



# Policy Proposal on Youth for Youth

## Increasing Youth Participation in the European Union

Brussels, April 23rd 2017

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## STUDENT FORUM MAASTRICHT

Student Forum Maastricht (SFM) is an annual student conference held at the Maastricht University Campus in Brussels. The conference is organised by students from Maastricht University in cooperation with different partner organisations. The participants are post- and undergraduate students from all over Europe with diverse academic backgrounds. Based on problem statements provided by European Commission representatives, they develop policy proposals for pressing topics within the Commission. Throughout this process the students receive input and insights from experts from NGOs, academia and the business sector working in Brussels. The 2017 edition of SFM took place from April 19<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup>. For more information on Student Forum Maastricht, please visit: [www.student-forum.eu](http://www.student-forum.eu)

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## Executive Summary

Youth participation in the EU is alarmingly low. Although the EU has implemented several formal measures [in accordance with its competences], additional non-formal measures are necessary to complement existing ones in establishing active citizenship for the European youth (18-29). As such, we suggest a three-fold proposal: The first proposal focusses on the creation of the *D'Artagnan-Programme*; a youth-for-youth learning and teaching program to be integrated in the existing framework of Erasmus+. The second proposal focuses on a revitalization of the European Youth Portal by making it more user-friendly, attractive, and inclusive. The third proposal focuses on increasing alternative forms of youth participation by introducing a specific subsection of Youth-Initiatives within the larger framework of the Citizens' Initiative. Together these three proposals aim to increase youth participation by ensuring education, improving and extending communication, and providing an alternative method of youth participation.

## Problem Statement

In regards to the low formal participation, as exemplified by the voter-turnout of the 2014 elections, how can the European Union increase participation and active citizenship among the European youth?

## Objectives

- Enhance the perceived value of a democratic European Union;
- Increase the reach of European Union's marketing campaigns to engage a larger, younger audience;
- Facilitate youth participation through alternative non-formal measures;
- Foster employability of young European citizens;
- Promote active participation of young people in both formal and non-formal democratic processes;
- Encourage youth-to-youth exchange in order to foster mutual learning and intercultural understanding.



## Introduction

The Commission report *2014 Post-Election Survey* states on the most recent European Parliament (EP) elections that “[o]nce again, the greatest abstainers in the European elections were young people (aged from 18 to 24), and yet it is they who express the most positive feelings about the EU”. Apparently, there is a discrepancy between the youth’s attitude towards the European Union and their participation in European elections. Regarding the amount of voter-turnout, 27.8 per cent of EU citizens aged 18-31 voted in contrast to 51.3 per cent of EU citizens of the 55+ demographic. Similar results could be observed in the 2009 elections.

Although the European Union has committed itself to implement formal measures aimed at enhancing youth participation, the results of the 2014 elections nonetheless indicate that the effects of these formal measures were limited. However, participation of young EU citizens is crucial, as young people constitute a large portion of EU-citizens that are currently under-represented within all levels of governance (regional, national, EU). In addition, young people have to become active citizens, as policy-making on all levels will affect them; if not now, then most certainly during adulthood.

Active citizenship can be fostered through non-formal learning, through extending the reach of current providers of information, and through the introduction of alternative ways of participation. Therefore, in regards to the aim of increasing active citizenship among young people, as also laid out in the *Strategic Framework - Education & Training 2020*, Student Forum Maastricht proposes three concrete non-formal measures, which will enable the European Commission to improve on this aim:

1. The *D’Artagnan* project seeks to foster a mutual learning experience between high school and elementary school pupils. High school students that volunteer as tutors are encouraged to engage with their younger peers through dynamic, interactive and playful workshops on active citizenship;
2. Communicating existing measures related to the European youth needs to become more efficient. We propose to especially increase the user-friendliness of the European Youth Portal, focusing on those who are currently disconnected;
3. The EU Youths’ Initiative: This category creates a specific Youth-initiative as a subgroup of the EU Citizen’s Initiatives with a signature-threshold of 150.000 only to be signed by European youth (18-29).

Each one of these three non-formal measures seeks to address a different dimension of the issue of youth participation: the structural lack of knowledge, engaging with youth currently falling out of the spectrum, and finally offering students alternative ways to become engaged citizens.



## Proposal 1

### Citizenship Education: The *D'Artagnan Programme*

The *D'Artagnan Programme* seeks to encourage school-based activities through a **youth-for-youth** approach. The main idea of *D'Artagnan* is therefore to implement the idea of voluntary tutoring (high school students) of primary school pupils; a group that is often overlooked in current formal and non-formal educational approaches to citizenship. The *D'Artagnan Programme* aims to offer a toolbox containing didactic material to empower volunteering high school students to engage in matters related to citizenship and education. In short, *d'Artagnan* aims to foster cultural and civic education as well as promote youngsters' participation and inclusion based on a youth-for-youth approach.

This youth-for-youth approach encourages high school students to tutor their younger peers through an active form of teaching/learning. The idea is therefore to supplement the traditional ways of learning in order to allow younger students to be actively engaged in the different activities carried out. Active participation through interactive, engaging, fun events has indeed proven to be more effective in stimulating different parts of the brain amongst young people. Furthermore, *D'Artagnan* seeks to benefit from the already existing closer connection between youngsters in the broadest sense. In such a fashion, the aim is to focus on mutual learning between young tutors and pupils rather than the traditional teacher-pupil relationship.

#### 1.1 Youthpass

The Youth in Action programme under Erasmus + should serve as a point of departure for the implementation of the *d'Artagnan* programme. The Youth in Action programme aims at promoting young people's active citizenship at the local as well as the European level. In sum, the Youth in Action programme seeks to promote sustainable and inclusive growth through a cross-sectoral approach to youth issues.

Youngsters who participated in Youth in Action programmes relating to non-formal learning through existing projects are rewarded with the Youthpass. The Youthpass validates and recognizes that young people participating in relevant projects receive the following officially recognised skills/competences: reflection upon the personal non-formal learning process; social recognition of youth work; employability of young people and youth workers; active participation of young people in society.

The Youthpass is an excellent initiative to encourage youth participating as it offers the chance to document the learning processes involved in being a young, active citizen. When applying for tertiary education or when entering the job market, such a certificate demonstrates the willingness to engage and learn.



### **1.2 D'Artagnan as part of Erasmus+**

The Commission should incorporate D'Artagnan into the existing structures of the Erasmus+ programme. While volunteering tutors will not receive any funding, other currently existing measures such as the Youthpass provide an attractive incentive for participation. Through this method of certificate acknowledgment, young individuals will be given recognition in a concrete way and consequently increase their chances for future employability. More importantly, D'Artagnan will also provide tutors with the tools for deeper social and cultural understanding, consequently increasing their societal interest at the regional as well as the European level. Incorporating D'Artagnan into existing Erasmus+ structures allows for a long-term approach in which young individuals will be empowered from the youngest age onwards in their privileges and responsibilities of democratic societies.

Once implemented in Erasmus+, D'Artagnan should be advertised and promoted by the European Commission in a more accessible way on the currently existing websites such as the European Youth Portal. Creative ways of online communication/ advertising should be envisaged in order to make the latter suggestions come to life, which our section on Communication details below. While tutors receive no official funding, the Commission could organize a yearly, paid European Tutor Conference to give tutors the opportunity to share experiences and gather novel teaching materials. Furthermore, this conference gives the opportunity to evaluate D'Artagnan's functioning and impact. Tutors should be coordinated by Erasmus+ national agencies. Agencies organize tutor trainings to prepare high school students for their new task. Furthermore, agencies should offer databases of tutors, their region and expertise available to interested primary schools.

To summarize, the existing structures of the Erasmus+ Programme would offer an effective framework for the implementation of the D'Artagnan project. In particular, the Youthpass constitutes an attractive tool to encourage and reward young tutors volunteering in the project. Already existing Erasmus+ national agencies can furthermore help in implementing D'Artagnan on national and regional level. The main idea is therefore for the European Commission to make use of the existing frameworks to achieve a quick, cost-efficient way of moving forward through interactive forms of non-formal education.

### **1.3 A toolbox for D'Artagnan tutors**

For tutors to teach primary school children, appropriate teaching material is crucial. Partially, appropriate teaching material is already available on the europa.eu/ teachers website or on the kids corner website. The existing material supports teaching in a traditional method, in which children learn in a passive way what their teacher is telling them.



This traditional way focuses primarily on 'cognitive knowledge', whereas our aim to transform high school pupils into tutors asks for a didactically less demanding approach. We therefore particularly encourage a toolbox that offers active ways of engaging with primary school pupils. 'Active' teaching material supports social, communicative and intercultural competencies, as well as knowledge of procedures and forms of participation within the European Union.

Taking into account the already existing material, we suggest constituting a broader range of tools to stimulate all of the above-mentioned levels of individual development of knowledge and interpersonal skills. Moving out of the classroom, we strongly advise the use of physical education in combination with suitable equipment. This would not only have a positive effect on the physical health of youngsters, but also on their social and cultural competences. Especially role plays have a positive effect on kids' and teenagers' understanding of social realism (Inside Role-Play in Early Childhood Education: Researching Young Children's Perspectives Sue Rogers, Julie Evans) and ultimately active participation in civil society. Taking into account the already existing European Parliament model games, organised in Brussels, we suggest providing similar exercises in primary schools.

In summary, the European Commission should provide tutors with a selection of different teaching tools, ranging from some traditional to active teaching materials, depending on the tutor's skills and preferences. Many appropriate materials are already available on the Commission website. These could be complemented with tools particularly developed for active learning in the primary school classrooms under the guidance of D'Artagnan tutors.

### *Proposal 2*

## **Communication: Revitalizing the European Youth Portal**

There are various existing programs and initiatives offered and funded by the EU, which are aimed to empower and support young people by creating new opportunities for them.<sup>1</sup> However, the added value of these initiatives would profit significantly if they reached more young people in Europe, regardless of their educational or social background. Young people inform themselves primarily online and via social media, therefore, it is especially important that the EU excels at providing clearly structured and informative digital tools via which young people can access the information they need straightforwardly.

We believe there is room for improvement in the marketing of the many existing efforts and successful programs by the EU. Due to the variety and large number of initiatives such as for example the EU Solidarity Corps, European Youth Event or Youth Guarantee,

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<sup>1</sup> For example, ERASMUS+, the Youth Unemployment Initiative, the EU Solidarity Corps, European Volunteer Service, European Youth Event, "New Narrative for Europe", EuropeDirect etc.



it is crucial to have a single portal on which information is bundled and can be accessed without requiring interested young people to find every website independently.

A similar portal already exists in form of the **European Youth Portal**.<sup>2</sup> Currently this portal and its Facebook page are managed by the DG Education & Culture, but have only a very limited reach as for example the Facebook page is followed by around 0.2 per cent of its target audience.<sup>3</sup> This proposal aims at suggesting ways in which the European Youth Portal can be transformed and re-launched into an effective and popular informational tool to strengthen knowledge and visibility of EU initiatives and subsequently the EU itself. There are three identified stages at which improvement is possible and specific measures are suggested: Usability and user-friendliness, branding and design and reach and inclusion.

## 2.1. Usability

The usability of a website makes or breaks its online success. Studies suggest that users no longer tolerate sites that are slow to load, unpleasant to look at, or difficult to navigate.<sup>4</sup> This is especially crucial when the target audience is the millennial generation, as we utilize social media and websites regularly in our everyday lives and thus have high expectations in usability. Usability means to understand your users, and to know their needs and expectations. The EU must adapt to the increasing technological innovations and to the mobility of the users of their websites. Especially young people interact increasingly via mobile devices and want to access information from their phones.

The European Youth Portal is currently not designed responsively, which means it does not adapt to a mobile and smartphone or tablet-friendly design. “Responsive Design” is common standard among much-visited websites and professional organisations; therefore the EU should invest in including responsive web design into their digital strategy. Usability also means to provide navigation which is easy to use. The way to the demanded information must be as easy and uncomplicated as possible to ensure the user is willing to visit the site again.

When a person tries to find for example a European volunteering program it currently takes at least 6 clicks to get from the homepage to the available projects. Therefore the European Youth Portal website should be also structurally adjusted and redesigned. Usability furthermore requires a clear and concise Website Design. Good design has a big great impact on public appearance and perception. Visitors of the European Youth Portal should immediately be able to identify the website’s purpose and find their way to the information they are looking for. This is why we propose a complete re-launch of the existing website and subsequent social media outputs. We urge the Commission to

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<sup>2</sup> [www.europa.eu/youth](http://www.europa.eu/youth)

<sup>3</sup> Facebook Likes 22 April 2017: 179.533 whereas people aged 15-29 estimated by Eurostat: 91.258.423 ([http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=yth\\_demo\\_060&lang=en](http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=yth_demo_060&lang=en))

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.hallaminternet.com/website-usability-important/>



take seriously the impact of an attractive online presence, especially when the targeted audience for information is the youth. Also from an inclusionary perspective, it is crucial to make it as easy as possible for young people to find the information they are looking for.

## **2.2. Branding and Design**

Our second proposal to improve communication refers to the implementation of the relaunch and redesign of the European Youth Portal's visual identity. Young people are receptive towards design that looks appealing and familiar to them. Therefore, we propose a youth-for-youth approach; young people should realize the web design for young people.

A possible solution and hence our proposition is to organize a contest among young graphic design students to re-launch the Youth Portal's visual identity. The task will be to create a design for the website, which will be adapted on the Facebook site and the Instagram account that should be set up. This youth-for-youth type of campaign will simultaneously encourage young designers to put into practice their knowledge and improve the current digital environment of the portal. The main rationale behind this proposal is the fact that engaging young designers to adjust the Youth portal's brand to the current trends will make it much more appealing and relevant to the target audience, which will eventually attract and engage the European youth with the future initiatives.

The re-branding and improving the design proposal can be implemented through several different stages all incorporating the youth-for-youth principle. First, a competition between the young graphic designers can be organized, attracting young professionals between 15 and 29, to develop the new visual identity of the portal. In order for the competition to be successful in incorporating the youth vision, the jury should be consistent from members in the same age group. Finally, an online poll should be conducted in order to evaluate the success of the new design among the target audience.

## **2.3. Reach and Inclusion**

In order to facilitate effective marketing, it is essential for any organization to understand its users. This in effect means that the best-suited people to conduct marketing and give information about EU Youth programs are young people themselves. We suggest that in order to promote the new, re-designed website, the EU should approach young people that have a large social media platform and a fan-base among the target group and invite them to participate in their programs, for example ERASMUS, the Solidarity Corps or European Youth Event, or to promote the Youth Portal as informational tool to their audience.

By documenting their participation in these initiatives via the Youth Portal and promoting the Portal on their individual Youtube, Facebook and Instagram accounts, a



wide range of young people will learn about the many opportunities the EU offers to its young citizens. The advantages of employing this alternative form additionally to traditional advertising via schools and brochures are two-folded: Firstly, it ensures the diversity of the reached young people and obviates the Youth Portal from being used and followed primarily by university students and other young people with privileged backgrounds. Secondly, as Youtubers, Bloggers and other influencers often have a rather young fan base, young Europeans will learn about potentially interesting and helpful projects early on. The young influencers, which again are to be chosen by Europe's youth itself, for example via the national youth forums in the Member States, shall receive incentive measures for their promotion.

### *Proposal 3*

## **Participation: European Youth Initiative**

High participation rates, regardless of ideological perspectives, are essential to the well-functioning of democracy and governance. The common trend of absenteeism amongst young voters in all European democracies and especially in European elections is influenced by several factors. First, the lack of representation of youth in all levels of governance (regional, national, EU). Moreover, young people have different conceptions and attitudes towards politics and also a preference for alternative forms and methods of political participation.<sup>5</sup> Encouraging and increasing youth participation therefore goes hand in hand with offering alternative ways of participation.

The EU realized the need for alternative ways of participation and in 2011, the European Parliament and the Council approved the Citizen's Initiative codified in Regulation 211/2011. Citizens are required to collect at least 1 million signatures to submit a proposal to the Commission. So far, only three initiatives succeeded. As of 22 April 2017, 22 initiatives have been rejected, 37 are registered of which 33 are currently closed since after the deadline expired, the required number of signatories was not reached.<sup>6</sup> These numbers demonstrate the hurdle that this alternative form of participation presents.

The Citizen Initiative is an alternative form of participation that corresponds to the current needs of the Youth. It would cut across party or other ideological lines, require a minimum of time and effort and offer a tool to unite young European's concerns from various Member States. However, reaching the current threshold of signatures even provides a bigger hurdle for groups that want to address an issue that only concerns a certain percentage of the population. Therefore, the authors recommend the EU to establish a 'Youth's Initiative' as part of the already existing Citizens' Initiative with the following aims:

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<sup>5</sup> Quintelier, E. (2007). Differences in political participation between young and old people. *Contemporary Politics*, 13(2), pp. 165-180. London: Routledge

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.citizens-initiative.eu/eci/open-closed/2017>



- a) Further the democratic functioning of the national governments and the EU;
- b) Strengthening the legitimacy of elected bodies at different governance levels;
- c) Enforcing youth's rights to participate in the democratic life of the Union;
- d) Protect vulnerable groups, such as youth, which are currently underrepresented in the political institutions.

### 3.1 Legal Basis

The legal basis of the Citizens' Initiative is set out in Article 11, Paragraph 4 TEU and Article 24, paragraph 1 TFEU. This initiative complements the existing right of petitioning the European Parliament and the right of appeal to the Ombudsman as set out in the Treaty of Maastricht.

The 'Youth Initiative' as a subsection of the general Citizens' initiative will be established under the same legislation, taking into account the principles and goals codified in Article 165 TFEU 'to encourage the participation of young people in the democratic life of Europe', the EU Youth Strategy 2010-2018 and Europe 2020 Strategy.

### 3.2 Operative Part

1. Subject matter: This recommendation established the procedures and conditions required for a youth initiative as provided for in Article 11 TEU and Articles 24 and 165 TFEU.
2. Definitions: In accordance with the EU indicators on youth within the framework of the EU Youth Strategy, 'youth' includes EU citizens covered by the age group 15-18. For the purposes of this recommendation, 'youth organisers' includes EU citizens eligible to vote in their respective Member States.
3. Requirements about organisers: For the purposes of this recommendation, 'youth organisers' includes EU citizens eligible to vote in their respective Member States not older than 29 years old at the time the initiative is created. The organisers shall create a 'youth committee' of at least 7 natural persons who are residents of at least seven different member states.
4. Requirements about signatories: For the purposes of this recommendation, 'youth signatories' includes EU citizens who have completed a statement of support to take part in the 'citizens' initiative' and which falls under at least one of the two following categories:
  - a) Citizens of the Union eligible to vote in their respective member states not older than 29 years old at the time they participate in the youth initiative;
  - b) Citizens of the Union between 15 to 29 years old at the time they participate in the Youth initiative as long as the 'initiative' directly impacts their interests and is appropriate for their age group.



The 'youth organisers' and the European Commission have the discretion to restrict the category under 4(b) from taking part in the proposal if the requirements established in such article are deemed not to be fulfilled.

5. Number of signatories:

- a) The minimum number of signatories required for a 'youth initiative' proposal shall be 150 000, proportional to the total of youth population in the Union. The member states threshold of signatories shall be distributed proportionally, too;
- b) The total number of signatories shall be revised every five years in accordance with the demographic tendencies;
- c) The proportionate decrease of the number of signatures recommended in section one from one million to 150.000 will empower youth citizens to fully explore their rights and opportunities to participate in the EU democratic process. The number has been selected taking into account the ratio of young people out of the total population of EU (17,4 % or 91.258.423 citizens between 15 and 29 according to Eurostat for 2016) and recalculating the exact age group being targeted by the youth initiative to nearly 75 million between 18 and 29.<sup>7</sup>

6. Support by youth organisations: The 'youth organisers' may seek support regarding the proposal's funding and dissemination from any legal persons whose activities and objectives are related to the content of the 'youth initiative' as established in their articles of association.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, the EU faces a considerable challenge regarding the participation of young people in the political process on all political levels. In order to promote active citizenship, this proposal suggests three concrete measures that supplement existing frameworks on citizens' education, information, and participation. These measures have the propensity to get youth engaged with their civic responsibilities starting at the primary/high school level (D'Artagnan). In addition, they ensure that EU information campaigns reaches a larger audience of young people (proposal on communication) and that youth can find ways to engage politically through alternative means of participation (European Youth Initiative) Naturally, the measures suggested in this policy proposal are not sufficient to address the existing generational gap. However, they serve a small but essential part of a sustainable future of the European Union.

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<sup>7</sup> Eurostat, "Youth population on 1 January by sex, age and country of birth", 2017  
[http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=yth\\_demo\\_060&lang=en](http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=yth_demo_060&lang=en)