Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth

Study on key trends in youth participation and youth organisations' responses to them

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1. BACKGROUND AND KEY FEATURES OF THE STUDY

About the European Youth Foundation

The European Youth Foundation (EYF) provides financial and educational support for youth projects of youth organisations developed by, with and for young people from the member states of the Council of Europe and the States Parties to the European Cultural Convention. The European Youth Foundation is a fund established by the Council of Europe in 1972. It continuously supports the Council of Europe's "Youth for Democracy" programme, which addresses the challenges facing young people in Europe. The EYF is a fund to support youth activities, youth work and youth organisations in Europe, an instrument of the Council of Europe's youth sector to promote the values and priorities of the organisation and a partner for local, national, and international non-governmental youth organisations and networks to strengthen civil society. The EYF annually provides grants to around 200 youth projects for a budget of around 4 million euros. All projects are in line with the Council of Europe's youth sector priorities. In addition, the EYF provides structural grants to international youth organisations and networks to support them in their operational needs. The financial support therefore includes (a) grants for annual work plans of international youth NGOs and networks; (b) grants for one-off international activities of international non-governmental youth organisations or networks and national youth NGOs with at least three partners in other countries; (c) grants for pilot activities of local/national NGOs and regional networks; and (d) structural grants for international youth NGOs and networks.

All activities supported by the EYF are linked to the strategic priorities (i.e. expected results and programme orientations) of the Council of Europe's youth sector, as defined by the Joint Council on Youth. First four youth sector priorities for 2022 - 2025 relevant to the grant programmes include:

(1) Revitalising pluralistic democracy, promoting democratic citizenship, participatory policies, removing barriers to participation.

(2) Young people's access to rights, supporting the implementation of the Council of Europe's standards in this area, promoting human rights education.

(3) Living together in peaceful and inclusive societies, countering discrimination, violence and exclusion and promoting European unity, global solidarity, peace, diversity, intercultural and intergenerational dialogue and environmental sustainability.

(4) Youth work, strengthening, recognising and promoting youth work, improving its quality and increasing its accessibility and attractiveness (see Council of Europe, 2023).

Through its grant system, the EYF supports activities such as education, advocacy, awareness raising, workshops, campaigns, online work and the development of tools. The EYF also provides support measures for applicant and grantee organisations, through capacity-building activities, information sessions, visits to supported projects, and advice services.

Background, data and the structure of this study

In 2022, the EYF began updating its grant-making procedures for funding youth organisations to remain a relevant donor that supports civil society in the context of the overall work of the Council of Europe with young people and non-governmental organisations. The overall intention is to reform in 2024/2025 the operational regulations for the EYF based on evidence, i.e. recognisable changes and trends in young people's democratic and civic engagement, as these trends may affect how young people are likely to engage in projects and initiatives that the EYF could financially support.

In this content, this study aims to answer the question: What are the trends in young people's democratic and civic engagement? How is youth participation changing, where are youth organisations located within these trends and what aspects does a donor such as the EYF need to consider in its reform to better support youth organisations to remain relevant to young people? The study examines patterns of decline and rise in youth participation, changing citizenship norms, priority issues and values of young people, and the process of shrinking civic space for young people across Europe. Furthermore, the strategies of youth organisations to promote youth participation and the representation of youth interests are examined. The evaluation results of relevant youth-oriented programmes, including those of the European Youth Foundation, will also be examined to inform the design processes of the EYF from the perspective of young people, the organisations that advocate for their interests and the lessons learned from the implementation of such programmes.

The core data used for this study consists of available studies on the needs and values of young people in Europe, youth organisations, including international organisations, studies on the impact of different EU youth programmes and available evaluation documents for specific European youth programmes. These include cross-temporal data from the European Values Study[2] (all five rounds), the European Parliament Youth Survey 2021, the Flash Eurobarometer 545: Youth and Democracy and a number of studies commissioned by the Youth Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe, the European Youth Foundation and evaluation studies from the RAY research network (Research-based Analysis and Monitoring of European Youth Programmes) [3]. Data availability is therefore limited to the countries participating in various initiatives and does not cover all 46 member states of the Council of Europe.[4]

This study, which looks at the evolving participation of young people, begins with an examination of the changing patterns of youth participation and discusses its importance and the obstacles it faces. The study then looks at the new form of citizenship and civic participation displayed by young people by examining how citizenship and civic participation is evolving and what specific issues and values resonate with modern youth. It also examines the civic spaces available to young people and how youth organisations are responding to the shrinking of civic space. The study also includes findings from the evaluation of other relevant youth participation programmes

[2] https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu

[3] https://www.researchyouth.net

[4] EP surveys include EU 27 countries, RAY data includes 34 countries across Europe (see https://www.researchyouth.net/network/), Civic space studies (Deželan, 2020; Deželan 2022) inlude EYF's member countries (https://www.youthforum.org/members) and Council of Europe countries at the time and European Values study includes 40 EVS partner countries (https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/about-evs/national-partners/).

and concludes with a series of recommendations to support the EYF reform planning and reflections.

Lessons learned from other funding programmes to promote youth participation

These lessons have been drawn from various findings on the design, performance and evaluation of transnational youth funding programmes with a strong participation and citizenship dimension. These include, but are not explicitly limited to, the generations of European Union Erasmus programmes with a youth dimension, the European Solidarity Corps, the European Voluntary Service and others. Important knowledge for these programmes is provided by the RAY research network (Research-based Analysis and Monitoring of European Youth Programmes) and other relevant portals such as the YouthWiki. The monitoring clusters provide a clearer understanding of the necessary thinking and evidence base to improve the design, implementation and outcomes of youth programmes.

To promote and support active citizenship and the participation of young people in democratic life, the **focus must be on participation** and the concepts that capture it must be **understandable**. Various evaluations (e.g. RAY, 2021; RAY, 2021a) therefore call for an explicit treatment of topics related to participation and citizenship and a clarification of the links between them. Furthermore, the evaluations call for projects promoting participation and active citizenship of young people with fewer opportunities, where the promotion of participation and citizenship education is also conceived as an integral part of youth work. The objectives of participation and citizenship also need to be strongly emphasised, clearly prioritised and communicated in an understandable and accessible language. Having these concepts as project themes and not just cross-cutting themes is another approach to making them more visible.

Much attention is also given to the **use of diverse non-formal learning methods** to promote deeper engagement, participation and reflection in youth projects. The benefits of non-formal education pedagogy, as well as the benefits of youth work, are also often associated with the provision of adequate preparation and reflection opportunities for participants (see RAY, 2021; RAY, 2021a). Suggested is the use of a variety of learning methods, including affective, interactive, experiential and cognitive learning, the necessary provision of time and (safe) space for informal learning, and guidance for reflection on participation and active citizenship experiences, which is closely linked to the provision of the necessary training opportunities for project implementers to develop and strengthen the capacities needed to implement these methods. Programmes also need to ensure that the skills acquired through such projects are better recognised by those involved so that they become more valuable for the professional, social and personal development of participants.

It is important to ensure that participation and citizenship projects supported by the examined funding programmes have **follow-up activities**, **sustainability measures** and the capacity to **multiply positive results**. Relevant evaluations (RAY, 2021; RAY, 2021a) emphasise appropriate incentives to support these processes, including through the introduction or strengthening of evaluation criteria that promote follow-up and sustainability. This is closely linked to the provision

of specific funding for follow-up activities resulting from participation and citizenship projects, which should also focus on the further development of participation skills.

A common feature of the evaluation documentation is the reference to the **complexity and redundancy of certain application procedures**, which create bureaucratic obstacles and inflexibility and render feedback systems ineffective. Demonstrated mostly in the evaluation of EU and national programmes, but not limited to them, recommendations often call for the simplification of processes and the provision of user-friendly, intuitive and effective tools, while also calling for adequate support for organisations at different stages of the project life (see RAY, 2022; EC, 2017). Instead, the evaluations often state that the different tools and procedures act as a deterrent and discourage organisations from participating in the funding programmes. This is linked to the complexity of the application forms, the clarity of the award criteria and the predictability of the outcomes, as well as the usefulness of the feedback loops, which are designed to educate, support and, above all, retain organisations applying for funds in a given programme. A common element of such considerations is also the disproportionate demands (reporting, planning, impact monitoring) placed on small and start-up projects compared to the larger projects.

The evaluation documents show that continuous **attention** is paid **to the participation of disadvantaged groups**, which requires efforts in various areas. Firstly, the target groups of disadvantaged young people need to be clearly defined, as unclear definitions (e.g. disadvantaged young people) reduce the potential of projects to reach these groups and increase the likelihood of failure. Evaluation documents (see e.g. EC, 2017) also emphasise that organisations already working with the target groups need to be targeted to ensure the best possible impact and actual access to the often hard-to-reach population groups. It is also important that funding programmes clarify and publicise their ambitions to target disadvantaged groups of young people, as this sends an important signal to the members of these groups and the organisations working with them.

A frequently voiced criticism of youth programmes and strategies is their **internal contradictions regarding sustainability and climate change**. Therefore, there are often calls for coherent policies and guarantees that funded projects are in line with sustainability and climate change objectives. This is particularly important for structures operating under different regimes and in different sectors (e.g. competition/industry and the environment). Therefore, the strategic objectives of different programmes also need to be translated to the implementation level, where certain sustainable practices such as the promotion of green travel options and support for projects addressing climate change are not yet fully embedded (see RAY, 2022). A frequently cited feature of evaluations highlighting sustainability issues is also the need to encourage organisations and participants to become more involved in local communities through projects such as volunteering or community-based initiatives, as this can increase the local relevance of these programmes and their social impact.

The strategies employed to promote youth funding programmes are often presented as a pathway to a more effective programme that ultimately achieves greater impact. In addition to traditional promotional activities, evaluations emphasise the importance of using national networks and peer-to-peer promotion, as well as the need to facilitate networking between

organisations (see RAY, 2022). Although the latter is also relevant for promotional purposes, its main strength lies in creating networking opportunities to share experiences and practices. Such activities are a strong element of building communities of practice, organisational learning and the professional development of staff and volunteers in organisations.

2. CHANGING PATTERNS OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION

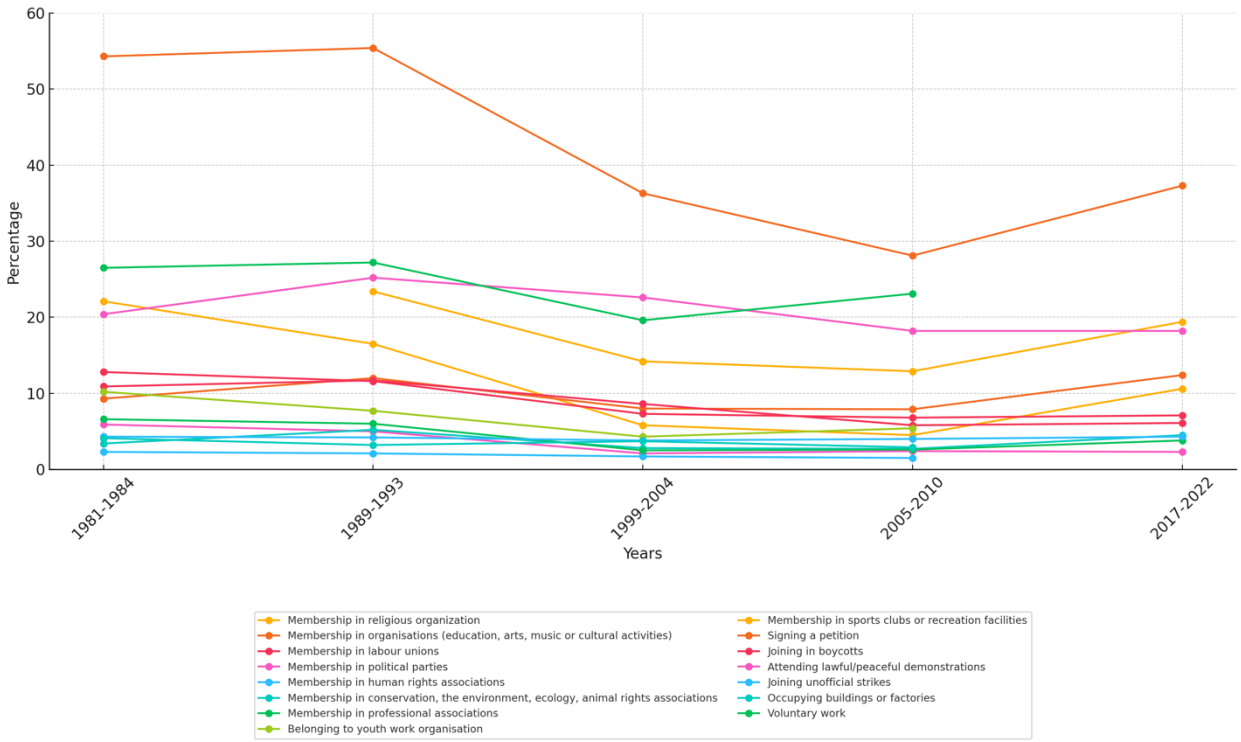
Why participation is important and how it has developed

Active participation of young people is an essential prerequisite for democratic, inclusive and prosperous societies (CoE, 2003). It is seen as something that democratic societies depend on (see Held, 2006), and there can be no situation where there is too much of it (Verba and Nie, 1972, 1). Participation lends legitimacy to the political and social order (see Held, 2006), helps articulate interests, which in effect improves the quality of democratic governance (see Macedo et al, 2005; Martin, 2012), provides an external check on decision-makers (O'Neill, 2009, 7), but also enhances the quality of life of citizens through its educational and personal growth potential, and contributes to the provision of a variety of goods and services that cannot be provided by the state or the market, making societies more liveable (Macedo et al, 2006, 5). Participation is therefore much more than voting or other forms of political action, it is about having the right, the means, the space, the opportunity and the support to influence decisions and participate in the actions of a society (CoE, 2003).

Participation is difficult to define and there is no single agreed-upon meaning for it. Various usages immensely conceptually stretch the term (see Berger, 2009), from voting in elections to donating money to charities or bowling in community leagues (Ekman and Amnå, 2012). The concept is therefore period, beholder, and context-dependent (Pickard, 2019) and has therefore changed in recent decades and now commonly encompasses a diverse range of actors, forms and targets (Norris, 2001). This is due to the emergence of new social movements, a more fluid membership and a variety of new forms of collective action (Marsh et al., 2007), which are either a reinvention of older forms of action or the result of technological innovations in recent decades.

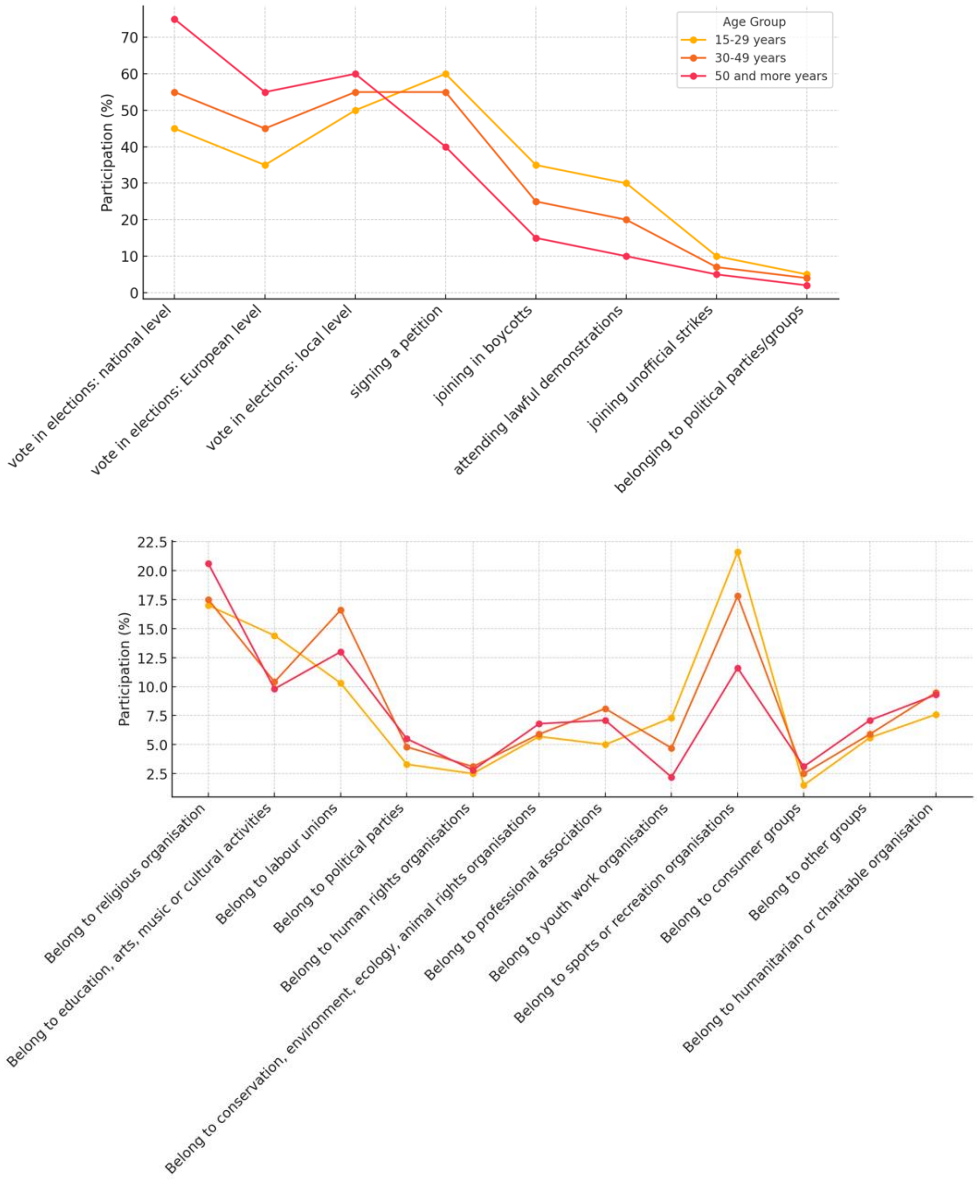
Research suggests that young people tend to move from institutional to non-institutional forms of participation (e.g. Wattenberg 2002, Norris 2002, Pattie et al. 2004, Macedo et al. 2005, Zukin et al. 2006, Marsh et al. 2007, Dalton 2009, Snell 2010, Martin 2012, Wattenberg 2012, Garcia Albacete 2014). The decreasing participation of young people in institutional politics is also reflected in the decline in party membership that can be observed across European democracies (Van Biezen et al. 2012, 38). The overview of the results of the European Values Studies for membership in organisations, political action and voluntary work over a period of forty years (Figure 1) shows a noticeable trend in participation, with significant declines and fluctuations. Membership in religious organisations declined significantly, from 22.1% in 1981-1984 to just 4.5% in 2005-2010, before a slight increase to 10.6% in 2017-2022. This pattern of decline can also be found in the membership rates for political parties and trade unions, albeit to a lesser extent. The biggest changes can be seen in petition signing as one of the most popular forms of participation, starting at 54.3% in 1981-1984, peaking at 55.4% in 1989-1993 and then falling to 28.1% in 2005-2010 before rising again to 37.3% in the most recent period. In contrast, a steady, moderate level of engagement can be observed in activities such as participation in lawful demonstrations and boycotts, both of which show greater stability in participation rates over the years. The available EVS data (up to 2010) also indicate that the proportion of volunteering is stable at around 20% and does not differ significantly between age groups, with 30 to 49-year-olds being slightly more involved in this form of participation.

Figure 1: *Membership of organisations, political action and voluntary work among 15-29 year olds* (EVS, 2022)



The comparison of age groups for the latest round of EVS data shows that older people (50 years and older) are most likely to engage in most conventional forms of participation, while young people (15–29 years) are more actively involved in non-voting activities such as signing petitions and attending lawful demonstrations, with participation rates of around 60% and 30% respectively (Figure 2). Across all age groups, participation in less conventional forms of political action, such as involvement in unofficial strikes or political parties, remains low, with younger adults showing slightly higher levels of participation in these areas. Figure 2 also shows notable differences in organisational participation between the three age groups: younger adults are most involved in sports or leisure organisations (21.6%), while older people (aged 50 and over) are more likely to belong to religious organisations (20.6%). Among 30–49 year olds, membership of trade unions (16.6%) and professional associations (8.1%) is highest, showing a stronger link to work-related activities. In contrast, membership of political parties is low in all age groups, although slightly higher among older people (5.5%). Participation in humanitarian and charitable organisations is moderate and relatively evenly distributed across all groups.

Figure 2: *Political participation in Europe by age group and membership of different organisations by age group* (EVS, 2022)



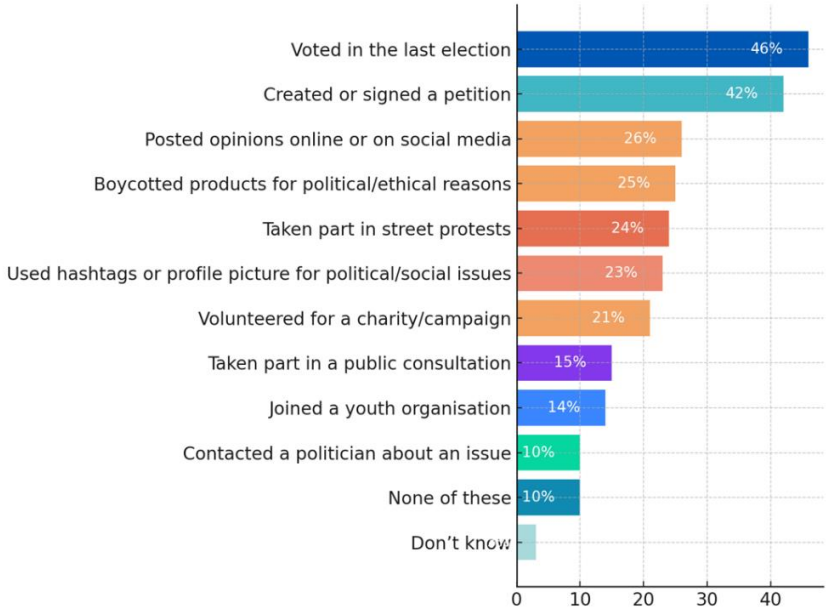
Overall, the data shows differences between the generations in terms of political engagement. Older age groups focus more on voting and conventional political activities, while younger people are more inclined towards activism. At the same time, when younger people turn away from involvement in institutional politics, they tend to favour leisure and cultural activities, while older groups tend to turn to religious and work-related organisations. Volunteering remains stable at around one-fifth of the population, with no significant differences between age groups.

The repertoire of participation and the obstacles to it

Narrow definitions of political participation lead to a narrow conception of the political imposed on young people by adults (Marsh et al. 2007, 4), and this results in young people's political imagination not being fully revealed. Relying on the most popular tools as the central approach to studying political participation does not reveal how young people think about politics and falsely associates non-participation in a given set of activities with apathy. In fact, there is much more to participation than the main transnational, cross-temporal social studies (e.g. EVS, WVS, ESS, ISSP) show. Like other parts of the population, young people also engage in various other forms of participation that are not captured by these studies, such as sharing opinions on political or social issues on the internet, politically motivated consumption and many other emerging forms.

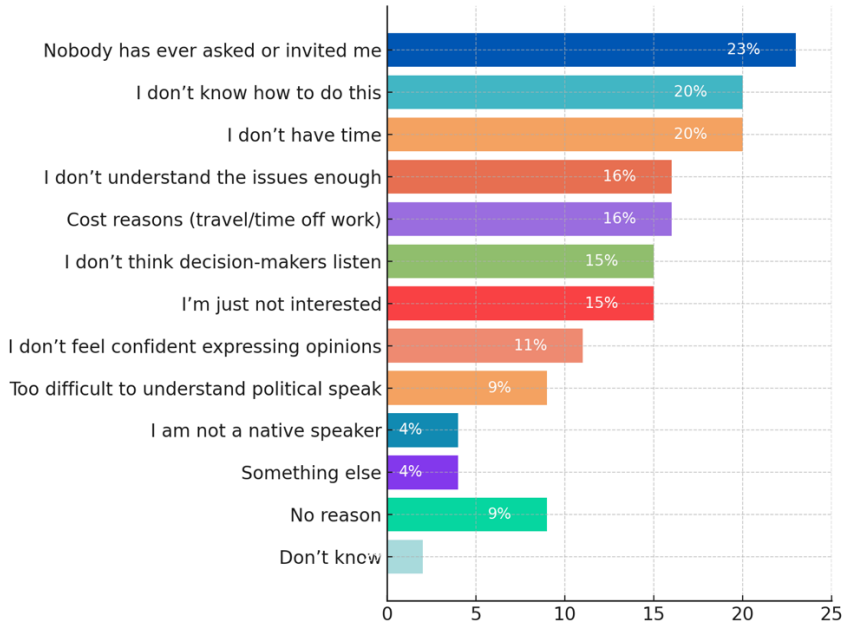
Recent data suggests that while young people remain active, they participate in different ways that are shaped by their experiences with institutions and people in their daily lives (Weiss, 2020). The European Parliament Youth Survey 2021 (EP, 2021) shows that voting remains one of the most common forms of participation, but a significant proportion of young people also create or sign online or offline petitions (42%), use social media as a popular platform for expressing political opinions (26%), boycott products for political, ethical or environmental reasons (25%) and continue to participate in street protests or demonstrations (24%), like previous generations of young people. Many of them also use hashtags on social media or change their profile pictures to support a cause (23%) and volunteer for a charity or a campaigning organisation (21%), while 15% of them take part in public consultations (15%) and join youth organisations' activities (14%). This data suggests that many of the forms of participation used by young people are based on their activism and are mediated by digital technologies that amplify their activism (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: *Have you ever done any of the following? (% - EU27)* (EP, 2021)



Respondents who did not show participatory experiences gave several main reasons for their non-participation. The most frequently cited reasons were the lack of an invitation (23%), the lack of knowledge about how to participate (20%) and the lack of time (20%). The lack of understanding of the issues is also a relatively common reason (16%), as are resources (16%), followed by the lack of interest (15%) and a belief that decision makers do not listen to people like them (15%), which points to the problem of political efficacy. This suggests that there is a plethora of relevant reasons for non-participation, from the inability to participate (resources, capacity) to psychological reasons (unwillingness to participate) to the lack of an invitation to participate (see Deželan, 2022).

Figure 4: *For what reason, if any, have you not taken part in these activities? (% - EU27)* (EP, 2021)



However, instead of dealing with the most conventional and often outdated forms of participation repertoire, it is important to enable young people to participate according to their preferences. Contrary to popular belief, the 2021 EP Youth Survey (EP, 2021) supports this line of thinking with the finding that only around a tenth of young people do not participate in any of the forms of participation measured[5] suggesting that young people do participate, but in very different ways and sometimes unrecognised by conventional measurements. To capitalise on the participation potential of young people, the focus should be placed on the diverse forms of young people's participation and the spaces in which it takes place.

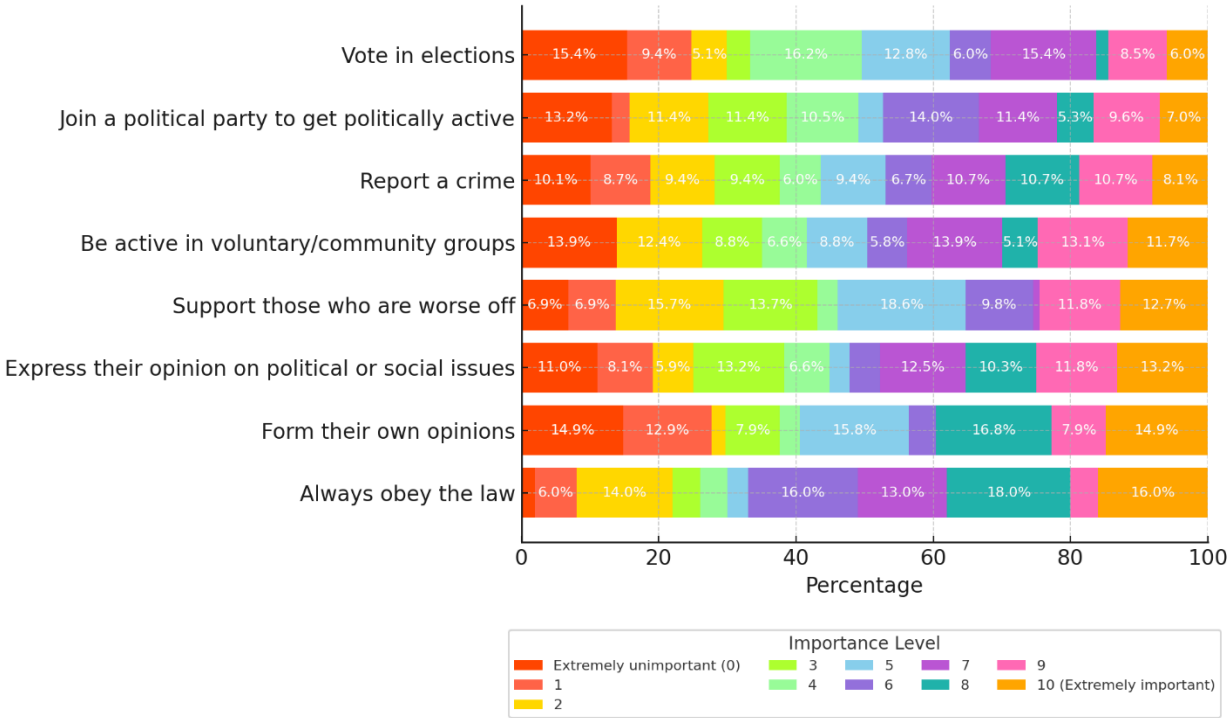
[5] It should be noted that respondents only had the opportunity to choose from a selected list of the best-known forms of participation.

3. THE NEW CITIZENSHIP OF YOUNG PEOPLE

The changing citizenship of young people

There are a number of studies that suggest that a new type of citizen is emerging and that different patterns of citizenship are only one expression of this (e.g. Dalton 2009; Xenos et al. 2014; Marsh et al. 2007; Norris, 2003). The EP Youth Survey (2021) shows that young Europeans today have a mix of citizenship norms that they prioritise. They place high importance on the elements that indicate the presence of a sense of duty and actualising citizenship. This is reflected in the high importance placed on reporting a crime, voting in elections and other items that demonstrate commitment to social order and the acceptance of state authority, while also emphasising the importance of forming one's own opinions, supporting those who are less well-off and other critical, deliberative and ethical aspects of citizenship (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: *To be a good citizen, how important do you think it is for a person to … ? (% - EU27)* (EP, 2021)



The EP Youth Survey (EP 2021) reveals a mix of citizenship norms that young people prioritise, with a strong commitment to both dutiful and actualizing citizenship. It is true that these citizens are less collectivist and more individualistic, cause-orientated and engaged. They are more likely to be members of informal groups than formal members of membership-based organisations, engage in protest politics due to growing political dissatisfaction and alienation, and focus on specific issues or political causes (Norris, 2003). However, as these people increasingly take

responsibility for managing their personal identities and disengage from organisations and institutions that previously provided a shared status, younger citizens feel less obliged to participate in institutional politics and are more inclined to display their lifestyle values through more personally expressive or self-actualising affiliations, which can be fluid and change (Bennet et al. 2009, 106). Young people today are also more attracted to and willing to experiment with new forms of mass communication (Martin, 2012, 102).

As young people's political identities and attitudes are shaped less and less by their social ties to family, neighbourhood, school and work, and more by the way they participate in social networks, we are witnessing the phenomenon of networked individualism, where the internet, particularly social media, plays a central role in individuals' political engagement (Rainie and Wellman 2012). Such networked citizens tend to be members of non-hierarchical networks, are project-orientated and maintain their relationships via social media. Networked young citizens reflect a positive relationship between social media use and political engagement and have the potential to influence long-standing patterns of political inequality (Xenos et al. 2014). This relationship implies a shift in the process of political socialisation (Vraga et al. 2014), mobilised by mass demonstrations against growing social inequalities. However, we must note that networked citizens do not represent a complete break with the notion of duty-based citizenship, as they can do things that are normal in institutional politics while also developing new regulative norms of inclusion and exclusion (ibid.).

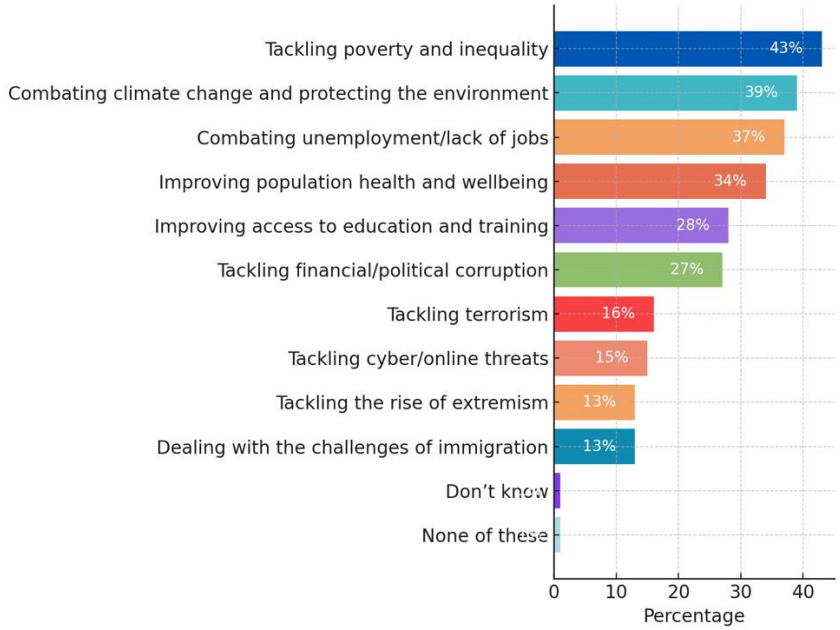
Themes and values tailored to the new generations of citizens

As already indicated above, there are certain topics in which young people are particularly interested due to the processes already mentioned. As the young people are more issue-orientated than previous generations, issues now play an even more important role in engaging them in political and social processes. The EP Youth Survey (2021) found that the most important issues for young people are combating poverty and inequality (43%) and combating climate change and protecting the environment (39%) (see Figure 6). This focus is also reflected in many of the lifestyle choices of today's youth, indicating that lifestyle politics is of great importance to this cohort. At the same time, 'traditional' youth issues such as youth unemployment (37%), education and training (28%) and health and wellbeing (34%) remain high on the list of priorities. Corruption as an indicator of integrity, which has a huge impact on trust, also emerges as relevant (27%), which was already to be expected based on the perception of good citizenship (Figure 5).

If we look more closely at the differences in prioritisation by age and gender, we find that young women in particular show marked differences to other groups in their additional support for issues closer to the principles of social activism and distributive justice (environment and climate change, tackling poverty and inequality) (see Deželan and Moxon, 2021). This is supported also by the results of Youth Partnership study on new forms of political participation of young people, with an additional insight into the participation patterns of young women (see Yurttagüler and Pultar, 2023). At the same time, we must bear in mind that issues change over time and also depend on external events to which younger generations only react. A clear example of this is the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, which have clearly pushed the issues of “human rights” and “war and conflict”

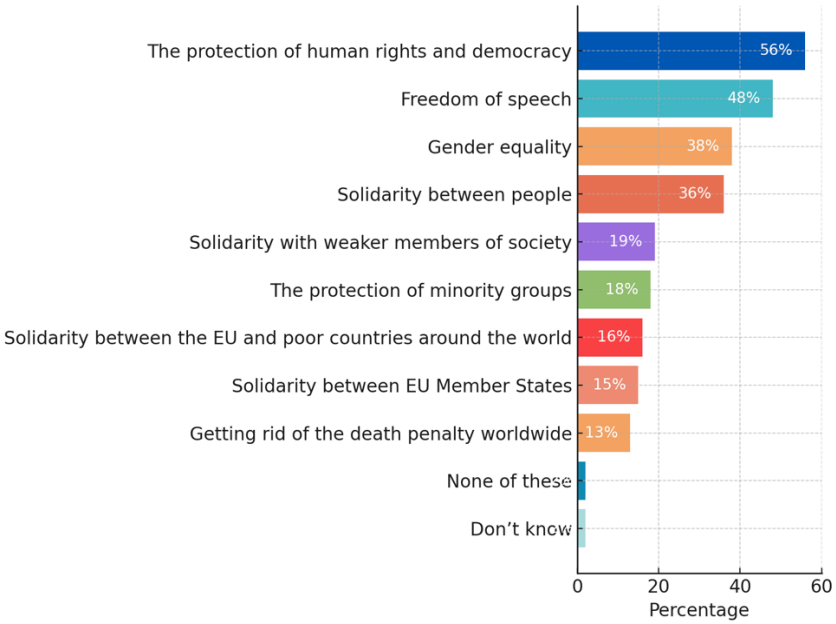
to the top ranks of importance, as shown by the Flash Eurobarometer 545 on youth and democracy (EC, 2024).

Figure 6: *In your opinion, which three of the following issues should be given priority? (% - EU27)* (EP, 2021)



Values are more robust and fixed in this sense, which also explains why certain topics emerge, even if they are caused by external and uncontrollable events. The EP Youth Survey (2021) confirms the importance of ethical as well as critical and deliberative aspects of citizenship for young people. Thus, the protection of human rights and democracy was already the most prioritised value for young people in 2021 and was indicated by 56% of respondents, followed by freedom of speech (48%), gender equality (38%) and interpersonal solidarity (36%) (see Figure 7). When it comes to values, young people therefore show a far less conscientious image of themselves than that which results from the norms of their citizenship. Important differences can again be observed among young women, who are more in favour of the protection of human rights and democracy as well as gender equality. In addition, the youngest group of respondents (16-19 years old) shows a higher level of support for gender equality and the oldest category of young people (25-30 years old) expresses greater support for solidarity (Deželan and Moxon, 2021).

Figure 7: *In your opinion, which three of the following values should be given priority? (% - EU27)* (EP, 2021)



4. CIVIC SPACE AND SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN THEIR ENGAGEMENT

The shrinking civic space for youth organisations and their responses

The overview of young people's participation patterns and changing norms of citizenship has shown that an important role in society's efforts to capitalise on young people's participation potential is to create spaces that encourage rather than hinder participation. Youth organisations and organisations for young people provide a platform for dialogue between a variety of voices and the free exchange of information between young people and different stakeholders, and amplify the voices of at-risk groups by raising the visibility of the key issues they face. Youth organisations that engage young people in civic life are particularly important as these organisations address youth-specific issues, put problems on the political agenda and find innovative solutions on the ground. As "laboratories of democracy", youth organisations have been an important catalyst for many social innovations. Despite the centrality of youth organisations to the promotion and protection of basic human rights and democracy for young people, or perhaps because of it, relevant studies show that these voices are repeatedly silenced – that the civic space available to youth is shrinking (Deželan et al, 2020, Deželan and Yurttaguler, 2021; Deželan 2022). Changes in the definitions and parameters for the legal status of organisations, funding restrictions, disproportionate reporting requirements, bureaucratic obstacles linked to other administrative regulations and smear campaigns aimed at undermining their reputation or questioning their mission are just some of the strategies used to shrink the civic

space of youth organisations (and other civil society organisations) and, consequently, of young people.

Research suggests (see Deželan et al, 2020, Deželan and Yurttaguler, 2021; Deželan 2022) that the shrinking of civic space for young people manifests itself in several dimensions. In terms of freedom of information and expression, organisations and individuals have less access to information from state sources and can no longer express themselves freely without being punished by the state. As far as freedom of assembly and association are concerned, they are only able to organise public meetings or demonstrations and campaign for the interests of young people to a limited extent. Participation in public political processes, (i.e. the extent to which individuals and organisations representing them are allowed to contribute to and influence public political processes), proved to be another area of malfunctioning civic space, as well as the increasing importance of “market indicators” for youth organisations to obtain funding for their basic activities. This signal of the 'neoliberal revolution' and its technocratic agenda (see Duggan, 2003; Fowler, 2010) prescribes 'economic growth indicators' (e.g. reports on their diversified financial profiles, diversity of donors, amount of private funding raised, nationwide impact) and pushes for youth organisations to be assessed on the basis of market efficiency and effectiveness rather than their social agency. At the same time, the requirement to apply, report and demonstrate impact demands a high degree of professionalisation in areas related to project management and reduces their capacity in areas that are their primary mission, which is particularly detrimental to youth-led organisations that already suffer from staff shortages and turnover.

Governments' tools to restrict the agency of youth organisations and, consequently, of young people therefore include (Deželan and Yurttaguler, 2021):

(1) the introduction of various forms of regulation and restrictions on freedom of expression, both online and offline;

(2) policies and practises that restrict the right to freedom of assembly and association (e.g. bans on demonstrations, security laws that impose restrictions on mobilisation, etc.);

(3) restrictions on activists moving in public.);

(4) restrictions on activism in general and on the internet due to repressive and intimidating practises;

(5) intimidation and violent attacks on organisations in the youth field, especially organisations dealing with human rights, sexual minorities, integrity and corruption;

(6) criminalisation of organisations and individuals in this field (mostly advocacy-oriented) along with other exclusionary practises such as stigmatisation and de-legitimisation, including through government-owned or controlled media;

(7) attempts to deter public and private donors to organisations in this field, with the risk of being portrayed as 'critical', 'political', 'threat to security', etc.

(8) introduction of domestic laws aimed at (over)regulating the activities and procedures of organisations in the youth field and demanding professionalisation;

(9) "philanthropic protectionism" as a set of state-imposed restrictions that limit the ability of domestic civil society organisations to obtain international funding;

(10) civil society spaces traditionally occupied by youth civil society organisations are now being replaced by GONGOs (government-organised non-governmental organisations), which also take up significant public funding; and

(11) withdrawal of the welfare state from youth work, leading to the introduction of less robust, less sustainable and politically influenced civil society organisations providing new services.

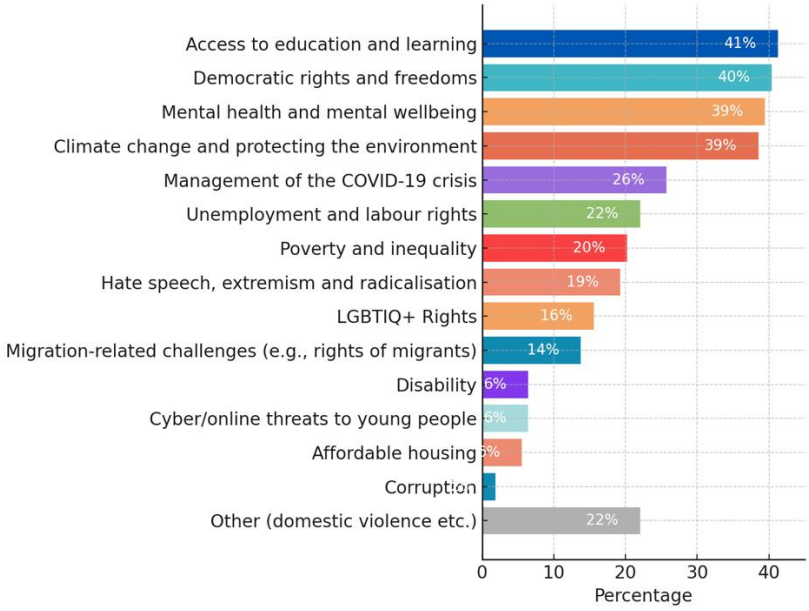
The organisations have developed various strategies to mitigate the shrinking of civic space across the dimensions mentioned above, e.g. through networking activities to build long-term (collaborative) relationships with individuals and entities on the government's side, building connections with individuals who understand the mission and challenges of youth organisations, engaging in broad-based coalition/alliance building processes and information sharing, conducting extensive online and offline public campaigns, establishing pools of pro bono professionals, providing or inventing safe spaces where individuals can speak out freely and safely, increasing the use of volunteerism and diversifying the funding portfolio, pooling resources between partner organisations, investing in training and awareness campaigns to build capacity and professionalisation, formal relocation to another country etc. (for more see Deželan et al, 2020).

Strategies of youth organisations to expand the civic space for young people

Especially during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, youth organisations have become more aware of their role in the expansion of civic space. It could be argued that the pandemic has also made others, who did not always appreciate the work of youth organisations and youth work organisations, aware of their value. The Youth Partnership Study (see Deželan, 2022) on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and its significance for the post-Covid-19 period has shown that the pandemic has further shrunk the civic space for young people, like all other crisis events in the last two decades but has also aligned the responses of organisations with the strongest needs of communities. Far from far-reaching, abstract and sometimes 'unapproachable' strategic orientations, organisations have been able to directly identify the needs of the users and the public they serve and align their future processes accordingly.

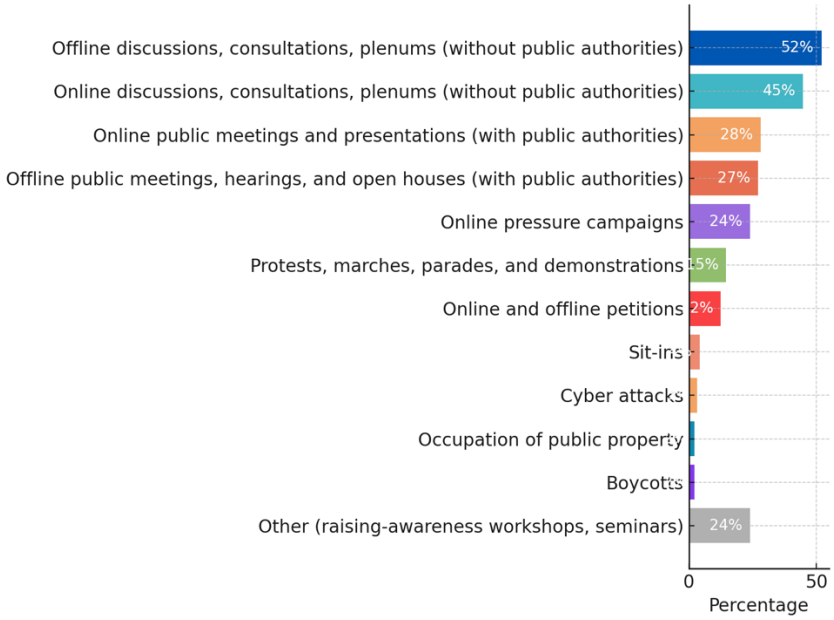
When it comes to the topics on which the organisations carried out activities, in addition to those related to the pandemic, the topics that are deeply rooted in young people's norms and values, which we have explored in the previous sections, were particularly important. Robust issues that attract young people's engagement regardless of temporal or contextual issues are therefore found to be primarily democratic rights and freedoms (40%), climate change and environmental protection (39%), poverty and inequality (20%), hate speech, extremism and radicalisation (20%), with mental health and wellbeing (39%) and unemployment and labour rights (22%) being topics that gained attention during the pandemic but were certainly present before and remain in the ironclad repertoire of youth activism (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: *What are the issues that your organisation has organised activities around that have attracted most engagement by young people?* (Deželan, 2022)



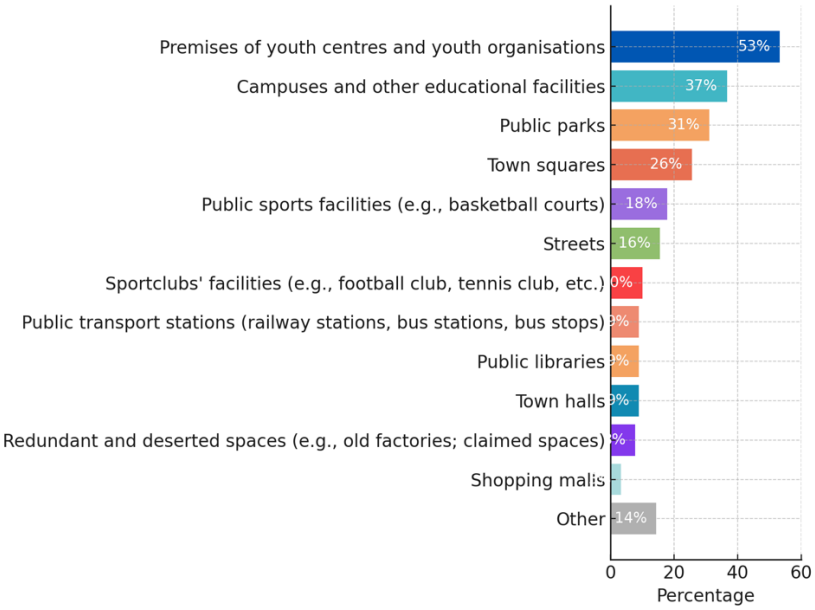
The types of activities that attracted the most engagement from young people vary, but also show the changing patterns of participation and citizenship engagement of young people, particularly the contentious nature of their activism and their networked citizenship profile. Offline discussions, consultations and plenaries without the involvement of authorities proved to be the most attractive, which clearly indicates the attractiveness of non-institutional and non-hierarchical civic engagement of young people on the ground. This form was even more attractive than the online version of the same type of engagement, which also points to the attractiveness and need for direct human contact (see Figure 9). Significantly less attractive, but still quite common, were online and offline public meetings, presentations, hearings and 'open houses'. All forms of engagement in institutional politics (online and offline) were mentioned by almost a third of the organisations, which also indicates that youth organisations are an important link between young people and key political institutions. Online pressure campaigns were also an important form of engagement that appealed to young people, selected by 24% of organisations, as well as protests, marches, parades and demonstrations at 12%.

Figure 9: *What type of activities that your organisation has organised have attracted most engagement by young people?* (Deželan, 2022)



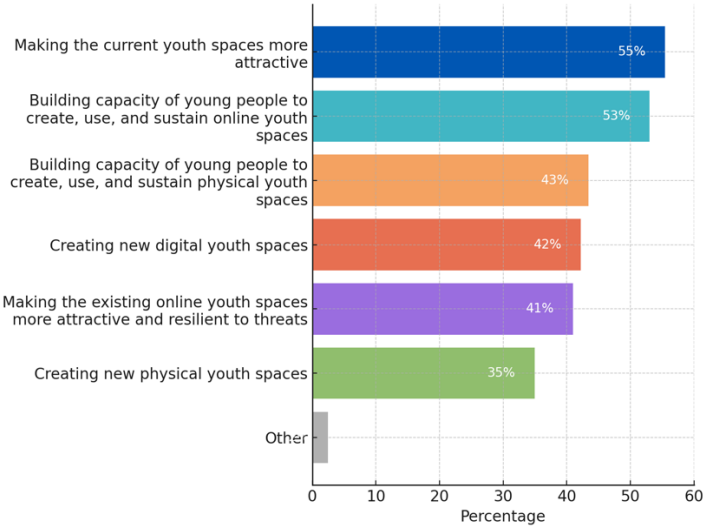
The types of offline spaces that proved most valuable to organisations in their efforts to engage young people were unsurprisingly representative of the key areas in which youth organisations and youth work organisations operate. To be precise, 53% of organisations cited youth centre premises and youth organisations. This is followed by campuses and formal education settings (36.7%), which are access points to young people for many organisations, and basically areas where organisations provide their own engagement opportunities for young people. General public spaces such as public parks (31%) and town squares (25.6%) as well as public sports facilities (17.8%) and streets (15.6%) also proved to be quite popular and effective (see Figure 10). Online spaces, on the other hand, show that participation takes place in most common spaces where young people also engage in online leisure activities. Social networks are seen as the most effective group of tools, followed by private messaging apps such as Whatsapp and Messenger (58%), image sharing tools such as Instagram (48.9%) and video hosting tools such as Youtube and Vimeo (29.6%) (see Deželan, 2022).

Figure 10: *What type of physical (offline) spaces have proven to be of highest value for your organisation in securing engagement of young people since Covid-19?* (Deželan, 2022)



Organisations have quickly learned that a safe and open environment, both offline and online, is an important prerequisite for the successful implementation of their mission and thus also for the creation of a civic space. Organisations indicate several strategies to ensure the engagement of young people in the future, also based on the experience gained during the pandemic. It is very clear that – although various strategies are proving relevant from their perspective – the creation of new spaces is not at the top of the priority list, as 35% of organisations indicated the creation of new offline spaces and 42.2% the creation of new online spaces. This is an important finding as many funding programmes put innovation and the creation of new spaces (rather than maintaining and using existing tools and structures) high on their list of priorities. It is quite clear that organisations – based on their direct experience with young people – believe that offline youth spaces should be improved to become more attractive (55.4%), and that young people's skills need to be improved so that they are able to competently create, use and maintain both online and offline civic spaces (53%). It is the co-creation, utilisation and gradual adaptation that is required to further secure, consolidate and expand civic spaces for young people's participation.

Figure 11: *What strategies related to youth spaces will your organisation pursue the most in order to assure engagement of young people in the (post-)pandemic period?* (Deželan, 2022)



6. FOOD FOR THOUGHT FOR THE EYF REFORM

Based on the examined data and results obtained from other relevant studies, we may discern several recommendations for the reflection processes accompanying the EYF reform.

Some of the actions that the EYF could take are:

a. Recognise the specific situations (socio-economic deprivation, multiple exclusions) and contexts in which certain young people live and the unique position of youth organisations in addressing these challenges. Put then in place flexible schemes for funding that allow young people that experience marginalisation or exclusion to be part of initiatives and projects.
b. Continue to combine project-based funding with structural funding, to allow youth organisations to carry out their work in suitable conditions.
c. Put into place the needed infrastructure so that the funding is accessible for informal groups and initiatives that operate outside youth organisations and deal with the same issues as these youth organisations. In this process, have an approach based on collaborations between organisations with legal personality and informal groups.
d. Support young people and youth organisations through capacity building and advice services, for example on project management and the implementation of their initiatives. Beyond this, involve the whole Youth Department in developing a training offer for youth organisations that supports them in organisational management, fundraising, project management etc.
e. Invest time and support in constant communication with young people to respond in the cases where there are pressures on organisations and shrinkage of civic space. Put into place a system of constant feedback by beneficiary organisations on the overall relevance and benefits of the EYF grants.

f. Have an open approach to new forms of participation and civic engagement, as these are culturally and time bound. Allow for initiatives that may seem far from usually encountered forms of participation.
g. Adapt communication to the target group in a logic of the minimal efforts for young people to access information and to be able to become ready for applying for grants in a short time and without too complicated procedures. Consider translating informational resources in multiple languages. Use youth-friendly tools and channels of communication and customise the messages to be accessible to the target groups.
h. Carry out constant monitoring and research to detect differences in access and agency of young people.
i. Develop inclusive policies and procedures in grant-making that enable greater participation of individuals and groups traditionally outside of funding programmes.
j. Support the initiatives that recognise the perspective and interest of youth also in policy areas not traditionally associated with young people (e.g. environmental policy, foreign policy, security policy, health policy, open government and digitalisation, etc.).
k. Consider multi-annual funding schemes for youth organisations to have support for ensuring continuity in their work and increased impact.
l. In all possible aspects of the grant-making process, reduce bureaucracy that burdens the already limited professional capacities of youth organisations (finance, accounting, legal, organisation).
m. Focus the narrative reports from the grants on the strategically important information to be provided.
n. Ensure that the new regulations lead to transparent, inclusive rules for access to the grants and remove any thresholds that exclude certain youth organisations (for example, those that have weaker capacities to write a project well, or those working with activists that come to the fore at a later age in their youth, etc.)
o. Incentivise youth organisations to use evaluation practices as a learning tool to support their organisational and strategic development.

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