

Democracy Now! CALL FOR ACTION

To mark the 50th anniversary of the Council of Europe youth sector and in the framework of the *Democracy Here / Democracy Now* campaign, the Youth Department hosted a Youth Action Week: *Democracy Now!* in Strasbourg from 28 June to 1 July. The Week was organised under the patronage of the Irish Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe and in partnership with the City of Strasbourg.

The Youth Action Week brought together some 450 youth leaders and activists to discuss the challenges faced by our democracies and what must be done to overcome them to revitalise democracy. The participants prioritised fifty actions, mirroring the fifty years of the youth sector, around the four themes of the activity.

The Council of Europe has developed a strong framework of standards that, if respected and implemented from local to European level, create the premises for a sustainable democratic life, respect for human rights and for the rule of law. In the past fifty years, the youth sector has also developed significant standards, for example a body of soft law guiding youth policy and youth work, and practices, such as the co-management system, as well as resources for non-formal education with and by young people.

The participants in the Youth Action Week stressed that the threats to democracy today are particularly serious because of the accumulation of factors and crises which nourish feelings of apathy, indifference and powerlessness. The ongoing armed aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine has catalysed many of these challenges and contradictions and conditioned the spirit of the Week in many ways. In their call for action, the participants recall that all processes to revitalise democracy must start with the respect and thorough implementation and regular monitoring of existing Council of Europe standards, and lead to their further development.

REVITALISING DEMOCRACY AND ACCESS TO RIGHTS

Human rights and democracy are intertwined. As per the European Convention on Human Rights, fundamental freedoms which are the foundation of justice and peace in the world and are best maintained on the one hand by an effective political democracy and on the other by a common understanding and observance of the Human Rights upon which they depend.

1. Independent and youth-led youth councils should be created and supported in every municipality in every Council of Europe member State. Participation in decision-making is a cornerstone of both democracy and human rights.

2. Discrimination of young people on any grounds, starting with age, maturity or experience, must be assiduously addressed. Racial discrimination, hate speech and hate crimes hinder the capacity of young people to participate fully in society and enjoy their rights. Youth-led and based campaigns against discrimination such as “A day in the life of (any young person)” should be initiated.
3. An anti-racism youth week, modelled on the Anti-Discrimination Month, inviting young people targeted by racism and discrimination to take a leading role in its organisation, should be set up by the Council of Europe.
4. Hate speech ought to be taken seriously as a threat to a culture of democracy and human rights. Member States must commit to implementing fully Council of Europe recommendations on combating hate speech. This must be accompanied by close monitoring by public (and democratic!) institutions of new media giants to combat hate speech and ensure their compliance with legal standards and democratic values.
5. Young people and youth civil society need the relevant competences and resources to advocate for and engage with issues of concern to them. The Council of Europe should guide national authorities by proposing training courses and educational resources, online and offline, to support youth leaders and youth civil society to build their competences and strategise advocacy efforts for bettering democracies.
6. The development of social and emotional competences through formal and non-formal education is key to empowering young people to take part in democratic life. The Council of Europe’s Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education clarifies the importance of education for strengthening democracy and respect of human rights; it must be present and taken seriously in all education programmes and contexts.
7. Educational practices need to be updated to reflect new developments and current interests of young people. The quality of democratic citizenship and human rights education is directly mirrored in the quality of our democracies. We need projects and programmes that develop democratic literacy and make use of varied pedagogical approaches, such as gamification.
8. Education for democratic citizenship and human rights should be core to higher education programmes; interdisciplinarity and the use of non-formal education approaches should be developed.
9. Educational resources and opportunities should systematically be available online to be accessible to all young people, combined with offline information work and counselling.
10. The current war against Ukraine, along with the existence in Europe of a multitude of conflict areas, are a reminder that action for peace and reconciliation remains of crucial importance in Europe; young people who experience or have experienced conflict should contribute to reconciliation and to living together in peace.
11. Economic and social injustice is an important cause of disillusionment with democracy and its mechanisms; it is important to strengthen the political participation of young people by focusing on their capacity to take part in discussions concerning economics and to support the organisation of fora on economic and social rights at local and regional levels.
12. Bold action and a strong awareness-raising campaign on the interconnections between the climate crisis and the mental health of young people are urgent; young people are very worried about climate change, negative emotions such as sadness, anger and powerlessness being associated with the topic, there is a generalised feeling of being ignored in society when they raise the issue; the credibility of democracies is also at stake here.

13. Regular events with debates and open exchanges between young citizens and politicians must be organised, especially at local and regional levels.
14. The independence and quality of journalism must be promoted at all levels across Europe, together with quality education for journalists that includes human rights, combating hate speech, and a critical awareness of online media; freedom of expression and information are essential for democratic societies; independent, reliable and quality journalism is paramount.
15. Gender equality guarantees should be applied to all public institutions, including those dealing with culture, education and youth; youth organisations should integrate bodies responsible for ensuring that intersectionality and gender equality pervade in all decisions and processes.

MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Participation in the democratic life of any community is about more than voting or standing for election, although these are important elements. Young people are motivated and interested in political issues in our societies, however they find that traditional avenues for participation are not delivering on their promise. Youth civil society has been particularly affected by the shrinking civic space, and yet has been delivering support in times of crisis, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic and to refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine. Discrimination of all kinds, along with a general othering and infantilisation of youth, keeps adding barriers to youth engagement with democratic processes and institutions, creating an atmosphere of mistrust and disenfranchisement.

16. Youth participation in the member States is changing and evolving together with young people and society. The Council of Europe and the member States should invest in research and dialogue among young people, youth civil society, youth researchers and policy makers.
17. Non-traditional ways of youth participation ought to be recognised and supported as legitimate acts of democratic engagement of young people and be given due consideration in research about youth participation.
18. Youth-friendly information and quality formal and non-formal education about democratic participation and decision-making structures and processes at local, national and international levels should be available to all young people.
19. Public authorities at all levels should provide transparent, accurate and accessible information to young people and youth civil society, allowing them to participate in the development and monitoring of the implementation of measures in the youth field.
20. Easily accessible, sustainable and meaningful structural funding should be made available to independent youth organisations, including national youth councils, as important platforms of socialisation and of the exercise of democratic participation.
21. Youth-led experimentations in youth participation, such as forms of deliberative democracy (e.g. randomised youth assemblies) should be promoted as complementing representative democracy and structures for youth participation such as youth councils.
22. Discriminatory barriers to the equal access of all young people to participation opportunities must be recognised and removed in order for them to take part in decision-making processes free of repercussions, retaliation or judgment.
23. Independently managed schemes to provide legal and financial support to young activists who face repercussions (including trials, harassment, injury, exile, etc) for their involvement in democracy should be created.

24. Young people must be encouraged and supported to stand for office including, for example, through the introduction of youth quotas for electoral lists; particular attention must be given to young people from minorities.
25. Young people in rural areas deserve equal opportunities when accessing information and education, as well as to participate; youth centres, including mobile ones, should be created to provide youth work and non-formal education as well as information in these areas.
26. Independent student councils must exist in every school so that young people have the power to concretely influence decisions in their schools and local communities; young people should be involved in the definition of the curricula and content of the topics studied in schools so they respond to their needs and interests.
27. All democratic processes must ensure that minority voices are heard in society and minorities are part of the decision-making process; structures dedicated to youth should include not only those elected by a majority, but also give voice to the wide diversity of young people.
28. Mental health services must be provided and made easily accessible to young people, be youth-friendly and tailored to respond to the needs of minority youth.
29. Young people need to have access to quality youth work and non-formal education, regardless of where they are; member states should ensure quality education for all young people, emphasising the particular and urgent attention to rural and minority youth. This implies investment in the infrastructure required for youth work and the training of youth workers.
30. Youth workers must be provided with education and networking spaces to reach out to and empower minority youth, including outreach measures; non-formal educational materials on meaningful democratic youth participation and on addressing discrimination and inequality should be made more widely available.

DIGITALISATION

Through digital tools, democratisation processes have become accessible in new ways to more people, while also shutting others out. The digitalisation of life has placed digital environments at the core of an increasing part of people's lives. Young people have been significantly affected by this trend, as the ones who typically use and integrate digital technologies at the fastest. Digital tools, including artificial intelligence (AI) systems, open up opportunities for young people but also raise challenges such as behaviour tracking and discrimination due to possible algorithmic bias and poor-quality data sets. Equally challenging is the lack of access of certain groups of young people to digital tools and services (the so-called "digital divide").

31. States must ensure accessibility and free access to Internet and technology, including services to support the development of digital skills, to all young people. Access concerns equally infrastructure, costs of the services and competences.
32. Formal and non-formal education need to deal with digital citizenship and AI literacy; curricula and educational resources need to be developed to this end.
33. Digital citizenship education opportunities need to be made available in offline activities, alongside online offers, emphasising learning-by-doing approaches.
34. Youth organisations must be encouraged and supported to carry out education and awareness-raising programmes on digitalisation issues (including technical awareness) to ensure that young people can reflect critically and make informed decisions.

35. Ways for youth work to engage on AI literacy and governance should be promoted, including funding for co-operation between youth workers and IT specialists.
36. Legal standards and instruments should be put in place to regulate the design, development and use of AI systems according to the values of human rights and democracy, and be based on an equal access to digital development.
37. Young people should have a clear role in decision-making on AI and Internet governance, including in processes of regulation development and monitoring.
38. Youth networks, or similar, should be set up to monitor and report the usage of AI systems and their impact on young people's access to rights.
39. Public digital platforms that allow for regular dialogue, learning and networking between young people and decision-makers should be created.
40. Online discrimination, racism and hate speech remain a reality for too many young people and must be combated and removed by bringing media platforms and perpetrators to account; educational resources must be promoted for awareness-raising and prevention.
41. Transparent and comprehensive policies must be promoted for young people to make informed choices regarding anonymity, data protection and confidentiality.
42. States must implement fully the Council of Europe's recommendations on standards for e-voting, with a focus on the creation of tools for meaningful youth participation, such as e-voting, e-counselling, and e-participation.

YOUTH PEACE

The Youth Peace Camp Conference brought together the experiences of young people and youth leaders from conflict-stricken regions in a context marked by the war in Ukraine and its consequences on young people, peace and democracy.

43. The Council of Europe and its member States must commit firmly to and advocate for action to address all conflicts through peacebuilding and non-violent conflict transformation; the interconnection between democracy and the non-violent solution of conflicts cannot be neglected.
44. All victims of conflict deserve our solidarity; all conflicts in Europe and beyond deserve equal attention from the international community and all stakeholders that can support peacebuilding processes.
45. Member States must increase youth participation and the involvement of youth civil society and youth workers in peace processes, in accordance with the UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security.
46. Young people and youth leaders from rural areas, especially those affected by armed conflict, must be specifically addressed and involved in peacebuilding processes, preparing them for dialogue according to their terms and context.
47. Young people need to have opportunities to develop the competences necessary for the non-violent transformation of conflicts; to this end, it is essential that peace education is included in formal education curricula.
48. Educational activities on peace and conflicts should be organised and funded, especially to make use of the full potential of non-formal education and youth work for peace education.

49. Spaces for dialogue and peacebuilding must be created to support justice and reconciliation among divided communities and address traumas of the conflicts; the Council of Europe should develop guidelines on the establishment and functioning of such spaces.
50. The human side and cost of conflicts need to be highlighted at all moments; stakeholders should advocate and showcase the impact of conflicts on individuals through all means.

Revitalising democracy is an intergenerational effort
where people of all ages are both learners and agents of change!

