



EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



Spaces and Styles of Participation

Formal, non-formal and informal possibilities of
young people's participation in European cities

Completed project

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INTRODUCTION

Setting the context

There is a **major concern** in European societies that young people do not participate enough in public affairs that concern “their lives and that of their communities” (European Commission White Paper on Youth 2001). This is viewed as potentially undermining the cohesion of democratic societies.

In politics, practice and research this is ascribed both to **structural barriers** and to **individual deficits** on the side of young people such as lack of information and “participation competence” (European Commission Youth Strategy 2009). Across different articulations of this discourse and different transnational, national and local levels, a picture results that young people do not participate enough with a majority of them not participating at all.

This implies that young people's distrust towards institutions is interpreted as a **knowledge problem** on the side of young people and not as a general problem of the relationship between individuals, institutions and society. Thus, increasing youth participation by education seems appropriate.

This discourse implies a **narrow, formalised and ideological understanding** of participation against which mainstream youth research tends to measure young people's activities and orientations. This understanding of participation reproduces inequalities and excludes a large range of young people's activities in the public from being recognised as participation. It also reduces democracy to institutionalised forms of decision-making.

General objectives

The assumption underlying the project PARTISPACE is that there is a relation between the apparent lack of participation of young people on the one hand, and the prevalence of ideological and discursive limitations of what is recognised as participation on the other. Participation is understood as resulting from the interaction between policies, provisions, and practices – or: between ideologies, institutions and individuals.

Against this backdrop, PARTISPACE aims at analysing what young people do in public spaces and what these activities mean to them in order to **re-conceptualise the understanding of participation**.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Research questions

The central research question of PARTISPACE was **how** and **where** young people do participate differently across social milieus and youth cultural scenes. What **styles** of participation do they prefer, develop and apply and in what **spaces** does participation take place?

The study has undertaken a comparative analysis of young people's practices in the public and the ways in which they are recognised or not by other societal actors. The study is conducted in eight cities across Europe – Bologna (IT), Frankfurt (DE), Gothenburg (SE), Eskisehir (TK), Manchester (UK), Plovdiv (BG), Rennes (FR) and Zurich (CH). These cities are not representative of but comparable in dimension and relevance for the respective country. The study covers formal, non-formal and informal settings and forms of participation.

Theoretically PARTISPACE starts from understanding youth participation as

- *Discursive* practice that is produced by societal discourses addressing young people as 'citizens in the making' and distinguishing participatory and non-participatory activities
- *Youth cultural styles* of practice in the public domain by which young people present themselves as different from children, adults and other young people
- Situated practice embedded in structured *social spaces* while at the same time expressing the appropriation of social space
- *Participation biographies* expressing young people's individual processes of coping with particular life situations and constructions of self-identity
- Enabled and inhibited by *public institutions and policies* at local, national, and transnational level.

Methodology

PARTISPACE has adopted a **mixed-method and multilevel approach**:

- National research literature reviews, youth policy and discourse analyses
- Analysis of the youth participation discourse at European level
- Analysis of European Social Survey data on young people's participation
- Local case studies in one major city per country (see above) including:
 - mapping youth participation in the city by expert interviews (N=188), focus group discussions and city walks with young people (N=96)
 - in-depth case studies (N=48; 6 per city) of formal, non-formal, and informal practices of youth participation consisting of ethnographic observation, group discussions and biographical interviews

(N=96)

- Participatory action research projects by and with young people with or by young people were developed (N= 18).

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

Understanding the situation

1. European discourses of youth participation

One of our first analyses consisted in a discourse analysis of documents of European institutions on youth participation, in particular of the European Union (EU), the Council of Europe (CoE) and the European Youth Forum (EYF). The focus lay on how they defined and referred to youth participation and how participation was related with other key concepts. Apart from this, both differences and relationships between these institutions were analysed (see Becquet et al., 2016).

Figure 1: Word cloud of the terms most used in European documents



A first key finding is that in all documents a concept of participation 'in something' is predefined and institutionalised by adults prevails.

A second key finding is that youth participation has been more and more related to education (see figure 1). On the one hand this means that young people are ascribed deficits of 'participation competence' and need to be educated according to dominant, institutionalised standards of participation. On the other hand, this means that already mere involvement in formal education is interpreted as participation.

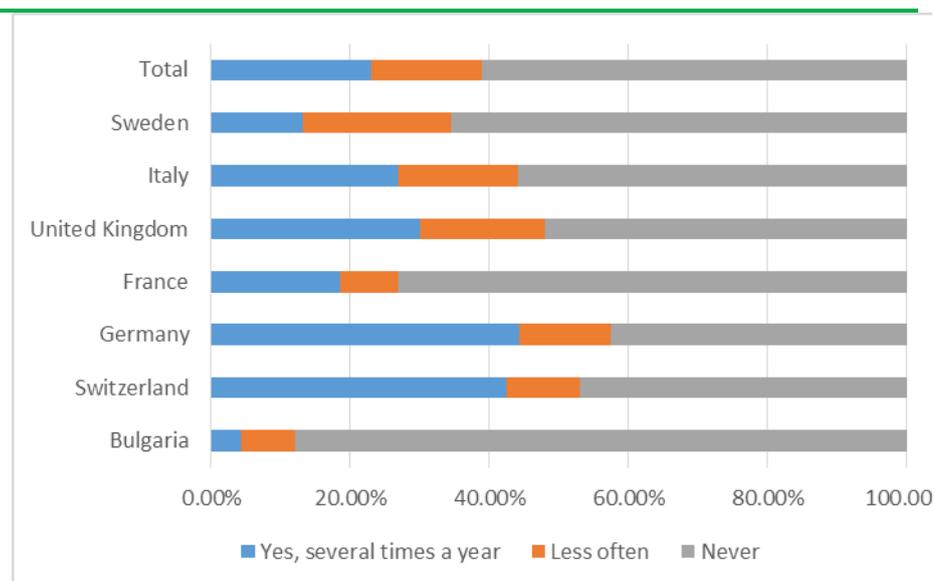
2. Survey data on young people's political and social participation

In order to have reliable reference to data on youth participation reflecting the dominant narrow concept of participation, data of the European Social Survey (#? wave) have been analysed. Key findings are the following

- *Political participation* is highest in Sweden followed by Germany regarding both for voting in elections and non-conventional forms of political participation, it is lowest in Italy in Bulgaria
- *Trust in politics* is highest in Sweden and Switzerland with regard to both national and European parliaments, lowest in Italy and Bulgaria
- *Civic participation* such as being involved in trade unions, voluntary or charity organisations is highest in Germany and Switzerland, lowest again in Bulgaria followed by Sweden as regards voluntary or charity organisations (see figure 2)

Participation rates have been correlated with social factors such as class, education, and gender and country. While socio-economic status, educational level and gender make a difference, the biggest influence results from country affiliation. While national political culture and trust in public institutions may be one explanatory factor, there seems to be a strong correlation between socio-economic aspects of life conditions and nationality. In sum, poverty and precariousness undermine young people's social and political participation (Kovacheva et al., 2017).

Figure 2: Involvement of young people (<29 years) in activities of a voluntary or charity organisations



3. Youth policies in the eight countries

The analysis of the **youth policies, educational policies and welfare systems** of the eight countries has shown that youth policy is a highly complex, yet **not a prioritised political area** in both a cross-sectoral and a specialised definition of youth policy. The following aspects apply to most countries but take different forms and have different effects and degrees:

- Youth policies are established and coordinated at national level but are subordinate to education or labour market policies in terms of budget and power especially in Switzerland, Sweden or Germany.
- Specialised youth policies have been turned into remedial policies aimed at including disadvantaged youth, especially in the UK.
- Despite increasing relevance of youth at the level of discourse, reliable and substantial institutional frameworks are lacking, as in Italy.
- Youth policies have been decentralised leading to lack of clarity concerning competence in decision making, a regional disappearance of funding and increasing inequalities, as in France.
- Recent development of youth policies through European integration is still in progress with discrepancies and contestation between national and local levels. This applies especially to Bulgaria and Turkey.

Young people's participation is high on the agenda in policy documents. However, a dominant principle of youth policy is **protection** whereby young people are addressed as children. In Italy, a fixed image of vulnerability due to economic uncertainty prevails. In France, Switzerland or Germany, the main concern is that young people shall enter a standard life course. Policies also address youth in terms of a **threat in need of control**, especially in the UK. Youth policy can also take forms of vague **promises for the future** as in Bulgaria and Turkey. Youth policy that genuinely **empowers youth as a resource** for themselves and their communities is rare. Where present, it appears most in Swedish youth policy.

In fact, youth policies rather reproduce social inequality and precariousness in young people's life conditions than reducing them.

4. What do young people do in public space and what does it

mean?

The qualitative research in the eight cities had two phases: The mapping provided insights into relationships between cities and 'their' youth and an overview how different actors refer to youth participation. Six in-depth case studies per city were conducted to understand how different practices in the public domain do emerge.

Figure 3: The PARTISPACE field work



The picture emerging from the **mapping process** confirmed the general impression of a large and deep **gap between adults/institutions and young people**. While professionals and policy makers ascribed low involvement in (formal) participation to young people's low motivation, deficits or problems, many young people expressed alienation from politics and institutions. Identification mainly emerged from informal 'chilling' and 'hanging out' with peers in public space. These combine aspects of consumerism and creativity addressing a wider public, at least implicitly.

Against this backdrop, settings or constellations of practices in the public were selected for **in-depth case studies** according to the following criteria:

- **Formal, non-formal, informal settings** operationalised as follows: adult- versus youth-led, organised versus spontaneous, regular versus episodic, explicit participation versus implicit taking part in public life, orientation to a general interest vs particularistic orientation.
- **Social categories:** age, gender, class, ethnicity, and education to include a wide range of different positions among young participants.

The studied constellations of participatory activities have been grouped in seven clusters according to their dominant forms and contents (for examples and lessons learned see page 6):

- I. **Representation** of interests as right and obligation
- II. Fighting with(in) the political system – explicit **political activities**
- III. Living **social alternatives** as a political model
- IV. Producing and negotiating **own spaces**
- V. Inbetween **service** of humanity and service enterprise
- VI. Exploring **interests**, developing and performing **skills**
- VII. **Pedagogically supervised leisure** for young people

Themes that emerged in this analysis were effects of socially divided and segregated cities on forms of participation and different interpretations of political, social or civic participation between adults and young people. Further cross-cutting dimensions of activities were the contesting and creating boundaries as well as the relevance of emotional bonds. Especially in the less formalised cases, young people referred to being like a family.

Evidence from exemplary in-depth case studies

Formal Youth Representation Manchester (Cluster I) is formed to represent young people in the city and the city council supported by a youth worker. Most activities are pre-defined by regional/national youth assemblies.

➔ **Also in formal settings young people struggle for participation in a subjectively meaningful way which is one reason for low response.**

Social Centre, Bologna (Cluster III): Activists and volunteers have squatted an abandoned space where they live, organise political activities, but also provide social services and an open space for the city population:

➔ **If informal groups have not to defend themselves against pressure and control, they are likely to open for dialogue with the community.**

Laboratory of Arts Projects, Rennes (Cluster VII) is self-organised by and for young people. They have developed a proposal on cultural policies from a youth perspective using drama, dance, fine arts, music, film:

➔ **Non-formal settings are an opportunity to reach out to young people but balancing framing activities and self-determination is difficult.**

Girls group, Frankfurt (Cluster IV): A group of young girls have discovered and conquered a youth centre as stage for experimenting with gender roles and youth cultural practice provoking constant conflicts with staff:

➔ **Contesting boundaries between 'inside' and 'outside' reveals an important identity issue but is challenging for public institutions.**

LGBT project, Gothenburg (Cluster VII): youth work for LGBT youth to feel safe from discrimination and develop own views, life styles and raise awareness outside. They are co-responsible for the space and activities:

➔ **Facilitating youth participation requires a balance between responding to needs 'inside' and supporting activities 'outside'.**

Informal network for arts and debate, Plovdiv (Cluster III): a group of cultural activists organise an informal club for performances in the basement of a pub. They feel youth culture is not supported by the authorities.

➔ **The lack of public infrastructures provokes young people's inventiveness and creativity for an alternative scene and space.**

Job exchange, Zurich (Cluster V) is a youth work project that provides young people access to occasional jobs. The service is delivered by young people who are trained, paid and see it rather as work than as engagement:

➔ **The more institutionalised, the less young people identify and innovate; yet, time for participation may be also paid – as in professional participation.**

Street musicians, Eskisehir (Cluster VI): a group of musicians who give an account of Kurdish culture which is under-represented in the public life of the city due to politics and mainstream student consumerism:

➔ **Young people creating micro spaces of intercultural exchange based on their struggle for identity.**

Learning from young people participating according to their own agenda

5. Youth-led action research projects

Accompanying youth-led projects provided insight into the mutual interplay between processes of participation and learning. These projects challenged assumptions about where, when and how young people participate and what it means to them. They seek to make a contribution in contexts that are often experienced as constricted, limiting and uncertain. A key finding is the significance of participation as a situated social learning process connected to the search for identity, belonging and status as citizens. Below there are three examples, further projects are documented in a video (www.partispace.eu).



Young people's idea of regenerating urban wasteland (Plovdiv)



Performance on religious and cultural identities of young muslims (Bolognina)



Street art by homeless young men on living on the street (Manchester)

Local constellations of youth policy and participation

Participation through appropriation of public space

Identification with participation through youth cultural styles

6. Key findings of local case studies and action research

The qualitative findings of PARTISPACE cover five theoretical dimensions:

- The eight cities differ according to socio-economic factors, youth policy infrastructure and responsiveness, and dominant discourses addressing youth as resource, as a threat or as victims. Influence of national welfare systems is less direct although individual and unconditional access to education, welfare and good jobs is the most powerful policy of participation. At city level, formal youth participation tend to go along with coordinated youth policies and a youth work infrastructure. However, in the activating welfare state formal adult-led youth participation tends to turn into a paternalistic approach to the formation of 'good' citizens – with the consequence of low response.
- Social space structures young people's practice while young people's practice structures social space. A key finding related to the question *where* young people do participate is that all practices by young people are attempts of appropriating public space, attempts of turning it into meaningful places that are meaningful for them; 'own' places to which they belong and which they feel to control, which fit to their youth cultural styles, and where they feel safe. Appropriation involves exploration, conquering and defending spaces. It is related with boundary work whereby inclusion/exclusion, inside/outside, and relevance/ irrelevance are constantly contested and confirmed. Only in few cases the internet beyond being a communication tool served as a space per se.
- Analysing young people's styles of participation starts from replacing the question *why* some young people participate and many do not by the question *how* young people participate in different ways only some of which are recognised as participation. Analysing these differences in terms of youth cultural styles of participation shows that not only forms matter. Sometimes also different issues are important for young people than for adults. Young people participate only in ways that enable exploration of their individual and collective identities. However, there are also differences and distinctions among young

Participation biographies of young people: searching for recognition and belonging

Young people learn participation from experience – not from teaching

Participation is a *relation*, not an individual act

Social inequality of recognition of practices as participation

Micropolitics and everyday life participation in space, style and biography

Participation implies accepting diversity – and conflict

Radical democracy questions boundaries between participation and non-participation

people which reflect social inequalities of life chances, risks, resources and recognition.

- To understand how young people get involved with particular practices their participation biographies have been reconstructed. Searching for recognition and belonging seemed to be the most important driver. In some cases this is linked to coping with critical life events or problems with peers, to experiences of injustice or to longing for self-efficacy. Analysis reveals that transforming coping with everyday life into acknowledged political, social or civic participation results from a complex interplay of factors which is particular in each individual case. While involvement in formal and political participation tends to go along with positive experiences of education and learning, negative experiences with formal institutions like school or youth welfare make involvement with informal settings more likely.
- The question how young people learn to participate cannot be separated from the processes of staging of participatory practice. Some of these processes are supported by adults, others evolve without or even against them. Across different contexts, there is strong evidence of a ‘pedagogisation’ of youth participation. Young people are addressed as not knowing and/or not wanting to participate and therefore needing education – while no attention is paid to structures of inequality and dominance. The analysis of participation biographies suggests that rather than teaching and training it is experiences of recognition that makes young people develop a self-concept as participants.

In sum, PARTISPACE findings suggest that participation is relational. Participation is not an individual act but emerges as quality of relational practice between members of a community or society in public space. Involvement and recognition are interrelated but structured by social inequality.

Discourse analysis reveals that constellations of power and knowledge determine which practices are recognised as participation and which are not. The social inequality of youth participation results less from lower levels of competence, motivation and engagement than from mechanisms due to which certain expressions are not heard and practices are not seen as claims for being a part of society.

PARTISPACE findings give evidence that participation – or ‘the political’, ‘the civic’ and ‘the social’ – are primarily found at the margins of acknowledged institutions. In fact, there are many forms of *everyday life participation* and *micropolitics* that do not fit into existing concepts and formats: where young people claim being part of society by using public *space*, by presenting and expressing themselves in their *styles*, by linking their *biographies* with the public in ways which are subjectively meaningful for them, and by questioning, contesting or simply disregarding *youth policy* institutions. Thereby participation and conflict are two sides of the same coin. In essence, participation means not preventing, avoiding or solving conflicts but conflicts being expressed, performed and negotiated.

As a consequence, it is not possible to qualify certain practices per se as participation and others not. In fact, differentiation between politics and expressions of the political, between civil society organisation and expressions of the civic, between institutionalised society and expressions of the

social is needed to identify the political, civic and social in young people's practices. Including young people into society requires *radical democracy* which is open, dialogic, and flexible for appropriation and re-negotiation – rather than expecting adaptation to particular spaces and styles.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Key messages

PARTISPACE does not advertise best practice in terms of youth participation because *there is no universal measure of what good youth participation or good politics in facilitating youth participation are*. Nevertheless, case studies and action research allow insight into different ways of dealing with young people's practices in the public and how this encourages or demotivates young people.

From invitation to 'participate in ...' towards recognition of actual practice

→ Recognition

PARTISPACE findings show that young people are involved in various practices in the public most of which are not recognised as participation. This misrecognition rather contributes to demotivating than attracting young people with regard to participation. First, it needs being recognised that in these practices young people are active in coping with contradictory demands of present societies. Second, experiences of recognition are the strongest motivator to engage.

Diversity of styles of participation is necessary in complex societies

→ Accepting and understanding diversity

The fact that young people engage in different ways including that a majority of young people refrains from engaging in formal, adult-led youth participation must not be seen as a problem but as a necessary expression of complex societies. This includes not only understanding and accepting a diversity of forms of participation – from formal to informal – but also a diversity of contents, even if some of these are only of particular interest (which is the case also with institutionalised politics).

→ Direct access to funding for different groups

Public authorities should support a variety of emerging and dissident youth cultural and political scenes. Public funds could be advertised for allocation on a regular basis, as well as ensuring equity in distribution of such funds in the light of structural inequalities. *EU youth policy* could contribute by re-introducing funds of local youth initiatives of former Youth for Europe programmes.

→ Conflict as participation

Accept conflicts as moments of participation

Diversity of practices reflect different needs, interests and claims of belonging to a community or society. These are potentially conflicting – between individuals, between or within groups as well as between individuals/groups and institutions. These conflicts are not barriers towards participation, these conflicts *are* moments and situations of participation. In conflicts, individuals and groups raise claims. Rather than preventing, inhibiting and solving conflicts participation therefore implies creating spaces in which conflicts can be expressed and performed.

→ Support learning without pedagogisation

From teaching and training towards experiences of democracy

Accepting participation as diverse and conflictual does not exclude learning. Yet, forms and goals of learning cannot be derived from adults' intentions like in conventional (formal and non-formal) education or training but need to start from young people's experiences. Rather than from citizenship education or participation programmes, participation learning emerges from reflecting experiences of practice and conflict in public space – whether this is streets, squares, parks, institutions, or the internet. This however requires a broader perspective than

→ Learning through

dialogue

simply preparing young people for institutionalised participation.

→ Democratisation of school

This requires ensuring young people have opportunities for expression, creativity, experimentation and articulation of difference autonomously as well as through mutual learning with adults/professionals. Dialogue and cooperation are imperative to achieve a sense of inclusive citizenship.

→ Opening up (public) spaces

This means especially turning *schools* into spaces in which democracy is not only taught for later life but lived and experienced in the present.

Young people need more accessible spaces

PARTISPACE has revealed that participation goes along with attempts and practices of appropriating public space (see also Structured Dialogue Youth Goals). However, in contemporary cities public space is less and less appropriation-friendly. On the one hand, abandoned areas and buildings should be made accessible for young people to create places for their own practices. Upon request they should also receive support in terms of consultancy, financial support and other material contributions. On the other hand, public institutions need to be turned into 'breathing' spaces that are open and flexible for different ways of using them.

→ Youth work is important

Youth work needs to be recognised, extended and opened

Youth work can be such a breathing space. However, this requires being open for a diversity of young people and a diversity of issues. Rather than instrumentalising youth work for young people's entrepreneurship and human capital in the future it needs being reinforced as a space where young people cope with their lives and experiment with their identities in the present.

→ What youth policy is needed?

Money and reflexivity for infrastructure and responsiveness

In order to provide conditions for youth participation, youth policy needs to get rid of its subordinate status in politics at local, national and European level. This implies increased funding to secure an infrastructure of youth work and open spaces for young people. It also requires reflexivity of professionals and institutions to understand and be open for new problems, practices – and conflicts. *EU youth policy* needs to increase pressure on member states in this direction while also taking the own credo of mainstreaming youth more seriously.

→ Fight social inequality and poverty

Money, competence and qualification make recognition a tangible asset

Young people's life conditions are structured by precariousness and uncertainty. No wonder they do not engage in public affairs if they are concerned with coping everyday life and achieving a minimum of security and perspective for their lives.

→ Access to welfare and education

As stressed also by the Youth Goals of the Structured Dialogue, free and unconditional access to welfare and education is thereby the most powerful and fundamental contribution to enable agency and trust and to encourage openness for dialogue and engagement. This involves flexibility allowing for choice and for adapting services to individual and collective needs. *EU policies* can make a change by addressing youth like *Youth on the Move* and *Youth Guarantee* need to include mechanisms of youth participation as conditions for funding.

→ Participation is about Rights and Power

Towards a European Charter of Youth Rights

The UN Convention of Children's Rights has been a momentum in childhood policies, research and practice. There is some overlap but no coincidence with young people's life conditions. The de-standardisation of transitions towards adulthood imply a suspension of full citizenship status. A European Charter of Youth Rights is needed that reflects young people's life conditions between childhood and

adulthood. Such a Charter needs to be conceptualised as process and living document that is co-created by young people in different moments, spaces and contexts and constantly re-negotiated. It could be a platform of living knowledge of new forms of governance in urban space and of expressions of 'the right to the city'. Coordination of the Charter process could lie in the hands of the *Youth Partnership of the Council of Europe and the European Commission* and/or connected to the *Structured Dialogue*.

PROJECT IDENTITY

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|-----------------------------|--|
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| COORDINATOR | Prof. Dr. Andreas Walther, JOHANN WOLFGANG GOETHE UNIVERSITAET, Frankfurt/Main, Germany, A.Walther@em.uni-frankfurt.de |
| CONSORTIUM | ALMA MATER STUDIORUM UNIVERSITA DI BOLOGNA – UNIBO – Bologna, Italy ECOLE DES HAUTES ETUDES EN SANTE PUBLIQUE – EHESP – Rennes, France GOETEBORGS UNIVERSITET – UGOT – Göteborg, Sweden JOHANN WOLFGANG GOETHE UNIVERSITAET – GUF – Frankfurt/Main, Germany NEW EUROPE CENTER FOR REGIONAL STUDIES SDRUZHENIE – NEC – Plovdiv, Bulgaria HOCHSCHULE FUR ANGEWANDTE WISSENSCHAFTEN – FHS – St.Gallen, Switzerland MANCHESTER METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY – MMU – Manchester, UK UNIVERSITY OF HUDDERSFIELD – HUD – Huddersfield, UK UNIVERSITE DE CERGY-PONTOISE – UCP – Cergy-Pontoise, France YEDITEPE UNIVERSITY VAKIF – YU – Istanbul, Turkey |
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| BUDGET | EU contribution: 1,985,711.00 € |
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FURTHER READING

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