Unmute the Youth!

Alessandro Ambrosino (The Graduate Institute Geneva), Simon Cecchin Birk (University of Copenhagen), Carlotta Mingardi (University of Bologna), Georgios Nikolou (University of Oxford), Lukas Spielberger (Leiden University), Elodie Thevenin (Jagiellonian University in Krakow), and Alice Trinkle (Free University Berlin)

This document presents the work of the Europaeum programme's 'Unmute the Youth!' project. It culminates in a set of recommendations for policymakers regarding how to strengthen democracy by better engaging young people in e-democracy initiatives.

Table of contents

1. Introduction

The political disengagement of the young – i.e. late Millennials and Gen Z (born between mid-1990s to early 2010s) – remains a core challenge in Europe and beyond. Although the European Commission and national governments have made multiple efforts to mitigate this problem, today young people are more disconnected from the democratic process compared to older generations (Kitanova 2020). They also have less liberal attitudes and are more likely to vote for populist parties than the general population (Foa & Mounk 2016; Foa et al. 2020). What is more, they have been impacted disproportionately by the financial crisis and the covid-19 pandemic given stubbornly high rates of unemployment, mental ill-health and deprivation among the youngest Europeans. The young are most likely to be engaged online. Being digital natives, they spend more time than the general population on the web and are more open to online activism. While the young can be mobilised politically as clearly shown by the environmental movements, current e-participation platforms are generally not catering to their needs and hence do not reach them. Yet, if e-participation platforms take measures to target the younger cohorts, they have a valuable opportunity to help overcome their disconnectedness.

This report offers actionable recommendations for policy-makers at the local, national and EU-levels on how to reach the young. In short, they must cater to young people's eagerness to get involved politically online by providing tools and methods that this target group is familiar with and attracted to.

The recommendations are based on a review of four select case studies, relevant research papers as well as original data that we have gathered through interviews with policy-makers and a survey among our target group in three European municipalities.

2. The problem – disconnected youth

Addressing the long-standing crisis of political participation among the European youth is a core concern for the EU and its member states (Kitanova 2020). This is a challenge that has only increased as the youngest generations have decreasing levels of attachment to traditional forms

of political engagement such as voting and political party membership (Mycock and Tonge 2012). At the same time, research shows that young people are increasingly disengaged with informal political activities such as protests and campaigns when compared to older generations, albeit with notable variations between places (Foa & Mounk 2016; Grasso 2014).

A landmark report on democratic legitimacy underscores the imminent need for policy-makers to engage the youth (Foa et al. 2020). The report concludes that the lower levels of political engagement among young people is paired with a worrying shift in democratic attitudes among this cohort. More specifically, it appears more cynical "regarding the value of democratic norms such as compromise, free exchange of ideas, or the independence of third-party institutions that may block transformative change" (Ibid., 24). At the same time, increasing numbers of young people are now attracted to populist parties on the right or the left above mainstream moderate parties. Compared to the general population, younger cohorts are also significantly more likely to dismiss their political opponents as morally flawed and view their viewpoints as illegitimate.

Moreover, the young have also been disproportionately affected by the impact of the financial crisis and the covid-19 pandemic. The former resulted in a surge in youth unemployment particularly in Southern Europe (Guerrieri 2014; Meyer-Hamme et al. 2017). While the long-term effects of covid-19 are yet to be established, it appears that the young have been systematically impacted by the negative effects of the pandemic (ILO 2020), suffering a worsened and less equal educational environment, an increase in mental health problems, and, most probably, another surge in unemployment (Gregorczyk et al. 2020; The Guardian 2020; Hurellmann 2020; McCrindle 2020).

Young people also report feeling overlooked by politicians, especially when it comes to public policy responses to crises (The Guardian 2020; OECD 2020). Unfortunately, this is not an isolated issue. No less than 71% of young people feel that they are misunderstood in contrast to 50% of those aged 25 or above (Roberton & Brown 2019).

3. Evidence

3.1. Understanding the young

Part of the reason that the youngest generation of Europeans feel misunderstood may be that they differ in important ways from their older peers. Most notably, they are digitally natives. More so than previous generations, spending much of their time online and relying on social media for obtaining information (Hurellmann et al. 2019, Parker et al. 2020). Their interest in traditional media has also decreased (Gentilviso et al. 2019) and they tend to prefer audiovisual over written content. They have a shorter attention span and are attracted by the typical punchy social media post formula of no more than five words and a picture (Rue 2018). At the same time, they are more pragmatic and concerned with time management (Ibid.). Through online-shopping they have also learned to expect both speed and quality, along with personalization when they consume. Hence, they expect well-functioning, well-designed, and smartphone-friendly interfaces online (Boadu 2021; Rue 2018). These aspects should be kept in mind when designing online participation tools for the young. Moreover, despite their decreased political activity, the pragmatic young still seek change on specific issues that are relevant to their lives. Most notably, they care about the economy and the environment. They also seek inclusion and diversity and are generally driven by forms of community-oriented activism (Ha et al. 2021; Rue 2018).

3.2. EU values and current youth policies

The following paragraph provides an overview of current EU initiatives that frame the scope of the EU's competences and active policies in matters of democratic participation among young people.

The promotion of democratic civic and political engagement among the European youth falls within the objectives of the European Union (EU). The promotion of democracy is a core objective enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU), and by virtue of Articles 165-166 TFEU the EU is explicitly committed to the democratic participation of young people, by facilitating vocational training (Art. 166), youth exchanges, and the participation of young people

in democratic life. However, the EU does not have exclusive competence when it comes to youth-related policies and acts largely through the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), which typically does not lead to binding EU legislative measures.

In matters of democratic engagement among young people, the EU has, to date, launched several initiatives that are intended to counter the disengagement of young people that utilise digital technologies for civic participation. Its flagship project for youth engagement is the European Youth Strategy which during the current cycle (2019-2027) aims, among other objectives, to "connect the EU with youth" and specifically to "explore and promote the use of innovative and alternative forms of democratic participation e.g. digital democracy tools." Under the covid-19 pandemic, however, consultative projects that were anticipated under this framework, such a Youth Dialogue and the European Youth Forum, have not taken place, and digital technologies remain so far underutilised. Similarly, the first EU Youth Coordinator, a figure which appeared in the 2019 strategy, was appointed only very recently (in June 2021). Though the EU has recognised the need for action, it has itself so far fallen short of providing a digital communication infrastructure specifically designed for young people.

By contrast, for other fields of its work, the EU has set up various formats of online consultation and deliberation. Public consultations have been used for some time and in principle allow all EU citizens to express their opinions on a piece of draft legislation, but these are predominantly used by interest groups. More recently, the online platform set up to accompany the "Conference on the Future of Europe" provides various opportunities to propose ideas and exchange opinions. A last pillar in the EU's strategy for youth engagement pertains to the National Youth Councils which provides toolkits and resources to support consultations in various formats. But still, these are largely intended for in-person meetings rather than engaging in the online world.

In summary, the EU clearly has some awareness of the potential use of deliberative and e-democracy tools to facilitate youth engagement, but has not yet matched these ambitions with concrete actions. The next sections will outline how we suggest the EU should uphold its responsibilities under the treaty by rising to this challenge.

3.3. Examples – what works

In this section we analyse several extant prominent online public consultation examples from around Europe (and further afield) and we identify the features that have allowed them to thrive. Public consultation is defined as every process by which the public is asked to offer insights regarding one or a set of policy proposals.

3.3.1. Better Reykjavik

Better Reykjavik is arguably one of the most successful e-participation tools in the world. Founded in 2011, *Better Reykjavik* essentially works as an umbrella for various extant programmes, including the municipality of Reykjavik's participatory budget-drafting process and the City Council's participatory law-making project. The initiative has generated significant public engagement, with some 27.000 registered users and over 20% of Reykjavik's population using the platform. We had the opportunity to discuss the initiative's success with its founder, Róbert Bjarnason (see list of conducted interviews in Appendix 1). As one of the world's leading experts in the field of e-participation, Bjarnason has advised numerous successful online platforms.

Some of the key inferences from our discussion with Bjarnason regarding effective online deliberation include the following elements.

Deliberation must be constructive: On the platform, citizens can "upvote" and "downvote" proposals, but they are discouraged from making unconstructive or critical comments, and it is not possible to reply directly to submitted proposals. Instead, participants can write a standalone counter point. The central aim of this is to draw the passion (and the poison) out of the process, unlike in a heated Facebook discussion. To be sure, this can be a bit restrictive but it also reduces the sorts of destructive and negative dialogue that many people find alienating about online civic engagement. AI is also employed to scan and remove comments that are deemed to be toxic or destructive.

Deliberation must be transparent: moderators should not over-promise regarding what the platform can achieve. People primarily want to be listened to and are reasonable. So, even if a

proposal that is reached after deliberation cannot be fully implemented (e.g., because of its cost implications) it is crucial that both policy-makers and those running the platform get back to the people who participated in the deliberation and explain why their proposal cannot be fulfilled. This is much better (and more accountable) than just not responding. This feedback cycle helps to keep people engaged and provides meaning to their involvement.

Opportunities must be advertised appropriately: 80% of the *Better Reykjavik* budget goes into advertising the platform. Clearly, without adequate promotion, even the best designed platform could end up without participants. In the same vein, big data analysis and content promotion through networks and social media platforms play a crucial role in the platform's success. Notably, Bjarnason mentioned that Twitter is better when it comes to promoting political content compared to Facebook.

Deliberation must be visualised: Images and videos play a key role in getting people engaged with the platform, since they help to simplify and contextualise participation and the issues under discussion.

Bjarnason also emphasised young people's tendency to be more sophisticated in their online interactions compared to older generations. Another interesting aspect is that young people were more reluctant to participate in the budgeting process compared to other features on the platform. To conclude, Bjarnason's trinity of success can be summarised as "keep it simple, don't make it toxic and promote".

Exhibit 1: Better Reykjavik uses a grid layout depicting deliberation on comprehensive projects. Users can visit each section and submit their proposals. As can be seen, visualisation plays a key role in identifying each topic.

3.3.2.   Decide Madrid

Following requests from many Spanish citizens for better quality democracy, in 2015, the Madrid City council launched the *Decide Madrid (DM)* website. This online platform represents an innovative experiment of online citizen participation. In fact, through this platform, all the citizens resident in the city can submit ideas and proposals to change Madrid. The members of the portal can then vote on each proposal. In February 2017 the platform achieved its first major success when more than 200.000 Madrileños used the platform to vote in a city referendum on three proposals to improve the quality of life in the city. The proposals concerned: reducing the traffic in the city centre, introducing a single ticket for all the public transports and a series of measures to make Madrid "100% green". According to a City Council spokesperson, the referendum was a success and demonstrated the importance of such channels for engaging in dialogue with the citizens.

The process of submitting proposals and of deliberation is at the same time quite straightforward and quite rigid. Any citizen can submit a proposal on the platform and the proposal then has 12 months to receive the support of 1% of the city's inhabitants. If it succeeds, the proposal moves to a second stage of public discussion and after this users can vote to either accept or reject the proposal. If accepted, the proposal is then considered by the City Council, which needs to submit a report on the proposal's legality, cost, feasibility etc. within a period of 30 days.

The municipality has sought to maximise participation by providing assistance for people lacking either access to the internet or familiarity with online processes. However, in an interview conducted for an academic paper some citizens cited the lack of information about their contributions as one of the main shortcomings of the platform (Royo et al. 2020). The same interviewees claimed that the most important motivation for using the platform is the possibility of their proposals being implemented or at least being taken into account (Ibid.).

In that regard, the elephant in the room for this and for other platforms is that municipalities still seem reluctant to allocate a significant portion of their budget towards e-participation proposals. In the case of Madrid, participatory budgeting conducted through DM still amounts to slightly less than 2% of the annual municipal budget.

Finally, the accessibility of the platform is a double-edged sword, as the volume of proposals submitted is very high, which arguably leaves a lot of quality proposals going unnoticed.

Toda la ciudad

Empieza un debate

Nuevos   Más activos   Mejor valorados

Deterioro grave del servicio de BICIMad

💬 1 Comentario • 26/07/2021 • Frann

Soy un usuario muy activo de BiciMad, desde hace mas de dos años Siempre he estado mas o menos contento con el servicio , hasta hace 3 semanas hasta ahora, ya que hay

bici-mad   bici-madrid   movilidad;BiciMad;Bicicleta;Transport...

BiciMad Bicicleta Madrid Limpia trans...

👍 77%   👎 23%
5 votos

Defensa de nuestra autonomía fiscal y universitaria.

💬 Sin comentarios • 22/07/2021 • Usuario eliminado

Muy queridisimos todos,

Desde los últimos años, varios representantes de distintos

Impuestos   Selectividad   universidades   tributos

👍 60%   👎 40%
1 voto

Exhibit 2: In the case of Decide Madrid the platform is based on text rather than on visualisation. The picture above shows a list of proposals that have garnered more than 1% of the public support and have thus made it to the second stage of deliberation, which is the accept or reject vote.

3.3.3.   vTaiwan

Looking further afield, in an attempt to bypass polarised political attitudes, the online-offline deliberative and consultation process implemented in Taiwan since 2014 is designed to promote consensus in decision-making. Born in response to a highly contentious political exchange that

emerged in the context of a proposed trade agreement with China and the subsequent "Sunflower Movement" (a protest movement driven by students and civil society against the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement between Taiwan and China), the platform aims to move political exchange "beyond" polarisation. The online platform has direct links with government representatives and other elected bodies to increase legitimacy and transparency within the decision-making process. Unlike traditional social media platforms, whose algorithms often create echo chambers and merely invigorate conflict, the *vTaiwan* programme allows users to express opinions on contentious policies. Notably, the platform highlights areas of similarity between proposals as opposed to points of contention in order to facilitate – and even gamify – the development of consensus. While replies to expressed opinions are not published on the platform to avoid trolling, the up- and down-votes are rendered publicly and depicted in a map to identify gaps, cleavages, and agreements. The platform has seen some notable success, for example with respect to transport, by helping to overcome the divide between pro- and anti-Uber participants by developing a legislative proposal that underpins how ride-sharing apps function in the territory that was acceptable to both camps.

Exhibit 3: A picture from vTaiwan platform. Though less visually attractive compared to its Reykjavik counterpart, the website offers a clear path on how deliberation is to be conducted, delineating all the different steps a proposal goes through.

3.3.4. Projects in the Alpine Space

Between 2016 and 2018, municipalities, regions and other institutions in the Alpine Space[1] have implemented a number of projects to foster the participation of young people in politics. The definition of "deliberative democracy" that they propose recalls the classic Greek idea of active involvement in public space. Thus, "deliberative democracy" should be understood here as the synthesis of practices and procedures that create citizens' means of effective involvement in decision-making processes (GaYa Report, 2020).

The outputs of these projects have demonstrated that it is possible to promote participation by taking specific actions such as by facilitating decision-making procedures that involve young people through their own communication networks. For example, in Heidelberg (Germany), Malles (Italy), Traunstein (Austria) Trento (Italy) and Wölkersdorf (Austria) local actors such as municipal youth councils, youth clubs and other youth associations set the goal of allowing young people to participate actively in the development of municipal and regional policies. This has seen the establishment of E-platforms and online public meetings, where citizens can actively share their ideas and experiences.

In particular, in Heidelberg the goal was to involve young people in the renovation of their Youth Club. First, children and young adults met in a "kick-off event" with local administrators. Later, the flow of ideas continued online through moderated WhatsApp groups and the results of these interactions flowed into a subsequent public architectural contest. A second example comes from the city of Malles, where the goal was to enable citizens to decide how a certain portion of the municipality's budget would be allocated. In this case, each participant could download a leaflet from the municipality website and fill it with a maximum of three proposals. Following this, the municipality examined the projects' feasibility in collaboration with a council of 15 randomly

---

[1] The definition of Alpine Space assumed in this policy paper reflects the one adopted by EUSALP, the European macro-regional strategy for the Alpine Region. It includes the seven states Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Liechtenstein, Slovenia and Switzerland and forty-eight of their subnational constituent entities that border the Alps, including Baden-Württemberg which encompasses Heidelberg.

selected citizens. The admissible projects were then put to an online vote and the political institution implemented the ones that were most popular.

In sum, the added value of participatory processes in policy development is the inclusion of those directly affected by the decisions. Thanks to an interactive dialogue with institutions and administrators, decision- and policy-makers also obtained insights into what really matters to young people.

3.4. Survey

We next turn to the discussion of empirical research that we have conducted for this project. We gathered original data that we collected in three European cities. We selected Krakow (Poland), Leiden (Netherlands), and Trieste (Italy) to represent the East, West, and South of the European Union respectively as well as these are cities with different population sizes. All three cities have old, established universities and considerable student populations, but Leiden stands out for its high share of young residents compared to Krakow and Trieste. In each city, different political issues are currently high on the agenda for young people (see Table 1).

City	Overall population	Share of young people among residents
Krakow	770 000	5.5% (18-24y)[2]
Leiden	110 000	17% (15-25y)[3]
Trieste	200 000	5.9% (18-24y)[4]

Table 1: Comparison of the three cities studied

We studied both supply and demand side factors regarding youth e-democracy initiatives. First, to represent the supply side, we will present the findings from interviews with local policy-makers (see Appendix 3) about their considerations and experiences of e-democracy and youth

---

[2] https://ugeo.urbistat.com/AdminStat/en/pl/demografia/dati-sintesi/m-krakow/20626777/4
[3] https://allecijfers.nl/gemeente/leiden/
[4] https://ugeo.urbistat.com/AdminStat/en/it/demografia/dati-sintesi/trieste/32/3

involvement in politics and we review policy initiatives for deliberation with young people in each city. Then we focus on the demand side and present the main findings of a survey that we conducted among 61 young residents of these cities (see Appendix 1). Overall, we find that young people are willing to participate more, but that public administrations will have to change their approach to succeed in reaching them.

3.4.1. Current policies

Our first case study of Krakow highlights the difficulty of attracting young people to conventional consultation formats. The City of Krakow has implemented three major participation tools to gauge the needs and opinions of citizens, namely: public consultations; participatory budgeting, in which inhabitants submit and vote for projects to be implemented; and local initiatives through which inhabitants can cooperate together while being financially and/or materially supported by the local government. Activities are coordinated by the office responsible for Participation and Dialogue, which provides extensive feedback to citizens following consultations.

Activities are aimed at all age groups: with the exception of local initiatives where participants must be 18 years or older, there is no age limit to participate. In this regard, the city promotes participative tools via different channels of communication aimed at reaching various age groups. Nonetheless, there is an overall absence of young people in all public consultation processes – both in terms of attendance and the number of initiatives and projects submitted.

While the majority of activities were usually held face-to-face with inhabitants, the covid-19 pandemic increased the use of online tools. Consultations were moved to an online format, which neither affected nor changed citizens' participation. Overall, the city tries to reach out to the youth in several ways; yet, even here, engaging effectively with young people has proved challenging.

In Leiden, the problem has not been a lack of opportunities for consultation, but how to process it. The municipality of Leiden solicits input from young people in a variety of formats, targeting not just the city's sizable student population, but even pupils as young as ten. The municipality can draw on well-established cooperation with the major student associations in the city, as well

as schools and neighbourhood youth councils for younger target groups. The city takes a bespoke approach to consulting with different groups and accounts for the variation of attention spans and levels of maturity across age groups.

Leiden provides a comprehensive digital offering. For young people, the municipality maintains a professional Instagram account and age-specific WhatsApp groups. Last year the municipality launched a *CitizenLab* for public consultations with all age groups, but an integrated framework for processing the input of young people is still missing.

Our interviewees explained that there are some pitfalls in cooperating with young people. Maintaining interest in the Instagram account has proven challenging, owing to the dry content of most municipal announcements. Further, relying on different technologies to reach specific target groups renders it difficult to report the results in a uniform way. As a result, despite broad political support in the municipal council, getting input from young people accepted within the administration remains a challenge.

Lastly, the experience of the city of Trieste underlines how lockdowns during the covid-19 pandemic have increased the need for online formats. There exist some active programmes which aim to target the youth and its needs, attempting to involve young people in local democratic participation. The most relevant are, however, very recent. One specific initiative (active SINCE April 2021) was set up by the local council in reaction to specific demands for inclusion from young citizens; it takes the form of an informal consultation body, and directly targets citizens under 30 and aims to bring young citizens close to the local administration.

In terms of digital offering, there is no previous substantial experience in targeting the youth with specific communication channels. However, both in-person and online meetings have been held through the GoToMeetings platform during the pandemic, which might have played a catalysing role in the digitalisation offering. Another relevant initiative gathers multiple youth local associations that are active in various fields of interests such as democratic participation and citizenship, education, job market opportunities, international mobility, art and culture, sport, and wellbeing.

3.4.2.   Survey results

To juxtapose the information gained from talking to policy-makers, we conducted a survey among our target group of young people. The objective of our survey was to find out more about young people's experience with and expectations of digital deliberation (see survey questionnaire in Appendix 2). We wanted to gauge specifically young people's knowledge of and attitudes towards democracy; their levels of political activism online and offline; what might encourage or keep them from using opportunities for participation; and to elicit specific recommendations for the design of an application. Our results suggest a considerable potential to use e-democracy to promote democratic participation among young people.

How satisfied are you with democracy on the following level?
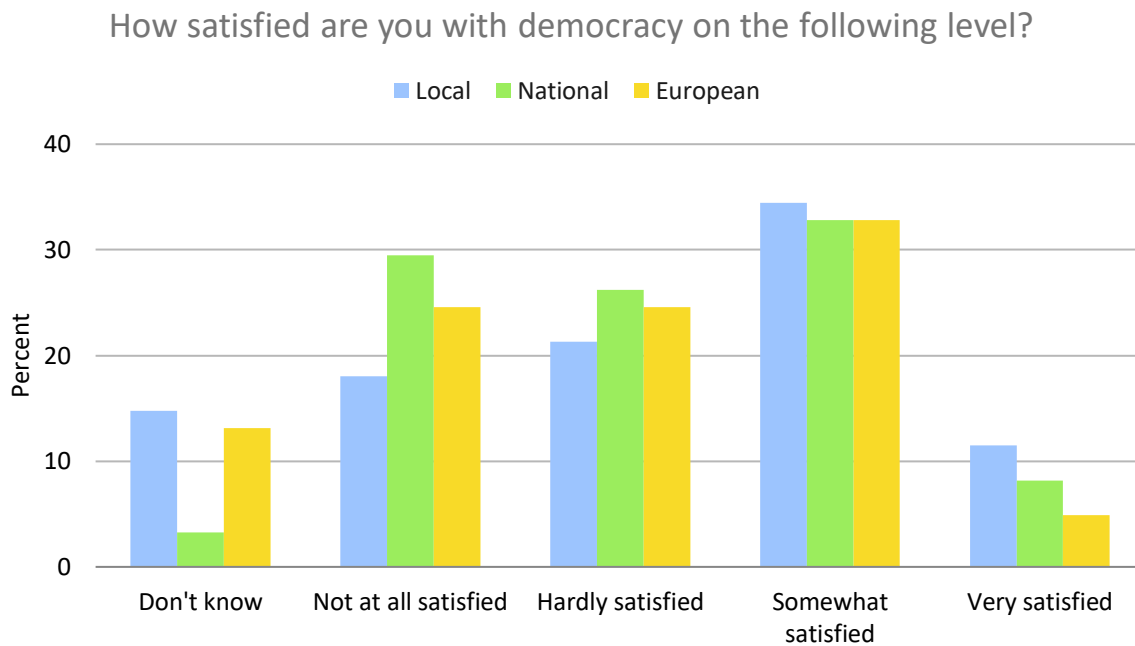
Graph 1: Young people (17-30) expressed relatively high satisfaction with democracy at the local level (in Krakow, Leiden and Trieste)

The most potential for political participation seems to lie at the local level. Though respondents indicate that they felt least informed and least interested in local politics, their level of satisfaction with democracy was slightly higher than with democracy on the national level (see Graph 1). Moreover, the level of interest for getting involved in local politics was equal to national

politics, at six out of ten responses. Taken together, these findings suggest that local politics might offer a good entry point for young people into democratic participation.
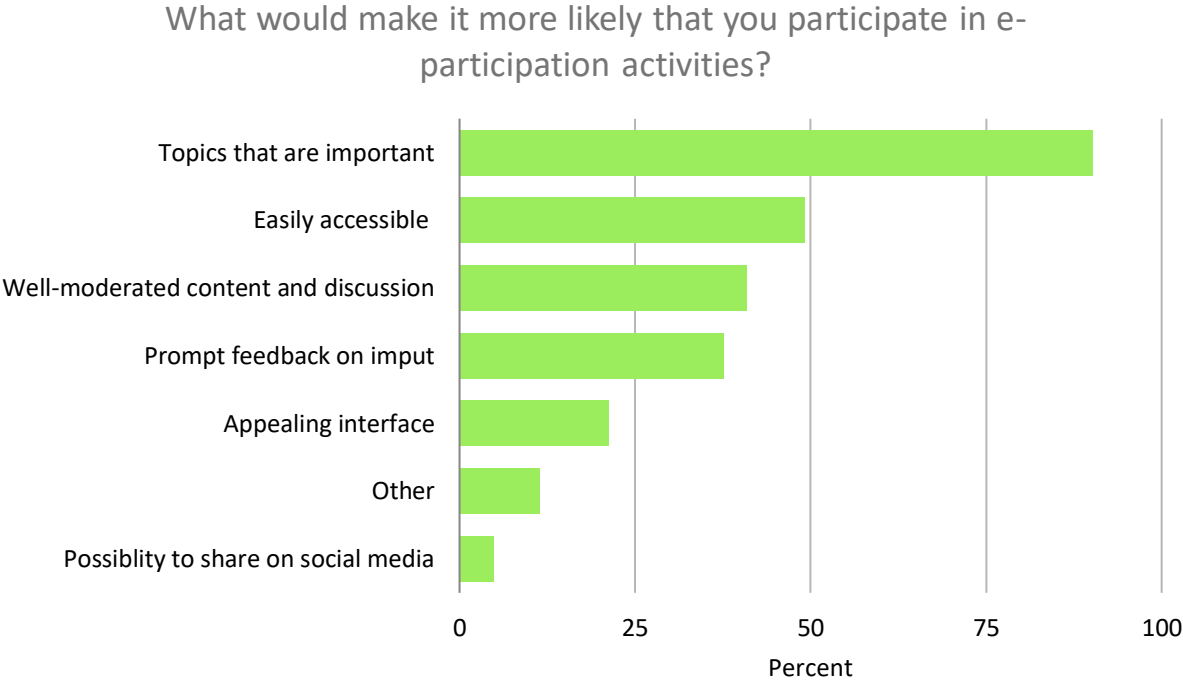
Have you in the past 24 months...?
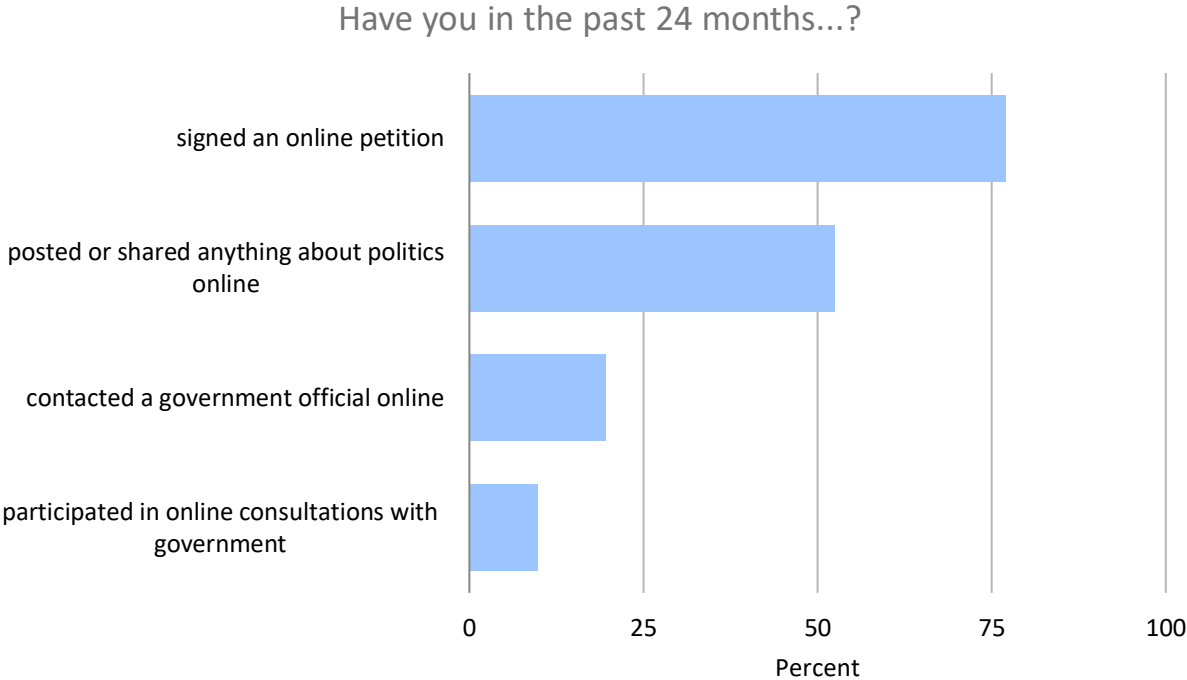
Graph 2: Most young people have signed online petitions and posted about politics online

A second major finding concerns differing patterns of political activity online and offline. In general, online media were far more widely used than their offline equivalents for other forms of political participation. As shown in Graph 2, almost 80% of respondents indicate that they had signed an online petition in the past two years, against one-third who had signed a petition with a pen; and while one in three participants had attended a demonstration in person, more than half had expressed political opinions on social media. While restrictions related to the pandemic might have limited young people's capacity to gather offline, these findings suggest that young people are comfortable with several ways of expressing political views online.
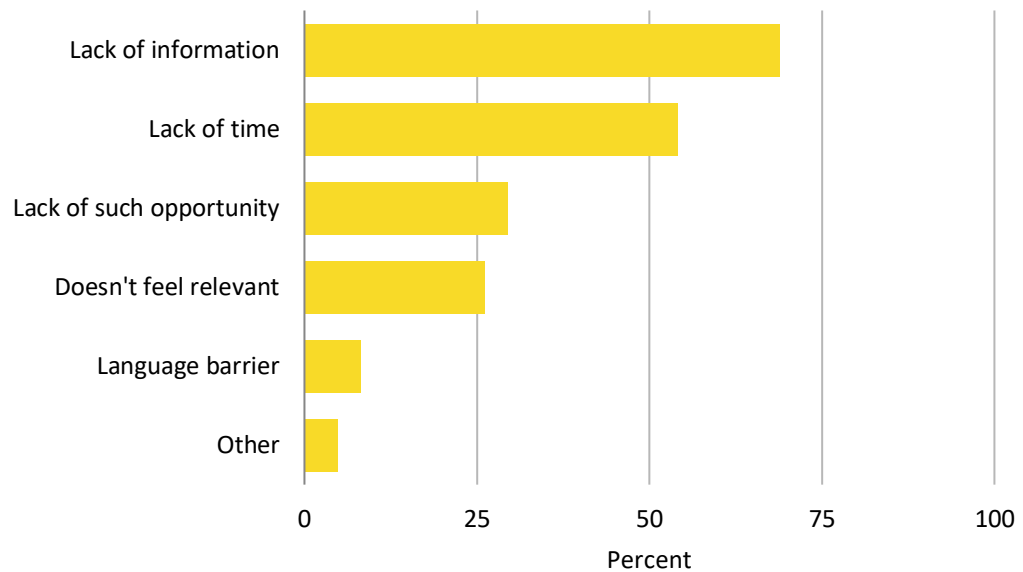
A similar conclusion can be drawn when it comes to direct consultations with governments. Though the number of respondents that engaged in citizen dialogues was around 10% for both online and offline formats, other channels for providing input were more widely utilised. One in four respondents indicate that they have used participation instruments or communication

channels that are made available by the local government; roughly one in five interacted with consultation instruments made available by EU institutions.

What would make it more likely that you participate in e-participation activities?

Category	Percent (approx.)
Topics that are important	~90
Easily accessible	~49
Well-moderated content and discussion	~41
Prompt feedback on imput	~38
Appealing interface	~21
Other	~11
Possiblity to share on social media	~5

Graph 3: Young people care most about being consulted on topics that they find important

What would make it less likely that you participate in e-participation?

Lack of information	
Lack of time	
Lack of such opportunity	
Doesn't feel relevant	
Language barrier	
Other	

Percent

Graph 4: The main impediments to online participation are lack of information and lack of time

Next, our findings suggest that young people care most about the substance of deliberations. By far the most common reason given for participating in online e-participation or political activities was that it concerned topics that were important to the respondents, while the importance of appealing interfaces or the possibility to share on social media came last (Graph 3). Yet the respondents also indicate that young people clearly appreciate and need low thresholds to participation. Half the respondents consider easy accessibility to be important and seven in ten indicate that the major impediment to engagement was lack of information about such activities (Graph 4). By contrast, only about a quarter of respondents expressed a lack of interest in such offerings. In sum, many young people seem willing to participate, but it seems that they want to be approached about such opportunities, and cajoled into participating.

Our survey concludes with recommendations for policy-makers regarding the effective design and delivery of applications that can be used to promote the engagement of young people with online e-participation/democracy platforms. More than 80% of respondents found using a web-based app suitable or very suitable for such purposes. Notably, respondents expect

[19]

accountability for how the input from consultations would be used – their expected time interval would not exceed a week following the consultation. Lastly, respondents provided some suggestions for how best to reach young people. Some stressed the potential of social media and the use of influencers to promote opportunities, but civic education in schools and through civil society organisation was also highlighted as an important channel.

Based on our survey, it is clear that young people are not a lost cause to democracy. Moreover, many are keen to contribute to political discussions. Many more have expressed themselves politically online than offline. Yet policy-makers that want to engage young people will have to take the initiative and must provide opportunities to participate in policy-making that makes young people feel that they are taken seriously and that offers them intuitive ways of expressing themselves and of influencing and shaping their communities.

3.4.3.   Synthesis

While the insights gained through our interviews in Krakow and Trieste demonstrated that reaching out to young people was challenging compared to other age groups, our respondents clearly showed a keen interest in wanting to participate in democratic processes and policy-making. Yet policy-makers must not expect initiatives that facilitate this to originate from young people and must take the initiative themselves. Our survey respondents indicate that young people need to be courted and want to be contacted and to feel recognised and validated by their leaders. Leiden's approach to setting up tailor-made formats for different young audiences can be commended in this context.

A second finding regards the presence of professional social media, which might be overrated. The municipalities of Leiden and Krakow, for example, invested in the curation of professional Instagram accounts to reach young people: however, the survey's respondents appear to care more about the substance of matters of deliberation than about the presence of local institutions on social media per se. A more promising way to disseminate opportunities to participate in local democracy might rely on cooperation with civil society organisations.

A final challenge concerns different time horizons and expectations regarding accountability. Whereas our survey respondents expect speedy feedback to their input, policy-makers have expressed that properly processing input from members of the public (including young people) from consultations takes time and can be technically challenging for multifaceted and complex multi-year projects. Especially when consultation formats are adapted to different target groups, it becomes difficult to process input and to present the results in a uniform, digestible way. Having one consolidated application, platform or interface might allow policy-makers to register responses clearly and to keep participants updated over the course of a project.

All in all, if policy-makers meaningfully engage with e-participation for your people, they can help to promote civic engagement, to cultivate a citizenry that feel like they have a stake in their communities, and to promote active, socially cohesive and sustainable societies that are good to live in.

4. Policy recommendations

Based on the research above, we identify six concrete opportunities for policy-makers to help resolve the crisis of youth disengagement with democracy by promoting the uptake of e-participation platforms.

You can hear the members of our group reading out our recommendations by clicking on the relevant hyperlink at the start of each recommendation.

1. **Tangible - E-participation platforms should focus on concrete policy issues that are dear to young people.**

Our survey findings confirm that Gen Z/ young people are more pragmatic than older generations - in line with existing research. Survey respondents stressed that important topics are the strongest reason for them to use e-participation platforms.

2. **Accessible - E-participation platforms should be convenient and simple to use. Young people appreciate accessibility.**

As digital natives, young people are comfortable expressing political opinions online. But they are used to snappy, visually appealing websites and have short attention spans. E-participation platforms have only a few seconds to capture their attention before they move on. Since young people navigate their environment predominantly through smartphones, designs should be suitable for small screens.

3. **Local - By involving young people in local initiatives, policy-makers can lean on pre-existing trust and deliver concrete results.**

Our survey has indicated that young people have high levels of trust in democracy at the local level, even though they know little about it. Small-scale initiatives allow participants to consult on practical policy issues close to their everyday lives, as the successful Madrid and Iceland's experiences have demonstrated. EU institutions could promote the adoption of these actions within the framework of the EU Youth Initiative and provide financial support.

4. **Constructive - E-participation platforms should be designed and moderated in a**

way that facilitates empathy and strengthens mutual understanding.

Well-designed platforms can foster constructive and pluralistic deliberation. By taking simple steps, "Better Reykjavik" and "vTaiwan" have created a positive discussion atmosphere and counteracted tribalism and polarisation. Policy-makers should draw on both content moderation and AI for this purpose.

5. **Promotion - Young people want to be approached. Policy-makers should promote e-participation platforms proactively and with the cooperation of social stakeholders.**

Whereas our survey respondents felt they lacked information about opportunities to participate, policy-makers have expressed difficulties attracting young people to e-participation platforms. In fact, successful platforms such as "Better Reykjavik" have spent the bulk of their budget on promotion through social media and civil society.

6. **Feedback - Young people demand fast feedback about how their input is being processed and require more explanation than adult participants.**

E-participation platforms should include mechanisms so that participants are kept up to date in a timely fashion about how their recommendations have informed policy decisions - as explained by a recent Europaeum Scholars' report. Policy-makers should be mindful of the need for accountability and transparency regarding the outcomes of proposals.

Sources

Boedu, E., 2021, 'Gen Z, cancel culture, and value shifts: how brands can thrive in 2021', *ClickZ*, available at: https://www.clickz.com/gen-z-cancel-culture-and-value-shifts-how-brands-can-thrive-in-2021/265498/ [Accessed 27 8 2021]

Butler, K. & Bannock, C., 2021. A sacrificed generation': psychological scars of Covid on young may have lasting impact. *The Guardian*, 21 6. Availble at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/02/a-sacrificed-generation-psychological-scars-of-covid-on-young-may-have-lasting-impact [Accessed 27 8 2021]

Collet, V. S., and Berman, E. (2021). "It will change traditional school in a very positive way": Educators' perspectives of the Marshallese experience during spring 2020 remote learning, *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/10714413.2021.1873005

Foa, R.S., Mounk Y., (2016). 'The Danger of Deconsolidation: The Democratic Disconnect', J*ournal of Democracy*, 27 (3), p. 5-17

Foa et al, (2020). 'Youth and Satisfaction with Democracy: Reversing the Democratic Disconnect?' *Centre for the Future of Democracy*,Cambridge, United Kingdom.

Gabriel, M. G., Maria León, A. B., and Outley, C. 2021 'Power and Social Control of Youth during the covid-19 Pandemic', *Leisure Sciences*, 43(1-2), pp. 240-246, DOI: 10.1080/01490400.2020.1774008

Genta et al., (2021). 'Covid-19 pandemic impact on sleep habits, chronotype, and health-related quality of life among high school students: a longitudinal study'. *Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine*, 17 (7), pp. 1371-1377, https://doi.org/10.5664/jcsm.9196

Gentilviso, C. & Deb, A., (2019). 'Embracing The Visual, Verbal, And Viral Media: How Post-Millennial Consumption Habits Are Reshaping The News. In: J. Schulz, et al. eds. *Mediated Millennials.* Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, pp. 147-171.

Grasso, M. T. (2014). "Age, Period and Cohort Analysis in a Comparative Context: Political Generations and Political Participation Repertoires in Western Europe." *Electoral Studies* 33: 63–76.

Gregorczyk, e. a., 2020. *bruegel.org.* [Online]

Available at: https://www.bruegel.org/2020/11/the-scarring-effect-of-covid-19-youth-unemployment-in-europe/ [Accessed 27 08 2021].

Guerrieri, P., (2014). 'The Rise of Unemployment in the Eurozone:The Worst of the Crisis is Not Over'. Available at: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/TT20-italy_guerrieri-2.pdf

Ha, L., Alison A. (2021). "New Strategies to Engage Millennials and Generation Z in Times of Uncertainty" - *Euromonitor International*. [Online] Available at: https://www.euromonitor.com/article/new-strategies-to-engage-millennials-and-

generation-z-in-times-of-uncertainty [Accessed 27 8 2021]

Hurellman, et al., (2020). 'Jugend 2019. Eine Generation meldet sich zu Wort'. *18. Shell Jugendstudie*, Shell Jugendstudie, (18), Weinheim: Beltz

Kitanova, M. (2020) 'Youth political participation in the EU: evidence from a cross-national analysis', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 23:7, 819-836, DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2019.1636951

ILO, 2020. *ILO-International Labour Organization.* [Online]

Available at: https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/youth-employment/publications/WCMS_753026/lang--en/index.htm [Accessed 27 8 2021].

Lim, S., 2020. Gen Z in APAC say their mental health has been impacted by Covid-19. *The Drum*, 10 10.

McCrindle, (2020). 'Mental health, wellbeing and resilience of the emerging generations during COVID-19'. Available at: *https://mccrindle.com.au/insights/blog/mental-health-wellbeing-and-resilience-of-the-emerging-generations-during-covid19/* [Accessed 27 8 2021]

Meyer-Hamme et al., (2017) 'An Incomplete Recovery: Youth Unemployment in Europe 2008 – 2016'. *Bertelsmann Stiftung*, Gütersloh, Germany. [Online]. Available at: http://aei.pitt.edu/102681/1/An_Incomplete_Recovery_-_Youth_Unemployment_in_Europe_2008_-_2016.pdf [Accessed 27 8 2021]

Mycock A., Tonge J.,(2012) 'The Party Politics of Youth Citizenship and Democratic Engagement', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Volume 65 (1), pp. 138–161, https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsr053

OECD, 2020. *Youth and COVID-19: Response, recovery and resilience.* [Online]

Available at: https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/youth-and-covid-19-response-recovery-and-resilience-c40e61c6/ [Accessed 27 8 2021].

OECD, 2021a. *OECD.* [Online]Available at: https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/young-people-s-concerns-during-covid-19-results-from-risks-that-matter-2020-64b51763/ [Accessed 27 8 2021].

OECD, 2021b. *OECD.* [Online] Available at:https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/what-have-countries-done-to-support-young-people-in-the-covid-19-crisis-ac9f056c/ [Accessed 27 8 2021].

Pelter, Z. 2020. Pandemic participation: youth activism online in the covid-19 crisis. UNICEF Office of Global Insight and Policy'. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/globalinsight/stories/pandemic-participation-youth-activism-online-covid-19-crisis [Accessed 27 8 2021]

Roberton J., Brown M., (2019), 'The Folly of Misunderstanding Youth', *Rispondi*,[Online]Availableat:https://www.respondi.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/respondi_whitepaper_the_folly_of_misunderstanding_youth.pdf [Accessed 27 8 2021]

Royo S, Pina V, Garcia-Rayado J. (2020). 'Decide Madrid: A Critical Analysis of an Award-Winning e-Participation Initiative'.

Sustainability.; 12(4), pp. 1674. https://doi.org/10.3390/su12041674

Rue, P., 2018. Make Way, Millennials, Here Comes Gen Z. *Sage Journals,* 23(3), pp. 5-12.

Teräs, M., Suoranta, J., Teräs, H., and Curcher, M. (2020) 'Post-covid-19 Education and Education Technology 'Solutionism': a Seller's Market'. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 2, pp. 863–878, https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00164-x

The Economist, 2020. *Southern Europe's millennials suffer two huge crises by their mid-30s.* [Online]

Available at: https://www.economist.com/europe/2020/04/16/southern-europes-millennials-suffer-two-huge-crises-by-their-mid-30s [Accessed 27 8 2021].

Trettel, M., et al, 2020, *Democratic Innovation and Participatory Democracy in the Alpine Area. Comparative Report*, EURAC Research, Bolzano/Bozen. Available at: https://www.alpine-space.eu/projects/gaya/results/comparative-report-english [Accessed 27 8 2021]

UNICEF, 2020. *Unicef.* [Online] Available at: https://www.unicef.org/laos/media/4816/file/IMPACT%20OF%20COVID-19%20ON%20ADOLESCENT%20WELLBEING%20AND%20MENTAL%20HEALTH.pdf [Accessed 27 8 2021].

Appendices

Appendix 1. Demographic profile of survey respondents

Our survey of youth people was run in three cities, namely: Krakow (Poland), Leiden (the Netherlands), and Trieste (Italy) from mid-July to mid-August 2021. The survey was set up online and distributed among the cities through similar channels of communication, with the help of respective municipal offices and universities. In all three cities, the survey was available in the official national language as well as in English. We received a total of 61 responses.

Share of respondents by case studies
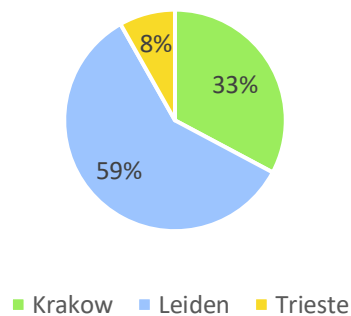
Gender of respondents
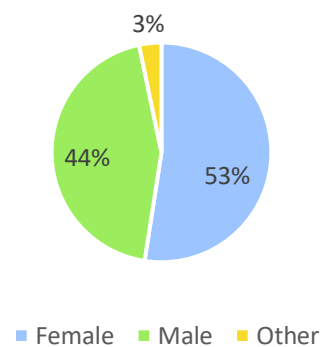
Graph 5: Respondents across studied cities

Graph 6: Gender of respondents

The survey was answered by young people aged between 17 to 30 (average age 22.5 years). While the majority of respondents (67.2%) were university students, the survey presents a relatively even distribution of respondents across education levels and university student respondents came from a wide range of programmes of study.

Appendix 2. Survey questions (English version)

	At the local level?	*At the national level?*	*At the European level?*
How interested would you say you are in politics?	0 – Don't know/Don't want to answer 1 – Not at all interested 2 – Hardly interested 3 – Somewhat interested 4 – Very interested	0 – Don't know/Don't want to answer 1 – Not at all interested 2 – Hardly interested 3 – Somewhat interested 4 – Very interested	0 – Don't know/Don't want to answer 1 – Not at all interested 2 – Hardly interested 3 – Somewhat interested 4 – Very interested
How would you rate your knowledge on political affairs?	0 – Don't know/Don't want to answer 1 – Very bad 2 – Bad 3 – Good 4 – Very good	0 – Don't know/Don't want to answer 1 – Very bad 2 – Bad 3 – Good 4 – Very good	0 – Don't know/Don't want to answer 1 – Very bad 2 – Bad 3 – Good 4 – Very good
How satisfied are you with the way democracy works where you live?	0 – Don't know/Don't want to answer 1 – Extremely dissatisfied 2 – Somewhat dissatisfied 3 – Somewhat satisfied 4 – Very satisfied	0 – Don't know/Don't want to answer 1 – Extremely dissatisfied 2 – Somewhat dissatisfied 3 – Somewhat satisfied 4 – Very satisfied	0 – Don't know/Don't want to answer 1 – Extremely dissatisfied 2 – Somewhat dissatisfied 3 – Somewhat satisfied 4 – Very satisfied
How satisfied are you with the ways that young people can have a say in the way things are run?	0 – Don't know/Don't want to answer 1 – Extremely dissatisfied 2 – Somewhat dissatisfied 3 – Somewhat satisfied 4 – Very satisfied	0 – Don't know/Don't want to answer 1 – Extremely dissatisfied 2 – Somewhat dissatisfied 3 – Somewhat satisfied 4 – Very satisfied	0 – Don't know/Don't want to answer 1 – Extremely dissatisfied 2 – Somewhat dissatisfied 3 – Somewhat satisfied 4 – Very satisfied
Would you like to get more involved in politics*?	0 – No/Don't know/Don't want to answer 1 – Yes	0 – No/Don't know/Don't want to answer 1 – Yes	0 – No/Don't know/Don't want to answer 1 – Yes

*Broad definition of politics, understood as social activities and/or engagement having some political implications (e.g. volunteering in political organisations or participating in democratic consultations).			
Have you voted in the most recent elections?	0 – No/Not eligible/Don't know/Don't want to answer 1 – Yes	0 – No/Not eligible/Don't know/Don't want to answer 1 – Yes	0 – No/Not eligible/Don't know/Don't want to answer 1 – Yes

- *Over the past 24 months, have you…*
    a) *been a member of or worked/volunteered for a political party?* (0 – No/Don't know/Don't want to answer/1 – Yes)
    b) *participated in any demonstrations, protests or other actions with a recognised social movement organisation or campaign?* (0 – No/Don't know/Don't want to answer/1 – Yes)
    c) *worked or volunteered with any other political organisation or association?* (e.g. charities, trade unions, student associations) ((0 – No/Don't know/Don't want to answer/1 – Yes)

- *Over the past 24 months, have you…*
    a) *contacted a government or local authority official or any politician by phone/post?* (0 – No/Don't know/Don't want to answer/1 – Yes)
    b) *physically signed a petition (with a pen)?* (0 – No/Don't know/Don't want to answer/1 – Yes)
    c) *taken part in a public demonstration?* (0 – No/Don't know/Don't want to answer/1 – Yes)
    d) *participated in any in-person consultation meetings with government or local authorities?* (0 – No/Don't know/Don't want to answer/1 – Yes)

- *Over the past 24 months, have you…*
    a) *contacted a government official or government politician online?* (0 – No/Don't know/Don't want to answer/1 – Yes)
    b) *signed an online petition?* (0 – No/Don't know/Don't want to answer/1 – Yes)

    c) *posted or shared anything about politics online, for example on blogs, via email or on social media such as Facebook or Twitter?* (0 – No/Don't know/Don't want to answer/1 – Yes)

    d) *participated in online consultations with government or local authorities?* (0 – No/Don't know/Don't want to answer/1 – Yes)

- *Have you ever interacted directly with any participation instruments or channels of communication that have been made available by your local government*? (e.g. social media accounts, online consultations)? (0 – No/Don't know/Don't want to answer/1 – Yes + if yes, specify)

- *Have you ever interacted directly with any participation instruments or channels of communication that have been made available by the EU institutions*? (e.g. social media accounts, online consultations such as the <u>digital platform set up for the Conference on the Future of Europe</u>)? (0 – No/Don't know/Don't want to answer/1 – Yes + if yes, specify)

- *If it is something you would consider doing, what would make it more likely that you would participate in online political activities* and exchanges with local government/EU institutions?* (please choose a maximum of three from the list)

  *In this context, political activities with local authorities and/or EU institutions might include, among other possibilities, providing institutions with ideas to be implemented, channelling your grievances on particular subjects directly to the institutions in charge or deciding how part of municipal budget is spent.

      a) Topics that are important to me
      b) Appealing interface
      c) Prompt feedback about how my input is being processed
      d) Easily accessible (e.g. compatible with your phone)
      e) Possibility to share on social media
      f) Well-moderated content and discussion
      g) Other reason (please specify

- *What would make it less likely for you to participate in online political activities and exchanges with the local government/EU institutions?* (please choose a maximum of three from the list)

      a) Lack of time
      b) Lack of information regarding such activities
      c) Lack of such opportunities
      d) Doesn't feel relevant to me
      e) Language barrier
      f) Other, reason (please specify)

- *What would you consider to be a reasonable response time for institutions to answer a request or query?* (ordinal, unit: minutes, days or hours)

- *What could the local government do that might be useful for young people to make a meaningful impact on how their locality is run that is not currently being done?* (open field)

- *What could the European Union do that might be useful for young to make a meaningful impact on how their locality is run that is not currently being done?* (open field)

- *Would you consider a web / phone application to be a suitable tool to engage with your local authority or with the European Union institutions?* (0 – Don't know/Don't want to answer/1 – Not at all suitable/2 – Somewhat not suitable/3 – Somewhat suitable/4 – Very suitable)

Appendix 3. List of interviews (anonymised)

List of interviews		
Locality	Format	Information (date of the interview)
EU-level	Online interview	Interview with former MP and Convenor of the Citizens' Convention for UK Democracy (16.12.2020)
EU-level	Online interview	Interview with Citizen Deliberation Coordinator at the European Citizen Action Service (27.04.2021)
Reykjavik (Iceland)	Online interview	Interview with President / CEO at Citizens Foundation and Founder of Better Reykjavik (26.03.21)
Krakow (Poland)	Online interview	Interview with officer in charge of public consultations in the City of Krakow (Department of Social Policy and Health, Office for Participation and Dialogue) (24.06.2021)
Krakow (Poland)	Online interview	Interview with the officer responsible for the Civic Budget in the City of Krakow (Department of Social Policy and Health, Office for Participation and Dialogue) (24.06.2021)
Krakow (Poland)	Online interview	Interview with the person in charge of local initiatives in the City of Krakow (Department of Social Policy and Health, Office for Participation and Dialogue) (24.06.2021)
Leiden (Netherlands)	Online interview	Interview with, policy advisor in education in the municipality of Leiden (20.05.2021)
Leiden (Netherlands)	Online interview	Interview with student coordinator at the municipality of Leiden (20.05.2021)
Trieste (Italy)	Online interview	Interview with local youth activist and member of cultural organisation (04.06.2021)
Trieste (Italy)	Online interview	Interview with local youth activist and member of cultural organisation (04.06.2021)
Trieste (Italy)	Phone interview	Interview with member of the Youth Municipality Council of Trieste (26.06.2021)