



# EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

June 2018



PARTISPACE Policy brief no. 4

## SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION BIOGRAPHIES

**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 young people claim being a part of society. **Why** and **how** young people become active participants is connected to their biographical development.

This policy brief is concerned with the **biographical meaning** that **young people** attach to their **participatory activities** and the **conditions** under which these can be supported. First, it gives recommendations to **youth policies** at local, national and European level who are concerned with empowering young people to get involved in political social and civic participation. Second, it addresses **education policies** with regard to necessary changes in formal and non-formal education. Thirdly, it refers to **practitioners** working with young people in formal and non-formal education.

### KEY FINDINGS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 1. Distance from formal politics does not mean political disengagement

Many young people are at distance from the political system. However, engaging with their biographies shows that they continue to seek to influence their lives and are in search for experiences of recognition from other societal actors.

→ The **interplay of biography and participation** implies the need of a **broad understanding of participation** in order to capture the diversity of young people’s lived citizenship today.

## 2. Young people need spaces in which they 'fit' and find recognition and belonging.

Analysis has revealed that the starting point of participation is often the wish for recognition and belonging which makes young people look for an alternative group or peer-context.

**Mario, 24**, from **Plovdiv**, felt he didn't fit in to secondary school due to low achievement and being an outsider. At age 13, he started looking 'outside' for other possibilities for belonging and activity. He engaged in illegal graffiti and formed his first band. Later, together with a friend, he found an alternative location where they organised concerts and debates. According to them authorities neither value nor support youth culture. At the same time, Mario has managed to finish school and to start studying Law.

→ For many young people having a space or the possibility to design a space on their own in which they make friends is more likely to make them participate than teaching them.

## 3. Experiences of recognition are the most powerful factor of participation biographies

**Recognition** of the ways in which young people are involved needs to become a fundamental principle and binding right in all institutions addressing young people including school, training and university.

A turning point in the life story of **Amanda, 17**, from **Gothenburg** was finding a word for her experiences since kindergarten of discrimination due to her black skin: bullying. She tells her mother who informs the school and the bullying stops. This experience made her realize the possibilities to fight against injustice and to use public spaces and institutions in this respect. She gets involved in student councils, she writes and lectures on racism and at age 16 she becomes president of the city's Formal Youth Representation.

## 4. Many young people lack positive experiences of recognition in formal institutions

Biographical analysis has revealed that distrust of many young people towards formal participation is rooted in negative or ambivalent experiences with formal institutions like school. They prefer informal contexts of participation which are less recognized. Thus social inequality is being reproduced.

The life story of **Marcus, 20**, from **Frankfurt**, is characterized by repeated school ruptures, a diagnosis of ADHD, he is a forced stay in psychiatric clinic and heavy family conflicts. At 11 he gets to know a youth centre that offers some anchorage. However, his search for belonging and recognition also brings him in contact with a Salafist group, he tries to put up a refugee initiative (alone) and he starts dealing with drugs. The youth centre stays a central place in his life but fails to create stable relationships of trust.

→ Enhancing young people's **trust** in institutions requires providing them with opportunities to exercise **power and choice** allowing for identification as well as to recognize their experiences, needs and aspirations, especially if they have made negative experiences previously.

## 5. Enhancing trust and participation by reducing social inequality in the EU

Young people in precarious life conditions, with problematic school careers and experiences of discrimination also struggle with a lack of positive experiences of recognition and belonging. Their lack of life chances beyond social disadvantage is reflected by lack of trust in institutions.

→ **unconditional access to welfare and education** to ensure that young people are not trapped in conditions of disadvantage but encouraged to use public space for their identities.

→ **EU policies** addressing young people in their transition to adulthood like the European Social Fund, ERASMUS+, URBACT and the Youth Guarantee need to be examples for low threshold, unconditional access and ways of flexible and participatory use.

## 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](http://www.partispace.eu/downloads)

Further PARTISPACE Policy Briefs:

- Policy Brief no. 1 project summary for policy and practice
- Policy Brief no. 2 recognize diversity of styles
- Policy Brief no. 3 spaces of participation
- Policy Brief no. 5 learning participation
- Policy Brief no. 6 address conflicts as participation

## 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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