

Youth and Politics in Dialogue: Empowerment through the EU

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ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of diminishing trust in European politics, rising nationalism, and decreasing electoral participation, political legitimacy needs to be strengthened through an active democratic participation culture, especially in the younger generation. The Structured Dialogue, a core element of the European Youth Strategy, is a political instrument that provides young people with insight into political decision-making processes and with an opportunity to actively participate with EU politics. It also presents a good opportunity for reaching young people who are not politically engaged and contributing to their empowerment. Nonetheless, the central factors for the success of participatory policy approaches like the Structured Dialogue include a binding nature and clear commitment from the side of politics.

PARTICIPATION DEFICIT IN THE EU

Since the financial crisis Europe has reached a turning point. For a long time the European Union has not only been struggling with the ramifications of an economic crisis, but has also been shaken by a series of political crises. The most recent and controversial extension of these crises is the U.K.'s Brexit leave vote in June 2016. Populism and new nationalism within the member states, coupled with growing dissatisfaction with Brussels and deficits of European politics, show how the future of Europe has dangerously changed.

In the face of pressing political and economic difficulties Europe is increasingly met with skepticism. While two-thirds of citizens do identify as Europeans, just one-third has confidence in the European Union. The approval ratings for the EU have declined significantly when compared to the previous year. (European Commission 2016: 43, 16f.). The European Union sees itself as a "Europe of citizens" and supports this concept with its own program for the promotion of Union citizenship (2014-2020). Nevertheless, Brussels is still more perceived as distant from citizens. A collective feeling of European over-regulation on the one hand and disorientation and stagnation

on the other prevails. In Germany, only a third of the population has a positive image of the EU, as negative views increase (European Commission 2016: 19). More than half of the 16 to 30-year-olds in Europe are concerned about becoming marginalized as a result of the crises and about becoming socially and economically dependent. (European Parliament 2014: 2)

What is expressed through Brexit in an acute form, but also evident in the electoral successes of Euroskeptic parties in other EU countries, is not a new phenomenon. The failed referenda to the EU constitution in France and the Netherlands in the mid-2000s come to mind, as does the image of the EU, which despite its many achievements in the promotion of citizens' participation, continues to suffer as it is thought of as an impersonal, bloated technocratic apparatus with a tendency towards regulatory delusion. This negative picture persists, despite the attempts to make the EU more personal and closer to its citizens, through the introduction of leading candidates during the last European Parliament elections in 2014, for example. The complex structures of the Union continue to leave the impression that the EU's competency areas are not transparent.

One can interpret this widespread EU-skepticism as a symptom of a legitimacy and explanation deficit in the EU, which contributes to the fact that many people cannot find access to EU policy and feel that their opinions are neither appreciated nor taken into account. 55 percent of Europeans believe that their voice does not count in the EU (European Commission 2016: 20). Given the present challenges and generally EU-critical public opinion, it is necessary to reduce the gap between politics and citizens, not least to prevent the latter from voicing their frustrations in a different form, such as by supporting EU-skeptical, populist parties.

Although young people tend to have a more positive assessment of the EU than the population as a whole, this does not necessarily lead to a concrete political commitment to the European integration process. In addition, it is difficult for them to assert their interests and standpoints against older generations. This is clear from the Brexit vote: According to surveys, remaining in the EU was more uncontested amongst younger voters than amongst older voters, but their pro-European attitudes nonetheless did not prevail (Lord Ashcroft Polls 2016).

POLITICAL INTEREST AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

In Germany, the political interest of young people has increased in recent years. Almost half of youth are generally interested in politics (Shell 2015: 157f.). Over two-thirds of young people are satisfied with democracy, in principle. Trust in social groups, such as human rights or environmental protection groups, is just as great as it is in official institutions such as the police, courts, or the federal government (Shell 2015: 177). However, over eighty percent demand that young people have more say in politics. Over 70 percent view elections as one's civic duty. Ultimately, however, only 60 percent of 21 to 24-year-olds participated in the last Bundestag election in 2013 (Der Bundeswahlleiter 2014: 105).

In participation research, political interest is seen as a decisive, motivating factor for political as well as social engagement by young people. The willingness to engage politically has also risen sharply in recent years. When considering their personal value scales, they regard social and political involvement as important. Young people consider being clearly environmentally conscious or helping socially disadvantaged and marginalized groups almost as important as having a high personal standard of living. Regarding gender, there are slight differences: Environmental decisions and social commitment tend to be more important to female adolescents than to males, and vice versa in political engagement (Shell 2015: 243, 263). (see Figure 1)

However, purely formal opportunities for participation within the official political structures are insuf-

Figure 1: Value orientation of young people in terms of participation and politics

Every person has certain ideas that determine their life and behavior. Once you think of what you want to do in your life, how important are the following things for you personally?

To be environmentally conscious in all circumstances	66%
To help socially disadvantaged and marginalized groups	60%
To engage politically	32%

Source: Shell Jugendstudie 2015, values for 1-3 = „important“

ficient for meeting young people's interest and willingness to participate in the sense of an active civil society. Young people see their participation within a larger socio-political context. This is accompanied by a critical, although not necessarily dissociated, attitude towards conventional forms of politics. Their criticism is directed at political representatives because, according to most youth, they do not care about what young people think (Shell 2015: 179). However these perceived shortcomings on the part of politicians do not justify speaking of disenfranchisement with politics among young people. This is all the more true if this point is only supported by evidence of the low electoral participation. On the contrary, there is a substantial disjuncture between youth and politics, which is also due to lack of youth-oriented offers in the area of political participation and inadequate communication. Therefore, it is not surprising that young people's commitment to civil society organizations is clearly superior to their commitment to political organizations (European Commission 2015: 6ff.). In addition, young people predominantly use unconventional forms of participation in their political expression and influence on the political process, for example by participating in petition campaigns or by boycotting certain products (Gaiser / de Rijke 2016)

Political representation, however, depends on the support and participation of civil society actors if it wants to secure long-term legitimacy and credibility. Political decision makers need to make sure the people they are addressing have a "sounding board." When looking at the younger generation, this cannot succeed, because youth do not feel as if they are taken seriously and do not recognize any opportunities to have a direct influence in politics. Particularly in times of crisis, such reassurance of and dialogue with the population is important in order to prevent the encouragement of populism and nationalism or a general disengagement with politics.

POLITICS IN DIALOGUE

In light of the aforementioned challenges, a dialogue between young people and politicians is of mutual interest. Young citizens offer new impulses and perspectives to politics. This applies to areas such as education policy, which directly affects young people, but also to current political issues such as refugee, asylum, and security policy. In these questions, young people often have a different focus than the older generations, and thus they are able to contribute diverse opinions regarding politics. They are also the ones who have to

live with the consequences of political decisions long-term. The dialogue with the politicians is also beneficial for the young people involved, while at the same time fulfilling a high political education function. While in contact with political decision makers, they can present their concerns and interests and thus actively shape politics in a direct or indirect way. At the local level, this is just as important as in national or European contexts. A sustainable and constructive dialogue between youth and politicians must balance multiple parallel objectives, while taking the interests of different stakeholders into account. In order to become a successful instrument of participatory policy-making, however, it faces the following challenges:

- How can a dialogue between youth and politics occur „on equal footing?“
- How can young citizens, especially those coming from less educated backgrounds, be encouraged to interact with political, naturally complex topics such as, European politics?
- How can it be ensured that brief, face-to-face meetings between young people and decision makers will have a lasting, sustainable effect on the participants?
- How can dialogue be made open, so that young people can express and contribute their own concerns and ideas, and, on the other hand, be focused enough to achieve concrete results and thus have a real impact on the political decision-making process?
- How do you make sure that politicians take the results of the dialogue seriously? Does this require a binding legal basis?

The European Union has declared participation as the guiding principle of its youth policy and is trying to address these challenges with the policy approach of the Structured Dialogue within the EU Youth Strategy 2010-2018 (Council Resolution 2009). Participation acts with a central dual function: both as a task and as a theme for youth policy. The priority of youth policy is to open up ways for political participation for its target group, so that they can express themselves in Europe and contribute more strongly to political decision-making processes.

This can only be achieved by offering young people the opportunity to participate at the theoretical and practical levels, giving them first-hand experiences and considering their feedback. It is important to enable young people to become

democratically and politically articulate in order to involve them in deliberation and decision-making. This is why EU youth policy not only has the practical goal of fostering participation, but it also provides information about the issues with which young people are dealing with at forums and conferences, where consultations are held and resolutions are passed.

THE STRUCTURED DIALOGUE ON YOUTH PARTICIPATION

The Structured Dialogue plays a central role within the framework of the current EU Youth Strategy 2010-2018 (Council Resolution 2009), which determines the priorities and direction of youth policy cooperation in Europe. With this participatory policy approach, the EU is addressing the question of how young people can be more strongly and more bindingly integrated into EU policy particularly concerning matters that pertain to them.

The foundations of the Structured Dialogue were laid in the White Paper “A new impetus for European youth” (European Commission 2001), which established greater participation of young people in democratic life as an objective. As a result of the failed EU constitution, the European Commission has been trying to bridge the gap between official EU policy and how the public perceives it.

This was made more concrete by Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate (2015) which aimed to make EU policy more transparent and accessible for citizens, as well as to facilitate the participation of citizens through direct contact with decision makers. In particular, young people should be given the tools “to actively participate in the decision-making process and gain ownership of the European project.” (Commission Communication 2005: 3).

As such, the Structured Dialogue was launched in 2005 by the EU Council of Youth Ministers in order to provide stronger and more binding involvement of young people in EU policy (Council Resolution 2005:5), with a view toward establishing itself as a participatory instrument for young people in the EU. The central idea is to promote exchange between young people and decision makers on the topics of the EU Youth Strategy through online consultations and project-oriented dialogue formats at local, regional, national, and European levels. In this way, the opinions and concerns of young people are to be determined in top-down and bottom-up processes and integrated into the forming of European youth policy.

EMPOWERMENT AS THE THEME AND OUTCOME OF THE STRUCTURED DIALOGUE

From July 2014 to December 2015 the Structured Dialogue was placed under the theme of “empowering young people” (Council Resolution 2014: 4). The focus was on access to rights and the importance of the political participation for young people in order to promote their autonomy and involvement in societal life. In local participation projects, existing obstacles to participation should be reduced and the dialogue competencies of young people should be strengthened. The overarching goal is to involve young people more strongly in political decision-making processes, as well as to enable them to discuss their interests adequately with decision makers. In this dual function, the theme of empowering young people in the EU also strengthened the intended impact of Structured Dialogue.

The implementation of the EU Youth Strategy in Germany fulfills this objective because it always considers „aspects of personality formation, the transfer of values, democratic education, participation, and the strengthening of civic engagement“ (Youth and Family Ministers’ Conference 2013). In this competency role, the Structured Dialogue in Germany plays a major transmission role, especially in its project direction. Through their involvement, young people should not only be concerned with the EU’s youth policy, but simultaneously they should also be able to develop and represent their own positions. Thus, the Structured Dialogue represents a significant contribution to young people’s capacity for democracy in the context of European policy-making.

Previous studies on the impact and resonance of the Structured Dialogue in Germany show that young people are interested in speaking with political decision makers and in becoming politically active (Feldmann-Wojtachnia / Tham 2014, 2016). Almost all participants consider it important to discuss social and political issues (97%), to get in direct contact with politicians (92%), and to participate in political decision-making processes (96%) (RAY 2015/16). (see Figure 2)

Figure 2: Young people’s interest in politics

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? I believe it is important for young people...

	Do not agree at all	Do not agree	Agree	Definitely
... to discuss political and social topics	0	3%	24%	73%
... to make use of their right to participate in political decision-making processes which affect them	1%	3%	26%	70%
... to have the opportunity to have direct contact with political actors	0	8%	29%	63%
... to participate in European policy	1%	10%	42%	7%

Source: RAY MON PP 2015/16; n=165 (Participants of the Structured Dialogue in Germany)

Set top-down as well as selected bottom-up topics are important in the Structured Dialogue projects, and youth participation plays an important role in the focus of the content. The concrete consultation themes of the EU such as the empowerment and rights of young people, for example, are also taken into account, but they are not the top priority in the opinion of young people. (see Figure 3)

Figure 3: The most important themes in the Structured Dialogue projects

Refugees/ Asylum	41%
Youth participation/ Youth Work/ Youth Politics	40%
School/ Education/ Vocational training/ University	33%
Trade/ the Economy/ Fiscal policy	24%
The environment/ Energy/ Sustainability	23%
Integration/ Inclusion	21%
War and peace/ Crisis and Conflict	17%
Europe/ European politics	17%
Volunteering/ Engagement/ Empowerment	10%
Human rights/ Youth practice	9%

Source: CAP Online Survey 2015; N=210, multiple responses were possible, dark blue = EU Themes, light blue= self-chosen themes

All participants had fun during the Structured Dialogue projects (98%), the topics were considered interesting (97%), and felt that involvement brought them something personally (95%). Similarly, almost all young people were able to contribute their ideas well (94%) and found the composition of the participants to be interesting (90%). In terms of the results, the young people also drew positive conclusions: the vast majority is fully or partially satisfied (88%) and believes that the dialogue between young people and politics succeed (88%). Over two-thirds felt that the concerns of young people were taken seriously by politicians (72%). (see Figure 4)

Figure 4: Assessment of the Structured Dialogue projects by the participants

Our concerns were taken seriously by the politicians.	72%
The dialogue between the youth and the politics was successful.	88%
I'm satisfied with the result of our project/event.	88%
The constitution of the participants was interesting.	90%
I easily could carry in me and my ideas.	94%
The participation at the project/event was useful for myself.	95%
The topics were interesting illustrated and discussed.	97%
I liked the project/event.	98%

Source: CAP Online Survey on the Structured Dialogue in Germany 2015; N=231, aggregated values for „definitely“ und „to some extent“.

One of the essential prerequisites for political participatory dialogue formats such as Structured Dialogue are target-group-specific approaches that enable young people to deal with political issues. With the approaches and methods of youth work selected in the projects, young people are sensitized and motivated to deal with politics more intensively. Creative offers such as art, music, theater, etc. enable low-threshold access and give young people the opportunity to express themselves and contribute differently. In this way, the complex and abstract subject matter is also concrete and tangible for young people, who come with little prior knowledge, and are otherwise seldom concerned with politics or more specifically with Europe. Here, the format of the Structured Dialogue often opens up a first opportunity to deal with current (European) political issues and even to participate actively.

By providing youth with the opportunity to discuss with others in their same age group, the approach of peer learning simplifies the handling of political questions. The topics to be addressed are linked to the everyday situations and lives of young people in the Structured Dialogue projects.

Youth-friendly language as well as everyday starting points create an atmosphere that makes it easier for young people to get involved with politics. The participatory approaches of youth work ensure that the interests and concerns of the participants are taken into account and that youth do not become overwhelmed. In this way, the content and concerns of the Structured Dialogue are not perceived as firmly set and foreign, but are brought closer to the participants through personal and local references. The mediation tasks that young people have to do in this context include both the development of skills and the promotion of key qualifications, such as communication and criticism, as well as other social skills.

It is important that young people are specifically prepared for the dialogues in the context of a comprehensive participatory process. Various forms of participation play a role within the different phases: youth work on the topics, clarify issues, and formulate demands for action. Through discussions with the other participants, they clarify their own positions, and discuss common concerns and demands (articulation and clarification phase). They prepare for the dialogues together, interact with their dialogue partners, and engage in discussions, while standing up for their concerns (deliberation and where applicable, decision-making phase).

Beyond the concrete dialogue events, participants have also been motivated to have more engagement with and participation in politics and society. In a survey on the impact of their participation in a Structured Dialogue project, half of the young people (51%) say that democracy has become more important to them. 40%, according to their own evaluations, participate more than before in the democratic life. More than half of the participating young people have learned something new about youth policy (59%) and are interested in participating in its further development (56%). With regard to the key qualifications gained in the Structured Dialogue, the youth involved also state that their social and citizens' competencies have improved significantly. Almost all participants feel better able to negotiate common solutions when there are different points of view (90%). They believe that political issues are more profoundly discussed, that their opinions can be better reflected in discussions and that, with the experience they gained, they can achieve something within their community or society (86%). Youth have largely had positive experiences in teamwork (85%) and more than two-thirds are now more likely to develop and implement a good idea (65%). The Structured Dialogue thus makes an import-

ant contribution to active citizenship. The young people also learn how local policy works and how and where they can contribute their own interests and concerns. (Figure 5)

Figure 5: Social and citizenship competences

Through my participation in this project I have improved the following competence(s)...

	Do not agree at all	Do not agree	Agree	Definitely
... to deeply discuss political topics	2%	12%	40%	46%
... to negotiate solutions when there are different viewpoints	2%	8%	47%	43%
... to achieve something in the interest of the community or society	3%	11%	44%	42%
... to work in a team	3%	12%	44%	41%
... to convincingly contribute your opinions in discussion	3%	12%	55%	30%
... to develop and realize a good idea	10%	25%	41%	24%

Source: RAY PP Mon PP 2015/16; n=199 (Participants of the Structured Dialogue in Germany)

This basic sensitization to and motivation for politics is the prerequisite for young people to be interested in European politics. By linking the issues of the EU Youth Strategy to the world around and the everyday experiences of young people, engagement with European topics is made possible. This „grounding“ of the topics makes European youth policy accessible to young people and awakens their interest in shaping it. Nearly half of the young people who participated in a project of the Structured Dialogue in Germany in 2015-16 say that they are now more informed about current European issues (44%) and almost all stakeholders consider it important that young people participate in European policy (89%) (RAY 2015/16).

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF THE EU'S PARTICIPATORY POLICY APPROACH

According to the EU's governance approach (European Commission 2001b), to be able to involve the population more closely in decision-making processes, also requires clarification about how young people can be more effectively involved in shaping the policies that concern them. The

Structured Dialogue fulfills an important societal function. In times when the interest of young people in politics is growing again, but youth and politics have become more and more alienated from each other, and in particular European policy requires better explanation, measures of Structured Dialogue contribute to reducing the gap between the two. In the dialogue events, not only do politicians learn more about the living conditions and interests of young people, young people also perceive politics and the European Union differently and develop a better understanding of the political work occurring at different political decision-making levels.

In order to strengthen youth participation in Europe, institutionalized instruments are needed, which can be adapted to young people and through which they can form lasting experiences of self-efficacy, in addition to a civil society participation culture. Those who are involved in Structured Dialogue projects feel attracted by this participatory EU policy approach and are encouraged to form and voice their own political opinions. They therefore feel able to participate in the policy in a European as well as a local context. However, the Structured Dialogue is only known within the small circle of European youth work and is not widely used beyond it.

In order for the Structured Dialogue to be able to develop its existing potential and to contribute to the political empowerment of young people in the long term, it is important that it receives the necessary political support and that it be broadly extended to new areas. A clear commitment to the concerns of the Structured Dialogue is necessary at all political levels, not just among the actors in the EU's youth policy, in order to actually achieve resonance and impact.

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