



Interreg
South Baltic



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**D-EFFECT - CIVIC SOCIETY DEMOCRACY LESSONS, bringing
a youth perspective in the EU policymaking at all levels in
line with Youth Strategy 2022-2027**



Activity 2.2 Cross-border research on perceptions and challenges - Co-creation of understanding in the transnational context



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DOCUMENT SUMMARY

This part of the research focuses on systemic solutions across the South Baltic area (SBA) in supporting and creating a framework for youth environment civic participation, with an emphasis on cross-border exchange and democratic engagement. Given this complex and multi-level aim, the following elements are included:

➤ Key Stakeholders 'identification and mapping.

Systemic change requires systemic actors. Youth civic participation does not exist in a vacuum, it is shaped by policies, institutions, NGOs, schools, media, and youth themselves. Stakeholders mapping helps to understand who has power, influence, or interest in youth engagement, whether that's national youth councils, local municipalities, EU programs, or activist networks. It enables targeted interventions, partnership building, and sustainability by aligning interests and responsibilities.

➤ Reviewing Policy and Institutional Support.

It is important to assess the enabling or constraining environment for youth participation. Policies (local, national, EU-level) often define the rights, responsibilities, and resources (European Commission, 2019) for youth civic engagement. Institutions (e.g. municipalities, youth parliaments, ministries) are crucial for implementation. Knowing their roles and effectiveness allows for evidence-based recommendations. Reviewing this also reveals gaps between policy rhetoric and practice, enabling critical insight into where systemic improvements are needed.

➤ Analysis of Scientific Publications and Articles in the Professional Press.

Academic and professional literature provides a theoretical and empirical basis (Centre for Media Pluralism and Freedom, 2023) for understanding how youth perceive and practice democracy. It also helps uncover trends, barriers, and innovations in civic participation, discloses scholarly debates and societal narratives. Young people's voices are often underrepresented in formal political discourses. This analysis helps bring in their subjective experiences and worldviews.

➤ Distinguishing Best Practices and Success Stories:

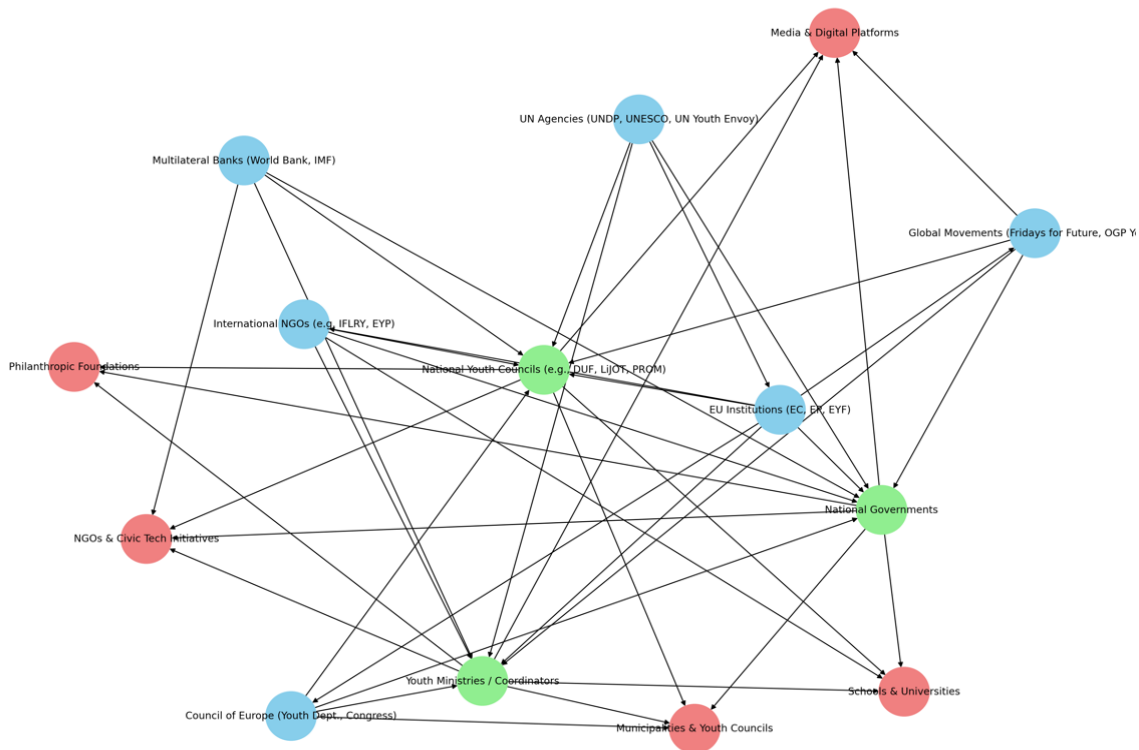
- demonstrates what works in real-life contexts and offers transferable models across borders,
- inspires innovation and allows for scaling of effective approaches,
- provides a positive narrative that counters youth apathy (DUF, 2022) by showcasing successful youth-led or youth-inclusive civic initiatives,

- helps practitioners and policymakers see the practical pathways toward systemic change, not just theoretical recommendations.

1. KEY STAKEHOLDERS OF YOUTH DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT

Youth democratic participation involves multiple stakeholders at different levels and cross-sections: international, national, local/municipal, as well as cross-cutting actors.

As depicted in Figure 1, in this multi-level ecosystem, the relationship between international stakeholders and national actors is crucial but complex. International entities rely on national governments to embed youth participation into domestic policy, yet national systems vary greatly in their openness, capacity, and political will. Some SBA countries, like Germany and Denmark, have well-integrated governance models that can translate international frameworks into tangible action. Others, such as Lithuania and Poland, often adopt international standards through top-down mechanisms, influenced strongly by EU accession processes or funding requirements. While this alignment helps accelerate reform, it can also limit local ownership and reduce opportunities for authentic co-creation with youth.



1 Figure. Relationships between International, National, and Local Stakeholders of Youth Civic Engagement

Notes:

International stakeholders (top cluster in blue), National-level stakeholders (middle cluster in green), Local and cross-cutting stakeholders (bottom cluster in red).

The arrows represent the influence or collaboration paths: International actors like the EU and UN serve as central hubs, National stakeholders mediate and adapt policies to their contexts, Local actors and hybrid platforms are the frontline implementers and innovators.

Source: Generated by ChatGPT, OpenAI (2025).

It is important to note that the classification of stakeholders into distinct levels (international, national, local, or cross-cutting) is not always clear-cut. In fact, several actors operate across these categories, reflecting their hybrid nature. For example, the European Youth Forum (EYF) is primarily an international-level stakeholder (European Youth Forum, n.d.), advocating for youth rights at the EU and global levels. However, it also functions as a cross-cutting actor, connecting national youth councils, mobilizing grassroots campaigns, and shaping discourse through digital and advocacy platforms. This dual classification acknowledges that some organizations transcend traditional boundaries, both structurally and functionally. Such categorization is essential for analytical clarity, but it also reflects the growing fluidity in governance arrangements where horizontal and vertical interactions are no longer easily separated. Recognizing these overlaps allows researchers and policymakers to better capture the complex interdependencies that define the youth democratic ecosystem and to design more integrated, sustainable policy solutions.

1.1. International Level

At the international level, youth civic democratic engagement is shaped by a constellation of institutional, intergovernmental, and non-governmental stakeholders. These actors function across geopolitical boundaries and exert substantial influence over national and local youth participation frameworks, especially within the South Baltic Area (SBA). Their roles encompass agenda-setting, norm diffusion, funding provision, and capacity-building in democratic education and civic infrastructure.

Key International Level Stakeholders and Their Functions:

- **United Nations System.** Agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNESCO, and the UN Youth Envoy promote youth empowerment as integral to sustainable development and peacebuilding. Their roles include normative guidance (e.g., UN Youth Strategy), technical assistance, and convening platforms like the ECOSOC Youth Forum. These actors emphasize inclusivity, rights-based approaches, and intersectionality in youth participation.
- **European Union Institutions.** The European Commission, European Parliament, and European Youth Forum (EYF) collectively shape the normative and funding environment for youth engagement. Instruments such as the EU Youth Strategy (2019–2027), Erasmus+, and the European Solidarity Corps incentivize both formal and informal youth participation. These

initiatives are particularly influential in SBA countries like Poland and Lithuania, where national mechanisms have developed in tandem with EU funding priorities.

- **Council of Europe (CoE).** Through the Youth Department and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, the CoE fosters youth democratic participation via the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life and the Youth Sector Strategy 2030. It also provides co-management structures and capacity-building tools for youth organizations across member states.
- **International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs).** Networks such as the World Youth Alliance, International Federation of Liberal Youth (IFLRY), and the European Youth Parliament create horizontal participation platforms beyond state control. They facilitate transnational political learning, intercultural dialogue, and advocacy training, particularly for politically marginalized or cross-border youth communities.
- **Global Movements & Civic Networks.** Decentralized movements such as Fridays for Future, #Youth4Climate, and the Open Government Partnership (OGP) Youth provide bottom-up spaces for youth activism, often leveraging digital platforms to mobilize around democracy, sustainability, and governance reform.
- **Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs).** Institutions like the World Bank and IMF, while traditionally macroeconomic in focus, increasingly fund youth-inclusive governance programs through initiatives like Youth Employment and Skills Development or Social Accountability Frameworks, thus indirectly shaping civic participation ecosystems.

The international stakeholder landscape in youth civic democratic engagement is rich in capacity, influence, and ambition, but it is also marked by systemic limitations and interdependency. One of the primary strengths of international actors lies in their normative power. Institutions such as the United Nations and the European Union provide a globally recognized framework for youth rights, democratic engagement, and cross-border collaboration. Their capacity to set agendas, offer policy guidance, and mobilize funding ensures that youth participation remains a strategic priority at multiple levels of governance. Furthermore, they serve as conveners of diverse actors, from national ministries to grassroots organizations, thereby fostering a more coherent and inclusive governance ecosystem.

However, the very characteristics that empower these institutions also expose certain vulnerabilities. Their reliance on soft power means that implementation depends heavily on the willingness and capacity of national governments and local institutions. As such, their guidelines, strategies, and funding instruments often lack enforceability, resulting in uneven uptake across regions. Additionally, many international initiatives are tied to project cycles, leading to short-termism and a lack of structural continuity. While funding flows generously in the initial phases, long-term support is frequently uncertain, leaving youth-led initiatives vulnerable to collapse once external financing ends. Another limitation is the risk of duplication and fragmentation, as overlapping

mandates among global, regional, and civil society actors can blur accountability and hinder strategic alignment.

In summary, international stakeholders form a foundational yet heterogeneous layer of the youth civic engagement ecosystem. Their legitimacy, resources, and networks are crucial for cross-border cooperation, norm diffusion, and institutional innovation. However, to maximize their impact, they must deepen local integration, foster youth-led co-design, and promote long-term structural support over short-term visibility. As such, they are both enablers and dependent actors within the broader governance ecology of youth democracy in the South Baltic Area.

1.2. National Level and Local/Municipal Levels

1.2.1. Institutional and Civic Participation Actors

Quite detailed information on youth policy-related structures, policies and initiatives in specific countries is available on the online platform Youth Wiki. The Youth Wiki is an initiative of the European Commission, developed to enhance European cooperation in youth policy by offering a user-friendly, continuously updated platform. It serves as a tool for the European Commission and member states to make informed decisions by providing information on reforms and initiatives related to youth policies. The Youth Wiki aims to support evidence-based European cooperation in the field of youth by providing detailed insights into national policies that support young people. This facilitates information exchange, showcases innovative approaches, and underpins peer learning activities among member states.

Likewise, various national and regional government sources, institutional reports, and youth-focused platforms complement the knowledge base by offering localized perspectives and practical insights into youth governance frameworks and participatory mechanisms.

Youth policy implementation varies across Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Poland, and Lithuania reflecting each country's unique governance structures and approaches to youth engagement. The following is a comparative analysis highlighting the organizational structures, along with their respective advantages and disadvantages.

Sweden's youth policy decision-making framework involves various governmental and non-governmental entities working collaboratively to address youth-related issues. The structure can be outlined as follows:

National Level:

- **Parliament (Riksdag):** Holds legislative power and represents the Swedish people.
- **Government:** Implements parliamentary decisions and proposes new or amended laws. All decisions are made collectively, with the Prime Minister overseeing policy coordination.
- **Ministry of Health and Social Affairs:** In Sweden, the responsibility for youth policy has transitioned between ministries over time. As of 2021, the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs

oversees youth policy including coordination, development, and international cooperation on youth issues. Previously, the Ministry of Culture held this responsibility. This shift underscores the cross-sectoral nature of youth policy in Sweden, encompassing areas such as education, employment, health, and culture.

- Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (MUCF): A government agency tasked with matters related to youth policy and civil society, ensuring the achievement of youth policy objectives.

Regional Level:

- Regions (21 in total): Responsible for tasks requiring coordination across larger areas, notably healthcare. They possess taxation rights to fund their services.
- County Administrative Boards (Länsstyrelser): Government bodies representing the counties at the regional level.

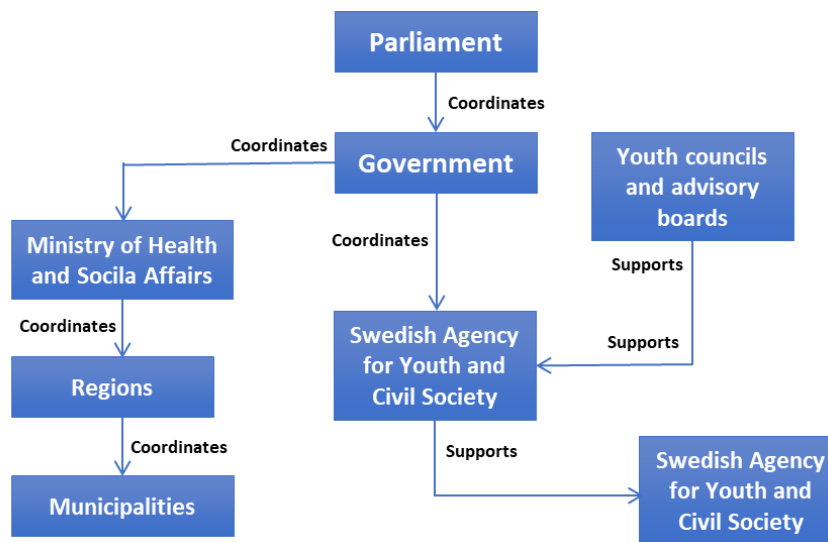
Local Level:

- Municipalities (290 in total): Entrusted with a wide range of services affecting young people, including education, employment, housing, health, participation, culture, and leisure. They have significant autonomy and taxation rights.
- Youth Councils and Advisory Boards: Many municipalities have established platforms such as youth councils, forums, delegations, or parliaments to facilitate dialogue between young people and local decision-makers. The organization and focus of these bodies vary by municipality.

Non-Governmental Actors:

- Swedish Association of Youth Councils (Sveriges ungdomsråd): A civil society organization that networks local youth councils and advisory groups nationwide, promoting cooperation and development among them.

This structure, as shown in 2 Figure, reflects Sweden's commitment to a decentralized approach, emphasizing local autonomy and active youth participation in policy-making processes:



2 Figure. Youth policy at national level in Sweden

Source: Generated by ChatGPT, OpenAI (2025).

The structure fosters an environment where youth play a significant role in shaping policies, as their active engagement ensures that initiatives are grounded in their lived experiences and evolving needs. At the same time, municipalities have the flexibility to adapt these initiatives to the specific context of their communities, enhancing both relevance and impact. However, this flexibility can also result in differing levels of implementation, as not all municipalities possess the same resources or capacities. Moreover, aligning national goals with locally-driven actions presents coordination challenges that demand robust communication and collaborative strategies.

Denmark's youth policy decision-making framework is characterized by a decentralized and cross-sectoral approach, involving multiple governmental levels and various organizations. The sectoral approach at the national level (involving different ministries depending on the topic) also reflects this decentralized, cross-sectoral character. This means that responsibilities for youth policy are spread across different levels of government: national, regional, and especially municipal. There is no single national youth ministry, and much of the policy implementation and decision-making takes place at the municipal level, allowing for local autonomy and tailored solutions based on local needs. Municipalities play a key role in shaping youth services, education, and participation mechanisms like local youth councils. The structure can be outlined as follows:

National Level:

- Parliament (Folketinget): The legislative body responsible for establishing the legal framework for national youth policies.
- Government: Defines overarching political strategies and ensures the implementation of policies.
- Sector Ministries: Denmark does not have a dedicated Ministry of Youth. Instead, youth policies are formulated within various sector ministries, such as:

- Ministry of Children and Education: Oversees educational policies affecting young people;
 - Ministry of Social Affairs and the Interior: Handles social policies impacting youth welfare;
 - Ministry of Health: Addresses health-related issues concerning young individuals.
- Danish Youth Council (Dansk Ungdoms Fællesråd - DUF): An umbrella organization representing approximately 80 children and youth organizations nationwide. DUF serves as a formal consultation partner in Danish legislation and is involved in various committees related to education policy, human rights, and EU affairs.

Regional Level:

- Regions (5 in total): Primarily responsible for tasks such as healthcare, which indirectly affect youth well-being.

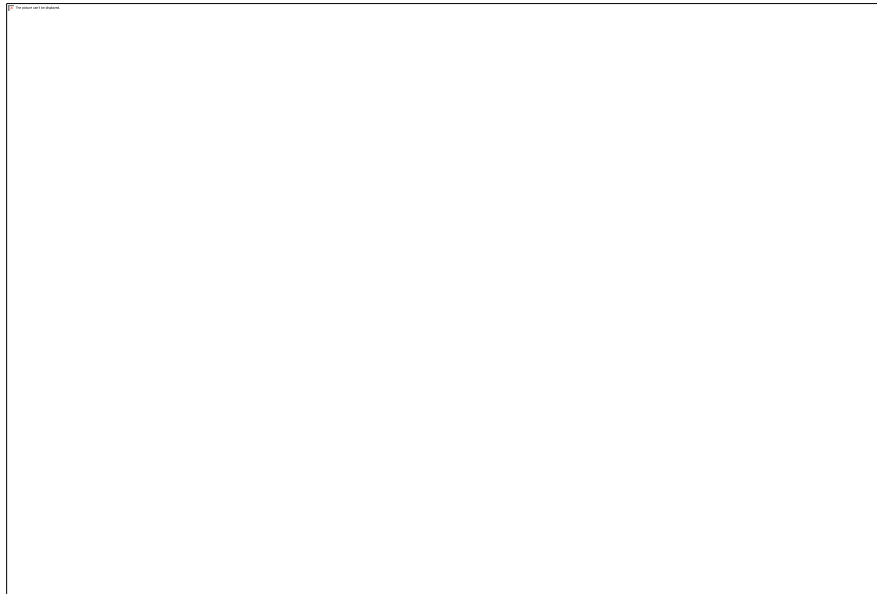
Local Level:

- Municipalities (98 in total): Entrusted with implementing youth policies and providing services directly affecting young people, including childcare, primary education, social services, and cultural activities. Municipalities have the autonomy to define local strategies and targets, provided they comply with national legislation and agreements.
- Local Youth Councils: Many municipalities have established local youth councils to promote youth participation in decision-making processes. These councils vary in structure; some are directly elected by young people, while others comprise representatives from educational institutions or function as open youth forums.

Non-Governmental Actors:

- National Union of Students in Denmark (Danske Studerendes Fællesråd - DSF): An umbrella organization representing students' unions at higher education institutions, advocating for student interests in educational policy.
- Political Youth Organizations: Affiliated with various political parties, these organizations engage young people in political activities and discussions. For example, the Social Democratic Youth of Denmark (Danmarks Socialdemokratiske Ungdom - DSU) is linked to the Social Democrats.

This decentralized structure, as shown in 3 Figure, reflects Denmark's commitment to involving various stakeholders at multiple levels, ensuring that youth policies are comprehensive and responsive to the needs of young people across the country:



3 Figure. Youth policy at national level in Denmark

Source: Generated by ChatGPT, OpenAI (2025).

The structure of youth policy implementation offers notable strengths while also posing significant challenges. On the positive side, municipalities can shape policies in ways that respond directly to the needs and realities of their local youth. This is especially important given the diversity of challenges faced by young people in urban versus rural areas. Local youth councils and forums provide young people with opportunities to participate in decision-making processes, fostering civic engagement and political awareness from an early age. Additionally, the involvement of multiple ministries such as those responsible for education, health, and social affairs enables a more holistic and integrated approach to youth development, addressing interconnected issues like mental health, education, and employment.

Decentralization also encourages flexibility and innovation. Local governments can experiment with new approaches, launch pilot projects, and share successful practices that have the potential to be scaled nationally. The proximity of municipalities to their citizens enhances the efficiency of service delivery and facilitates faster feedback, making local governance more responsive and adaptive.

However, this structure is not without its limitations. Regional disparities in resources and capacities can result in unequal access to youth services, effectively creating a “postcode lottery” in which the quality of opportunities for young people depends heavily on where they live. The absence of a strong central coordinating body may lead to fragmented efforts, duplication, or gaps in services, making it difficult to maintain coherence across the national landscape. Moreover, while local youth participation mechanisms exist, their quality and effectiveness vary greatly, and without a consistent model, some youth voices are more effectively represented than others.

The involvement of multiple levels of governance can also lead to unclear lines of accountability, making it difficult to determine who is responsible for specific outcomes or failures. In the absence of a dedicated youth ministry or a unified national strategy, long-term planning may suffer, with efforts

becoming piecemeal or short-sighted. Despite its strengths, the structure thus requires careful coordination, strategic vision, and mechanisms to ensure equity and accountability across all regions.

Germany's youth policy is shaped by its federal system (Federal Ministry for Family Affairs et al., n.d.), in which responsibilities are distributed across federal, state (Länder), and local levels. The system emphasizes subsidiarity and cooperation between public authorities and civil society organizations, particularly youth associations. The structure can be outlined as follows:

National Level:

- Bundestag (German Federal Parliament). The legislative body responsible for passing laws and frameworks that affect youth policy on a national scale.
- Federal Government (Bundesregierung). Composed of federal ministries, it develops national strategies and oversees their implementation through sectoral policies.
- Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ). The primary ministry responsible for youth policy at the federal level. It ensures coordination across sectors (e.g. education, health, digitalization) and manages cooperation with EU and international institutions on youth affairs.
- Federal Youth Advisory Board (Bundesjugendkuratorium). A consultative body composed of experts and representatives from academia, youth work, and politics, advising the BMFSFJ on structural and strategic youth issues.
- Federal Child and Youth Plan (Kinder- und Jugendplan des Bundes – KJP). Germany's central funding instrument for child and youth services at the national level. It finances nationwide activities, organizations, and pilot projects.
- German Federal Youth Council (Deutscher Bundesjugendring – DBJR). An umbrella organization representing over 30 youth organizations and associations at the national level. It engages in political advocacy and policy consultation and is a key actor in youth participation at the federal level.

State (Länder) Level:

- 16 Federal States (Länder): Each state has its own youth policy and legislation in areas such as education, youth welfare, and participation. They also have their own ministries responsible for youth issues.
- State Youth Offices (Landesjugendämter): Function as supra-regional authorities offering professional support, guidance, and coordination to municipalities and independent providers of youth services.

Local Level:

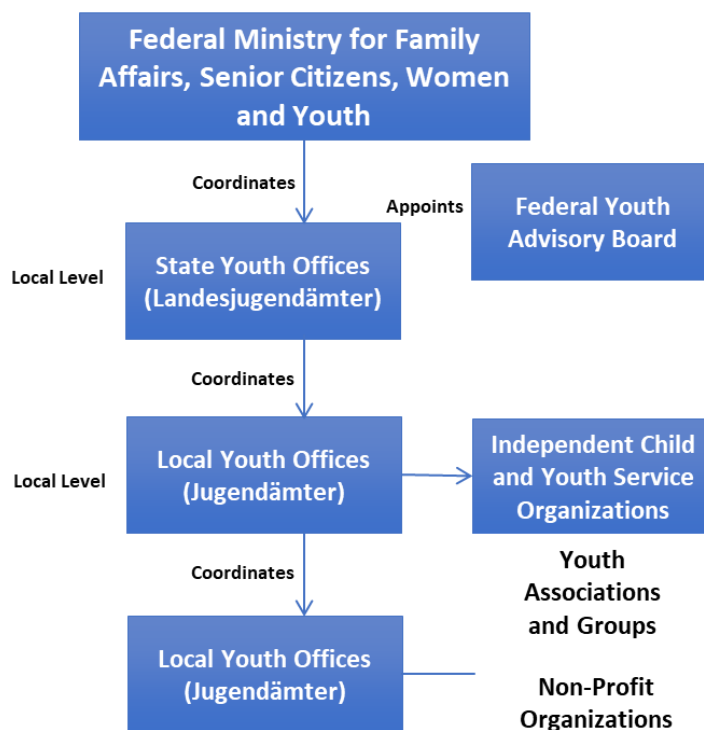
- Youth Welfare Offices (Jugendämter): Approximately 600 offices operate at the municipal level and are responsible for implementing child and youth services. They plan, fund, and supervise youth work, youth social work, and youth welfare services.

- **Local Youth Councils and Forums:** Many municipalities support youth participation through youth parliaments, advisory boards, and forums, ensuring that young people's voices are heard in local decision-making.

Non-Governmental Actors:

- **Independent Child and Youth Service Providers:** Include religious institutions, welfare associations, and youth organizations. These actors implement a large share of youth services under the principle of subsidiarity.
- **Youth Associations (Jugendverbände):** Operate independently but often receive public funding. They provide informal education, promote civic engagement, and are involved in policy dialogue at all levels.

This multi-tiered structure, as shown in 4 Figure, reflects Germany's commitment to a comprehensive and collaborative approach to youth policy, ensuring that the interests and needs of young people are addressed across various levels of government and society. This structure reflects Germany's commitment to federalism, subsidiarity, and civic involvement in youth affairs:



4 Figure. Youth policy at national level in Germany

Source: Generated by ChatGPT, OpenAI (2025).

The structure is characterized by a high degree of autonomy and flexibility, allowing states and municipalities to develop youth policies that respond to local realities while still contributing to broader national objectives. This decentralized approach is complemented by the strong and

formalized involvement of civil society. Youth associations and independent service providers play a central role not only in implementing initiatives but also in shaping the direction of youth policy itself. Participation is well institutionalized, with youth councils and advisory bodies operating across national, regional, and local levels, ensuring that young people have structured opportunities to engage in political processes and influence decisions that affect their lives.

A key strength of the system lies in its stable funding mechanism. The Child and Youth Plan (KJP) provides a reliable, long-term source of financial support for youth work across the country, allowing for strategic planning and sustained investment in youth development.

Yet, the very features that lend the system its strengths also contribute to its complexity. The multilevel governance structure, while empowering local actors, can make coordination and strategic coherence more difficult to achieve. Disparities in regional resources and political priorities may lead to fragmented service delivery and unequal opportunities for youth engagement, depending on where a young person lives. The limited central oversight, a consequence of strong local autonomy, can also make it challenging to implement unified national strategies or to evaluate outcomes comprehensively across the system. Balancing flexibility with cohesion remains an ongoing challenge within this otherwise robust and participatory framework.

Poland's youth policy is characterized by a centralized coordination mechanism (Government of Poland, 2020) under a Government Plenipotentiary, combined with local-level execution and involvement of youth advisory bodies. Civil society and umbrella organizations also play a critical consultative role.

National Level:

- Sejm (Parliament): Legislative authority responsible for shaping laws, including those that affect youth policy frameworks.
- Government of Poland (Council of Ministers): Adopts strategic directions and oversees youth policy development across sectors.
- Government Plenipotentiary for Youth Policy (Pełnomocnik Rządu ds. Polityki Młodzieżowej): Established in 2020. Main coordinator of youth policy across ministries, institutions, and civil society actors. Promotes dialogue between the government and youth organizations.
- Ministry of Education and Science: Oversees formal education policies and youth educational initiatives.
- Ministry of Family and Social Policy: Leads on social inclusion, family support, and welfare programs for youth.
- Council for Dialogue with the Young Generation (Rada Dialogu z Młodym Pokoleniem): Official advisory body composed of youth representatives, ministries, local authorities, and NGOs. Bridges communication between the government and young people.
- Polish Council of Youth Organizations (PROM): National umbrella platform for youth NGOs. Represents youth in policy consultations and European platforms.

Regional Level:

- Voivodeships (16): Regional governments are responsible for implementing aspects of youth policy related to education, vocational training, and social services.
- Youth Parliaments (Młodzieżowe Sejmiki Województwa): Established in various provinces, such as Dolnośląskie, Kujawsko-Pomorskie, Lubelskie, and others. Act as formal structures to support and represent youth at the regional level.

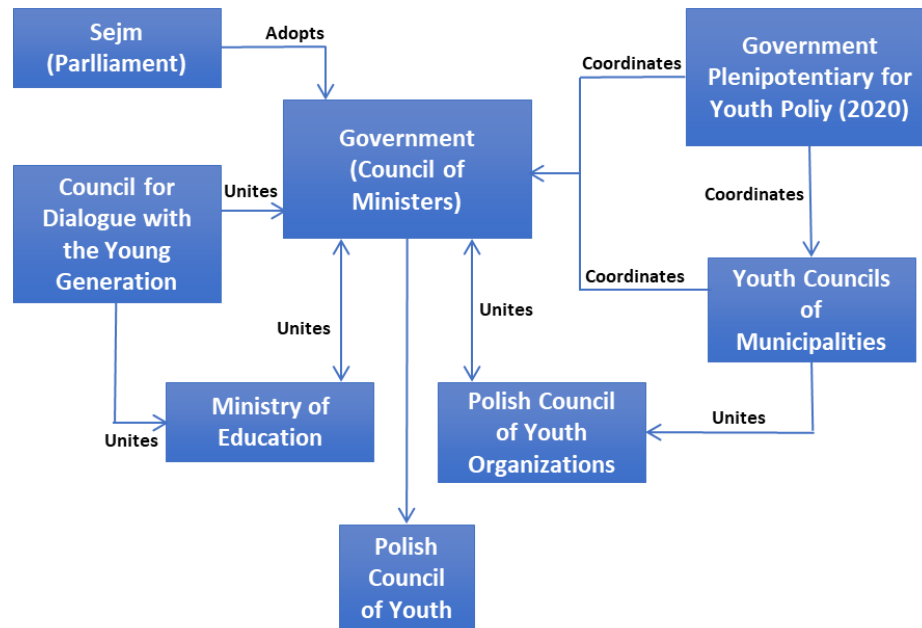
Local Level:

- Municipalities (Gminas and Powiats): Deliver services that affect youth directly (education, culture, leisure, housing). Responsible for the implementation of national youth strategies at local level.
- Local Youth Councils (Młodzieżowe Rady Gmin/Miast): Voluntary bodies established by local councils to involve young people in decision-making. Their roles and levels of influence vary by locality.

Non-Governmental Actors:

- Youth NGOs and Informal Groups: Organize youth work and civic engagement projects. Often co-financed by national or EU funds.
- Political Youth Wings: Represent youth interests within political parties. Contribute to political engagement and leadership development.
- Student and Academic Councils: Active particularly in universities. Influence decisions in higher education and student welfare.

This multi-tiered structure, as shown in 5 Figure, ensures that youth policy in Poland is addressed comprehensively, incorporating perspectives from national authorities, regional bodies, and local governments:



5 Figure. Youth policy at national level in Poland

Source: Generated by ChatGPT, OpenAI (2025).

The structure supports meaningful engagement between young people and decision-makers through established dialogue mechanisms. Institutions such as the Plenipotentiary and the Dialogue Council provide formal channels for youth voices to be heard in policymaking processes, fostering communication that is both structured and ongoing. At the national level, youth NGOs benefit from a strong platform through PROM, which unifies their representation and connects them to broader European discussions, amplifying their influence beyond domestic borders. Meanwhile, local and regional authorities retain the ability to shape programs that respond directly to the needs of their communities, allowing for a degree of adaptability in youth policy implementation.

However, the effectiveness of this structure is tempered by several challenges. While local youth engagement mechanisms exist, they are not mandatory and thus vary significantly in presence and quality from one region to another, leading to inconsistent opportunities for participation. Although municipalities possess some autonomy, the overall coordination and decision-making processes remain largely centralized, limiting the scope of truly localized innovation and ownership. Furthermore, the frequent reshuffling of youth policy responsibilities between ministries weakens institutional memory and continuity, making it difficult to maintain long-term strategies or build on previous progress in a coherent way. Despite its potential, the structure requires stronger commitment to decentralization, consistency, and inclusive implementation to fully realize its promise.

Lithuania's youth policy framework reflects a centralized yet participatory approach (Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania & Jaunimo reikalų departamentas, n.d.), where the national government takes the lead in youth affairs while encouraging municipal involvement and youth participation. The structure is aligned with European Union standards and emphasizes cross-sectoral cooperation.

National Level:

- Seimas (Parliament of Lithuania): The legislative body responsible for adopting laws and approving national strategies related to youth.
- Government of the Republic of Lithuania: Coordinates the implementation of youth-related legislation and national programs across ministries.
- Ministry of Social Security and Labor (SADM): The main institution responsible for shaping and implementing youth policy in Lithuania. It coordinates inter-institutional cooperation, ensures the development of youth policy at the national level, and oversees EU and international cooperation in the youth field.
- Agency of Youth Affairs under the Ministry of Social Security and Labor (Jaunimo reikalų departamentas): A specialized public body that implements national youth policy by coordinating youth programs, distributing funding, supervising municipal youth coordinators, and evaluating policy outcomes. It also manages international cooperation projects and ensures youth participation in decision-making.
- Lithuanian Youth Council (LiJOT): The national umbrella organization uniting over 60 youth and student organizations. LiJOT serves as a formal partner in policy consultations, represents youth interests, and promotes active civic engagement through structured dialogue and public initiatives.

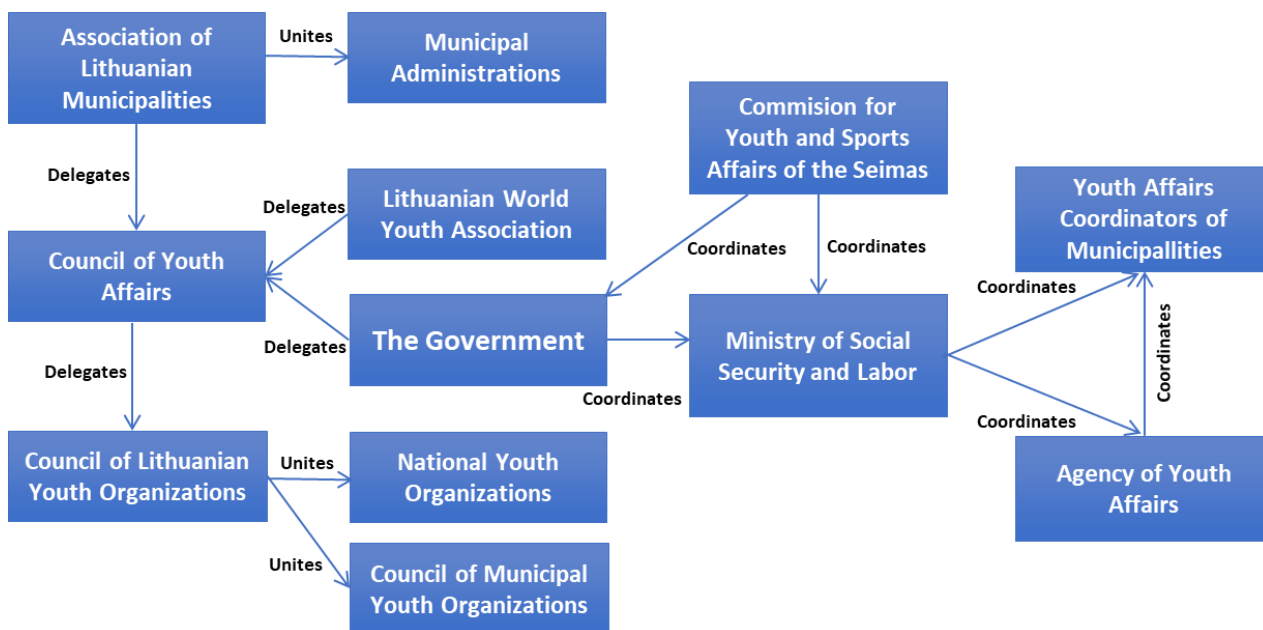
Municipal Level:

- Municipal Youth Affairs Coordinators (Savivaldybių jaunimo reikalų koordinatoriai): Appointed in every municipality to develop and implement local youth policy in coordination with the national framework. They act as intermediaries between local youth, NGOs, and the Agency of Youth Affairs.
- Municipal Youth Councils (Jaunimo reikalų tarybos): Formal bodies operating in municipalities composed of equal representation from local government and youth organizations. They consult on youth issues, participate in decision-making, and advise municipal councils on youth policy and funding.

Non-Governmental Actors:

- Youth Organizations and NGOs: A wide range of local and national organizations implement youth work, organize civic initiatives, and offer services in areas such as education, mental health, volunteering, and social inclusion.
- Youth Workers (Jaunimo darbuotojai): Recognized as professionals supporting young people's personal development and social integration through non-formal education. Municipalities often employ youth workers in open youth centers.

This structure, as shown in 6 Figure, reflects Lithuania's commitment to developing a consistent national youth policy that ensures participation, inter-institutional cooperation, and decentralization of certain responsibilities to the municipal level:



6 Figure. Youth policy at national level in Lithuania

Source: European Commission. *Youth Wiki – Lithuania: Youth Policy Decision-Making*. Retrieved April 2, 2025, from: <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/lithuania/14-youth-policy-decision-making>

The structure of youth policy is marked by strong central coordination, with the Agency of Youth Affairs playing a key role in aligning national efforts with international priorities and ensuring effective implementation across different levels. This centralized approach is complemented by structured mechanisms for youth participation, such as Municipal Youth Councils and the national youth organization LiJOT, which provide institutional platforms for young people to contribute to decision-making processes.

A well-developed professional infrastructure supports youth work across the country. Trained youth workers and dedicated youth centers play a vital role in engaging young people, especially at the local level, by offering targeted services and creating inclusive spaces for development. Civil society is also actively involved, with youth NGOs participating as policy partners and driving innovation in youth engagement and development initiatives.

Despite these strengths, the system faces several challenges. Not all municipalities are equally equipped to implement youth policies; smaller or rural areas often lack the necessary resources or institutional capacity. Many local initiatives depend heavily on central funding, which can limit their flexibility and long-term sustainability. While mechanisms for youth participation are in place, their quality and impact vary widely from one region to another. Additionally, coordination among different levels of government and institutions can sometimes lead to bureaucratic inefficiencies, slowing down implementation and increasing administrative burdens. These issues highlight the need for more equitable support, decentralized capacity-building, and streamlined governance to enhance the system’s overall effectiveness.

The SBA countries, as exposed in 1 Table, represent diverse institutional models for youth policy governance, from Nordic decentralization and civic embeddedness to post-socialist central coordination with emerging participatory structures:

1 Table. Comparative summary of the organizational structures for youth policy implementation in Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Poland, and Lithuania

Country	Organizational Structure	Advantages	Disadvantages
Sweden	Decentralized–coordinated. Strong municipal role; national coordination via ministry and MUCF.	High youth participation; local initiative; flexible funding.	Uneven municipal capacities; complex coordination mechanisms.
Denmark	Strongly decentralized, sectoral. No dedicated youth ministry; policy spread across sectoral ministries.	Strong local adaptation; youth councils; flexibility and experimentation.	Inequality across municipalities; fragmented participation models.
Germany	Federal & decentralized. Federal coordination (BMFSFJ), strong Länder and municipal autonomy.	Stakeholder involvement; funding stability (KJP); youth engagement at all levels.	Regional disparities; coordination burden; weak national cohesion.
Poland	Mixed centralized-local. National Plenipotentiary + formal advisory bodies, with implementation at local/voivodeship levels.	Formal youth representation (PROM, Dialogue Council); local adaptation.	Implementation gaps; central decision-making dominance; political shifts.
Lithuania	Centralized with participatory elements. Strong coordination by Agency of Youth Affairs under the Government of the Republic of Lithuania; structured youth participation through municipal youth councils.	Inclusive decision-making; good alignment with EU; youth workers and councils.	Bureaucratic inertia; dependency on national funding; local disparities.

Source: elaborated by author.

Practices related to youth participation and policymaking have developed differently across countries, shaped by historical experience, cultural differences, and other conditions. For instance, countries such as Sweden, Denmark, and Germany have long nurtured traditions of local governance, a strong role for civil society, and an emphasis on youth rights and civic education. This kind of development has fostered trust in public institutions and opened more space for youth inclusion.

In other countries, such as Lithuania and Poland, democratic traditions are much more recent, largely evolving after the year 2000, particularly following accession to the European Union. In these contexts, the institutionalization of youth policy has often been driven by a desire to catch up with European standards, leading to a stronger emphasis on strategic planning at the national level, with top-down initiatives still playing a prominent role.

Cultural factors have also shaped the development of youth policy. In Northern European countries like Sweden and Denmark, there is a strong emphasis on youth autonomy, participation in decision-making, and trust-based governance. In Germany, the combination of civic responsibility and the principle of subsidiarity is more prominent, supported by strong youth associations and structured funding. Meanwhile, in Lithuania and Poland, participatory culture is still in the making, often relying on top-down programs encouraged by external sources such as EU funding.

All the SBA countries have umbrella organizations that connect the voice of youth (European Youth Forum, n.d.) with policymaking, for example, LiJOT, DUF, PROM, DBJR, or LSU. However, the roles and influence of these organizations vary greatly from active involvement in decision-making to more symbolic representation.

There are also diverse mechanisms of engagement at the municipal level. In some countries, local youth councils serve formal advisory functions, while in others, they operate as open forums encouraging broader dialogue. Inter-institutional cooperation likewise differs. Denmark and Germany more frequently demonstrate cross-sectoral coordination, whereas Lithuania and Poland tend to rely on vertical structures, with a leading role played by a ministry or national agency.

The European Union's Youth Strategy has had a significant impact (European Commission, 2019) on the systems in all these countries, particularly in Poland and Lithuania, where many participation mechanisms have been established through instruments such as Erasmus+, the European Solidarity Corps, or Youth Wiki recommendations.

In summarizing the institutional models of youth policy implementation across the South Baltic Area (SBA), it is evident that substantial opportunities for mutual learning exist, particularly in the domains of strengthening youth participation, mitigating regional disparities, and enhancing the coherence between policy frameworks and practical implementation. The most effective systems tend to rely on a synergy of key elements: national coherence paired with local flexibility, stable and well-funded participation channels, a strong civil society, and youth-led innovations supported by public institutions.

1.2.2. The Role of Non-Governmental and Hybrid Stakeholders in the South Baltic Area

Democratic participation of young people is a crucial aspect of a vibrant, inclusive democracy, especially in the European Union. Across the South Baltic region, which includes Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Poland and Lithuania, a wide range of stakeholders, not only public institutions, and local organizations, play their roles in enabling young people to meaningfully participate in democratic processes. Non-Governmental and Hybrid Stakeholders are also involved obviously:

- **Media & Public Broadcasters.** National media play a crucial role in informing and mobilizing young people about democratic engagement.
- **Academic Institutions & Think Tanks.** Universities and research centers contribute through civic education and policy recommendations.

- Private Sector & Social Enterprises. Businesses and startups often support youth-led initiatives related to democracy, technology, and civic engagement.
- Schools & Universities. Educational institutions play a direct role in civic education and promoting democratic values.
- Local Media & Digital Platforms. Community radio stations, local newspapers, and online forums help raise youth voices.
- Religious & Cultural Organizations. Faith-based and cultural groups influence young people's political awareness and activism.

In Sweden, the ecosystem for youth democratic participation is both institutionalized and pluralistic. Public broadcasters like Sveriges Television (SVT) and Sveriges Radio (SR) have explicit mandates to promote democratic values. According to the Swedish Education Act, "education should impart respect for human rights and fundamental democratic values," reflecting the role of schools in fostering civic identity.

Academic institutions, such as Uppsala University's Civics Education Design Lab (CEDEL), play a research-to-practice role, bridging academic insight and school curricula. Religious and cultural organizations, including Coexist Malmö, further enrich Sweden's democratic infrastructure by facilitating intercultural dialogue and social cohesion.

Denmark's model is characterized by a synergistic relationship between formal education, civic organizations, and state-supported initiatives. The Danish Youth Council (DUF) represents over 70 youth associations and plays a pivotal role in coordinating youth voices in policymaking. Denmark also boasts a unique network of Folk High Schools, which emphasize democratic education outside formal academic institutions.

Public broadcasters such as DR and TV2 actively engage youth through accessible, civic-oriented programming. Universities like Aarhus and Copenhagen contribute critical research and partner with civil society to enhance democratic literacy.

Germany's stakeholder landscape is marked by a blend of federalism and civic innovation. Public media, notably ARD and ZDF, promote political literacy through targeted platforms like funk, which are tailored to youth digital consumption habits. The education system integrates civic education through formal curricula, particularly from the 9th grade onward, ensuring a systemic approach to democratic upbringing.

Institutions such as the Otto-von-Guericke University Magdeburg and GIGA Hamburg lead projects like DEMOGAMES to make democratic concepts accessible via gamification. Religious organizations like KLJB and the Evangelische Trägergruppe are significant actors in rural and urban contexts alike, shaping values-based participation among youth.

Poland presents a complex scenario marked by both robust civic initiatives and politicized public institutions. While public broadcasters such as TVP face criticisms over impartiality, civil society and academia have taken proactive roles. The Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) and the Institute of Public

Policies (IPP) conduct influential research on youth attitudes toward democracy, supported by policy dialogues.

Social enterprises and digital media projects such as *Orientuj się* empower youth through grassroots storytelling and citizen journalism, particularly via platforms like TikTok. However, the involvement of religious-political actors like the Catholic Church and ONR in public discourse raises concerns over ideological polarization and its impact on youth engagement.

Lithuania's efforts are shaped by post-Soviet democratization and a strong civil society. The national broadcaster LRT collaborates with educational institutions to produce civic-oriented content. However, as research indicates, many youths consume news primarily through social networks, creating both opportunities and challenges for democratic engagement (VDU, 2023).

Higher education institutions such as Vytautas Magnus University and the Lithuanian College of Democracy focus on civic innovation and youth leadership. Projects like participatory budgeting in schools exemplify bottom-up democratic practices. Faith-based youth organizations, such as Ateitis and JKD, offer additional channels for political socialization and engagement.

Despite differences in historical, political, and cultural contexts, commonalities emerge across the South Baltic region. All five countries demonstrate institutional commitments to civic education and a growing role for digital platforms. Yet, while Sweden and Denmark emphasize pluralistic dialogue and independent media, Poland and Lithuania show stronger influence from religious-political actors. Germany's federal structure fosters diverse educational approaches, but also necessitates coordination.

The table in the 1 APPENDIX presents a side-by-side comparison of stakeholders by country and type.

Several cross-national lessons can be drawn from the stakeholder frameworks:

- **Sweden and Denmark** showcase strong media-literacy integration and cross-sector collaboration. Their models could inspire more inclusive policy frameworks in countries where trust in public institutions is lower.
- **Germany's digital civic tools**, like DEMOGAMES, offer scalable methods for engaging youth across the region.
- **Poland and Lithuania's grassroots innovations**, such as youth-led platforms and participatory budgeting, present replicable examples of low-cost, high-impact engagement models.

As youth participation becomes increasingly mediated through digital means, all five countries could benefit from co-developing transnational platforms that combine civic education, digital media literacy, and intercultural dialogue. Cross-border cooperation is not just a possibility; it is a democratic imperative (Youth Democracy Cohort, n.d.).

1.3. Cross-Cutting Actors

Cross-cutting actors operate across borders, sectors, and traditional governance structures, playing pivotal but sometimes overlooked roles in shaping youth democratic engagement. Unlike institutional or geographically anchored actors, these stakeholders influence youth participation systemically by setting agendas, shaping digital discourse, funding civil society, or enabling intergenerational collaboration. They represent emerging centers of power and legitimacy within a multi-nodal youth democracy ecosystem in the South Baltic Area (SBA).

Technology and Social Media Platforms. Transnational digital platforms such as Meta (Facebook, Instagram), X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok have become dominant arenas for youth political expression, mobilization, and advocacy. These platforms serve as informal public spheres where civic debates unfold and democratic norms are negotiated, often outside formal institutions. Campaigns such as #FridaysForFuture (Fridays for Future, n.d.) or local civic actions in Poland and Lithuania have gained visibility precisely through such platforms, showing their disruptive and enabling potential. However, the ephemeral nature of online engagement and the dominance of commercial logics may lead to performative rather than transformative participation. Algorithmic bias and lack of platform transparency can also skew visibility and participation.

Philanthropic Foundations and Donors. Foundations such as the Open Society Foundations, the Ford Foundation, or regional Grantmakers like the Körber Foundation (Germany) or the Nordic Council of Ministers provide essential funding for youth empowerment programs, civic education, and democratic innovation. They often support grassroots organizations and informal movements that operate outside the formal NGO sector. However, many of these initiatives are project-based, with limited follow-up funding or sustainability plans. Once initial grants end, youth-led structures may dissolve or become inactive due to a lack of core funding, staff continuity, or institutional memory. This exposes inefficiencies in resource allocation and raises concerns about long-term impact and resilience.

Intergenerational Networks. Intergenerational collaboration via councils, mentorship programs, or co-governance models aims to bridge the experience gap between youth and older political actors. Structures such as the Council for Dialogue with the Young Generation in Poland or municipal youth boards in Denmark enable joint decision-making and knowledge exchange. Yet, the functionality of such platforms often depends on individual actors' commitment and political will. In some cases, intergenerational networks serve more as symbolic than substantive structures, constrained by rigid hierarchies or lack of youth decision-making power. Without structured evaluation and feedback mechanisms, these networks risk tokenism rather than real empowerment.

Tech-for-Good Initiatives and Civic Startups. A growing layer of actors includes civic tech initiatives, youth-driven digital tools, and social enterprises working at the nexus of democracy, data, and activism. Examples like Germany's Demogames or Denmark's open-data platforms offer scalable, low-barrier tools for youth engagement. However, many such initiatives originate from time-limited EU-funded projects (e.g., Erasmus+, Horizon Europe). Once the project cycle ends, continuity can falter. Moreover, digital civic tools may exclude youth without access to necessary technology or digital literacy, inadvertently reproducing participation gaps.

Cross-Border Youth Advocacy Networks. Transnational coalitions like the European Youth Forum, Baltic Sea Youth Platform, or informal regional initiatives connect local concerns to EU-level advocacy and facilitate youth mobility. Nevertheless, these networks often suffer from fluctuating funding, limited staff, or weak integration with national policy ecosystems. Many operate on a volunteer basis, leading to burnout or inconsistent engagement. Furthermore, without institutional anchoring or long-term strategic vision, they struggle to maintain relevance beyond the lifespan of individual projects. This underscores a pattern of fragmented efforts and underutilized potential in regional youth cooperation.

In summary, the highlights would be as follows:

- A sustainability deficit is likely, as many cross-cutting actors, particularly digital or project-based networks, lack long-term continuity. Policymakers and donors should prioritize core funding mechanisms and capacity building to strengthen institutional resilience.
- There are signs of fragmented efforts and inefficient resource allocation. Coordinated strategies, including monitoring and impact assessments, are necessary to reduce duplication and scale what works.
- Equally important is platform accountability. While digital platforms offer powerful tools for engagement, their governance models are often opaque. This underscores the urgency for youth-centered digital literacy programs and ethical platform design supported by public regulation.
- Tokenism vs real Influence. Intergenerational councils and advisory boards often have symbolic roles unless structurally empowered. As the Lithuanian case shows, “while mechanisms for youth participation are in place, their quality and impact vary widely from one region to another” (Youth Wiki – Lithuania, 2025). This calls for institutional reforms that embed youth influence in formal governance processes, not just consultative rituals.
- Inclusive Access: digital civic tools and international networks often benefit tech-savvy or well-connected youth, creating participation gaps. As observed in the Lithuanian context, “many youths consume news primarily through social networks, creating both opportunities and challenges for democratic engagement” (VDU, 2023). Therefore, equity-based design and offline access models must accompany digital participation tools to ensure broader inclusivity.

2. POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

Youth democratic engagement has increasingly become a priority within the European Union's regional development and democratic renewal strategies. In the South Baltic Area, countries employ diverse national frameworks and participate in various international initiatives to promote youth involvement across borders.

2.1. Policy and institutional frameworks for CB youth democratic civic engagement

Cross-border youth democratic engagement in the South Baltic Area is shaped by a complex interplay of national strategies, legal frameworks, and supranational programs. All five countries possess national youth strategies, though as shown in 2 APPENDIX, their integration within broader public policy differs. Sweden and Denmark employ cross-sectoral approaches, aligning youth strategies with welfare and development policies. Germany implements a federal strategy ensuring youth inclusion in political processes. Poland and Lithuania emphasize structured legal instruments, with Lithuania enshrining youth policy in national law through the Law on Youth Policy Framework.

Legal frameworks for youth NGOs vary. Sweden and Denmark provide substantial institutional and financial support. Germany and Poland focus on funding projects that promote youth democracy. Lithuania employs a structured approach, involving both governmental and non-governmental actors.

Cross-border engagement policies reflect each country's orientation toward international cooperation. Sweden and Denmark facilitate youth participation in development cooperation and regional partnerships. Germany and Poland implement youth exchanges through platforms like Erasmus+ and the Youth Lublin Triangle, a trilateral cooperation initiative among Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine. Lithuania supplements these efforts through national democracy promotion programs and the European Solidarity Corps.

Institutional participation in EU programs is prominent across all countries. Sweden, Germany, and Lithuania are especially active in Erasmus+ and Solidarity Corps initiatives. Denmark's engagement is channeled through the Danish Youth Council, while Poland aligns national strategies with EU objectives despite limited structural mobility initiatives.

Municipal involvement is crucial for youth democratic engagement. Swedish and German municipalities support youth policies through twinning arrangements and youth exchanges. Denmark shares policymaking responsibilities across national, regional, and local levels. Polish and Lithuanian municipalities institutionalize youth councils to activate civic engagement at the grassroots level.

Despite the overarching commitment to youth engagement, several countries face structural impediments. Poland lacks age-specific legal provisions facilitating youth participation. Lithuania reports limited support at the local level (Youth Wiki – Lithuania, 2025), constraining democratic participation. These challenges suggest a need for more inclusive and binding regulations to ensure meaningful youth involvement.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that while progress is evident, particularly through regional initiatives and EU funding mechanisms, further alignment of legal and institutional structures is needed to eliminate participation barriers and strengthen youth democratic agency across borders.

2.2. Governmental and NGO support for cross-border youth democratic festivals

Cross-border Youth Democratic Festivals (CB YDF) in the South Baltic Area (SBA) (Baltic Sea Youth Platform, 2023) have emerged not as isolated events but as essential civic infrastructures that support intercultural exchange, democratic learning, and cross-border solidarity among young people. These festivals are increasingly recognized not only for their creative vibrancy but for their function as

democratic laboratories, spaces where participatory governance is both practiced and reimaged (European Commission, 2019).

CB YDF in the SBA serve as vital platforms for intercultural exchange, democratic learning, and civic co-creation among young people. These festivals bring together diverse youth constituencies across national boundaries and institutional contexts to engage in dialogue, debate, and participatory policy making. Governmental and non-governmental support plays a pivotal role in enabling, sustaining, and scaling such initiatives.

From Malmö to Klaipėda, the architecture of support underpinning these events reveals a complex interplay between state frameworks, NGO ecosystems, and youth led networks. As one program lead from Denmark's DUF noted, youth events are not merely symbolic acts but scaffolding for democratic agency (DUF, 2022). Governmental support mechanisms, while divergent in implementation, commonly blend national policy directives with EU level strategic frameworks. Sweden's MUCF, for instance, operates through decentralized youth dialogues, enabling local municipalities to co-finance participation events in partnership with regional twinning programs (MUCF, 2023). Germany's KJP (Kinder- und Jugendplan) enables Länder level co-funding for initiatives such as Junge Ideen für Europa, which brought youth delegations from Poland and Lithuania into structured dialogue with policymakers (DBJR, 2023).

Yet this state support is typically cyclical and contingent on project-based funding, creating discontinuities in long term impact. "The problem isn't launching youth initiatives, it's sustaining them beyond the funding cycle," observed one PROM program officer in Poland (PROM, 2022). Structural fragmentation between ministries, between levels of governance can delay or dilute youth agency, despite good intentions. Lithuania's Agency of Youth Affairs, although actively engaged, is often limited by bureaucratic constraints when facilitating continuity for events like Baltic Civic Jam, which featured co-creation labs on gamified voting and civic tech in Klaipėda (LiJOT, 2023).

In contrast, non-governmental actors bring critical dynamism and adaptability. They are the ecosystem's "innovation engines," operating where institutions cannot. The Baltic Sea Youth Platform has consistently enabled transnational youth camps, ensuring not only digital infrastructure but a model of participatory co-design that centers youth voice (Baltic Sea Youth Platform, 2023). According to one youth delegate, Elin Nilsson, "We don't want to be invited to the table, we want to build it" (Baltic Sea Youth Platform, 2023). These actors curate festival content, engage marginalized voices, and extend the life of festivals through post-event storytelling and civic action labs. They also integrate creative pedagogies such as Demogames, a German civic education initiative (GIGA, 2021) that uses roleplay to teach democratic values (DBJR, 2023).

Nevertheless, NGOs remain financially precarious. Their dependence on short-term EU or private grants challenges the institutional memory and sustainability of youth democratic festivals. "The continuity of our networks shouldn't be a gamble, sustainability is a governance issue, not just a budget line," said youth coordinator Laura Jurgelionytė of LiJOT (LiJOT, 2023).

To operationalize the transformative potential of Cross-border Youth Democratic Festivals (CB YDFs), a comprehensive Festival Toolkit is required. The toolkit provides a structured yet flexible

framework for planning, organizing, and evaluating youth democratic events. It contains eight major interconnected components, as presented in 2 Table:

2 Table. Components of the Youth Democracy Festival Toolkit (Festival Flow)

Components	Description
Planning & Outreach	Foundational to the process are visioning workshops with local youth councils and grassroots actors, where shared goals and values are identified. These are complemented by needs assessments with target demographics (e.g., rural youth, NEETs, LGBTQ+ communities) to ensure relevance and responsiveness. Inclusive communication strategies, including multilingual outreach, digital storytelling, and youth-friendly visuals, enhance accessibility and engagement across borders.
Partnership Formation	The festivals rely on durable cooperation. This includes the establishment of cross-border Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) between NGOs and municipalities, anchoring joint commitments. Youth-led organizing committees act as co-designers, ensuring that festival planning reflects bottom-up governance and horizontal accountability.
Funding & Resource Mobilization	Financial sustainability is addressed through the identification of diverse funding sources, such as Erasmus+, national youth grants, and private donors. Partners engage in joint budgeting workshops to align expectations and share costs equitably. Grant-writing training for youth-led teams builds long term capacity, while transparent co-financing frameworks establish mutual trust and reduce dependency on single funders.
Content Design	Festival activities embrace innovation and interactivity. Gamified civic education tools, including Demogames and digital simulations, enable experiential learning. Co-creation labs explore civic tech solutions and participatory urban planning. Meanwhile, artistic activism components from murals and spoken word to street performances foster democratic expression beyond conventional formats.
Event Logistics	Hybrid delivery models leverage both physical and virtual platforms (e.g., Zoom, GatherTown), expanding reach while lowering barriers. Accessibility planning addresses translation, mobility, and sensory needs. Safe space protocols, co-developed with youth, ensure psychological and physical safety, particularly for marginalized groups.
Event Delivery	The festivals begin with inclusive facilitation guidelines to set the tone for respectful and pluralistic dialogue. Activities include panels, debates, and hackathons centered on youth democratic participation. Evenings are often reserved for artistic showcases and intercultural exchanges, strengthening solidarity. On-site mentoring and emotional support teams provide guidance and care throughout.
Post-Festival Engagement	Sustainability is ensured through youth media collectives that document outcomes and share stories across platforms. Outputs are fed into local policy dialogues, fostering institutional uptake. The formation of regional youth advisory boards facilitates continuity and the integration of youth voices into governance processes.
Monitoring & Evaluation	Impact assessment uses a mix of pre/post surveys on democratic attitudes, focus groups with participants, and Theory of Change models to map long-term civic outcomes. These tools go beyond surface metrics, capturing the deeper transformations in identity, confidence, and civic imagination.

Source: elaborated by author.

Ultimately, CB YDFs are more than youth events, they are civic accelerators. They transform the South Baltic region from a geopolitical space into a participatory commons. This transformation depends on sustained cooperation, visionary governance, and radical inclusion. As one participant, Janek from Gdańsk, expressed after the Youth for the Future festival: “This was the first time I felt that politics could be ours” (Government Plenipotentiary for Youth Policy, 2022).

To imagine a resilient future for CB YDFs, the policy framework must evolve. Hybrid co-funding models that treat youth organizations as co-creators, rather than subcontractors, are essential (PROM, 2022). Policy mainstreaming via embedding CB YDFs within national youth strategies would affirm their role not as add-ons, but as core components of democratic infrastructure (European Commission, 2019). Furthermore, the festivals themselves require upgraded capacities in areas such as grant management, inclusive facilitation, and cross-border legal logistics. A Baltic-wide monitoring framework could additionally assess impact beyond attendance or outputs, capturing instead how such festivals shape youth identities, civic attitudes, and long-term engagement.

In closing then, while state mechanisms offer legitimacy and resources, they often fall short in ensuring continuity due to cyclical funding and bureaucratic constraints. In contrast, NGOs provide the flexibility, innovation, and youth-centered practices that infuse these initiatives with dynamism and inclusivity, though they face structural fragility due to precarious funding.

The interplay between these sectors calls for a reimagining of support architectures. Sustainable models must prioritize long-term investment, hybrid co-governance, and the institutional embedding of CB YDFs within national and regional policy frameworks. Strengthening these festivals requires not just financial commitment but a cultural shift toward treating young people as equal stakeholders in democratic innovation.

Ultimately, CB YDFs represent more than participatory events, they are the scaffolding of a democratic culture in the making. As transnational platforms of civic imagination and action, they have the potential to transform the South Baltic Area into a model region for youth-led democratic renewal.

2.3. Best practices for sustainable funding and institutional backing

In an era marked by democratic fatigue, growing polarization, and declining trust in public institutions, empowering young people through meaningful civic engagement has never been more urgent. Cross-border Youth Democratic Festivals offer a unique platform for young citizens to collaborate, deliberate, and shape the democratic futures of their regions. However, for these initiatives to move beyond symbolic gestures and become lasting democratic infrastructures, they require sustainable funding and robust institutional support. Identifying best practices in this domain is critical, not only to ensure continuity and impact, but also to foster a culture of shared governance, civic innovation, and youth driven policy transformation across the South Baltic Area.

Triangular Co-Governance Models: Sweden and Germany

One of the most effective practices observed across the South Baltic Area is the implementation of triangular co-governance models, as evidenced in Sweden and Germany. These models involve a three-way partnership among municipalities, youth NGOs, and national funding agencies. In Sweden, the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society co-finances democratic festivals through decentralized dialogue platforms and twinning programs, ensuring both top-down legitimacy and bottom-up participation (MUCF, 2023). In Germany, the Kinder- und Jugendplan serves as a durable funding anchor, while municipalities and Länder contribute through autonomous youth policy innovation

(DBJR, 2023). The model works because it institutionalizes co-responsibility, shares financial burdens equitably, and enhances continuity beyond electoral or grant cycles.

Embedded Grant-Writing and Capacity-Building: Denmark and Lithuania

Sustainability hinges not only on money but also on skills to access and manage it. Denmark's DUF integrates grant-writing training into its preparatory programs for youth democratic initiatives (DUF, 2022), while Lithuanian initiatives led by LiJOT and the Agency of Youth Affairs include financial literacy modules and budgeting workshops in festival planning (LiJOT, 2023). These practices are considered exemplary because they democratize access to funding, empowering youth actors with the capacity to lead autonomously and sustainably. Notably, these models treat youth not as mere beneficiaries, but as full partners capable of navigating complex institutional environments.

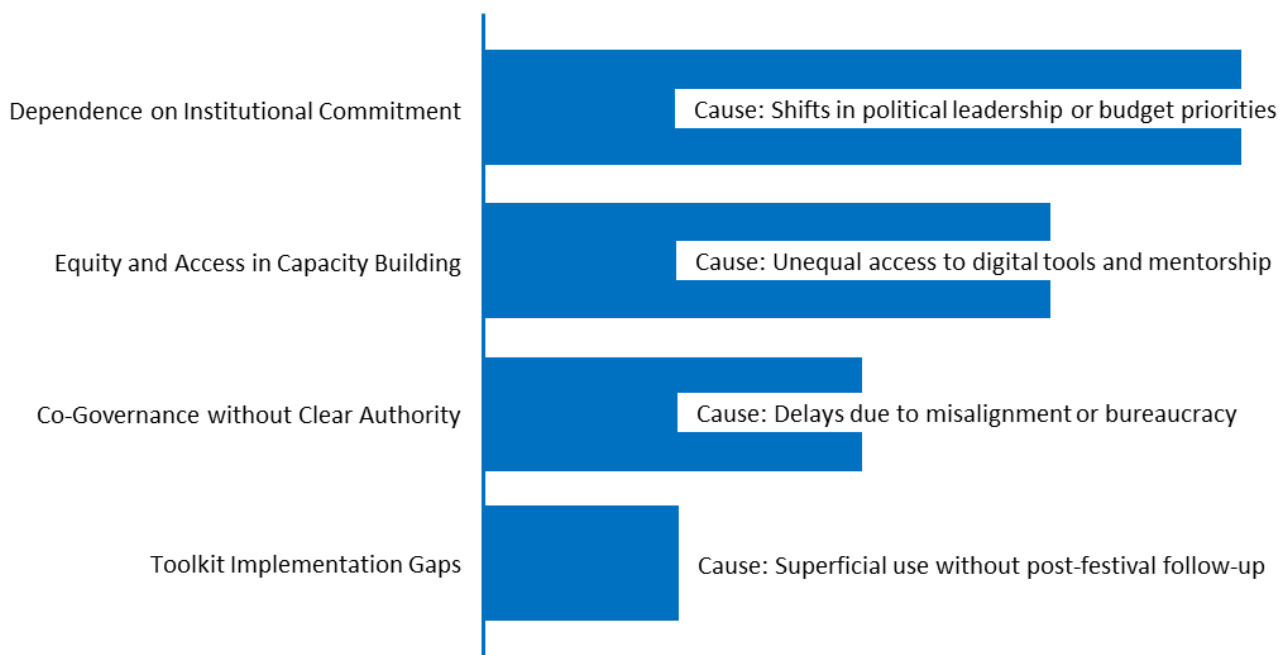
Youth Led Co-Design Platforms with Public Anchoring: The Baltic Sea Youth Platform

The Baltic Sea Youth Platform has emerged as a best-in-class example of participatory infrastructure, co-designed by youth and institutional stakeholders. Its model blends public funding (e.g., EU Interreg) with youth led design committees that determine content, logistics, and legacy actions (Baltic Sea Youth Platform, 2023). Its strength lies in horizontal accountability: youth are not consulted after planning but are involved from the beginning. This participatory ethic also extends to post-festival structures, with media collectives and policy task forces institutionalizing youth outcomes into local governance.

Hybrid Festival Toolkits and Long-Term Anchoring: Cross-Country Innovations

The Festival Toolkit developed across multiple SBA countries (as detailed in the article's "Festival Flow" framework) is a critical innovation. Its success stems from modular adaptability, allowing use by both grassroots groups and formal institutions. Particularly effective is the inclusion of post-festival engagement strategies, such as youth advisory boards and digital storytelling units, which extend festival impact into governance cycles. When implemented jointly by municipalities and NGOs, as seen in Klaipėda's "Civic Jam" and Gdańsk's "Youth for the Future", this model ensures that CB YDFs are not one-off events but part of systemic democratic scaffolding (LiJOT, 2023; Government Plenipotentiary for Youth Policy, 2022).

Even within the strongly positive assessment of best practices for funding and supporting CB YDFs in SBA, certain underlying limitations and potential vulnerabilities become apparent, see in 7 Figure.



7 Figure. Limitations of Best Practices in CB YDFs and Their Causes

Source: elaborated by author.

A closer examination reveals circumstantial gaps that deserve attention. For example, the triangular co-governance models observed in Sweden and Germany showcase impressive collaboration across municipal, national, and youth-led actors, yet their long-term stability depends heavily on sustained institutional commitment and political continuity. Any future shift in political leadership or budget priorities, such as austerity measures or a change in government, could threaten the consistency of funding or diminish local engagement, revealing the risk of over-reliance on state driven actors when political focus drifts from youth democratic engagement.

Similarly, while Denmark and Lithuania offer promising examples of embedded grant-writing and financial literacy programs, which aim to democratize funding access, these capacity-building initiatives do not always reach all youth equally. Young people in rural or marginalized communities might lack the digital infrastructure, institutional familiarity, or access to NGO mentorship necessary to fully benefit from such programs, increasing the risk of reinforcing existing inequalities, as more privileged youth disproportionately gain.

Additionally, while horizontal co-governance models, such as those used in the Baltic Sea Youth Platform, promote high levels of youth involvement, they can encounter difficulties with coordination and accountability. Youth led design committees may experience delays or reduced impact if institutional partners are misaligned or if public funding mechanisms like Interreg impose complex bureaucratic demands, creating a tension between authentic youth leadership and administrative functionality.

Lastly, while hybrid festival toolkits developed in Klaipėda and Gdańsk present scalable methods for organizing and sustaining youth democratic festivals, their effectiveness is contingent

upon thorough implementation and long-term follow-up, factors not guaranteed in every context. In some cases, municipalities or NGOs might adopt these toolkits for a single event without establishing post-festival structures such as youth advisory boards. This superficial engagement can stem from limited human resources, underdeveloped local governance ecosystems, or even donor fatigue, which together risk undermining the institutionalization of outcomes that these toolkits are meant to support.

Thus, the observation reveals that the best practices in the sustainable funding and institutional backing of CB YDFs within the SBA demonstrate that effective civic infrastructure is co-owned, co-funded, and co-designed. Practices from Sweden and Germany show the value of shared responsibility and stable public funding. Denmark and Lithuania illustrate the transformative power of capacity-building and skill transfer. The Baltic Sea Youth Platform exemplifies participatory co-governance, while hybrid festival toolkits show how format flexibility leads to structural sustainability.

Crucially, all these best practices emphasize that democratic engagement is not episodic, it is embedded. When youth are positioned not as symbolic participants but as structural actors, CB YDFs can evolve from temporary events into permanent civic ecosystems.

Even among these best practices, success is not automatic or evenly distributed. The stability of co-governance models is sensitive to political changes, capacity-building efforts risk deepening existing inequalities if marginalized groups are not sufficiently reached, and youth led co-design platforms sometimes struggle with bureaucratic demands. Moreover, the long-term impact of festival toolkits hinges critically on thorough implementation and sustained post-event engagement, which is not uniformly guaranteed.

Proactive management of vulnerabilities and empowerment of strengths of existing best practices should include the following measures:

- **Institutionalize Youth Engagement Beyond Political Cycles.** National and local governments should enshrine youth participation mechanisms in statutory frameworks, ensuring funding and political support for CB YDFs are protected from shifts in political leadership or budget priorities.
- **Expand Capacity-Building to Marginalized Youth.** Specific outreach strategies should be developed to engage youth in rural, marginalized, or underserved areas. Mobile grant-writing workshops, digital access initiatives, and partnerships with local schools and community centers can help bridge access gaps.
- **Streamline Bureaucratic Processes in Youth-Led Platforms.** Simplify administrative requirements for youth committees, especially in EU-funded programs like Interreg, by creating youth-friendly compliance templates, mentoring programs with administrative advisors, and reducing procedural bottlenecks.
- **Guarantee Post-Festival Continuity Structures.** It should become standard practice to integrate post-festival engagement mechanisms, such as youth advisory boards, media

collectives, and policy task forces, directly into funding contracts and municipal strategies to ensure sustained impact.

- **Monitor and Evaluate Impact Systematically.** Establish regular monitoring and evaluation frameworks that not only assess event quality but also track long term youth participation outcomes, policy influence, and organizational sustainability over multiple years.
- **Encourage Cross-Border Learning Exchanges.** Facilitate structured exchanges between CB YDF organizers across the South Baltic Area to continuously share lessons learned, adapt innovations, and co-create solutions for common challenges.

By proactively addressing these vulnerabilities and reinforcing the strengths of existing best practices, CB YDFs can evolve from symbolic events into vital engines of democratic renewal across the South Baltic Area.

3. SCIENTIFIC PUBLICATION, ARTICLES IN THE PROFESSIONAL PRESS: DEMOCRACY THROUGH THE YOUTH EYES

Youth political engagement is both a barometer and a predictor of democratic resilience. Across Europe, youth democratic festivals (YDFs) have emerged as transformative spaces where young people encounter democracy not as an abstract concept but as a lived, participatory process. This chapter explores the potential of these festivals to foster civic and political engagement among youth. Based on a qualitative analysis of recent scientific and policy literature, the discussion spans five European countries – Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Poland, and Lithuania – each offering unique contextual insights into the relationship between youth, democracy, and participatory innovation. The analysis is rooted in the review of scientific publications, impact reports, ethnographic accounts, and policy documents, demonstrating how YDFs act as experimental arenas for rethinking youth participation in an era marked by institutional distrust and political innovation.

3.1. The Role of Youth Democratic Festivals in Fostering Civic and Political Engagement across South Baltic Area

Youth Democratic Festivals as Civic Ecosystems: A General Overview

Youth democratic festivals are more than celebratory events; they are strategic interventions in youth civic life. As Sloam (2016) observes, European youth increasingly engage with politics through issue-based activism rather than traditional party politics. Festivals respond to this shift by offering thematic, co-creative environments where young people can deliberate, simulate policymaking, and interact with decision-makers (Crowley & Moxon, 2017).

The Council of the Baltic Sea States (2025) underscores that platforms like the Baltic Sea Youth Dialogue provide structured and youth-led forums that enhance political trust and participatory efficacy. Similarly, Aflaki et al. (2023) caution that youth participation is meaningful only when institutions are prepared to incorporate young voices into decision-making processes. Without

structural support, festivals risk becoming symbolic rather than substantive. In this context, youth democratic festivals operate as civic ecosystems that blend deliberative participation, digital activism, and political literacy.

Denmark: From Symbolic Engagement to Structural Empowerment

According to Ringsmose and Kragh-Müller (2013), Denmark's emphasis on democratic values begins in early childhood education through relational pedagogy, participation in everyday decision-making, and mutual respect in adult-child interactions. Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the authors argue that democratic learning is not confined to classrooms but is embedded in the cultural and political macro-system. This is supported by Denmark's high performance in the ICCS (International Civic and Citizenship Education Study), where Danish youth rank first in democratic knowledge. Even disadvantaged groups maintain relatively high democratic literacy, due to systemic policies ensuring access to childcare and civic education.

Youth festivals in Denmark such as Ungdommens Folkemøde and Ungdomsøen are structured as participatory events that blend culture, politics, and education. Unlike traditional top-down civic education, these festivals represent what Dewey (2004) would term "learning by doing," enabling youth to interact directly with decision-makers, NGOs, and each other. They provide symbolic and material spaces for political socialization that is experiential rather than didactic (Laopodi, 2003).

However, as Koefoed et al. (2022) warn, these spaces are also sites of paradox. On one hand, they suspend daily social norms, enabling empowerment and embodied participation. On the other, they can reproduce hegemonic structures if participation remains superficial or exclusionary: "The celebration, performances, and pleasure of festivals... can also be exclusive, alienating, and the vehicle of the hegemonic order".

In a comparative perspective, Coopmans' (2019) study of Dutch Liberation festivals offers a critical lens through which to examine the Danish context. While festivals may promote awareness of democratic values, their long-term effect on political engagement is contested. Coopmans finds that youth festival attendance correlates with voting intentions, but mainly for those already embedded in civic socialization environments, suggesting a selection effect rather than a transformative one.

This insight applies to Denmark as well, where engagement patterns often reflect pre-existing inequalities in access to social capital. As Li (2020) notes, Denmark's youth policy supports volunteerism but does not yet fully address "the alienation of youth from traditional politics," nor does it institutionalize diverse pathways of engagement for all youth groups.

Milana and Sørensen (2009) describe how Denmark's long tradition of non-formal adult education, particularly through Folk High Schools, has promoted civic competence. However, the extension of this model to younger populations is inconsistent. While youth-focused programs exist, they are fragmented across municipalities and often lack cohesive national coordination.

Li's (2020) analysis of youth policy across three Danish municipalities, Gentofte, Silkeborg, and Rudersdal, reveals substantial variation in youth participation mechanisms. Some rely on youth councils, while others prioritize event-based engagement or digital platforms. These diverging models

highlight a broader issue: the absence of a unified framework for sustained, youth-led democratic participation.

The literature suggests that young people in Denmark do not reject democracy per se, they often reject the form it takes. Following Marsh, O'Toole, and Jones (2007), youth are constructing “new politics of lived experience,” preferring action on climate, equity, and identity over formal party politics. Youth festivals that align with these concerns, through co-creation, horizontal structures, and aesthetic expression, may indeed be transformative.

Yet, as Olsen (2013) reminds us, festivals often serve economic and branding functions that can hollow out their democratic potential. To avoid becoming merely performative, these events must be integrated into a larger democratic learning ecosystem that includes schools, NGOs, media, and municipal institutions.

Youth democracy in Denmark is not in crisis but in flux. The eyes of Danish youth perceive democracy not just as governance, but as belonging, participation, and action. While current institutional mechanisms and festivals offer important entry points into democratic life, their transformative potential depends on depth, inclusion, and continuity. A shift from symbolic engagement to structural empowerment is necessary to turn these civic rituals into vehicles of long-term democratic agency. Thus, while Denmark's democratic culture and educational infrastructure support civic engagement, a more unified and inclusive framework is required to transform symbolic participation into structural empowerment.

Sweden: Youth as Co-Creators of Democracy

Democratic engagement among youth has become a central theme in social and political research. In Sweden, a country historically praised for its robust welfare state and participatory democratic tradition, youth political participation is undergoing a transformation. This transformation is shaped by broader shifts toward neoliberal governance, digital mobilization, and changing forms of civic identity. The empirical studies examined in this analysis collectively question: how do Swedish youth perceive democracy, and how do they reshape it through their actions and spaces?

A core concept in understanding youth participation in Sweden is the re-evaluation of agency. Traditional democratic theory often conceptualizes participation as formal political engagement (e.g., voting or joining parties). However, as Sundhall (2017) argues, these perspectives are deeply embedded in “adulthood norms,” which systematically exclude youth from being recognized as full political subjects. Drawing on Wall's theory of *childism*, Sundhall challenges this epistemic adultism, advocating for structural change that values youth experiences not as preparation for citizenship, but as citizenship in itself.

Co-creation emerges as a critical complement to this theory. According to Narbutaite Aflaki et al. (2023), co-creation “is seen as a new norm to democratize public decision-making,” enabling a shift from tokenistic consultations (e.g., youth councils) toward deeper democratic innovation. This approach emphasizes relational power and deliberative democracy, offering youth genuine influence in shaping policies.

Political engagement among Swedish youth cannot be reduced to a single typology. Coe et al. (2016) offer a processual understanding, identifying four transitions in youth political action: from consciousness to action, personal experience to shared goals, social to political activities, and single to multiple arenas. This framing underscores the complexity of youth engagement, rejecting binary models that separate institutional from non-institutional participation.

These transitions are not linear. Instead, they are shaped by socio-political context, place, and lived experiences. In their study on youth activism in suburban Stockholm, Ålund and León Rosales (2017) document how racialized youth in Husby constructed a “justice movement” rooted in cultural production and neighborhood solidarity. Their political subjectivity emerged not through school civics classes, but through music, protest, and place-based resistance.

Lisbeth Lindström’s (2012) research on local councils’ leisure policies highlights ambivalence in how youth are framed: as both “self-actualizing” citizens with creative agency and “dutiful” citizens needing guidance and surveillance. This contradiction reflects broader tensions in Sweden’s public sector: while councils articulate democratic ideals, implementation often falls short due to managerialism and risk-averse governance.

Similarly, Lindström (2012) finds that youth centers, while often designed as democratic spaces, are governed by norms of control, performance measurement, and adult-centered supervision. In practice, this diminishes the transformative potential of such spaces.

The metrocentric bias in youth studies is also addressed in Adolfsson and Coe’s (2024) review, which critiques the tendency to study political action primarily in urban centers. They argue that rural and peripheral youth are often depicted as “non-political” or assumed to act like their urban counterparts. Their call to study “place-specific ways that young people do politics” is critical in ensuring equity and visibility across Sweden’s diverse geographies.

The school system remains a key arena for democratic socialization. Alerby and Bergmark (2018) argue that while Sweden’s curricula emphasize democratic values, education reforms have increasingly prioritized measurable outcomes over civic engagement. Consequently, student participation is often limited to symbolic gestures rather than real influence on school governance.

Their findings reinforce Biesta’s (2009) critique of outcome-based education, where democracy becomes a “nice to have” rather than a foundational practice. A shift toward participatory pedagogies, where students shape learning environments and decision-making, is essential for democratic resilience.

The studies converge on a key insight: democracy, as seen through the eyes of Swedish youth, is not static but contested and co-produced. Whether through activist networks, youth festivals, co-created policies, or local decision-making forums, young people are not waiting to be invited, they are constructing alternative political imaginaries.

However, systemic obstacles persist. Age-based hierarchies, institutional rigidity, and neoliberal governance frameworks limit the effectiveness and authenticity of youth participation. Overcoming these requires: institutional reflexivity and readiness for co-creation (Narbutaite Aflaki et al., 2023), abandoning adultist epistemologies (Sundhall, 2017), investing in place-sensitive democratic

infrastructures (Adolfsson & Coe, 2024), integrating affective and creative forms of activism as valid political expressions (Ålund & León Rosales, 2017).

Sweden offers a rich context for exploring youth-led democratic renewal, but its institutions must move beyond tokenism and embrace a deeper, transformative partnership with youth. Democracy through the youth eyes is not merely about inclusion, it is about rethinking how power, voice, and space are structured. If Sweden seeks to uphold its democratic tradition, it must center youth not at the margins, but at the core of its civic life.

Germany: Participatory Discontent and Institutional Adaptation

While the democratic engagement of youth is often questioned in mainstream discourse, empirical data from Germany demonstrates that young people hold nuanced, often critical views of democratic systems. They exhibit a persistent support for democratic ideals, yet also a growing dissatisfaction with institutional performance and accessibility. As Gaiser et al. (2003) observed, "support for the democratic ideal, albeit at a high level, is declining," particularly in the post-reunification period when democratic expectations clashed with socioeconomic hardships.

Youth in Germany participate in politics through diverse modalities: formal voting, protests, digital activism, and community initiatives. However, this engagement is stratified socioeconomically. As Sloam (2014) notes, while protest and issue-based activism are increasing among youth, these avenues are often dominated by "highly educated and well-off citizens," thereby reinforcing participatory inequality.

Busse et al. (2015) argue for the existence of "two worlds of participation" – institutional and alternative – where young people gravitate towards the latter due to a lack of meaningful entry points in formal politics. This bifurcation is significant in understanding why traditional forms like party membership continue to decline while online and grassroots activism grows.

In their cohort analysis, Gherghina and Geissel (2017) found that German youth who prefer citizen-based decision-making mechanisms are more inclined towards participatory modes (e.g., referendums and consultations), whereas those favoring politicians as decision-makers stick with voting as their primary engagement method. This distinction confirms the rise of participatory democracy preferences among youth, as noted in post-materialist value theory.

Sack (2017) examines the enduring East-West divide in democratic value orientations. Even 20 years post-reunification, East German youth show stronger attachment to collectivist and socialist democratic ideals, whereas their Western peers support liberal institutional frameworks. However, Sack's findings also reveal convergence among youth under 30, suggesting that democratic socialization processes are beginning to unify generational worldviews.

This generational shift is supported by research into civic identity development, which emphasizes adolescence and early adulthood as critical stages for political identity formation (Eckstein et al., 2015). These phases coincide with intensified exposure to education, peer influence, and media – crucial vectors of democratic learning.

While often dismissed as performative events, youth festivals in Germany have the potential to become democratic learning environments. As Giorgi et al. (2011) argue, festivals are not merely entertainment but “sites for contestation and democratic debate” that can foster cosmopolitan civic identities.

However, these festivals currently mirror existing exclusions. Marginalized youth, particularly from migrant backgrounds, remain underrepresented. Eckstein et al. (2015) highlight that immigrant youth in Germany are often more civically engaged through informal networks than through institutional channels. This signals the need to redesign festivals to be co-creative and inclusive spaces of civic innovation.

Rindermann (2008) provides robust cross-national evidence linking education and intelligence with democratic outcomes. In Germany, better educational outcomes correlate with stronger democratic commitment and participation. This reinforces the importance of integrating civic education into mainstream schooling, not only to inform but to empower.

Educational interventions should emphasize deliberative skills, digital literacy, and critical thinking, capacities that equip youth to evaluate political systems and engage meaningfully. The stagnation of such education risks widening the divide between participatory elites and politically excluded youth.

The current generation of young Germans is not politically disengaged but differently engaged. They view democracy as a process, not a fixed system. As Sloam (2016) articulates, “young people are reinventing political activism”, from vertical allegiance to horizontal, issue-based networks.

This shift, however, creates institutional challenges. If democratic systems do not evolve to accommodate decentralized and digital modes of engagement, they risk further alienating a generation that remains democratically minded but disillusioned.

To align democratic structures with youth expectations and behavior in Germany, several key measures are proposed. First, institutional openness should be fostered by integrating youth voices into policymaking through the establishment of permanent youth councils and the implementation of participatory budgeting at the municipal level. Second, youth democratic festivals should be redesigned to serve as genuine forums for deliberation, activism, and intercultural dialogue, moving beyond mere symbolic inclusion. Third, civic education must be targeted and comprehensive, with curricula that emphasize critical thinking, intercultural competence, and the use of digital civic tools. Finally, it is essential to bridge the gap between formal institutions and grassroots movements by creating mediating platforms that prevent the emergence of parallel civic ecosystems.

Poland: Between Nationalism and Pluralism

Youth engagement is a critical indicator of the health and sustainability of democratic systems. In Poland, the post-1989 transition opened significant opportunities for civic participation, yet paradoxically left many young people disillusioned with formal politics. This paradox is at the core of the inquiry: What does democracy mean for Polish youth today, and how do they practice it?

Polish youth exhibit a complex relationship with democracy, marked by a mixture of distrust, symbolic nationalism, and hopeful agency. As Mrozowicki and Kajta (2022) reveal in their longitudinal study, Polish youth are “disappointed with the state” yet continue to express “hope for a better life” and political system. This ambivalence is not apathy but a reflection of dissonance between political ideals and institutional realities.

Quantitative and qualitative data from the South Baltic Youth Civic Participation Study confirm that young people are interested in politics and civic affairs but often lack institutional pathways to participate meaningfully (Gomółka et al., 2020). Youth feel excluded from decision-making processes, which are perceived as top-down, ineffective, and unresponsive to their concerns.

Mass gatherings like World Youth Day (WYD) or patriotic events are often celebrated as milestones of youth engagement. However, their democratic value depends on the nature of youth participation. As Niedźwiedź (2019) demonstrates in her ethnography of WYD 2016, such events often function as performative affirmations of national-Catholic identity rather than platforms for pluralistic civic dialogue.

The transformation of youth festivals into genuine civic laboratories remains limited. The symbolic layering of religious nationalism, as analyzed by Kotwas and Kubik (2019), reinforces exclusionary narratives and may alienate secular or minority youth. Yet, the potential exists: when properly designed, festivals can provide arenas for debate, co-creation, and democratic learning, particularly if aligned with youth-driven agendas.

Formal education in Poland largely fails to foster critical democratic competence. Marzęcki and Stach (2016) found that many students in Polish high schools support democratic principles abstractly but are skeptical about institutions and participation mechanisms. This gap between values and action is partly rooted in rigid curricula and a lack of participatory teaching methods.

NGOs have stepped in to fill this void. The Europe4Youth Association exemplifies how grassroots organizations can implement youth policy and civic education that is practical, participatory, and locally grounded (Moś, 2020). Similarly, Polish NGOs engaged in Eastern European civic education projects have shown that informal education can improve youth political efficacy and democratic attitudes (Pospieszna & Galus, 2020).

However, these initiatives often operate without systemic support, and youth work is not recognized as a profession in Poland. This hinders scaling and institutional sustainability.

Civic engagement is not only rational; it is also emotional. Marzęcki (2020) argues that “constructive patriotism” can positively correlate with civic activity if framed in inclusive terms. In contrast, exclusionary nationalist mobilizations like “Rosary to the Borders” reflect what Kotwas and Kubik (2019) term the “symbolic thickening” of public culture, where rituals and symbols narrow rather than expand the scope of democratic belonging.

Polish youth are exposed to contradictory emotional cues: inclusive visions of European democracy on one hand, and culturally restrictive definitions of community on the other. This creates identity tension and shapes how they relate to public life.

In the context of global challenges, youth democratic engagement must also be forward-looking and solution-oriented. Creativity, as Mróz and Ocetkiewicz (2021) argue, is a core 21st-century competency essential for sustainable development. Yet Polish schools seldom employ methods that nurture it. Youth festivals and informal learning environments may be better suited to develop these critical skills, particularly when connected to civic innovation and co-design practices.

In conclusion, youth in Poland experience democracy as a space of tension between ideals and lived realities. They recognize the promises of democratic values but often encounter symbolic gestures of inclusion that lack tangible impact or follow-through. This dissonance fuels a sense of exclusion; however, it does not result in disengagement. Instead, Polish youth are actively seeking new forms of democratic participation that resonate with their lived experiences and personal aspirations. Their engagement is adaptive and evolving rather than passive or withdrawn.

To support and harness this evolving engagement, youth festivals should be reframed not merely as celebratory events but as genuine participatory democratic spaces that encourage dialogue, agency, and co-creation. National policy frameworks need to institutionalize youth work as a recognized and supported field, ensuring its sustainability and professional development. Civic education must be reimagined to be dialogic, creative, and rooted in youth perspectives, moving away from didactic approaches. Increased investment and structural support for NGOs working with participatory youth projects are essential, as these organizations serve as crucial intermediaries between young people and democratic institutions. Finally, public discourse and symbolic representations must reflect pluralism and complexity, allowing for diverse youth voices and identities to be visible and valued.

Polish youth are not abandoning democracy; rather, they are articulating and shaping democratic practices that better reflect who they are and the future they wish to build.

Lithuania: From Formalism to Participatory Innovation

In contemporary Lithuania, youth engagement in democratic processes is influenced by a confluence of historical legacies, civic education structures, and participatory innovation. Despite EU alignment and national strategies to promote youth involvement, a consistent "participatory deficit" persists. While civic engagement is often framed through formal mechanisms (elections, youth councils), new participatory models, such as youth democratic festivals, present opportunities for reconfiguration.

Youth participation in democratic life is often conceptualized through the lens of civic empowerment, a multidimensional concept involving knowledge, skills, motivation, and institutional opportunity structures (Boda et al., 2022). In Lithuania, youth policy is implemented according to the principle of subsidiarity, emphasizing the responsibility of municipalities to enable youth participation (Šukvietienė & Šilalienė, 2023).

However, civic education is insufficiently institutionalized. The GEN DEMOS study revealed that youth in countries with higher curricular hours dedicated to civic education display stronger

democratic efficacy (Boda et al., 2022). In Lithuania, the fragmented implementation of citizenship education hampers consistent development of political agency among students.

Multiple studies have highlighted a democratic participation gap in Lithuania. According to Piktornaitė et al. (2022), 86.5% of young people do not engage in NGO activities, and 46.6% have never participated in voluntary work. Only every third eligible youth votes during elections. This reflects both structural and motivational deficiencies: weak institutional support, limited opportunities for co-decision, and skepticism about efficacy.

The analysis of youth perspectives in Klaipėda also underlines socio-psychological barriers such as declining motivation, weak identity links to place, and limited emotional engagement with public affairs (Piktornaitė et al., 2022). These factors reinforce the hypothesis that traditional participatory forms fail to resonate with younger generations.

While institutional and motivational deficits are well-documented, research also highlights social and demographic conditioning of youth civic behavior. According to Barrett and Pachi (2019), family values, parental political practices, and peer engagement significantly influence youth political socialization. In Lithuania, where civic engagement structures were historically top-down, the intergenerational transfer of political trust and participation remains fragmented.

Barrett and Pachi's findings also reinforce that political alienation, feelings of powerlessness or irrelevance, is common among youth when they perceive institutions as unresponsive. This is echoed by Piktornaitė et al. (2022), who note declining motivation and identity fragmentation among Lithuanian youth post-pandemic.

A promising alternative lies in youth democratic festivals that combine deliberative, creative, and participatory elements. The Youth4Change initiative exemplifies this approach, using Participatory Action Research (PAR) and "Project Citizen" methodology to train youth (15–19 years old) to critically address community issues and interact with local governance structures (Celiėšienė et al., 2023).

Such models create a liminal space between informal socialization and formal political practice, bridging the gap between intention and action. Festivals offer experiential learning that formal curricula often lack, enabling youth to engage in low-barrier, high-impact democratic practices such as dialogue forums, simulation games, and participatory budgeting.

Traditional Lithuanian youth festivals have predominantly been ethnocultural in nature. Events centered on folklore, music, and national heritage reflect a historic emphasis on cultural identity formation. According to Grincevičienė et al. (2021), "national self-awareness gets mature and a sense of citizenship is formed" through symbolic rituals. Yet, such framing is limited in fostering critical, pluralistic civic consciousness.

There is a growing need to transition from festivals as sites of symbolic affirmation to sites of deliberative engagement. This does not require the abandonment of cultural motifs but rather their embedding into participatory, co-creative, and dialogic formats. The evolution from cultural to civic festivals represents a paradigmatic shift in youth participation.

Frėjutė-Rakauskienė (2015) draws attention to the importance of voluntary organizations in identity formation, particularly among ethnic minorities like the Polish community in Southeastern

Lithuania. These organizations play a dual role: sustaining ethnic cohesion and mobilizing community interests within the broader civic landscape. This underscores the need for intersectional approaches to youth participation that account for regional, ethnic, and linguistic diversity.

Furthermore, Kvedaraite (2018) reveals that despite post-Soviet skepticism toward NGOs, youth volunteering in Lithuania is on the rise, often driven by informal networks and identity-based initiatives rather than formal political mechanisms. Her findings suggest that non-formal civic engagement, when supported by communication and participatory tools, can serve as an important entry point to democratic life, particularly in youth subcultures.

While youth councils and municipal platforms exist, they are often underfunded, tokenistic, or disconnected from policymaking cycles (Gomółka et al., 2020). This underscores a mismatch between institutional frameworks and participatory innovation. The Lithuania 2030 strategy suggests that moving towards co-creation and collaborative governance requires institutionalizing stakeholder involvement, clarifying responsibilities, and ensuring permanent dialogue platforms (Paliokaitė & Sadauskaitė, 2023).

To fully leverage youth festivals as instruments of democratic innovation, Lithuania must align them with strategic documents and municipal planning cycles, thereby creating feedback loops between youth ideas and public decision-making.

Summarizing, democracy through the eyes of Lithuanian youth is complex and multilayered, shaped by historical legacies, national identity narratives, and the evolving landscape of civic education. While young people express support for democratic values, they often encounter participation structures that feel distant, symbolic, or inaccessible. Traditional mechanisms, such as youth councils, formal voting, or textbook-based civic education, have not fully adapted to their needs, motivations, or social realities. Many youth perceive democracy as something administered from above, rather than lived or co-created from within their communities.

Despite this, emerging forms of youth participation, particularly democratic festivals and non-governmental initiatives, demonstrate significant potential to revitalize civic life in Lithuania. These non-formal, experiential spaces allow young people to engage actively, express ideas, and interact with decision-makers in ways that are creative, inclusive, and empowering. Unlike formal participation channels, youth festivals provide low-barrier, culturally resonant environments where democratic skills can be practiced rather than merely taught.

To ensure lasting impact, these festivals and youth initiatives must be embedded into broader civic ecosystems that include schools, municipal structures, and NGOs. This integration is essential for transforming episodic participation into sustained democratic engagement. It also allows a shift from symbolic forms of citizenship to practices of meaningful co-creation. Bridging the gap between youth aspirations and institutional responsiveness will require not only policy innovation but also a cultural shift in how youth voice is valued and integrated into the democratic process. For Lithuania, embracing this paradigm means investing in structures and practices that move beyond formalism, toward a participatory democracy built on trust, relevance, and shared ownership of the future.

Civic education in Lithuania should be reformed to include experiential, project-based learning, enabling youth to practice democracy through debate, simulation, and real-world problem solving. Youth democratic festivals should be institutionalized as recurring civic events, supported by municipalities, and embedded in local consultation and decision-making structures. Youth NGOs must be recognized and sustainably funded as essential actors in citizenship development, particularly in rural and ethnically diverse regions where formal structures often fall short. Lithuania should also adopt co-creation governance models inspired by Lithuania 2030 and international best practices, fostering permanent platforms for youth-government collaboration. Finally, democratic efficacy, participation rates, and levels of youth trust should be systematically measured and monitored using national indices to ensure accountability and long-term improvement.

Summary and Recommendations

Youth Democratic Festivals are not only celebratory spaces but also potential incubators of democratic learning, activism, and co-creation. A cross-national analysis reveals that while all five countries value youth participation, their institutional frameworks, cultural contexts, and modes of civic education differ significantly. On the other hand, there are obvious mutual learning opportunities and good practices that countries can adopt from each other, as presented in 3 Table:

3 Table. Youth civic participation framework in the South Baltic Area & Recommendations

Category	Denmark	Sweden	Germany	Poland	Lithuania	General Recommendations
Civic Education	Early childhood focus; experiential methods in festivals	Curricula Include democracy but implementation is symbolic	High educational quality, but inequality persists	Rigid curricula; reliance on informal NGOs	Fragmented and formalistic	Reform education to include experiential, project-based civic learning in all countries
Festival Design	“Learning by doing” ethos; some exclusion risks	Strong emphasis on co-creation and youth agency	Underused as democratic labs; often elitist	Often symbolic, tied to national identity	Transitioning to co-creative formats	Institutionalize YDFs as recurring participatory civic events tied to policymaking
Institutional Structures	Fragmented municipal support; youth councils vary	Adultist norms persist; rural areas neglected	East-West divide fading, but class/migrant gaps persist	Top-down participation; weak youth work professionalization	Weak municipal platforms; low trust	Create national frameworks that coordinate local and youth-led initiatives
Youth Voice in Governance	Co-creative, but lacks national coherence	Institutional reflexivity emerging	Youth demand participatory budgeting and digital platforms	NGOs key mediators, but unsupported	New models like Youth4Change promising	Embed youth co-creation into local decision-making and consultation cycles

Category	Denmark	Sweden	Germany	Poland	Lithuania	General Recommendations
Participation Gaps	Access inequality despite high literacy	Place-based and racial/ethnic disparities	Digital vs institutional split; immigrant exclusion	Nationalist overtones exclude minorities	Identity fragmentation, motivation decline	Build inclusive, low-barrier platforms tailored to diverse youth groups
Specific Recommendations	Develop a national youth participation framework uniting municipal efforts; institutionalize youth feedback loops; support alternative engagement beyond volunteering.	Address rural/urban divides; deconstruct adultist practices; expand affective and creative engagement as valid political expressions.	Integrate participatory budgeting in schools and municipalities; redesign festivals for intercultural inclusion; build bridges between formal institutions and informal networks.	Recognize and fund youth work as a profession; pluralize national identity narratives in festivals; systematically support NGO-youth partnerships.	Align youth festivals with strategic municipal planning; support youth NGOs in rural/ethnic regions; monitor youth democratic indicators nationally.	-

Source: elaborated by author.

All countries can adopt **Sweden's co-creation model**, **Germany's deliberative platforms**, **Denmark's early childhood civic pedagogy**, **Poland's grassroots NGO engagement**, and **Lithuania's experiential learning innovations** to enhance inclusive youth participation.

3.2. Cross-Cultural Exchange and Identity Formation

In an era of geopolitical instability and rising nationalism, Cross-border Youth Democratic Festivals stand as critical venues for cultivating intercultural dialogue, transnational solidarity, and inclusive youth identities. As dynamic expressions of participatory democracy and cultural celebration, these festivals mobilize young people across Europe to co-create spaces of shared meaning, challenge xenophobia, and explore new forms of civic belonging.

Fostering Cross-Border Solidarity and Understanding

Cross-border Youth Democratic Festivals serve as transformative arenas for solidarity-building among European youth. By bringing together participants from diverse cultural and national backgrounds, these events help dissolve stereotypes and build mutual recognition. According to the 2022 Eurobarometer survey, young people overwhelmingly support the idea of cross-European civic participation, particularly through opportunities that enable them to engage in political and cultural life abroad (European Commission, 2022).

Lähdesmäki et al. (2020) show that EU education policies have increasingly embraced intercultural dialogue as a framework for promoting tolerance, inclusion, and empathy. Initiatives like the DIALLS project, which engages young people in non-verbal storytelling and manifesto writing,

illustrate how cross-national activities promote solidarity and cultivate a sense of shared European identity.

Intercultural Dialogue and Identity Development

At the heart of these festivals is intercultural dialogue – a dynamic, reciprocal process of engaging across cultural differences. Ratzmann (2019) defines this as an encounter based on mutual respect and empathy that promotes reflection on one's values and assumptions, enabling the formation of "flexible, fluid, and multiple identities". Such processes are amplified in physical and virtual exchange spaces such as youth festivals, where dialogue becomes embodied through performances, collaborative workshops, and co-creative actions.

Koefoed et al. (2022) argue that urban multicultural festivals serve as both liberatory and contested spaces. In their study of Copenhagen festivals, they reveal how young people use festival environments to explore belonging while simultaneously navigating hegemonic cultural scripts. These encounters, while potentially empowering, also risk reinforcing dominant norms unless structured around critical pedagogies of inclusion.

Bennett and Woodward (2016) highlight that festivals function as liminal spaces, enabling participants to experiment with identity and community in ways often not available in everyday life. Through affective experiences – music, dance, storytelling – young people find modes of expression and belonging that transcend nation-state boundaries and foster cosmopolitan sensibilities.

Reducing Xenophobia and Increasing Tolerance

The participatory and dialogical structures of youth festivals can play a powerful role in countering xenophobia. Skiple (2020) examines Sweden's "Tolerance Project," which used Holocaust education and youth ambassador models to prevent far-right extremism. The project demonstrated that when youth experience structured intercultural learning in mixed groups, they not only become more tolerant but also emerge as proactive agents of inclusion in their communities.

Similar findings are echoed in the UNHCR's evaluation of xenophobia-related programming in South Africa. Misago et al. (2015) describe how youth peace education through sports and media platforms built local trust and reduced hostility. The authors stress the importance of anchoring such efforts in community-led structures and peer engagement, a point echoed in youth festivals across Europe.

Dewilde et al. (2021) provide a compelling case from a multicultural youth festival in Norway. Their ethnographic study reveals that young participants viewed the festival as a space of inclusion, safety, and transnational identity formation. Youth reported a deepened interest in learning about cultural others, reinforcing the idea that such festivals normalize diversity and challenge exclusionary narratives.

Čamo (2023) situates these practices within the broader EU communication strategy, arguing that festivals act as a form of "millennial diplomacy", a way for the EU to engage young Europeans in co-authoring a future based on dialogue, unity, and shared values. Campaigns like "Engage. Connect. Empower." and Erasmus+ exemplify how policy frameworks support these cultural-political spaces.

Finally, Kitanova (2020) underscores the structural conditions that affect youth civic engagement across EU member states. Her cross-national analysis shows that youth participation correlates with democratic maturity and opportunities for transnational engagement, exactly the kinds of conditions fostered by cross-border democratic festivals.

Hence, Cross-border Youth Democratic Festivals are not merely celebratory events; they are incubators of democracy, solidarity, and critical intercultural competence. They offer young Europeans tangible opportunities to construct inclusive identities, foster dialogue across difference, and actively resist the forces of xenophobia and exclusion. The cumulative research affirms their value as both policy tools and cultural practices that contribute to a more tolerant and united Europe.

3.3. Digital and Hybrid Participation

In the age of digital interconnectedness, the civic and political engagement of young people is undergoing a significant transformation. Cross-border youth democratic festivals (CB YDF) increasingly rely on digital and hybrid platforms to enhance participation, foster activism, and address social issues such as xenophobia and intolerance.

Digital Tools and Youth Involvement in CB YDF

Digital platforms are essential for increasing access and inclusivity in CB YDF. They allow asynchronous participation and foster interactions across borders, especially for youth who might otherwise be excluded due to geographical, social, or economic barriers. As Garcia et al. (2015) emphasize, critical literacy and digital media production empower youth to become active civic agents. Youth-led participatory research projects, supported by digital tools, help participants document and share their civic experiences widely.

Similarly, Amgott (2018) highlights the integration of critical and digital literacies in education, arguing that digital activism projects initiated through multimedia production not only promote social justice but also engage youth in sustained civic discourse. This approach enables youth to participate actively in local and global communities through campaigns and projects that are easily disseminated and measured online.

Čamo (2023) further underscores that the European Union's millennial diplomacy strategy recognizes the importance of digital engagement in reaching young citizens. EU public diplomacy campaigns, such as "Engage. Connect. Empower," leverage social media and digital storytelling to resonate with youth values and habits, bridging traditional diplomacy and digital culture.

Digital Activism and Festival Participation

Youth use social media platforms as sites of political expression and collective identity construction. Stornaiuolo and Thomas (2017) identify digital activism as a form of civic engagement that disrupts educational and social inequalities. Young activists use digital tools to share narratives, document injustices, and mobilize communities around shared causes. This is particularly evident in

CB YDF contexts, where hybrid formats encourage both in-person and digital contributions to civic debates.

Dishon and Ben-Porath (2018) argue for the redefinition of digital civility to accommodate spontaneous, expressive, and horizontal interactions online. These features are central to the success of CB YDF initiatives, where young participants are encouraged to engage respectfully yet critically in diverse civic conversations.

Digital Participation as a Tool for Tolerance and Anti-Xenophobia

One of the most promising aspects of digital and hybrid participation in CB YDF is its potential to foster intercultural understanding and reduce xenophobia. According to Abbas et al. (2024), digital inclusion and community engagement are vital in building resilience to radicalization. Training programs developed under this initiative stress the importance of addressing social exclusion through positive digital narratives and inclusive online spaces.

The Handbook on Preventing and Combating Radicalisation (Manevski et. al, 2023) echoes this view, noting that intercultural youth exchanges and European citizenship promotion help mitigate the risks of online radicalization. When young people collaborate across borders in hybrid civic environments, they gain exposure to diverse perspectives, which is a powerful antidote to prejudice.

Davies (2018) adds that educational initiatives focused on digital literacy and democratic dialogue are effective in countering violent extremism. By incorporating elements of media analysis and intercultural dialogue, CB YDF can provide a proactive framework for fostering tolerance and mutual respect.

Moreover, Sandel (2019) emphasizes that social media's affordances allow for both community-building and empowerment of marginalized voices. While acknowledging the risks of surveillance and misinformation, he argues that these platforms remain essential for the development of subaltern political agency and localized civic identities.

Lastly, the European Youth Strategy (Vankov et al., 2024) demonstrates that structured digital interventions can positively influence youth perceptions of European citizenship. Although outcomes vary by country, the strategy shows that carefully designed hybrid programs can deepen young people's civic identity and promote solidarity across national lines.

As demonstrated across the sources, digital and hybrid participation in CB YDF represents a transformative force in youth civic engagement. By lowering barriers to entry, amplifying youth voices, and fostering intercultural understanding, digital tools and social media platforms support the development of a more inclusive and tolerant civic culture. These tools not only engage youth more effectively but also contribute to long-term social cohesion by reducing xenophobia and promoting critical, informed participation in democratic life.

3.4. Education and Informal Learning

Cross-Border Youth Democratic Festivals (CBYDFs) have increasingly emerged as dynamic civic ecosystems where democratic education, youth empowerment, and transnational cooperation

intersect. These festivals are not merely celebratory or entertainment-focused gatherings but function as significant pedagogical arenas that enhance civic understanding, foster digital literacy, and instill a sense of global and democratic citizenship. They provide a platform for young people to not only learn about democratic practices but to actively embody and engage with them through collaborative activities and expressive mediums.

Cross-Border Youth Democratic Festivals as Platforms for Civic Education

CBYDFs have recently evolved into vibrant spaces that promote civic learning, dialogue, and cross-border collaboration. These festivals offer youth opportunities to engage democratically not just within their national contexts but also across borders. They create pedagogical environments that foster participatory practices, encourage digital and global citizenship, and inspire critical involvement in civil society (Ho & Barton, 2020).

Traditional civic education has primarily focused on enabling youth to participate in state-centered institutions through voting and formal mechanisms. However, Ho and Barton (2020) critique this limited scope, proposing a broader civic education paradigm that empowers students to partake in deliberative and justice-focused practices within civil society settings, including NGOs and advocacy networks. CBYDFs exemplify this broader pedagogical approach by bringing together diverse stakeholders and creating spaces for experiential civic engagement.

These festivals operationalize this expanded vision of civic learning through interactive elements such as simulations, debates, and cross-border collaborations, helping youth to develop both civic knowledge and democratic dispositions essential for inclusive participation in a pluralistic society. In parallel, Cates (2022) expands civic education into the realm of global learning, emphasizing competencies like understanding international issues, cross-cultural empathy, and action-oriented learning. CBYDFs align with this by providing multilingual and multicultural platforms that nurture these capabilities.

Activities like mock parliaments and collaborative projects at CBYDFs instill a collective sense of responsibility and solidarity, key features of "world citizenship" (Cates, 2022). Additionally, Breed and Prentki (2018) highlight the value of performance in civic education. Creative forms such as theatre, spoken word, and digital storytelling within festival settings empower youth to express political subjectivities and participate in the public sphere, following Arendtian ideas of collective action.

The performative aspects extend into the digital realm, as participants use online platforms, livestreams, and social media to voice opinions and mobilize peers (Breed & Prentki, 2018). These creative and digital engagements enable youth to test and refine their civic agency in dialogical spaces.

Another significant dimension of civic education at CBYDFs is the cultivation of digital citizenship. Choi (2015) identifies five core domains: technical proficiency, global awareness, networking agency, digital activism, and critical perspectives. CBYDFs implement these principles through digital infrastructures used for organizing, communicating, and collaborating. Participants

engage in activities such as co-creating policy proposals via digital tools or leveraging social media to disseminate civic messages, thereby practicing digital citizenship in tangible ways.

Choi (2015) underscores the transformative potential of such digital participation, which CBYDFs amplify by combining in-person interactions with virtual engagement. These hybrid formats ensure that civic learning transcends physical boundaries and becomes part of the digital commons.

Informal Learning Opportunities Related to Democracy, Human Rights, and Activism

Informal learning environments have gained prominence as spaces where youth cultivate civic identities, explore democratic values, and engage in activism. From climate justice to human rights, informal platforms like CBYDFs, youth-led groups, and online activism enable critical reflection, rights assertion, and future-oriented action. Boni and Calabuig (2017) argue that such informal settings foster critical thinking, moral imagination, and ethical reasoning, capabilities essential for global citizenship.

Their case study on Mueve, a student group at Universitat Politècnica de València, illustrates how informal engagement can embody democratic values such as empathy and deliberation. These activities function outside formal education, allowing youth to experience democracy through real-time action (Boni & Calabuig, 2017).

Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra (2022) introduce the idea of an "ecology of participation," combining institutional frameworks with protest and creative dissent. Youth-led activism, especially when initiated independently, challenges superficial participation and fosters genuine political agency. Examples from global climate strikes and local activism demonstrate how personal experiences are transformed into collective consciousness.

The digital realm plays a significant role in this informal education. Despite risks such as surveillance and exclusion, digital activism remains a vital pathway for civic engagement in the networked age (Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022).

Dyrness and Abu El-Haj (2020) emphasize the civic learning of transnational youth, those who live across multiple cultural or national contexts. These youth develop "critical democratic citizenship," formed through experiences of inequality, displacement, and solidarity. Their learning challenges nationalistic and assimilationist civic education frameworks, calling for an inclusive, justice-oriented approach.

Festivals like CBYDFs provide an ideal venue for such learning. Kwon (2019) critiques global youth forums supported by international institutions for often being performative, yet acknowledges their role in networking and strategizing. CBYDFs can be similarly ambivalent: both empowering and limited—depending on design and institutional sincerity.

Common obstacles in informal civic learning include tokenism, elitism, institutional resistance, and intersectional exclusions (Kwon, 2019; Dyrness & Abu El-Haj, 2020). Informal learning often lacks formal validation, complicating its integration into educational or policy frameworks. Ensuring meaningful participation, inclusivity, and youth leadership is essential to address these issues.

Transnational Knowledge Exchange Among Youth

CBYDFs facilitate transnational knowledge exchange and political engagement, especially important in a world of growing connectivity and shared crises. Youth navigating transnational realities bring nuanced perspectives that challenge traditional citizenship models (Dyrness & Abu El-Haj, 2020).

These events connect local struggles to global discourses, fostering what Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra (2022) call "critical social capital" through debates, simulations, and collaborative projects. Such activities embody Dewey's (2024) educational vision, which emphasized experiential learning, moral agency, and civic responsibility.

CBYDFs also serve as incubators for "networked agency" (Choi, 2015), enabling youth to participate in digital activism and transnational solidarity. This aligns with Cates's (2022) framework of global education, which promotes democratic empathy and intercultural competence through multilingualism and inclusive dialogue.

Boni and Calabuig (2017) delineate formal, mobility-based, and informal learning spaces for global citizenship. CBYDFs integrate these modalities through structured workshops, international exchanges, and self-organized assemblies. EU programs such as Erasmus+ and Youth in Action serve as complementary models, providing peer-led and participatory approaches to youth engagement (European Union, 2015).

Multilingual education, when embedded within civic frameworks, also supports inclusivity and democratic participation (Cates, 2022). CBYDFs adopt language learning strategies to bridge cultural divides and promote linguistic justice.

Artistic expression is another potent medium for civic dialogue. Breed and Prentki (2018) highlight performance as a political act, and CBYDFs leverage theatre, music, and visual arts to address themes like migration, human rights, and environmental justice. These approaches democratize civic expression and build community.

Ho and Barton (2020) reiterate the necessity of including civil society in civic education curricula. CBYDFs manifest this principle by simulating roles in NGOs and fostering intercultural cooperation. However, caution is required to avoid the symbolic participation critiqued by Kwon (2019). Horizontal governance and transparency are key to authentic knowledge sharing.

Social Inclusion and Accessibility

CBYDFs can significantly enhance political inclusion and belonging among marginalized European youth. Aglietti and Long (2024) demonstrate that initiatives prioritizing intersectionality effectively engage underrepresented groups, such as disabled and refugee youth, by offering translation services and inclusive environments.

Eleftheriadis (2018) documents how queer festivals use horizontal governance and multilingual approaches to create inclusive spaces. Similarly, the Commissioner for Children and Young People (2023) notes that age-based exclusion continues to marginalize youth in traditional civic spaces. CBYDFs designed with youth leadership can counteract this by offering autonomy and co-creation.

However, Collins et al. (2016) reveal barriers such as recruitment challenges, funding limitations, and adult resistance in youth councils, which mirror issues in CBYDF contexts. Boldt et al. (2021) and Mato (2017) caution that without intentional co-design, even inclusive-seeming events may reproduce hegemonic structures.

Successful inclusivity strategies include participatory design, safe spaces, and educational tools like the "Wheel of Privilege" (Aglietti & Long, 2024). Youth-led climate justice movements illustrate how collective mobilization acknowledges internal diversity while promoting equity (Habib & Ward, 2019).

Siročić (2023) proposes "reparative politics," wherein feminist and queer festivals use play and collective memory to address trauma. CBYDFs could adopt similar strategies to create emotionally resonant experiences.

Debusscher (2023) discusses gender inequality in EU institutions, emphasizing the need for intersectional approaches in policy and resource distribution. CBYDFs, if curated thoughtfully, can subvert gender hierarchies and foster horizontal, inclusive spaces (Siročić, 2023).

The benefits of CBYDFs, as well as recommendations for their improvement, are presented in 8 Figure. CBYDFs obviously are particularly significant in supporting informal and non-formal learning processes. These learning environments, often overlooked by formal educational institutions, provide young people, especially those from transnational or marginalized backgrounds, with meaningful opportunities to form civic identities and to participate in political life. By integrating performance, digital media, multilingual dialogue, and policy-oriented activities, CBYDFs allow young people to develop critical civic competencies that bridge local experiences with global democratic discourses.

However, these events are not without limitations. Without intentional design and ethical sensitivity, CBYDFs can reproduce hierarchical structures, tokenism, and exclusion. The transformative potential of these festivals ultimately depends on how inclusively they are organized and how seriously the voices of young participants are taken in decision-making processes.

To maximize their impact, CBYDFs should prioritize genuine youth leadership and agency. This involves moving beyond symbolic consultation and creating participatory structures that allow young people to co-design, lead, and evaluate festival activities. Organizers should ensure that marginalized youth, including those from racialized, disabled, queer, refugee, and economically disadvantaged communities, are not only included but are also empowered to shape the agenda. This requires intersectional approaches, accessible formats, inclusive language practices, and financial support for participation.

Moreover, CBYDFs should continue to integrate formal and informal modes of learning. Workshops, policy simulations, and debate forums can be complemented by artistic performance, grassroots organizing, and digital activism. Emphasizing hybrid formats, both online and offline, can broaden participation and deepen engagement. The festivals should also be aligned with broader

policy frameworks such as the EU Youth Strategy, Erasmus+ programs, and national civic education goals to ensure long-term sustainability and institutional recognition.

Finally, ethical practices such as transparency, accountability, and reflective evaluation should guide all aspects of festival planning and execution. Organizers and partners must recognize that inclusion is not a static checkbox but an ongoing process of critical reflection and adaptation. By doing so, CBYDFs can truly fulfill their potential as inclusive, empowering, and democratic spaces for the youth of Europe and beyond.



8 Figure. Benefits of Cross-Border Youth Democratic Festivals, Recommendations for Improvement

Source: elaborated by author.

3.5. Impact Assessment and Effectiveness

Cross-Border Youth Democratic Festivals (CB YDF) have gained prominence as participatory platforms that aim to invigorate youth engagement with democratic processes in transnational contexts. These festivals provide an informal yet politically significant space where young people interact, deliberate, and create networks that transcend national borders. However, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning the systematic evaluation of these festivals' effectiveness.

Despite their increasing popularity, little is known about the extent to which CB YDFs achieve their stated democratic engagement goals, or the longevity of their impacts. As Rossitto (2021) notes, the long-term influence of civic projects like these festivals requires deeper conceptual and empirical scrutiny, particularly regarding how youth appropriate the experience into sustained civic or political behaviors.

Theoretical Foundation and Relevance

The theoretical underpinning of CB YDFs is multifaceted, drawing from participatory democratic theory, youth civic engagement frameworks, and cross-border cooperation models. These festivals align closely with the European Youth Strategy, which emphasizes youth participation, empowerment, social inclusion, and active citizenship (Vankov et al., 2024). The strategy's policy emphasis on transnational experiences and digital competencies provides the normative basis for organizing CB YDFs.

According to Grassi et al. (2024), younger generations are not disengaged from democratic values per se but increasingly seek alternative and non-traditional forms of political participation. These include digital activism, issue-based mobilization, and participatory events like CB YDFs. The democratic potential of such initiatives lies in their capacity to bridge experiential learning with deliberative practices. Grassi et al. (2023) argue that youth's democratic disaffection often stems from institutional distrust rather than apathy. As such, festivals that provide horizontal, co-created spaces can restore confidence and participation.

Moreover, the concept of “millennial diplomacy” as discussed by Čamo (2023) introduces the idea that EU communication strategies now increasingly rely on digital storytelling and youth-friendly narratives to engage younger audiences. This conceptual shift has influenced the structure and framing of many CB YDFs, which attempt to blend educational components with interactive media and social connectivity.

Measuring Effectiveness in Achieving Democratic Engagement Goals

Assessing the effectiveness of CB YDFs requires a multi-dimensional approach. The primary evaluation dimensions include political knowledge acquisition, enhanced civic identity, participatory competencies, and the creation of durable civic networks. The European Youth Strategy's goals are largely assessed through self-reported shifts in perceptions and engagement levels, often operationalized through tools like the Global Citizenship Scale (Vankov et al., 2024).

Empirical evidence from Li's (2020) assessment of youth civic engagement in Danish municipalities underscores the importance of tailoring evaluation criteria to local and national policy contexts. The author highlights that youth engagement is not monolithic and often varies based on municipal resource allocation, inclusivity frameworks, and decision-making openness. Similarly, Darabos (2023) shows that perceptions of democratic quality are deeply embedded in political culture. Youth festivals functioning in political environments with higher democratic quality are more likely to see engaged and empowered youth participation.

Additionally, inclusion and diversity are essential benchmarks for evaluating CB YDFs. According to Pawluczuk et al. (2020), digital participation platforms embedded within festivals can serve as entry points for marginalized groups, provided that the tools are co-designed and accessible. Youth empowerment is not simply a function of presence but of voice, agency, and influence within deliberative spaces.

Methodologies for Evaluating Short and Long-Term Impacts

Literature reveals considerable variation in the methodologies applied to youth engagement evaluation. Vergou (2022), in a scoping study on STEM engagement, advocates for a theory of change (ToC) approach that identifies causal pathways from program activities to outcomes. This logic is directly applicable to CB YDFs, which require a strategic mapping of expected changes – immediate and sustained – in participant behavior and attitudes.

Short-term impact assessments often rely on pre- and post-festival surveys, measuring shifts in political knowledge, confidence in institutions, or self-efficacy in civic engagement. However, Timreck et al. (2024) contends that short-term evaluation alone is insufficient. Longitudinal studies tracking participants over time are necessary to understand whether CB YDFs led to lasting behavioral shifts or merely episodic enthusiasm. The report illustrates successful use of tracking methods through alumni networks and follow-up interviews.

Moreover, participatory evaluation, where youth are actively involved in designing, collecting, and interpreting data, is gaining prominence as a reflective and empowering approach. Tholstrup et al. (2022) demonstrate how youth-led evaluations in Nordic participation projects resulted in higher relevance, better policy uptake, and increased sense of ownership among young participants.

Digital methods also provide new opportunities for impact measurement. As suggested by Pawluczuk et al. (2020), social media engagement, digital storytelling outputs, and virtual co-creation sessions offer quantifiable and qualitative data on youth participation. However, they also caution against overreliance on digital metrics, noting the risk of superficial assessments that fail to capture the depth of civic learning.

Comparative Analysis of CB YDF Models

CB YDFs are not uniform, and their models vary significantly across geographical, political, and cultural contexts. Nordic festivals, as examined by Tholstrup et al. (2022), prioritize inclusivity, democratic pedagogy, and sustainability. These festivals are often co-hosted by schools, NGOs, and municipal authorities, creating a supportive ecosystem for youth engagement. The programming includes simulations of parliamentary debates, youth-led town halls, and cultural diplomacy initiatives.

In contrast, Central European models tend to focus on EU citizenship, collective memory, and identity formation. Vankov et al. (2024) document mixed outcomes in a comparative study across Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary. The success of CB YDFs in this region was closely tied to national political culture, with Slovakia demonstrating greater engagement and positive shifts, while Bulgaria recorded negligible or even negative results. These findings reinforce Darabos's (2023)

assertion that political culture and historical narratives condition youth receptivity to democratic interventions.

In South-Eastern Europe, particularly in post-conflict areas, CB YDFs often center on reconciliation, interethnic dialogue, and peacebuilding. Čamo (2023) argues that the format and messaging of EU-sponsored festivals in Bosnia and Herzegovina have evolved from top-down advocacy to co-created millennial diplomacy, engaging youth through influencers, podcasts, and local storytelling.

Across all regions, common success factors include sustained institutional support, integration with formal education systems, meaningful partnerships with civil society, and use of innovative communication strategies. On the other hand, recurring challenges include political cynicism, digital exclusion, limited funding continuity, and lack of evaluation capacity.

4. BEST PRACTICES AND SUCCESS STORIES

Effectiveness of CB YDFs cannot be assumed; it must be systematically assessed through rigorous, context-sensitive methodologies. As demonstrated by the reviewed literature, CB YDFs succeed best when embedded within broader youth policy frameworks and co-developed with the young people they aim to serve.

Future programs should prioritize embedding evaluative thinking at all stages of design and implementation. Following Vergou's (2022) recommendations, theory of change models should guide festival planning, ensuring alignment between goals, activities, and outcomes. The literature further advocates for participatory evaluation models, which empower youth not only as subjects but as agents of inquiry.

A second key recommendation is the promotion of inclusive and diverse festival formats, tailored to the local political culture while maintaining transnational solidarity. Digital platforms should be utilized not only for communication but also as tools for engagement and evaluation. As noted by Timreck et al. (2024), longitudinal tracking of alumni is essential to understanding whether CB YDFs contribute to structural change or remain isolated interventions.

Lastly, effective CB YDFs require durable partnerships among government agencies, educational institutions, civil society, and international organizations. This intersectoral collaboration ensures resource sustainability and policy integration.

By grounding CB YDFs in reflective, inclusive, and data-driven practices, stakeholders can transform these festivals into engines of democratic renewal and civic resilience.

4.1. Efficiency Evaluation Criteria

Fourteen various CB YDFs, identified in the 3 APPENDIX, were selected across the South Baltic region and beyond to identify best practices and areas for improvement based on theoretically informed evaluation criteria.

The evaluation of the CB YDFs is grounded in a framework derived from recent academic literature and policy recommendations, including the D-EFFECT project's reflections. Seven core criteria were used:

- C1 - Co-creation with Youth – involvement in planning, implementation, and evaluation;
- C2 - Embedded in Broader Policy Frameworks – integration into national/EU youth strategies;
- C3 - Inclusivity and Diversity – access and representation of marginalized youth;
- C4 - Long-term Impact and Alumni Tracking – mechanisms to monitor continued engagement;
- C5 - Durable Partnerships – collaboration with civil society, education, and government sectors;
- C6 - Digital and Participatory Tools – use of ICTs and participatory methodologies;
- C7 - Cross-border Relevance – multinational engagement and cooperation.

4.2. Effective Models of Youth Democratic Festivals

Each festival, as depicted in the 4 Table, was assessed against the seven core criteria using publicly available information and strategic documentation:

4 Table. Evaluation of CB YDFs

Festival / Initiative	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	Overall evaluation
D-EFFECT Project	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Good practice
SB Youth Core Groups Network	✓	✓	✓	⚠	✓	⚠	✓	Good practice
European Youth Event (EYE)	✓	✓	✓	⚠	✓	✓	✓	Good practice
Interreg South Baltic Programme	⚠	✓	✓	⚠	✓	⚠	✓	Promising
Folkemødet (Denmark)	⚠	⚠	✓	✗	✓	⚠	⚠	Moderate
Almedalsveckan (Sweden)	⚠	✓	✓	✗	✓	⚠	⚠	Moderate
SuomiAreena (Finland)	⚠	⚠	✓	✗	⚠	⚠	✗	Weak
BŪTENT! (Lithuania)	⚠	⚠	✓	✗	✓	⚠	⚠	Moderate
Arvamusfestival (Estonia)	⚠	⚠	✓	✗	⚠	⚠	⚠	Moderate

Festival / Initiative	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	Overall evaluation
Lampa Festival (Latvia)	✓	⚠	✓	✗	⚠	⚠	⚠	Moderate
Demokratiefestival MV (Germany)	✓	✓	✓	⚠	✓	✓	✓	Good practice
Baltic Sea Youth Platform (BSYP)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Good practice
YOU:KO Conference (Germany/Poland)	✓	⚠	✓	⚠	✓	⚠	✓	Good practice
Baltic University Programme Student Conferences	⚠	✓	✓	⚠	✓	⚠	✓	Promising

Source: elaborated by author.

Among the evaluated initiatives, six stand out as good practices due to their comprehensive integration of youth co-creation, cross-border cooperation, long-term impact mechanisms, and durable partnerships. These festivals represent strong models that could guide future CB YDF development.

Recommendations for future programming:

- Embed Theory of Change and Participatory Evaluation methods;
- Ensure active co-creation with youth at all stages;
- Invest in longitudinal tracking of participants;
- Strengthen intersectoral partnerships for sustainability;
- Expand digital participation tools for inclusiveness and monitoring.

By aligning festival practices with these standards, CB YDFs can move from isolated events to transformative, policy-relevant mechanisms for civic renewal.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The analysis showed that many youth cross-border projects lack sustainability, especially their continuity. This creates preconditions for inefficient resource allocation, so it is obvious that there is a need to reduce duplication of youth projects and effectively coordinate youth inclusion strategies. The role of digital platforms in youth inclusion is growing, but due to the lack of transparency in their management, there are many unanswered questions, so the importance of accountability increases. It is necessary to take into account the facts that technologically savvy youth or those who have mastered them well are winning and starting to dominate cross-border digital tools and international networks.
2. The lack of political and institutional support for youth empowerment across borders indicates that there is still a lack of proactive management of youth vulnerability, as it is necessary to ensure institutionalized funding and support for youth activities regardless of the fluctuations of political cycles. This is especially relevant when it comes to the information literacy of rural, marginalized youth, as bureaucratic processes, complex administrative requirements hinder their involvement, despite the reduction of procedural barriers. Evidence shows that this also hinders the development of youth festivals across borders, and prevents advisory youth councils, media outlets and other interested parties from achieving long-term impact. Therefore, it is natural that systematic impact assessment and continuous monitoring of the results of youth activities are necessary.
3. The analysis of the SBA countries showed that youth democracy festivals have the potential to be an incubator of democratic activism and co-creation. Of course, there are many differences between the countries due to the development of their democratic traditions. Naturally, the Scandinavian countries are oriented towards learning by doing and co-creation. Meanwhile, Germany is doing well in implementing youth participatory budgeting despite the differences between Eastern and Western countries. In their own ways, Poland and Lithuania rely on a top-down approach where the main role falls to youth NGOs, which often lack funding. Finally, comparing these experiences with Central and Eastern Europe, it can be said that a top-down approach based on national political culture still prevails there.

1 APPENDIX. Examples of Non-Governmental and Hybrid Stakeholders in the South Baltic Area

Country	Media & Broadcasters	Academic Institutions	Private/ Social Sector	Schools & Universities	Local Media & Digital Platforms	Religious & Cultural Orgs
Sweden	SVT, SR, UR	Uppsala Univ., Stockholm Univ.	CSR Startups, Gov-Private Projects	Civic Ed mandated by law	Community Radio, Hyperlocal News	Church of Sweden, Coexist Malmö
Denmark	DR, TV2	Aarhus Univ., Univ. of Copenhagen	Tech Startups, Open Internet Initiative	Folk High Schools, Student Councils	Jysk Fynske Medier, Local Platforms	DUF, Unge Nydanskere
Germany	ARD, ZDF, funk	GIGA, Otto-von-Guericke Univ.	Freudenberg Foundation, Civic Tech	Citizenship Education by Länder	osradio 104.8, Regional Platforms	KLJB, Evangelische Trägergruppe
Poland	TVP, Polskie Radio	IPA, IPP	Social Enterprises, Social Economy Sector Orgs	Civics in Reform, Student Engagement	"Orientuj się", Citizen Journalism	Catholic Church, ONR
Lithuania	LRT	VDU, LDUK	Social Enterprises, Local Projects	Participatory Budgeting in Schools	Digital-first News, Youth Platforms	Ateitis, Young Christian Democrats

Source: elaborated by author.

2 APPENDIX. Policies and institutional frameworks for cross-border youth democratic engagement in the South Baltic Area countries

Policies & Institutional Frameworks	Sweden	Denmark	Germany	Poland	Lithuania
National Youth Strategy	Cross-sectoral policy aiming to provide good living conditions and influence for youth	Integrated into general policies supporting Democratic welfare society	Federal Youth Strategy ensuring youth interests in political actions	National youth policy with emphasis on cross-border cooperation	Governed by the Law on Youth Policy Framework
Legal Framework for Youth NGOs	Support for youth organizations and participation	Substantial funding for youth organizations	Funding for Projects Promoting democracy and youth participation	Encouragement of joint activities among youth	Structured Approach Involving Government and NGOs
Policies on Cross-Border Collaboration	Engagement in regional Development cooperation	International programs engaging youth in democracy	Bilateral agreements and youth exchanges	Initiatives like Youth Lublin Triangle	Democracy promotion and development cooperation programs
EU-Related Institutional Participation	Active participation in EU youth programs	Engagement through Danish Youth Council	Participation in Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps	Participation in EU initiatives and programs	Coordination with EU youth policies
Local/Regional Authority Involvement	Municipalities involved in youth policy implementation	Responsibility shared among national, regional, and local authorities	Municipalities maintain Twinning arrangements with youth exchanges	Local authorities support youth participation	Local municipalities involved in youth policy
Hindering Regulations				Lack of age-based legal Regulations facilitating youth participation in democratic procedures	Limited support at local level hindering youth participation

Source: elaborated by author.

3 APPENDIX. Cross-Border Youth Democratic Festivals across the South Baltic region and beyond

Festival / Initiative	Country	Focus	Cross-border
D-EFFECT Project	Multinational (LT, PL, DE, SE, DK)	Community of practice, civic participation, youth engagement	Yes
South Baltic Youth Core Groups Network	Multinational (LT, PL, DE, SE, DK)	Youth voice in decision-making	Yes
European Youth Event (EYE)	EU-wide	Youth and European democratic dialogue	Yes
Interreg South Baltic Programme	South Baltic Area	Civic cooperation, youth inclusion	Yes
Folkemødet	Denmark	Democracy, youth dialogue	Occasional
Almedalsveckan	Sweden	Political dialogue, youth forums	Occasional
SuomiAreena	Finland	Societal debates with youth	No
BŪTENT!	Lithuania	Civic dialogue, youth involvement	Occasional
Arvamusfestival	Estonia	Participatory democracy, youth	Occasional
Lampa Festival	Latvia	Civic courage, youth-led debates	Occasional
Demokratiefestival MV	Germany (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern)	Youth engagement, democracy education	Yes
Baltic Sea Youth Platform	Baltic Sea Region	Youth policy, sustainability, civic engagement	Yes
YOU:KO Youth Conference	Germany/Poland	Cross-border civic dialogue, youth empowerment	Yes
Baltic University Programme Student Conferences	Baltic Sea Region	Youth governance, sustainability, participation	Yes

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