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From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations
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Subject:	Conclusions of the Council on safeguarding and creating civic spaces for young people that facilitate meaningful youth participation

Delegations will find in the annex the conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on safeguarding and creating civic spaces for young people that facilitate meaningful youth participation, as approved by the Council (Education, Youth, Culture and Sport) at its meeting on 29-30 November 2021.

Conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on safeguarding and creating civic spaces for young people that facilitate meaningful youth participation

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE GOVERNMENTS OF THE MEMBER STATES MEETING WITHIN THE COUNCIL

RECOGNISING THAT

1. The European Union and its Member States agreed that cooperation at EU level in the field of youth ‘supports social and civic engagement and aims to ensure that all young people have the necessary resources to take part in society’¹
2. Young people are one of our society’s strengths, as well as being individual's rights-holders. As such, they have the right to participate meaningfully in development, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and following-up of policies that affect them and society at large.²
3. ‘A healthy democracy relies on citizen engagement and an active civil society, not only at election time, but all the time. Engaged, informed and empowered young citizens and organisations advocating for their interests are the best guarantee for the resilience of our democracies’³, and for the common good.

¹ Resolution of the Council of the European Union and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on a framework for European cooperation in the youth field: The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027 (2018/C 456/01, 18.12.2018, p. 2).

² Resolution of the Council of the European Union and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on a framework for European cooperation in the youth field: The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027 (2018/C 456/01, 18.12.2018, p. 3).

³ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the European Democracy Action Plan (COM (2020) 790, 3.12.2020, p. 3).

4. The European Union is founded on values such as democracy, pluralism, equality and the rule of law. Respect for human rights, freedom, non-discrimination, gender equality, tolerance, and the protection of minorities are inalienable cornerstones of the European idea⁴.
5. ‘The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and its socioeconomic consequences have a growing negative impact on human rights, democracy and the rule of law, including on civic space’.⁵
6. Further development of young people’s participation in democratic processes in line with the Council Resolution on encouraging political participation of young people in democratic life in Europe⁶, the Conclusions of the Council on fostering democratic awareness and democratic engagement among young people in Europe⁷ and the Conclusions on strengthening the multilevel governance when promoting the participation of young people in decision-making processes⁸ will contribute to the strengthening of civic spaces for young people and encourage the engagement of young people within them.

⁴ This paragraph is based on Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union.

⁵ Council conclusions on a human-rights-based post-COVID-19 recovery (6324/21, 22.2.2021).

⁶ Council Resolution on encouraging political participation of young people in democratic life in Europe (OJ C 417 of 15.12.2015, p.10).

⁷ Conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on fostering democratic awareness and democratic engagement among young people in Europe (OJ C 415 of 1.12.2020, p.16).

⁸ Conclusions on strengthening the multilevel governance when promoting the participation of young people in decision-making processes (8766/21, 17.05.2021).

CONSIDER THAT

7. Civic spaces for young people are spaces that allow for their meaningful participation in society and are a crucial part of any democratic society⁹. They are (online and offline) political, public and social environments that meet a set of legal, policy, institutional and practical conditions for allowing young people to exercise their civic freedoms in terms of accessing information, expressing their views, and forming associations or organisations for participating in public life, with a view to influencing and shaping societies.
8. Since civic spaces for young people are dynamic and constantly changing, all democratic and independent organisations active in the field of youth and non-formal groups of young people are proving to be key actors in promoting youth participation and should therefore be supported and safeguarded.
9. Young people need free, safe, open, accessible inclusive and representative civic spaces that allow them to form associations, to engage in areas related to their needs and interests, regardless of the topic, to speak out on public issues and to participate in public decision-making.
10. The active involvement of diverse groups of young people, including vulnerable or seldom heard young people such as young migrants, in range of civic spaces helps them develop the competencies needed for civic engagement. At the same time, it promotes their personal, professional and social development, contributes to European Union values¹⁰, social cohesion, intergenerational collaboration - and ensure that democracy and citizenship reflects the variety of perspectives and the plurality found in society.

⁹ The notion of 'civic spaces for young people' used in these conclusions is based on the OECD definition of civic spaces for non-governmental actors.

¹⁰ Official Journal of the European Union, Consolidated versions of the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, (2016/C 202/01).

11. The involvement of young people in civic spaces has been an ‘important catalyst for various social innovations’¹¹, which shows that these spaces contribute to more democratic and better-informed decision-making processes, thus strengthening the quality of democracy. On the other hand, young people are particularly vulnerable to discrimination and to restriction on civic spaces¹².
12. The shrinking civic space for young people and the reported violations of fundamental and democratic rights are global phenomena that might pose a threat to democracies across Europe, regardless of economic development or geographical location. Studies show that opportunities for youth civil society organisations to participate in policy processes have also been reported as limited¹³.
13. Organisations active in the field of youth and non-formal groups of young people should be involved in developing key projects on all the topics covered by the 11 European Youth Goals among others. Moreover, these organisations are essential for providing services and support to young people, often complementary to the services provided by the public authorities.
14. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, civic spaces for young people in many countries are shrinking even further, with their online equivalents often being used as the only viable alternative. Some of the lessons learned are positive, for example, where new functionalities have been found in digital spaces, however, the migration to online civic spaces has exposed issues related to the access (infrastructure), ability (competences) and online safety of young people.

¹¹ Safeguarding Civic Space for Young People in Europe, European Youth Forum (p. 8)

¹² Youth Partnership: Tomaž Deželan and Laden Yurttagüler, Pool of European Youth Researchers, Shrinking democratic space for youth, 2021.

¹³ Youth Partnership: Tomaž Deželan and Laden Yurttagüler, Pool of European Youth Researchers, Shrinking democratic space for youth, 2021.

EMPHASISE THAT

15. A one size-fits-all approach is not appropriate for building an enabling environment to support organisations active in the youth field and with non-formal groups of young people. Universal design, different cultural and geographical backgrounds, structural inequalities, gender inequality and other intervening factors all need to be borne in mind, where these are preventing young people and youth civil society organisations from operating freely and participating in a meaningful way.
16. Over-exposure to screens and to online activities have a negative impact on young people's mental, physical and social health¹⁴. Nonetheless, online civic spaces have provided many young people with an important refuge where they can take advantage of their civic rights, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, while health-related matters are one aspect to be borne in mind, online safety and the digital divide (including infrastructure and cognitive barriers) also needs to be addressed. Finding the right balance between online and offline engagement should thus be a priority for all stakeholders when it comes to supporting civic spaces for young people.

INVITE THE MEMBER STATES, IN LINE WITH THE SUBSIDIARITY PRINCIPLE AND AT THE APPROPRIATE LEVELS, TO

17. Safeguard and expand civic spaces for all young people, especially those most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and put in place additional measures to ensure that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and with fewer opportunities, in particular those from remote and rural areas and those with disabilities, can access and participate in these spaces. Visibility and accessibility of these spaces for young people should also be fostered.

¹⁴ UNICEF statement, Growing concern for well-being of children and young people amid soaring screen time, 8 February 2021.

18. Address concerns linked to processes and instruments that cause a shortage of free and accessible public spaces, or impose substantial barriers vis-à-vis young people seeking to access and participate in civic spaces, namely commercial tools which use algorithms that deliver personalised marketing, gentrification, rural migration and increased commercialisation of physical and online spaces.¹⁵
19. Address concerns linked to the privacy of young people exercising their civic rights and freedoms, in order to ensure their personal safety and ensure respect for the individual's rights, which should be promoted in accessible language, and give control over their data, above all through secure and lawful processing of all data that belong to them or is about them as defined in the EU General Data Protection Regulation.
20. Take into account the barriers to online participation faced by young people (*inter alia*, access to the internet, digital competences, lack of infrastructures and equipment) and strive to ensure safety of digital youth civic spaces by fostering the digital resilience in particular by strengthening digital and media literacy and awareness of young people, including through safety measures to protect young people from misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, societal polarisation, hate speech and cyberbullying, cyber grooming, etc.

¹⁵ Smith, Neil (1996) *The new urban frontier: Gentrification and the revanchist city*. London, Routledge. Day, Kristen (1999) *Introducing gender to the critique of privatized public space*. *Journal of Urban Design*, Vol.4, No. 2. Kohn, M., (2004) *Brave new neighborhoods: The privatization of public space*. New York, Routledge.

21. Recognise educational providers in all learning arenas (formal, non-formal and informal) as key actors for promoting various forms of citizenship education that focus on competences for required active citizenship, which in turn contributes, to a more democratic society.
22. Promote civic and political processes and active cooperation between youth organisations and education and training institutions on common projects, *inter alia*, so as to improve the conditions for existing civic spaces or create new civic spaces, thereby also making a practical contribution to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and the European Youth Goals.
23. Commit to and support, where applicable, co-designed and co-managed interactions or communication channels between public authorities and young people through civic spaces, including those supported and maintained by organisations active in the field of youth and non-formal groups of young people, so as to facilitate a meaningful and diverse representation of young people's voices and make a tangible impact on the development, implementation and follow-up of policies that are relevant to young people.

INVITE THE MEMBER STATES AND THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION, IN THEIR RESPECTIVE AREAS OF COMPETENCE AND AT THE APPROPRIATE LEVELS, WITH DUE REGARD FOR THE PRINCIPLE OF SUBSIDIARITY, TO

24. Strive to safeguard and expand a variety of civic spaces for young people at all levels through sustainable structural funding and, where appropriate, consider project-based funding for organisations active in the field of youth and non-formal groups of young people. Raise awareness among young people about their civic and political freedoms and the opportunities to enjoy them through their engagement in civic spaces.
25. Support organisations active in the field of youth and non-formal groups of young people combating hate speech and other threats to their activities, especially as regards the exercise of their freedom of expression, association and assembly.
26. Continuously monitor, assess, and support the enabling environment for civic spaces for young people, whilst identifying and addressing threats to these spaces.
27. Provide easy access to information in accessible formats and, where appropriate, in youth-friendly language and in accordance with the ‘European Youth Information Charter’¹⁶, so as to foster transparency and increase the trust of young people in political institutions while also putting in place adequate measures in particular by promoting media literacy to tackle misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, societal polarisation, hate speech, conspiracy theories, cyberbullying and, cyber grooming, etc.

¹⁶ The European Youth Information Charter is a set of professional principles and guidelines for youth information and counselling work.

28. Increase the institutional outreach to young people (directly or through organisations active in the field of youth and non-formal groups of young people) by using effective offline and online engagement tools. In addition, use mechanisms co-designed with young people themselves, acknowledged by decision-makers and supported by independent research in order to facilitate the participation of young people in civic spaces and in politics.
29. Examine, where relevant, the effects that commercial tools that use algorithms to deliver personalised marketing have on civic spaces for young people and engage in a dialogue with the providers of these tools to address the effects they may have on civic spaces. Consider adopting necessary, suitable and proportionate measures to tackle any negative effects of commercial tools that cannot be alleviated through dialogue.
30. Support research and monitor the state of civic spaces for young people across the European Union, and at national, regional and local level, including the challenges and threats they are facing and evaluate of the participation of young people in civic spaces.
31. Consider giving specific attention to youth civic spaces and basic freedoms of young people within the European Year of Youth 2022.

INVITE THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION TO

32. Support non-commercialised, open, inclusive and safe civic spaces for young people, through different European programmes, including the key programmes in the youth field such as Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, and across sectors.
33. Further involve young people and organisations active in the field of youth and non-formal groups of young people in the planning, implementation and following-up of European initiatives that have an impact on their lives such as the New European Bauhaus, the EU Climate Pact and the Conference on the Future of Europe, bearing in mind the role of these initiatives in the provision of civic spaces for young people.

References

In adopting these conclusions, the Council and the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council take note of the following documents:

- Joint Research Centre: Scientific and Technical Reports, Measuring Civic Competence in Europe, A composite indicator based on IEA Civic Education Study 1999 for 14 years old in School, 2008.
- Moxon, D. and Bárta, O. (2018), Structured Dialogue Cycle VI Thematic Report: Young People and the EU, European Steering Committee of the 6th Cycle of Structured Dialogue, 2018.
- European Commission: Eurobarometer, Future of Europe series, March 2021.
- European Parliament: Study requested by CULT Committee, Education and youth in post-COVID-19 Europe – crisis effects and policy recommendations, PE 690.872, May 2021.
- Youth Partnership: Tomaž Deželan and Laden Yurttagüler, Pool of European Youth Researchers, Shrinking democratic space for youth, 2021.
- Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly, Resolution 2096 (2016) How can inappropriate restrictions on NGO activities in Europe be prevented?
- Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation).

- General Assembly of the European Youth Information and Counselling Agency (ERYICA), European Youth Information Charter, adopted in Cascais (Portugal) on 27 April 2018.
 - Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, European Climate Pact, COM/2020/ 788 final.
 - European Union, Conference of the Future of Europe, webpage [Conference on the Future of Europe | European Commission \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eu-foreign-affairs/en/conference-on-the-future-of-europe)
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