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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 2.4

Exploration of the existing YDF method - Model solutions of youth democracy festivals - general frames & understanding



Responsible Partner: Klaipeda University

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Introduction

The importance of democratic education for youth is growing inexorably, as many countries are experiencing democratic crises, and traditional democratic values, such as freedom and the rule of law, are being questioned. It is natural that in such circumstances, young people have to face many choices that can determine their future. Youth democracy festivals (YDF) often serve as a basis for forming passive and democratically minded citizens, as schools and participation in NGO organisations provide opportunities for acquiring knowledge about civic competencies, political literacy, social inclusion, and similar concepts.

This report examines four youth democratic festivals carried out in Denmark, Poland and Lithuania as part of the project "D-EFFECT- Civic society democracy lessons, bringing a youth perspective in the EU policymaking at all levels in line with Youth Strategy 2022-2027".

- Youth Democratic Festival – Guldborgsund Municipality;
- Youth Democratic Festival – Odsherred municipality;
- Youth Democratic Festival in Szczecin;
- Public Administration IDEas festival – Klaipeda University.

After analyzing these festivals based on the information provided by the project partners, a model of a youth democratic festival was developed. This model conceptualizes the Youth Democratic Festival (YDF) as a multi-layered platform for youth empowerment, participation and policy feedback. The existing YDF model is based on four main functions: education and learning, empowerment, participation and youth policy feedback, which form the normative and practical basis of the YDF activities.

Different artificial intelligence tools were used in the preparation of this report: ChatGPT version 5.2, Scopis AI, and Google Translate.

1. Conceptual and Theoretical Background

1.1 Defining *Youth Democracy Festivals*: origins, evolution, and typologies

Festivals, as a social phenomenon, have deep cultural and ritual roots that go back to ancient civilizations. According to Cudny (2014), festivals originated from religious and communal rites, such as the Greek Dionysia or the Roman Saturnalia, which symbolized collective joy, community renewal, and the strengthening of solidarity. These events were moments of “temporarily suspended daily life” when the community experienced communion, and the rituals' nature promoted social bonding and strengthened cultural identity. Cudny (2014) draws on classical sociologists such as Émile Durkheim and J. Duvignaud, who emphasized that festivals are an expression of “social effervescence” – a time when a society collectively experiences its unity and values.

Since the mid-20th century, festivals have acquired new, secular and cultural functions, becoming part of urban life. According to Cudny (2014), this transformation is associated with economic and social modernization, the growth of leisure industries, and the development of urban cultural policies. Festivals began to perform not only ritual, but also educational and representational functions – they became a way to express urban identity, strengthen social ties, and promote tourism and the development of creative industries.

This historical transformation is complemented by Cudny et al. (2012), who emphasize that festivals have become a common social ritual in modern societies, analogous to a daily walk or sporting activity. They note that, especially after World War II, festivals have become an important part of urban social policy, a tool that promotes cultural vitality and civic participation.

Later, this phenomenon began to take on the characteristics of community initiatives and bottom-up organization. Fiedler et al. (2023) point out that the so-called “embedded” or “home-grown” festivals arise from local volunteering traditions and are closely rooted in the culture of the region. They are not created by external organizers but are born from the needs of local communities and the desire to maintain authentic cultural expression. Such events function as forms of community self-government, in which participation becomes a process of civic

empowerment. This dimension of “embeddedness” later became a key principle in shaping youth democracy festivals.

Furthermore, Riga (2022) emphasizes the spatio-temporal nature of the festival, a phenomenon that never repeats itself identically, making each experience unique, involving the senses and a sense of community. It is this dimension of temporality and shared experience that is the essence of the festival, which later became a core feature of Youth Democracy Festivals (YDFs): to temporarily create a space in which democracy can be practiced, debated, created and learned.

Riga (2022)’s study of the DESECE Children’s Festival at the University of Patras (Greece) identifies another lineage, namely the educational and civic tradition of the festival. This festival, which began in 2010, was created as a co-creation event between students and teachers, which aimed to develop the curiosity, civic awareness and social skills of children and young people through art, science and creative activities. According to Riga (2022), festivals of this type essentially perform a non-formal educational function, providing participants with the opportunity to learn through experience, participate, improvise and reflect. They strengthen the social connection between the university and the local community, thus combining education, culture and civic life into one integrated experience.

Meanwhile, in Asia, a similar phenomenon has been analyzed by Akbar (2021), who studied art festivals in Indonesian “kampungs” (informal urban neighborhoods). She argues that these grassroots festivals emerged as a response by local youth groups to social marginalization and urban challenges (Akbar, 2021). Such events were not only a means of artistic expression, but also a strategy for community survival, that is, an attempt to demonstrate the vitality of the place and protect its environment from gentrification. Akbar (2021) emphasizes that festivals here have become laboratories of empowerment, where young people learn to organize, negotiate, and act in public.

Another lineage of festivals emerges through the contexts of diaspora and migration. Gedecho (2024) in his work on diaspora festivals, notes that migrant communities create a new type of celebration, namely diaspora festivals, in which the connection with the homeland, the desire to maintain identity and integration into the host society are intertwined. Such festivals

become forms of cultural diplomacy, promoting dialogue between different cultures. This lineage is particularly close to the concept of youth democracy festivals, as it shows how a celebration can be a space for democratic practice and intercultural understanding.

In the Western world, festivals have also evolved from cultural representations to instruments of social welfare. Alonzo and Rossetti's (2023) study on "cultural welfare festivals" argues that contemporary festivals emerge as forms of social inclusion and emotional health promotion, to strengthen community and reduce social exclusion. They are not only tools for cultural dissemination, but also social policy instruments that combine art, participation and public dialogue.

Meanwhile, Chang, Ku (2023) research has identified another lineage in which festivals are an instrument for regional economic revitalization. They describe "festival marketplaces" as hybrid forms that combine culture, business, and community to strengthen local identity and employment. This logic, where the festival becomes a local innovation marketplace, is closely linked to the youth democracy festival's goal of building social and civic capital.

Interesting trends emerge in the Arab world. Hothan and Butler's (2025) study of Western music festivals in Saudi Arabia reveals a new direction of origin, namely, politically initiated cultural experiments, where the state seeks to modernize society through entertainment formats. These festivals, although not democratic in their origin, show that the festival can become a platform for value dialogue and social change even in conservative cultures.

Table 1 below provides a comparative analysis of traditional and youth democracy festivals. As we can see, the purpose of a YDF is to experience and empower democracy, while the purpose of a traditional festival is to celebrate and continue traditions. Traditional festivals are often artistic, ritualistic and passive, while a YDF becomes a platform for dialogue, where inclusion and interactivity are important.

Table 1. Comparison of traditional and youth democratic festivals

Criteria	Traditional Festival	Youth Democratic Festival
Purpose	Celebration, continuity of tradition	Experiencing democracy, empowering youth
Participants	Local community, performers	Youth, NGOs, local governments, schools
Form	Artistic, ritualistic, passive	Dialogic, inclusive, interactive
Result	Cultural identity, economic benefits	Civic competences, social inclusion
Scope	Local and National	Cross-border, networked, collaborative
Learning method	Observation and entertainment	Experiential learning, discussion, collaboration

Sources: Cudny, W. (2014). The phenomenon of festivals: Their origins, evolution, and classifications. *Anthropos*, (H. 2), 640-656; Riga, V. (2022). A children's festival during the covid-19 pandemic. *European Journal of Education Studies*, 9(5).

These festivals aim to develop civic competencies and social inclusion, while traditional festivals are often focused on economic gain or the promotion of cultural identity. YDFS must involve hands-on learning – learning by doing, through discussions and interaction, while in traditional festivals, this is often limited to entertainment or passive observation.

In summary, it can be stated that Youth Democracy Festivals (YDFs) have grown from several parallel sources of origin:

1. Ritual and cultural traditions that emphasize community (Cudny, 2014).
2. Grassroots initiatives and volunteer movements, in which the festival is a means of empowerment (Akbar, 2021; Fiedler et al., 2023).
3. Educational and civic traditions (Riga, 2022)
4. Migration and diaspora experiences, where the festival becomes a space of identity and integration (Gedecho, 2024).
5. Cultural welfare and social inclusion policies, where the festival serves as a tool for social cohesion (Alonzo & Rossetti, 2023).
6. Institutional modernization strategies, where festivals are included in national transformation programs (Hothan & Butler, 2025).

Thus, youth democratic festivals are a product of the intersection of these historical trajectories from ritual to civic action, from celebration to laboratory of democracy.

1.2 The YDF Method as a Hybrid Form of Civic Participation and Informal Learning

Youth Democracy Festivals (YDFs) represent a hybrid form of civic participation and informal learning, merging democratic practice, cross-border collaboration, and experiential education. These festivals function not merely as celebratory gatherings but as dynamic civic ecosystems that bridge the gap between political engagement and democratic learning. Within YDFs, youth move beyond symbolic participation—they co-create, deliberate, and experiment with democracy through discussion, art, and digital interaction.

Traditional civic education has often been limited to formal instruction about institutions, voting, and rights. In contrast, the YDF method exemplifies a broader pedagogical approach aligned with Ho and Barton's (2020) concept of *deliberative civic learning*, which situates democratic participation within lived experiences and collaborative practices. YDFs operate through debates, mock parliaments, simulations, and workshops that enable young people to test democratic skills in real time. Through these participatory structures, YDFs enhance both civic knowledge and democratic dispositions, fostering pluralism and critical agency.

As Cates (2022) argues, global civic education must integrate empathy, intercultural dialogue, and action-oriented learning. YDFs embody these dimensions by serving as multilingual, multicultural, and transnational spaces where youth develop *global democratic citizenship*. They learn not only about democracy, but *through* democracy by engaging in collaborative projects and community problem-solving. Artistic performances, spoken words, and digital storytelling forms highlighted by Breed and Prentki (2018) further extend civic participation into the aesthetic and emotional domains. These creative expressions enable young people to articulate their political identities and to experience freedom as a shared, collective act of participation.

The YDF framework also embraces digital citizenship as a learning process. Following Choi's (2015) five domains: technical proficiency, global awareness, networking agency, digital activism, and critical perspectives YDFs integrate online collaboration with on-site participation. Hybrid festival formats, combining in-person activities with livestreams and social media interactions,

provide youth with tangible experiences of digital activism and civic engagement in a connected world.

In this sense, YDFs reflect the educational principles proposed by Dewey (2024) that democratic learning must be experiential, relational, and community-based. Learning occurs informally, through conversation, creative experimentation, and shared responsibility. As Boni and Calabuig (2017) note, such environments foster moral imagination and critical thinking, forming the ethical foundation for global citizenship.

Ultimately, the YDF method blurs the boundaries between formal education, activism, and community life. It positions youth not as passive recipients of democratic values but as active producers of democratic culture. This hybrid integration of civic participation and informal learning transforms the festival space into a living classroom participatory arena where young people experience democracy not as a concept to be taught, but as a practice to be lived.

2. Methodological Framework: qualitative exploration and comparative analysis

This report analyses the Youth Democratic Festival (YDF) model, based on the experiences of four youth democracy festivals held in different European countries. The festivals held in Szczecin (Poland), Klaipėda (Lithuania), and Odsherred and Guldborgsund municipalities (Denmark) reveal how youth empowerment, non-formal learning, inter-institutional cooperation and creative activities can be integrated into a single democratic education platform. Although each festival had its own structure, context and objectives, their analysis allows for the formation of a generalized model reflecting the main principles of youth democracy education.

From a methodological point of view, the study was conducted using the logic of a collective case study. The four festivals are treated as independent but comparable analytical units. All data were obtained from the submitted documents – festival reports, programs and reflections, which describe the activities, participants, organizational processes, experiences and challenges. The applied qualitative thematic analysis allowed for the identification of recurring

themes and inductive synthesis to create a generalized YDF model. Such a methodology allows one to rely on real practices, rather than theoretical assumptions, and ensures that the model is based on concrete, empirically recorded experience.

The Szczecin YDF was integrated into the wider city week of informal initiatives, giving young people the opportunity to participate in discussions, workshops and community events. Participants particularly appreciated the informal discussions and meetings with active community members, although it was noted that young people sometimes lacked the courage to get involved. This context revealed an important dimension of the festival – an informal and safe environment in which young people can more easily express themselves. Szczecin also highlighted that by including the activities in a wider city event – the NGO Passion Picnic – the conditions for wider community involvement and participation in cross-sectoral initiatives were created.

Klaipėda University IDEas Festival highlighted the potential of academic youth participation. It combined presentations of NGO activities, student research, documentary films and discussions. Students discussed civic responsibility, social justice, security in the Baltic States, participatory governance and media literacy. The festival revealed a strong educational potential: students were active participants, but their involvement in the organization was weaker; therefore, it was recommended to increase their responsibility and participation in event planning. This experience makes it clear that youth agencies must be developed in a purposeful and consistent manner.

The Odsherred Municipality YDF was the largest in scale and stood out for its thematic structure. The festival was organized around four spaces – international, identity, leisure and education “streets”. Such a structure allowed young people to freely choose activities according to their interests and migrate naturally between different themes. The role of young people was particularly prominent: about 70 students led workshops themselves, while others participated in creative and practical activities. Young people created graphic novels, visions of the municipality’s future, identity symbols, and participated in workshops on economic literacy and social competencies. This festival showed that the strongest youth engagement is achieved when young people become not only participants, but also content creators.

The Guldborgsund YDF was divided into a structured part for schools and one open to all young people. In the first part, students worked on complex topics such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, youth policy-making, and spatial planning. In the second part, the festival atmosphere was completely informal - young people did sports, participated in creative workshops, played games with the mayor, socialized, and ate together. One of the most important elements was the “dream wall”, where young people expressed their needs and ideas, which were promised to be passed on to the political leadership of the municipality. This practice showed that collecting young people’s opinions can become a real tool for policy-making if integrated into institutional processes.

Comparing all four YDFs, many recurring features emerged that allow for the creation of the YDF model. First, all festivals combined formal and informal education. Presentations, discussions and workshops formed a structured part, while informal activities such as creative workshops, concerts, games, and social initiatives created a friendly and safe atmosphere. Second, the festivals were oriented towards experiential learning where young people not only listened, but also created, designed, researched and experimented. Third, youth agency manifested itself differently in different contexts: in Odsherred, youth were the most prominent creators of the festival, while in Klaipėda and Guldborgsund, it was recommended to strengthen the role of youth in organizing the event. Fourth, cross-sectoral cooperation was a necessary basis for the functioning of all festivals as they were created by municipalities, universities, schools, NGOs and youth organizations.

The methodological approach to this data allowed the identification of key recurring dimensions, which were synthesized into the YDF model. The analysis revealed six key areas common to all cases: program structure, topical relevance, youth empowerment, partnerships, experiential learning and informal spaces. These dimensions were identified inductively through thematic document analysis, and their synthesis allows for the creation of a common and adaptable YDF model, regardless of the different national contexts.

The generalized festival experience reveals that YDF successfully functions as a youth empowerment system, the essential components of which are a youth-friendly environment, practical activities, creativity, agency and real links with local politics. The methodological and

analytical synthesis created based on the four case bases not only shows how festivals can be organized, but also how they can become a sustainable practice of democratic education on a regional and international scale.

3. Mapping of Existing Youth Democratic Festivals Models

3.1 Comparative Mapping of Youth Democratic Festivals in Denmark, Poland, and Lithuania

This section will present the case studies of four YDFs from Guldborgsund Municipality, Odsherred Municipality, Media Dizajn from Szczecin and Klaipėda University. All four cases were implemented within the framework of the project D-EFFECT- Civic society democracy lessons, bringing a youth perspective in the EU policymaking at all levels in line with Youth Strategy 2022-2027.

Youth Democratic Festival – Guldborgsund Municipality

A. Nature of the event (stand-alone or combined event)

It was a combined festival, which overall consisted of two parts:

Part 1 was an event for specially invited guests. Three upper secondary school classes with social studies as their main subject were invited to a three-hour program, where they participated in different workshops; a workshop with focus on the challenges and complexities regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict, a session where they could contribute with inputs and ideas for the municipality to create attractive conditions for a good youthlife in our municipality, a workshop with focus on developing youth area in an old building at the harbour etc.

Part 2 was an open event, where all youngsters in Guldborgsund Municipality, neighbouring areas and international partners were invited. A lot of offers and activities were available to ensure that the participants should feel comfortable and have a good time regardless of whether they are interested in discussing politics, meeting local stakeholders, playing games, trying out different activities, hanging out with friends, or something else.

B. Participants

In Part 1 of the festival, participation was confirmed for 75 young people from upper secondary school classes with social studies as their main subject, accompanied by two teachers. In addition, two staff members and four young people/volunteers from Operation Dagsværk participated, along with two representatives from the youth group based in “Markedshallen” and six employees from Guldborgsund Municipality.



For Part 2 of the festival, the exact number of participants from the primary target group (young people) could not be confirmed. However, it is estimated that approximately 30–40 local young participants and four young people from Odsherred Municipality attended the event throughout the day. Furthermore, around 20 co-organisers were present, including staff from Guldborgsund Municipality, the public library, the youth school, Headspace, the Cultural Factory, and other organisations working with young people in their daily professional roles. A representative from Odsherred Municipality also participated.

C. Summary of the event

During the first part of the festival, upper secondary school students specializing in social studies followed a diverse program of activities. They learned about Operation Dagsværk and explored its anniversary exhibition, gaining insight into the organization’s work and impact. The students also took part in a workshop on the challenges and complexities of the situation in Palestine, where they engaged in dialogue and critical reflection.

In another interactive session, participants shared their ideas and wishes for a meaningful youth life by contributing to a large collective “*dream wall*.” They also joined a creative workshop

focused on reimagining the future use of the former factory building that hosted the event. Alongside these educational and participatory activities, the students enjoyed time to play games, socialize, and relax, creating an open and inclusive atmosphere that combined learning with community building.

During the second part of the festival, which was open to the general public, visitors and stakeholders were invited to engage in a wide range of activities and experiences. They could try wakeboarding or explore the anniversary exhibition by Operation Dagsværk. Creative opportunities were also available, such as a sewing workshop hosted by *Kulturfabrikken* in Nykøbing and a black poetry slam session organized by the local library.

Participants ranging from local youth to institutional stakeholders could learn about the EU and democracy through Europe Direct, meet Headspace, an organization providing conversation and hangout opportunities for young people, and join a photo competition on the theme “What makes you happy?”.

Social and interactive activities included table tennis and table football matches with the mayor and other attendees. Festival-goers also contributed their ideas and wishes for a meaningful youth life on a shared dream wall, which later inspired a performance by a local youth choir.

Visitors and stakeholders had the chance to observe young people from the youth school building a wooden ship, spend time talking and relaxing, and enjoy a shared informal pizza meal, reinforcing community ties and cross-sector collaboration.

D. Learnings and take aways

What Went Well

The festival succeeded as a joint project, bringing together a wide range of stakeholders who collaborated effectively and gained a deeper understanding of each other's activities and contributions. The program included fun, engaging, and developmental activities, balancing calm, immersive experiences with movement-based tasks and friendly competitions.

During Part 1, upper secondary school pupils participated enthusiastically, and the collaboration with teachers was excellent. Across both parts of the festival, participants

contributed numerous ideas to the dream wall, providing valuable insights that will be shared with political and administrative leaders in the municipality.

The event maintained a positive and welcoming atmosphere, supported by a unique location in the former factory building/Market Hall and strong cooperation among partners. The informal environment encouraged active participation rather than passive observation. A particularly memorable moment was the moving musical performance by the youth choir. Shared pizza and communal dining strengthened the sense of togetherness, and the overall community spirit among participants and the wider youth network was highly appreciated.

It was also successful to involve young students in the development of the logo, design, and title for the event. Additionally, a youth group from a social meeting place for vulnerable young people expressed that being part of the festival was a meaningful and positive experience.

What Went Less Well

Some pupils from the upper secondary school classes chose to leave after Part 1, which reduced youth presence later in the day. Communication and information about the event were insufficient and sent out too late, limiting broader engagement. Furthermore, not enough young people were involved in the actual planning process, which suggests the need for earlier and more structured youth participation in future events.

Youth Democratic Festival – Odsherred municipality

A. Nature of the event (stand-alone or combined event)

For 4 years, Campus Odsherred hosted a yearly youth festival in Odsherred municipality. Prior to that, the festival was hosted by another organization in the municipality. The following is meant as a layout of how we have organized the festival. Last year I was the prime coordinator of the event, and the layout will therefore primarily sum up how that was organized and carried out.

B. Participants

Campus Odsherred is a high school consisting of approximately 450 students all of which were either involved in running a workshop (approximately 70 students) or participating in

different workshops (the remaining of the students). Besides our own students, all year 9 students from elementary schools in our municipality were invited. All in all, approximately 700 students participated in the event.

C. Summary of the event

Theme (decided by our students at Campus Odsherred through a democratic process): youth as a life phase.

The festival venue consisted of a marketplace and 4 'streets' which each had an overall topic: international street, identity street, spare time street, and educational street. On the market place students could visit different pop-up stands where they could: play mini gulf and discuss prejudice against certain educations, create a fruit with a wish for their future and put it on the three of dreams, vote for most prominent youngster in our municipality, create an art work depicting Odsherred municipality, voice their inner hopes in the confession room, and help build a sustainable nature around school. Besides that, the students were assigned to two workshops of each 1 hour, where they worked with something related to one of the 'street-topics', meaning that each street consisted of several workshops that students had then been assigned to prior to the festival.

After finishing the workshops, students were then assigned to two debates which again were related to, and took place in, the different streets. The event was finalized by a concert with a local upcoming artist.

A diverse range of workshops was offered during the festival, delivered by a combination of internal educators, students, and external partners. The local youth house—of which Line from the D-Effect project is a member—played a particularly active role, contributing both to workshop facilitation and to the pop-up stands located in the marketplace.

Several illustrative examples highlight the breadth of workshop themes. The municipal church organized a session in which young participants explored issues of youth identity, while the local bank facilitated a workshop on financial literacy, focusing on strategies for establishing a healthy personal economy at a young age. The Rockwool Foundation invited students to envision and design the municipality of the future, fostering creativity and civic imagination.

Additionally, a professional author guided young people through the process of creating graphic novels, combining artistic expression with narrative skill development.

E. Learnings and take aways

Collectively, these workshops approached the overarching theme of “youth as a life phase” from multiple perspectives, international, identity-related, recreational, and educational, thus enabling participants to engage with youthhood as a multidimensional and evolving phenomenon.

External workshop providers were contacted and given the opportunity to decide whether they wished to participate. Although no financial compensation was offered, many appeared to regard the festival as a valuable avenue for visibility and outreach. All schools in the area were invited to participate, and each school was asked to assign its students to two workshops and two panel debates deemed most relevant to their educational needs and interests.

Youth Democratic Festival in Szczecin

A. Nature of the event (stand-alone or combined event)

The initiative was implemented in two formats: as a stand-alone event and as a combined event held in conjunction with the NGO Passion Picnic. The NGO Passion Picnic, organized in Szczecin by Media Dizajn, is an outdoor, open-access gathering addressed to residents of the city and the wider region. During this event, non-governmental organizations, social groups, and representatives of the creative sector present their activities, initiatives, and contributions to local civic life. Integrating the youth-focused activities with this broader civic celebration enables wider community engagement and enhances the visibility of participatory and creative initiatives across multiple stakeholder groups.

B. Participants

A total of 26 young people took part in the festival. The participants represented various youth organisations and initiatives from Szczecin and the West Pomeranian region: the Szczecin Youth City Council, the West Pomeranian Youth Assembly, the West Pomeranian Voivodeship Youth Secretariat, the Szczecin City Center Gardens organisation, the NATUREEF association and the Creative Sector Incubator INKU. Pupils from Secondary School No. 7, accompanied by two teachers, also took part.

The age of the participants ranged from around 18 to 30. They joined after receiving individual invitations or learning about the event through social media.

C. Summary of the event

The organization of the meeting was guided by two key factors: the opportunity to align the event with the Week of NGO Initiatives and the Passion Picnic, and the insights gathered from participant feedback during earlier round-table discussions. These consultations revealed that the most valued elements were meetings with active community leaders and moderators of local civic life, as well as discussion sessions conducted in an informal and open atmosphere.

The event began with participant registration, followed by an introduction to the project *“D-Effect – Lessons of Democracy in Civil Society, Bringing a Youth Perspective to EU Policy-Making at All Levels in Line with the Youth Strategy.”* The opening keynote, *“A Place that Connects – How to Create a Space with Social and Democratic Value,”* was delivered by a representative from Ogrody Śródmieście – City Gardens. Lunch provided an informal setting for dialogue and

networking.



A panel discussion titled *“Local Identities – How a Place Can Have a Voice”* was then held. This was followed by a presentation of *“Fashion for Sense – Democratic Initiatives,”* highlighting the importance of the Week of Non-Governmental Initiatives, as well as an overview of the Passion Picnic, a celebration of civic organizations and social initiatives. The day concluded with a summary and a Q&A session.

The second day again opened with registration and the presentation of workshops, including *“Love Volunteering”* and *“The Ideal Team: How to Create Effective Teams in the Third Sector.”* Participants continued their discussions over lunch in an informal environment. This was followed by a panel session titled *“Models of Work for Democracy, Volunteering, and More,”* featuring contributions from invited experts. The day ended with a summary and Q&A.

On the final day, participants took part in the NGO Passion Picnic a major regional celebration of civic organizations, social initiatives, and stakeholder engagement. Informal lunchtime discussions once again facilitated exchange among participants. The final panel,

“Scenarios for Conducting Classes in Organizations: Methods of Adapting to Audience Needs,” addressed practical pedagogical approaches for civil society organizations. The event concluded with a closing summary and Q&A session.

F. Learnings and take aways

Recruiting young participants proved challenging, largely due to the timing of the event, which coincided with the end of the school year and the beginning of university examination periods. Despite these constraints, participants expressed strong appreciation for the informal discussions and the opportunity to engage during the Picnic, where they could converse freely on practical and relevant topics. The discussion panels were intentionally kept informal, avoiding the rigidity typically associated with conference formats, to create a more open and approachable environment.

It was observed that some young participants were initially hesitant to contribute during discussions and required additional encouragement. To promote active engagement, small incentives in the form of books on democracy were offered. This strategy proved effective, as the rewards were well received and helped foster greater participation and interest in the thematic content.

Public Administration IDEas festival – Klaipeda University

A. Nature of the event (stand-alone or combined event)

The Student IDEas Festival consisted of two parts. In the first part, guests made their presentations, representing two popular NGOs in Lithuania, namely the Klaipėda Old Town Rotary Club and the Riflemen's Union "Western (Sea) 3rd Regiment and 311th Priekulė Vėtros Company". Both presentations focused on citizenship education, but from different perspectives. The Rotary Club representatives emphasised the fight against poverty, various diseases, and assistance to the elderly, while the Riflemen's Union paid more attention to the defence of the country. Next, Klaipėda University journalism undergraduate students presented their newly created documentary film "Let's Take a Walk Around Klaipėda". Following this presentation, a pilot test was conducted to verify the survey, which had already been conducted in Poland by Media Design. The survey was presented, and the festival participants filled out questionnaires. Then, two public administration students and one journalism student read their reports.

In the second part, the students were divided into two parallel sections. Students from political science, public administration and journalism study programs gave their presentations. Discussions were held. Students discussed participatory governance, national security of the Baltic States, youth political participation, media literacy, and ensuring equal opportunities in providing public services.

B. Participants

Eight students and four NGO representatives participated in the first part of the IDEas festival. Twenty-one students participated in the second part. The event was also attended by the department's lecturers as organizers and leaders of students' scientific projects/ideas. A total of 9 participants, including 7 leaders and 2 contributing to the organization.



C. Summary of the event

What Went Well

The Student IDEas Festival was a multifaceted academic and civic event that brought together students, non-governmental organisations, and university staff to explore themes of civic responsibility, national identity, and youth engagement. The programme combined inspirational talks, creative outputs, and student-led research presentations. Participants engaged with issues ranging from social justice and national defence to participatory governance and media literacy. The festival also featured a screening of a student documentary and a pilot survey related to youth perspectives. At the conclusion of the event, participants were presented with commemorative gifts featuring the visual identity of the D-effect project, recognising their active involvement and contributions. Altogether, the event involved 33 students, several NGO representatives, and university lecturers who supported the development and dissemination of student initiatives.

Journalism students also created their own show dedicated to the conference and published it on Youtube platform: [Studentų konferencijos reportažas | Studentų Langas](#)

What Went Less Well

Communication strategies need to be improved to attract a broader range of participants from other study programmes at Klaipėda University, as well as from secondary schools in the city. Although several innovative elements were introduced, such as a documentary screening produced by journalism students and the implementation of a pilot survey, there remains a need to identify and develop additional engaging formats. Furthermore, students have not yet been sufficiently involved in the organisation and planning of the event.

As shown in table 2, the four Youth Democratic Festivals implemented in Denmark, Poland, and Lithuania demonstrate both shared principles and context-specific variations in format, scale, and impact. All festivals combined civic education with participatory and experiential learning, while differing in organizational scope—from large-scale, school-based stand-alone festivals (Odsherred) to smaller, network-oriented and community-embedded events (Szczecin and Klaipėda). The Danish cases stand out for their high participant numbers and strong

institutional anchoring, whereas the Polish and Lithuanian festivals emphasized informal dialogue, civil society networking, and academic–civic exchange. Across all cases, inclusivity, cross-sector collaboration, and interactive formats emerged as key strengths. At the same time, challenges related to communication, youth recruitment, and early involvement of young people in planning were consistently identified (see Table 2).

Table 2. Comparative overview of the Four Youth Democratic Festivals

Criteria	Youth Democratic Festival – Guldborgsund (DK)	Youth Democratic Festival – Odsherred (DK)	Youth Democratic Festival – Szczecin (PL)	Public Administration Ideas Festival – Klaipėda University (LT)
A. Nature of the event (stand-alone or combined)	Combined event with two components: (1) a closed session for invited secondary school classes; (2) an open festival for all young people and partners.	Stand-alone annual festival organized for four years by Campus Odsherred, structured around thematic “streets”.	Combined event integrated into the NGO Passion Picnic and the Week of NGO Initiatives.	Combined event: (1) NGO presentations on citizenship; (2) student academic sessions and discussions.
B. Participants	Part 1: 75 secondary school pupils + teachers, municipal staff, Operation Dagsværk volunteers. Part 2: approx. 30–40 young people + 4 from Odsherred; ~20 co-organizers from various institutions.	Approx. 700 participants: 450 high school students, 70 student workshop leaders, and all 9th- grade students from local schools. Strong involvement from the local youth house.	26 young participants (aged 18– 30) from youth councils, NGOs, creative sector & schools; represented regional youth structures.	33 students, 4 NGO representatives, 7 university lecturers/organizers; participants from several study programmes.
C. Summary of the event	Part 1 included workshops on Palestine, a “dream wall” for youth ideas, creative sessions, and social activities. Part 2 featured wakeboarding, creative activities, meetings with organisations, informal discussions, games, and cultural performances.	Theme: “Youth as a life phase.” Festival divided into 4 streets (international, identity, leisure, education). Included workshops, debates, pop-up stands, creative tasks, and a concert.	Three-day event with keynote talks, informal panels, workshops (“Love Volunteering,” “Ideal Team”), participation in the NGO Picnic, networking lunches, and sessions on civic work models.	Event combined NGO talks, documentary screening, a pilot survey, student research presentations, and two parallel thematic sections on governance, security, youth participation, media literacy, and equality.
D. What went well	Strong cross-sector collaboration; high student engagement; welcoming atmosphere; creative industrial venue; active youth involvement in the festival’s visual identity; meaningful input from the dream wall.	Wide range of workshops; many external partners; high participation numbers; theme chosen democratically by students; diverse educational formats.	Participants valued informal discussions; effective engagement strategies (e.g., books as incentives); strong cooperation with local NGOs; successful integration into larger civic events.	Successful mix of academic and civic activities; innovative elements (film screening, pilot survey); active student involvement; festival coverage published by journalism students.
E. What went less well	Some students left after Part 1; communication was late and limited; insufficient youth involvement in planning.	External partners’ involvement voluntary and inconsistent; challenges in balancing workshop quality; need for more innovative engagement tools.	Recruitment difficulties due to school/exam schedules; some youth were initially hesitant to speak; need for more effective communication outreach.	Need for stronger communication to attract more programmes and possibly schools; students not yet fully involved in planning; need for more innovative, youth-friendly approaches.

3.2 Youth Democratic Festival as a Model: General Frames and Functional Logic

A model was constructed based on the four YDFs already implemented under the project "D-EFFECT- Civic society democracy lessons, bringing a youth perspective in the EU policymaking at all levels in line with Youth Strategy 2022-2027" (see Figure 1). This model conceptualizes the Youth Democratic Festival (YDF) as a multi-layered platform for youth empowerment, participation and policy feedback. The existing YDF model is based on four main functions: education and learning, empowerment, participation and youth policy feedback, which form the normative and practical basis of the YDF activities. These functions answer the question "why" as they define the added value of the festival for democratic processes and youth engagement.

The core of the YDF model is implemented through different forms of activity, such as youth research ideas and projects, workshops, discussion panels, debates, and cultural and artistic engagement. These forms allow for the combination of formal and informal learning, deliberative practices, and creative methods, thus creating a conducive environment for critical thinking and active civic participation.

A distinct and essential dimension of the YDF model is inclusion and accessibility, answering the question "to whom". It emphasizes the participation of diverse youth groups, including marginalized and underrepresented youth, young people with diverse social, economic and cultural backgrounds. The model also emphasizes transnational youth dialogue, diversity of forms of participation and socio-economic accessibility, ensuring that YDF does not become an elitist or narrowly accessible initiative.

The sustainability and impact dimension of the model focuses on the question of "what remains after". It includes long-term youth engagement, post-festival outcomes, impact on youth policy and ongoing transnational cooperation. This part emphasizes that YDF is not a one-off event, but a process aimed at long-term structural and institutional change.

Finally, the model details implementation mechanisms, including partnerships with local authorities, schools and NGOs, resource allocation, evaluation and learning. These elements ensure the model works in practice and allow for systematic evaluation of the results achieved and improvement of YDF activities in the future.

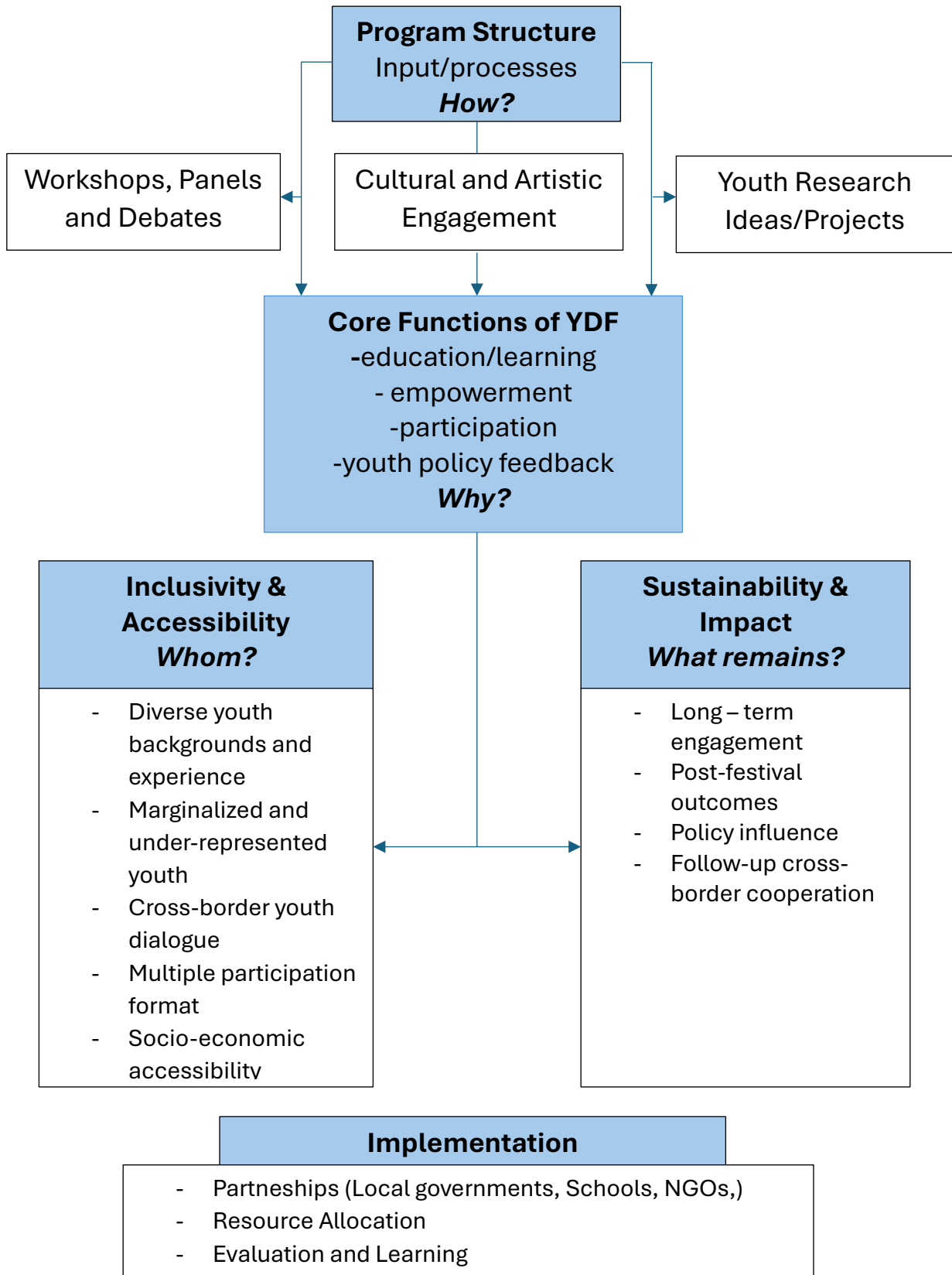


Figure 1. Youth Democratic Festival Model

In summary, the presented model combines the normative framework of democratic participation with practical implementation mechanisms and clearly structured dimensions of activity and impact, and can therefore be applied both in analyzing youth democratic initiatives and in developing or evaluating transnational youth engagement formats.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the literature review and case studies, it can be stated that YDF functions as an effective, hybrid platform for democratic education and civic empowerment, combining non-formal learning, experiential activities and real youth participation in public policy processes. The four analyzed cases in Denmark, Poland and Lithuania confirm that the success of YDF is based on a combination of several elements: a safe and informal environment, creative and dialogic activities, cross-sectoral cooperation and the opportunity for young people not only to participate but also to create the content of the festival. In this way, democracy in the context of YDF is not conveyed as an abstract value or theoretical field of knowledge, but is experienced as a practice that develops critical thinking, civic competences and social responsibility.

The YDF model is an adaptive and transferable form of good practice, suitable for different national, institutional and cultural contexts. Although the festivals differed in scale, audience and organizational structure, the same challenges emerged in all cases: attracting youth, communication gaps and insufficient involvement of young people in the planning stages. This shows that the long-term impact of YDF depends not only on the quality of the event, but also on its integration into wider processes of youth policy, education and local governance. Therefore, YDF should be understood not as a one-off event, but as an ongoing process of democratic education, which can contribute to structural changes in the areas of youth participation and public policy-making.

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