

PROJECT: COHERENT “A Circle Of youth for the Europe we want”

Work package 5  
Deliverable: D.5.1 Policy Toolkit

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# POLICY TOOLKIT

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## Content

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2. European youth landscape</b>	<b>3</b>
2.1. <i>Statistics</i>	4
2.2. <i>Questionnaires</i>	9
<b>3. Basic concept of democratic youth policy and its best practices</b>	<b>14</b>
3.1. <i>Interpretation of efficient youth policy – the “Ladder of Participation”</i>	14
3.2. <i>Best practices</i>	16
3.2.1. Finland – Youth Centres	16
3.2.2. Germany – Berlin Youth Democracy Fund	17
3.2.3. Austria – Aha Plus	18
<b>4. Basic principles and recommendations</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>5. Conclusions</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>6. Resources</b>	<b>25</b>

## 1. Introduction

The European Commission has officially declared **2022 the European Year of Youth**. All of this reflects on several things at once; the social and economic tensions unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the growing social and political alienation of young people, or even the declining demographic trends. It is now clear that the results of the democratic development achieved by the European Union and the Member States will only be sustainable in the long term if young people's participation in society is strengthened and their participation in public and, where appropriate, political decisions and processes is deepened. This is the only way to ensure that the foundations of social coexistence and public policymaking based on democratic principles are secured for future generations, thus guaranteeing the survival of the European way of life.

This document has a dual purpose. Its **first objective is to explain in detail the main reasons for the alienation of European youth and their distrust of political institutions**, which makes the key issues of youth participation in society more understandable to decision-makers and youth policy organizations. The **second objective is to present good practices and formulate recommendations that provide obvious support to youth policy makers** in outlining and implementing decisions or developing social partnerships.

It should also be emphasized that the findings of the document prepared by the COHERENT (A Circle Of youth for tHe EuRope wE want) project partnership reflect not only the analysis of policy documents and EU statistics, but also the results of its own questionnaire research. The consortium considered it essential to include in the document the opinions and reflections of NGOs engaging in the field of youth policy. Thus, **the content of the present document is reflecting the views of 25 responding youth organizations from 10 EU member states**, which significantly strengthens the relevance of the research and advisory potential of the policy toolkit.

With this added value, the COHERENT consortium recommends the use and consideration of the findings and recommendations in this document, which we hope will contribute to a constructive strengthening of youth policy.

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## 2. European youth landscape

In general, it must be underlined that the **future of the European integration is largely relying on the attitudes of younger generations**: most decisively on their association with democratic values, their willingness to embrace European identity and their active engagement in the political process. As a result, younger citizens must be actively involved in European affairs and social dialogues to avoid their alienation from civic participation and social/political engagement in all levels of European politics (from municipalities to EU institutions).

In this respect, strengthening democratic attitudes of younger citizens in each member state and improving their access to social and educational services, as well as enhancing education opportunities and employment prospects can be identified as one of the strategic goals of the EU. As such, the EU-initiated Erasmus+ programme is focusing on “improving the skills level of young people, supporting their participation in democratic life and in the labour market, and promoting active citizenship, intercultural dialogue, social inclusion and solidarity”. Moreover, within Erasmus+, the European Solidarity Corps, established in December 2016, provides a unique possibility for young citizens to take part in activities such as volunteering and employment in their own country and beyond. Also, programmes like Euroscola and the European Youth Event, foster students to express their ideas and engage in mutual dialogue with professionals and decision-makers. Consequently, the motivation of similar initiatives is a strategic cornerstone of the diverse nature of EU youth policies, which combine cultural and educational activities to help ensure the economic and political empowerment of young Europeans.

As a positive feedback, recent survey results attest that that many young people are already interested and engaged both politically and civically within the EU. Many research documents underline the fact, that younger generations are actively taking part in political and social life, willing to stay informed on current affairs, and ready to devote time to volunteering (EP 2021). Furthermore, they are the most educated and digitally conscious of all generations, and among the most motivated to tackle serious global issues such as climate change, they have the potential to have a significant impact on the system. However, as a negative aspect, the same research documents identified that a significant proportion of European youth is still alienated from politics or disinclined to take part in political or social activities due to lack of interest, time, awareness, or a sense of purpose. As the 2021 European Parliament Youth Survey points out, such serious disengagement of younger people has been identified all over the EU as presenting a major challenge for some democracies (EP, 2021).

Regarding the fact, that **engaging, connecting, and empowering** youth are the three cornerstones of the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, adopted by the European Council in 2018, it is a necessity to tackle with this challenge and foster the social and political participation meanwhile raising also the European awareness of younger citizens within the EU (Sipos, 2020). Nevertheless, as an analysis by Ipsos, concerning the lives and opportunities of Generation Z, reflects that **younger generations are not necessarily less politically active than previous generations, but have slightly different social values and concerns than their elders** (IPSOS, 2018). It is thus essential to better understand the interests and attitudes of European youth when it

comes to politics and social engagement, as well as any potential obstacles to the participation of a diverse range of young people. Such an in-depth understanding will be crucial in shaping and enhancing the decision-making of political and civic institutions aimed at fostering young people to become more active citizens in European democracy and society.

## 2.1. Statistics

In 2021, to ensure a better understanding upon challenges of youth engagement and social involvement, the European Parliament commissioned a new Flash Eurobarometer survey to gather information regarding youth attitudes and behaviours in respect of political engagement and the EU (more precisely their general interest in politics, democratic values, motivations of engagement, consciousness).

The results of the research were published by the EP in September 2021, which give us a very up-to-date and accurate picture of the social participation of younger generations in relation to the topics mentioned.<sup>1</sup> Due to all this, to explore the situation more potently, the review of the research material in the framework of the present policy toolkit can be considered highly recommended, which can directly help us to identify the most important problems and potentials.

Based on the research results of the European Parliament flash survey, **we can highlight the following points as main conclusions regarding youth attitudes** (EP, 2021):

- Younger generations generally **speak a lot about politics but have a limited knowledge upon the functioning of the EU.**
- Their most important topics in mind are **poverty/social inequality** and **climate change** which they consider crucial regarding their future.
- Their political participation can be considered quite weak. Only **46% of the respondents have voted in the last local, national, or European election.**
- **They can be reached mainly through social media**, however national medias have also a meaningful impact when it comes to judge the EU and political issues.
- Altogether, **62% respondents are generally in favour of the EU.** However, on the other hand, **45% consider their interpretation of the EU has remained stable over the last years, while 31% say it has got worse.** Consequently, it can be concluded that almost one third of the respondents have a more critical view upon the EU comparing to previous years.

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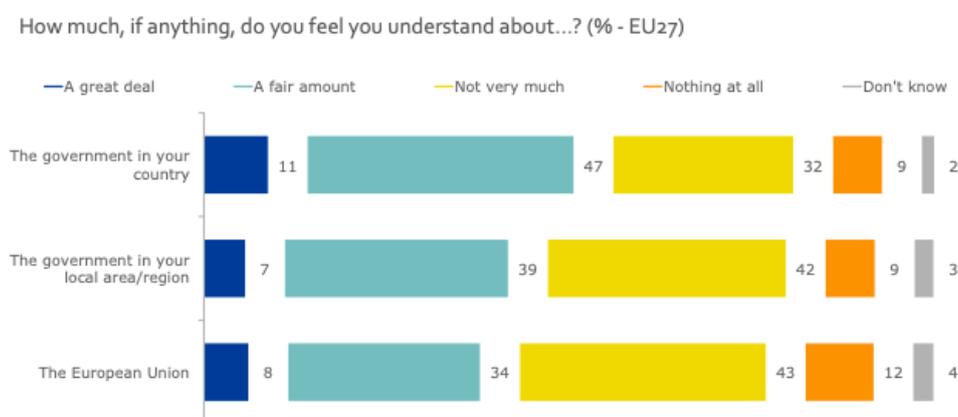
<sup>1</sup> Ipsos European Public Affairs interviewed a representative sample of young people aged 16-30, in each of the 27 Member States of the European Union. Between 18 June and 27 June 2021, 18 156 young people were surveyed via computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI), using Ipsos online panels and their partner network.

The main conclusions of the survey research can be explained and visualised in detail by the following points and figures topics by topics:

### Importance of politics and priority issue

- Approximately nine in ten respondents (85%) talk about politics when they get together with friends or relatives (25% doing so “frequently” and 61% doing so “occasionally”).
- A majority (55%) of participants consider they don’t understand much or anything about the EU, while 42% say they understand a great deal or a fair amount.

1. Figure: Knowledge about politics and the EU

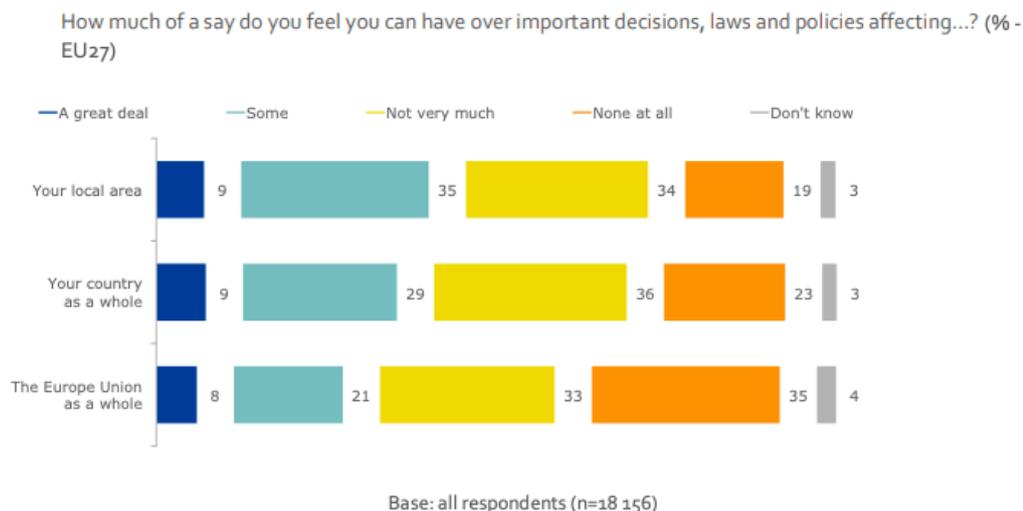


Base: all respondents (n=18 156)

Source: EP 2021

- **Most respondents think they don’t have much, or any, say over important decisions, laws and policies affecting their lives.** This feeling increases the more distant the sphere of governance under consideration. (53% feel they don’t have much, or any, say over decisions, laws and policies affecting their local area, rising to 70% for matters affecting the EU).

2. Figure: Interpretation of influencing potential in decision-making

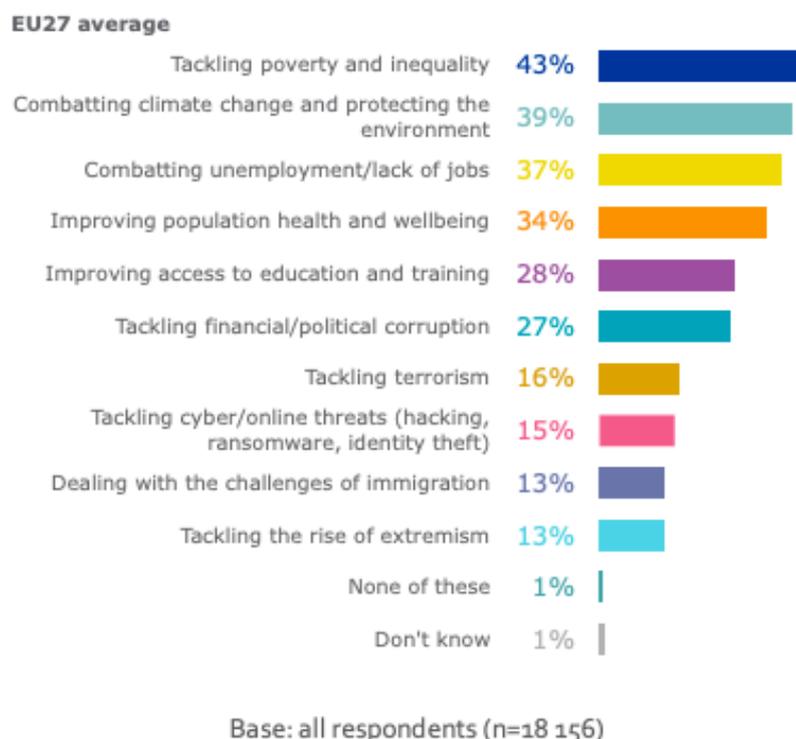


Source: EP 2021

- Political issues that respondents would **most like to see prioritised** are **tackling poverty and social inequality** (43%); **followed by combating climate change and protecting the environment** (39%); and combating unemployment or a lack of jobs.

3. Figure: Most important priorities of European youth

In your opinion, which three of the following issues should be given priority? (% - EU27)



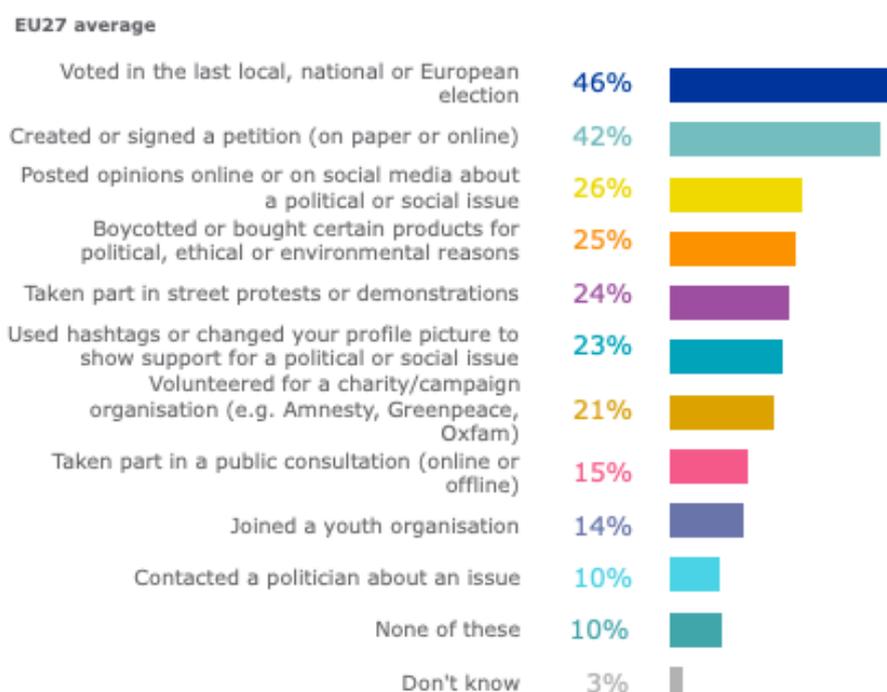
Source: EP 2021

## Political and civic engagement

- 87% of respondents have engaged in at least one political or civic activity. **46% have taken part in the last local, national, or European election, and 42% have created or signed a petition.** Around 25% have engaged in other, more direct forms of action, including boycotting, or buying certain products on political, ethical, or environmental grounds (25%); and taking part in street protests or demonstrations (24%). Also, a similar proportion has engaged in online activities, including posting opinions on social media about a political or social issue (26%).

4. Figure: Political and social participation of European youth

Have you ever done any of the following? (% - EU27)



Base: all respondents (n=18 156)

Source: EP 2021

- The perceived most effective actions for making one's voice heard is "voting" mentioned by 41%, followed by taking part in protests and demonstrations (33%), and creating or signing a petition (30%).
- Participants never voted were asked what, if anything, had prevented them from doing so. **Most identified at least one barrier of electoral participation: a basic lack of interest (15%), a belief that decision makers "don't listen to people like me" (13%) and a lack of understanding of the issues at stake (11%).**

## Information on political and social issues

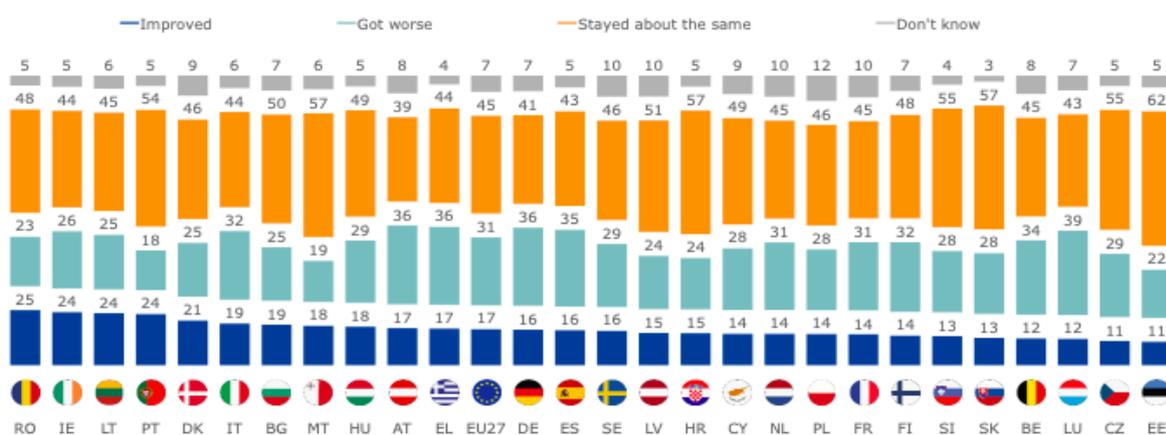
- Top sources of information on political and social issues for youth are **social media and news websites**, each of which are mentioned by 41%.
- The specific social media channels respondents tend to rely on are **Facebook** (54%) and **Instagram** (48%), followed by **YouTube** (35%) and **Twitter** (29%) respectively.
- However, the most trusted sources of information **about issues facing Europe** are **national media** (25%), **friends, family, or colleagues** (23%), **EU leaders** (23%) and **national government** (21%).

## Attitudes towards the EU

- **62% respondents are generally in favour of the EU.** However, this share also includes 34% who are dissatisfied with the functioning of the EU. Besides, a further **21% of respondents are rather sceptical** of the EU but could change their opinion if radical reform is introduced, while **5% are opposed to the general idea of the EU.**
- **45% of participants consider their interpretation of the EU has remained stable over the last year, while 31% say it has got worse and 17% say it has improved.**

5. Figure: Changing interpretation of the EU

Over the last year, would you say that this image you have of the European Union has improved, got worse or stayed about the same? (%)



Base: all respondents (n=18 156)

Source: EP 2021

## 2.2. Questionnaires

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the COHERENT project partnership made it a priority to assess the social activity of younger generations not only in the light of statistics but also in the form of direct feedback from NGOs through online interviews. All this made it possible to obtain more detailed and thorough information, so the assessment of the situation of the research could also lead to more specific conclusions.

This chapter focuses on the synthesis of the answers and reflections given by the 25 responding youth NGOs, according to the thematic grouping of the questionnaire, covering many issues from social life to public education and motivations.

### 1. The importance of active youth participation in social life:

- Young people are living in societies, and they should have a say in what happens around them. Moreover, **they should take part in strengthening democratic values through social interactions.**
- They are the most prominent **promoters of social progression** and democratic reforms.
- **Construction should always start from the bottom**, so it is important for young people to take an active role in local communities. Unfortunately, **the lack of active participation has a very big impact on the detriment and disintegration of local communities.** Therefore, it is important to encourage young people to take an active part in the life of communities.
- **Young people are the future of our societies**, and their involvement can contribute to their development by understanding their needs.
- When young people vote and participate in civic life, **they can bring valuable perspectives to public issues** and play an active role in shaping their future.
- **Young people are demanding change.** For some of them the fight against climate change is urgent, and these activities give, in some way, a response to their demands. They enrich the lives of youths and are socially beneficial to the community, while young people get aware of societal and environmental crisis. For example, volunteering is one form of civic engagement included in the establishment of civic action and civic commitment.
- **Participation in civic engagement activities can also help youth become better informed about current events.** It enables them to make a positive contribution by developing the knowledge and experience needed to claim their rights and understand their responsibilities.
- **Youth need to be the true protagonist of their societies**, feeling that they can influence and change the places in which they live, and they can be the little “drop” that together with other “drops” will fill the emptiness of “the nothing will change or will be better”

## 2. Strengthening the involvement of younger generations by decision-makers and social actors in the decision-making processes affecting them:

- Above all, **politicians and decision-makers should be role models for young people**. Politicians should foster openness and communication with young people, helping them to understand that they share the same goals and values, and seek to cooperate, listen, and help.
- By **inviting them to different meetings, events and offering internships in public institutions** and bodies which have public decision competencies.
- By **creating or strengthening youth councils bringing together decision-makers and young people** (e.g. debates, recommendations) so that the voices of young people can be truly heard and taken into action by those who are deciding and those who are in charge of social affairs.
- The crucial thing is to **implement as many co-decision-making mechanisms as possible** into formal education institutions (for example participatory budgeting in schools, various other deliberation processes), to involve young people in municipal assemblies, to promote cooperatives and strengthen neighbourhood/ district communities with the decentralisation of competencies.

## 3. Decreasing interest of youth in public life and its causes:

- The most significant negative impact is **the lack of trust in politicians and decision-makers**. Mistrust is passed on from one generation to the next, and the proper involvement of young people in the decision-making process is not created. Both youth education and open dialogue with politicians can help create this.
- Low engagement in public and social life is caused by the **lack of information**, difficulties to align non-formal social activities with work or studies.
- **In a school setting, they do not receive knowledge of how public life / politics works**, but they are so stimulated by social media and everyday life about these topics that most of them do not understand and therefore do not want to deal with. Thus, they are often excluded from the learning opportunities provided by NGOs because they feel that public life / politics is bad and too complex. A negative factor is that if they get involved in a case, they can only do it with great difficulty. Many of them don't even have a need to join or start with good causes.
- It is a matter also of public education. In general, **school does not educate youth towards social participation and participation in public life**.
- **They are depressed**, under pandemic circumstances, climate change problems, financial crisis, war in Ukraine – they do not see future for themselves, they don't know what to do in their lives.
- COVID-19 had a huge impact on how young people perceive social life now-a-days. **Since the pandemic, there has been a shift: from in person to online, from valuing physical presence to online interactions** where everyone can create circles of friends according to their wills and needs.
- **Some of them are justly disillusioned with formal politics and representative democracy**, since it does not bring about the change (for example in environmental protection) that would benefit all the society. They are

also for mostly targeted as consumers instead of social and political actors of their own accord.

#### 4. Motivating values, conscious social behaviour, subculturalization:

- **Young people are particularly attentive to climate change.** They buy and consume more consciously, with an awareness of the environmental impact of these actions. But while they are aware of this, **they do not have the means to make it a regular practice.** Also, solidarity is one of the important values that should be cultivated. However, **having been born in independent countries, young people do not fully understand the value of freedom** and see values such as democracy, human rights, freedom of speech, etc., as givens that do not need to be fostered.
- **Good job perspectives, future with no economic stress, places where they can have fun.** Some of the young people do have thoughts about social issues, but this is a small minority.
- The interests of young people are very diverse, but they all have one thing in common: **the importance of community life.** How this is achieved by the groups can also vary greatly from environmental protection, through social sensitivity, to strengthening credit, but each time the emphasis is on the formation of the groups and their subsequent development and maintenance.
- Technology has created a whole new set of beliefs, fears, and aspirations. **Work and economy are two of the main issues that concern young people.** Many suffer from the negative effects of social networks, in the desire for fame to be seen and recognised by others.
- Interest in politics and religion has declined sharply, perhaps due to the lack of charisma and credibility of politicians and the church. **Young people with a higher academic level give more relevance to prosocial and post-materialistic values,** while young people with a lower academic level give more relevance to values related to well-being and personal gratification.
- They have a **strong belief that education in technologies will provide them with success in the future.** Younger generations also believe that technology will solve most environmental problems soon.
- More young people show more proactive attitudes, are more involved or are more willing to get involved in society. Some of these young people **question the status quo and are in favour of a social change.** In contrast, there is also a notable trend towards more conservative positions, with the vindication of traditional morals, values, and virtues.

#### 5. Responsibility to strengthen the ability of young people to recognize various manipulation techniques and to conduct a conscious and critical consumption of media:

- As young people start using smart technologies and the internet at a very early age, **it is essential that critical thinking is developed from a very young age.** Of course, it is essential that children understand the basics of critical thinking in the family, but **education outside the family is just as important.**

As they grow up and spend more and more time outside the family, they are exposed to different opinions and attitudes towards information. It is therefore necessary to promote critical thinking on a continuous basis, through different activities, both in formal and non-formal education.

- In the first place, **the responsibility lies with the state** (education policy), which should promote critical thinking in schools in facing of media manipulation. To this end, **funds need to be earmarked for extracurricular and cross-curricular activities to enable young people to develop these competences and skills**. Families are also responsible, but there is a great lack of knowledge on the part of parents on how to deal with these issues. Therefore, critical thinking must be developed from primary school onwards, using age-appropriate methods.
- However, **fighting against manipulation is also the parents' responsibility in the beginning**. Media is consumed since birth, therefore the skills of critical thinking needs to be developed with parents in the early stages of the life-cycle. In addition, it must be integrated to the teaching all the way from the kindergarten considering the age and the understanding of the child.

## 6. The role of public education and its challenges in fostering young people to become conscious, active, and critical citizens:

- **The role of public education in empowering young people to become more conscious, active, and critical citizens is crucially important**. By starting to support students since their first years of school, they can motivate them to become more aware of their importance as citizen and how they must think and deal with the life in all its general aspects.
- However, **in many EU member states, too little attention is paid to civic education in the formal education system**. Pupils consider it as boring and sometimes difficult to understand the theoretical content, which is why it is particularly important to educate them by involving students in practical activities.
- Ensuring appropriate education from a young age is essential. It is also **essential to develop attractive forms of education that engage young people**.
- Public education should shift from information knowledge orientation to personal development and social skills education and related awareness-raising.
- In 2022, **media and its use should already be a separate lesson**, rather than hidden in another curriculum.

## 7. Motivating employers to be interested in hiring fresh graduates:

- **The current situation shows that employers are looking for young employees but offer them internships or low-paid positions**. For this reason, young people are looking for job opportunities abroad (mainly in better-paid Western European countries), where their qualifications would be much more valued. In response to the situation, **governments could initiate**

**incentives for companies employing young people and promote their integration into the national labour market.**

- To attract more young people, if possible, **employers should offer flexible working hours that fit in with their studies or requirements.** It is also important that qualification and experience demand shall be realistic and that competitive salaries are offered.
- It would be a great advantage **if companies could report social responsibility spending for hiring fresh graduates,** or some compensation after keeping the fresh graduate employed for one to three years would make it even more attractive.
- Most companies consider it crucial that fresh graduates have previous work experience to be hired, and they particularly value work experience in another country. But this is not within the reach of all young people. **Many skills and competences, which young people need to acquire to enter the labour market, are not taught in universities.** Paid internships in companies should be promoted to gain this prior experience. But there are many companies that take advantage of young people's work for very little pay.
- To **support employers with tax breaks.** While it is also crucially important **to improve hands-on education at all levels of education,** thus reducing the gap between the fresh graduates and an older, more experienced worker.
- **Using Youthpass on a wider scale,** available through Erasmus + program, would be a good option for employers. But unfortunately, generally they don't know about it. With Youthpass, employers could also find out several skills and knowledge regarding the young person that would not otherwise be known. However, Youthpass is known only to the civil society, therefore the formal recognition of non-formal learning by employers could effect a real progress in this field.

### 3. Basic concept of democratic youth policy and its best practices

#### 3.1. Interpretation of efficient youth policy – the “Ladder of Participation”

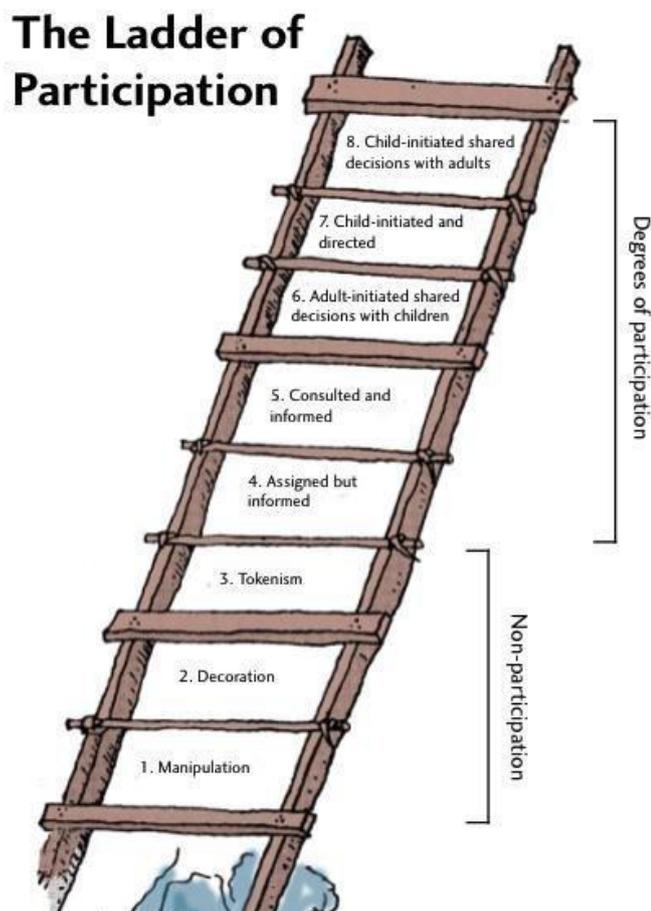
After examining and evaluating the political and social engagement of young people in Europe, the focus of the present policy toolkit turns to the identification of conditions for the ideal design of youth policy and the presentation of relevant good practices. In doing so, **the COHERENT project consortium aims to present examples that can inspire decision-makers and the work of organizations involved in youth activities.**

This is particularly important as the term "youth policy" may mean different forms of implementation for different actors and EU Member States. That is why it is necessary to define the basic principles of an effective youth policy that produces real social added value, thus **providing a common basis of interpretation for the actors involved in shaping this policy field.**

To better understand how youth policy can be improved, it is essential to clarify what social levels of youth involvement we know and which of these are worth targeting to bring about positive change. In this interpretation, we shall rely on the scientific work of the sociologist Roger Hart, who wrote a book for UNICEF in 1997, entitled *“Children's Participation: The Theory and Practice of Involving Young Citizens in Community Development and Environmental Care”* (Hart, 1997). In this book, Hart established a pyramid model, called the **“Ladder of Participation”**, symbolizing 8 levels of youth involvement by differentiating between them based on the extent of social and political involvement of youth in decision-making. As such, Hart created a framework from the weakest to the strongest level of youth involvement, therefore, we can clearly identify the most beneficial forms of youth empowerment and the false forms of incentives tending towards manipulation and symbolic participation.

According to the theoretical concept, the “Ladder of Participation” can be visualized and described with the following figure and points:

6. Figure: The framework of the “Ladder of Participation”



Source: Dillon, 2018

1. **Manipulation:** This is the case when adults use young people to support issues and pretend that young people inspired the actions.
2. **Decoration:** We talk about this scenario when young people are used to “support” and help things in a relatively indirect way. Adults don’t even pretend the case was inspired by young people.
3. **Tokenism:** In this case, young people seem to have the opportunity to express their views, but in reality, they have little or no influence over what they do or how they participate.
4. **Assigned but informed youth:** Young people are selected for special roles and given information on how and why they will be involved.
5. **Consulted and informed youth:** This is the scenario when young people are consulted on projects or programs designed and run by adults. Young people are informed about how their contribution will be used and the results of the final decision will be made by adults.
6. **Adult-initiated co-decisions with children:** We talk about this option when projects or programs are initiated by adults, but the decision-making processes take place together with young people.

7. **Child-initiated and directed initiatives:** This is the step when young people initiate and lead a project or program. Adults are only present as supporters.
8. **Child-initiated shared decisions with adults:** This can be the scenario when projects and programs are initiated by young people and young people are involved in the decision-making process together with adults. On the one hand, such projects empower young people to take an active part; on the other hand, they allow adults to gain experience and

## 3.2. Best practices

For the sake of better illustration of how ideal youth policy initiatives work on, the COHERENT partnership has identified a couple of European best practices. In the present policy toolkit, **3 particularly outstanding and progressive best practice were selected to be presented as good examples to be followed by decision-makers and youth policy stakeholders in shaping policy incentives.** In this respect, the following sub-chapters will uncover the basic patterns of actions and programs that can be supportive in strengthening the social participation and activism of younger generations

### 3.2.1. Finland – Youth Centres

In case of Finland, from the perspective of the social inclusion of younger people and the Finnish youth work administration, the national network of expertise centres – as an institutional background – can be considered an exemplary good practice. **Finnish Youth Centres** are supervised and subsidized by the Ministry of Education and Culture.<sup>2</sup> The development of youth work in the Youth Centre Network is carried out by following the current Youth Act and The National Youth Work and Youth Policy Program. **The operative responsibility of these expertise centres largely consists of developing the quality of youth work on a national scale through training activities and empowerment with expertise and knowledge.**

The expertise centres also support through their operations the development of high quality regional and local youth work by enabling the sharing of best practices and by participating in the youth strategy processes of municipalities and social organizations. Also, the Youth Centre Network provides a safe and responsible environment for many campsites, courses, activities, training sessions and other events throughout the entire year. As **experiential learning is the process of learning through experience, more specifically defined as “learning through reflection on doing”**, the Youth Centres are consecrating a dedicated attention to the improvement of skills, knowledge and experience that can be more suitably acquired outside a traditional academic classroom setting.

Experiential learning focuses on the learning process for the individual, which is based on four main elements operating in a continuous cycle during the learning experience:

- Concrete experience
- Reflective observation
- Abstract conceptualization

<sup>2</sup> Finish Youth Centres: <https://www.snk.fi/en/>

- Active experimentation

In this concept, all Finnish Youth Centres are perfectly situated for inspiring outdoor activities. The Youth Centres offer safe and attractive facilities for school camping groups. Among these special and relaxing conditions, children can learn much about Finnish culture, lifestyle and nature and improve their learning, teamwork, self-reflection, and social skills, which will help them move forwards in their social participation and engagement with confidence thus also fostering the social inclusion of the disadvantaged youth in Finland.

**All programs conducted in the Youth Centres follow the method of non-formal education, which supports the Finnish curriculum and children’s active learning with careful planning and execution of activities outside the school environment.**

The centres have ready-made programs leaning on Finnish values and education, while also considering the social background of each group. Consequently, from camp activities or trainings provided by the Youth Centres, children return home with more holistic abilities for learning, lovely memories, and useful experiences they will treasure for life. Therefore, in the present days, Finnish Youth Centres can be considered one of the most successful practices in terms of youth empowerment in Finland, thus this example shall be promoted also on international scales to initiate new ideas and motivations in case of other national support systems as well.

### 3.2.2. Germany – Berlin Youth Democracy Fund

In Germany, the **Berlin Youth Democracy Fund** can be identified as one of the best institutional examples to boost effectively the civic engagement and social empowerment.<sup>3</sup> The most important objective of the organisation is **to ensure direct financial contribution to further expanding democratic structures, participation** and work against right-wing extremism, racism and anti-Semitism in Berlin. It is intended to encourage and support new project ideas and projects initiated by young citizens, youth organizations and politically independent social stakeholders. For this aim, **the fund maintains the 3 types of grants** (with 15.000 EUR, 3.000 EUR or 1.000 EUR maximum awards) to support volunteer works, encourage youth participation and promote tolerance through civic education and awareness raising events.

The evaluation and funding decision is made by the “Berlin Youth Jury” (decision-making body of the fund), thus giving young people and their organizations the opportunity to put their projects into practice. According to the evaluation criteria, only self-governing or self-organized youth initiatives can be granted whose content and goals have an impact beyond the local levels and which they organize independently. If necessary or if there are problems with the project implementation, technical and professional support can be obtained from specialists provided by the fund. Regarding the objectives of the organization, project proposals have to focus on the following key areas to boost youth activism and social inclusion:

- Extension of participation contexts (horizon)
- Promotion of volunteer work
- Development of new participation formats (eParticipation)
- Promotion of diversity and tolerance

<sup>3</sup> Youth Democratic Fund Berlin: <https://stark-gemacht.de/foerderung/>

- Political-historical (civic) education.

Due to the funding schemes of the Berlin Youth Democracy Fund, supported children and young people can become more experienced in being active citizens and shaping democracy. Through their own and direct participation, they learn and deepen their skills in living democracy and actively shaping society. To support this engagement, since its establishment in 2013, **the fund has granted around 70.000 children and adolescents so far**, while the total amount of funding stands at 2.8 million EUR. Regarding the scope of projects, the main target groups addressed the independent public organizations, associations and civil society initiatives in the fields of youth work, youth association work and youth social work that have local or state-wide relevance. Therefore, Berlin Youth Democracy Fund is the most prominent and exemplary support organization in the German capital in the field of youth policy and engagement.

### 3.2.3. Austria – Aha Plus

**In parallel with the previous German practice**, we can identify a similar youth support scheme also in the federal province of Vorarlberg in Western Austria. In this case, the youth support scheme is called **Aha Plus**, which is **an official application** (a certain digital platform as recognition system) to be used by young citizens between 12 – 24 years actively engaging as volunteers in organizations in their municipality or in a local initiative.<sup>4</sup> **Using this application, young citizens can initiate and carry out useful volunteering activities – as youth work – to help local organizations taking part in the Aha plus network.** Consequently, volunteers can collect points in the application that can be later officially exchanged for several forms of rewards, such as concert tickets, meeting with famous persons or getting a youth employment in a local enterprise. Thus, Aha Plus offers a verified “Social-CV” to young members that strengthens their job opportunities in their career.

But apart from the opportunities which aha plus offers to young people who are already active in an association, the tool also helps young people who would like to pursue voluntary work to find appropriate tasks to help others. For this aim, the application offers local organizations the opportunity to promote their activities among young people. As a result of the successful implementation of the application, Aha Plus became the most significant volunteering platform for youth (around 200-250 participating organizations and several thousands of volunteers per year) empowering them in social activism and inclusion, thus Aha Plus is an outstanding example on an international scale as well to be followed by youth policy stakeholders.

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<sup>4</sup> Aha Plus: <https://www.aha.or.at/plus>

## 4. Basic principles and recommendations

Based on the research experience described above, the COHERENT project partnership has developed a complex proposal structure – in line with the EU Youth Strategy and the Council resolutions – to provide guidance to decision-makers and professional organizations seeking to strengthen the social participation of young people at European and national level through the formulation of principles and policies (CE, 2018).

The package of proposals put forward by the partnership consists of the following elements:

### **BASIC PRINCIPLES**

1. **Involvement:** Actively involve young people, youth organizations and other organizations active in youth work in the development, implementation and evaluation of policies affecting the lives of young people at local, regional, national and European level, - support the establishment of youth representative bodies at local, regional and national level, the right of young people to participate and organize themselves, and to promote the recognition and involvement of representative youth structures in the work of local, regional, national and European authorities.
2. **Continuous dialogue and empowerment:** Support and promote the EU Youth Dialogue to reflect the different views of young people in decision-making processes at all levels and to promote the development of civic competences through citizenship education and learning strategies:
  - a. make participatory activities interesting and help young people prepare for and participate in social participation, thus providing an opportunity to "learn to participate" and supporting this learning
  - b. explore and encourage innovative and alternative forms of democratic participation
  - c. tools related to e-democracy, for example
  - d. use and facilitate their use to support young people's participation in democratic life and involve them in an inclusive way, but also bearing in mind that some young people do not have access to or have access to the Internet and digital technologies with the necessary skills
3. **Encourage youth mobility:** Remove existing barriers and implement support measures that pay special attention to young people with fewer opportunities, thus enabling all young people and youth workers to take part in cross-border mobility opportunities, including volunteering in the civil society sector:
  - a. Encourage the participation of young people in solidarity activities and, to this end, promote relevant support schemes and seek and complement synergies between EU funding instruments and national, regional and local schemes
  - b. actively involve young people and youth organizations in the design, implementation and evaluation of relevant EU support programs
  - c. share good practice in non-formal and informal learning

- d. solidarity and voluntary activities, among others
  - e. work on and further develop effective systems for the validation and recognition of skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning
4. **Agenda-setting:** Develop and implement a European agenda for youth work that includes quality, innovation and recognition aspects of youth work. It is important to pool the expertise of youth representative bodies, youth organizations, youth workers and researchers, as this will allow them to reach their full potential. Synergies with the work of the Council of Europe in this area should be encouraged:
- a. support the high-quality development of youth work at local, regional, national, and European level, including the development of policies in this area, the training of youth workers, the establishment of a legal framework and the provision of sufficient resources
5. **Foster social engagement:** Support youth work activities at all levels, including local ones, and recognize the role of youth organizations in ensuring the development of competences and social inclusion through activities in the field of youth work and non-formal education, while respecting the role of youth organizations in this field. carried out national, regional and local activities:
- a. establish and further develop, when and where possible, easily accessible contact points for young people that provide a wide range of services and / or information, including financial guidance, on careers, health and relationships, and education, provide guidance and support for cultural and employment opportunities.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. **Research-based youth policy-making and knowledge-building:** EU and national-level youth policy must be based on research results and on the real needs and situation of young people. This requires continuous research and knowledge development and constant contact with young people and youth organizations (*by strengthening academic – mainly sociological – research and initiatives in this field*). The collection of data on young people, broken down by different aspects, is particularly important in order to better understand the needs of certain groups of young people, especially those with fewer opportunities. Policy decisions based on research results should be taken in support of the Youth Wiki and youth research networks, in cooperation with international organizations such as the Council of Europe, the OECD and other bodies, including youth organizations.
2. **Learning from each other and disseminating results:** Member States, the European Commission and stakeholders should learn from each other and use this as a tool to promote youth policy in both core and cross-sectoral areas (*by fostering international knowledge exchange and sharing of experiences*). Following the overarching priorities of the EU Youth Strategy and in the framework of the three-year work plans, the expert groups will continue to develop policy guidelines and practical tools and share best practices; this strategy will provide new tools for learning from each other, such as peer review,

partner advice, high-level forums, analysis, and studies. This tool will build on existing networks and take a more systematic approach to providing high quality information, information, and dissemination to young people.

3. **Participatory governance:** In order to recognize that young people are experts in their own lives, it is essential to ensure that young people and the organizations that represent them are involved in the various stages of implementing the EU Youth Strategy. Participation makes young people and their problems more visible, but also makes young people more aware of youth policy-makers (*by creating youth parliament that has support in the municipality for example, or technically involve them in municipal/national decision-making mechanism*). Participation also aims to increase the legitimacy and acceptance of youth policies. The EU Youth Strategy Platform will aim to facilitate participatory governance and coordination in the implementation of the strategy, to provide a good basis for regular social dialogue, to give stakeholders a greater role in coordinating the implementation of the strategy and to provide opportunities for activities and activities. to exchange information on results. The Commission is invited to organize targeted meetings bringing together, as appropriate, representatives of the EU institutions, Member States, Erasmus + and European Solidarity Corps National Agencies and youth organizations, as well as other stakeholders and local and regional authorities.
4. **Mobilizing EU programs and funds:** Member States and NGOs shall mobilize EU programs and funds, such as Erasmus +, the European Solidarity Board, the European Structural and Investment Funds, Horizon 2020, including the Marie Skłodowska Curie actions, Creative Europe and will encourage the effective use of successor programs. *Member States, national agencies and youth stakeholders shall be invited to jointly explore synergies between funding sources at EU, national, regional, and local levels with the aim to elaborate and implement state-of-art projects to support youth initiatives.*
5. **Financial incentives for employers:** To improve the employment situation of young people, the introduction of tax incentives and financial support schemes at the nation-state level should be considered, which make companies interested in employing young graduates, thus compensating for the weaker working skills and experiential background of fresh graduates. (*for example tax deductions or benefits based on youth employment*).
6. **Strengthening civic education in schools:** To develop stronger civic attitudes, it is essential to place greater emphasis in public education systems on *the development of civic awareness* at a young age, as well as on the awareness-raising necessary for conscious social participation (*mainly in form of more targeted "civic culture" classes*). In addition to educators, there is a need for more active involvement of independent NGOs committed to democratic values in schools.
7. **Putting more emphasize on teacher training:** More conscious training of teachers is essential for the development of civic education in schools. Therefore, within national competences, Member States need to strive to

*increase teachers' access to the methodological knowledge of non-formal teaching and the theoretical knowledge needed to teach democratic attitudes in teacher training systems.*

8. **Fighting against manipulation and online violence:** Reducing the widespread manipulation and online violence in social media can be seen as a priority along both national and youth policy values and interests (*mainly as a result of more effective action by the judiciary and law enforcement authorities*). Within national competences, Member States should strive to take the most effective legal and security action against hate speech and to operate emergency services to assist young people who are victims of online violence, involving civil society actors.
9. **Communicating the EU Youth Strategy:** The purpose and content of the EU Youth Strategy should be communicated in a comprehensive and youthful way, taking into account the different stakeholders involved in decision-making on youth (*for example in form of youth days, offline road show campaigns, EU days, festivals, etc.*). The EU Youth Strategy and the European Youth Goals can provide direction for those closely involved in shaping youth policy, as well as those outside the field, to send new and positive messages about EU youth policy and European youth work.
10. **Using the planner for future national activities:** The usage of *Planner for Future National Activities* online platform is intended to allow Member States to share their priorities in line with the EU Youth Strategy on a voluntary basis. It aims to increase the transparency of the implementation of youth policies at regional, national and EU level. This is expected to help identify the right partners for learning from each other, based on the specific needs of each Member State. *In order to avoid additional administrative burdens, the planner of future national activities should build on existing national youth policy frameworks / national youth strategies.*
11. **EU Youth Dialogue:** Building on the previous results, a new national Youth Dialogue should be set up (*in form of annually open discussions between policy-makers and youth, organized by youth centres for example*) within the EU with the necessary tools to enable more decision-makers and young people, to participate in decision-making processes and to increase their involvement and political participation in social affairs in general. In addition, more regular exchanges of views between the national working groups of the EU Youth Dialogue and the European Commission should be encouraged.
12. **EU Youth Coordinator:** The appointment of an EU Youth Coordinator in 2021 within the European Commission to strengthen cross-sectoral cooperation and to increase awareness and understanding of youth issues is a great step forward in real policy action. As a consequence, *Member States and NGOs shall work closely with the Coordinator* to ensure coherence in communication with young people and to better initiate new programs and incentives targeting youth empowerment and engagement.

- 13. Information and support for young people:** In order to better involve younger generations into social and political life, it's essential to provide high-quality information upon services, youth work opportunities, initiatives and volunteer programs to younger people. As such the European Youth Portal or the Planner for Future National Activities can be considered as useful example to be followed by Member States and national youth agencies *to effectively maintain the flow of information for the youth*. Within this engagement, youth workers and mentors can participate as boosters, therefore their work and active participation must be highly appreciated and supported by local or state-level policy-makers.
- 14. Create “Youth Hubs” on municipal/local levels:** Based on the project experiences, young people need of a free internal creative space, where they could mingle and co-create projects, play games, watch movies, and elaborate social initiatives (example: Cultural Incubator). Therefore, in this regard, European municipalities has a significant responsibility in providing such social “safe places” in order to foster social activism of younger citizens. Moreover, Youth Hubs can function as meeting places between local youth and other civic organisations, therefore, these hubs can also ensure an adequate non-formal learning and cultural environment for workshops to strengthen the social competencies of younger generations and their local identity.

## 5. Conclusions

In general, it is important that a policy target group has a say in matters that concern them. Young people should have the right, the means, the support, the opportunity, and the partner to participate in youth policy and related decision-making measures: **to advise or co-decide on its design, to provide services, to monitor and evaluate the impact of policies, and not just to be recipients of services.** When young people are involved, they feel they are making their own decisions and larger services are better able to live up to their ideas or rights. The chances of success of such policies are so high.

The EU Youth Strategy (2019-2027) focuses on three areas: **involvement, interconnection** and **empowerment**. The strategy encourages the participation of young people in democratic life (involvement); promotes volunteering, learning mobility, solidarity and intercultural learning (linking) and supports young people's responsibility through the recognition of quality, innovation and youth work (empowerment). The strategy aims to reach all young people and involve those with fewer opportunities in EU programs. The strategy takes into account the outcome of the dialogue with young people, which has led to the creation of 11 European youth goals.

These objectives can be achieved through specific youth programs such as Erasmus + and the European Solidarity Board. The strategy is also based on effective, coherent and joint implementation across sectors, by mobilizing more EU programs and funding sources and by encouraging cross-sectoral cooperation at all levels. Besides, the EU Youth Strategy includes mutual learning activities and joint actions between Member States, information sharing at national level, EU youth dialogue and other forms of youth participation in policy-making, the EU Youth Strategy Platform, and evidence-based tools. In this respect, Member States and national authorities have a meaningful role and significant impact in shaping and improving youth policy measures, focusing on involvement, interconnection and empowerment. For this aim, the present policy toolkit and its recommendations ensure a useful technical guidance for decision-makers and policy stakeholders to better interpret the existing situation and effectively formulate their actions to boost youth activism.

## 6. Resources

- Council of Europe (CE, 2018): Resolution on the EU Youth Strategy for the period 2019-2027, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14080-2018-INIT/en/pdf>
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