



# EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



PARTISPACE Policy brief no. 1

## SPACES AND STYLES OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

**Horizon 2020 Project “Spaces and Styles of Participation. Formal, non-formal and informal possibilities of young people’s participation in European cities”**

### INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

The project “Spaces and Styles of Youth Participation: Formal, non-formal and informal possibilities of young people’s participation in European cities” (PARTISPACE) has analysed **what participation means for young people** in different social positions and life conditions in eight European cities: Bologna (Italy), Eskisehir (Turkey), Frankfurt (Germany), Gothenburg (Sweden), Manchester (UK), Plovdiv (Bulgaria), Rennes (France), and Zurich (Switzerland).

The project responds to a major **concern in European societies** that young people do not participate enough in public affairs which is viewed as potentially undermining the cohesion of democratic societies. **Understanding meanings and motives of young people** is crucial for developing more and better ways of encouraging them to become active in public space.

PARTISPACE has analysed what young people do in public spaces and what these activities mean to **better understand youth participation**. Research findings suggest that participation is more than conventional representation, political activity or voluntary work. A broader understanding is needed that recognises the diverse ways in which young people claim being a part of society.

This policy brief **summarises** the key findings and **provides recommendations** of what can be done to support young people in their political, social and civic participation. It addresses policy makers at local, national and European level as well as all practitioners working with young people in the fields of education or training, youth work, sports, cultural activities or in maintaining public order like the police. It is complemented by a series of more targeted policy briefs (see below).

## 1. Narrow Understandings of Youth Participation in European and National Policy Documents

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



One of the first steps in the project was a discourse analysis of documents of European institutions on youth participation, the European Union, the Council of Europe and the European Youth Forum, as well as of national governments. The focus lay on how they defined and referred to youth participation and how participation was related with other key concepts.

A first finding is that in all documents participation is defined as ‘involvement in ...’ predefined and institutionalised activities. A second finding is that youth participation has been increasingly related to ‘education’ (see figure 1). Young people are ascribed a lack of ‘participation competence’ and education is expected to adapt them to participate according to institutionalised standards. In addition, participation is also interpreted in terms of involvement in formal education.

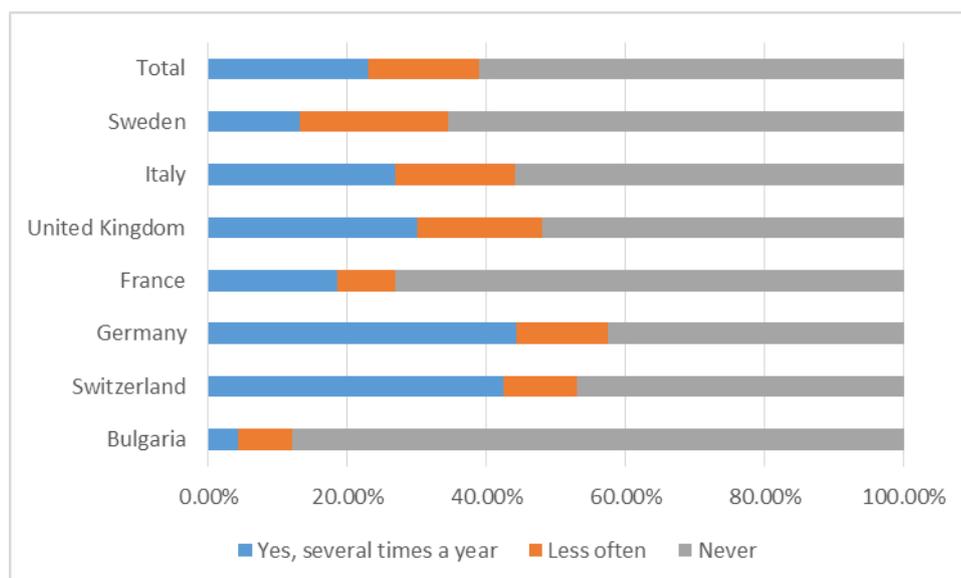
## 2. Cross-national differences in participation and engagement

In order to have an overview of statistical reference data on youth participation reflecting, data of the European Social Survey (wave 6) have been analysed:

- *Political participation* (voting in elections as well as non-conventional forms of political participation) is highest in Sweden followed by Germany and lowest in Italy and 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, 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.

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



### 3. Different levels of youth policy development – youth participation high on the agenda but ...

The analysis of the **youth policies, educational policies and welfare systems** of the eight countries has shown that youth policy is 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 to different degrees, but take different forms and give rise to different effects:

- Youth policies are established and coordinated at national level but implemented at local level. Even where they are well-developed like in Switzerland, Sweden or Germany, they tend to be subordinate to education or labour market policies in terms of budget and power.
- Specialised youth policies have been turned into remedial policies aimed at including disadvantaged youth, especially in the UK.
- Despite the increasing prominence of youth in policy discourses, 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.
- European integration has contributed to developing youth policies especially in Bulgaria and Turkey, yet there are still discrepancies and contestation between national and local levels.

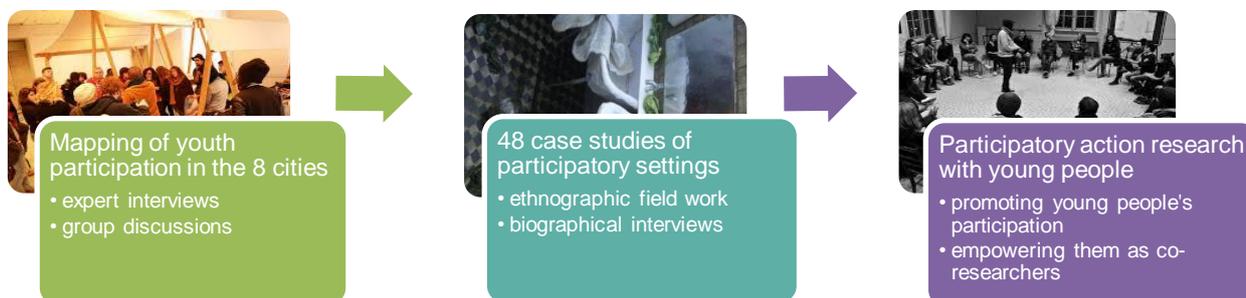
Young people's participation is high on the agenda in policy documents. However, a dominant principle of youth policy is **protection** whereby young people are addressed as children. In Italy, a fixed image of vulnerability due to economic uncertainty prevails. In France, Switzerland or Germany, the main concern is that young people shall enter a standard life course. A second dominant principle in policies is to address youth as 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. Together, these differing policy positions give rise to ambivalence in young people's citizenship status. 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. They refer to participation but are ineffective in empowering young people effectively.

#### 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 and in-depth case studies.

Figure 3: The PARTISPACE field work



The mapping provided insights into relationships between cities and ‘their’ youth and an overview how different actors refer to youth participation. It confirmed the general impression of a large and deep gap between adults/institutions and young people. While professionals and policy makers ascribe low involvement in (formal) participation to young people’s low motivation, deficits or problems, many young people expressed alienation from politics and institutions. Identification with public space mainly emerged from informal ‘chilling’ and ‘hanging out’ with peers in public space.

Such practices have been defined as **everyday life participation**. They are part of young people’s ways of coping with stressful and precarious life situations using public space for it. The boundaries between everyday life and political participation are fluid:

A group of young men in a peripheral urban district complain: “We would like to have more influence in our neighbourhood because we are a part of it. For example, if benches that are used by young people who chill outside are simply dismantled ..., this means interfering with a territory of young people that is used 24 hours a day.” (group discussion, Frankfurt)

In order to widen the view beyond the prevailing narrow understanding of participation, a diversity of settings have been analysed using in-depth case studies (six per city, 48 in total):

- Formal settings in which youth participation is explicitly institutionalised (e.g. youth councils)
- Non-formal settings in which participation is not the explicit aim but an integral working principle such as starting from young people’s interests (e.g. youth centres)
- Informal settings in which young people are active in public spaces regardless of whether as part of the wider community or following their own interest.

As a result of initial analysis, these participatory activities have been grouped in **seven clusters of styles of participation** according to their dominant forms and contents (see also next page):

- I **Representation** of interests as right and obligation (like youth or student councils)
- II Fighting with(in) the political system – explicit **political activities** (e.g. youth sections of parties)
- III Living **social alternatives** as a political model (e.g. squats combining politics and life-style)
- IV Producing and negotiating **own spaces** (e.g. using spaces according to own needs and rules)
- V In between **service** of humanity and service enterprise (e.g. engagement in traditional NGOs)
- VI Exploring **interests**, developing and performing **skills** (e.g. artistic or sports initiatives)
- VII **Pedagogically supervised leisure** for young people (e.g. youth work)

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

→ **In formal settings young people struggle for participation in a subjectively meaningful way which is one reason for low interest of most young people.**

**NDENDE Rennes (Cluster II)** is an informal civic movement that emerged from protests against employment legislation. Everyone can bring up what they want and take initiative:

→ **Non-conventional political activities are inclusive and dialogic forms of compensating the deficits of representative democracy, yet often concerned with structural issues.**

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

→ **If informal groups did not have to defend themselves against pressure and control, they would be more open to the community and contribute to social innovation.**

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

→ **The lack of public infrastructures provokes young people's inventiveness and creativity in developing alternative scenes and spaces.**

**Girls group, Frankfurt (Cluster IV):** Young girls have co-opted a youth centre as a stage for experimenting with gender roles and youth cultural practice provoking constant conflicts with staff:

→ **Contesting boundaries between 'inside' and 'outside' involves important identity work but is challenging for public institutions.**

**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 and paid:

→ **The more adult-led an activity is, the less engagement it requires from young people; yet, time for participation may also be paid – as in adult politics.**

**Street musicians, Eskisehir (Cluster VI)** give an account of Kurdish culture under-represented in public life and engage in an alternative lifestyle:

→ **Young people create micro spaces of intercultural exchange based on their struggle for identity.**

**LGBT project, Gothenburg (Cluster VII):** Co-organised youth work space for LGBT youth to feel safe from discrimination and develop own views, life styles and raise awareness outside:

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

## 5. Young people researching participation on their own terms

Accompanying **youth-led action research** 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](http://www.partispace.eu)).



Young people's idea of regenerating urban waste-land (Plovdiv)



Performance of religious and cultural identities of young muslims (Bologna).



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

## 6. Towards a better understanding of youth participation

The qualitative findings of PARTISPACE contribute to a deeper understanding of youth participation:

- **City contexts differ** according to socio-economic factors, youth policy responsiveness, youth work infrastructure, dominant discourses on youth as a resource or as problems. Influence of national welfare systems is indirect but unconditional access to education, welfare and good jobs are powerful factors and signs of participation. Formal participation is a sign of well-developed youth policy but it is also contradictory because imposing an adult habitus on young people.
- **Social space structures young people's practice – young people's practice structures social space.** All practices by young people in public space are attempts to appropriate space and turn it into meaningful places to which they belong, which they feel able to control, which fit with their youth cultural styles, and where they feel safe.
- Young people's **styles of participation** reflect the relationship between different social positions and different processes of identity. Young people participate only in ways that enable exploration of their individual and collective identities. Analysing these differences shows that whilst forms matter, different issues are important for young people than for adults.
- Analysing young people's **participation biographies** shows that search for recognition and belonging are the most important drivers. This can be linked to coping with critical life events or problems with peers, to experiences of injustice or to longing for self-efficacy. Positive experiences in formal institutions like school make engagement in formal participation more likely.
- Young people's participatory practice involves processes of **learning**. 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 or wanting to participate and therefore needing education. However, young people learn participation not from teaching and training, but from **experiences of recognition and from dialogic reflection as they participate**.

In summary, PARTISPACE findings suggest that youth participation is **relational** (not individualised), based on experiences of **recognition**, **political** (but not politics) and often **conflictual**. Participation is rooted in everyday life practices and struggles structured by social inequalities, inclusion and exclusion. It evolves in public spaces and thus includes claims to be a part of, and attempts to take part in, society.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

PARTISPACE does not prescribe 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.

### FOR A SHIFT FROM INVITATION TO 'PARTICIPATE IN ...' TOWARDS RECOGNITION OF ACTUAL PRACTICE

- PARTISPACE findings show that young people are involved in various practices in public space most of which are not recognised as participation. This contributes more to demotivating than attracting young people to participate. First, it needs to be 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.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING A DIVERSITY OF FORMS OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION – ESPECIALLY FOR LOCAL YOUTH POLICIES

- The fact that young people engage in different ways is not a problem but a necessary expression of diverse and complex societies. This includes **accepting that** a majority of **young people refrain from** engaging in **formal**, adult-led **youth participation** and that for young people **different forms and different contents** can be more relevant, even if some of these are apparently only of particular interest.
- Local youth policies need to **balance infrastructure and flexibility**: On the one hand, youth participation benefits from a reliable infrastructure of youth work covering the whole city taking account of social segregation and disadvantage and different scenes and groups of young people. On the other hand, youth policies need to be more **reflexive and responsive**, with respect to changing needs and new practices that young people develop.
- **Funding of youth policy should be diversified** including a variety of emerging and dissident youth cultural and political scenes. Public funds should be allocated on a regular basis, as well as ensuring equity in distribution of such funds in the light of structural inequalities. Funding should not only go to organisations but also to **young people's initiatives directly**.
- **Young people need more accessible spaces**: Participation often involves appropriating public space. 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. At the same time, public institutions need to turn into 'breathing' spaces that are open for different ways of using them.
- **Youth work needs to be recognised, extended and opened**: Youth work can be such a breathing space. However, this requires being open to 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 to be reinforced as a space where young people cope with their lives and experiment with their identities in the here and now..

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUFFICIENT AND STABLE FUNDING FOR YOUTH POLICIES AND YOUNG PEOPLE AND DEMOCRATISATION OF SCHOOL – ESPECIALLY FOR NATIONAL POLICY MAKERS

- In order to provide youth work infrastructure and allow youth policy to respond to the changing needs and initiatives of young people, **local governments need sufficient resources**.
- Young people's life conditions are structured by precariousness and uncertainty. **Unconditional access to welfare and education** as well as **flexibility for choice** in using them are the most powerful and fundamental contributions to enable agency and trust in institutions.
- **Schools and training need to be turned into democratic spaces** in which democracy is not only taught for later life but lived and experienced in the present.

## RECOMMENDATIONS ON HOW YOUNG PEOPLE CAN BE SUPPORTED IN LEARNING TO PARTICIPATE – ESPECIALLY FOR LOCAL POLICY MAKERS AND PRACTITIONERS

- **Democracy is learned by doing** – young people's learning of participation needs to start from their experiences and is different to learning about participation and citizenship in formal education settings
- **Learning of participation** emerges from recognising and reflecting on experiences of practice in public space – whether this is streets, squares, parks, institutions, or the internet. Supporting it requires a broader perspective than preparing young people for institutionalised participation.
- **Dialogue and cooperation** are imperative in achieving a sense of inclusive citizenship: This requires ensuring young people have opportunities for expression, creativity, experimentation and articulation of difference as well as through mutual learning with adults/professionals.
- **Accept conflicts as moments of participation:** In diverse societies, claims for inclusion and participation are necessarily diverse and at times conflicting. These conflicts are not barriers towards participation but 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.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENCOURAGING CHANGE AT LOCAL/NATIONAL LEVEL – ESPECIALLY FOR EUROPEAN POLICY MAKERS

- European youth policies (EU and Council of Europe) need to **increase pressure on member states to ensure** sustainable and effective support of youth participation
- The EU needs to take their own credo of **mainstreaming youth** more seriously, for example by ...
- **re-introducing funding of local youth initiatives** of former Youth for Europe programmes.
- **including mechanisms of youth participation** as conditions for funding in programmes like *European Social Fund, URBACT, Youth on the Move, Youth Guarantee* and *ERASMUS+*.

## TOWARDS A EUROPEAN CHARTER OF YOUTH RIGHTS

Inspired by the UN Convention of Children's Rights a European Charter of Youth Rights is needed. The life conditions of young people are particularly due to the de-standardisation of transitions which suspends full citizenship status. Such a Charter needs to be a process and living document that is co-created by young people to provide a platform of knowledge and support for new forms of urban governance. Coordination of the Charter process should be linked to the *Structured Dialogue* & the *Youth Partnership of the Council of Europe & the European Commission*.

## RESEARCH PARAMETERS

PARTISPACE has responded to a concern 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).

The central research question of PARTISPACE was **how** and **where** do young people participate across formal, non-formal and informal settings. 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).

**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
- Being constituted out of (unequal) *relationships between individuals, institutions and society*, rather than a problem of individual attitudes or knowledge deficits.
- *Manifest through 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.

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 including mapping youth participation, expert interviews (N=188), group discussions & 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 led by young people on their own issues (N= 18).

## FURTHER INFORMATION

Information, reports and working papers can be accessed at: [www.partispace.eu/downloads](http://www.partispace.eu/downloads)

Further PARTISPACE Policy Briefs:                    Policy Brief no. 2 recognize diversity of styles  
    Policy Brief no. 3 spaces of participation  
    Policy Brief no. 4 biographies of participation  
    Policy Brief no. 5 learning participation  
    Policy brief no. 6 address conflicts as participation

Policy Briefs are available for download from: [www.partispace.eu/downloads/policybriefs](http://www.partispace.eu/downloads/policybriefs)

**PROJECT IDENTITY**

**PROJECT NAME**                    **Spaces and Styles of Participation.** Formal, non-formal and informal possibilities of young people’s participation in European cities (**PARTISPACE**)

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