



EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

June 2018



PARTISPACE Policy brief no. 2

RECOGNIZING THE DIVERSITY OF STYLES OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Horizon 2020 Project “Spaces and Styles of 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. Research findings suggest that an understanding of participation is needed that is broader and recognises the diverse ways in which young people claim being a part of society. Styles of participation can conform to existing rules but also deviate, they can address a whole community or society but they can also focus on the interests of a specific group.

This policy brief is concerned with emphasising the need to **recognise the diversity of styles of youth participation**. It gives recommendations to policy and practice at local, national and European level concerning why recognition of diverse styles is necessary in promoting youth participation and what this can mean in terms of concrete orientations and actions.

KEY FINDINGS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Participation is more than representation, political activity and voluntary work!

PARTISPACE findings show that there is a broad diversity of styles in which young people are active in public space and claim being part of society and which need to equally recognised as participation:

- 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)
- V Inbetween **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)

2. Formal representation: complementing and flexibilising a classical tool of democracy

PARTISPACE findings confirm that engaging in formal representation is an excellent means of providing young people experiences of democracy. However, most young people feel alienated and stay away; those who engage feel torn between expectations of adults and of their peers:

Formal Youth Representation Manchester (Cluster I) is formed to represent young people in the city and the city council. Most activities are campaigns on education and diversity that are pre-defined by others and facilitated by a youth worker. There is little space for own objectives and experimenting with own forms.

→ Formal settings of representation need to be turned into ‚breathing spaces‘ in which rules and routines can be negotiated and which are linked to other scenes and activities

3. Political activities are conventional and non-conventional: support diverse forms

Young people are interested in political themes and activities even if most are sceptical towards politics. There are various forms of non-conventional political action. However they struggle with a lack of stability and routine – also due to a lack of recognition and support.

NDENDE Rennes (CLUSTER II) is an informal civic movement emerged from protests against employment legislation where everyone can bring up what they want and take initiative. It aims at compensating for the deficits of representative democracy but after some time was mainly concerned with own structures.

→ Non-conventional forms of political activity should be supported as conventional ones.

4. Social alternative models: dialogic approaches allow for sharing social innovation

Young people engage in combining alternative lifestyles, political activity and contributing to public life, often in areas not catered for by public services. Where this is tolerated or even supported dialogue develops, where this is repressed young people develop mistrust and resistance:

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. After a period of toleration, the city has applied a repressive approach forcing the group into defending themselves.

→ City planners and policy makers should recognise abandoned places and support young people in these spaces, this would strengthen the trust in local policy.

5. Young people need and create own spaces for everyday life participation

Young people's everyday lives are structured by pressure to succeed in school and transitions to work, by discrimination and precariousness. Often they use public spaces for coping with these demands and constrains. This includes contesting boundaries of places and institutions:

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

→ Young people's use of public space reflects the need to cope with societal constraints and contradictions. These practices need to be recognised as micro-political claims of being part of society.

6. Young people provide voluntary services for society – yet for various motives

→ Policy makers and professionals who aim at fostering voluntary work of young people need to accept and provide for a diversity of motives and forms of voluntary work.

Young people engage in voluntary work in civil society organisations but also in own alternative contexts and compensate for services that authorities fail to provide. However, they do this not only for altruism but also to improve their careers, have fun with peers or for money.

The youth branch of a humanitarian NGO, Plovdiv (Cluster V), are a group of young people who provide services for vulnerable groups. They contribute to public life by collecting money and awareness campaigns. They are proud of their voluntary engagement but having fun together is also important.

7. Young people need and create spaces to explore their interests and develop skills

Many youth cultural practices centre around specific interests and skills like sports, music, or artistic production as a part of their identity process. They need stages to perform and become visible. From these activities micro-spaces emerge which develop public space for participation..

Street musicians, Eskisehir (Cluster VI) give an account of the marginalised Kurdish culture and engage in an alternative lifestyle. They depend on the acceptance of inhabitants and shopkeepers and are in constant struggle with the authorities, yet they contribute to the vitality of the student city

- Policy makers and youth workers should support young people in their attempts of creating micro spaces of cultural and sports activities reflecting struggles for identity and claims for recognition.

8. Pedagogically supervised leisure for young people

Youth work is a public space which young people can appropriate, where they can experiment with youth cultural practice and where they receive support in coping with their lives. Where youth work starts from young people's interest it is an important space for youth participation.

LGBT project, Gothenburg (Cluster VII) is a co-organised youth work space for LGBT youth to feel safe from discrimination and develop own views, life styles and raise awareness outside. Youth participation in youth work contexts requires flexible boundaries between 'inside' and 'outside'.

- Youth work should **not be instrumentalised for human capital building** or by complementing school in preparing young people solely as future economic participants.
- Learning to participate does not need extra programmes, **each conflict is a situation in which claims for participation are involved** and can be negotiated.
- Practitioners and policy makers are needed who are **not afraid of conflicts but reflect on** their role.

9. Youth policies need to balance infrastructure and responsiveness

Such a diversity of forms and issues of participation only develops in a sustainable way where on the one hand youth policies provide a youth work infrastructure that is reliable, that covers the whole city and is accessible for all young people. At the same time, youth policy needs to be reflexive and flexible with changing needs and practices of young people. **Youth work** needs to be **properly resourced** and preserved as an **open space** for young people's practices of appropriation, exploration and experimentation.

10. Towards a European Charter of Youth Rights

A European Charter of Youth Rights would be a powerful sign of recognition and empowerment of young people. Such a Charter should be a dynamic and open process co-created by young people and by the *Structured Dialogue*. The EU might give an example by making funding from programmes like ERASMUS+ and the Youth Guarantee conditional to subscribing such a Charter.

ABOUT THE PARTISPACE PROJECT

PARTISPACE has responded to a concern that young people do not participate enough in public affairs. The central research question of PARTISPACE was **how** and **where** young people do 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, 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, group discussions & city walks with young people
 - in-depth case studies of formal, non-formal, and informal practices of youth participation consisting of ethnographic observation, group discussions and biographical interviews
- Participatory action research projects led by young people on their own issues.

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.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Information, reports and working papers can be accessed at: www.partispace.eu/downloads

Further PARTISPACE Policy Briefs:

- Policy Brief no. 1 project summary for policy and practice
- 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

PROJECT IDENTITY

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