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Subject: Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on Strengthening the multilevel governance when promoting the participation of young people in decision-making processes

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 Strengthening the multilevel governance when promoting the participation of young people in decision-making processes, as approved by the Council (Education, Youth, Culture and Sport) at its meeting on 17-18 May 2021.

Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council

on

Strengthening the multilevel governance when promoting the participation of young people in decision-making processes

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

RECALLING THAT

1. Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union provides for European Union action aimed at encouraging the participation of young people in democratic life in Europe.
2. Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union states that ‘the Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities’. Article 10(3) recognises every citizen’s right to participate in the democratic life of the European Union.
3. Articles 11 and 12 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union state that everyone has the right to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association. Article 24 declares that children may express their views freely and stipulates that such views are to be taken into consideration on matters which concern them in accordance with their age and maturity.

4. The Council Resolution on a framework for European cooperation in the youth field: The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027¹ refers to the importance of supporting social and civic engagement and aims to ensure that all young people have the necessary resources to take part in society. The Resolution also recognises participation² and the global, European, national, regional and local dimensions³.
5. The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development⁴ identifies young people as active agents of sustainable development; the United Nations World Programme of Action for Youth⁵ calls for full and effective participation of young people in the life of society.
6. The Council of Europe's European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life⁶ stresses the need to reinforce the access of young people to the full enjoyment of their rights and liberties, particularly those related to participation.
7. The Council conclusions on fostering democratic awareness and democratic engagement among young people in Europe⁷ recognise that all young people should be enabled to participate meaningfully in decisions on all matters concerning them. They have the right to freedom of expression, access to information, and to be protected from discrimination.

¹ OJ C 456, 18.12.2018, p. 1

² 'Recognising that all young people are a resource to society, all policies and activities concerning young people should uphold young people's right to participate in the development, implementation and follow-up of policies affecting them by means of meaningful participation of young people and youth organisations. In this context, policies should be built in recognition of the changes brought about by digital communication affecting democratic and civic participation.'

³ 'In order to ensure sustainable impact on young people, it is important that EU youth policy be implemented with the interlinkages with regional and local levels in mind and that activities are conducted to support youth policies at grass-roots level. At the same time, young people's voices should be taken into account whenever global issues are addressed.'

⁴ https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E

⁵ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/world-programme-of-action-for-youth.html>

⁶ 1992, Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life, 2003 and 2015

⁷ OJ C 415, 1.12.2020, p. 16

8. The Council conclusions on the role of young people in building a secure, cohesive and harmonious society in Europe⁸ state that young people are innovators and agents of change and that their contributions should be actively supported, solicited and regarded as essential in building a peaceful society and supporting democratic governance.
9. The Council Resolution on encouraging political participation of young people in democratic life in Europe⁹ and the Council Resolution on encouraging new and effective forms of participation of all young people in democratic life in Europe¹⁰ strengthen the overall youth dimension and highlight the importance of promoting active and responsible participation of young people in the development of policies that affect young people's lives.
10. The 2019 flash Eurobarometer survey on young people¹¹ indicates that young people are very active in democratic life, and that levels of participation are increasing, with three quarters of young respondents having been engaged in some form of organised movement.
11. The study on the landscape of youth representation in the EU¹² suggests that the EU youth sector is growing, and that traditional youth structures such as NGOs and networks continue to play a key role; it also identifies a need for more diverse and flexible spaces for participation.

⁸ OJ C 195, 7.6.2018, p. 13

⁹ OJ C 417, 15.12.2015, p. 10

¹⁰ OJ C 169, 9.6.2011, p. 1

¹¹ Flash Eurobarometer 478: How do we build a stronger, more united Europe? The views of young people, https://data.europa.eu/euodp/fr/data/dataset/S2224_478_ENG

¹² Study on the landscape of youth representation in the EU, 2019, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/57e87ca0-900d-11ea-812f-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-search>

RECOGNISING THAT

12. Although significant progress has been made, young people still have fewer opportunities to participate, are underrepresented in decision-making processes and face multiple challenges that have been accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The main challenges¹³ amplified amongst young people in vulnerable positions include a higher risk of unemployment, labour precariousness, poverty, exclusion, marginalisation, discrimination and inequality, insufficient investment in skills development, and impacts on their mental health.
13. Young people's growing vulnerability is linked to unequal access to inclusive formal education and training, non-formal and informal learning and opportunities, over-representation in non-standard work and insufficient access to social protection, which have a structural effect on young people's lives, emancipation and transition to autonomy, in particular in terms of access to housing, fair living conditions, health care and decent jobs.

¹³ Partnership between the EU and the CoE in the field of youth, 'Towards a better understanding of the impact of Covid-19 on the youth sector', <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/72351197/Summary+13+Oct+2020.pdf/c8808ff7-25bef7f9-3504-b2a189a64bd0> ; European Parliament, 'COVID-19: MEPs ask to prevent lasting damage on youth and on sport' (January 2021) <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20210122IPR96224/covid-19-meps-ask-to-prevent-lasting-damage-on-youth-and-on-sport>; OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19), 'Youth and COVID-19: Response, recovery and resilience' (June 2020), <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/youth-and-covid-19-response-recovery-and-resilience-c40e61c6/>; ILO, Youth employment, <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/youth-employment/lang--en/index.htm>.

14. There is an urgent need for young people to be provided with quality citizenship education fostering democratic values and empowered with information and media literacy skills in order for them to be able to understand the political and societal contexts, recognise the threats of disinformation, polarisation and propaganda as well as to be fully and freely informed to make relevant choices and decisions.
15. The European Council's new Strategic Agenda 2019-2024¹⁴ and the 2021 Commission Work Programme¹⁵ recognise the role of young people in building a climate-neutral, green, fair, digital and social Europe, promoting sustainable consumption and production patterns, and implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.
16. Non-formal and informal learning play a key role, for example in civic matters and participation; are embedded in the European Youth Work Agenda¹⁶; and aim to strengthen and develop cooperation between the various actors involved in youth work in multiple areas, in line with the 'Bonn Process' and the implementation of a strategic framework for youth work development¹⁷.

¹⁴ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39914/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024.pdf>

¹⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2021-commission-work-programme-key-documents_en

¹⁶ Resolution on the Framework for establishing a European Youth Work Agenda (2020/C415/01), https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.C_.2020.415.01.0001.01.ENG&toc=OJ%3AC%3A2020%3A415%3ATOC

¹⁷ The 3rd European Youth Work Convention, Final Declaration https://www.eywc2020.eu/downloads/doctrine/WebforumVeranstaltungenWebsiteBundle:Media-file-54/EN_3rd%20EYWC_final%20Declaration.pdf

CONSIDER THAT

17. Young people make essential contributions to the further development of society. Decisions made today affect both their present and future lives. Young people are affected by issues that are cross-sectoral and relate to the whole political agenda, and therefore their engagement and involvement in finding responses to societal, environmental, digital, economic, cultural and political challenges are essential in order to foster the democratic principle of representation. This should enable young people to take charge of their own lives, learn, have a voice in building resilient, cohesive, inclusive, climate-neutral, prosperous, fair and sustainable societies, and contribute to Europe's recovery in the context of major crisis situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to the digital and green transitions.
18. For an effective approach to multilevel governance¹⁸ in the field of youth, and in particular the participation of young people, it is important to support the establishment and development of youth representation at all levels¹⁹, recognise young people's right to self-organise and participate and enable them to do so. Recognition of and support for youth organisations and structures, ensuring an enabling environment at all levels, is indispensable for effective, meaningful and sustainable participation of young people in decision-making processes.

¹⁸ See definition in the Annex.

¹⁹ See definition in the Annex.

19. The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027²⁰ refers to youth participation in democratic life, supports social and civic engagement and aims to ensure that all young people have the necessary resources to take part in society, emphasising the realisation of young people's vision and goals for Europe through the mobilisation of EU-level policy instruments as well as actions at national, regional and local level by all stakeholders.
20. The 11 European Youth Goals²¹ focus on the vision of young people for Europe, identify cross-sectoral areas that affect young people's lives, and reflect priorities that are important to them, including youth participation itself in European Youth Goal #9, 'Space and participation for all'.
21. Youth participation is about exercising rights and having opportunities, equal access, support and responsibility to participate and influence decisions, and to be systematically engaged in actions and activities that help to strengthen a society based on EU values.
22. Youth participation is also about preventing the shrinking of spaces for civil society, which has a substantial impact on decision-making processes and creates additional challenges for young people, youth organisations and structures, and youth workers.

²⁰ OJ C 456, 18.12.2018, p. 1

²¹ EUYS, Annex 3, *ibid.*

23. The EU Youth Dialogue²² has been instrumental over the last 10 years in fostering youth participation at all levels, through the involvement of youth councils, national working groups and other youth stakeholders, while promoting structural dialogue with relevant decision-makers. Youth civil society stakeholders, in particular the European Youth Forum, international non-governmental youth organisations and national youth councils, have made a valuable contribution to the representation of young people in decision-making processes at EU level, *inter alia* through the European Union Youth Conferences.
24. Youth policy governance differs across EU Member States, given their different political, cultural, historical, societal and geographical contexts. They have different frameworks (e.g. the legal framework for youth policy development, the role of elected bodies / legislative structures, or the topics covered by youth policies), as well as different models of implementation (e.g. horizontal, vertical or cross-sectoral coordination, implementation powers at different levels of public administration)²³.
25. Young people, expressing themselves in a wide and diverse range of formats and geographical contexts, constitute the foundation on which youth representation and participation is based. These formats include organisations and non-formal groups, from urban environments to rural and remote areas²⁴, youth work structures, youth councils and youth organisations at all levels, as well as young individuals who are not part of existing structures or organisations.

²² OJ C 189, 2.6.2019, p. 1

²³ ‘Insights into youth policy governance’, Youth Partnership, 2018, https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261953/122018-Insights_web.pdf/99400a12-31e8-76e2-f062-95abec820808

²⁴ OJ C 193, 9.6.2020, p. 3

EMPHASISE THAT

26. It is essential that all young people have equal opportunities for participation, involvement and empowerment in relevant decision-making processes at all levels. Such participation is important not only for the quality of youth policies, but also for all other transversal policies affecting young people. It is about the personal, social, cultural and intellectual development of young people and their transition to adulthood²⁵.
27. Youth participation generates a sense of belonging, citizenship and solidarity, and makes policy processes more transparent and accountable towards young people. At the same time, youth participation empowers young people and helps them to develop self-confidence and a sense of initiative, ownership and responsibility, thus enabling them to acquire and develop experience and relevant skills for their democratic and professional lives, in areas such as critical thinking, communication, negotiation and team spirit.
28. Mainstreaming multilevel governance when promoting young people's participation in decision-making processes fosters inclusive and resilient societies, strengthens social, civic and territorial cohesion, and enhances links between European and local level policies through concrete initiatives such as the European Youth Capital and the Erasmus+ Youth in Action project 'Europe goes local'²⁶. At the same time, it empowers young people by creating opportunities for them to put into practice and improve the knowledge, skills, competences and attitudes they need to fully participate in diverse societies and to be prepared for future challenges.

²⁵ The Lisboa+21 Final Declaration

²⁶ <https://www.europegoeslocal.eu/about/>

29. The digital transformation of our democracies²⁷ brings with it the need to explore and promote innovative and alternative forms of participation such as digital democracy tools, whilst recognising the challenges of participation in the digital space and the limited access of some young people to the internet or digital technologies, or their lack of the skills and knowledge needed to use them. Therefore, there is a need to provide access and tailor-made solutions to support youth participation in democratic life through digital means and engage young people in an inclusive way.
30. Policies that create more opportunities for young people and enable their full participation in society must be further supported. In this context, the role of youth work, non-formal and informal learning and effective dialogue with all young people must be enhanced, in the framework of a cross-sectoral approach to fields such as social policy, employment, education, digitalisation, health care, housing, culture and the environment.
31. For the effective participation of young people²⁸ in society, some key aspects have to be considered, for example: mapping youth policy governance; bench-learning²⁹ on youth policy mechanisms at all levels; training public officials on youth participation issues; and identifying the role and responsibilities of young people in policy design, development, implementation and evaluation.

²⁷ Communication from the Commission on the European democracy action plan, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2020%3A790%3AFIN&qid=1607079662423>

²⁸ ‘Insights into youth policy governance’, Youth Partnership, 2018, https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261953/122018-Insights_web.pdf/99400a12-31e8-76e2-f062-95abec820808

²⁹ See definition in the Annex.

TAKE NOTE OF

32. The ideas and opinions of young people shared at the EU Youth Conference in March 2021, where young people outlined a number of initiatives that provide valuable inspiration for action to decision-makers, youth organisations and young people themselves, in order to promote democracy among young people at local, regional, national and European level. These ideas and opinions concern:

- setting up mechanisms at the relevant levels to consult young people on national, regional and local policy issues;
- organising non-formal learning and advocacy training for young people, including for those with fewer opportunities;
- lowering the voting age and rights to 16 years, coupled with citizenship education, in order to encourage and empower young people to actively participate in elections;
- identifying and promoting the use of public spaces available to young people, as well as streamlining that information;
- co-developing and adopting EU guidelines and quality labels in order to ensure access for all young people to youth-friendly, safe and inclusive digital spaces;
- creating platforms for assisting bottom-up, youth-led initiatives and youth organisations at local and regional level;
- expanding the school curriculum and diversifying the stakeholders through the inclusion of non-governmental organisations in order to foster the development of creative thinking, active citizenship and practice of decision-making through non-formal education.

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

33. Empower all young people through education and training, youth-oriented information, feedback, non-formal and informal learning, youth work and other practices that contribute to informed and critical participation in multilevel decision-making processes.
34. Adequately promote and support the setting up or improvement of sustainable multilevel governance structures, in order to facilitate youth participation in decision-making processes as well as in agenda setting, while encouraging a variety of non-formal participatory solutions. This requires recognition of, support for and full involvement of youth organisations, youth workers, young professionals, youth leaders³⁰, schools, teachers, coaches, trainers and other relevant stakeholders. Specific efforts should be made to reach and empower young individuals not engaged in formal structures and organisations.
35. Promote and support, especially in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and rural and remote areas, accessible physical, digital and hybrid solutions that facilitate the effective participation and engagement of all young people in decision-making processes at all levels, in a multi-sectoral manner, in order to provide them with open and safe spaces, as well as opportunities for personal, social, cultural and professional development.
36. Provide equal and fair opportunities, supporting all forms of youth participation and engagement at all levels. This approach applies to all matters affecting young people, for example housing, education and decent jobs, sustainable development, climate change, human rights, intergenerational equity and solidarity, gender equality, capacity building and the impact of digitalisation, in line with the commitment to ‘leave no one behind’³¹.

³⁰ For the purpose of these conclusions, youth leaders also include young people who assume leadership roles without being part of a formal organisation or structure.

³¹ UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

37. Where appropriate, establish or maintain synergies and cooperation between youth-related policy sectors and programmes, in particular between youth work education and training and youth researchers, in order to foster critical thinking, provide comprehensive information about decision-making processes at all levels and increase young people's understanding, commitment and effective and meaningful participation.

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

38. Mainstream and support active and sustainable structures for youth participation in the development of policies for and with young people at all levels and in all fields, while providing them with access to reliable data, evidence, and accountable and regularly reviewed decision-making processes, building on participation processes such as the EU Youth Dialogue and other arrangements in the various policy areas that aim to foster young people's participation.
39. Support the further development and review of approaches aimed at increasing youth participation in decision-making processes at all levels. This can build on existing concepts and mechanisms, as well as on the work of the Council of Europe, the Member States and civil society organisations in this field. These approaches should involve young people, youth workers, youth organisations (including local youth councils), practitioners, youth policy researchers and policy-makers, at all levels and from all relevant sectors.

40. Take full advantage of relevant EU programmes (*inter alia* Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps) to promote and support knowledge, exchange of practices, and mutual learning activities, as well as the design, development, implementation and evaluation of mechanisms of youth participation based on a multilevel governance approach.
41. Where relevant, make effective use of the EU youth policy dashboard³² and take into account as appropriate the impact assessments that, *inter alia*, compare the scope of youth participation in decision-making processes and the regional and local features in terms of demography, well-being, democratic engagement and sustainable development.
42. Keep fostering the EU Youth Dialogue and the national working groups put in place in Member States and, where appropriate, reserving a key role for the national youth councils, in order to take advantage of this framework in other consultative processes, such as those related to the Conference on the Future of Europe and the New European Bauhaus initiative.

INVITE THE COMMISSION TO

43. Organise a peer-learning activity in the field of youth with the objective of exchanging knowledge and experience on how to promote the effective participation of young people in decision-making processes at all levels and in all policy areas, thus creating a common understanding of the concept of multilevel governance.

³² As developed by the expert group established in 2019, in the context of the EU Youth Strategy (2019-2027) and its Work Plan 2019-2021.

44. Contribute to knowledge and capacity building on youth participation in decision-making processes at multiple levels, including where possible through Youth Wiki, youth research networks and cooperation with international organisations such as the Council of Europe, the United Nations and the OECD and other relevant bodies.
45. Where appropriate, use the European Youth Portal to engage with young people through online dialogues and consultations.

INVITE ALL ACTORS INVOLVED IN EUROPEAN COOPERATION ACTIVITIES IN THE YOUTH FIELD TO STRIVE TO

46. Establish transparent procedures that enable young people to be directly involved in decision-making processes, whether individually, in the case of youth leaders, or through youth organisations, youth workers, teachers, researchers, journalists or other youth-related structures or non-formal groups. This participation should address all questions that impact young people's lives, on a cross-sectoral basis, while promoting synergies and cooperation in joint decision-making processes, shared responsibilities and implementation of solutions.
47. Widen the scope and range of opportunities for stakeholders in formal education and informal and non-formal learning to act together to increase youth participation in decision-making processes and to support various forms of 'learning to participate' from an early age, as this increases the possibilities for lifelong participation³³.

³³ Council Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning (OJ C 189, 4.6.2018, p. 1)

Definitions

For the purpose of these conclusions:

‘*Multilevel governance*’ refers to decision-making structures and processes, in formal and non-formal settings, that exist at different territorial levels (from local to regional, national and European), with participation of young people and/or youth organisations, where decisions are taken in accordance with the arrangement between all actors, both horizontally and/or vertically, based on the principle of subsidiarity, with the aim that decisions are taken and policies are implemented at the most appropriate institutional and territorial levels.

‘*All levels*’ refers to local, regional, national, European and global levels, as appropriate.

‘*Bench-learning*’ is a process whereby an organisation can compare its performance with that of other organisations. The goal is to learn from the strengths of other organisations and what they do well, seek inspiration for the organisation’s own work and also learn from mistakes. It is an active and continuous process and not just a comparison of indicators, facts and measures.

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:

- 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, 1.12.2020, p. 16)

https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.C_.2020.415.01.0016.01.ENG&toc=OJ%3AC%3A2020%3A415%3ATOC

- Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on the Framework for establishing a European Youth Work Agenda (OJ C 415, 1.12.2020, p. 1)

https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.C_.2020.415.01.0001.01.ENG&toc=OJ%3AC%3A2020%3A415%3ATOC

- Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on raising opportunities for young people in rural and remote areas (OJ C 193, 9.6.2020, p. 3)

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- Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council establishing guidelines on the governance of the EU Youth Dialogue (OJ C 189, 5.6.2019, p. 1)

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- Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (OJ C 398, 22.12.2012, p. 1)

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- Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on encouraging new and effective forms of participation of all young people in democratic life in Europe (OJ C 169, 9.6.2011, p. 1)

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- The United Nations World Programme of Action for Youth
<https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/wpay2010.pdf>
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<https://rm.coe.int/1680702379>
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