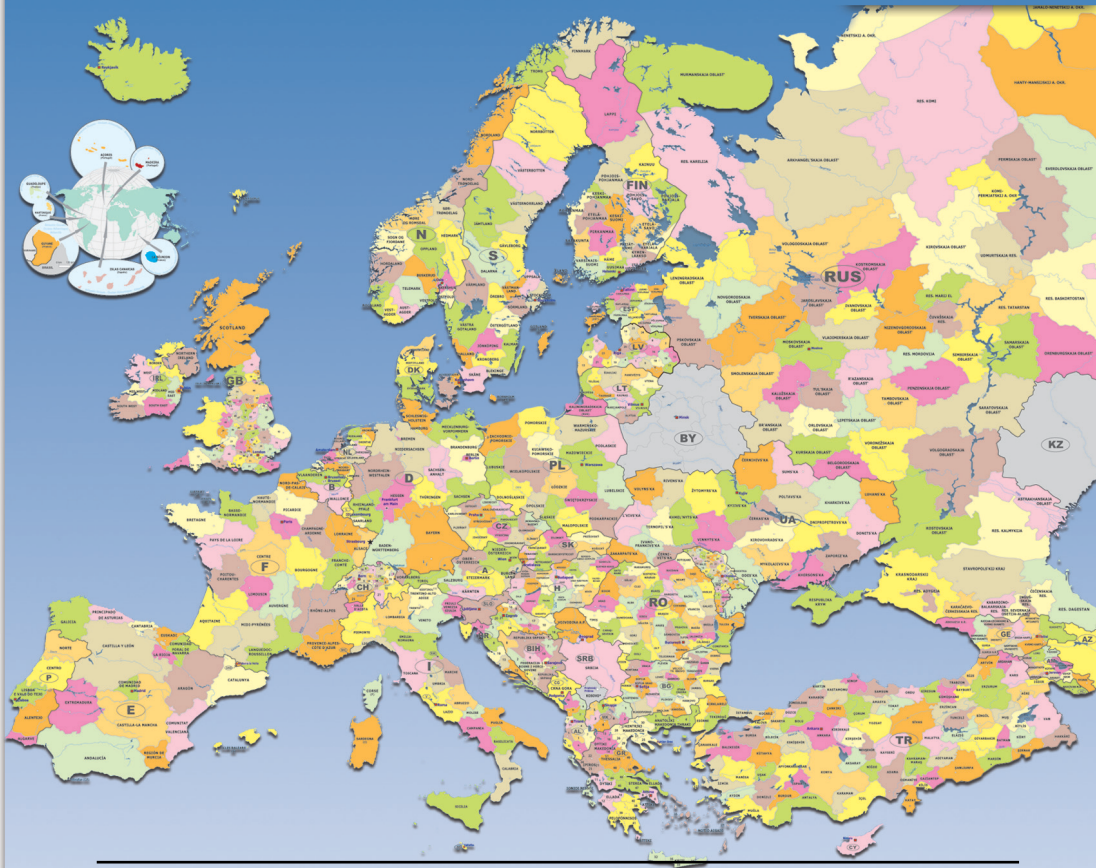


Assembly of European Regions

Political Report

The involvement of young people
in democratic life at regional level



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The rapporteur's foreword



Dear colleagues,

Europe is going through a difficult economic situation. Young people are particularly concerned by the crisis, as youth unemployment sets new records day after day. A whole generation is facing difficulties entering adult life, and feels excluded not only from the labour market, but also from democratic life. As a result, political mistrust is increasing, while youth participation is becoming lower and lower. This might have disastrous consequences for the future of Europe's democracies, taking into account that they will constitute tomorrow's electorate.

That is why, integrating young people into decision-making processes must be our priority. In the last years, measures to create a strong dialog between youth and politicians have already been emerging on European, national and regional level. Considering human capital as their most important resource, regional authorities are dedicating significant financial means to education, training, and the promotion of citizenship. Political responsibility also means having faith in our younger citizens, giving them access to civic education. For instance, thanks to the creation of the Youth Parliament in 2011, the Alsace Region recognises its younger citizens as equals, and allows them to be actors of their future. The Alsace Region wishes now to share its experience, and decided to lead on a AER report on youth participation in democratic life.

In this context, I would like to thank the following regions and organisations which participated in the development of this report :

- Alsace (France)
- Alba (Romania)
- Donetsk (Ukraine)
- Fribourg (Switzerland)
- Nordland (Norway)
- Sankt Gallen (Switzerland)
- Vojvodina (Serbia)
- Västernorrland (Sweden)
- Dolnoslaskie (Poland)
- Association of Local Democracy Agencies (ALDA)
- Congress of the Council of Europe

The following document presents good practices and gives recommendations on how to integrate young people in democratic life in our regions, which will certainly benefit to political leaders in orienting their positions on the needs of the concerned citizens.

On the eve of the European elections, I hope that this report will be taken in consideration by decision-makers for their work, and that we can achieve together a high youth participation rate, to strengthen the democratic Europe of tomorrow.

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Context

Over the last years, a falling youth participation has been noted in Europe. This lack of interest in public policies goes hand in hand with the current economic situation. This young people mostly belong to a generation the European Commission calls NEET. They are Not in Education, Not in Employment, and Not in Training. As a consequence, this young citizens feel excluded from democratic life, just as much as from the labour market.

Yet, on regional, national and European level, governments are implementing measures to make the voice of the youth heard. For instance, the Alsace Region has put in place its Youth Parliament in 2011, and gave it full decision powers in certain regional policies concerning youth. With its youth policy, Alsace aims at considering young people as equal and serious citizens, because they represent added value to European democratic systems. In order to keep the region attractive for young people, who will shape its economic development in the next years, regional authorities engaged to involve youth in public life and allow territorial anchorage. The region is investing in its own future, as it educates its young people to responsible citizens.

In addition, with regard to the upcoming European elections in 2014, low participation represents a threat for democracy, as well as for European integration, giving space for nationalist and eurosceptic parties to take up traditional institutions. Therefore, the integration of young people in political decisions must become a priority. The youth of today constitutes tomorrow's leadership, hence investing in young people's education means stabilizing democratic institutions.

This report points out three main observations. First of all, youngsters do not feel listened to by decision-makers, and as a consequence do not believe in democratic elections. Therefore, youth must be at the heart of political debates across Europe. Many of AER member regions have empowered young activists through the creation of Youth Assemblies, Councils or Parliaments in their administrative institutions. This actions must be expanded and promoted.

Though young people don't feel included, they have a lot of innovative ideas, that they are keen to share in their own way. Politics should take into account

opinion of young people, especially concerning topics that affect them directly. A closer structured dialog between youngsters and decision-makers might be a solution to the falling youth participation. In fact, it has been noticed, that youngsters are interested in politics, but they express themselves in new ways, using online media, volunteering, or taking the streets. That is why, it is our responsibility to encourage dialog between youth structures and decision-makers. In this context, the report highlights that traditional institutions have to connect with young people, and to adapt politics to the digital era.

Despite this changes in democratic practices, we need to improve youth interest in traditional representative democracy institutions, and give them informations on their rights as full citizens, because it is the only way to make their voice effectively heard. Indeed, youth participation is not only about voting. It is also fundamental to teach the citizens of tomorrow democratic practices. They should grow up into their citizen's responsibilities and learn to debate and exchange ideas. That is why, education must not be forgotten concerning youth participation.

Observations, good practices and recommendations

Observation 1

Young people are not systematically involved and encouraged to participate in decision making processes. Regional authorities should accept them as full partners, and specific structures should be created and support this purpose.

In all their contributions, the partners of the report pointed out the role of Youth structures - such as youth councils - to enable young people to have a say in the implementation of which should have a youth dimension. They all agree to say that young people must be full actors in the policies that affect them, assume direct responsibility for projects and play an active part in related policies.

According to Dolnoslaskie's report, setting up Youth councils is the better way to fix a current problem: young people are not always listened to nor perceived as serious partners by politicians. Thus, the aim of these platforms is to ensure a better participation of youth in public life and also to create a real and useful dialog between the regional authorities and young people.

Some youth structures already exist in Europe. Each partners of the report gave a presentation of the good practices towards youth participation existing in their regions, and the way they may be developed according to them.

Good practices

Each Region is free to choose the type of body it wants to create to develop youth participation. There is not one option better than the other, what is important is for regional authorities to help and support Youth structures, so they can be active and considered as serious elements in regional politics.

Thus, youth structures can be embodied in youth councils, but not only. According to the Alsatian Youth Parliament, various types of collective engagement should be developed. It is actually up to each region custom. Different levels of youth involvement in regional politics exist: consultation, committee, co-management, cooperation, common projects and initiatives, etc.

Young people can be invited, through youth structures, to participate in several ways: attend plenary sessions of the Regional Council, make proposals

regarding various policies, make proposals regarding youth policies only, or independently develop and monitor youth projects at regional level (etc.).

In Donetsk for example, the student Parliament is a collegiate advisory-deliberative body at Donetsk Regional Council. Its members can attend Sessions of the Council and meetings of the standing commissions, express their recommendations and proposals.

One of the good practices of youth involvement in process of decision-making in Donetsk is the project "Future Begins Today": members of Students Parliament had two-week internship at city councils of the region, with the opportunity to study structure of councils, examine deputies' work and programs of youth policy, and make recommendations for their implementation.

In Vasternorrland, the Regional Youth Committee's role is to spread awareness and create a public opinion.

In the Alsace region, the Alsatian Youth Parliament (AYP) is consulted by the Regional Council since 2011 concerning regional projects and actions in favour of youth. Divided in three thematic committees, the Alsatian Youth Parliament deals with major regional youth projects, and set up propositions for concrete actions. It designs concrete action proposals and thus plays a contributing role in regional politics. The AYP is the 3rd regional council of its kind.

In St Gallen, the Youth Parliament is organized as an association. Every young citizen between 14 and 26 can become member, and when Youth Session take place it is open for all young citizens from the region. The Youth Parliament of St. Gallen has its own budget and is free to organize its own events (Youth Session, concerts, Public debates, etc.).

Several types of selection for members do exist: elections, appointment/nomination, on a voluntary basis, etc.

St Gallen recommends the members of youth councils to be elected by the young people they represent.

In Alsace, the members of the youth parliament are appointed by a jury, in a way to ensure a fair and balanced representation of the alsatian youth. For example, objective criterias such as geographic origins, age, gender, and status (student, employee, job seekers, etc.). are taken into account.

■ Recommendations

All participants are pointing out the necessity for authorities to settle down youth structures and to let them participate in the decision making process.

There is also an important need to provide resources, both financials and materials (meeting rooms, offices, computers, etc.), to support them.

They should also provide support to young people in the shape of participation training.

Regarding the financial resources matter, the Alsatian Youth Parliament suggests that no general budget is allowed to youth structures but proposes instead that some money is granted to support specific projects. St Gallen, on the contrary, recommends a specific budget for Youth councils.

At last, to ensure the diversity of the population that is represented, young people with any minority background and those with disabilities should be represented in youth councils.



Observation 2:

Politics are often perceived to be out of young people's world. Thus, Politicians must find a way to improve youth interest in politics by developing modern forms of communication so young people can be "politically aware", awakened and a true part of it.

As the Congress of the Council of Europe's 2012 report on "youth and democracy" discovered, young people have not lost interest in politics, they are engaging differently: they are participating in school councils, youth organisations, youth work, and via social media. The essential element for today's youth is to make their voice heard.

Vasternorrland's report grabs attention upon the fact that people are today mobile and looking for quick solutions and results. They are more interested in daily life issues and they use different communication methods than adults. For example, young people prefer networks for communication.

Also, it is mainly a problem of communication which causes a gap between the politicians and young people. Young people are usually not interested in political issues because the political world is often a strange world that they don't understand, with subjects unable to attract them.

Thus, one of the main things to work on, according to the partners of the report, is to improve youth citizenship with better methods of information, because it will allow an improvement of youth interest in politics. It is only once young people are "politically awakened" that communication between politics

and young people will be developed through modern forms of youth participation.

■ **Good practices**

For Norland, the important action in the purpose of raising youth interest in politics is to include young people with the right experience according to the theme in question. For example, pupils should be consulted about schools, or victims should be consulted about post traumatic stress care. Furthermore, several commissions dealing with several youth topics must be created in youth councils, so young people can attend to one they are interested and/or qualified in.

For instance, in Alsace, three committees were set up: two deal with orientation, training, and professional integration on one side, and citizenship, mobility, access to culture, and living conditions on the other. The 3rd committee is in charge of overlooking projects submitted by youths in response to calls for projects from the region.

In Vasternorrland, the committee may also establish working groups on specific issue.

In Dolnoslaskie, the young parliamentarians will very soon have the ability to present documents of Regional Parliament of Lower Silesia in the places where they live in, for instance at schools, at youth councils, etc. Young parliamentarians will collect ideas for initiatives in their hometowns and bring them to the meetings of Youth Regional Parliament where they will be discussed and voted. It is a very good way to collect youth ideas and participation from all across the region territory.

In Vasternorrland, the Regional Youth Committee was created for young people and with them. Its originality comes from the way it has been settled down : to establish the youth committee, the county council invited youth organisations, youth parties, schools, etc. to discuss all the important questions regarding the creation of the Regional Youth Committee.

Also, the members of the Regional Youth Committee in Vasternorrland took initiatives and built up a work-team during the preparatory process and decided on a work plan of an information campaign to each municipality in order to raise interest and to start up a democratic nominating process.

In Vojvodina, the Provincial Secretariat for Sports and Youth works to motivate young people to activism and social inclusion and to promote volunteerism.

■ Recommendations

The report of Donetsk recommends, to erase the communication problem, the organization of recurrent meetings between young people and local authority representatives to make the dialog between them more effective.

Vasternorrland suggests that politicians revise their methods for communication with youth and discuss directly with them on how to build the structures for youth participation and involvement. Sharing power and responsibility are key factors to increase youth participation.

Politicians should increase political communication in direction of young people, and especially use internet as a free and easy way to inform them.

Another very important thing to work on is the “physical/geographical” access of young people to political information and participation.

It is really important to help young people in rural cities to have access to political information and to be able to frequently come to youth structures. For instance, regional transports should be developed by regional authorities for that purpose, and regional authorities may financially help members of youth councils to join their structure.

When a youth session takes place in St Gallen, it is open for all young citizens from the region.



■ Observation 3:

Education has an important role to play for motivating young people.

According to the Alsatian Youth Parliament, there is a big lack of political information toward young people, and when there is, the information is often too abstract for them and far from their life and reality.

Young people are not enough aware of the realizations that political decisions can make, and education has a major role to play there.

As the Alba’s reporter said, “School is the first institution we came in contact with, our first contact with the institutionalized society”, that is why school must offer a civic education. But not only schools. Education is a subject for family, public administration, non-governmental organizations and local environment, especially to reach young people who dropped school.

Young people need youth structures to address their needs and aspirations today while they are young, not tomorrow.

■ Good practices

According to the Council of Europe Congress, an interest in politics, policy-making and participation can be awakened in children by setting up school councils and other representative bodies in schools and providing education for democratic citizenship.

However, young people also learn about citizenship through non-formal education they receive elsewhere, such as in youth clubs and local civic organisations.

On this topic, both the Council of Europe and the European Commission have given non-formal education and learning a high status and considerable momentum with high-level resolutions: the Council of Europe with Resolution (2003) 8 of the Committee of Ministers on the promotion and recognition of non-formal education/learning of young people; the European Union with Resolution 2006 / C168 on the recognition of the value of non-formal and informal learning within the European youth field.

In Vojvodina, civic education was introduced in the first grade (7 years old) in the regular classes throughout the school and in high school. Young people learn their rights, how civil society works, and state institutions.

Furthermore, all secondary schools in Vojvodina have been established student parliaments.

■ Recommendations

Schools is the best place to start because everybody starts here, it's a way to reach every young person.

According to St Gallen, political or civic education needs to begin much earlier in school, like it is in Vojvodina for instance. And it would also be relevant to look at the role of NGOs, to invite them to schools so that they can present their activities, because non-formal education is also important.

Vojvodina also recommends the support of small youth organizations in rural areas, which must not be left apart. It is important to reach young people who live in rural cities.

Participation increases the feeling of being a part of a whole - in this case the local society.

That is why the Alsatian Youth Parliament insists on the importance to also reach those who dropped schools, by sensibilising all type of structures that are still in contact with young people - such as NGO's, job agencies, etc. – on the matter to inform them.

And to have representatives youth councils, students who have dropped out of school should also be part of it.

The Alsatian Youth Parliament also recommends schools to teach students how to give their opinion and to listen to the other's, so they can start thinking and discuss about youth issues. This exercise will be very useful to raise their "political awareness" and self confidence in order to make them participate in regional youth issues.

School does not allow a lot of free time out of class and usually members of youth councils do it on their own free time. Thus, it can be hard for students to combine both schools and youth councils.

On that topic, the partners of the report suggested and listed several recommendations: for instance giving a minimum of hours to the members of youth structures during school time, or considering that being a member of a youth council is a part of their formation, and for example giving them ECTS at university level, etc.



Conclusion

Following the above mentioned acknowledgements, three main aspects must command the region's attention in their work, in order to involve youth in democratic life at regional level.

First of all, Regions must keep in mind that it is important to give youth some power in their decision making process, as today's youngsters represent the leader of tomorrow. Empowering youth and providing youngsters with education and training will lead to the stabilization of our democracies. Thus, regional authorities must enable youngsters to participate and make their voice heard by implementing youth structures in their administration. However, there is not only one possible structure. Indeed, each region is free to decide what might be the best option, regarding also its historical custom. As a result, regions remain free to choose to create whether a Council, a Parliament or another kind of youth organisation. The relevant point here is to give youth the means to get involved.

Besides this structural dimension, a dialog between youngsters and politicians must be established. This report points out that the younger generation is still interested in politics, but that it is using modern ways of communication. In this perspective, decision makers must connect with young people, using similar channels. Politicians and young people must “meet” to set an effective dialog, and avoid standoffs. This report recommends to consult youth on this matter, so that politicians can learn about possible communication forms.

The third lesson to be learned is not to neglect the importance of civic education in a democracy. One is not borne as a responsible and aware citizen, one becomes one. Political responsibility includes trusting our young citizens and enabling them to gain experiences in political decision-making, through adapted, formal or non-formal structures. For this reason, it must be a priority to educate young people, and provide them with political information. This could be achieved by developing civic education classes in schools, where pupils would learn how to use tools of democracy, such as debating. Non formal education should not be forgotten either. Governments could rely on cooperations with NGOs, youth organisations etc.

All in all, this report brought interesting practices from AER member regions together, illustrating the benefits of an increased involvement of young people in democratic life.

Bringing young citizens closer to decision-makers is a chance for regional authorities to be more attractive for youngsters, who are the first resources to territorial development. Integrating young people in democratic life and taking their needs into account will guarantee a prosperous life to the regions, on a human, economic and political level. In deed, in order to tackle future challenges, decisions-makers must work closely today with tomorrow’s political actors.

Moreover, bearing in mind the upcoming European elections, empowering young people’s voice in democratic life could lead to a stabilization of our institutions and democracies. In fact, soon the European citizens will have the opportunity to vote their representatives in the European Parliament. This might be a decisive moment for the future of the European Union and its democratic system. The intrinsic problem of democracy must never be forgotten: democracy can destroy itself. To tackle this threat, decision makers must promote youth participation and civic education. Considering the increasing far-right parties and eurosceptic views, time has come for European politicians, wether they are elected on local, regional or national level, to take up the challenge and give young people the chance to build up a stronger Europe, based on people’s sovereignty. Thus, integrating young people in democratic life at regional level means strengthening European democratic models by empowering tomorrow’s citizens.

For more information on the Youth participation report

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