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Subject: Young people as agents of democracy in the EU
- Policy debate

Following consultations of the Youth Working Party, the Presidency has prepared the attached discussion paper, which is submitted as the basis for the Youth Ministers policy debate to take place at the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council meeting on 22-23 May 2019.

EYCS Council (Brussels, 22 May 2019) - Youth policy debate

Young people as agents of democracy in the European Union

- Presidency discussion paper -

1. Young people and democracy

Democracy is one of the fundamental principles upon which the EU was founded and its institutions function. Consolidating and supporting it is key to ensuring the wellbeing of the EU's citizens.

Regarding young people and democracy, the EU's relationship with young people is mainly guided by Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, which states that 'Union action shall be aimed at (...) encouraging the participation of young people in democratic life in Europe'. In line with these provisions, the recently adopted EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 aims at fostering youth participation in democratic life and also refers to 'the way our democracies work', 'socioeconomic and democratic exclusion', and 'democratic deficits in EU processes'¹. All of these issues should be addressed by building bridges towards youth with a view to strengthening their trust in democracy as a system of government that delivers for and seeks to engage young people.

Though still rather low in absolute terms, participation from an electoral turnout perspective seems to be on the rise among young people, and while we are eagerly awaiting a confirmation of this trend in the upcoming European elections, it is equally important to look beyond them. Young people are certainly looking beyond the elections, given their increasing willingness to be more involved in the activities of youth organisations, NGOs and even political parties – although membership levels are still fairly low. Furthermore, volunteering, especially with a focus on the local community, has also become a more appealing activity for young people.

¹ European Union Youth Strategy, OJEU C 456, 18.12.2018

These factors make it clear that today's young generations are not apathetic. However, when it comes to their views on the areas of action that for instance the EU should prioritise, democratic participation falls behind education and skills, protection of the environment and the fight against climate change, employment, migration and refugee issues². That does not necessarily mean that young people are not interested in democracy. Quite the contrary: eight in ten young Europeans believe that support should be given to educational programmes that promote critical thinking and better education about the rights and responsibilities of EU citizens, and the functioning of the EU and its institutions – all key elements to ensuring the smooth functioning of a modern democracy³.

In view of the above, it should be acknowledged that young people do value democracy, but more efforts are needed in order to bring it closer to their hearts and – especially – minds. What is more, we need to make sure that young people feel included and are able to play an active role in the EU's and Member States' democratic life. But in order to achieve this, several aspects need to be taken into consideration.

2. How to encourage young people to further participate in the democratic life of the EU

a) The appeal of alternative political narratives

The narrative focused on democracy, fundamental human rights and intercultural dialogue is liable to lose support in a climate of material insecurity and hardships (high and persistent unemployment, in-work poverty, low probability of social mobility, etc.), especially if democratic governments take too long to find answers to these challenges. It would therefore be little surprise if citizens, regardless of age, listen to those that claim they possess easy fixes to today's social and economic problems.

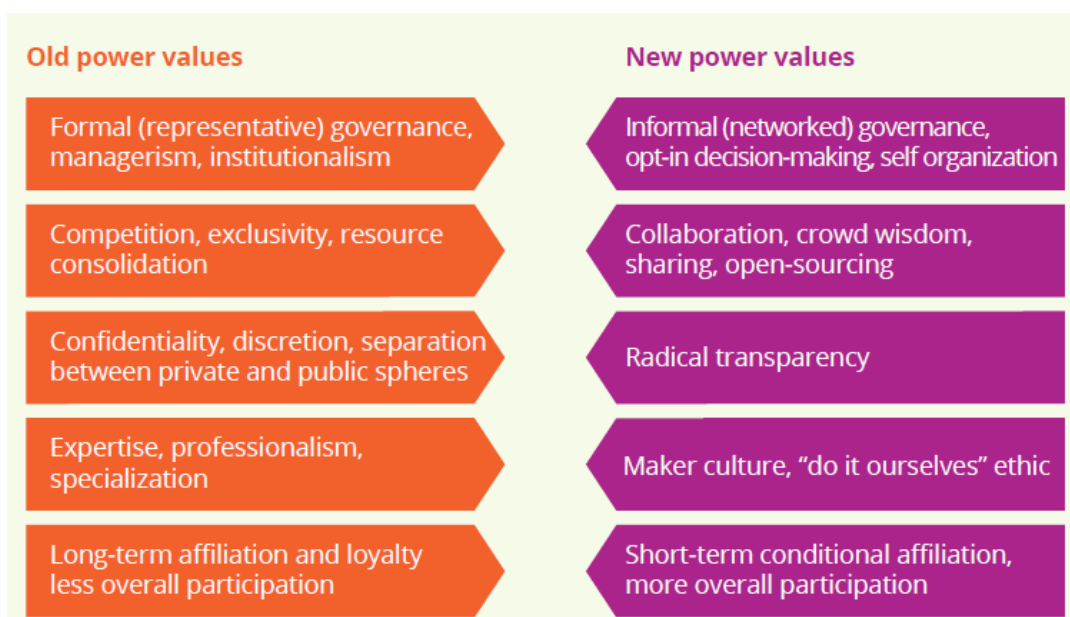
Tapping into people's frustrations is now easier thanks to new connectivity and information flows that enable the spread of disinformation. It is therefore critical that more attention is paid to how policy options are formulated, communicated and implemented.

² Flash Eurobarometer 455, European Youth (2017). Survey conducted by TNS political & social at the request of the European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture

³ Ibid 2.

b) New and shifting forms of power and youth participation

Despite the above recent improvements, the perception that we are dealing with a young generation that is somewhat disengaged from the traditional forms of participation in decision-making (voting, political parties, youth organisations, participation in public debates, etc.) still persists. Voting at regular intervals may no longer be a sufficient way of engaging in decision-making for young people and the values that define the traditional power structure are not necessarily appealing when compared with more preferable alternatives⁴:



These new forms of power and participation certainly raise questions over the representativeness of decision-making and governance systems.

⁴ Alex Farrow, Youth Participation: Closer to the Edge of Participation and Activism, SALTO Think Tank on Youth Participation, Tallinn, 2018, available here.

c) The use and influence of technology

New technologies also provide for the possibility of breaking down the distance between citizens and government institutions and allow for rapid communication and expression of opinions. The young generations generally feel comfortable in using social media tools, which is a strength to be considered.

However, more emphasis also needs to be placed on:

- The digital divide among young people and the need to overcome it;
- Closing the communication loop – young people are consulted, express themselves and participate in decision-making, but the results also need to be communicated back to them and the decisions argued for in a similarly youth-friendly fashion;
- Digital participation, which does not have the mechanisms that more traditional forms of participation have in place to ensure quality and outreach.

3. *Questions for the ministerial policy debate*

At the policy debate that is set to take place at the Youth Council meeting on 22 May, ministers are invited to address the issues raised in this paper. In doing so, they may wish to answer the following questions:

1. **What can Member States and EU institutions do to respond to the challenges highlighted in this paper, with a view to fostering young people's commitment to democratic principles?**
2. **Considering the strengths, interests and profile of today's young generations, what measures would be most effective in increasing their participation in the democratic life of the EU and its Member States?**