



PARTICIPATORY SUPERPOWER

CIVIC PARTICIPATION GUIDE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

#YOUTH | #DEMOCRACY | #CIVICPARTICIPATION

INTRODUCTION

You are the centre of this story. And it doesn't matter whether you're 16 or 19 years old. This story is about society because only together we can change the place where we live. We call it a SUPERPOWER, but in fact – it's the responsibility of every citizen.

For you to feel and be a significant part of society, you have to know what your options are to impact political and social processes in your municipality. If you want to initiate positive changes in your life and society, you can only do it if you know what you can do and how and if you're ready to participate.

In this publication, you'll get to know about different youth participation mechanisms and ways that you can act. To structure the story about participation, it's based on four thematic priorities that the Council of Europe has included in one of the key strategic documents in the youth sector "Youth Sector Strategy 2030 – Engaging young people with the Council of Europe's values." They are as follows:

1. **Revitalising pluralistic democracy.** This priority pertains to facilitating youth participation in decision-making and active citizenship.
2. **Access to rights.** This priority covers the issue of young people's access to civic, political, digital, and social rights, including the right to human rights education.

3. **Living together in peaceful and inclusive societies.** This priority includes work on the appreciation of diversity, peace-building, combatting all forms of racism and intolerance, and the inclusion of vulnerable groups.
4. **Youth work.** This priority strengthens the development, quality and recognition of youth work.

This publication was developed within the framework of the project **MUNICIPALITY 16+**, which aims to improve young people's civic participation competence in the use of civic participation mechanisms in Latvia, Slovenia and the Czech Republic. This publication can be used as an information source and guide in familiarising one with the use of democracy and civic participation mechanisms. We suggest that you assess your knowledge of participation mechanisms, civic skills and experience using the digital self-assessment tool for young people – **PARTICIPATION INDEX**. The Index allows one to not only determine the level of civic participation but also receive feedback and get to know how to improve it. During the project, a simulation game will be developed to train young people in the use of civic participation mechanisms and encourage active citizenship.

Transparency International Latvia (Delna) with its partners European Movement – Latvia, PiNA – Association for Culture and Education (Slovenia), and NVIAS (Czech Republic) is implementing the project from 1 September 2023 to 30 June 2026.

REVITALISING PLURALISTIC DEMOCRACY

A democratic society is based on participation processes – these allow individuals to make decisions about their community and co-create it. These processes can be categorised as representative and direct democracy processes. Each process is based on a publicly known and accessible participation mechanism.

In a **representative democracy**, people elect their representatives who represent their interests in the respective institution. Therefore, a representative democracy is more efficient and dynamic time-wise. It is assumed that representatives have the knowledge necessary to carry out the work, and they defend the interests of their electors or group. Representatives have to make decisions and solve problems in the name of the population.

However, in reality, we can see that such mechanisms reduce the people's ability to make decisions directly, which may create a gap between the interests of individuals and the decisions made by the elected representatives. Citizens can only make decisions during elections; prior to that, their power is rather limited. This power limitation can cause apathy, passive perception of developments, and poor understanding of political processes, therefore, people move away from the decision-making process.

Representative democracy is the most popular and widespread form of democracy. It doesn't require the extensive involvement of people, therefore, a larger number of people are ready to participate, for example, by electing deputies of municipalities and parliament members once in four

years or European Parliament members once in five years. However, considering the lack of trust in politicians and political institutions and the loss of interest in politics in general, more and more people, including young people, refrain from taking part in elections. As the number of young people is declining in general, with it being possible that their interests are not sufficiently represented, it might cause the feeling that young people are not listened to and they cannot influence what happens in society. Only by improving the knowledge of young people and strengthening their skills in the use of participation mechanisms can their voices be heard louder, gradually changing society on a regional, national and European level.

EXAMPLES OF REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY MECHANISMS SUITABLE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE:

■ MUNICIPALITY, COUNTRY AND EUROPEAN ELECTIONS:

Young people can vote and run as candidates at different elections when they have reached the age stipulated by their country of residence. In the majority of cases in Europe, young people can take part in elections from the age of 18; however, there are some exceptions where it is possible to vote from the age of 16 (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Malta, Estonia, Scotland, Wales, and Switzerland). The elected representatives make decisions for society, not just on matters significant to young people, therefore, it is vital that young people participate not only as voters but also as candidates. Only in this way can young people fully represent their interests in politics and shape their future.



Information on elections in Latvia is available here: www.cvk.lv, elections in Slovenia: <https://www.dvk-rs.si/>, and elections in the Czech Republic: <https://www.volby.cz/>.



www.cvk.lv



www.dvk-rs.si



www.volby.cz

■ CITIZEN COUNCILS OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES/REGIONS:

Councils consist of elected members residing in the territory of the respective region, and the elected individuals become the representatives of the interests of the population in the respective region in communication with the municipality. Their impact is limited to a certain territory, however, they can do a lot for the population, discussing practical matters, improving daily life, and facilitating cooperation between people for the common good. The involvement of young people in these processes is very important because it allows them to discuss and deal with matters of importance to young people, directly communicating with the municipality. Latvia serves as a good example, as young people from the age of 16 can run as candidates to be elected to citizen councils, and this is stipulated on the national level in the Local Government Law (2022).

■ YOUTH COUNCILS:

Youth councils consist of representatives of youth organisations. They represent youth interests and serve as a bridge linking their interests and local decision-makers.

The establishment of a youth council in a municipality is essential because it gives a voice to young people who are often underrepresented in political structures. More information on youth councils and their activities is available in the national laws governing the implementation of youth policy and youth work, known as Youth Laws.

■ SCHOOL/STUDENT COUNCILS:

This mechanism pertains to decision-making in educational institutions only, however, it is important to strengthen the civic competence of young people and their understanding of democratic processes at school.

In contrast to **representative democracy**, direct democracy exists where people have greater power because they can impact processes and decisions directly. This type of democracy provides the direct participation of people (without any intermediaries) and it is believed that people's wishes and needs can be addressed more efficiently.

The processes of direct democracy are implemented on the local and national levels. On the local level, they include meetings of the local administrative territory or community, participatory budgeting, or collective submission. People use these mechanisms to solve matters they know the best. On the national level, processes of direct democracy include referendums, collective submissions and petitions. In these processes, one matter is usually considered, and it has been publicly discussed with people sharing their opinions about it before.

Such mechanisms of direct democracy, where one specific matter is considered, are more appealing to young people who are less interested in political processes. Young people feel more informed (this causes greater interest) to express their opinions and make decisions. The level of involvement of young people in solving a specific matter can be higher compared to a representative democracy because it is limited in time, it is specific, and the sense of empowerment is greater. Due to this reason, these mechanisms can be the first steps for young people to enter the political world.

EXAMPLES OF DIRECT DEMOCRACY MECHANISMS SUITABLE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE:

■ REFERENDUM:

The most popular mechanism of direct democracy, where citizens (by voting) can decide to support or not support specific suggestions. A referendum can be organised on the national or municipal level. This process allows people to have a larger impact if they can collect a certain number of signatures, which allows them to submit the proposal to be decided in a referendum.

■ PETITION:

The way that citizens can block proposals or support the adoption of new laws. By submitting a petition to amend laws or to adopt new laws, citizens can participate in national or local decision-making processes directly.

■ COLLECTIVE SUBMISSION:

By submitting a collective submission, young people can ask the municipality to provide an

answer about the matter within its competence, for example, about the municipality's slow action in developing an infrastructure object that is important for youth.

■ PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING:

Participatory budgeting gives young people the opportunity to vote on submitted projects or submit their own ideas on how to use municipal funds. Participatory budgeting provides the resources necessary to implement projects and allows one to create a local environment based on their needs. In some municipalities, a special participatory budget for young people is provided.

ACCESS TO RIGHTS

The European Union Strategy on the Rights of the Child states that children are entitled to decide on matters that affect them and are to be assisted in fulfilling their rights. This complies with the vision that every child should have the opportunity to be an active citizen and an important part of a democratic society.

The age at which young people are entitled to use the participation mechanisms referred to in the previous chapter varies in different countries, but in most cases, they have to be at least 18 years old. The age, however, is gradually changing. Previously, some European countries were mentioned where young people could vote at the municipal, national, or European elections when reaching the age of 16. Moreover, there are countries where young people who have reached the age of 16 can take part in creating a participatory budget (for example, Slovenia and Latvia).

There are different civic participation mechanisms that are specifically targeted at young people, for example, school and student councils, youth councils, or participatory budgets. Young people must be aware of these opportunities and use them, thereby strengthening their civic competence and improving life in society.

In many countries, the number of older people is growing, and this means that their needs are often louder than those of young people. This can cause policy that's more focused on the needs of older people, neglecting the next generations. To address this issue, it's important to support young people's opportunities to learn about civil rights and democracy because civically active young people can balance the interests of different age groups and better facilitate a more inclusive democracy. The link between theory and practice increases young people's interest in politics and civic participation; therefore, formal education has to be supplemented with informal education to reduce the barrier between knowledge and experience.

LIVING TOGETHER IN PEACEFUL AND INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES

A democratic society is an inclusive society where everyone has a voice, and everyone is accepted and valued. According to studies, young people are more open to differences and are not afraid of them; therefore, they can create a bridge to integrate many oppressed groups in the community.

Young people view violations of human rights and are ready to protest and fight to defend the oppressed groups. In Europe, for example, young people are actively fighting for a more

sustainable future within the framework of the movement **Fridays for Future**. They are aware of the injustice of the current system and are ready to play their part in reducing it. At the same time, it should be noted that modern youth is more focused on individual interests and needs. Young people are aware of their rights and are ready to stand up for them; however, they are less aware of the significance of community.

The process of building an inclusive society is slow, but due to technologies, young people are used to getting what they want quickly and seeing the results of their actions as soon as possible. This holds young people back from engaging in long and complex participation processes, however, sometimes only slow and systematic work can change significant and wide-ranging problems. Not to discourage young people, in the early stage, participation processes on the local level are effective. On this level, cultural and social events are perfect for integrating young people and building a sense of community. Experience in working together is the best way to get to know each other and overcome possible barriers in communication and cooperation; moreover, it strengthens the sense of belonging and the wish to be active in the community. Good experience can convince young people to take part in other activities as well, including clean-up and improvement campaigns, improvements of playgrounds, fund-raising projects, etc. By getting involved in these and similar activities, young people develop their civic competence while at the same time improving their own and community life. Only practical action strengthens young people's confidence in themselves as a significant part of the community, increasing their sense of responsibility towards others.

YOUTH WORK

As mentioned above, many mechanisms exist that contribute to the involvement of young people in decision-making and participatory processes; however, the speed and quality of young people's involvement in these processes is not as it should be. Youth workers play a significant role in these processes. They have to find ways to support, inspire and involve young people.

The processes have to start with informing young people, considering the fact that they're not a homogeneous group but rather a group of unique personalities and that different channels and methods, including social media, posters, flyers, etc., have to be used to reach them. Moreover, cooperation with primary, secondary and higher educational institutions is also needed to reach young people. The forms of cooperation can be different: informal education lessons in educational institutions and projects, as well as participation in competitions and campaigns. Moreover, it is important to offer or allow young people to work on topics they are interested in themselves. Without any interest, their motivation and focus will only be temporary. In youth work, it is significant to use different methods that are interesting and fun, but at the same time, they provide knowledge and skills to ensure the meaningful participation of young people. Knowledge creates confidence with regard to power, skills facilitate the participatory process, experience allows one to feel the impact of created changes, and mutual trust is the key component of this process.



Take a self-assessment
of civic participation by
visiting the website
PARTICIPATION INDEX:
participationindex.eu/



Read more about the
project MUNICIPALITY 16+
on the project website:
youth.delna.lv/



WORDS OF GUIDANCE

Young people are a significant part of society with a strong voice. In a democratic society, the participation of young people is ensured by different participatory mechanisms; however, knowledge of them and experience cannot be obtained without involvement. To create a world where youth participation is meaningful and sustainable, interaction between formal and non-formal education and support is needed, as well as the involvement of adults.

It is emphasised that youth workers and teachers play a crucial role in strengthening young people's civic competencies, however, you, as a youngster, have an equally important role to play because only you can think, choose, and act. Remember – life in a democratic society requires the participation of citizens because **YOU HAVE THE POWER!** Is your participatory **SUPERPOWER** strong enough? Check in the **PARTICIPATION INDEX**, strengthen it, and embark on your first mission! Good luck!

The project MUNICIPALITY 16+ is funded by the European Union. However, the views and opinions expressed are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the granting authority – Agency of International Programs for Youth of Latvia. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

