in foreign languages, like Dari and Arabic, has been a mechanism designed to integrate refugees and new migrants into social life. Decentralising activities have also been a strategy to tackle the lack of participation in some districts; some stakeholders in the public sector have made reference to the implementation of local deliberative projects at the districts where young people live, and some of the organisations also offer their services directly at the localities. Lastly, initiatives like mock elections have tried to get young people interested in electoral politics.

- **Addressing social problems first:** There cannot be full political integration of young people without increasing their social access on equal bases, so it is first of all necessary to tackle the main social problems that young people encounter, such as access to affordable housing, access to education and the labour market.
- **Engaging young people with urban planning:** Since several interviewees argued that young people are not regarded as equal interlocutors by policy makers, and in view of the spatial segregation and lack of spaces of socialization, local governments need to consider the voices of young people in urban planning. Diverse youth groups should be consulted at the local level. Initiatives should consider needs such as affordable housing, non-commercial spaces of encounter, and good public transport. It is important to create attractive places specifically for young people, both during the day and at night, so that they can meet there whenever they wish, nurturing a collective sense of belongingness, as well as engaging in common expressive activities.
- **Shaping policies on the diversity of youth:** We should no longer think in terms of 'youth policy', as if we were dealing with a homogenous public. Young people are a very heterogeneous group, socially, culturally and even territorially. It is essential to set up a large range of 'youth policies', which is a way of saying that youth diversity must be taken into account. At the local level, it is important that districts develop differentiated approaches to address their young people and promote bottom-up approaches based directly on the expectations and practices of young people. City councils should generate forms of consultation and participation for young people. These need to be institutionalized, sustainable and to consider that young people may prefer informality. In turn, this means multiplying the more informal and *ad hoc* forms of participation.
- **Raising visibility for instances of participation:** There are numerous schemes and instances of participation for young people in the cities studied, however, they are not well-known by young people. Those who do find these instances are usually middle-class, educated young people who are already mobilized. Thus, young women, young people with migrant, working-class and non-academic backgrounds are often absent from these instances. It is crucial to increase the visibility of these schemes; for this, cities can promote the creation of grassroots organizations at the local level in order to reach young people in all districts. Moreover, the spaces and the mechanisms of socialization need to expand: organisations and district authorities promoting youth participation should reach out to school pupils, but also to unemployed youngsters, to young workers, to young migrant groups, neighbourhood associations, etc.
- **Using the language and the channels of the young:** Since young people communicate through social networks and favour creative and informal forms of communication, it is crucial that public authorities master some of their 'codes' and use them to raise their collective awareness and political participation. It is important to create accessible spaces of exchange between young people and policy-makers where communication is horizontal and less formal.
- **Creating channels to communicate with marginalized youth:** Policy-makers and organisations working to promote youth participation need to reach out to the more marginalized youth, such as those who are neither in education nor in employment (the so-called NEET phenomenon), those who belong to poorly integrated communities or who live in marginalized neighbourhoods. Contact should not be limited to a social-work approach, but should concentrate on giving these young people an opportunity to voice their concerns and, in the long term, offer the chance for bottom-up initiatives to rise. This is a paramount challenge in which neighbourhood associations and district authorities can play a crucial role.

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)

COORDINATOR Prof. Marco Giugni, University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland, marco.giugni@unige.ch

CONSORTIUM

- European Alternatives, London, United Kingdom
- Sciences Po, Paris, France
- Scuola Normale Superiore, Florence, Italy
- Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain
- University of Crete, Rethymnon, Greece
- University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland
- University of Sheffield, Sheffield, United Kingdom
- University of Siegen, Siegen, Germany
- University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland
- Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

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 www.unige.ch/sciences-societe/euryka/home

FOR MORE INFORMATION Marco Giugni (University of Geneva), marco.giugni@unige.ch

Christian Lahusen (University of Siegen), lahusen@soziologie.uni-siegen.de

FURTHER READING EURYKA Integrated Report on Organizational Analysis (Deliverable 3.3) prepared by the University of Siegen project team (led by Christian Lahusen)

The full report can be found on the project website: <https://unige.ch/sciences-societe/euryka/outputs/deliverables/>

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