

## Human Rights Council resolution 33/22: Equal participation in political and public affairs

### EUROPEAN YOUTH FORUM SUBMISSION

#### 1. Background

The European Youth Forum (YFJ) is the platform of youth organisations in Europe. Representing 104 youth organisations, both National Youth Councils and International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations. Youth participation has been a long standing priority of the Youth Forum that works to empower young people to participate actively in society to improve their own lives by representing and advocating their needs and interest and those of their organisations.

Diminishing conventional forms of democratic participation, namely decreasing participation rates in elections at all levels, decreasing membership in political parties in most established democracies, which severely hinders political parties' recruitment and mobilization functions, and less than 2% of parliamentarians globally under the age of 30, mean that young people are less represented in traditional political processes, leading to lower levels of trust in the system and institutions of representative democracy, as well as high levels of political inequality. **Young people consequently do not have full access to the right to participation.**

This submission elaborates on political, social, economic and legal/institutional barriers young people face in accessing their right to participate, responding to the call for input released by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)<sup>1</sup>. Based on the European Youth Forum's own research "Young People and Democratic Life in Europe"<sup>2</sup> it provides recommendations to Member States on the effective implementation of the right to participate in political and public affairs with regards to youth.

#### 2. Citizenship education and political literacy

The European Youth Forum strongly believes that quality education is a human right, and that all young people are entitled to access to quality education. Given the interdependent and interrelated nature of all human rights, fulfilling this right means contributing to the right to life with dignity and to the development of young people as autonomous, supportive, responsible and committed citizens. The European Youth Forum believes that States are particularly responsible for the fulfillment of the right to education and should be held accountable for the education that young people have access to.

The lack of political knowledge, competences and literacy are the most important barrier to the full and informed political participation of young people. Quality citizenship education plays a crucial role in the building of democratic, peaceful and inclusive societies by equipping learners with knowledge, skills, and understanding to exercise and defend their democratic rights and responsibilities in society, as well as internalize democratic values, with a view to the promotion and protection of democracy and the rule of law. This is investment in the personal and social development of young people and society and a way to safeguard our democracy.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Draft guidelines on the effective implementation of the right to participate in public affairs, -

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Pages/DraftGuidelinesRighttoParticipationPublicAffairs.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> European Youth Forum, "Young Peoples and Democratic Life in Europe", 2015, -

[https://www.youthup.eu/app/uploads/2015/11/YFJ\\_YoungPeopleAndDemocraticLifeInEurope\\_B1\\_web-9e4bd8be22.pdf](https://www.youthup.eu/app/uploads/2015/11/YFJ_YoungPeopleAndDemocraticLifeInEurope_B1_web-9e4bd8be22.pdf)

However, many States either do not have citizenship education curricula at all or it is ill designed and taught in education systems in a way that neither promotes the culture of democratic participation, nor connects young people with political institutions. The European Youth Forum believes that quality citizenship education provides young people with the necessary skills to be resourceful and pro-active citizens and should be mainstreamed in school curricula from early age onwards. However, citizenship education should be extended beyond school walls to provide opportunities to apply citizenship education in practice, adopting learner centered, individualized and participatory approach. Our publication on “Youth organizations’ contribution to citizenship education”<sup>3</sup> provides an overview of the European Youth Forum’s understanding of what constitutes quality citizenship education, and gives recommendations towards improving its provision.

### **Recommendations to Member States**

- Ensure to every person the right to quality education that is free for all and there are no hidden costs of education, through a sustainable increase in public investment in education and by safeguarding it against any cuts to national budgets.
- Improve access to quality citizenship education, through funding for partnerships between formal and non-formal education providers, notably youth organisations, and creating windows in school curricula to partner with youth organisations to run joint citizenship education programmes.
- Provide resources for training programmes for teachers, school heads and other educators in the field of citizenship education.

## **3. Legal barriers young people face in political participation**

### **A. Lowering voting age to 16**

The right to vote is a fundamental democratic right, and a key element to participating in modern democracy. In many countries 16 year-olds are allowed to join the army, they pay taxes and execute a number of other obligations as citizens; however, they are denied a fundamental demarcating right to vote.

The research has consistently shown that under-18s are as willing and able to participate as their older peers. They follow the same voting patterns and are not excessively influenced by extremist parties or politicians. Paired with effective and quality citizenship education in schools, a lower voting age makes it much easier to help to develop a habit of voting in young people at an early age, boosting lifelong participation rates. In Europe Austria, Estonia and Malta has already successfully implemented vote at 16 in their elections, other countries are exploring the possibility, while vote at 16 is becoming a reality in many countries across the globe as well. The momentum to extend voting rights to 16 and 17 year-olds is here to ensure that no longer interests of younger citizens remain underrepresented in political systems.

### **B. Targeted voter information and education campaigns**

Together with quality citizenship education that needs to accompany lowering voting age at 16, voters should also be informed of electoral processes explaining why, when and how to participate through a single campaign that combines online and offline information and uses a variety of communication channels (e.g. voting advice applications, posters, leaflets, newspapers, TV, institutional and media websites and social media). Electoral Management Bodies (EMB) or appropriate public authorities should prepare impartial literature that targets young or first-time voters, ethnic minorities and other typically marginalized groups. Youth civil society representatives and experts for youth should be included in all phases of the voter information and education campaign in order to guarantee the

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<sup>3</sup> European Youth Forum, “Youth organisations contribution to citizenship education”, 2016, - <http://www.youthforum.org/assets/2016/10/Youth-organisations-contribution-to-citizenship-education.pdf>

presence of different youth perspectives in the design, evaluation, and validation of such activities.

### **C. Minimum age to run for office**

Aligning the minimum voting age with the minimum age of eligibility to run for office should facilitate greater participation by youth in representative political bodies at all levels (Municipal Assemblies, Local Councils, National Parliaments, European Parliament etc.). Age limits to run for public office, which are often higher than the legal voting age contribute to distrust between young people and politicians and to a low level of representation of youth in the main representative bodies preventing their voices and opinions from being heard.

### **D. Financing of political parties and campaigns**

Imposing limitations on party and candidate spending has the potential of allowing younger candidates easier entry into the electoral arena and can lessen the obstacles facing new political actors that enter the world of institutional politics. Enforcing transparency in donations or provisions that limit and ban donations from private interests and public actors can also reduce the gap between youth and established political actors by limiting the influence of private vested interests on decision-making.

### **Recommendations to Member States**

- Lower the voting age at 16 in all elections.
- Develop targeted voter information and education campaigns.
- Align the voting age with the minimum age of eligibility to run for office.
- Improve transparency and considering limitations in the financing of political parties and campaigns.

## **4. Participatory policy-making**

Young people's lack of participation and representation in the traditional institutions of representative democracy creates an ever-growing gap between young people and political systems. Consequently, little priority is given to young people, policies targeting them, or the obstacles they face in accessing their human rights. Young people do not feel that their interests are represented in decision-making processes. Equal opportunity to participate in decision-making processes would not only improve understanding of young people and the issues they care about but also ensure legitimacy of political decisions made. Therefore, existing participatory decision-making mechanisms should be improved and enhanced and new ones explored.

Drawing on research, the European Youth Forum's "YouthUP" campaign ([www.youthup.eu](http://www.youthup.eu)) promotes ideas to innovate and fix democracy so that it truly includes young people. Among these, the idea of citizens having more opportunities to participate and influence decision-making between elections, through participatory policy-making mechanisms, is highlighted. Such participatory structures offer the possibility to think beyond traditional voting in terms of the depth of our democratic systems, and to make better use of ICT to improve access, accountability, legitimacy, and ultimately the way policies and decisions are made.

### **A. Participatory policy-making mechanisms**

Regarding offline based participatory policy-making mechanisms some examples already exist at local level (such as participatory budgeting), national level (through youth councils) and regional level (including the co-management system in the Council of Europe or EU Structured Dialogue with youth). Such mechanisms should be de-signed not as parallel policy making processes, but feed into actual decision-making, where a feedback loop is established so that young people that participate to the processes can see what is the follow-up to their contribution. These mechanisms should be more accessible and inclusive of young people from all backgrounds, notably of those young people from

the most vulnerable backgrounds, such as people with disabilities, refugee and asylum seekers, Roma youth, indigenous groups and young people from disadvantaged socio-economic background.

### **B. National and local youth councils**

There is a critical need for local and national authorities, where appropriate, to establish or further enhance functioning local and national youth councils. Public authorities must provide support, and refrain from politicising them (in a partisan manner where young people are seen as instruments of political parties). To ensure clarity, clear agreements and a solid normative framework of cooperation (consultation and co-management), including timelines and attendance and budget requirements, should be established to prevent practices of non- or badly functioning local and national youth councils.

### **C. Media education and digital literacy for participatory policy-making**

For instance, young people more than any other group in today's society is increasingly present in online space. Hence, the first step towards meaningful and effective participation in a digital environment is the establishment of media education in formal and non-formal curricula. This should focus on technical aspect of the Internet, coding and critical content assessment in order to foster online debates, exchanges with different actors, including political authorities, and participation in social actions. A part of this media education programmes should be teaching online ethics with a particular focus on combating hate speech. Media and ICT literacy training programmes for public officials engaged in outreach activities should also be established and supported to fully use the potential ICT is offering for enhanced participatory policy making.

### **D. Research on youth participation**

In order to develop evidence based policies and strategies regarding youth participation in political and public life, public authorities and regulatory bodies should support continuous and systematic data collection and research on youth political involvement. Data collection should track youth participation, representation and inclusion, youth transition from school to the world of work, the impact of policies on various youth groups, and youth involvement in the political process.

### **Recommendations to Member States**

- Promote, enhance and further explore participatory policy-making mechanisms at all levels of public decision-making.
- Provide adequate funding and ensure input from youth councils in municipal and national policy-making.
- Support more research on youth participation.

## **5. Active youth involvement in implementing 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**

Young people have been called “torch bearers” and “critical agents of change” in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. However, without youth participation in decision-making around sustainable development, and without the respect and protection of young people's rights, they cannot properly fulfill that role and expectation.

### **Recommendations to Member States**

- Representative youth organisations to be provided with the space, support and resources to participate in decision-making, policy-making, budgeting, implementation, follow-up and review for sustainable development at all levels.
- Create institutionalized mechanisms for participation of civil society and stakeholders in decision-making around sustainable development, such as national or regional sustainable development councils or commissions, or equivalent bodies. A space for youth organisations must be guaranteed within such bodies.