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Subject:	Conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on Fostering democratic awareness and democratic engagement among young people in Europe

Delegations will find in the annex the conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on Fostering democratic awareness and democratic engagement among young people in Europe approved by the Council by written procedure on 20 November 2020, in accordance with the first subparagraph of Article 12(1) of the Council's Rules of Procedure and Article 1 of Council Decision 2020/556.

These conclusions will be forwarded for publication in the Official Journal, as decided by the Committee of Permanent Representatives on 18 November 2020.

Conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on Fostering democratic awareness and democratic engagement among young people in Europe

THE COUNCIL AND THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE GOVERNMENTS OF THE MEMBER STATES MEETING WITHIN THE COUNCIL

RECOGNISING THAT

1. The European Union is founded on values such as democracy, pluralism, equality and the rule of law. Respect for human rights, freedom, non-discrimination, tolerance, and the protection of minorities are inalienable cornerstones of the European idea.¹
2. Democracy and a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, the rule of law and solidarity prevail must never be taken for granted; they must be protected, strengthened and promoted by political actors, society, business, academia, the media, in formal and non-formal learning and training, and by each and every one of us together.
3. Young people should be enabled to participate meaningfully in decisions on all matters concerning them. They have the right to freedom of expression, access to information, and to be protected from discrimination. They are entitled to education, training and youth work which enable them to learn about, *inter alia*, human rights and fundamental freedoms and prepare them for a responsible life in a free society.

¹ Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union.

4. The creativity of young people is essential for a living democracy in Europe. Youth cultures, movements, groups, organisations and initiatives can have a defining influence on political developments and societal change. Initiatives for environmental and climate protection, anti-racism and social diversity are just some examples of issues with which young people in Europe frequently engage.
5. Youth is a defining stage of life which merits special attention from a political perspective. Young people across Europe are characterised by a broad diversity of backgrounds, interests and abilities and are facing multiple challenges at both individual and societal level. Opening up life opportunities for individuals, especially for young people who have fewer opportunities, and fostering young people's democratic awareness are tasks which require broad support from society and appropriate policy measures.
6. Media and digital technology offer great potential to strengthen trust in democracy, by providing significant opportunities for young people to access the information needed for democratic engagement, interact with others over long distances, voice their opinions, exercise their rights and engage in active citizenship. At the same time, digitalisation brings with it some negative elements that can challenge democracy, such as disinformation, polarisation, propaganda and hate speech.
7. The European Union aims to encourage the participation of young people in democratic life in Europe.²

² Article 165(2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

8. The promotion of inclusive participatory democracy is one of the guiding principles of the EU Youth Strategy (2019-2027). The EU Youth Strategy aims to support the involvement of young people in Europe in shaping society and politics. With this in mind, young people's opinions are taken into account through, for instance, the EU Youth Dialogue and the 11 European Youth Goals³. European Youth Goals No 1 (Connecting EU with Youth) and No 9 (Space and Participation for All) are particularly relevant in terms of the democratic participation of young people.

TAKE NOTE OF

9. The ideas and opinions of young people shared at the EU Youth Conference in October 2020 were focused on the topic of space and participation for all, and provide valuable inspiration for action to foster democratic awareness and democratic engagement among young people in Europe. These ideas and opinions of young people concern

- making critical thinking an obligatory part of school curricula;
- co-decision-making processes at all levels involving young people and youth organisations, implemented through a rights-based approach;
- lowering the age to vote and to stand for election to 16 for all elections, while removing all barriers to voting and ensuring encouragement of participation in elections;
- dedicated processes which amplify young minority voices and ensure their direct involvement;
- funding for permanent structures of participation;
- new European funding opportunities to set up and sustain youth spaces;
- prioritising at European level and in a cross-sectoral approach the creation of safe digital spaces for young people and the promotion of digital literacy.

³ Annex 3 to the Council Resolution on a framework for European cooperation in the youth field: The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027 (2018/C 456/01).

CONSIDER THAT

10. Young people must be able to experience self-efficacy, taking initiative, and co-creation in order to develop democratic awareness. In so doing, they experience democratic processes and acquire competences that form the bedrock of a living democracy. Experiencing an open culture of discussion, increasing tolerance of different opinions and ways of life, and developing the capacity to compromise, accept majority decisions and protect minorities are essential parts of this inclusive process.
11. Encouraging democratic engagement means stimulating young people to think autonomously, critically, and in a nuanced manner, and to be active citizens, as well as encouraging them to assess whether their environment safeguards European common values and guarantees their rights. This can strengthen young people's autonomy, their capacity to make their own decisions, and their civic courage, and can empower them to shape not only their own lives, but also politics and society in Europe, in accordance with democratic principles and in a spirit of solidarity.
12. European cooperation builds on diversity, understanding and open dialogue. This basic consensus contributes both to a democratic culture and to cohesion in Europe, and forms a solid basis for the democratic engagement of young people. It helps counteract anti-democratic, inhuman, sexist, racist, discriminatory and exclusionary tendencies in our society, and can also contribute to the prevention of violent extremism.
13. All young people need access points, support and opportunities to enable them to take ownership of their choices, express themselves, experience self-efficacy and contribute freely to democratic life in Europe. Digital and physical spaces for young people should be co-designed by young people themselves, provided by governmental and non-governmental actors, and promoted in all forms of formal and non-formal learning and training. This also requires strong and independent civil society. Forms of self-organisation and advocacy, such as youth organisations and youth councils, in which young people learn to take responsibility for themselves and others, are particularly important.

14. Enabling all young people to experience democracy requires an inclusive approach which takes account of their diversity in many respects. Special attention should be given to young people who have only limited access to participatory processes, youth work opportunities and interactions with other civil society actors as a result of individual or structural disadvantages, while bearing in mind the risk of intersectional discrimination.

EMPHASISE THAT

15. The principles of non-formal and informal learning, and in particular the values and practices of youth work, offer many opportunities to foster the democratic awareness and democratic engagement of young people. This is possible primarily because youth work activities are process-oriented and participatory in nature, they are aimed at both organised and non-organised youth, and they are closely aligned with the needs and interests of young people. The expertise and methods applied in youth work can serve as an inspiration for other sectors. Youth work therefore has the potential to play a unifying and coordinating role in fostering democracy and political participation among young people, from the local to the European level.
16. Furthermore, innovative concepts and practice with a critical and emancipatory approach should be developed within the youth work sector, centred around young people's autonomy, sense of initiative and opportunities for co-creation. Existing concepts such as human rights education, intercultural and global learning, digital and media literacy, and citizenship education can be taken as a starting point. Paid and voluntary youth workers should be seen as accompanying young people in these experiences, and should be given support in exchanging good practices and acquiring personal skills and competences.
17. Various European programmes promote democratic awareness and engagement. The Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes are particularly suitable frameworks for fostering young people's involvement in a targeted manner through intercultural dialogue and peer learning, especially with regard to European common values and issues.

18. Young people's democratic awareness and democratic engagement help boost the resilience of society. This becomes particularly apparent in situations in which fundamental democratic principles and rights are restricted due to extraordinary circumstances (e.g. the COVID-19 pandemic). Young people who have a solid understanding of democracy are, after all, better able to distinguish between strategies for dealing with such challenges which are compatible with democracy, and those which are not. In addition, it is essential that young people's rights and freedoms are safeguarded during temporary restrictions and fully and immediately reinstated once the restrictions have come to an end. This is particularly applicable since young people, especially those with fewer opportunities, are often among the groups most severely affected by crises.

INVITE THE MEMBER STATES, IN LINE WITH THE SUBSIDIARITY PRINCIPLE AND AT THE APPROPRIATE LEVELS, TO

19. Where appropriate, establish or continue, on a sustained basis, sector-specific and cross-sectoral funding programmes and initiatives at all levels within the Member States, in order to increase young people's understanding and appreciation of democracy and diversity. These should provide space and opportunities for learning about and experiencing democratic engagement, both as part of a group and individually, while ensuring access for all young people, in particular those with fewer opportunities. Youth organisations and youth initiatives in particular, as expressions of young people's capacity for self-organisation, should be strengthened in their capacity to support these endeavours.

20. Promote democracy and human rights learning in all sectors and levels of education, training and lifelong learning; and foster close, sustained cooperation on these issues across sectors. Special attention should be given to active citizenship education and education for democracy by considering a wide variety of practices and learning environments and by fostering the development of citizenship key competences, as set out in the Council Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning⁴ and the Council recommendation on promoting common values, inclusive education, and the European dimension of teaching⁵.
21. Empower young people to respond to the potential and challenges of digitalisation and to participate in online communication in an active and self-reflective manner.⁶ To this end, digital and media literacy in particular must be fostered in young people and persons supporting them (e.g. youth workers, teachers), especially the ability to deal with information overload, disinformation, hate speech and other forms of harmful content. Special emphasis should be given to the provision of suitable supporting tools as well as to ensuring a high level of quality of smart youth work solutions and of digital participatory processes. Barrier-free access to digital media must be ensured for all young people, in particular those with fewer opportunities.
22. Acknowledge the particular interest and active civic engagement shown by young people in matters such as environmental, social and economic sustainability, human rights, intergenerational equity, gender equality and the impact of digitalisation, and support them actively in their efforts to shape relevant political and social processes. In particular, young people's engagement at local level, such as in student councils, local youth organisations or youth initiatives should be encouraged.

⁴ Council recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning (OJ C 189, 4.6.2018, p. 1)

⁵ Council recommendation on promoting common values, inclusive education, and the European dimension of teaching (OJ C 195, 7.6.2018, p. 1)

⁶ Council conclusions on smart youth work (OJ C 418, 7.12.2017, p. 2) and Council conclusions on digital youth work (OJ C 414, 10.12.2019, p. 2).

23. Adequately promote and support accessible physical and digital youth work structures and smart youth work solutions, in particular in the wake of the COVID-19 containment measures, in order to give young people free, open and safe spaces and opportunities for personal development.

INVITE THE MEMBER STATES AND THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION, IN THEIR RESPECTIVE AREAS OF COMPETENCE AND AT THE APPROPRIATE LEVELS, WITH DUE REGARD FOR THE PRINCIPLE OF SUBSIDIARITY, TO

24. Further develop young people's participation in political processes in line with the Council Resolution on encouraging political participation of young people in democratic life in Europe⁷, and thus further strengthen all young people's meaningful and sustainable participation in decision-making processes at all levels.
25. Where appropriate, make political processes and decisions at all levels accessible, transparent and understandable, by using youth-friendly information and communication. This should include in particular providing feedback to young people on the results of youth participation processes. The information needs to be disseminated in a targeted manner so that it reaches all young people regardless of their environment. Appropriate communication strategies should be developed in cooperation with youth information networks and other stakeholders of the youth sector, such as the European Youth Information and Counselling Agency and the Eurodesk network, at European level.
26. Introduce and promote the concepts of democratic awareness and democratic engagement to young people as an ongoing and crucial part of youth work, and recognise the youth work sector as being a favourable space for providing opportunities for young people to develop and contribute to democratic society. This includes the provision, within the existing structures, of appropriate framework conditions and adequate financial resources at all levels, as well as increased thematic training, skills and qualifications for youth workers.

⁷ Council Resolution on encouraging political participation of young people in democratic life in Europe (OJ C 417, 15.12.2015, p. 10).

27. Support the further development and reshaping of approaches to increasing democratic awareness and democratic engagement in young people. These can build on existing concepts of pedagogy⁸ and of democracy, active citizenship and human rights education/training, as well as the work of the Council of Europe and civil society organisations in this field. These approaches should be passed onto practitioners through regular training programmes and can serve as inspiration for the practice of EU youth programmes, or the development of a competence-based framework for formal and non-formal youth work education and training⁹. Opportunities for mutual learning activities within the youth work sector should also be created – both between practitioners, academics, policymakers and young people, and between sectors.

INVITE THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION TO

28. Take into account the interests of young people and their democratic engagement as a cross-cutting issue in European processes and programmes, such as the Conference on the Future of Europe, the Digital Education Action Plan, or the European Education Area, and in the implementation of the relevant EU programmes in force, the European Green Deal, the European Pillar of Social Rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and in enhanced cooperation with the Council of Europe.
29. Emphasise research activities and evidence-gathering tools that analyse the impact of EU funding programmes on the promotion of democratic awareness and democratic engagement in young people.
30. Strengthen European activities with partner countries funded by EU programmes to further promote democratic awareness and democratic engagement in young people, and continue to develop youth work through cooperation and exchange.

⁸ In particular, the concepts of critical and emancipatory pedagogy.

⁹ Council conclusions on education and training of youth workers (OJ C 412, 9.12.2019, p. 12).

INVITE ALL ACTORS INVOLVED IN EUROPEAN COOPERATION ACTIVITIES IN THE YOUTH FIELD TO STRIVE TO

31. Emphasise issues such as European values and identity, democracy, acceptance of diversity, human rights, gender equality, protection of minorities, critical thinking, new forms of participation and civic action in the implementation of the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps funding programmes. Inclusive and open access, simple procedures and adequate resources should be ensured for projects that can offer young people the chance to initiate, contribute and have their say. This should be taken into consideration especially for dedicated actions on participation and solidarity.
32. Ensure that EU programmes for youth take into account the needs, interests and diversity of young people. This includes youth-friendly and easy accessible funding information, support for young people's own project initiatives, and consideration of programme organisers and their needs. Where appropriate, the programmes should be able to make improvements that further prioritise young people's initiative and thus their democratic engagement and experiences.

References

In adopting these conclusions, the Council and the representatives of the governments of the Member States meeting within the Council take note of the following documents:

- Council Resolution on a framework for European cooperation in the youth field: The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027 (OJ C 456, 18.12.2018, p. 1)
- Council Resolution on encouraging political participation of young people in democratic life in Europe (OJ C 417, 15.12.2015, p. 10)
- Council conclusions on youth in external action (8629/20)
- Council conclusions on media literacy in an ever-changing world (OJ C 193, 9.6.2020, p. 23)
- Council conclusions on education and training of youth workers (OJ C 412, 9.12.2019, p. 12)
- Council conclusions on digital youth work (OJ C 414, 10.12.2019, p. 2)
- Council recommendation on promoting common values, inclusive education, and the European dimension of teaching (OJ C 195, 7.6.2018, p. 1)
- Council recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning (OJ C 189, 4.6.2018, p. 1)
- Council conclusions on smart youth work (OJ C 418, 7.12.2017, p. 2)
- Council conclusions on the role of the youth sector in an integrated and cross-sectoral approach to preventing and combating violent radicalisation of young people (OJ C 213, 14.6.2016, p. 1)

- Paris Declaration of 17 March 2015 of the European Union Education Ministers on promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education
- UN Convention on the Rights of the Child of 20 November 1989
- European Commission: Flash Eurobarometer 478 – How do we build a stronger, more united Europe? The views of young people, March 2019¹⁰
- European Parliament: Study – Shrinking space for civil society: the EU response, 2017¹¹
- Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)7 adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to member states on the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education
- Council of Europe: Reference Framework of Competencies for Democratic Culture: Volume 1 – Context, concepts and model, 2018¹²

¹⁰<https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/ResultDoc/download/DocumentKey/86162>

¹¹[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/578039/EXPO_STU\(2017\)578039_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/578039/EXPO_STU(2017)578039_EN.pdf)

¹²<https://rm.coe.int/prems-008318-gbr-2508-reference-framework-of-competences-vol-1-8573-co/16807bc66c>