



Lessons on strengthening youth participation in EU democratic life



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1. Introduction

The EU Youth Strategy is the framework for EU youth policy cooperation for 2019-2027, based on the [Council Resolution of 26 November 2018](#). EU youth cooperation shall make the most of youth policy's potential. It fosters youth participation in democratic life; it also supports social and civic engagement and aims to ensure that all young people have the necessary resources to take part in society. (*EU Youth Strategy | European Youth Portal, n.d.*)

The EU Youth Strategy focuses on three core areas of action, around the three words: [Engage](#), [Connect](#), [Empower](#), while working on joined-up implementation across sectors. During a 2017-2018 dialogue process which involved young people from all over Europe, [11 European Youth Goals](#) were developed. These goals identify cross-sectoral areas that affect young people's lives and point out challenges. The EU Youth Strategy should contribute to realising this vision of young people. (*EU Youth Strategy | European Youth Portal, n.d.*)

The EU Youth Strategy is based on several instruments, such as [mutual learning activities](#), [Future National Activities Planners](#), [EU Youth Dialogue](#), [EU Youth Strategy Platform](#) and [Evidence-base tools](#). The [EU Youth coordinator](#) is the European Commission's contact and visible reference point for young people. (*EU Youth Strategy | European Youth Portal, n.d.*)

More information on the youth policy cooperation before 2019 can be found in the archives, including [Council conclusions and resolutions](#) adopted in the field of youth policy between 2010 and 2018. (*EU Youth Strategy | European Youth Portal, n.d.*)

The YouEU project was born to provide a positive answer to the goal set by the European Union about empowering youth through e-participation. It is necessary to involve young people in the European democratic processes in order to ensure a democratic future, maintaining our European values, providing youth with critical thinking, and the necessary tools to participate in the daily life of democracy.

The project is composed by five countries (Greece, Austria, Spain, North Macedonia and Bulgaria) that will implement the YouEU model: a toolkit, a democratic platform for active citizenship and a e-learning course that will provide the youth from each country with the necessary tools and knowledge to be more active in democracy.

In this report the e-participation actions and its results through the project lifetime are collected.

References

EU Youth Strategy | European Youth Portal. (n.d.). European Youth Portal. Retrieved January 23, 2023, from https://youth.europa.eu/strategy_en

2. Lessons learnt as seen from the side of the implementation team (researchers, trainers).

The implementation team was composed, in this case, of trainers and researchers from all partner institutions. They have worked collaboratively during the project lifetime, sharing the results, implementing working plans to follow, and sharing the results in their countries.

The implementation team in Spain has been in touch with young people and youth workers since the beginning of the project. The main situations in which the Spanish team has interacted with young people have been during the workshop on the toolkit, the multiplier event and the IO4 feedback seminars on the platform.

In the first case, when the toolkit was presented to the youth, there were interactive activities beforehand to get to know their level regarding EU democracy. INCOMA's team came to the conclusion that they did not have clear some essential concepts, and some of them did not have the basic information.

Given this situation, the workshop aimed at providing them with some information and tools that can be used to be more active in EU decision making. Thanks to this workshop, they showed a high interest in being involved in EU democracy, and they were very interested in the different initiatives collected in the toolkit.

This demonstrates that the YouEU project is necessary in order to involve young people and make them care. Nevertheless, the teachers were really interested and they showed interest in using the YouEU project in their classroom.

During the IO4 Feedback Seminars on the YouEU e-learning platform, participants were really involved with the topic and they were highly interested.

They showed interest mostly in the Module 2, Lesson 3, which is about the options for different volunteer and mobility programmes. They did not know about that, and several questions were raised regarding this topic. The same happened during the Multiplier Event carried out at University of Seville, in which participants were highly interested in the contents of the training.

To sum up, the project in Spain has shown to fill the gap of information about the European Union and the ways in which they can be involved. Moreover, it shows them real opportunities and the way in which they can take advantage of it. It has been considered as a very useful tool among Spanish youth.

On the other hand, during the implementation of the YouEU project, **it was evident that in Greece**, there are many young people interested in the issue of active citizenship. In fact, during different project dissemination activities, youth showed their inquiry into this issue and spent quality time discussing it with trainers. However, the majority were not familiar with the best practices regarding digital participation tools. Taking into consideration the involvement of young people in other thematic areas, such as climate change or entrepreneurship, the subject of active youth participation in EU democratic life seems to be more complicated, which consequently affects their engagement. This is an important lesson learnt over a period of almost two years.

The young generation is willing to gain further knowledge on reinvigorating their relationship with the EU. Nevertheless, both younger people and youth workers emphasise that the process might be challenging, as younger people are not that exposed to it. In fact, during a workshop held in Greece in October 2021 within the YouEU project, a significant finding was that most participants confessed that they had never tried to communicate with the EU either because of a lack of knowledge or motivation. Therefore, any training material to be developed had to acknowledge and focus on this fact.

In a workshop in Greece that was conducted in November 2022, students had the opportunity to be informed about the YouEU project and its deliverables. It was a very positive element that many of them had the time to visit the YouEU e-course before the workshop and go through the lessons provided. This enabled a short discussion over the workshop, with the participants focusing on the lessons that they found the most interesting, such as the European Programs for Youth and those that needed to be more familiar, such as the EU Instruments and Ordinary Legislative Procedure.

When it comes to North Macedonia, the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies, prepared throughout an inclusive process and consultation with young people, youth workers, representatives from the Government and relevant stakeholders, was adopted in January 2020 and features definitions of:

Young people are persons aged 15-29 years old;

Youth policy is a set of measures and activities that are undertaken to meet the needs of young people in order to realise their full potential;

Youth work is an organised and systematic process of education and support for authentic youth development in order to achieve the whole personal, social and social potential of the young people and their active involvement in the community;

Youth workers are qualified persons who have competencies for work with young people who carry out activities that support you as a personal and social development through informal and informative learning;

Youth participation is a process that enables young people to participate and be joint decision-making on policies and programs that directly or indirectly are supporting and shaping the lives of young people.

According to YouthWiki e-participation is an essential in the process of involving young people in decision-making processes. The involvement of young people in social and political life, local and national institutions still are facing challenges to recognize the benefits of increased civic participation in decision-making process. Those issues come from the lack of knowledge of engaging young people, openness for cooperation and facilitating the dialogue between the relevant stakeholders. According to Coalition SEGA, which introduced the Youth Development Index in North Macedonia, the municipality average is 0,491 on a scale from 0 to 1. The index is closely related with the index of youth participation and youth empowerment. Regarding the categories of youth development, the highest fulfilment of indicators is in the category of Political participation, where the average score is 0,537, followed by the Civic participation with 0,497, Employment and Opportunities with 0,468 and Education with 0,405. The lowest fulfilment of the indicators is in the category Health and wellbeing where the average score is 0,364.

Taking into consideration this, the youth organisations and organisations working with youth throughout their activities constantly are working towards involvement of young people and empowering their skills.

The COVID-19 pandemic emphasised the need for higher rates of use of the Internet as a valuable source for impacting the youth participation at national and local level. The process of creating youth policies that significantly impact the social and personal development of young people and the process of their implementation at local and national level depends on the participation of young people in local government, institutions and organisations as part of the municipal council. According to the Coalition of youth organisations SEGA the average of young people employed in the municipal administration amounts to a modest 11 %. Within the council of the municipality, the average of the participation of the young people is 20 % of the total number of councillors in the municipalities.

According to the Law of Youth Participation and Youth policies, the young people should be represented by the National Assembly of Youth which is planned to be a body of forms of youth organisation that elects youth representatives in the advisory body, creates priorities and policies for youth advocacy and coordinates and follows their work.

The Law also regulates Local Assemblies of Youth, which are essential tools for boosting the youth participation at local level. According to the latest data from National Youth Council Macedonia Local Assemblies of Youth are established in 13,5% of the municipality at national level. The data shows the need for continuous digital transformation of the local government and providing opportunities for increasing e-participation at local level.

The involvement of young people as active citizens in their own community from the earliest age through volunteering activities, allows them to contribute in the process of building resilient communities able to engage young people in decision-making processes. As a result, the process of e-participation gives them a possibility to increase their technical skills, problem-solving, social exclusion, poverty, inequalities, gender issues and youth unemployment.

The local activities in North Macedonia were implemented in collaboration with the Gymnasium Algorithm. In total 21 young people, high school students joined the event and had an opportunity to test the e-platform and enrolled in the e-course. The team of trainers guided the group throughout the learning process of improving their knowledge related to the role of EU institutions, EU citizenship and e-participation.

During the Multiplier event, students participated in several activities that aimed to give them food for thought on how to get involved in the initiatives at local level and bring changes in their community.

The process of testing the e-platform was inclusive and crucial in finalising the intellectual outputs within the project. Taking into consideration the need of creating a user-friendly e-platform, the project team aimed to increase motivation and bring a new perspective in young people's lives.

Let's focus on Bulgaria. The implementation of the YouEU project has attracted and engaged numerous young people in Bulgaria. At first, during the research phase of IO1 it was observed that young people aged 16 – 26 have not been actively involved in e-activities for active and democratic participation in the EU democratic life. With the development of the online course and its piloting with young people from Bulgaria, we witnessed high interest and level of involvement of young people in gaining new knowledge about the EU and opportunities for being part of European activities.

On 16th of December 2022, Know and Can organised a seminar focused on piloting of the #YouEU online course with the general aim of promoting the project's activities and bringing awareness about the importance of e-participation of young people in the EU. In total, 21 young people participated in the seminar, who learnt about the YouEU project and its results. The online course was piloted and young people found it user-friendly and easy to follow. The highest interest among the young people was the second module about the EU and Youth, especially the lesson about the EU programs and opportunities for volunteering and internships in Europe.

Eventually, **if we focus on Austria**, they developed the same activities with the youth: first, the workshop on IO1 sharing with them the toolkit and the national initiatives; they also developed the Multiplier Event, in which they were able to involve youth workers and young people.

Furthermore, the workshop for the pilot testing of the YouEU platform was carried out, where participants had the opportunity to evaluate the platform in two moments of the event. Firstly, after the presentation of the platform there was time for questions and for a first general feedback. The main opportunity for participants to explore the platform was after the meeting in individual self-learning sessions. We decided to give

them more time to explore the platform alone in order to get a better overview and discover the various topics of it. The questionnaire was filled out after this experience.

3. The #YouEU experience evaluated by participants and users of the platform.

A questionnaire was delivered to participants in some countries, collecting 30 answers in the Spanish version, 43 in the English version, and 30 in the Greek version (please, see the questionnaire: <https://forms.office.com/e/2YnHHrh2YQ>). It is a total of 93 responses, and we should add the questions gathered by the North Macedonian team, who collected feedback through focus groups, involving a total of 21 people. To sum up, **114 young people have tested the YouEU e-learning course** during a seminar that was developed in each country, focus groups and an online questionnaire.

3.1 Austria

The workshop took place on Saturday, 3rd of December with the title “Die EU & Du. Wie soll Mitbestimmung in Europa für junge Leute ausschauen?” (The EU & You. What should participation for young people look like in Europe?). It was organised as an online-event in order to reach more participants also outside of Vienna. In order to get more participants, the event was organised in cooperation with Pulse of Europe Austria.

The event was split into three parts: First we started with a short overview over the project, the main outcomes and the presentation of the platform and the forum followed by more interactive tasks where participants had to select one creative card with different symbols describing why the selected card represents for them Europe and participation. Having done this, in the last part we talked about participation in general and what are common threats that prevent a broader participation in daily political life as well as ideas on how to overcome barriers and create more inclusive forms of participation for everybody.

In total 15 users participated in the online workshop, however some of them did not stay for all of the workshop or arrived later.

Regarding the lessons learnt for the implementation team, the whole process of organising the online workshop was interconnected with organising the Multiplier Event that took place on 17.11.2022, only two weeks before the online workshop. In

this perspective, we reviewed internally the developed project products, the toolkit, the booklet and the platform. In this way, we further found ways to “transmit” the key messages of all the products to our final beneficiaries and we also got a deeper understanding of new forms of (e-)participation in general. The whole process helped the team to further understand how important new forms of participation, especially for young people, are.

In addition to that, the whole organisation process of the event was a lesson learnt itself. The aim was to create an interactive workshop where participants can actively discuss new ideas of participation, but in the same way, it was also necessary to leave enough space to introduce the project and especially the developed platform. The combination of both, creating an interactive event on the one hand and presenting the platform on the other, was a challenge that however in the end worked out.

3.2 Greece

The participants in the workshop for the piloting of the YouEU e-course offered their thoughts on this experience. After completing the workshop, participants spent time reviewing the lessons in a self-paced mode and filling in a questionnaire with their input. In order to gain further feedback from young people, the University of Peloponnese reached out to more students and introduced them to the E-course. Consequently, 20 people (45% between 16-20 years old and 40% between 20-30 years old) accessed and assessed the e-course.

Eighty per cent of the participants gave the e-course five stars, while 20% four stars. Moreover, 55% rated the overall course as very good, and 50% characterised the content of the different lessons as very good as well. As regards their personal abilities after completing the e-course, 70% completely agree that it will reinforce their role in society, and 65% completely agree that they became aware of their rights and how they can be more active. Furthermore, 55% completely agree that they feel better equipped to participate in political processes.

Besides the above, the platform users shared some comments on personal/technical competences that they need to improve or develop further. These mostly include their social and networking skills, their active role and inquiry in gaining new knowledge (e.g., by searching online), as well as their willingness and dedication to reaching out

to EU organisations. These competences can be partially cultivated on the YouEU platform, which works as a public sphere, bringing together people across the EU. Nevertheless, during the workshop, where the participants had the chance to see how the platform works, it was evident that they were pretty shy about signing in and starting a conversation.

3.3 Spain

During the Feedback Seminar on the YouEU e-learning platform, a questionnaire was forwarded to participants.

These were the main answers provided by Spanish respondents:

A total of 30 responses were collected during the seminar in Spain, 27 of respondents were female, and only 3 were male. 76% were between 20 and 26 years old, while 10% between 16 and 20 years old.

They evaluated the course with 3.87/5, which means that they assessed it positively.

However, when they assessed the concrete aspects of the course, these were the results: Modules' contents: good or very good (83%), enough (17%); Adaptation to their needs: good or very good (81%), enough (13%), and not enough (6%); Materials: good or very good (83%), enough (17%); Improvement of their skills: good or very good (90%), not enough (10%); Improvement of their technical skills: good or very good (83%), enough (3%), and not enough (10%). Regarding their experience with the course: I have developed new skills in dealing with policy makers: completely or partially agree (60%); neutral (27%), partially or completely disagree (14%); I am more aware of the democratic processes and its importance: completely or partially agree (60%), neutral (27%), partially or completely disagree (14%); I am more aware of my rights and how I can be more active: completely or partially agree (67%), neutral (20%), partially or completely disagree (14%); I have strengthened my cooperation with local stakeholders: completely or partially agree (47%), neutral (33%), partially or completely disagree (14%); I acquired new methodologies to promote culture: completely or partially agree (57%), neutral (23%), partially or completely disagree (17%); I feel valued as a citizen: completely or partially agree (64%), neutral (20%), partially or completely disagree (17%); I feel that I have strengthened my role in

society: completely or partially agree (64%), neutral (20%), partially or completely disagree (17%); I feel better prepared to participate in political processes: completely or partially agree (50%), neutral (27%), partially or completely disagree (23%).

Eventually, there are skills participants mentioned when being asked about the competences they want to improve. They want to improve their skills related to politics, their technical skills, and some of their personal skills as well.

3.4 North Macedonia

The diverse group of total 21 participants (13 male, 7 women and 1 non-binary) affected the group dynamic and different point of views. Some of the lessons from the e-learning course (e.g., the lesson about the SDGs) provoked fruitful discussion about the role of young women in ensuring peace and security in the world. Furthermore, the participants emphasised the need of providing quality education, especially for their peers with fewer opportunities facing challenges and isolation in their life.

In addition, other lessons, such as the ones on e-participation, encouraged and helped them to become more aware about the importance of how their participation can shape their lives. They expressed the need for common support and solidarity in their community and other peers coming from countries that are facing armed conflicts, especially young people living in Ukraine and Afghanistan.

The participants expressed overall satisfaction of the event and were highly motivated to share their opinion with their peers within the group. According to the evaluation form, the e-platform provided them with valuable information that strengthened their knowledge and skills, while the material design and the content were engaging and interesting, which led to improvement and growth on a personal level.

The training program presented in the e-platform during the event, influenced the participants, motivated them and reinforced their role in the society. With the presented Toolkit with good practices, the young people had an opportunity to better understand their role as European citizens, different approaches for getting involved in their communities and increase their political participation.

3.5 Bulgaria

The young people were encouraged to explore the online course features as a self-learning material and to provide their feedback about the YouEU e-course. 60% of the young people defined themselves as women, and 40% as male. The greater proportion of young people 70% followed in the age category 20-30 years old and 30% in the 16-20 years old.

80% of the young people rated the course highly with 5 stars and 20% gave 4 stars. 70% of young people rated the course as very good and 30% as good. Regarding the content, more than 60% of young people considered the course as very good as well as the content of the different lessons. Similarly, 80% of young people considered that after the completion of the e-course, it will foster their role in society and 70% reported that they are more aware of their rights. In terms of participation in the political processes, 60% of young people agreed that they are well equipped to take part in political activities.

Regarding the improved personal and technical competences, 70% of young participants declared that their abilities have improved. Overall, the experience of young people and their participation in the e-course were positively ranked, and about 65% of participants completely agreed that they have developed new abilities to engage with policy makers and with local stakeholders. Young people stated that their personal skills like soft skills and key competences needed to be further developed. More particularly, young people considered critical thinking and effective communication as one of the most essential skills needed for their personal and professional development.

During the workshop, young people had the chance to learn about the newly developed forum as well as were guided on how to navigate around the forum. At first, some of the participants were hesitant to engage and communicate with other young people from Europe. After they were given some time to explore the features of the forum on their own, they started to be active, took initiative for starting new posts, and discussed their views and opinions about EU issues and their vision for the future of Europe.

4. Specific cases of youth e-participation during the project.

In the case of Austria, in the last part of the online workshop they had the opportunity to discuss new forms of participation with special focus on e-participation and e-democracy.

They started the discussion by focussing on current obstacles that make it difficult for young people to participate. The main issues regarding this according to our participants is the missing representation of young people in decision-making institutions. There are almost no ways for young people to participate, given the fact that in future the society will further age, opportunities for young people to influence the future are getting low. Our participants came up with the idea to establish a “youth council” that has the opportunity to block decisions from other bodies or at least to make them obligated to revise new measures or laws in order that they do not “forget” the point of view of young people. This can be done also in the form of online gatherings or by using polls and other tools to get the opinion of as much as possible of young people throughout all Europe.

Young people in decision making processes should not be just “consulted” or used by decision makers as “marketing objects”, but should be actively included in the decision-making processes.

According to the Greek team, the YouEU project, as mentioned before, provided the opportunity for young people to learn what e-participation is about and how this can be achieved. Before their engagement, the majority had no solid knowledge of this matter or even the curiosity to learn more about it. However, during the project’s dissemination activities, they learned about the possibility of involvement in youth-led organisations in Greece, aiming to redefine the way social and political conversations are conducted and to cultivate active participation in democratic processes.

Additionally, they became familiar with the ways that they can communicate their claims to the relevant EU institutions (e.g., through the European Parliament’s petitions portal, the European Commission’s online consultations via the web portal of Your Voice in Europe, the Conference on the Future of Europe, etc.). Last but not least, they were invited to register on the YouEU digital platform, where they can

communicate with others, share their thoughts on different issues and build claims together.

Furthermore, **according to the Spanish team** and their experience, before the project, participants in the activities did not have the knowledge or interest in the democratic processes and the main contents covered by the project.

However, after the IO1 workshop and the IO4 feedback seminars, in addition to the multiplier event, they had the chance to feel involved and discuss topics such as e-democracy and e-participation. These are, by the way, concepts that they did not know before the project.

This means that, thanks to the YouEU project and its products, they had the chance to get to know new ways of communicating and participating online in democracy. A total of 30 people have logged into the online platform, leaving their comments on it.

Eventually, when the e-learning was tested, they took the e-course and acquired new knowledge thanks to this online opportunity.

If we focus on North Macedonia, we can conclude that throughout the project the project team implemented several on-line and in-person events that aimed to increase the visibility of the project, to get involved with the young people and to establish collaboration with relevant stakeholders at national and local level.

During the Multiplier event, the trainers facilitated the discussion and increased the motivation of the participants to get involved in the local initiatives at local level. In order to disseminate the results, the trainers presented the good practices for e-participation in North Macedonia and the partner countries explained in the Toolkit.

Taking into consideration that the young people are aware of the problem of pollution in Skopje, they had an opportunity to learn more about the local initiative focusing on that issue. The team of trainers put attention on the process of increasing the engagement, involvement, connection and inclusion of young people in order to motivate them to bring changes in their community, by following the best practices from the other partner countries.

In N. Macedonia, there is an on-going process for creating the National Youth Strategy. For that purpose, the young people were motivated to get involved and participate online in consultation processes on the level of defining key challenges they are facing and providing long-term objectives and measurements to address their needs for personal, social and professional development. The consultation process is inclusive and gives them an opportunity to be involved in many initiatives to increase their active participation in democratic life. Furthermore, for the purpose of creating the first Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policy, young people were also consulted for their needs and opinions. Taking into consideration that the Covid-19, the socio-political challenges and arm conflict in Ukraine, express the need for access to youth services. Even though North Macedonia made a significant impact in reinforcing the youth participation, youth work and youth policy, still there is a need of improving the systematic approach and support from the national and local institution. The project team motivated the participants to get involved in the process.

Furthermore, the participants shared that they were encouraged to follow the initiatives supported by EU and UN Agencies that work towards empowering young people globally. The participants considered the process of supporting and networking with young people from other countries could help them to increase their voice and advocate for human rights for their peers.

In addition, the team of trainers encouraged the participants to take action at the local level and to advocate in the municipalities to take measurements related to climate change and other issues of importance to young people.

Focusing on Bulgaria, At the initial stage of the YouEU Project, it was observed low-level of engagement among young people in Bulgaria in e-participation activities and lack of knowledge about the key features of the EU. After the development of the toolkit with the good practices on e-participants and the online course, specifically designed for young people, it became evident the increased level of participation and interest among young people for involvement in e-participation as well as general involvement in the EU democratic process.

Young people improved not only their knowledge about the development and features of the EU, but also their competences for involvement and participation in various EU opportunities and funding programs designed for young people. All of the implemented

activities in the frame of the YouEU project contributed for active participation and inclusion of young people in EU democratic life.

More than 25 young people from Bulgaria registered in the forum and engaged in discussions with other young people from the partner countries of the project. All of the developed outputs have been highly ranked and considered as very appropriate and suitable for young Europeans.

5. Conclusions

As a conclusion, the YouEU e-learning course has been tested by 114 young people, and the assessment has been quite positive.

One of the lessons learnt is that it is easier for them to focus on one of the topics such as green transition, skills, and so on, as for them it would be too abstract to talk about active citizenship.

In some cases, it aroused their interest in the part of e-learning in which the consortium provides specific information on how to participate in volunteering, the Solidarity Corps, the Youth Passport, as it affects directly to the opportunities they could benefit from. It was highly attractive for them in Spain, as they were looking for opportunities to travel around Europe.

In all countries the youth agree that they need more tools and, mostly, they need more information about the democratic processes. It is essential for them to be aware of the democratic processes and how they can participate. Moreover, in some countries it was relevant that they barely had information about the EU, its institutions, the anthem, the flag and its purpose.

The conclusions are:

- The European youth need to gain basic knowledge about the EU and its democratic processes and values.
- They enjoy participating and they appreciate being involved in democratic processes.
- E-participation is the best way to engage them, as they live digitally and it is easier for them to understand how to participate.

The outcomes developed by the consortium through the project lifetime collect all these necessities in order to bring them a solution and fill the gap.

In short, e-participation is an essential part of participation of young people. According to the implemented activities within the project, we aimed to increase the awareness of young people about their active role in the society. The partner organisations, EU

and UN institutions have invested in development of educational programs, such as Erasmus+, Erasmus Solidarity Corps etc., that aim to address social issues that are important for the social and personal development of young people. The non-formal education and digital youth participation are powerful tools for shaping the future of young people in the process of creating a more democratic, inclusive, peaceful and sustainable society where the young people will have the right to be active European citizens.

YOU EU

