A New Narrative for EU Elections and Beyond: How to Engage Youth on Long Term?

Guidelines with Lessons Learnt on Youth Participation from the 2019 European Elections

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The paper evaluates both progresses and shortcomings in young people’s efforts to get more involved in EU democracy. Building on the valuable experience we had during our own project prior to the May 2019 European elections, and seeing the bigger picture of the recent years’ low youth involvement in the EU, the aim is also to reflect on the importance of the revived democratic participation in the context of the New Commission led by Ursula von der Leyen and its upcoming strategic agenda for 2019-2024.

The analysis stresses the fact that a clear and outspoken message was sent in these elections to EU representatives - that in order to be agents of change, young people need several key ingredients, besides their own constant engagement and strong will: the right support, willing political institutions that take them seriously and the right tools for participation adapted to the digital era. In the conclusions, the paper emphasises how much progress is still needed to maintain young citizens' participation on long term with a series of concrete policy recommendations that focus on having a better understanding of how to communicate with young voters.

September 2019
“The youth can be a force for democracy”
Jayathma Wickramanayake
UN Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth

“To create a future that young people desire, a sustainable future, an inclusive future and a participatory future, you have to choose a European leadership that acts to achieve this vision”
Carina Autengruber
President of European Youth Forum

“Citizens voted in these European elections based on a very strong support for the EU and with a much stronger belief that their voice counts in the EU”
David Sassoli
New President of the European Parliament
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Introduction

2019 was expected to be an interesting and challenging year, announcing a consistent political and institutional renewal for the EU, among the many other internal and external crises, with Brexit’s chaos at the top of the list. But it turned out to be quite the opposite, when nobody expected the European young citizens to be the game changers in these EU elections.

In recent years, Eurobarometer data showed a growing popular dissatisfaction with the EU among larger and very different age groups of EU citizens and talks about ‘EU’s democratic deficit’ made the headlines. Even though the EU has a huge impact on young people’s lives, figures showed that they were in the paradoxical situation of being the least engaged with EU politics and policies, having had the lowest turnout of any age group in previous EU elections cycles, 28% for 18-24 years compared with 35% for 25-39 years, 45% for 40-54 years and 51% for 55+ years1. Based on this bleak picture of disengagement, passivity and absenteeism of young citizens from the Euro-polity, they were known to be most at risk of exclusion from the complex EU political process. This picture was indeed extremely worrying, especially knowing that young people’s participation in EU’s widest democratic process (organized once in 5 years) reached just half the level of older citizens, especially since in the 2014 elections, the turnout among young voters (18-24) was as low as 28%, in contrast to the 42,54% turnout among the rest of the population2. This phenomenon of low electoral participation of young people is indeed considered a direct threat to EU’s democratic system and it affects its legitimacy. But after the 2019 elections, we have a completely new picture - with almost doubled youth participation, reaching the historic level of 42%3. This election round will be remembered as a very special one in EU history, because it was marked by the participation of a record number of Europeans in general4, but youth in particular.

Thus, this year it was young people who created a double pleasant surprise for the EU: first, through their significant mobilisation to vote and second, thanks to their actions for climate change across the continent, their civic actions managed to bring the environment to the heart of the debate, and that across the whole political spectrum, concretising this engagement at the ballot boxes (resulting in Green parties gaining significant support in many countries). This breakthrough of the Greens illustrates a transformation of the European

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1 How to reconcile youth with the EU elections?, https://youthforeurope.eu/how-to-reconcile-youth-with-the-eu-elections/
2 How to reconcile youth with the EU elections?, https://youthforeurope.eu/how-to-reconcile-youth-with-the-eu-elections/
4 Overall, all Europeans mobilised to make their voice heard, with participation rising to an unprecedented level of 50.8% (since 1999, in a pre-enlarged EU)
Parliament, the centre-right and the social democrats. The big progress of the Green agenda in France, in Germany and in many other countries of the EU definitely marks a turning point in EU politics, placing at the same time young people’s contribution to these changes to the forefront. Moreover, the main topics that dominated the pan-European electoral campaign debates, such as Brexit, the migration question, the issue of a redefined ‘European sovereignty’ and the fight against global climate change, revealed an unprecedented emergence of a more integrated European public opinion.

But democracy should not be reduced only to elections, and neither should youth civic engagement be reflected only in these recent encouraging figures. Beyond elections, we observed in recent years young people's increased participation in alternative forms of political action, such as local, national or even global protests, signing online petitions, boycotting or supporting certain products and brands based on how they impact societies, demanding the respect of human rights during the migration crisis and opposing the de-humanizing policies of their governments in dealing with refugees, creating social media creative and out-of-the-box campaigning. They all show that this generation of young people is interested in EU politics, but in its own terms. Right now, many young people before the voting age limit (starting with secondary school and high-school pupils) are at the forefront of many global movements and youth-led organisations (examples as Greta Thunberg’s protests for taking actions against climate change are emblematic). As such, we believe that reflecting on how to keep youth in the EU engaged for long term is a timely topic that deserves a more in-depth analysis.

In this overall context, the main aim of the analysis is to provide a guideline on lessons learnt on how to empower youth on the importance of EU elections (How to engage? Why? Which way? What where the methods used in this sense?), based on the findings during the project, especially since many attempts to bridge this growing distance between young people and political institutions in recent years have failed, at least when looking at voting turnout for 2014 elections.

Hence, we have structured the analysis as follows: in the first part we tried to shortly explain why this year’s European elections were different that the ones before. A particular focus was given to the overall impact of youth absenteeism and its relevance in 2019 in EU. Next, we described the results in the 2019 elections and we reflected on the main factors that helped EU regain citizens’ interest in the elections. In the last section we raised the following question: Should these results be celebrated as an opportunity for new beginnings and a new approach of young people on the EU? This part explores the forms of mobilisation of European voters that influenced the new composition of the European Parliament, that prospects for it to pave the way for a change of course in EU democracy. Based on these lessons learnt from our own project’s experience with the youth activists from Greece and Romania, we end with a set of policy recommendations addressed to the how the new Commission should adapt its policies for engaging young people on long term.
European elections - missing a generation in EU politics?

Generally, youngsters’ participation in EU elections is rather low, but the turnout itself has been constantly decreasing, as we can observe since 1979\(^5\): from a 61.99% presence at the first time the elections were organised to 58.98% in 1984, 58.41% in 1989, 56.67% in 1994, falling for the first time under the 50% threshold with 49.51% in 1999, 45.47% in 2004, 42.97% in 2009, 42.61% in 2014.

It is important to underline that in Greece, the trend has been aligned with the European one, although it is a member state where the vote is compulsory, ranking from 81.84% in 1981, to 80.59% in 1984, to 80.03% in 1989, to a high distance of 73.18% in 1994, to 70.25% in 1999, to 63.22% in 2004, to 52.61% in 2009, to 59.97% in 2014 as the first time in the Greek rounds of elections when we can see a slight increase of the citizens’ presence, which hasn’t maintained, given that for the 2019 elections, the turnout has fallen again to 57.60%.

On the other hand, the turnout in Romania has known an opposite trend, given that it has grown from 29.47% in 2007 to 32.44% in 2014, after having a setback at 27.67% in 2009 and finally, achieving 49.02% in 2019, close to the 50.5% at European level.

In this framework with a decreasing total number of European citizens, youth absenteeism is even more important, because it sets a trend even from the early stage of what should be the beginning of an active political life of each person. Youngsters that from the very beginning are distant from the electoral process will not engage in its follow-up and will, therefore, be a missing part in the complex system of policy elaboration and implementation and of accountability for the representatives in the European institutions.

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This lack of interest is not seen as well at the level of implication in all the features of the European decision-making process, given that youth participation in the European Citizens’ Initiative comes to underline that there is a potential for youth interest in the European Union’s actions and regulations and the EU institutions have adopted new regulations in order to facilitate youngsters access and involvement in this procedure, by modifying the regulations so that starting with January 2020, young people will have increased opportunities to participate as member states may, in accordance with their national laws, set the minimum age for supporting an initiative at 16 years⁶.

For some time, populists are trying to impose their agenda at the European level using disinformation method that young people are more vulnerable to because of the big quantity of online information that they get. This high turnout in the election gives the EU a mandate to prove it can respond to voters’ concerns. EU needs to become more participatory and collaborative and youth participation could be one possible antidote to the rise of illiberal populist parties. Europe needs youth participation beyond elections in order to have a real impact on the quality of European democracy.

Therefore, the EU has to take into consideration all the specific features of its diverse social categories in order to best respond to each of these ones’ needs in terms of communication in both ways, assuring that for example, the information about the EU gets to youngsters, but also that the later can provide inputs for the European actors involved in the European multilevel and network governance. Otherwise, there is a possibility that on one hand, youngsters draw even more apart from the EU functioning and on the other, that this would reflect on the EU policies that may come to ignore youngsters as a significant part of what should be their recipients.

The Dangers of Youth Absenteeism from the Europolity

Despite its democratic deficit⁷, the European Parliament is the EU’s iconic democratic institution, given that it is composed by European deputies, directly elected by the European citizens in order to represent them at the supranational level.

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⁷ A continually decreasing one
Since this is exactly what makes the difference in relation with the other institutional actors, it is very important that all sectors of the European population play an active role in determining what the EP’s composition will be. Youngsters should not be an exception, because they are a social category that has specific interests in terms of European policies that the MEPs should try to satisfy in terms of education, formation, research or entering the labour market.

On the other hand, youth absenteeism from the Europolity does not generate incomplete policies for themselves, but also for other domains that would have benefited otherwise of the implication of engaged youngsters that have innovative solutions for topics such as gender equality, social inclusion, sustainable development, climate change, education, international cooperation, technological breakthroughs etc.

Therefore, youngsters that participate in the electoral process do not stop at the announcement of the scrutiny’s results, but remain connected to the process of elaboration and implementation of European policies, in which the EP plays an important role, given that the EU’s ordinary legislative procedure requires an agreement of both the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union on a legislative proposal of the European Commission.

**Surprise, surprise! Record participation in May 2019**

The 2019 elections were organised in a complex and fuzzy European context, especially if we look at the months before them, when the EU had to deal with:

- the prospects of a renewed European project set to be relaunched by President Juncker’s initiative on consultations for the ‘Future of Europe’ that ended with the Sibiu Summit during Romania’s Council Presidency;

- the paralyzing Brexit negotiations, scheduled initially for March 2019, and the postponed for numerous times until today\(^8\)

- the elections for a new European Parliament in end of May 2019 and dark predictions regarding voter turnout and lack of interest by EU citizens;

- pressing internal disputes among member states, and concerns derived from trade disputes with the United States, migration, disagreements with Poland, Hungary and Romania about constitutional weakness and rule of law deviations, budget deficits;

- the growth of right-wing populist movements and Euroskeptics’ attacks on EU’s viability such as the ones by Marine Le Pen in France to Matteo Salvini in Italy or Alexander Gauland in Germany.

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\(^8\) At the time when the analysis was written - September 2019
Nonetheless, the participation to the EU elections was not as dark as the predictions would call it: the turnout was of 50.5%, a good one compared to the previous two rounds: 42.61% in 2014 and 42.97% in 2009.9

Moreover, the pro-European attitude was not manifested only during the elections, but also afterwards, given that the European Parliament published in July 2019 first results of its post-electoral Eurobarometer survey10 that highlighted a significant increase in young people with a pro-European mind-set cast a vote in the 2019 European elections, the most significant ones being in former Communist: Poland (+22%), Romania (+19%) and Hungary (+14%).

"Pro-Europeans have claimed victory in the May vote and this is both a good news and a bad news. The good part comes from the fact that turnout leaped to 51 percent, and two-thirds of voters supported pro-European parties, which topped the polls in 23 out of 28 member states. The more worrying part comes from the after-elections set-up and coalitions in the EP, which became more fragmented and more polarised than ever before. The European Parliament published in July 2019 first results of its post-electoral Eurobarometer survey. A significant increase in young people with a pro-European mind-set cast a vote in the 2019 European elections".

Why was it different this time? Models for Youth Engagement.
Lessons learnt from the 2019 campaign

The power of ‘First time’ voters

In this year’s elections, Europe’s young and first time voters were the ones to drive turnout figures up and they became a game changer in these elections11. Even in the UK’s referendum in 2016, it was shown that young citizens, who are also a part of the so-called ‘generation Erasmus’, think positively about the EU, but this does not solve all their insecurities.

The fear of EU disintegration

The increasing popularity of Euroskeptic forces in the EU (both in old and new member states) was also a game changer for these elections and represented an incentive for

11 Voting is compulsory for at least some elections in Belgium, Cyprus, Luxembourg and Greece. The voting age is 18 for most of the elections in the EU Member States and in Croatia, with the exception of Austria where the voting age is 16.
youngsters to express their vote, which was also a way of manifesting their disapproval of the populist trend in national and European politics.

Ever since 2015, and specifically connected to the refugee crisis, the anti-EU narratives grew stronger than ever before and offered a PR platform for populist claims. In this context, disinformation was used as a tool to gain citizens’ support and this became in itself a threat to democratic values. Even though in theory, candidates for the European Parliament should have a supranational agenda, and voters are supposed to appoint their representatives with an eye on EU issues in practice, this is not always the case since some candidates tend to focus on domestic problems and voters tend to use the elections to reward or to punish their national governments.

Nonetheless, contrary to many scenarios, in the end, the pro-EU forces remained in control of the European Parliament and this was also possible to the increased level of the turnout at the 2019 elections, shrinking the proportion of populist, Euroskeptic and extremist parties.

**Climate change activism and the Green agenda**

Climate change became an increasingly common focus of many young Europeans. Student protesters recently turned out in 120 countries and 1,700 cities to demand action on climate change just days before the EU elections on May 26\(^\text{12}\). The next global students’ youth strike took place on September 20\(^\text{th}\) and drew even bigger numbers\(^\text{13}\). These movements advanced the Green agenda and in some countries offered a viable alternative for a significant number of young people not be drawn to far-right or anti-establishment parties.

The so-called ‘Friday climate strikes’ were also mobilising first time voters by stressing the role EU could have in advancing the low carbon emission agenda at the global level. In this context, it is expected that the environmentalist Greens to continue to grow in popularity, bringing more civic activism together with it.

**Using personal stories, youth-driven messages and real facts**

A very good communication idea was the grassroots initiative *This Time I’m Voting*\(^\text{14}\), of the European Parliament itself, that was active in all 28 EU member states, and which has tried to explain the importance of electoral participation by means of a variety of user friendly instruments. The impact figures are impressive - in total, three hundred thousand people have

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\(^{13}\) Global Climate Strike, [https://globalclimatesrike.net/](https://globalclimatesrike.net/)

\(^{14}\) “Thistimeimvoting” is the name of the campaign and the EU portal community where you could register to confirm your active participation during these elections and also persuade others to vote, talking to people around you about it and sharing on social media to spread the message.
registered on the campaign website, while the promotional video *Choose Your Future* has reached 120 million views across various platforms\(^{15}\).

**European Youth Parliament**

As EU became more and more contested in recent years (by populists, but also by well-informed critics), youth initiatives to promote citizen participation also have made substantial progress (particularly at the local level). An example of such an activity is the European Youth Parliament, which an opportunity for all young people aged between 16 and 30, from all over Europe, to go inside the EU Parliament and have a direct contact with some politicians, deputies and other leading individuals these days. The event is organized once every 2 years and it is completely free.

**European Citizens’ Consultations (ECCs)** initiated by President Juncker were the first pan-European participatory project to involve citizens from all twenty-seven member states of the European Union into the debate about the future of the continent. This was a response to the emergence of populist forces claiming to represent the ‘people’ in EU.

If in previous years, the EP had hired communication agencies for similar information campaign (that had little outreach), this time it has organised it on its own, by making an unprecedented communication effort. It relied mostly on personal stories of how ordinary citizens from all countries have experimented Europe and on their own worries about the future. Many youth activist messages have been thus present on this transnational platform that gathered 28 countries, 24 different official languages, and around 400 million eligible voters—all coordinated from Brussels. But it was perceived as offering more citizen ownership through active participation in European elections. In the end, it managed to achieve its goal - to safeguard the legitimacy of European institutions and revive voter turnout in European elections.

Besides conventional methods like media engagement, the EP used another innovative campaigning tool, sometimes referred to as “mobilizing the mobilizers”, in which they encourage ordinary citizens to join the campaign and act as 'influencers' on their peers and sharing their own stories.\(^{16}\) The EP provided them with the necessary engagement tools (*personalized banners, posters, pins, etc.*) in order to engage other citizens in their communities.

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\(^{16}\) “EU and Me” was another European campaign organised in 2019 to show how the EU legislation and initiatives can help youngsters to develop their passion and interests. In the website you can find some practical information at European level, about 5 main topics: Mobility, Rights, Sustainability, Digital, Skills and Business. The message sent by the platform to young Europeans is that in order to foster the active participation there are different contests or projects for which you can apply, to develop your personal skills and to give your personal contribution to EU.
on the street, at their jobs, or on college campuses. This aspect of the campaign attracted the involvement of many young people. This model of peer-to-peer communication proved to be a suitable tool to confront at the anti-elitist narrative that populist Euroskeptics had promoted about the ‘excessively bureaucratic’ EU. It all focused on concrete everyday examples, aimed at countering also disinformation campaigns and fake news regarding vital issues about the conduct of EU decision-making. In this sense, one of the campaign’s key elements was a website with the name What Europe does for me which also offered user-friendly facts about the main benefits that the EU brings to people and the tools it uses to take decisions that affect EU citizens. This particular strategy was targeted directly to respond to mostly young citizens’ feeling of not being heard, to offer alternatives to anti-EU messages, and further to reduce the alienation of Eurosceptic voters or non-voters fed with ‘false information’. The platform focused on citizen-driven topics selected from EU agenda such as the future EU funding programmes and budget, the impact of copyright rules or the relationship with third countries (such as the United Kingdom after Brexit), provoking debates and fuelling discussions.

This year’s information campaign showed an innovative (and probably more efficient) way of combining participative and representative democracy - participative EU-wide activities have been used in order to increase participation in EU elections.

The increased numbers of citizen participation across Europe was a result of a continuous series of other actions (some led by EU institutions, others by citizens themselves) to improve participation in EU decision-making. All of the initiatives mentioned above contributed constructively to revitalizing democracy and getting young people back on board. This is the new narrative on Europe which was at the heart of the higher turnout in elections.

Let youth create the new narrative on Europe!

In the following section we try to draw some lessons learnt and observations from our direct experience with mobilising youth to engage more at the European level and we will start with a description of the rationale of our project and its structure.

The project A new narrative for EU elections and beyond: How to engage Youth’ aimed to raise awareness and know how among youth on the importance of EU 2019 elections and empowering youths and youth workers with the needed tools to gain momentum and influence over EU’s direction through interactive and user friendly methods. It brought together one NGO from Romania (CRPE as a coordinator), a university in Romania (the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration) and an NGO from Greece (Inter Alia). Our intention was to motivate, encourage and enable the young citizens for participating actively in EU’s fundamental political processes.

First, we launched the online platform YouthVote2019.eu in February 2019 in order to contribute to increasing voter turnout before the EU elections of May 2019 through:
• an information and quiz competition on our website (in February 2019);
• an interactive online debate in teams on current EU topics (in March 2019);
• a one-week training in Brussels to improve their understands of the EU and the possibilities they have at hand for more participation, addressed to a selected group of youth workers that that won the online debate competition (April 2019).

Our goal was to train multipliers (youth activists, youth leaders, youth workers) as well as to gather and develop tools and resources for them to organise local activities designed to include young voters in debates about the EU and encourage them to vote.

The Quiz and the online debate tried to reinforce the democratic and transnational dimension of the European elections and the democratic legitimacy of the EU decision-making process. The last from the total 4 rounds of debates focused mainly on youth’s input about the advantages that European citizenship conveyed, such as the right to study and work in more than twenty different countries, and are aware that their fundamental rights and freedoms are protected throughout the EU. Moreover, their view was also critical, showing that even if almost nine million people have benefitted from the Erasmus programme over the last three decades, there are also significant numbers, from underprivileged families, that did not have this opportunity and this issue needs to be addressed.

The sessions were mainly dedicated to explaining about how the EU institutions works, the importance of the decisions taken by the European Parliament and how they affect their daily lives. The other aim was to show them how its policies translate into tangible results which positively affect their daily lives. In the end, we offered the proper tools for a selected group of 16 young people from Romania and Greece to share the message with their friends and peers prior to May 2019.

The one week intensive training in Brussels offered the group of youth workers unbiased, politically neutral information on the European Union, how it works, what it does and why it’s important to vote. We also shared with them useful tool to share ideas on how to bring youth closer to politics and to EU, organizing actions, fostering policies, sharing experiences. During each day of the training in Brussels we tried to include information sessions, visits to EU institutions and also interactive parts that would engage participant’s creativity. We organised the main aims and activities of the lessons on transmitting the idea that voting in the European elections is what enables the institutions to take decisions, and EU to grow and to improve itself.
The main aim of the training in Brussels was to make sure that young people gain the knowledge, competencies and tools necessary to be engaged for the future of Europe at the local level. We wanted to give them the space to ask the questions they need answered in dialogue with decision makers and experts in Brussels. As such we structured the training in four major components:

1. **In-depth information and interactive working sessions** with topics such as:
   - “European Union – What is it all about? Inter-institutional relations, multilevel and network governance within the EU”
   - “The role of citizens in the EU - EU Ecosystem Game”
   - “What is at stake during the European elections?”
   - “The role of think tanks in EU policy making”
   - “Threats against European Democracy”

2. **Visits** to important EU institutions, museums and think tanks:
   - a guided tour of the European Parliament
   - a Treasure Hunt in the Parlamentarium (fact-finding exercises about EU’s history)
   - a visit at the Presidency of the Council of the EU
   - a visit to the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee
   - a guided tour of the House of European History

3. **Meetings with experts in EU affairs from**:
   - the European Policy Centre (EPC)
   - the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS)

4. **Final 2 exercises**:
   - a role play focused on “Civic participation and Disinformation” focused on outlining the risks for the European elections
   - a public discussion organised at the House of European History entitled: ‘The Dangers of a Single Story on Europe – Youth reflections”.

We aimed at tackling several crucial issues connected to youth participation in elections such as:

- the complexity of the EU institutional apparatus
- citizens’ larger anxieties over the state of European democracy or their diminishing trust in politicians
- different types of existing participatory initiatives and how they work in practice
- the required future efforts made to restore EU democratic accountability.
At the end of the training we gathered several ideas and arguments presented as participant’s feedback that we would like to discuss here as observations and reflections:

- EU is expected to become a world leader in the fight against climate change;
- youth experiences in many member states are rather dominated by job instability, environmental pollution, corrupt administrations, a need to emigrate, and the prospect of becoming worse off than their parents (mainstream political parties are not addressing these topics and not offering tailor made solutions for their real concerns);
- young people, who are digital natives, do not know how to communicate with EU institutions, that seem too complicated; they feel the need to build on the huge potential of digital solutions to drive positive change in society and to improve European democracy; these tools could also help removing the existing barriers to participation (for poor, under-privileged youth, also from the rural areas);
- there is a need for better citizenship education in schools (particularly in primary schools), and for this history and role of the EU into national educational systems should be integrated in national curricula;
- some suggested the benefits of a wide electoral reform (to bring more homogenisation on how the elections are organized in all member states) and also lowering the voting age;
- it was stressed that youngsters are switching to online political engagement and they are looking for new ways to make their voices heard (this model of participation with digital tools is easy, affordable, and can reach a wider audience).
- in this context of shifting patterns of engagement, it was also added that EU institutions need to acknowledge the fact that younger generations choose other forms of political participation since they feel excluded from ‘traditional’ politics (they they need to feel empowered to pursue these other forms, hence young people use their creativity and innovation in how they choose to engage in the political process and institutions need to acknowledge young people’s involvement in a range of groups and clubs such as sports clubs, youth organisations and cultural organisations).

During our talks it was underlined that young people in EU are not passive, but they just started to engage politically in different, unconventional ways, outside of the traditional political system. The participative turn in European democracy was more than needed in the spring of 2019, for an EU facing numerous internal and external challenges. Looking at the very low levels of citizen participation not only outside, but also inside the main channels of representative democracy such as the European elections (with the last cycle of elections in May 2014 bringing the highest figures of absenteeism), one had little space for hope or change. But it’s not just about voting or not voting. In the last years, the viral spread of protests in EU member states (both old and new) is a vivid proof to citizens’ demand for a greater voice in
how political power is exercised. The European Citizens’ Consultations process, from mid-2018 to 2019, welcomed suggestions on the future of the EU. This exercise of inclusiveness mattered.

Moreover, young people understood that democracy and civic participations should go far beyond the ballot box and institutions need to take that into account. Beyond protests, we have witnessed a wide spread of consultative participation of youth (in solving local issues and pressuring on local institutions to take action) which represents a notable development in European political governance. The new leadership of the EU institutions that will start its activities in autumn 2019 need to reflect these changes. Youth needs to be part of EU narrative. Our intense discussions with youth workers and students underlined the fact that there is the need for a new narrative on Europe, and this refers to the fact that such increased youth participation offers a means of rebooting democracy and creating at least a partial antidote to illiberal populism. This narrative should be youth-led, aimed at maintaining a increased civic participation of young people at EU level, focused also on ‘low-politics issues’—decisions related to local projects—rather than high-politics issues related to EU-level issues.

So how can youth be in the forefront of agenda setting and monitoring power at the EU level?

**Conclusions. How to keep youth engagement alive on long term?**

Abstention in EU elections has been a growing phenomenon for many decades. The 2019 European elections surprising voters’ turnout showed that young people can become highly politically engaged when they realise that a vote has high stakes. Impactful experiences, such as the millions of job losses in Europe that followed the financial and economic crisis of the past years, eventually shaped the political outlook of many young Europeans and constituted a drive to go out and cast a vote. These elections resulted in big changes, largely due to youth getting involved in politics. As such, we think that any ‘New Narratives for Europe’ should address the needs of main young voters from two major groups: the so-called “Generation Z” (those aged 18-24) and the “Millennials” (those aged 25-34). New EU narratives should be meant to disperse insecurity about the future by focusing on what the young voters had brought as the new ‘critical issues’.

Our aim with the concluding section of this paper is to build on the ideas collected and momentum created to ensure a long-term European-oriented youth participation. Are these positive trends in youth turnout capable to restore the link between Europe’s peoples and European integration?

Along the analysis and through the experience of this project we have identified several signs that we are heading towards a new democratic culture of the young electorate in Europe. But there is also the fear that this ‘trend’ might also change in the next years, if the top down approaches do not take into account the messages brought by the increased youth turnout in
these elections. The widespread feeling that the European institutions are remote from everyday life might again be catalysed by skilful Euroskeptics. In the last decade, EU official narrative demonstrated to have little appeal for young voters. There is a need for a ‘new narrative’, shaped by youth’s hopes, fears and constructive political engagement within the EU. The new Commission will take over in November 2019 for a five-year period. The coming institutional cycle is crucial because it will determine the Future of Europe and in this context there is a need for the EU to redefine the relations between young citizens and its institutions. We hope it would take on board several of our following policy recommendations.
Policy recommendations

Adapt the new narratives to emerging technologies, using easy to understand language (and visuals), putting youth at the heart of the debate. It is therefore essential to communicate with young people, especially those who see no benefit in being part of the EU; emerging innovative digital tools should be used to improve young people’s identification with the European Union; the connection should be stronger between offline and online debate about the future of the EU. Offer proper tools for young people to take ownership of the European Project in transparent and inclusive ways;

Put topics of interests for youth on top of EU agenda, having, thus, the opportunity for setting the agenda for the next five years. Also, include youth issues clearly in party manifestos. As shown by a very recent study of the European Parliament, the top issues which influenced citizens’ voting decision were economy and growth (44%), climate change (37%) as well as human rights and democracy (37%). With 36% of mentions, ‘the way the EU should be working in the future’ emerged also as top voting motivator for citizens. In 16 countries, respondents cited the economy and growth as the most important voting issue, whilst citizens in eight countries named climate change as the top topic for them. We believe that these youth relevant topics should be the topics where EU institutions should focus more in engaging them. Focus more on social inclusion, climate, environment, and air quality, and that they are usually much more pro-European - offering a credible, concrete, pragmatic vision of a hopeful future.

Be better prepared, do more to respond to the main concerns of pro-Europeans without ignoring the growing voices against the European project, and also to big global challenges. EU institutions need to take fact-based critics and counter-arguments seriously and be responsive towards them;

Make stronger links between party life and alternative forms of participation that could bring parties back in touch with young people; Increase the number of MEPS aged under 35; MEP candidates need to be stimulated in all parties to take part in elections on eligible places.; Introduce pan-European lists of candidates in future European elections;

Take the EU debate to the local level - EU institutions need to expand their presence to smaller cities and rural areas. Develop the skills and capacities of young people and youth organisations

Define new target key groups of young people that should be streamlined by EU institutions communication teams such as: students, the socially excluded and first time voters. Create a strategy to engage the many first-time voters that were casting their ballots in May 2019 as game changers. In this sense, develop new activities and tools for youth organisations to continue working for the European engagement of young people on a long-term basis and use social media to engage and network with the young audience. Find better ways of connecting with European citizens so that, in return, they would want to participate. Increase levels of information on EU affairs.

We think that official narratives need to make Europe far more relevant to all of us at the personal level. We thus tried to show young voters’ importance in rejuvenating Europe’s politics and rebuilding trust in the European project. Only in these conditions, and by leading the ‘new European narratives’ can we expect young people to take a leading role in building new and sustainable democratic systems.
About the project "A new narrative for EU elections and beyond: How to engage Youth" funded by the European Commission, Erasmus+ Programme, Key Action 2: Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices.
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“Anew narrative for EU elections and beyond: How to engage Youth” was funded by the European Commission, Erasmus+ Programme, Key Action 2: Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices.

Period of implementation:
September 2018 – October 2019

Context of the project:
Falling voter turnout is a common trend and young voters abstain more than the general population in all European democracies. The democratic deficit and low electoral turnout is not faced by specific countries, but it is a phenomenon happening at EU level. The gap between the democratic institutions in Europe, their representatives and Europe’s young generation is growing. Although young people are more likely to be present in other forms of political participation (protests, strikes, joining pressure groups, etc), their overall election turnout is dramatically falling. In 2014 only 28% of under 25 were voting, compared to the general election turn-out rate which was 42.6%. In order to increase voter participation, the project targeted youths, students, youth workers from Romania and Greece, with an interest in EU affairs/EU elections that can further create a ‘snowball effect’ and replicate the activities of the project in their organizations (through specific trainings on EU elections, debate Competitions, EU Narratives and Counter Narratives) during 2019 Elections.

The project was implemented by:

Founded in Bucharest in 2009, the Romanian Center for European Policies (CRPE) is one of the foremost think tanks operating in Central and Eastern Europe, a leading forum for debate in the region, as well as for Eastern Partnership countries (focused especially on Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia) on EU affairs, democratization and and overall evidence-based public policy. CRPE’s mission is to promote Romania as an influential leader in the development of EU agendas and policies. Another major objective is to advance the Europeanization processes in Romania and to promote European citizenship by providing expertise, monitoring tools and research in various fields and by initiating public debates.

The Centre of European Studies (CES) was established in 2003, as one of the main teaching and research structures within the Department of International Relations and European Integration of the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA) in Bucharest, Romania. Since its foundation, the Centre managed research grants related to the fields of International Relations and European Studies. Through its activity, CES aims to be a hub of expertise for both academics and practitioners in South East Europe, by participating in programs of national and international cooperation regarding research, education and the dissemination of information about the European Union and the integration process. Moreover, it focuses on promoting partnerships and debates on European issues, cooperating with public institutions, professors and researchers from Romanian academic centers, as well as from other academic centers situated in EU member states.

Inter Alia (IA) is a private not-for-profit organization based in Athens, Greece. Its activities are carried out by its two interconnected branches, a youth organization and a think-tank. Both branches have common aims and diverse tools for pursuing them. Inter Alia’s founders and members are interested and work on contemporary challenges of Europe and the world with focus on democracy, citizenship, education, and human rights.

More info about the project: www.youthvote.eu