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Youth movements for democracy

Report[1]
Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media
Rapporteur: Ms Yevheniia KRAVCHUK, Ukraine, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe

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1. Reference to committee: Bureau decision, Reference 4879 of 11 April 2025.

A. Draft resolution[2]

1. Over the past years, youth-led movements have emerged as vital forces in the defence and renewal of democratic values, particularly in the face of rising authoritarianism, institutional distrust, socio-economic exclusion, digital transformation and environmental crisis, as well as shrinking civic space that undermines young people's ability to participate in democracy and advocate for change.

2. Referring to its Resolution 2553 (2024) "Strengthening the youth perspective in the work of the Parliamentary Assembly" and Resolution 2610 (2025) "Social mobilisation, social unrest and police reaction in Council of Europe member States: is there a need for a new social contract?", the Parliamentary Assembly:

2.1. affirms that young people across Europe are among the most active defenders and imaginative builders of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, advancing inclusive visions of justice, rights and participation;

2.2. recognises the creativity, resilience and civic innovation of youth organisations and youth movements, which are pioneering new forms of political participation, from participatory budgeting to open-data civic labs, and from environmental justice frameworks to community-led democratic education, while also reshaping political participation through non-institutionalised forms of direct action, such as protests, petitions, boycotts, occupations, and online activism;

2.3. is deeply concerned by the growing repression faced by young activists and youth organisations in some member States, including politically motivated arrests, criminalisation of peaceful protests, harassment, surveillance and stigmatisation;

2.4. stresses that governments and institutions must respond to youth civic engagement not with repression or indifference, but with recognition, protection, support and structural reforms.

3. The Assembly welcomes the long-standing work of the Council of Europe in supporting youth participation through its co-management system, European Youth Centres, European Youth Foundation and policy frameworks such as the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life.

4. In the light of recent developments, the Assembly urges Council of Europe member States to:

4.1. protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of young people by:

4.1.1. guaranteeing the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association for young people, in accordance with Articles 10 and 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5), and removing administrative and political obstacles that disproportionately affect youth-led organisations and movements;

4.1.2. repealing or amending legislation that criminalises or unjustly restricts peaceful protest, including vague provisions on public order, national security or "extremism" that are often used to silence youth dissent;

4.1.3. ending politically motivated arrests of young activists and ensuring that any deprivation of liberty is strictly compliant with legal standards, while strengthening access to legal aid and judicial remedies for youth facing persecution for their civic engagement;

4.2. institutionalise youth participation in political processes by:

4.2.1. ensuring meaningful youth representation in elected bodies, such as national parliaments and local councils, by supporting effective and inclusive structures and mechanisms to integrate young people in policy and decision making;

4.2.2. consider lowering the voting age to 16 across all Council of Europe member States to foster early civic responsibility and inclusion;

4.2.3. introducing multi-age electoral lists and youth quotas in political parties and public institutions to counter generational imbalances and promote intergenerational solidarity in governance;

4.3. support youth-led initiatives and civic infrastructure by:

4.3.1. protecting young people's human rights and freedoms, guaranteeing the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association*;*

2. Draft resolution adopted by the committee on 4 September 2025.

4.3.2. allocating dedicated public funding for youth civic infrastructure, including safe and inclusive community centres, independent online platforms, legal clinics and participatory spaces where young people can organise and collaborate;

4.3.3. promoting youth-led media and embedding democratic civic education in school curricula, in line with the Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education and the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, to equip young people with the values, attitudes, skills and knowledge needed to engage in democratic life and resist disinformation and extremism;

4.3.4. encouraging active involvement of young people and youth-led organisations in post-war recovery and reconstruction processes, recognising their potential to contribute with innovative solutions, promote inclusive governance and strengthen democratic resilience in societies emerging from conflict or facing complex political transitions. Special attention should be paid to supporting youth in countries at war or in fragile political situations, ensuring that their voices and initiatives are protected and integrated into national and international recovery strategies;

4.4. tackle structural barriers to youth democratic participation by:

4.4.1. addressing youth socio-economic precarity through inclusive housing, employment, and education policies that recognise the link between economic marginalisation and democratic disengagement;

4.4.2. promoting access to free, independent and pluralistic media, including in digital format, to ensure that youth have access to diverse sources of information and can freely express their views;

4.4.3. supporting international and European youth co-operation and youth-to-youth exchanges, as a means of building democratic cultures across borders, fostering solidarity and preventing conflict.

5. Furthermore, the Assembly calls for strengthened international co-operation to uphold youth civic space by:

5.1. promoting the Council of Europe's role as the main pan-European driving force for the development of youth policy and standards in Europe, taking forward the outcomes and results of the 10th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth scheduled to take place on 8-9 October 2025, in Valletta, Malta;

5.2. encouraging the European Union to integrate civic space benchmarks into enlargement processes and funding frameworks, including specific indicators on youth rights and participation;

5.3. co-ordinating with international organisations, such as the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), to improve access of young people to human rights, capacity building, support to youth organisations and movements, and complement existing Council of Europe mechanisms to address shrinking civic space;

5.4. engaging diaspora and refugee youth in democratic participation strategies, recognising their unique experiences and potential to contribute to democratic development both in their countries of origin and in host societies.

6. The Assembly commits itself to:

6.1. strengthening the participation of young people in its work, including through the activities of youth rapporteurs, regular dialogue with youth-led organisations, and structured input from the Advisory Council on Youth;

6.2. mainstreaming youth perspectives across all committees and reports, treating youth civic space as a standing democratic concern, and monitoring restrictions on youth rights with the same urgency as other human rights violations;

6.3. ensuring that the Assembly's Bureau and part-sessions provide platforms for youth perspectives, particularly from those in repressive contexts;

6.4. promoting exchanges between parliamentarians and youth activists, organisations and youth movements including by providing sustainable, inclusive and effective mechanisms, including funding as appropriate.

7. The Assembly encourages all relevant stakeholders, including international organisations, civil society, academia and the private sector, to work in partnership with youth organisations and youth movements to co-design democratic innovations, amplify youth voices in decision making, and invest in sustainable civic infrastructure.

8. Protecting youth freedoms, institutionalising participation, and dismantling structural barriers are democratic imperatives, and youth movements must be recognised not as threats but as indispensable actors in building democratic resilience in Europe.

B. Draft recommendation[3]

1. Referring to its Resolution … (2025) "Youth movements for democracy" emphasising that young people across Europe are not only participants but also essential defenders and innovators of democracy, and that their engagement is critical to sustaining democratic resilience in the face of authoritarianism, institutional distrust, socio-economic exclusion, digital transformation and environmental crisis, the Parliamentary Assembly:

1.1. stresses the need for the Council of Europe and its member States to protect and promote youth civic engagement and (financial) support to youth organisations, safeguard youth rights, and dismantle the structural barriers that prevent young people from fully participating in democratic life;

1.2. welcomes the Council of Europe's longstanding achievements in promoting youth participation through the co-management system, the European Youth Centres, the European Youth Foundation, and its standard-setting work, in particular the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life and the forthcoming reference framework for a youth perspective.

2. In view of the above, the Assembly recommends that the Committee of Ministers:

2.1. ensure that youth participation, as a core priority for the Organisation on the basis of the Reykjavik Declaration and Reykjavik Principles for Democracy, is mainstreamed across all sectors of the Council of Europe's work;

2.2. integrate youth civic space as a standing item in the Council of Europe's human rights monitoring and co-operation programmes, including within accession, post-monitoring and thematic review processes;

2.3. invite relevant intergovernmental committees, including the European Steering Committee for Youth (CDEJ) and the Joint Council on Youth (CMJ), to develop and strengthen standards for member States on protecting youth civic engagement, in line with Articles 10 and 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5), and to report regularly on implementation;

2.4. encourage the adoption and promotion of the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, its own recommendations and the reference framework for a youth perspective, and support their dissemination and implementation at national and local levels;

2.5. strengthen the resources of the European Youth Foundation and the European Youth Centres in order to provide support for youth-led democratic initiatives, including in contexts where civic space is shrinking;

2.6. promote intergovernmental exchanges of good practice on lowering the voting age to 16, introducing youth quotas and multi-age electoral lists, and embedding democratic civic education in formal and non-formal settings;

2.7. enhance co-operation with other international organisations, including the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations, to co-ordinate action in monitoring and defending youth human rights, supporting civic infrastructure, and maintaining warning mechanisms for threats to youth civic space;

2.8. ensure the effective participation of young people from diverse backgrounds, including those from rural areas, minority communities, and diaspora and refugee populations, in Council of Europe activities and policy processes;

2.9. make full use of the Assembly's youth participation mechanism and the role of youth rapporteurs in order to create regular and structured opportunities for dialogue between the Committee of Ministers, the Assembly, and youth-led organisations.

3. Draft recommendation adopted by the committee on 4 September 2025.

C. Explanatory memorandum by Ms Yevheniia Kravchuk, rapporteur[4]

1. Introduction

1. Over the past years, youth-led movements have emerged as vital forces in the defence and renewal of democratic values, particularly in the face of rising authoritarianism, institutional distrust, socio-economic exclusion, digital revolution and environmental crisis.

2. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has recognised the urgent need to place young people at the heart of democratic resilience. My report builds on Resolution 2553 (2024) "Strengthening the youth perspective in the work of the Parliamentary Assembly", which calls for systemic inclusion of youth in decision-making processes and the creation of meaningful, structured channels for participation.

3. It complements the work of Ms Sona Ghazaryan (Armenia, ALDE) on "The role of youth in revitalising democracy"[5], with a focus on how youth movements are actively reshaping democratic practices in member States.

4. Assembly Resolution 2610 (2025) "Social mobilisation, social unrest and police reaction in Council of Europe member States: is there a need for a new social contract?" also highlights the need for a new social contract in response to growing social unrest and declining trust in democratic institutions. It stresses the importance of participatory and deliberative democracy, especially involving young people, and calls for more inclusive policy making. Resolution 2610 urges member States to prioritise dialogue, mediation and de-escalation in policing protests, invest in community-based policing, and combat discriminatory practices such as ethnic profiling. It promotes a public service model of policing rooted in accountability, respect and local engagement, with a focus on training and reforms that uphold human rights and democratic values.

5. My report intends to offer a focused analysis of youth movements across a number of Council of Europe member States. It examines key areas of mobilisation, such as anti-corruption, democratic accountability, digital rights, environmental justice, and human rights, and outlines emerging trends, challenges, and policy responses.

6. The Council of Europe's institutional role, alongside other international organisations, is also assessed. The final chapter provides concrete recommendations for governments, parliaments and multilateral institutions to safeguard, empower and meaningfully include Europe's young democratic actors.

7. An initial exchange of views took place on 25 June 2025, with the participation of Ms Miriam Teuma, Chairperson of the European Steering Committee for Youth (CDEJ), Council of Europe; Ms Nina Grmuša, Chairperson of the Joint Council on Youth (CMJ) and of the Advisory Council on Youth (CCJ), Council of Europe; Mr Francesco Gellel, Youth Officer from Malta; Mr Tobias Flessenkemper, Head of the Youth Department, Council of Europe, as well as several Assembly youth rapporteurs. Emphasis was placed on empowering young people as active agents in shaping democratic governance across Europe.

8. I have also received a written input by the Advisory Council on Youth, which was presented by the chairperson of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media at the committee meeting of 4 September 2025. My goal is to present this report at an event organised in the margin of the 10th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth entitled "Young People for Democracy: Youth Perspectives in Action", which will take place on 8-9 October 2025, in Valletta, Malta.

2. Youth at the forefront of democratic change

9. Europe's young people are redefining the meaning and practice of democracy. Their activism does not wait for election cycles or traditional political entry points. Instead, it arises from lived experience: injustice, corruption, precarity, discrimination, silencing, inaction.

10. Young activists in Europe today are intersectional, digitally native, transnational in outlook, and grounded in shared values, such as freedom, dignity, sustainability and accountability.

4. The explanatory memorandum is drawn up under the responsibility of the rapporteur.
5. See Doc 15756 and Doc 15921.

11. Movements are horizontal, fluid, and often decentralised. Rather than seeking power within existing structures, they challenge power imbalances directly by reclaiming public space, producing counter-narratives, and creating community-led alternatives to State services. These movements' legitimacy is often rooted in civic ethics, not partisan affiliation.[6]

12. Across contexts, youth movements are not only protesting but also offering proposals: anti-corruption watchdogs, participatory budgeting, social justice tools, school democracy charters, open-data civic labs, and inclusive climate policy frameworks. Governments should recognise and support this form of political activism, which contributes to democratic innovation, not "destabilisation".

3. Recent examples of youth movements in Council of Europe member States

3.1. Ukraine: youth as a driving force of resilience and recovery

13. Despite the hardships of war, Ukrainian young people have emerged as key pillars of resilience for their nation. They are active contributors to their communities and the broader war effort. The full-scale invasion inspired youth volunteerism: surveys show that 22% of young Ukrainians began volunteering directly because of the war, taking on roles from humanitarian aid distribution to digital advocacy abroad.

14. Ukrainian youth are not only focused on the present struggle but are eager to participate in rebuilding their country. A recent study found that 72% of young people express willingness to take part in post-war recovery efforts.[7]

15. This civic engagement has been further amplified in 2025, with Lviv holding the title of European Youth Capital. The city has hosted numerous international forums, cultural exchanges, and policy discussions that brought together young leaders from across Europe. These initiatives highlighted how Ukrainian youth are shaping not only national resilience but also Europe's democratic community.

16. Ukrainian youth are also active participants in political life, particularly in advancing Ukraine's path towards European Union membership and driving reforms, in particular, those aimed at strengthening the rule of law and building an effective anti-corruption system.

3.2. Serbia: youth-driven uprising against corruption

17. The student-led protests that began in Serbia in November 2024 were sparked by a deadly infrastructure failure in Novi Sad, but quickly evolved into a broader indictment of corruption, authoritarianism and decay.[8] Demonstrators, many of them students and young professionals, demanded early elections, ministerial resignations, and structural anti-corruption reforms.

18. In response, the government has intensified repression: arrests, physical violence, media disinformation and stigmatisation of protesters. Yet the movement has persisted and innovated, organising "democracy schools", silent vigils, horizontal assemblies, and acts of protest pushing for institutional accountability. The protests united generations and social groups, from pensioners to farmers, creating one of the largest civic mobilisations in the region in over a decade.[9]

19. In March and in August 2025, the Assembly monitoring co-rapporteurs also expressed grave concern about escalating repression and called on Serbian authorities to respect the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of political expression.[10] In April 2025, an inspiring demonstration occurred when approximately 80 Serbian students completed a 1 400 km bicycle journey from Novi Sad to Strasbourg, a symbolic journey to speak with European Parliament and Council of Europe representatives, advocating for accountability and democratic values.[11]

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6. CIVICUS, "Youth civic infrastructure", 2023.
7. www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-01/undp-impactofwaronyouthinukraineen_v05.pdf.
8. Most recently, on 28 June 2025, a major rally in Belgrade resulted in dozens of arrests and injuries to both protesters and police, "Dozens of protesters detained during clashes with riot police in Serbia", *AP News*.
9. "Serbia Watchlist 2025",*Civicus Monitor*.
10. "PACE monitoring co-rapporteurs express concern about the escalation of tensions in Serbia"; "Surge of clashes in Serbia: PACE rapporteur urges all sides to refrain from further violence and to engage in constructive dialogue".
11. "Serbian Students Bring Protest Cause to Strasbourg After Bicycle Marathon", *Balkan Insight*.

3.3. Türkiye: civic courage under pressure

20. In Türkiye, youth activists continue to resist shrinking democratic space. Protests against government control of universities, suppression of LGBTI+ groups, and environmental degradation are met with intimidation, legal persecution and physical violence. According to human rights organisations, youth-led environmental movements, student assemblies and online solidarity campaigns represent powerful counterweights to top-down control.[12]

21. Despite the risk, young people continue to speak up. They hold constitutional reading events in public squares, organise legal clinics, and offer cultural resistance through art, music and independent media. Just recently, on 6 August 2025, the President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Marc Cools, strongly condemned the arrest of Congress youth delegate, Enes Hocaoğulları, in Türkiye, for exercising free speech and denouncing police torture and strip searches in the protests, during the Congress session in March 2025. President Cools called for his immediate release, highlighting the violation of democratic rights and urging Turkish authorities to drop all charges.[13]

3.4. Georgia: rejecting foreign agent legislation

22. In Georgia, proposed legislation labelling NGOs and media as "foreign agents" triggered mass youth mobilisation. Young people led large-scale demonstrations, occupied public institutions, and built strong digital networks. Their message was clear: transparency cannot be built on repression.[14] Although the law still passed, albeit in a modified version, the movement succeeded in re-framing civic discourse and asserting youth as a pro-European democratic force. Some movement leaders are now playing a role in policy debate at national and international levels.[15]

3.5. Slovak Republic: defence of Europe-oriented democracy

23. In December 2024, Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico's unannounced trip to Moscow to meet Russian war criminal and illegitimate President Vladimir Putin, amid Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, triggered nationwide protests with strong youth participation. Rallies in Bratislava and other cities were united under the slogan "Slovakia is Europe," signalling rejection of a pro-Moscow turn and affirming support for the European Union (EU), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Ukraine. The demonstrations lasted until May 2025.[16]

3.6. France, Italy, Malta, United Kingdom: the politics of justice and imagination

24. In France and Italy, youth activism blends environmental, social and democratic concerns. In France, mock climate tribunals and climate justice protests highlight government inaction. In Italy, youth groups are reclaiming urban spaces, supporting precarious communities and articulating radical economic alternatives, from degrowth to universal basic income.[17]

25. Youth groups such as Moviment Graffitti[18] in Malta, while intergenerational, have strong youth involvement and have been at the forefront of campaigns against unsustainable planning and overdevelopment. Protests have called for transparent environmental impact assessments, protection of public land, and meaningful participation in decision-making processes.

26. Youth Demand, emerging in the United Kingdom, is a youth-led activist group known for disruptive but non-violent tactics. Rooted in environmental and political action, with connections to Just Stop Oil, it was staged road blockades, spray-painted public spaces, and organised dramatic stunts to demand an end to fossil fuel licensing and trade with Israel. In 2025, they escalated efforts with "open swarming" protests, and even celebrated activists with an "awards ceremony" for those arrested.[19]

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12. "Türkiye: Stop the crackdown on peaceful dissent", Amnesty International; "Türkiye: Regional Influence Shouldn't Eclipse Crackdown", Human Rights Watch.
13. "Council of Europe Congress President calls for the immediate release of the Congress youth delegate arrested in Türkiye", 6 August 2025.
14. Freedom House, "Georgia country report*", 2024*; International Crisis Group: "Georgia's Ruling Party Should Call Off Its Crackdown on Dissent".
15. "The Troubling March of 'Foreign Agents' Laws", Open Society Foundations.
16. "Slovak protests draw 100,000 denouncing pro-Putin tilt by Fico government", POLITICO.
17. Accueil – Fondation pour la Nature et l'Homme; "Local Narratives, Global Connections: Modes of Action and Coordination Among Italian Youth Activists" – Inguaggiato – 2025 – Sociology Compass – Wiley Online Library.
18. Home – Moviment Graffitti.

27. These movements showcase creativity and political engagement and represent not only protest but future-oriented policy laboratories.

4. Themes and methods in youth democratic activism

28. Anti-corruption: throughout Europe, youth are exposing systems of impunity and corruption. They use transparency tools, citizen journalism, and protest to demand clean governance.

29. Environmental and climate justice: Fridays for Future and allied movements have evolved to include intersectional demands, i.e. environment, equity and rights. Youth activists connect climate collapse to political irresponsibility and inaction.

30. Socio-economic justice: housing, education and employment are now central concerns. Activists tie economic precarity to democratic exclusion and demand structural reforms.

31. Rights and freedoms: freedoms of expression, assembly, and association are core issues. Legal education, human rights campaigns, and strategic litigation are part of youth organising across Europe.

32. Foreign policy and global politics: young people are mobilising and calling on their governments to act in the face of foreign policy and global political crises, most recently as regards the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

33. Digital mobilisation: youth use encrypted messaging, open-source tools and livestreams to co-ordinate protest, educate peers and avoid surveillance. Their digital literacy is a democratic asset.[20]

34. Human-centred artificial intelligence (AI) and universal basic income (UBI): across Europe and beyond, youth-led movements are championing ethical technology and economic dignity in the digital age. Movements such as the Algorithmic Justice League and UNICEF's Generation AI involve youth in shaping AI governance, addressing algorithmic bias, surveillance and exclusion. Youth activists see UBI as a response to rising inequality, job insecurity and automation. Young people played a visible role in the 2021 Basic Income March and have taken part in UBIE (Unconditional Basic Income Europe) campaigns across Europe.[21]

5. Emerging trends of youth democratic engagement

35. As outlined above, youth movements across Europe are not only responding to immediate crises; they are also shaping new forms of democratic practice. These movements are experimenting with ideas, tools and values that differ significantly from conventional political engagement. Several distinct trends have emerged that reflect this generational shift.

36. Transnational solidarity has also become a defining characteristic of youth mobilisation. Movements in Serbia, for instance, have drawn inspiration from youth-led resistance in Georgia. Protest handbooks, visual materials, digital toolkits and strategic frameworks are translated and adapted across borders. Social media channels, encrypted messaging apps and informal alliances allow youth to learn from each other in real time, creating a civic culture that transcends national boundaries and authoritarian constraints.

37. Horizontal governance is another hallmark of these movements. Rejecting traditional hierarchies and rigid structures, many youth collectives operate on the basis of consensus, shared leadership and mutual accountability. They employ rotating facilitation, open assemblies and distributed roles to ensure inclusivity and to challenge dominant models of decision making that often marginalise younger voices. These organisational methods not only reflect their democratic ideals but also serve as practical tools for resilience and adaptability.

38. Civic infrastructure building is increasingly at the heart of youth activism. Young people are not only resisting unjust systems, they also are actively creating alternatives. Across Europe, we see the establishment of youth-led media platforms, legal aid collectives, digital advocacy networks and schools of democracy. These spaces offer political education, community support, and platforms for expression that are often unavailable through State institutions. They reflect a generational determination to sustain democratic culture from the ground up.

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19. "Undercover at Youth Demand's awards for arrested activists".
20. "A pathway forward for digital rights", Access Now.
21. www.ubilabnetwork.org/ubi-labs;https://basicincome.org/news/author/youthscholars/; www.teenvogue.com/story/basic-income-march-2021; https://www.ubie.org/news/.

39. Narrative disruption is also central to the way young people engage with politics. They challenge dominant frames and reimagine the language of public discourse. Words like “resistance”, “protest” and “disorder” are reclaimed and reframed: resistance becomes a form of care for society; protest becomes protection of rights; and what authorities may label as disorder, youth movements interpret it as accountability in action. Through storytelling, humour, art and symbolic action, they shape new understandings of what it means to participate in democracy.[22]

40. Finally, resilience and joy run through these movements as acts of defiance and hope. In the face of repression, marginalisation or indifference, young people infuse their activism with art, creativity, music, humour, and a strong sense of community. These are not superficial gestures but actual political strategies. They sustain morale, attract wider participation, and reflect a deep commitment to human dignity. Through collective joy and cultural expression, youth movements reclaim public space as a site of belonging, community and transformation.[23]

41. Together, these trends point to a reconfiguration of democratic engagement. Youth are not simply demanding inclusion in existing systems, they are pioneering new ways of imagining and practising democracy that deserve recognition, protection and support.

6. Barriers to participation

42. Youth participation in democratic and social movements often encounters significant obstacles that limit their ability to engage fully and effectively. These barriers take many forms, ranging from legal and economic challenges to digital and institutional constraints, as well as pervasive social stereotyping.

43. Legal persecution constitutes a major impediment. Across many Council of Europe member States, the criminalisation of protest has become an increasingly common tactic used to suppress dissent, particularly when young people are involved. Laws that broadly define or restrict peaceful assembly, alongside targeted arrests of youth activists, send a chilling message that discourages participation. Punitive legislation, such as laws imposing heavy fines or prison sentences for organising or attending protests, further deters young people from exercising their democratic rights. This legal repression not only limits immediate participation but can have long-term consequences, including criminal records that restrict future opportunities.[24]

44. Economic exclusion also plays a pivotal role in hampering youth involvement. The rising costs of housing, widespread unemployment or precarious work conditions, and the burden of high tuition fees create daily survival challenges that leave many young people with little time, energy, or resources to engage civically. When basic needs like stable housing and financial security are unmet, participation in social movements or political processes may seem like a luxury rather than a priority. Economic hardships disproportionately affect certain groups of young people, deepening inequalities and further restricting who can participate.[25]

45. Digital repression is a newer, yet increasingly pervasive barrier in the digital age. While online platforms have opened up new spaces for youth mobilisation and expression, these spaces are simultaneously subject to surveillance by State authorities, who monitor activists’ digital activities. Disinformation campaigns seek to confuse and undermine youth-led movements, eroding trust and sowing division. Additionally, platform censorship – whether through automated algorithms or government pressure – can result in the removal or suppression of content that challenges established power structures. Such digital controls restrict young people’s ability to organise, share information, and reach wider audiences, effectively curbing their influence.

46. Institutional gatekeeping manifests in the form of superficial or tokenistic engagement mechanisms. While some institutions may invite youth to participate in consultations or advisory roles, these opportunities are often devoid of genuine decision-making power. This “box-ticking” approach undermines young people’s agency and breeds frustration, as their contributions are ignored or sidelined in favour of maintaining the status quo. True participation requires not just access but empowerment, ensuring that youth voices have real influence over policy and practice.[26] That is why I have requested an input from the Advisory Council on Youth (see above, paragraph 8) to make sure youth’s voice and recommendations are included in my report.

22. European Youth Forum, “Youth and Democracy Report” (2023); Tufekci, Z., Twitter and Tear Gas (2017).
23. European Youth Forum, “Youth Civic Engagement Report” (2023); CIVICUS, “Youth Civic Infrastructure” (2023).
24. “Europe’s Democratic Future Depends on Human Rights”, Human Rights Watch.
25. European Youth Forum, “Barriers to Youth Participation” (2023).
26. Idem.

47. Finally, stereotyping remains a pervasive social barrier. Young people are frequently portrayed in media and political discourse as naïve, overly radical, or easily manipulated by external forces. Such depictions diminish the legitimacy of youth movements and discourage broader public support. This stereotyping marginalises young activists, creating social stigma and reducing their credibility as serious actors in democratic processes. It also discourages young people themselves from participating, as they anticipate being dismissed or misunderstood.[27]

48. Taken together, these barriers create a complex environment in which youth participation is constrained at multiple levels. Addressing them requires comprehensive and co-ordinated efforts to reform legal frameworks, reduce economic disparities, protect digital freedoms, ensure meaningful institutional inclusion, and challenge harmful stereotypes. Only then can the full potential of youth engagement in democracy and society be realised.

7. Role of the Council of Europe and other international organisations

49. The Council of Europe can build on over 50 years of experience and achievements in the youth sector and in promoting youth participation, reinforcing the role of young people in advancing democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Through mechanisms such as the co-management system,[28] the European Youth Centres,[29] and the European Youth Foundation,[30] the Council of Europe has consistently supported meaningful youth participation by empowering youth civil society organisations, promoting access to rights, and fostering active engagement of young people across Europe.[31]

50. At the 4th Summit of Heads of State and Government in Reykjavik in May 2023, European leaders reaffirmed the importance of youth inclusion in intergovernmental processes. The Reykjavik Declaration emphasised that youth participation is a cornerstone of inclusive democratic societies, effective public policy and democratic resilience.[32] In June 2022, at the Youth Action Week: "Democracy Now!" young activists and youth leaders prioritised 50 key actions.[33]

51. The recently revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life is expected to be adopted by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities in October 2025. It emphasises the vital role of meaningful youth participation, urging local councils and communities to amplify young people's voices.[34]

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27. European Youth Forum, "Youth and Democracy Report", 2023.
28. The co-management system is a pioneering model of participatory democracy in which young people and government representatives co-decide on youth policy priorities, programmes, and budgets on an equal footing. This system is embodied by the European Steering Committee for Youth (CDEJ) and the Advisory Council on Youth (CCJ), working together within the Joint Council on Youth (CMJ).
29. The European Youth Centres in Strasbourg and Budapest serve as co-created spaces for democratic citizenship. Each year, over 10 000 youth leaders participate in more than 200 multilateral activities, fostering dialogue, skills, and solidarity.
30. The European Youth Foundation (EYF) provides financial support to international youth-led projects that promote human rights, democratic values, and youth participation.
31. Relevant publications of the EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership:
"Meaningful Youth Political Participation in Europe: Concepts, Patterns, and Policy Implications", 2022.
"Insights into Meaningful Youth Political Participation in Europe", 2021, offers complementary perspectives on youth-led movements.
"Disobedient Youth: Lessons from the Youth Climate Strike Movement", 2021, and its accompanying animated video, explore climate activism as an issue-driven, informally organised movement that is largely led by young women.
"Youth Knowledge Book' #29 – Youth political participation" features several chapters on youth political participation with a focus on youth-led climate action.
32. Relevant recommendations by the Committee of Ministers include:
Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)6 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on protecting youth civil society and young people, and supporting their participation in democratic processes.
Recommendation CM/Rec(2023)4 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on Roma youth participation.
Recommendation CM/Rec(2024)6 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on young people and climate action.
Recommendation CM/Rec(2025)3 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the social, economic and political participation of rural youth.
33. Democracy now! Call for action.
34. Youth participation – Congress of Local and Regional Authorities.

52. The 2021 EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership study on "Meaningful Youth Political Participation in Europe: Concepts, Patterns, and Policy Implications" calls for the recognition and support of both conventional and unconventional forms of youth engagement. The study suggests that supporting these movements requires co-ordinated action from multiple stakeholders, i.e.:

– public institutions should strengthen participatory structures, support deliberative processes in youth councils and advisory bodies, and co-design political spaces with young people. The Council of Europe's reference framework for a youth perspective, which is expected to be adopted by ministers responsible for youth in Europe in October 2025, will provide valuable guidance in this respect;

– international organisations, NGOs, older activists and other stakeholders can provide guidance, bring legitimacy and resources to sustain youth-led initiatives;

– policy makers must adopt a holistic approach, recognising that young people engage in politics in diverse and evolving ways. Institutional engagement must move beyond traditional parliamentary models and offer multiple entry points that match young people's varied capacities and civic engagement experiences.

53. The study also calls on public authorities to uphold and actively support these alternative pathways, ensuring that protest, civil disobedience and non-traditional forms of activism are respected and protected as vital expressions of a vibrant democracy.

54. The upcoming 10th Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth, to be held in Malta in October 2025, is expected to renew commitments to youth participation and promote policy development with, by and for young people.

55. For its part, the Assembly must ensure that its mechanisms respond rapidly to violations of the human rights of youth, support grassroots initiatives in repressive contexts, and uphold civic space in accession and monitoring processes. The new Assembly youth participation mechanism and the creation of youth rapporteurs foreseen by Resolution 2553 (2024), are a crucial step in this direction.

56. Regarding complementary action by key international organisations, it should be noted that the European Commission and Parliament support youth engagement through Erasmus+, the European Youth Strategy, and the Civil Society Facility. Conditionality mechanisms should integrate youth civic freedoms into accession negotiations.[35]

57. The United Nations Youth2030 Strategy provides a global framework. However, implementation in Europe needs better funding and visibility.[36] The electoral missions of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE/ODIHR) increasingly engage youth monitors. This practice should be scaled and diversified.[37]

8. Conclusions and recommendations

58. Young people across Europe are not merely participants in democracy, they are among its most active defenders and imaginative builders. In the face of democratic backsliding, polarisation and institutional inertia, youth movements are advancing inclusive visions of justice, rights and participation. Their actions show that democracy must be lived, contested and renewed by every generation.

59. Governments and institutions must ensure that this courage is met with recognition, support and structural reform, not repression or indifference. The Council of Europe and its member States should protect, fund and learn from these movements, recognising them as democratic beacons in an increasingly fragile landscape.

60. The Assembly should affirm that young people are essential actors in defending and renewing democracy, and call on member States, the European Union and relevant international stakeholders to safeguard and promote youth civic engagement as a cornerstone of democratic resilience by:

– protecting the human rights and freedoms of youth, guaranteeing the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, removing disproportionate obstacles to youth-led protests, repealing laws that unjustly restrict peaceful protest, and ending politically motivated arrests of young activists, while ensuring access to legal aid and judicial remedies;

35. EU Youth Strategy | European Youth Portal.
36. United Nations, Youth2030 Strategy.
37. OSCE/ODIHR, Youth.

– adopting a strategic “youth perspective” in policy and decision making to ensure that young people’s experiences, needs, and interests are consistently reflected, thereby strengthening the impact and legitimacy of processes and policies;

– institutionalising youth participation, ensuring meaningful youth representation in elected bodies and consultative structures through sustainable, inclusive, and participatory mechanisms for young people, lowering the voting age to 16 in all member States, and introducing multi-age electoral lists and youth quotas to promote intergenerational solidarity;

– supporting youth-led initiatives and civic infrastructure, allocating dedicated funding for safe and inclusive spaces, independent online platforms and legal clinics, and promoting youth-led media and democratic civic education in line with the Council of Europe’s Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education and Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture;

– tackling structural barriers, addressing socio-economic precarity through youth-sensitive housing, employment and education policies, promoting access to free and pluralistic media, and supporting cross-border youth co-operation and youth-to-youth diplomacy;

– strengthening international co-operation, encouraging the EU to integrate youth civic space benchmarks into enlargement and funding frameworks, co-ordinating with the United Nations, OSCE and others to monitor and protect the human rights of youth, and engaging diaspora and refugee youth in democratic participation strategies.

61. For its part, the Assembly should lead by example, strengthening youth participation in its own work through youth rapporteurs, regular dialogue with youth-led organisations and structured input from the Advisory Council on Youth. It should mainstream youth perspectives across all committees, treat youth civic space as a standing democratic concern, and monitor restrictions on the human rights of youth with urgency.

62. By listening to, standing with and acting alongside young people, the Assembly can help ensure that democratic renewal in Europe is both possible and inevitable.

Appendix – Dissenting opinion presented by Ms Zeynep Yildiz (Türkiye, NR), member of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media, pursuant to Rule 50.4 of the Rules of Procedure

1. Freedom of expression and the civic engagement of youth are fundamental pillars of the protection and promotion of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. While the Assembly's focus on civic courage and youth activism is fully acknowledged and valued, I feel compelled to express reservations regarding the portrayal of Türkiye in paragraphs 20-21 of the report. The report, as currently drafted, does not adequately reflect Türkiye's policies, legal frameworks, and institutional support mechanisms for youth engagement. Such assessments could give an incomplete impression and may unintentionally affect the perceived balance of the Committee's work and the thorough efforts of the rapporteur.

2. Türkiye has long placed youth at the center of its national agenda, recognising young citizens as active partners in building democracy and contributing to the country's social, cultural, and political development. The Turkish Constitution guarantees the rights to free speech, peaceful assembly, and association, and these rights are upheld within a vibrant civil society that includes active student movements, youth organisations, and public forums for debate. In order to foster meaningful youth participation, Türkiye has institutionalised mechanisms such as the Youth Parliaments in the Grand National Assembly, local youth councils in municipalities, and the National Volunteering Platform, which mobilises thousands of young people for civic, social, environmental, and humanitarian initiatives. These initiatives demonstrate that youth activism and civic courage are encouraged and recognised, not suppressed.

3. The report refers to isolated cases of arrests and legal actions involving youth activists, which may understandably raise questions or concerns. It is important, however, to consider these incidents in the broader context of Türkiye's legal and constitutional framework, which seeks to balance the protection of civil liberties with the maintenance of public order, security, and the rule of law. Drawing broad conclusions from individual cases risks oversimplifying the nuanced realities of youth engagement in Türkiye. A careful and measured assessment, informed by dialogue with national authorities and a thorough understanding of the legal and institutional context, is essential to ensure a fair, balanced, and accurate representation of Türkiye's civic space and the environment for youth participation.

4. In conclusion, Türkiye remains fully committed to strengthening youth participation in democratic life, fostering civic responsibility, and supporting initiatives that promote social cohesion, environmental awareness, social, political and cultural engagement. I respectfully submit this dissenting opinion, urging the Assembly to consider these broader institutional realities and policy frameworks in its evaluation, and to adopt a measured and contextualised approach that accurately reflects the state of youth civic engagement in Türkiye.