

WORKING TOWARDS A MORE DEMOCRATIC EU - STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES



ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟ ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΕΥΡΩΠΑΪΚΗΣ & ΕΞΩΤΕΡΙΚΗΣ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΗΣ
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About the project

The YouthEU project is supported by the European Commission through the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme (CERV) and aims to address the sources of Euroscepticism among youth (high school and first-time voters) in the most Eurosceptic societies in the EU and among the EU candidate countries. The project also provides an opportunity for experts and policymakers to gain insight into the attitudes of young people towards the EU and European integration while creating a platform through which the youth can discuss and exchange their views of the EU and learn about the European project.

The YouthEU incorporates both top-down and bottom-up approaches to educating and empowering youth on the EU and their role as European citizens through webinars, workshops, and engagement with EU stakeholders in Brussels. The project delivered 40 webinars in 4 countries, which directly engaged more than 800 participants. Out of those, 15 participants were chosen to take part in each of the national rounds. Ultimately, 24 students from 4 participating countries were selected to travel to Brussels for a three-day study trip. Each country brought the outcomes from the national rounds that took place earlier in their capital cities respectively. After the first discussion, they set the main priorities that were formed into 4 pillars (climate, society, democracy, and the future of the EU). These were later on introduced during the general session and presented to MEP and EU delegates. During all of the abovementioned activities, students discussed how they perceive the EU and what they consider the biggest challenges to its prosperous future.

Issues raised by the students during the Brussels round of the project

Based on a cross-country in-group discussion and the engagement of all students from Greece, Czechia, France, and Serbia some significant issues regarding

democracy and Euroscepticism were raised, considering the current geopolitical threats, and national security challenges for the EU (and non-EU) member states.

The media landscape is a challenging element in the students' discussion. Partial and unfree media outlets are crucial leverage in manipulating collective behaviour, spreading disinformation, and giving room to political rhetoric and propaganda that can lead to increased Euroscepticism. The participants of the Brussels Round thoroughly examined and questioned the legality of the sponsoring and funding revenues of major media outlets by state (corporations) and individuals as well as the effect on more eurosceptic societies. They elaborated on the legislative framework that would ideally protect consumers (citizens) from disinformation,

„Besides freedom of speech and press, an unrestricted and efficient electoral system is considered an intrinsic part of a stable democracy.“

propaganda, hate speech, and toxic language.

The preparatory idea was the introduction of EU-funded outlets and the strengthening of the existing ones, such as Euronews. The discussion focused on the way financial transparency could be ensured and how an efficient monitoring

process on the funding/funder as well as the content would release the media from barriers, such as repression of a free press and misuse by individuals for their personal ends.

Besides freedom of speech and press, an unrestricted and efficient electoral system is considered an intrinsic part of a stable democracy. Most students discussed the way the EU (and ultimately national) elections could step forward from a print-in-a-paper vote to an online vote. Digital e-voting and its advancement to all member states is a gradual phase-in securing the promotion of the EU's principles of democracy, as well as increasing the share of voter turnout (especially in rural areas, young people). Yet, current technological progress along with discrepancies in data protection management (e.g. cyber-attacks) challenge the implementation of such an initiative on a large scale. Regarding the electoral

geography of the EU, the students added the allocation of state observation committees (where/when necessary) in order to monitor elections proceedings to avoid cases of electoral fraud.

Another issue introduced by the students within the group of democracy (Simulation of the Committees of the European Parliament) was the abolition of unanimity in decision-making. The discussion focused on whether the EU should formulate a non-unanimous decision-making procedure (by majority) or preserve the veto right in the accession of a new member state (the example of Bulgaria's veto on North Macedonia's accession had been used). Following the in-group simulation and an explicit procedure similar to the committees, the students within this group did not vote for the abolishment, and therefore, the proposal did not qualify for the plenary sessions. It is worth mentioning in this report that the final decision on abolishing the EU unanimity was based on the qualified majority of the students (3 out of 5 voted against abolishing it). A debate emerged between those who favoured flexibility in using veto rights on limited cases and not the accession of new member states. Their main argument was the need for acceleration of the accession talks and negotiation in the Western Balkan region amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The counter-argument was based on the power control that small states could potentially lose in the decision-making process as well as the public discontent that would potentially arise. Giving away veto rights could be politically exploited and instrumentalized leading to increased Euroscepticism.

Proposals suggested by the students during the Brussels round of the project

The EU stands for democracy and its ability in adapting to poly-crises. These dynamics reshape general directions, policies, and strategies in decision-making.

In this sense students from the four countries came up with concrete proposals in the respective areas of concern (Democracy and Free Europe) as follows:

1. Media landscape (outlets)

Prioritising the way media is financed and considering the funds/ownership transparency as a key factor for their (im)partiality and integrity, students proposed all member states **have at least one media outlet financed from the state budget and not by private individuals or corporations**. For media to remain intact and free, the **EU should forbid politicians from owning news media outlets**. In the case of non-state media (proposed above), funding from individuals and corporations **must be regularly and closely audited** while consumers must be aware of the media's background funding and ownership.

Students underlined the necessity to **form coherent legislation that protects users and limits disinformation, fake news, and interference from government, companies, or other influential individuals**. Tools of monitoring and reporting should be further developed by the EU to tackle the spread of falsification of news.

2. EU & national elections

The EU should increase the infrastructure needed for the transition to digital voting. Hence, it will **ensure the engagement of citizens, accessibility of more voters** (rural areas, disabled people, diaspora, etc.), **and reduce logistics**. Developing a digital environment should be a priority for the EU, as it would reduce cases of fraud and promote democracy.

The introduction of an election observation committee designated directly by the EU is also a measure to combat cases of election fraud. The committee would include national delegates who would scrutinise the proceeding of different party campaigns and guarantee safe, free, and transparent elections. The EU should design the structure but also fund such committees. Lastly, steps to an online

digital frame of voting entail cyber risks from internal and external actors. The EU should **increase the digital cyber-capacity of its infrastructure and develop a new defence system in parallel to the e-voting transition.**

3. Veto rights

What has been considered the most controversial topic of the session was the abolishing of unanimity (veto rights) examined within the simulation of the cross-country group on democracy. Although students voted against the abolition (in using veto rights on the accession of new member states) they sparked a conversation on whether such an act helps the EU in acquiring a faster decision-making process. It also generated a debate that the abolishment would bring further friction to smaller societies (considering the veto as a powerful negotiation tool) and create political turbulence. Political elites could benefit from the abolishment and use it as a way to supply eurosceptic agendas. Most of the students positively mentioned the geopolitical pulse and stability required by a fast integration of the Western Balkans into the EU. However, the overall voting results (3 negative and 2 positive votes) were merely based on the drawbacks, namely the weakening of negotiating power of smaller states, unjust decision-making process, and lack of cohesion. As a result, no proposal was made for this part, because it was not qualified.

Elaborations of the students' proposals

By the time of the workshop (July 2022) the students had widely considered the security issues amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its implications on democracy within Europe. The social and political cohesion has been strengthened since February 2022, with the EU increasing its financial support to Ukraine, promoting internal measures in alleviating discrepancies in energy prices, and accelerating the process with the Western Balkans. The proxy influence of Russia to the EU (e.g. via Serbia) and other destabilising factors made students come up with proposals based on a "jeopardised democracy".

Media landscape (outlets)

Several crises in the last years such as the pandemic, the energy crisis, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the refugees' inflows along with hybrid attacks, and tensions as a result of inflation have brought media once again to the foreground. Affected by the economic backlash, traditional media outlets experienced a decline in print readership revenues. Additionally, as most funding companies and sponsors here were hit by the lockdown effect, the allocated budget for advertising also decreased. (1,2)

Students from the Czech Republic initiated a discussion on media ownership, mentioning the example of the then-Czech Prime Minister, who owns one of the most influential TV outlets and newspapers in the country. The student from Serbia also shared similar views where media freedom has been largely violated. The proposal from students to exclude politicians from media ownership is an endeavour to limit negative influence.

The Media Pluralism Monitor Reports demonstrate data on both EU and candidate countries' media freedom. Focusing on political independence, the reports have shown political interference and prevalent funding from state advertising mostly in Eastern, Southern, and Central Europe ([European University Institute, 2022](#)). The students combined their proposal with an alternative (sub-proposal). Instead of totally prohibiting political individuals from acquiring ownership of state media (understanding the fact that many media outlets face financial constraints), the new law framework could allow politicians to media ownership under specific conditions. These conditions include close monitoring, and auditing procedures, disclosure of media background funding, and ownership status. This could be applied to social media and online outlets with unclear ownership details and funding backgrounds.

Due to the shift from traditional and conventional media to online platforms, the framework should be extended to also monitor, audit, and clear the path for transparent online media. This will empower credibility, with citizens knowing where the information they receive originates.

„Ownership transparency is a key element in healthy competition, the elimination of fake news, and accountability in cases of disinformation, propaganda, and political manipulation.“

Ownership transparency is a key element in healthy competition, the elimination of fake news, and accountability in cases of disinformation, propaganda, and political manipulation. High commercial and ownership influence on editorial content has been observed (according to Media Pluralism Monitor Reports) in all the countries of the YouthEU participants, except France. According to the report, there is no clear approach to obtaining the necessary information on ownership data across Europe, both for ordinary media and online outlets/platforms. Yet, national initiatives or projects from civil society and other non-state actors across several countries have managed to collect ownership data and disclose them publicly.

Aligning with the proposal of the students for restriction on media ownership by politicians, the European Commission has stepped forward in adopting the **European Media Freedom Act** with a legal frame of rules in order to ensure, media pluralism, independence, and impartiality. Although it does (and cannot with respect to the free market principle) restrict ownership by politicians, it does set a number of measures on key topics such as **ensuring no political interference, protecting editorial quality, and independence from state advertising**. The Act also ensures pluralism for online media content and proposes an **independent European Board for media** services that will implement and safeguard the application of the EU media law framework.

The setting up of a commission also proposed by the students will regulate the media market and issue opinions on national measures that could potentially strengthen media independence. Students emphasised that **the priority for this commission is to ensure the overall media quality, auditing, and sanctioning**. Therefore, the European Media Freedom Act initiative should also include a potential set of sanctions imposed on media, governments, individuals, advertisers, and states that do not comply with the conditions of no involvement in freedom of speech/press. The Media Freedom Act can promise a structured disclosure of ownership data to the public and a new legal framework to combat political interference on journalists and editors, and fight surveillance, spying, and propaganda.

EU & national elections

In order to understand the electoral system in European (and later on national elections) the EU should build and foster a comprehensive framework for the future of e-voting. Moving forward to digitising paper voting, the EU can benefit from the advantages of the technology such as decreasing time and cost of logistics, increasing turnout (rural areas and youth), and engaging citizens with the institutions in a simpler and more convenient fashion.

During the in-group discussion, the students also addressed the importance of increasing infrastructure capacity for e-voting in the EU elections that could potentially be incorporated into national elections. In particular, **moving to e-voting is likely to combat Eurosceptic attitudes among the youth around the EU by bridging the gap and increasing the turnout.** ([Trechsel et.al, 2016: p.8](#))

The high usage of smartphones and computer literacy among the youth is a way to bring them closer to voting through online procedures.

Based on Estonia's pioneer electronic voting example (that dates more than a decade in both national and European elections) an increased turnout over the years and a minimization of costs are feasible. The accessibility in rural areas and

the additional participation of diaspora communities (around 8 million Europeans live in a residence different from their homeland) increase the democratic weight of the elections. In addition, digital voting is less likely to become a tool of political interference in the results.

However, the digitalization of the voting process should be gradual and first introduced to the municipal level, so that citizens can familiarise themselves. This will grow trust and build confidence in the process and therefore increase their participation. In order to acquire a high level of trust (on the use of data, risks, etc.) campaigns are necessary, as is training on improving digital literacy and trials.

E-voting could also expand among young people, who are more computer literate.

„For all the digital transitions to occur, steps on cybersecurity infrastructure should simultaneously be proposed and applied. While the transition is taking place, a paper vote should remain an option as well.“

As Euroscepticism among youth stems also from a lack of connection and a long distance from the EU institutions, an easy method of applying (registering) and voting via the internet would enable the youth to engage with a “one-click” process. It is also very important for rural areas and people with mobility limitations to enjoy easy access to

their fundamental right to vote and stand for election. Although the distance from ballot centers and the cost of commuting are not the main reasons for low turnout, it is important to minimise such external disincentives for people.

For all the digital transitions to occur, steps on cybersecurity infrastructure should simultaneously be proposed and applied. While the transition is taking place, a paper vote should remain an option as well. The students proposed the introduction of special election observation committees. These special committees will be comprised of national delegates appointed by the main parties

who could monitor the process. Such committees would be efficient in providing a clear and transparent report on the election proceedings.

Recently, the Hungarian anti-LGBT referendum brought attention to the international community. The OSCE decided on a full-scale monitoring mission in Hungary (as part of the international election observation strategy of the EU). In this example, the deployment comprised long-term and short-term international experts observing the proceeding before and during the election day and referendum. Following this pattern, the EU could ensure (alongside the digital transition to e-voting) the deployment of special election observation committees in regions and cases where anti-democratic behaviours have been identified. Although these missions are in force since 2000 in more than 75 countries globally, it is also necessary to heal democratic friction in member states.

Recommendations

Media

1. The EU should build a legal framework to prohibit (or limit the number of) politicians from acquiring media ownership. The EU should form a framework of platforms, committees, and independent institutions that would monitor, evaluate, and disclose ownership and funding data to relevant stakeholders and the public.
2. Following the European Media Freedom Act (initiated in September 2022) the EU should further add the option to impose sanctions on media, corporations, individuals, and advertisers that interfere with media content, and pose a threat to the right of freedom of speech.

Elections

1. The EU should facilitate (by funding, advocating, and informing) the gradual implementation of electronic voting trials (on the municipal level) in order to examine the first pilot results. This would provide the first data on e-voting such as people's response to it, familiarisation with the process, and the electoral turnout for future large-scale elections.
2. The EU should accompany the trials with workshops and training campaigns for less computer-literate people. These campaigns should focus on the advantages of electronic voting, building trust on the internet, and informing on the benefits of the process.

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For more information about the YouthEU project and organisations involved in its implementation, please visit youtheu.eu.



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