

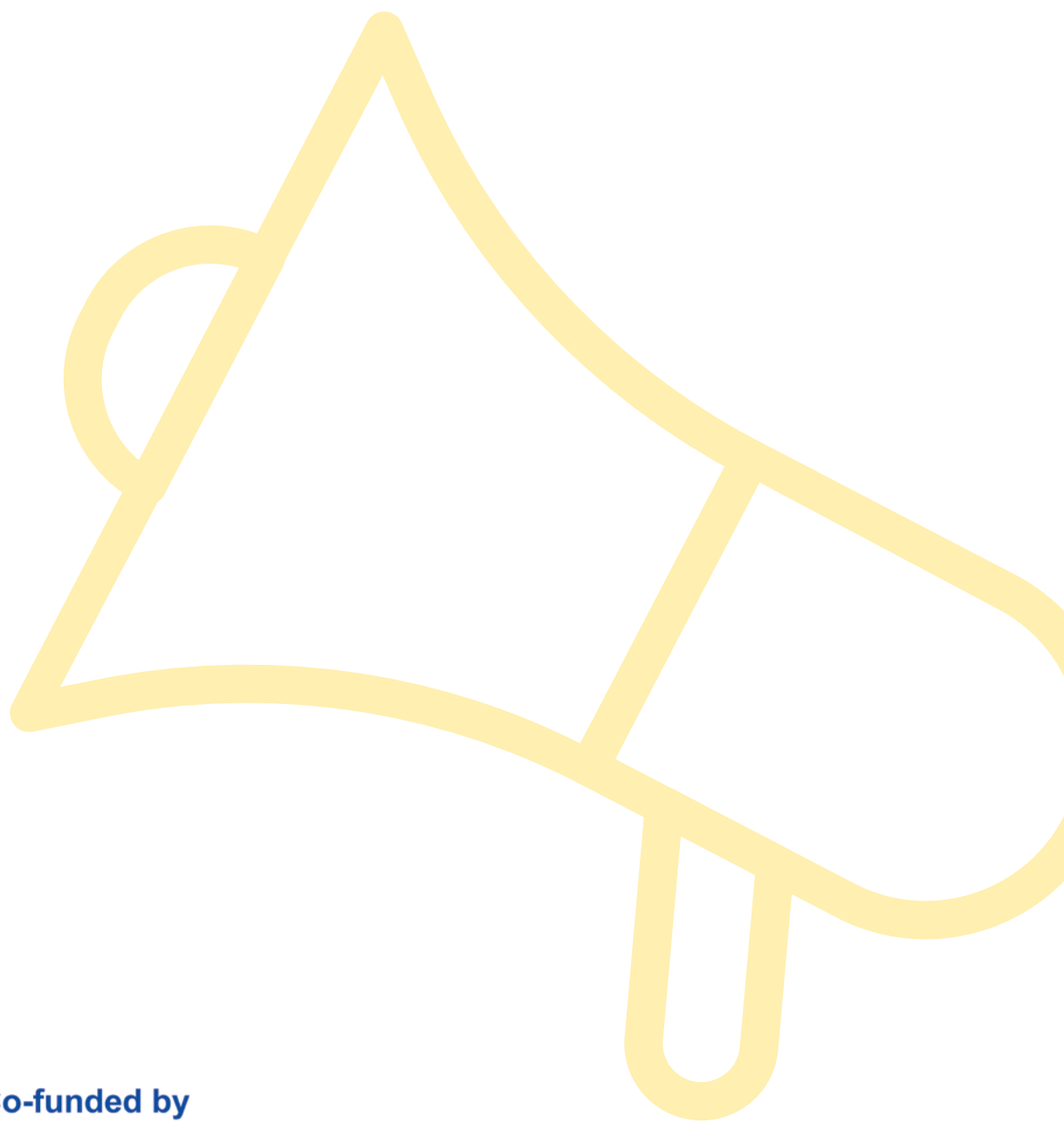


Promoting Democracy among Young Europeans: a How-to Guide

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Why Engaging Young People in Politics Matters

Ensuring space for young people to participate in both national and European politics will be critical to securing a more promising future for Europe. As the next leaders, they bring fresh perspectives and can offer sorely needed innovative solutions to tackle serious challenges. In fact, the readiness of youth to adapt to and embrace change has oftentimes served as a driving force for the evolution of political systems that have been consistently reinvented to meet contemporary demands. The open-mindedness of young voices can also contribute to the introduction of diverse viewpoints, ensuring inclusiveness and intersectionality in policymaking, proper reflection on the needs of underrepresented groups and the fostering of more peaceful and inclusive societies.¹

However, according to several studies, the young generation is currently the group least satisfied with the state of democracy in their home countries.² Disillusionment and dissatisfaction are perhaps the feelings that best capture the present relationship between young people and democracy in Europe.³

This gloomy sentiment is undoubtedly linked to the many pressing challenges facing young people in Europe: the rise of democratic backsliding as populist and nationalist right-wing parties enact their policy agendas into law, the still lingering after-effects of economic and social crises connected with high youth unemployment, rising living and housing costs, climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic impacts on mental and physical health.⁴

Several studies have further found declining interest among young people in European and national politics, which could be seen both as a cause and consequence of the low representation of individuals aged 18-29 in local

and European political bodies. This lack of involvement is attributed to a number of structural barriers, including:

- ✎ Lack of accessible information about political processes and voting procedures
- ✎ Deficits in civic education
- ✎ Socioeconomic disadvantages
- ✎ Geographical isolation
- ✎ Perception of ineffectiveness and distrust in institutions
- ✎ Bureaucratic hurdles
- ✎ Age restrictions
- ✎ Marginalisation of youth voices
- ✎ Unequal access to technology

A somewhat positive trend, however, is now apparent with respect to voting habits. While low youth turnout in European elections once underscored their general disinterest and apathy in politics, this picture has started to change in recent election cycles. Indeed, the 2019 and 2024 European Parliament elections saw increased participation at the ballot box among young citizens (for 2024: according to preliminary reports as final tabulations are compiled).

However, while turnout itself is an expression of engagement and represents the use of a core democratic tool, young people continue to be severely underrepresented in policymaking. This deficit, despite youth's readiness to be engaged in democratic processes and civic life, in turn, hampers the drafting of more inclusive and refined policies.

¹ <https://data.europa.eu/en/publications/datastories/understanding-youth-engagement-europe-through-open-data>

² <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/youth-political-participation>

³ <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/a-disaffected-generation-the-youth-vote-and-europes-future/>

⁴ <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/topic/youth>

Education levels of youth do matter

The segmentation analysis from the 2021 European Parliament Youth Survey⁵ report provides an insightful deep dive into the categorisation of young people based on their political engagement. It identified five distinct groups, each with unique socio-demographic profiles and varying education levels:

- 1. Untapped Potentials (20%)** – These individuals are often well-educated and knowledgeable about politics but feel they lack influence and exhibit moderate engagement. They typically have a higher education level, reflecting their strong understanding of political systems. The group is highly engaged with digital media, relying mainly on television news and news websites for information, along with social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube.
- 2. Empowered Joiners (35%)** – Members of this group generally have good academic qualifications and feel they have significant influence. They actively participate in political parties and volunteer work but show a lower propensity to vote. Their education level supports their engagement in organisational activities. This group contains a higher-than-average proportion of people who identify as LGBTQ+ or as having a disability.
- 3. Dutiful Traditionalists (24%)** – Being the most highly educated of the segments, this group often values voting as a civic duty and is active in petitions. Their engagement is more focused on traditional forms of participation. Consisting predominantly of women (55% versus 44% men), the group is also the most likely to speak more than one EU language (74%). Like the Untapped Potential segment, the group is highly proficient in using digital communication tools such as Instagram and Facebook.
- 4. Enthusiastically Engaged (11%)** – These individuals are highly active and well-informed about politics, typically possessing higher education levels. This group is particularly active with regards to alternative modes of participation – such as online activism, signing petitions, volunteering and joining youth organisations. On the other hand, engagement in more traditional political participation, such as voting, is considerably low compared to other segments. This group contains a higher than average proportion of respondents who identify as LGBTQ (15%) or as belonging to an ethnic or religious minority (12%). These realities suggest a need for targeted and tailored encouragement to overcome disengagement in traditional modes of political participation.
- 5. Disengaged (11%)** – The “disengaged” group is characterised by low interest in politics, minimal civic participation and limited understanding of government. Members of the group rarely discuss politics, seldom vote and consume little political information, which they generally distrust. This group is the least educated and the least likely to speak multiple EU languages, with many being sceptical of the EU or dissatisfied with its current governance.

Highlighting the education disparities among these groups underscores the importance of tailored engagement strategies. For the **disengaged** group, focusing on inclusion and targeted educational initiatives is crucial. Improving political education and fostering inclusivity can help bridge the gap, ensuring that all young people, regardless of their education background, are better informed and motivated to participate in the democratic process.

Apart from education level, various macro and micro socio-economic variables influence youth participation. Factors such as age, gender, cultural capital, social capital⁶, social environment and mass media⁷ are statistically significant in explaining why young people differ in their levels of political participation. A sensitive and tailored approach, considering these diverse factors, is essential for all stakeholders—whether at the supranational, national, or local level—to effectively engage and mobilise young people.

⁵ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2021/youth-survey-2021/report.pdf>

⁶ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11614-023-00543-1>

⁷ <https://ijie.um.edu.my/index.php/ijie/article/download/42785/15559/107164>

Underrepresentation of youth in European politics vs. alternative political activism

Even though young people make up about 15-20% of the entire population, less than 3% of members of national parliaments are under the age of 30, with young women making up 1.1% (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2021).⁸

As the European Youth Forum reports, in the previous term, only two Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) were under 30, representing just 0.28% of all MEPs.⁹ The underrepresentation of the 18-29 age group in European politics is a long-standing issue highlighted by numerous studies.¹⁰ Despite this, youth participation in the European elections in June 2024 remained strong.

The results of the latest European elections demonstrated how closely the European political landscape reflects the domestic political arena. For instance, in Central and Eastern Europe, the local dominance of populist, far-right conservative or nationalist parties was similarly reflected in the seats of the European Parliament. To much surprise, the above-mentioned parties were exceptionally successful at attracting young people's votes across Europe. How is that possible?

Populist, far-right nationalist parties have mastered campaigning via social media—a platform that is not merely an alternative but the primary social space for young people today. The very trendy and accessible promotion of quick and unevicted solutions to the current multi-crises on social media has become the strongest asset for political leaders of populist and far-right parties.

Political participation today extends beyond traditional activities such as voting, joining political parties, engaging with representatives and participating in local councils.¹¹ In the dynamic and complex landscape of modern democratic governance, youth political participation is broader and more multifaceted. It often does not address government directly. Instead, young people engage with institutions

they encounter in everyday life, such as joining student and youth clubs, working or volunteering in nongovernmental organisations and participating in street protests or boycotts. A significant portion of youth participation occurs online through what is known as online activism via social media engagement. However, youth online activism is wide, fragmented and dynamic, presenting both challenges and opportunities for democratic engagement.

The digitalisation of political and civic activities has prompted policymakers to rethink how they build, foster and maintain democracy, assigning a far more significant role to young people in shaping it. According to the latest Eurobarometer on Youth and Democracy¹², only 24% of respondents are familiar with EU social media channels and websites. This highlights a significant gap in communication, underscoring the urgent need to strengthen the connection between the EU and its young citizens.

There are two notable initiatives that highlight the potential for using open data to engage citizens in politics: the apps TrackmyEU¹³ and Democracy Game¹⁴. Originating in the EU, these apps offer innovative ways to enhance political engagement. By aligning with the digital behaviours of younger audiences, they provide fresh approaches to making political information more accessible and engaging, encouraging more active participation in democratic processes. The EU should prioritise these initiatives and work to maximise their impact for broader use.

Prior to the EP elections, the European Commission launched several initiatives¹⁵ aimed at strengthening youth voices in the EU. One of these is embodied within the EU Youth Dialogue, a mechanism seeking to address participation challenges by providing a structured platform for young people to express their views and influence policymaking. This initiative is part of the broader EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, which focuses on promoting oppor-

⁸ Youth Political Participation (2023)

⁹ <https://www.youthforum.org/news/joint-statement-no-say-day-2024>

¹⁰ Similarly, despite the fact that young people make up about 15-20% of the entire population, less than 3% of members of national parliaments are under the age of 30, with young women making up 1.1% (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2021).

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/754634/EPRS_BRI\(2023\)754634_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/754634/EPRS_BRI(2023)754634_EN.pdf)

¹¹ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/13676261.2019.1636951?needAccess=true>

¹² <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3181>

¹³ <https://trackmyeu.org/>

¹⁴ <https://data.europa.eu/en/news-events/news/teams-behind-apps-series-meet-democracy-game>

¹⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_86

tunities for young people to meet and exchange ideas across Europe, fostering a sense of European identity and supporting youth mobility, volunteering and intercultural learning.

According to the interim evaluation of the 2024 EU Youth Dialogue,¹⁶ there is still room for improvement of the initiative to be truly effective and comprehensive. First, it is essential to actively involve hard-to-reach groups such as young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, those not in employment, education or training (NEETs) and

rural youth. Second, it is important to provide systematic engagement with national youth councils to ensure a coordinated and effective process. Proper preparation will enable young participants to contribute meaningfully to the dialogue. Lastly, it is necessary to map out the synergies of various initiatives focused on participation in democratic processes at all levels. By doing so, civil society organisations can better navigate and utilise these opportunities. Robust support should be provided to these organisations to help them understand and capitalise on the available resources effectively.

The CEE countries—Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Bulgaria—have long lagged their Western European counterparts in terms of political participation and engagement.¹⁷ This deficit has been marked by high levels of dissociation and disinterest in both local and European politics.¹⁸

However, the tide is beginning to turn with CEE countries seeing a remarkable rise in young voter turnout in European Parliament elections, particularly notable in 2019. While data for the 2024 EP elections is still being compiled, preliminary results indicate a continued upward trend in young voter participation. Concurrently, much like their Western European peers, young voters in the CEE region are experiencing a noticeable rightward shift in their political preferences.

In parallel with this evolving political landscape, young citizens in the CEE countries share a concern for democracy and the rule of law. They are also deeply worried about pressing issues such as climate change, mental health and youth employment, indicating a growing awareness of critical social and environmental challenges. Despite their historically lower levels of engagement compared to Western Europe, youth in these countries are voicing a strong desire for more opportunities to express their opinions and influence political debates.

To address the matter of youth apathy in politics, in recent years, several CEE countries have developed formal consultation mechanisms and large-scale initiatives to promote dialogue or debate between public institutions and young people. These are not only realised through regular consultations with youth through the EU Structured Dialogue¹⁹ or Youth (student) councils and parliaments, but many countries have established their own unique mechanisms for informal consultation. Estonia's "Osaluskohvikud", or youth participation cafes, provide platforms for local politicians, civil servants and professionals to engage with young people on various issues.²⁰ Similarly, Latvia is adopting a parallel initiative titled "Coffee with Politicians", inspired by a model already adopted in Sweden.²¹

In Hungary, the National Youth Council launched 'Step up!', a country-wide programme whose aim was to bring young people and decision-makers together.

In Czechia, an example of collaborative and interactive political engagement is illustrated by the initiative "Youth Speak Up!", developed by the Young Political Scientists Club.²² The initiative supported high school students in citizen education and participation and organised a national discussion involving 20 successful young people across social sectors. As a concrete outcome, the initiative collected 21 ideas for the future of Czechia, resulting in a political manifesto presented to political parties.²³

16 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52024DC0162>

17 New democracies and democracies with shorter democratic traditions have significantly lower turnout compared to established democracies, Kostadinova and Power 2007; Deželan 2015

18 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13676261.2019.1636951>, FES Youth Studies 2021 (<https://democracy.fes.de/topics/youth-studies.html>)

19 https://youth.europa.eu/have-your-say/structured-dialogue_en

20 <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/estonia/54-young-peoples-participation-in-policy-making>

21 <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/latvia/54-young-peoples-participation-in-policy-making>

22 politologve.cz

23 [Homepage - Youth, speak up! \(youthspeakup.cz\)](https://youthspeakup.cz)

Guidelines on How to Improve Youth Participation in (European) Democratic Processes

1. Empower Youth Through Digital Tools and Community Initiatives

Utilise digital tools like participatory budgeting and social hackathons to engage young people and NGOs/CSOs. Implement community initiatives like asset-based development to involve youth in local decision-making.

2. Build Trust with Young Citizens

Provide real opportunities for empowerment and participation to build trust. Measures should foster positive interactions with public administration staff and ensure institutions are transparent and accountable.

3. Address Long-Term Structural Barriers

Promote inclusiveness and diversity in decision-making. Decisions should be made with a long-term perspective to forge trusting relationships with young people through transparency and accountability. Specific quotas or incentives should be created for including young people and underrepresented groups in political and administrative roles.

4. Lower the Voting Age

Lowering of the voting age (16), combined with quality civic education that equips young citizens with the knowledge and skills necessary to make informed decisions, could empower youth to have a stronger say in shaping their future and ensure that the perspectives and interests of this segment of the population are represented.

5. Implement Youth Quotas and Boost Representation

Implement youth quotas in political bodies and ensure the presence of young people in significant decision-making roles. Political parties should be encouraged to nominate young candidates and incorporate youth issues in their platforms by linking financial subsidies to the process.

6. Increase Youth Electoral Participation and Use of Alternative Voting Methods

Political parties should partner with youth organisations to increase young people's voting engagement and to bolster youth wings of political parties through participa-

tory opportunities (candidacies). Further, introducing and promoting e-voting and other non-barrier alternative voting methods will contribute to bolstering youth electoral participation.

7. Involve Young People in Policymaking and Ensure Visible Follow-Up on Youth Engagement

Meaningfully involve young people and youth organisations in all policymaking processes. Co-management structures should be implemented to support direct participation. Additionally, it is necessary to ensure visible follow-up actions after consultations or engagements with young people by governments or institutions.

8. Ensure Impact Assessment, Especially for Youth-Related Policies

Ensure that policies and legislation, especially affecting young people, include impact assessments that involve young citizens, and mitigation measures for negatively impacted groups.

9. Foster Supporting Structures, Resources and Expanding Definitions and Opportunities

Recognise and validate non-institutional forms of participation like student clubs, NGOs/CSOs, protests and digital activism. Moreover, sustained funding should be provided and diverse support structures developed to support youth initiatives.

10. Provide Educational Opportunities, Enhance Media Literacy and Ensure Access to Information

Implement participatory learning experiences involving practical and decision-making processes through formal and informal educational methods. Clear and easily accessible information about voting processes, political issues and engagement opportunities needs to be readily available. Furthermore, youth-friendly digital platforms and social media channels for sharing political information and encouraging feedback should be created, while enhancing media/digital literacy among youth.

Zooming in:

Policy Recommendations	EU Representatives	National Legislatures	Civil Society	Local Municipalities
Empowering Youth Through Digital Tools and Community Initiatives	Provide funding and support for digital tools and platforms for youth engagement	Provide additional funding for digital engagement tools; Co-develop new tools with youth, non-governmental and private sectors	Organise participatory events, trainings and social hackathons	Implement participatory budgeting digital platforms, citizen assemblies (virtual and in-situ) and community asset-development initiatives
Building Trust with Young Citizens	Develop EU-wide transparency standards	Set organising of public meetings and hearings and making all necessary information easily accessible as mandatory	Train public administrators for positive interactions; Run or support programmes that educate citizens about their rights, the electoral process and how government works	Engage young citizens in youth councils ; Implement mentoring programmes and internships
Addressing Long-Term Structural Barriers	Set EU benchmarks for diversity and inclusion; Provide funding and resources to support inclusive practices	Strengthen legislature and regulations to protect and promote inclusiveness and diversity	Advocate for inclusive practices; Provide guidelines and trainings	Build open dialogue and transparent communication with youth participants in local policymaking
Lowering the Voting Age	Promote research and dialogue on the impact of lowering the voting age; Progress with the harmonisation process of the voting age by the Council and member states approval ²⁴	Legislate to lower voting age to 16	Organise awareness-raising activities, and public debates with sharing best practices	Start preparations for lowering the voting age in local context
Implementing Youth Quotas and Boost Representation	Develop and promote guidelines for youth quotas and representation; Monitor compliance	Implement youth quotas in administrative bodies; Political parties nominate young candidates and include youth issues in platforms	Monitor and encourage meaningful quotas implementation	Ensure presence of young people in decision-making roles in local councils and other administrative units

24 <https://epthinktank.eu/2023/06/07/voting-age-for-european-elections/>

Policy Recommendations	EU Representatives	National Legislatures	Civil Society	Local Municipalities
Increasing Youth Electoral Participation and Use of Alternative Voting Methods	<p>Develop campaigns and tools to increase youth electoral participation;</p> <p>Provide funding for youth voter education;</p> <p>Support pilot projects across member states</p>	<p>Partner with youth organisations to boost electoral participation;</p> <p>Legislate for e-voting and other non-barrier alternative methods</p> <p>Political parties should engage with youth, represent their interests and establish or strengthen their youth political wings</p>	<p>Promote and bring awareness to the importance of voting;</p> <p>Support, consult and monitor legislation drafting on e-voting or other alternative voting methods</p>	<p>Facilitate youth voting and candidacy through local partnerships;</p> <p>Promote and facilitate e-voting at the local level</p>
Involving Young People in Policymaking and Follow-Up on their Engagement	<p>Develop EU-wide frameworks for youth involvement in policymaking;</p> <p>Fund youth councils and forums;</p> <p>Develop and enforce standards for follow-up on youth consultations</p>	<p>Mandate youth representation in governmental bodies and legislation drafting;</p> <p>Establish public follow-up as a requirement to consultation processes</p>	<p>Monitor EU, national and local authorities in their follow-up to young people's engagement</p>	<p>Mandate the inclusion of young people and youth organisations in local policymaking processes;</p> <p>Provide clear feedback on how youth input is used</p>
Ensuring Impact Assessment Youth-Related Policies	<p>Develop standards for the use of youth impact assessment tools across member states</p>	<p>Perform youth impact assessment for new and re-visited policies</p>	<p>Monitor the proper implementation of impact assessments</p>	<p>Perform youth impact assessment for new and re-visited policies, initiatives and local projects</p>
Fostering Supporting Structures, Resources and Expanding Definitions and Opportunities	<p>Enhance funding and further develop diverse support structures for youth initiatives;</p> <p>Promote recognition of non-institutional forms of participation at the EU level</p>	<p>Allocate funding and resources for youth initiatives;</p> <p>Recognise non-institutional forms of youth participation</p>	<p>Develop and offer diverse support structures involving various actors;</p> <p>Strengthen and support non-institutional formats of participation</p>	<p>Support and provide resources for youth-led initiatives leading to more avenues for local youth engagement</p>
Providing Educational Opportunities, Enhancing Media Literacy and Accessing Information	<p>Develop guidelines for participatory learning initiatives across member states;</p> <p>Promote digital and media literacy programmes across member states;</p> <p>Develop and fund youth-friendly digital platforms and social media channels</p>	<p>Implement digital and media literacy programmes in national education systems;</p> <p>Provide clear and easily accessible information;</p> <p>Strengthen civic education</p>	<p>Support the integration of digital and media literacy into schools and universities by providing expertise and developing creative projects</p>	<p>Provide informal learning opportunities on digital and media literacy;</p> <p>Provide clear and easily accessible information</p>

Notes

Ruled lines for writing notes.



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