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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 2.1

EU and Democratic Values

in EU and SBA Vision - Grasping Youth Democratic engagement potential (bottom-up approach)



Responsible partner – Hochschule Wismar, University of Applied Sciences: Technology, Business and Design

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Introduction

This report has been developed as part of Activity 2.1 of the D-EFFECT project and focuses on the potential of youth democratic engagement in the South Baltic Area from a bottom-up perspective. The central idea of the report is that young people should not be understood only as recipients of democratic education or as future voters, but as active actors who are already shaping democratic life through their own initiatives, organisations, local engagement, digital activism, social movements and participation in public debate.

The report examines how young people in the South Baltic Area engage with democratic values and how different national contexts support or limit their participation. It focuses on five countries involved in the project: Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Sweden and Denmark. These countries share a commitment to European democratic values, but they differ significantly in their political traditions, youth policy frameworks, civic cultures and forms of participation. This makes the South Baltic Area a valuable region for comparative analysis, because it allows the report to identify both common challenges and country-specific strengths.

The analysis is based mainly on secondary sources, including youth policy documents, survey data, academic literature, reports from public institutions and materials from youth organisations. Particular attention is paid to forms of participation that go beyond formal electoral politics. These include youth councils, student councils, youth organisations, volunteering, participatory projects, civic education, climate activism, school-based democratic learning, local initiatives and youth-led events. The report also considers barriers that may prevent young people from participating meaningfully, such as low trust in institutions, unequal access to information, social inequalities, weak links between civic education and real-life participation, and limited representation of young people in elected bodies.

An additional empirical component of the study is a youth survey conducted by the project partner Media Dizajn in Szczecin as part of D-EFFECT Activity 3.6 (Media Dizajn, 2025). Section 4 presents the findings of that survey — drawn from 1,511 young respondents across Szczecin and the West Pomeranian Voivodeship — and integrates them into the SBA comparative frame, providing grassroots empirical evidence from the Polish side of the region.

The purpose of this report is not only to describe existing youth participation structures, but also to understand how bottom-up democratic engagement can be strengthened in practice. The report therefore looks at the conditions under which young people can move from passive consultation to active co-creation. Cross-border formats, including youth democratic festivals, can be one practical example of such an approach, but they are understood here as part of a broader participation landscape. The main focus remains on how young people can gain real opportunities to express their views, shape agendas, influence decisions and contribute to democratic life in their communities and across the South Baltic Area.

2. Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Youth Participation

This chapter provides the conceptual foundation for the following country analysis. It first clarifies how youth participation can be understood in contemporary democracies, where young people engage not only through elections and formal institutions, but also through local initiatives, volunteering, digital activism, social movements and issue-based campaigns.

It then outlines the main barriers that may limit meaningful youth participation, including declining trust in institutions, unequal access to information, social inequalities and the gap between civic education and real-life democratic practice. Finally, the chapter introduces the bottom-up approach as a key perspective for this report. This approach is particularly relevant because it understands young people not only as recipients of democratic education, but as active contributors to democratic life and co-creators of participation processes.

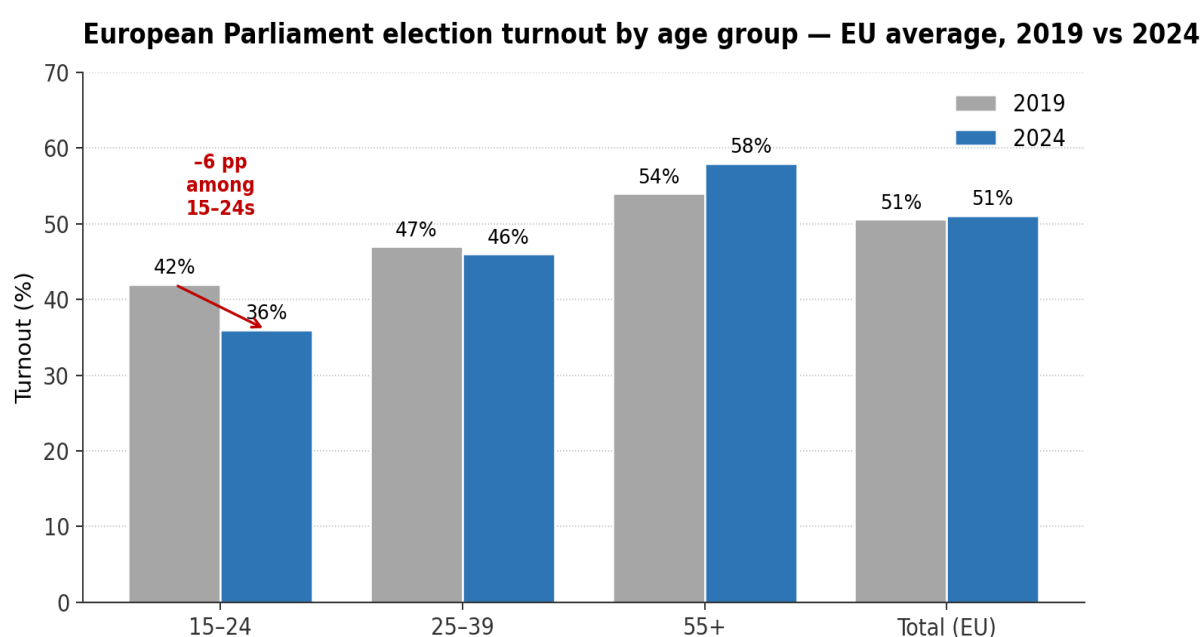
2.1 Youth Participation in Democracy: Forms, Dynamics, and Trends

Youth participation in democratic processes is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. According to Henn and Foard (2014), youth engagement in democracy encompasses not only formal voting but also a wide range of practices such as civic expression, participation in debates and collective actions aimed at social change. The authors emphasise that young people are not merely objects of politics but full-fledged actors capable of influencing decision-making. A more recent approach, advanced by Checkoway and Gutierrez (2022), defines youth participation as a combination of structured and unstructured actions that empower young people to influence the political agenda and promote social transformation. This definition underlines the importance of youth agency in rapidly evolving social contexts and highlights the need for inclusive spaces for meaningful engagement.

Participation spans both formal mechanisms — voting, party membership, youth councils — and informal practices like protests, local initiatives, digital activism and issue-based campaigns. As categorised by Teorell, Torcal and Montero (2007), formal participation relates to institutionalised systems of democracy, whereas informal practices are more flexible and spontaneous forms of civic expression, often driven by youth movements and networked communities.

The 2024 Flash Eurobarometer on Youth and Democracy, carried out between 3 and 12 April 2024 with 26,189 respondents aged 15–30 across the EU-27, provides the most recent EU-wide empirical baseline. It found that 64% of young people intended to vote in the June 2024 European elections, 64% had participated in the activities of at least one organisation in the previous 12 months and 48% had taken action to influence society — by signing petitions, participating in rallies or contacting decision-makers. The most frequently cited issues were human rights (34%), climate change and the environment (33%), health and well-being (29%) and equal rights (European Commission, 2024a). Voting was considered the most effective action for making one's voice heard (38%), followed by engaging on social media (32%). However, 19% of respondents declared no interest in politics and 13% said they were not interested in voting (ERYICA, 2024a; European Commission, 2024a).

Post-electoral data tell a more sobering story. According to the EU post-electoral Eurobarometer (2024) and the Council of Europe's analysis (Council of Europe, 2024), aggregate turnout among young people fell by six percentage points relative to 2019. Turnout reached only 36% in the 15–24 cohort and 46% in the 25–39 cohort, driven by distrust in political institutions, low political efficacy and declining interest in politics. Turnout patterns across the SBA diverged sharply: Sweden registered the highest SBA figures (approximately 56% in both youth cohorts), Germany — which lowered its voting age to 16 for the first time in an EU-wide election — recorded around 48% among 15–24s and higher turnout among 25–39s, while Lithuania had one of the lowest figures in the EU at roughly 12% among 15–24s and 25% among 25–39s. Denmark and Poland fell in the middle of the SBA range (Council of Europe, 2024).



Source: European Parliament post-electoral Eurobarometer 2024; Council of Europe (2024). Figures rounded.

Figure 1. EU-wide European Parliament turnout by age group, 2019 vs 2024. While the overall EU turnout remained stable at around 51%, turnout among 15–24-year-olds fell by six percentage points to 36%, the steepest decline of any age group.

Among those young people who did vote, alignment with the proposals of parties on EU-level issues (48% of 15–24s, 49% of 25–39s) and on national issues (45% and 43% respectively) was the single strongest driver of party choice (FEPS, 2024). Habitual voting, by contrast, was far less common among the youngest cohort than in the general population (31% versus 46%). The implication is clear: young voters are more persuadable, later-deciding and issue-oriented than their elders, which gives late-campaign communication disproportionate weight.

These trends resonate with Civic Efficacy Theory, which posits that a sense of influence is crucial for sustained democratic engagement (Bandura, 1997; Kahne & Westheimer, 2006). The OECD (2024a) further defines civic efficacy as a combination of cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions that enable young people to understand their civic role and influence policymaking. The OECD's 2024 Survey on Drivers of Trust confirms the mechanism empirically: 69% of respondents who feel they have a say in what government does trust the national government, compared to only 22% of those who feel they lack such voice (OECD,

2024b). Institutional support for local initiatives — including youth councils, public consultations and digital feedback mechanisms — therefore plays a critical role in building both efficacy and trust.

In the SBA, earlier work by the South Baltic Youth Core Group Network (SB YCGN, 2020) found that local engagement substantially increases perceived impact: about 40% of respondents stated that their local actions had tangible outcomes, pointing to considerable democratic potential at the grassroots level. Understanding youth participation in the region therefore requires integrating formal channels — elections and advisory councils — with flexible tools for local and digital participation, rather than treating these as competing logics.

2.2 Barriers to Youth Democratic Inclusion in a Changing Societal Context

Despite growing institutional recognition of youth participation as vital to democratic sustainability, significant barriers persist. These challenges span structural deficits in education and representation, shifts in digital behaviour, and diverging political cultures, with particular salience in the SBA.

The 2024 Flash Eurobarometer on Youth and Democracy documented that a substantial minority of young EU citizens — 13% — who were eligible to vote said they would not do so, and 19% expressed no interest in politics (European Commission, 2024a). Disillusionment with traditional political actors, low trust in institutions and growing economic precarity feed a sense of political inefficacy. In post-communist countries such as Poland and Lithuania, legacies of top-down governance have historically dampened civic optimism among younger generations (Pospieszna & Krawatzek, 2025), though — as sections 3.2 and 3.3 will show — recent trajectories diverge sharply between these two cases.

Digitalisation has reshaped the terrain of civic engagement. Platforms such as TikTok and Instagram serve as hubs for mobilisation, particularly around climate justice, gender equality and anti-corruption. However, these spaces are also highly fragmented and algorithmically curated, which can limit exposure to pluralistic dialogue and foster polarisation. Moreover, digital participation is often issue-specific and episodic, lacking integration with institutional processes that might convert activism into policy influence (Barberá et al., 2015). The 2024 European elections made this pattern visible: in Germany, a professional far-right TikTok presence is widely credited with the AfD's rise from 5% to 16% among 16–24-year-olds (Hockenos, 2024; The Conversation, 2024); in Poland, 54% of citizens now access news primarily via social media, a higher share than in Germany, France or the UK (Tilles & Cibor, 2025).

The OECD 2024 Trust Survey, conducted in late 2023 across 30 member states, found that average trust in national governments stood at only 39% and that 15% of respondents expressed near-complete distrust (OECD, 2024b). Political agency — the perception of having a say and being able to participate — was the single strongest driver of trust, outweighing partisanship, socio-economic status or demographic variables. The survey also flagged a widening gender trust gap, especially among youth, rising from two to eight percentage points between 2021 and 2023 (OECD, 2024b). Intersectional vulnerabilities compound these trends: youth from rural areas, migrant backgrounds or low-income families face heightened obstacles to engagement,

including exclusion from school councils, limited transport, and inadequate access to digital tools or reliable information.

Education systems, which should serve as incubators for civic competence, often fall short. The 2022 International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS), published in 2024, documented a decline in civic literacy across most participating EU countries between 2016 and 2022 (Schulz et al., 2024). Lithuania, for example, saw its share of students reaching at least a satisfactory civic-knowledge score fall from 70.0% in 2016 to 62.6% in 2022 (European Commission, 2025a). The Eurydice comparative analysis of citizenship education (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017; updated briefs 2023–2024) continues to show that most EU countries still teach civics as a theoretical subject rather than embedding participatory learning in school life. Teachers cite time constraints, lack of institutional support and insufficient training in youth-centred pedagogy as major barriers — producing a civic-skills gap that limits young people's confidence and capacity to navigate democratic systems.

Disinformation adds another layer of challenge. The Council of Europe's 2024 report on youth participation in the European elections highlights how micro-targeted disinformation campaigns have eroded young people's trust in the electoral process and public institutions (Council of Europe, 2024). While youth are generally more digitally literate than older generations, they are also more likely to encounter manipulated or algorithmically filtered content because of their media-consumption patterns. These dynamics point to a paradox: while today's youth have unprecedented means to express political views, systemic and institutional shortcomings continue to suppress their actual influence. This sets the stage for section 2.3, which considers how bottom-up democratic frameworks respond to these challenges.

2.3 Bottom-Up Democracy: Conceptual Foundation and Strategic Value for Youth Inclusion

Bottom-up democracy refers to democratic processes that start from the grassroots level and are shaped by citizens, communities and civil society actors. In the context of youth participation, this means that young people are not only invited to react to decisions that have already been made, but are actively involved in identifying problems, setting priorities and developing solutions. This approach differs from top-down models of governance, where decisions are mainly designed by institutions and then communicated to citizens. In bottom-up democracy, participation is understood as a shared process based on dialogue, inclusion and co-creation.

This approach is particularly relevant for young people, who are often underrepresented in formal political structures. Many young people do not have direct access to decision-making bodies, political parties or elected institutions. Bottom-up participation can therefore create alternative pathways for democratic engagement. By allowing young people to initiate, co-design and evaluate policies or projects, it strengthens democratic literacy, civic confidence and the feeling that participation can lead to real influence. As Vesnic-Alujevic and Stoermer (2022) argue, participation by design — rather than consultation after policy formation — is essential for democratic outcomes that reflect young people's needs and experiences.

At the European level, bottom-up participation is closely connected to the broader vision of democratic resilience. The European Democracy Action Plan and the European Democracy Shield emphasise the importance of local participation infrastructure, civic education, digital engagement tools and multi-stakeholder cooperation. Instruments such as the EU Youth Dialogue, Erasmus+ Youth and INTERREG civic programmes can be understood as practical examples of this approach, because they create spaces where young people, institutions and civil society organisations can work together on shared democratic challenges (European Commission, 2023; European Commission, 2025b).

Participatory practices such as youth councils, participatory budgeting and deliberative mini-publics can contribute to meaningful youth inclusion. These mechanisms are especially valuable when they are anchored in local governance, because many issues that affect young people directly — such as education, mobility, public spaces, leisure opportunities, climate action and social inclusion — are experienced at the local level. Through such formats, young people can gain practical experience in discussion, collective decision-making and advocacy. Smith and Wales (2000) note that citizens' juries and deliberative formats can strengthen trust, accountability and democratic resilience. However, as Kothari and Cooke (2024) caution, participatory democracy only becomes meaningful when public bodies are willing to share responsibility and accept youth input as relevant for real outcomes. Otherwise, bottom-up participation risks becoming symbolic or performative.

The EU vision of democratic values is based on participation, pluralism, human rights, equality, the rule of law and active citizenship. For young people, these values become meaningful when they are connected to everyday realities, local challenges and opportunities for practical involvement. In the South Baltic Area, cross-border cooperation adds an additional layer to this process. Young people can compare democratic practices across national contexts, learn from different participation cultures and develop a broader understanding of European democracy. For this reason, the following country analysis examines how bottom-up youth participation is supported, limited and practised in Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Sweden and Denmark.

3. Youth Bottom-Up Potential in the South Baltic Area (SBA)

Youth participation in democratic life across the SBA is shaped by diverse political traditions, governance structures and civic cultures. Despite these differences, all five SBA countries — Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Sweden and Denmark — share a commitment to fostering youth engagement through both institutional and informal pathways. This section explores the landscape of bottom-up youth participation in each country, focusing on self-initiated, grassroots and locally embedded democratic practices. Emphasis is placed on youth-led projects, participatory mechanisms and enabling environments that allow young people to influence decisions and co-create democratic processes in their communities. The analysis draws on recent empirical evidence, national policy frameworks and illustrative examples that reflect the unique potential of youth as agents of bottom-up change.

3.1 Germany: Legal Foundations, Youth Representation and Bottom-Up Engagement

Germany is a particularly relevant case for analysing youth participation in the South Baltic Area, because it combines a strong institutional framework with a wide range of self-organised and bottom-up initiatives. Youth participation in Germany is shaped by the federal structure of the country, the principle of subsidiarity and a long tradition of civic engagement. This means that youth policy is not concentrated only at the national level. Instead, responsibilities are shared between the federal government, the 16 federal states and municipalities. As a result, youth participation does not look the same everywhere in Germany. Some cities and regions have well-developed youth councils, youth parliaments and participation formats, while others rely more strongly on project-based or informal forms of engagement. This creates a broad and diverse, but also complex, landscape of youth participation (SGB VIII § 8; BMFSFJ, 2019; Deutsches Jugendinstitut, 2024).

The most important legal foundation for youth participation is § 8 of the Child and Youth Services Act, known in German as Sozialgesetzbuch VIII. This provision gives children and young people the right to be involved in decisions that affect them, according to their age and level of maturity. In this sense, youth participation is not only a political or educational aim, but also a legally recognised right. This is especially important at the municipal level, because many decisions that directly shape young people's everyday lives are made locally. These include questions of leisure activities, public spaces, mobility, youth services, schools, cultural offers and local democratic participation (SGB VIII § 8).

At the federal level, youth participation has been strengthened through the Federal Youth Strategy, which was adopted in December 2019. It was the first comprehensive cross-departmental youth strategy of the German Federal Government and was designed to ensure that young people are considered across different policy fields. The strategy is coordinated by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth and includes nine priority areas. One of these areas is “Engagement, Participation and Democracy”, which shows that youth participation is understood as a central element of democratic development and not only as a separate youth policy topic (BMFSFJ, 2019; BMFSFJ, Federal Youth Strategy).

The National Action Plan for Child and Youth Participation further develops this approach. It was created in connection with the Federal Youth Strategy and aims to strengthen the participation of children and young people at all levels of governance. According to the BMFSFJ progress report published in 2024, more than 500 youth parliaments and youth advisory councils are currently active across Germany. These bodies give young people structured opportunities to express their opinions, formulate proposals and participate in local decision-making processes. They are also important because they allow young people to experience democratic procedures in practice, not only as theory in civic education (BMFSFJ, 2024; EACEA Youth Wiki, Germany, Chapter 5, 2024).

The German system also relies on several specialised institutions and civil society actors. At the federal level, the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth and the Federal Ministry of Education and Research are important for the coordination of youth-related policies. Research, policy advice and practical support are provided by organisations and institutions such as the German Youth Institute, the German Federal Youth Council and the project office responsible for supporting the implementation of the Federal Youth Strategy. These actors help to connect research, youth organisations and political decision-makers (Deutsches Jugendumstitut, 2024; Deutscher Bundesjugendring, 2024).

A central actor in organised youth representation is the German Federal Youth Council, the Deutscher Bundesjugendring. It acts as an umbrella organisation for nationwide youth associations, regional youth councils and associated organisations. According to its own information, it represents around six million young people in Germany. This makes the DBJR one of the most important links between young people, youth organisations and political institutions. It also coordinates formats such as the National Youth Conference and the Youth Policy Days, which create opportunities for young people to enter into direct dialogue with policymakers at the federal level (DBJR, 2024; JugendPolitikTage, 2024).

At the local level, Germany has developed a variety of structures that support youth participation in more practical ways. The initiative “Strong Children’s and Youth Parliaments” supports local youth bodies through counselling, training, networking and practical tools. Its purpose is to strengthen youth parliaments as permanent participation structures and to improve their role in municipal decision-making. This is important because youth participation often remains symbolic if young people are invited to speak but their proposals are not connected to actual decision-making procedures (Starke Kinder- und Jugendparlamente, 2024).

Another important instrument is the federal programme Zukunftspaket für Bewegung, Kultur und Gesundheit. This programme shows how participation can go beyond consultation by providing young people with direct resources for their own projects. In its first year in 2023, more than 37,000 children and young people planned and implemented more than 2,400 projects. These projects reached around 465,000 peers and were supported with approximately EUR 37 million in federal funding. The programme was renewed in 2024. This example is highly relevant from a bottom-up perspective because it allows young people not only to comment on policy, but to design and implement their own activities (BMFSFJ, Zukunftspaket, 2023/2024).

The year 2024 was also important for youth electoral participation in Germany. For the first time, 16- and 17-year-olds were allowed to vote in the European Parliament elections. Germany was one of only four EU member states, together with Austria, Belgium and Malta, to introduce this lower voting age for the European elections. This reform gave voting rights to around 4.8 million young German citizens and approximately 300,000 young EU citizens living in Germany (Bundeswahlleiterin, 2024). In several federal states, voting from the age of 16 already applies to state or municipal elections, including Bremen, Brandenburg, Hamburg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, North Rhine-Westphalia and Schleswig-Holstein. However, for

federal elections, the minimum voting age remains 18 (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2024).

The expansion of the youth electorate was a major democratic step, but the political results also showed that youth participation cannot be understood only as a question of access to voting. In the 2024 European Parliament elections, the AfD received 16 percent of the vote among 16- to 24-year-olds, which was an increase of 11 percentage points compared with 2019. At the same time, the Greens lost significant support in the same age group. Analyses by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation connect this shift partly to the professional use of social media, especially TikTok, by right-wing political actors (FES, 2024). The study Jugend in Deutschland 2024 also points to growing openness towards the AfD among young people. In this survey, 22 percent of respondents aged 14 to 29 stated that they would vote for the AfD. This should be understood as a survey-based tendency rather than an actual election result. The study identifies financial insecurity, housing problems, labour-market concerns and a general feeling of economic pressure as important reasons behind this development (Schnetzer et al., 2024).

The 2025 federal election confirmed that young voters in Germany are politically active but increasingly difficult to place within traditional party patterns. While the voting age at the federal level remained 18, the AfD became the second-strongest party nationwide with 20.8 percent of the vote. At the same time, Die Linke gained strong support among young voters under 25 and became the strongest party among 18- to 24-year-olds with approximately one quarter of the vote. These developments show that young people are not politically passive. Rather, their voting behaviour reflects social insecurity, frustration with established parties, future-related fears and the growing importance of digital political communication (Bundeswahlleiterin, 2025; Tagesschau, 2025).

However, youth participation in Germany is not limited to elections, youth councils or official participation formats. Many young people are active in self-organised initiatives that address local, social, cultural, environmental or political issues. These initiatives are particularly important for a bottom-up understanding of democracy, because they show young people not only as participants in existing structures, but as creators of new spaces and practices.

One example is Second Attempt e. V. in Görlitz. The organisation emerged from a youth-led initiative and developed into a socio-cultural centre in a structurally weak region close to the German-Polish border. It has become an important actor in local culture, youth participation and civic development. This example shows that youth-led initiatives can contribute to democratic life even in regions facing social and economic challenges (Second Attempt e. V.; RELOCAL, 2019).

Similar dynamics can be observed in urban planning initiatives in cities such as Erfurt and Leipzig. There, young people developed proposals for public spaces, some of which were later included in municipal planning processes. These examples are important because they show that youth participation can produce concrete outcomes. Young people are not only asked for

opinions, but can develop ideas that influence local policy and urban development. This makes co-creation a key element of meaningful bottom-up participation (RELOCAL, 2019).

Other initiatives show the thematic diversity of youth-led engagement in Germany. In Berlin, #BIKEYGEES e. V. supports refugee and migrant women by teaching them how to cycle. At first glance, this may seem like a mobility project, but it also has a broader democratic meaning. It strengthens independence, social inclusion and participation in public life. In Munich and other cities, buntkicktgut offers an intercultural street football league. Young people do not only participate as players; they also organise teams, coordinate events and contribute to a league magazine. This creates opportunities for responsibility, self-organisation and intercultural learning in an accessible, low-threshold format (#BIKEYGEES, 2024; buntkicktgut, 2024).

Climate engagement is another important field of youth participation. The Local Conference of Youth Germany, LCOY Germany, is organised annually by volunteers aged between 16 and 30 and brings together more than one thousand participants to discuss climate policy, sustainability and social transformation. Fridays for Future Germany remains the most visible national branch of the international climate strike movement. Between 2019 and 2024, it mobilised hundreds of thousands of young people and became one of the largest youth-led civic movements of the last decade in Germany. These examples show that many young people prefer issue-based participation, especially when they feel that traditional politics is too slow or too distant from urgent problems (LCOY Deutschland, 2024; Fridays for Future Deutschland, 2024).

Together, these examples show that bottom-up youth participation in Germany is broad and diverse. It includes formal youth councils, funded youth-led micro-projects, local urban initiatives, social inclusion projects, intercultural sports formats and climate activism. Young people create their own spaces, organise activities, formulate demands and contribute to local and national debates. This is important for the D-EFFECT project because it shows that democratic participation can take many forms and does not always begin inside political institutions.

At the same time, Germany also shows the limits of a strong institutional participation system. Access to youth participation is not equally distributed. Research by the Goethe-Institut and the Heinrich Böll Foundation indicates that young people in rural areas, young people with migration backgrounds and young people from low-income families face more barriers to engagement. These barriers include limited institutional support, a lack of information about participation opportunities, financial constraints, mobility problems and insufficient recognition of informal forms of engagement (Goethe-Institut / Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2020).

The National Action Plan for Child and Youth Participation therefore places strong emphasis on inclusive outreach. It also calls for better recognition of informal participation formats, such as digital activism, project-based engagement and temporary participation formats. This is important because young people do not always participate through stable organisations or long-term membership. Many prefer flexible and issue-based formats. Nevertheless, practical

implementation remains uneven. Some municipalities have well-developed participation structures, while others lack long-term funding, stable contact points or binding procedures for including young people in decision-making (BMFSFJ, 2024).

A further challenge concerns regional differences, especially between western and eastern Germany. In eastern federal states such as Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, Thuringia and Brandenburg, support for the AfD among young people is in some cases higher than in western Germany. At the same time, some regions have weaker civil society structures, fewer civic education opportunities and less stable youth participation infrastructure. Demographic developments, including youth out-migration from rural areas, can further reduce local participation opportunities (FES, 2024).

This situation shows that a dense participation infrastructure alone does not automatically produce democratic trust or liberal-democratic attitudes. Germany has many youth parliaments, advisory councils, youth organisations, programmes and participation formats. However, current political developments among young people show that democratic participation also depends on social security, trust in institutions, civic education and media literacy. Strengthening youth participation therefore requires more than creating participation bodies. It also requires addressing young people's everyday concerns, such as housing, financial insecurity, future prospects, digital misinformation and the feeling that political institutions do not listen to them (FES, 2024; Schnetzer et al., 2024).

The trust gap between young people and political institutions is particularly important in this context. Recent youth studies point to declining institutional trust and growing political frustration among young people in Germany. This means that young people do not only need more participation opportunities. They also need to see that their participation has consequences and that their concerns are taken seriously. Without visible outcomes, participation can easily be perceived as symbolic or ineffective (Schnetzer et al., 2024).

In summary, the German case presents both strong potential and important challenges. On the one hand, Germany has a solid legal and institutional basis for youth participation. This includes the right to participation under § 8 SGB VIII, the Federal Youth Strategy, the National Action Plan, more than 500 youth parliaments and advisory councils, strong youth organisations, federal funding programmes and a rich landscape of civil society initiatives. On the other hand, inequalities in access, regional disparities, digital polarisation, right-wing populist mobilisation and declining institutional trust show that participation structures alone are not enough.

3.2 Poland: Youth Mobilisation, Youth Councils and Bottom-Up Civic Engagement

Poland is a particularly interesting case for analysing youth democratic engagement in the South Baltic Area. The country combines a fragmented youth policy framework with a very dynamic pattern of youth mobilisation. On the one hand, Poland does not have a single comprehensive Youth Act, and youth policy is distributed across different ministries, public institutions and

local governments. On the other hand, recent years have shown that young people in Poland can become a highly visible and politically influential group, especially when they feel that democratic values, civil rights or social justice are at stake.

The legal foundation for participation in Poland is rooted in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland. The Constitution establishes the principle that supreme power belongs to the nation and refers to social dialogue as an important basis of public life. Citizen participation can take different forms depending on the level of governance, the type of participants and whether the process is permanent or temporary. It may include formal consultations, advisory bodies, participatory mechanisms, local initiatives and broader civic action (Constitution of the Republic of Poland, Preamble and Article 4; Robert Bosch Stiftung, 2024).

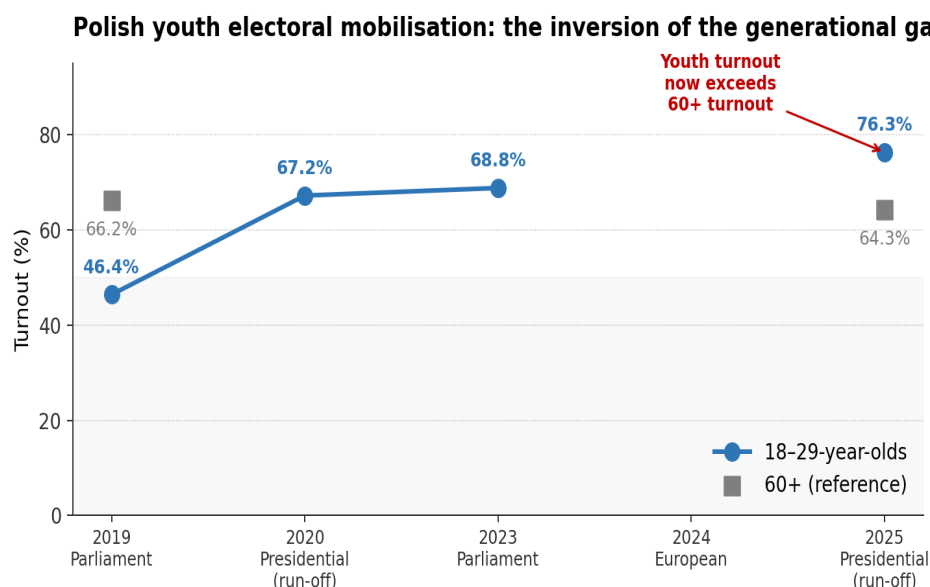
Youth participation, however, is not regulated through one unified national youth law. The former State Strategy for Youth 2003–2012, *Strategia Państwa dla Młodzieży*, formally ended in 2012 and remains the only national document that comprehensively defined the direction of Polish youth policy. Since then, youth-related issues have been addressed through different policy areas and institutional channels. This creates a fragmented policy environment in which youth participation depends strongly on local governments, civil society organisations, schools, youth councils and project-based initiatives (EACEA Youth Wiki, Poland 1.4 Decision-making).

This fragmentation is also visible in the language used in Polish policy documents. The term “youth participation” is not always used directly. Instead, Polish documents often refer to *aktywne obywatelstwo młodzieży*, meaning active youth citizenship, or *partycypacja obywatelska*, meaning civic participation. This shows that youth engagement is often framed as part of broader civic responsibility rather than as a separate policy field. While this can connect youth participation to wider democratic life, it may also make youth-specific needs less visible in national policymaking (EACEA Youth Wiki, Poland 5.1).

At the same time, there are signs that youth policy may become more structured in the future. In September 2025, the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy commissioned the Polish Society for Social Policy to prepare a new *Diagnosis of Children and Youth, Diagnoza Dzieci i Młodzieży*. This document may become an important basis for a future national youth strategy and could help address the current fragmentation of youth policy (EACEA Youth Wiki, Poland 1.4 Decision-making).

Despite the lack of a unified youth policy framework, youth political engagement in Poland has changed significantly in recent years. For a long time, Polish youth followed the common international pattern of lower electoral participation compared with older generations. In the 2019 parliamentary elections, only 46.4 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds voted, compared with 66.2 percent of voters aged 60 and above. However, this pattern has changed dramatically. The 2023 parliamentary elections marked a turning point: turnout among 18- to 29-year-olds reached 68.8 percent, more than 20 percentage points higher than in 2019. Commentators and policy observers described this development as a Polish “youthquake”, because young voters

became one of the most visible forces in the election (EACEA Youth Wiki, Poland 5.2; Tilles & Cibor, 2025).



Sources: EACEA Youth Wiki Poland (2024); Tilles & Cibor (2025), Notes from Poland; Ipsos / Euronews (2023). 2024 EP figure not separately reported for 18-29 in Poland.

Figure 2. Polish youth (18–29) electoral turnout, 2019–2025. Youth turnout more than doubled over six years and, in the 2025 presidential run-off, surpassed the turnout of voters aged 60 and above — an inversion of the generational pattern seen in most democracies.

The trend continued in the 2025 presidential election. In the run-off on 1 June 2025, 76.3 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds voted, compared with 64.3 percent of voters aged 60 and older. This means that youth turnout exceeded older-voter turnout, which represents an unusual reversal of the traditional generational pattern of political participation (Tilles & Cibor, 2025). This development is important because it shows that young people in Poland are not politically passive. When political conflicts become connected to issues they consider important, they are ready to participate in large numbers.

However, the political meaning of this mobilisation is complex. Young Poles are not simply becoming more loyal to mainstream political parties. In the first round of the 2025 presidential election, only around 24 percent of voters aged 18–29 supported candidates from the two dominant political camps, Civic Coalition and Law and Justice. By contrast, 35 percent supported Sławomir Mentzen from the far-right Confederation, while 19 percent supported Adrian Zandberg from the left-wing Razem. This indicates that many young voters are dissatisfied with the long-standing KO–PiS party divide and are looking for alternatives outside the traditional political centre (Tilles & Cibor, 2025).

This makes Polish youth engagement ambivalent. On the one hand, young people have become one of the most mobilised groups in the electorate. On the other hand, survey evidence points to frustration with the existing political class and a fragile commitment to democratic norms. The TUI Foundation’s Young Europe 2025 study found that only 48 percent of Polish youth firmly believe that democracy is the best form of government. The NDI regional survey, published in January 2025, also found that youth preference for democracy had declined by 15 percentage points since 2018, while political interest among Polish youth fell from 80 percent

in 2018 to 62 percent in 2024 (NDI, 2025; TUI Stiftung, 2025). These findings suggest that Polish youth are politically active, but their relationship with democratic institutions is marked by disappointment, distrust and a search for new political alternatives.

A decisive moment in the recent politicisation of young people was the Women's Strike in autumn 2020. The mass protests against restrictions on abortion rights brought many young people, especially young women, into public debate and street-level mobilisation. Several organisations, including GrowSPACE, Ważne Sprawy and the Centre for Citizenship Education, identify 2020 as a breakthrough year for youth political engagement in Poland. The protests helped normalise youth participation in political and civic debates and made visible a generation that was willing to act publicly on issues such as women's rights, human rights, democratic values and social justice (GrowSPACE, 2024; Centre for Citizenship Education, 2024; Tilles & Cibor, 2025).

At the same time, traditional forms of political membership remain weak. Political party membership has continued to decline in Poland. Data from the Central Statistical Office show that the number of registered party members decreased from around 300,000 in 2014 to 203,800 in 2022, representing only about 0.7 percent of voters. Youth party organisations had around 7,100 members in 2022, which means a loss of around 10,000 members since 2016 (EACEA Youth Wiki, Poland 5.2). This confirms that young people may be politically mobilised without necessarily joining traditional parties or engaging in long-term party structures.

Youth councils are one of the most important institutional mechanisms for youth participation in Poland. The first youth councils emerged in the early 1990s after the democratic transformation of 1989. Their creation at the local government level was formally recognised in 2001 through Article 5b of the Law on Local Governments. Historically, youth councils were mainly limited to communes and towns with county rights. This changed through the 2021 reform, which amended the acts on commune, county and voivodeship self-government. The reform strengthened the legal framework and made it possible to establish youth councils at county and regional level. It also gave these councils more specific powers and was linked to the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 (Schuman Foundation, 2024; EACEA Youth Wiki, Poland 5.2; EACEA Youth Wiki, Poland 5.3).

The reform was an important step, but youth councils still face several limitations. According to the last national count in 2017, Poland had 408 municipal youth councils, which represented around 16 percent of all municipalities. The number has likely increased since the 2021 reform, but no consolidated national count has been published. This makes it difficult to assess how far the reform has changed the actual participation landscape (EACEA Youth Wiki, Poland 5.3).

There are also practical and legal barriers. Youth councils do not have legal personality. They are neither independent institutions nor NGOs in the legal sense, and therefore they cannot directly raise funds for their own activities. As a result, they often depend on local authorities for organisational support, resources and implementation capacity. This can limit their autonomy and reduce their ability to act as genuinely independent youth-led bodies. Inclusion

is another concern. Youth councils often attract young people with higher social, cultural or educational capital, while young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, rural areas or socially vulnerable groups are less likely to participate (Schuman Foundation, 2024; EACEA Youth Wiki, Poland 5.3).

At the national level, Poland does not have a democratically elected youth parliament. The Children and Youth Parliament, Sejm Dzieci i Młodzieży, is representative in name, but functions mainly as an educational project organised by the Chancellery of the Parliament. Its 30th session took place in autumn 2024 and used a two-stage lottery system involving 153 randomly selected primary schools. While this format has educational value, it does not replace a democratically elected national youth representation body with a stable mandate (EACEA Youth Wiki, Poland 5.3).

In addition to local youth councils, several sectoral youth councils operate at ministerial or central level. These include the Youth Climate Council, established in 2020, the Youth Council at the President's Office, established in 2021, the Youth Sports Council, established in 2022, and the Children and Youth Council at the Ombudsman for Children, whose recruitment was completed in June 2024. These bodies show that youth consultation is expanding into different policy fields. However, their practical influence depends on how seriously public institutions take youth recommendations and whether consultation leads to visible outcomes (EACEA Youth Wiki, Poland 5.3).

Civil society organisations play a crucial role in Polish youth participation. Local initiatives such as “Youth active locally” have provided participatory tools for students since 2018, including educational lessons, creative workshops and animator support for middle- and high-school students in Warsaw districts. Another example is the “Change in neighbourhood” project, which supports youth involvement at district level. Such initiatives are important because they connect democratic participation with young people's everyday environments and make engagement more practical and accessible.

The Polish Council of Youth Organisations, PROM, is one of the most important national-level youth actors. Founded in 2011, it brings together around 30 Polish youth organisations and represents more than 250,000 young people. PROM functions as the de facto National Youth Council and has coordinated the EU Youth Dialogue in Poland in most years. Between 2023 and 2024, the EU Youth Dialogue was temporarily coordinated by other partners, but PROM remains a central actor in youth advocacy, youth-sector coordination and policy engagement. It is also a full member of the European Youth Forum (PROM, 2024; EACEA Youth Wiki, Poland 5.5; European Youth Forum, 2024).

A particularly important bottom-up development was the creation of the National Coalition for Youth Work, Krajowa Koalicja na rzecz Pracy z Młodzieżą, in 2024. The coalition brings together around 25 organisations, local governments and public institutions. Its aim is to build policy structures for youth work and to achieve formal, social and legal recognition for the sector. This is important because youth work can act as a bridge between young people, public

institutions and local communities. The coalition draws on the European Charter on Local Youth Work, which understands youth work as a practice based on young people's agency, partnership and civic development (EACEA Youth Wiki, Poland 10; European Charter on Local Youth Work).

Another relevant instrument is the Youth Fund, Fundusz Młodzieżowy 2022–2033. It is the first long-term national funding mechanism dedicated specifically to youth organisations and youth councils. For bottom-up participation, such funding is crucial, because youth initiatives often need stable resources, organisational continuity and support beyond short-term project cycles (Fundusz Młodzieżowy, 2022–2033).

Poland also has a rich landscape of youth-oriented and civic education organisations. The European Youth Parliament Poland has been active since the 1990s. Europe4Youth, based in Kraków, works in civic education programmes. GrowSPACE supports youth human rights and well-being and has been particularly visible in discussions about youth political mobilisation after 2020. Together with Ważne Sprawy and the Centre for Citizenship Education, such organisations have contributed to making youth political engagement more visible and more accepted in public life (EYP Poland, 2024; Europe4Youth, 2024; GrowSPACE, 2024).

The South Baltic regional context is especially important in the case of West Pomerania. The project partner Media Dizajn is based in Szczecin, and the region has historically shown lower engagement indicators than central and southern Polish metropolitan areas. This reflects, among other factors, the socio-economic legacy of the so-called Recovered Territories. Since around 2020, however, a stronger network of civil society actors has been developing in the region. The POLITES Association in Szczecin, the West Pomeranian NGO Federation and local NGOs working with rural municipalities have supported the expansion of Municipal Youth Councils and youth-led projects. PROM's advocacy has also helped empower existing youth councils and support their creation in more vulnerable or disengaged areas (Civic Europe, 2023; POLITES, 2024; Sekretariat ds. Młodzieży Województwa Zachodniopomorskiego, 2024).

Recent developments in 2024 and 2025 suggest that youth organisations in Poland are becoming more active at the central level. This can be understood as a continuation of two broader processes: the post-1990 development of bottom-up civil society after democratic transformation, and the post-2004 growth of youth organisations connected to Poland's accession to the European Union. Today, the Polish youth participation landscape includes youth initiatives, mass youth organisations, school-based youth work, NGO-led civic education and an expanding system of youth councils (EACEA Youth Wiki, Poland 5.1; EACEA, Youth Policies in Poland, 2021).

Evidence from research on NGO-led civic education also suggests that targeted training can influence young people's democratic values and civic behaviour. Mos argues that when civic education content is closely connected to the intended outcome, measurable changes can occur among young participants in line with democratic values (Mos, 2022). This is particularly

relevant for bottom-up democratic formats, because it shows that participation can be strengthened through practical, well-designed and youth-centred learning processes.

At the same time, several challenges remain. The NDI 2025 survey shows declining political interest and falling satisfaction with the political situation among Polish youth. Research by Pospieszna and Krawatzek also suggests that youth protest participation in Poland is shaped by different, often polarised networks, especially cultural-liberal and cultural-conservative mobilisation. This means that bottom-up youth engagement in Poland is real and visible, but it is also polarised, often crisis-driven and institutionally uneven (NDI, 2025; Pospieszna & Krawatzek, 2025).

In summary, Poland shows a highly dynamic but uneven landscape of youth democratic participation. The country lacks a single Youth Act and a current comprehensive national youth strategy, and youth councils continue to face legal, financial and inclusion-related limitations. At the same time, recent electoral mobilisation, the legacy of the Women's Strike, the development of PROM and KKPM, the Youth Fund, the expansion of youth councils all point to significant bottom-up potential. Polish youth are politically active, but many of them are dissatisfied with traditional party politics and seek other spaces for engagement.

3.3 Lithuania: Legal Youth Policy Framework, Civic Agency and Bottom-Up Participation

Lithuania represents an important case of youth participation in the South Baltic Area because it combines a relatively well-developed legal and institutional framework with persistent challenges related to electoral engagement, civic literacy, regional access and the translation of youth agency into formal political influence. Compared with some other countries in the region, Lithuania has a clearly defined youth policy system, specific legal provisions for youth work and youth organisations, and a national youth council with a strong representative role. At the same time, evidence from recent studies shows that many young people still experience barriers to meaningful participation, especially when formal civic education is disconnected from practical democratic experience.

Lithuanian youth policy targets young people aged 14 to 29. This group includes more than 630,000 people, which corresponds to around 21 percent of the country's population (Lithuanian Ministry of Social Security and Labour, 2024). The legal and institutional basis of youth policy has been in place for more than 15 years and is primarily anchored in the Law on Youth Policy Framework, Law No. IX-1871. This law was originally adopted in 2003 and later revised in 2005, 2016, 2018, 2020 and most recently in 2024. The amendments of 2018 and 2020 aimed to improve legal regulation and ensure a more systematic implementation of youth policy. The 2024 update further strengthened provisions related to youth participation in youth work and youth organisations (Law on Youth Policy Framework IX-1871; EACEA Youth Wiki, Lithuania 1.2).

The existence of a specific youth policy law is important because it gives Lithuania a relatively clear institutional foundation. Youth are legally defined as a distinct policy group, and youth work, youth organisations and youth participation are recognised as relevant fields of public policy. In this sense, Lithuania has a more structured youth policy framework than countries where youth participation is mainly addressed through general civic education or social policy. However, the Lithuanian case also shows that legal recognition alone is not enough. Even when formal structures exist, young people may still experience barriers related to access, information, regional inequalities, civic education and limited political representation.

The current main strategic instrument is the Action Plan of the National Youth Policy 2023–2027, which replaced the earlier 2022–2024 plan. The action plan focuses on social inclusion, youth well-being, global citizenship education, evidence-based youth policy and the successful integration of young people into the labour market and the education system (Lithuanian Ministry of Social Security and Labour, 2024). These priorities show that youth policy in Lithuania is understood not only as a matter of political participation, but also as a broader framework for supporting young people’s social development, well-being and transition into adult life.

Institutionally, several bodies are involved in youth policy and youth participation. The Ministry of Social Security and Labour is responsible for coordinating and implementing youth policy and supervises the Law on Youth Policy Framework and EU youth policy measures. The Agency of Youth Affairs, Jaunimo reikalų departamentas, implements national youth policy measures and encourages young people to engage in active public life. According to the OECD Youth Policy Implementation Assessment, the Agency of Youth Affairs plays a central role in developing and implementing the national youth strategy and in coordinating youth-related policies and services across ministries and agencies (OECD, 2024). The Commission for Youth and Sport Affairs in the Seimas provides parliamentary-level oversight of youth policy implementation, while the network of municipal youth coordinators connects national-level policy with youth organisations, regional youth councils and local communities (Seimas, Youth and Sport Affairs Commission; Agency of Youth Affairs, 2024; EACEA Youth Wiki, Lithuania 5.4).

A central actor in youth representation is LiJOT, the Lithuanian Youth Council. Founded in 1992, LiJOT brings together national youth organisations and regional unions of youth organisations. As of 2024, it unites between 57 and 68 member organisations, depending on the reporting source, and represents more than 200,000 young people. LiJOT is a full member of the European Youth Forum and the Baltic Youth Forum and coordinates EURODESK Lithuania. In 2024, it also received the European Youth Information Quality Label from ERYICA, which underlines its role in youth information, counselling and representation (LiJOT, 2024; European Youth Forum, 2024; ERYICA, 2024).

LiJOT’s Strategic Plan 2024–2028 focuses on comprehensive representation of young people, the promotion of youth well-being, the development of the LiJOT community, the implementation of youth policy in the regions and the strengthening of LiJOT’s attractiveness

to young people and youth organisations. The organisation also holds structured dialogue consultations with open youth centres and youth organisations and works with young people from vulnerable groups. However, formal mechanisms for monitoring how youth input is actually integrated into policy decisions remain underdeveloped. This means that Lithuania has participation channels, but still needs stronger feedback loops between consultation, decision-making and visible policy outcomes (LiJOT, 2024; EACEA Youth Wiki, Lithuania 5.4).

Lithuania does not have a national youth parliament with a representative mandate. The European Youth Parliament Lithuania, active since 2013, plays an important educational and simulation role, but it does not function as a formal representative youth institution. Instead, youth participation is mainly organised through LiJOT, municipal youth coordinators, youth organisations, regional councils and consultation mechanisms connected to the Department or Agency of Youth Affairs. This structure gives Lithuanian youth participation a decentralised and organisational character. It is relatively well institutionalised, but it depends strongly on the capacity of youth organisations and municipalities (EACEA Youth Wiki, Lithuania 5.4).

Recent developments suggest that the political influence of young people in Lithuania is slowly growing. Researchers from Vytautas Magnus University argue that Lithuanian political parties increasingly see young people as relevant political actors, including through youth think-tanks and party-related youth structures (VMU/VDU, 2024). At the same time, the national youth study Jaunimas 2022 shows that young people have a growing interest in NGO youth organisations, but only a limited share of them are familiar with the activities of youth councils. This points to an important visibility gap. Youth organisations may be active and recognised within the youth policy sector, but many young people outside these structures do not necessarily know how they can participate or whom they can contact (Jaunimas, 2022).

The same study shows that many young people in Lithuania prefer participation through discussion, consensus-building and practical problem-solving. They see volunteering as one of the most important forms of civic participation. However, a considerable number of young people are reluctant to volunteer because they lack information about where to go, do not receive personal invitations and do not feel sufficiently encouraged. This suggests that the problem is not simply a lack of interest. Rather, young people often need clearer pathways into participation, more visible opportunities, motivating networks and mentorship (Jaunimas, 2022). From a bottom-up perspective, this is highly relevant: young people are more likely to participate when engagement feels accessible, personal and connected to real communities.

The Civic Power Index provides additional insight into youth civic engagement in Lithuania. Among the 18–29 age group, the index increased from 35.4 in 2020 to 41.3 in 2021, before declining to 38.4 in 2022 and rising again in 2023–2024 (EACEA Youth Wiki, Lithuania 5). The 2024 report provides more detailed age groups and shows that young people aged 18–24 reached a Civic Power Index of 34.8, while those aged 25–29 reached 40.2. This indicates a visible maturity effect: civic confidence and participation capacity appear to increase with age and life experience (Civic Power Index, 2024). At the same time, the pre-pandemic baseline for

18–29-year-olds was 34.1 in 2019, which means that youth civic power after the pandemic remained above the earlier baseline.

Electoral participation, however, remains one of the main challenges. According to the 2024 post-electoral Eurobarometer and the Council of Europe's analysis, Lithuania recorded one of the three lowest youth turnout levels in the European Union in the 2024 European Parliament elections. Only around 12 percent of young people aged 15–24 and 25 percent of those aged 25–39 voted. This was far below the EU average and much lower than in countries such as Sweden, where youth turnout was around 56 percent (Council of Europe, 2024). This result shows that European-level elections remain distant for many young Lithuanians and that institutional participation channels do not automatically translate into electoral mobilisation.

At national level, the picture is somewhat more positive but still mixed. In the 2024 Seimas elections, held on 13 and 27 October 2024, total turnout reached 52.06 percent, compared with 47.80 percent in 2020. The election was won by the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party, which received 52 seats. However, youth representation in parliament remained limited. The average age of members of the Seimas elected for the 2025–2029 term was 50.7 years, which shows that young people continue to be underrepresented in formal political institutions (Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania, 2024; Seimas, 2024 election results).

A brighter point was the 2024 presidential election. In the first round, youth turnout reached a record 49.05 percent, the highest ever recorded by the Central Electoral Commission for a Lithuanian youth cohort (EACEA Youth Wiki, Lithuania 5). This suggests that young people can be mobilised when elections are perceived as meaningful, visible and connected to their values. Issue-based voting also seems to be important. According to FEPS analysis of the 2024 European elections, 77 percent of young Lithuanian voters said that party proposals on EU issues aligned with their values. This was the second-highest rate in the EU (FEPS, 2024). The implication is that Lithuanian youth may respond strongly to value-based and issue-oriented political communication, even if overall turnout remains uneven.

The structural challenges of Lithuanian youth participation have deeper historical and social roots. Žiliukaitė and later national analyses argue that the cohorts whose political values formed after the collapse of communism show some of the lowest levels of electoral turnout in society. Longitudinal analysis suggests that these cohorts remain less active as they age than older generations were at the same age. Several explanations are commonly mentioned: political processes are often perceived as difficult to understand, politicians are associated with injustice or distrust, the Soviet legacy continues to shape attitudes toward politics, and gaps in civic literacy remain visible (Žiliukaitė, 2013; Youth Civic Participation in the South Baltic Region).

Earlier data also show limited civic empowerment among young people. The 2016 Civic Power Index found that only 36 percent of young Lithuanians had experience in NGO-provided activities, indicating that practical civic engagement was still relatively limited at that time (Civic Power Index, 2016). More recent education data point to another challenge. According to ICCS 2022, published in 2024 and reported in the 2025 Education and Training Monitor,

Lithuania's civic knowledge score declined from 70.0 percent of students reaching at least a satisfactory level in 2016 to 62.6 percent in 2022. This decline was sharper than the EU average. The data also show one of the largest gender gaps in civic knowledge in the EU, in favour of girls, as well as persistent equity gaps. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and rural areas are less likely to participate in civic activities and to demonstrate strong civic literacy (European Commission, 2025; Schulz et al., 2024).

This points to one of the most important weaknesses in the Lithuanian youth participation system: the gap between formal civic education and real-life democratic practice. The ParticipACTION national-level assessment conducted in 2025 found that Lithuanian youth often perceive school-based civic education as too theoretical and disconnected from everyday participation. Many young people therefore turn to non-formal education, NGO-led initiatives and youth organisations to develop practical civic skills (ParticipACTION, 2025). This is highly relevant for the D-EFFECT project because it suggests that youth democratic engagement should not rely only on school-based civic knowledge, but should also create practical spaces where young people can experience participation directly.

One of Lithuania's most important programmes for practical youth engagement is the Youth Voluntary Service. This long-term national programme is funded by the Ministry of Social Security and Labour and is described as the first and only national voluntary programme specifically targeting youth competences and their recognition. Volunteers spend around 50 hours per month in accredited placements and are supported by mentors and coordinators (Innovation in Politics Institute, 2024). The programme is important because it connects civic engagement with skills development, personal growth and recognition. From a bottom-up perspective, it helps young people move from abstract interest in social issues to concrete participation in local communities.

A particularly relevant example of youth-led mobilisation is the 2024 LiJOT campaign "Man ne dzin", which can be translated as "I do care". The campaign was designed and implemented entirely by young people within LiJOT. Its aim was to counter political apathy and mobilise first-time voters. It developed an interactive platform to simplify electoral information and combined this with visible street campaigns. Its impact was visible in higher turnout rates among young voters in the 2024 presidential and Seimas elections (LiJOT, 2024). This campaign is important because it shows that youth-led communication can be more effective than traditional institutional messaging. When young people themselves design the format, language and channels of mobilisation, participation becomes more relatable and accessible.

Other initiatives also demonstrate the breadth of bottom-up and non-formal youth engagement in Lithuania. The Liepāja 2027 Youth Development Pilot Programme engages young people in cultural development in a cross-border context. Young Change Agents teaches young people how to bring together diverse groups, improve their surroundings and prioritise community issues. Youth Action for Sustainable Development focuses on climate and the Sustainable Development Goals. Participatory budgeting workshops, climate activism projects and civic

education events across Lithuanian municipalities form a local grassroots layer beyond national policy structures (Liepāja 2027; Youth Action for Sustainable Development, 2024).

Lithuania has also invested strongly in transnational and Nordic-Baltic youth cooperation. The Nordic-Baltic Youth Summit in Vilnius in 2024 was organised by the Nordic Council of Ministers, LiJOT and Sweden's LSU. It brought together young participants to discuss democracy, climate, well-being and regional security and produced concrete policy recommendations for decision-makers across the region (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2024). Lithuanian youth organisations also participate in the MEET project, Mobilise Europe = Engaging Together, and in Erasmus+ Youth initiatives. These activities show that Lithuanian youth participation is not limited to the national level. It is also embedded in wider European and Baltic cooperation networks.

The historical development of youth organisations in Lithuania helps explain the current situation. After 1990, the first youth organisations and youth movements were created in the context of democratic transformation. These organisations were often driven by strong democratic ideas, but at the beginning they lacked established pedagogical concepts, youth leaders and developed youth work methods. Over time, youth organisations coalesced under the LiJOT umbrella and a more diverse youth work landscape emerged. However, youth work still does not reach all young people equally. Rural and peripheral areas continue to have more limited access to youth work, non-formal education and participation opportunities.

Municipal-level youth empowerment remains uneven. Most municipalities recognise the need to involve young people in decision-making, but the practical level of support differs considerably. The 2023 analysis of youth empowerment in Lithuanian municipalities shows that youth empowerment is understood differently at local level. In some municipalities, it is mainly framed through labour market participation, culture or non-formal education, rather than through equal participation in decision-making and service design (Analysis of Youth Empowerment in Municipalities of Lithuania, 2023). This uneven understanding makes it difficult to build a coherent system of bottom-up participation across the country.

A further challenge is the political agency gap. Lithuanian youth often show a stronger belief than older generations in their ability to influence political processes, but this belief does not consistently translate into electoral turnout. Instead, non-electoral forms of participation, such as volunteering, youth organisations, e-participation and issue-based initiatives, are areas where young Lithuanians are more active than older cohorts (EACEA Youth Wiki, Lithuania 5). This means that youth participation in Lithuania should not be evaluated only through voting behaviour. A broader perspective is needed, one that includes digital, voluntary, local and cross-border forms of engagement.

The representation gap is also significant. Young people remain underrepresented in formal political institutions. The average age of members of the Seimas for the 2025–2029 term is 50.7 years, while the Freedom Party had the youngest parliamentary cohort, with an average age of 37.2 years (Seimas, 2024 election results). This suggests that even when young people are

active in civic life or youth organisations, their presence in elected politics remains limited. For democratic legitimacy, this gap between youth engagement and youth representation is an important issue.

In summary, Lithuania has a strong legal and institutional basis for youth policy and participation. The Law on Youth Policy Framework, the National Youth Policy Action Plan 2023–2027, the Agency of Youth Affairs, municipal youth coordinators and LiJOT provide an organised environment for youth participation. At the same time, several challenges remain: low youth turnout in European elections, uneven access to youth work, theoretical civic education, regional disparities, weak monitoring of youth input into policymaking and limited representation of young people in elected institutions.

3.4 Sweden: Bottom-Up Participation through Civic Education, Youth Organisations and Local Democracy

Sweden represents one of the most institutionally developed models of youth democratic participation in the South Baltic Area. The Swedish case is shaped by a long tradition of civic engagement, strong public institutions, relatively high trust in democratic procedures and stable support for youth organisations. Compared with other SBA countries, Sweden stands out because young people participate in elections at a high level and are introduced to democratic practices early, especially through school-based civic education and the Skolval school election system. At the same time, the Swedish example also shows that high turnout and strong institutions do not automatically guarantee equal influence, strong local participation structures or young people's access to elected positions.

Sweden does not have a single Youth Act. Instead, youth policy is based on a national policy framework that has been in place since the 2014 Youth Policy Bill. The current framework is the Government Communication 2020/21:105, Ungdomspolitisk skrivelse, which sets out four multi-sectoral priorities and an action programme with around 100 measures across different policy areas. The framework applies to young people aged 13 to 25, a group of approximately 1.6 million inhabitants. Its central objective is that all young people should have good living conditions, the power to shape their own lives and influence over developments in society (Government of Sweden, Skr 2020/21:105; EACEA Youth Wiki, Sweden 1.4).

This objective reflects a broad understanding of youth participation. In Sweden, youth policy is not limited to elections or formal political representation. It is also connected to living conditions, education, health, social inclusion, autonomy and the ability of young people to influence decisions that affect their everyday lives. Participation is therefore understood as both a democratic right and a practical condition for young people's personal and social development.

Youth policy is coordinated by the Ministry of Culture and implemented mainly through the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society, MUCF. MUCF plays a central role in monitoring youth policy, supporting civil society, distributing grants, producing knowledge and developing

participation methods. The agency was rebranded from Ungdomsstyrelsen in 2014. In 2024, MUCF was authorised to operate from two headquarters, Stockholm and Växjö, and from 1 January 2026 the Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities is expected to be incorporated into MUCF. This development shows that MUCF has become a broad public agency for youth, civil society and democratic participation (MUCF, 2024; EACEA Youth Wiki, Sweden 1.7).

Overall, the Swedish case shows that bottom-up participation can be supported by strong public institutions, but it cannot be fully created by them. Young people need access to schools, youth organisations, local councils and social movements, but they also need real opportunities to influence decisions. Sweden therefore demonstrates that bottom-up democracy works best when institutional support, civic education and youth-led initiatives are connected with visible follow-up at the local level.

A key feature of the Swedish system is municipal autonomy. National youth policy guidelines are not binding for municipalities and regions. This means that local governments have considerable freedom in deciding how they implement youth participation. On the one hand, this allows municipalities to adapt participation formats to local needs. On the other hand, it also creates uneven implementation. Some municipalities have strong and long-term youth participation structures, while others have weaker or less permanent forms of youth involvement. This local variation is one of the main challenges of the Swedish model.

One important national initiative is MUCF's Demokratin 100 år, "Democracy 100 Years", assignment. This programme has been running since 2020 and marks 100 years since Sweden's democratic breakthrough, when universal and equal suffrage was introduced in 1921. Within this assignment, MUCF works with six municipalities and one region to develop and share models for strengthening young people's knowledge of local democracy. The focus is strategic, cross-sectoral and long-term. Preliminary conclusions were published in 2024, and the work is scheduled to continue until 2025, after which the approach is expected to be integrated into MUCF's regular operations (MUCF, 2024a).

This initiative is particularly relevant from a bottom-up perspective because it focuses on local democracy. For many young people, democracy is most visible at the local level: in schools, youth centres, transport, public spaces, leisure activities, cultural life and municipal services. Strengthening young people's knowledge of local democracy can therefore make participation more concrete and easier to understand. It also helps young people see how decisions are made and where they can influence them.

Another important Swedish tool is the LUPP questionnaire. LUPP has been used since 2004 as a local youth policy follow-up instrument. About half of Sweden's 290 municipalities have used it, and around 150 municipalities have used it more than once. The questionnaire covers areas such as work, school, health, future outlook, influence and democracy. It gives municipalities comparable data on young people's living conditions, needs and views. In this

way, LUPP creates an evidence-based infrastructure for local youth policy and helps municipalities identify participation gaps (MUCF, 2024b).

The value of LUPP depends on how municipalities use the results. If the questionnaire is followed by discussion, policy adaptation and visible local action, it can become an important bridge between young people and municipal decision-making. If there is no follow-up, however, young people may experience the process as symbolic. This is an important lesson for bottom-up participation: collecting youth opinions is not enough. Young people also need to see that their input matters and can lead to concrete outcomes.

Sweden has one of the highest youth turnout rates in the South Baltic Area. In the 2022 Riksdag election, total turnout was 84 percent, down from 87 percent in 2018. Turnout among 18- to 29-year-olds was 82 percent, compared with 86 percent in 2018. Although this was a slight decline, the level remained very high compared with the European youth average. First-time voter turnout also remained strong, falling only from 86 percent to 84 percent. According to Statistics Sweden, the strongest predictor of first-time voter turnout was having at least one parent who voted. This shows that democratic participation is strongly influenced by family-based political socialisation and the wider civic environment in which young people grow up (Statistics Sweden, 2023).

In the 2024 European Parliament election, Swedish youth turnout was again among the highest in Europe. According to the Council of Europe, turnout was around 56 percent in both the 15–24 and 25–39 age groups, which placed Sweden at the top level among EU countries. Among first-time voters, turnout reached 46 percent, a slight increase compared with the 2019 European Parliament election (Council of Europe, 2024; Statistics Sweden, 2024). These figures show that electoral participation remains a strong part of Swedish youth democratic culture.

However, the Swedish case also shows that high youth turnout does not automatically translate into young people's representation in elected bodies. In the 2024 European Parliament election, 11.8 percent of nominees were aged 18–29, but none of them were elected. The same problem was visible in 2019, when 16.5 percent of nominees were young, but again no young candidate was elected. This points to a persistent pipeline problem. Young people vote, participate and appear on candidate lists, but they often do not reach elected positions. Party structures may favour older candidates with more experience, stronger networks and greater political resources (EACEA Youth Wiki, Sweden 5.2; Statistics Sweden, 2024).

Party membership among young people is relatively stable, but it remains a limited form of participation. In 2024, 4.0 percent of young people aged 16–29 were members of a political party, compared with 4.7 percent of the total population over the age of 16. Between 2008 and 2024, youth party membership fluctuated between 3.3 and 5.1 percent. This means that young people in Sweden are not dramatically less connected to political parties than adults in general, but political party membership is not the dominant form of youth engagement. Many young people prefer issue-based, flexible or informal forms of participation (Statistics Sweden, 2024; EACEA Youth Wiki, Sweden 5.2).

Sweden is also strongly associated with youth-led social movements, especially climate activism. It is the home base of Fridays for Future, which started with Greta Thunberg's school strike in 2018 and developed into one of the most influential youth-led climate movements globally. Social media played an important role in spreading the movement and connecting young activists across countries. Fridays for Future shows that bottom-up participation can become powerful when young people organise around issues they consider urgent and when they are able to use digital communication effectively (Fridays for Future, 2024).

MUCF's Fokus 21 report, *The Will to Change*, describes young people in Sweden as a committed generation. Many are interested in social issues and politics, and many try to influence both their immediate surroundings and society more broadly. This is important because it challenges the idea that young people are politically passive. In the Swedish case, youth engagement is visible not only through voting, but also through climate action, student organisations, local initiatives, digital mobilisation and civil society work (MUCF Fokus 21, 2021).

Local youth councils are an important part of youth participation in Sweden, but their development shows signs of weakness. A MUCF survey from 2019 found that only 47 percent of Swedish municipalities had a youth council, compared with 63 percent in 2010. This decline is important because youth councils can provide young people with a structured way to influence local politics. Since national guidelines are not mandatory, the existence and quality of youth councils depend heavily on local political will, resources and administrative capacity (Ungdomsstyrelsen, 2010; MUCF, 2019; EACEA Youth Wiki, Sweden 5.3).

Most Swedish youth councils work independently at local or regional level and are not connected to a national umbrella structure. Sveriges ungdomsråd, the Swedish Association of Youth Councils, was founded in 2003 and functions as a civil society network for local youth councils. It gathers around 40 local youth councils and received a government grant of approximately EUR 120,000, or SEK 1.4 million, in 2024. This network is important, but the limited number of connected councils also shows the decentralised and uneven character of local youth participation in Sweden (EACEA Youth Wiki, Sweden 5.3).

At the national level, the National Council of Swedish Children and Youth Organisations, LSU, functions as the de facto national youth council, although it is not formally appointed by the state. LSU represents Swedish youth organisations and plays an important role in national and international youth policy cooperation. In 2024, LSU co-organised the Nordic-Baltic Youth Summit in Vilnius together with LiJOT and the Nordic Council of Ministers. This illustrates Sweden's active role in Nordic-Baltic youth cooperation and cross-border democratic dialogue (LSU, 2024; Nordic Council of Ministers, 2024).

School-level participation is one of the clearest strengths of the Swedish system. Skolval, the national school election programme, is organised in parallel with general elections, European elections and some regional elections. In 2022, 1,442 schools and almost 386,000 students participated. The programme gives students practical experience with democratic procedures

before they are eligible to vote in real elections. Combined with compulsory citizenship education and a strong tradition of school-based associational life, Skolval helps young people become familiar with political debate, voting procedures and democratic responsibility (Skolval, 2022; Sweden.se, 2024).

Student participation is also formally recognised in higher education. The Higher Education Act guarantees student representation in universities, and the Student Union Ordinance regulates the recognition of student unions. This gives students structured opportunities to influence university governance and contributes to a wider culture of democratic participation among young adults (Högskolelagen; Studentkårsförordning).

Funding is another major strength of the Swedish youth participation system. Sweden has a long tradition of government grants to non-profit youth organisations, dating back to 1954. In 2024, 110 youth organisations received around EUR 22 million, or SEK 262 million, in direct government grants. Student and school organisations also received significant support. Sveriges Elevkårer, the Swedish Association for School Student Unions, received approximately EUR 1.37 million, or SEK 15.1 million, while Sveriges Elevråd, Sweden's Student Council, received around EUR 244,000, or SEK 2.7 million in the same year (MUCF, 2024c).

The Swedish Inheritance Fund, Allmänna arvsfonden, is another important source of support. In 2024, it distributed around EUR 87 million, or SEK 956 million, in project grants. Around EUR 35 million was directed to youth-related projects, while around EUR 25 million targeted children. This creates a strong financial basis for youth initiatives and allows many civil society organisations to develop projects that support participation, inclusion and democratic learning (Allmänna arvsfonden, 2024).

At the same time, public funding also creates a sustainability question. The Swedish Agency for Public Management has found that about half of MUCF-funded organisations depend on state funding to a great or very great extent, and that this dependence has increased since 2014. Public support makes many youth organisations possible, but strong dependence on state funding may also create vulnerability if priorities, budgets or administrative rules change (Statskontoret, 2024).

Several challenges therefore remain. First, the decline of local youth councils from 63 percent of municipalities in 2010 to 47 percent in 2019 suggests that Sweden's participatory ecosystem is not equally strong everywhere. Second, there is a clear gap between participation and representation: young people vote at high rates, but they are rarely elected to representative bodies. Third, participation remains unequal. Voter turnout among foreign-born residents has been persistently lower than among Swedish-born residents from 1991 to 2022, and the gap has increased in recent elections. This suggests that Sweden's strong democratic culture does not reach all groups equally (Statistics Sweden, 2023).

The OECD Trust Survey also points to changing trust patterns among young people. Across OECD countries, the gender trust gap among youth widened between 2021 and 2023, from two

to eight percentage points, and Sweden follows this broader trend. Trust is important because it affects whether young people believe that participation is meaningful. Even in a country with strong democratic institutions, young people may disengage if they feel that institutions do not listen or that participation does not lead to real influence (OECD, 2024).

In summary, Sweden offers a strong but not problem-free model of bottom-up youth participation. It has a well-developed youth policy framework, strong institutions, high youth turnout, systematic monitoring through LUPP, school-based democratic learning through Skolval, stable funding for youth organisations and globally visible youth-led activism through Fridays for Future. These elements make Sweden one of the strongest SBA cases in terms of democratic habits and institutional support.

At the same time, the Swedish case shows that strong national indicators can hide local and social inequalities. The decline in youth councils, the weak pipeline from participation to elected representation, lower turnout among foreign-born residents and dependence of youth organisations on state funding all point to structural challenges. For bottom-up democracy, the key issue is therefore not only whether young people participate, but whether they have equal access to influence and whether their participation can lead to representation and visible outcomes.

3.5 Denmark: Bottom-Up Participation through Association Culture, Student Democracy and Youth Festivals

Denmark represents a strong case of youth democratic participation in the South Baltic Area, especially because of its long tradition of association-based civic life, student democracy and practical democratic education. Like Sweden, Denmark does not have a single Youth Act. Instead, youth participation is supported through several legal provisions, institutional practices and civil society structures. The Danish model is characterised by a strong connection between formal democratic rights and everyday participation in schools, associations, youth organisations and local communities. This makes Denmark particularly relevant for a bottom-up understanding of democracy, because many young people encounter democratic practice not only through elections, but also through student councils, associations, youth wings, local hearings and youth festivals.

The legal framework for youth participation in Denmark is distributed across different pieces of legislation. One important basis is the Folkeskole Act. According to § 46, subsection 3, student councils are mandatory in public schools from grade 4 upwards. This gives children and young people early and guaranteed experience of representative democracy within the school environment. Student councils allow pupils to discuss issues that affect their everyday school life, formulate common interests and learn how representation works in practice (Folkeskoleloven, § 46). Another important legal basis is the Day Care Act, which recognises children's right to be heard and involved in day-care institutions. This means that participation is introduced not only at school age, but already in early educational settings (Dagtilbudsloven, § 7). In addition, Denmark has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article

12 of the Convention obliges authorities to ensure that children and young people are heard in matters affecting them (UN CRC, Article 12).

This legal foundation is important because it shows that youth participation in Denmark is not treated only as a matter of youth policy or political education. It is embedded in educational institutions and in the broader understanding of children's and young people's rights. Young people are expected to be heard, to participate in collective settings and to gain democratic experience from an early age. This creates a strong basis for later participation in civil society and electoral democracy.

Youth-related policies are coordinated mainly through the Ministry of Children and Education, while the Ministry of Culture is relevant for civil society and association life. However, one of the most important actors in the Danish youth participation landscape is the Danish Youth Council, Dansk Ungdoms Fællesråd, known as DUF. DUF functions as the central civil society interlocutor in the field of youth participation. It is an umbrella organisation of around 80 youth and children's organisations and works to strengthen democratic participation, young people's influence and the role of youth organisations in Danish society (DUF, Dansk Ungdoms Fællesråd).

A distinctive feature of Denmark is its strong foreningskultur, or association culture. Sports clubs, cultural associations, scouts, student organisations, youth churches, political youth wings and other membership-based organisations play an important role in young people's social and civic development. Through associations, young people learn how to organise activities, take responsibility, discuss common rules, elect representatives and cooperate with others. This makes association life one of the main everyday schools of democracy in Denmark. Participation is therefore not limited to formal politics, but is deeply connected to social life and collective organisation (DUF, About).

This association-based model also has a direct link to electoral participation. Denmark has high youth turnout in national elections, especially among first-time voters. In the 2022 Folketing election, held on 1 November 2022, first-time voter turnout reached 85 percent. Turnout among 19- to 21-year-olds was 76 percent, and turnout among 22- to 29-year-olds was 75 percent. This pattern reflects the so-called first-time-voter effect: many young people vote in their first election, often with strong support from schools, families and civic campaigns, but turnout tends to decline slightly in the following age groups (Statistics Denmark, Voter Turnout 2022).

The first-time-voter effect is important because it shows both a strength and a challenge in the Danish system. On the one hand, Denmark is very successful in mobilising young people at the moment when they first enter the electorate. On the other hand, the decline between first-time voters and the 22–29 age group suggests that democratic engagement needs to be maintained after the first vote. This is especially relevant for bottom-up participation because long-term democratic engagement depends not only on one election, but on whether young people remain connected to civic organisations, local communities and political processes over time.

The DUF Democracy Analysis 2025, prepared ahead of the November 2025 municipal and regional elections, showed that 79 percent of young people aged 18–30 expected to vote. The analysis also found that the share was notably higher among young people who were active in associations. This confirms that civil society membership remains a strong predictor of electoral engagement in Denmark. Young people who participate in associations are more likely to feel politically competent, informed and connected to democratic life (DUF, Demokratianalyse 2025).

At the same time, Denmark maintains a voting age of 18 for all elections, including national, regional, municipal and European Parliament elections. Unlike Germany, Denmark did not lower the voting age to 16 for the 2024 European Parliament elections. Youth voter mobilisation therefore focuses mainly on supporting young people from the age of 18 and encouraging them to participate in elections where turnout is traditionally lower, especially municipal, regional and European elections (EACEA Youth Wiki, Denmark 5.2; DUF, Demokratianalyse 2025).

Youth participation at local level is supported through youth councils, known as Ungeråd, and youth parliaments in many municipalities. These bodies are not required by law, but they are widespread because many municipalities actively seek to involve young people in issues that affect their lives. Youth councils may work on topics such as leisure activities, schools, environment, culture, public spaces and local youth policy. Their role is usually consultative, but they can still provide young people with important access to local decision-making and help municipalities understand youth perspectives (EACEA Youth Wiki, Denmark 5.3).

One illustrative example is Odsherred Municipality. There, the Student Council on Campus Odsherred helps decide the overall theme of the annual Youth Democratic Festival, Ungdommens Folkemøde. The municipality also organises an annual children's democracy day, where two representatives from each 6th-grade class come to the city council hall to agree on a common event for all 6th-graders. The explicit aim is to teach children that democracy is not about everyone agreeing, but about respecting opinions other than one's own. This example is especially relevant because it shows how democratic learning can be connected to practical decision-making and local community life (Odsherred Municipality, Ungeråd).

Student democracy is one of the strongest elements of Danish youth participation. Because student councils are mandatory from grade 4 in public schools, many young people experience representative structures before they can vote in official elections. In addition, every second year, the Danish Parliament organises the national School Election, Skolevalg, for students in grades 8 and 9. Skolevalg is organised in cooperation with the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, DR, the Danish Youth Council and the Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy. It simulates a general election campaign and gives young people the opportunity to discuss political issues, compare parties and practise voting (Skolevalg.dk).

Skolevalg plays an important role in Danish democratic education because it connects civic learning with practice. Young people do not only learn about democracy as a subject; they experience campaign dynamics, public debate and voting procedures. This helps to build

political confidence and makes democratic participation more familiar before young people become official voters. In this sense, school-based participation is a key bridge between civic education and electoral engagement.

At national level, DUF plays a central role in representing youth organisations and strengthening youth participation. It supports democratic education, advocacy, international youth representation and the development of youth organisations. One distinctive feature of the Danish model is DUF's funding structure. Approximately 7.95 percent of the Danish gambling surplus, under the Gambling Act, is allocated to DUF for distribution among member organisations. This amounts to around DKK 120 million, or approximately EUR 16 million, per year. This funding model provides one of the most stable youth funding structures in Europe and gives Danish youth organisations a strong financial basis for long-term work (DUF; Druk Journal, Danish Youth Participation).

DUF also appoints eight delegates to the Danish Youth Delegate Programme. These delegates represent Danish youth at the United Nations, the European Union and other multilateral forums. This gives young people access not only to national participation structures, but also to international policymaking arenas. In this way, Danish youth participation connects local association life with national and global democratic engagement (DUF, UN Youth Delegate Programme).

Political party youth wings are also important in Denmark. They function as training grounds for young people who want to enter formal politics and are relatively active compared with many other EU countries. Youth wings allow young people to develop political skills, learn about campaigning, participate in ideological debates and build networks within political parties. This contributes to Denmark's broader democratic ecosystem, although it also means that politically active young people are often those who already have access to organisational resources and political networks (DUF, Member Organisations).

One of Denmark's most visible youth democracy formats is the annual Ungdommens Folkemøde, or Youth Democratic Festival. It is modelled on the adult Folkemødet on Bornholm and functions as a meeting place for young people, politicians, organisations, activists and decision-makers. The festival gives young people an opportunity to discuss political and social issues in an open and informal setting. It is particularly relevant for D-EFFECT because it demonstrates how democratic participation can be organised as an accessible event format rather than only through formal meetings or institutional consultations (Ungdommens Folkemøde).

Another important Danish institution is the højskole, or folk high school. Folk high schools are a distinctive part of Danish educational and democratic culture. They are non-formal educational institutions for young adults, usually from the age of 17.5, and focus on personal development, culture, democracy, community and active citizenship. Denmark has more than 60 folk high schools nationwide. They provide young people with space to reflect, discuss, live in community and develop civic responsibility outside the formal examination system.

Internationally, the folk high school model is often recognised as a unique form of democratic education (Folkehøjskolernes Forening i Danmark).

Municipal youth hearings, theme days and town-hall meetings provide further opportunities for young people to participate in local decision-making. These formats may not always be permanent institutions, but they allow young people to express opinions on concrete issues and interact directly with local politicians and administrators. They are important because they can reach young people who may not be members of formal youth councils or political organisations (EACEA Youth Wiki, Denmark 5.4).

DUF's recent report Meaningful Youth Participation towards 2030 and Beyond provides guidance on how young people can be included in ways that strengthen their democratic confidence and self-perceived efficacy. This is particularly important because participation should not only be about inviting young people to events. It should give them a real sense that their voices matter and that their contributions can influence outcomes. From a bottom-up perspective, meaningful participation requires shared agenda-setting, accessible formats, transparent follow-up and respect for young people's own priorities (DUF, Meaningful Youth Participation).

Despite Denmark's strong participation culture, several challenges remain. One important concern is the decline in turnout after the first vote. Although first-time voter turnout was exceptionally high at 85 percent in the 2022 Folketing election, turnout fell by around 9 to 10 percentage points among young people aged 22–29. This second-vote drop-off suggests that mobilisation around the first election is not enough. Young people need continuous support and opportunities for engagement after they have entered the electorate (Statistics Denmark, Voter Turnout 2022).

Another challenge is lower turnout in local and European Parliament elections compared with Folketing elections. This is especially relevant for young voters, who may perceive local, regional or European elections as less visible or less connected to their everyday concerns. For this reason, youth voter mobilisation efforts in Denmark often focus on these intermediate elections, where the risk of disengagement is higher (Statistics Denmark, Election Statistics; DUF, Demokratianalyse 2025).

The DUF Democracy Analyses from 2024 and 2025 also point to a small but persistent group of young people with low political self-efficacy and limited interest in formal politics. These young people are often outside association membership. This is a key challenge for the Danish model. Association culture is a strong democratic resource, but it may not automatically reach all young people. Those who are not part of associations, clubs, student councils or youth organisations may have fewer opportunities to develop democratic confidence and political skills (DUF, Demokratianalyse 2024; DUF, Demokratianalyse 2025).

Voter inequality is another structural issue. Turnout among young people with a non-Western migration background remains lower than among young people with Danish-born parents. This

long-standing gap is also visible in countries such as Sweden and Germany and points to broader questions of inclusion, belonging and equal access to democratic participation. For bottom-up youth participation, this means that outreach must go beyond already active young people and include groups that may feel less connected to formal politics or established civil society structures (Statistics Denmark, Voter Turnout by Background).

Finally, the sustainability of the DUF funding model requires attention. The model based on the Danish gambling surplus provides stable and substantial support to youth organisations, but it also depends on national gambling revenues, which can fluctuate. In addition, EU-level discussions on online gambling regulation may affect long-term funding conditions. While the model is currently one of the strongest in Europe, it is still connected to a revenue source that may change over time (Spillemyndigheden, Danish Gambling Authority).

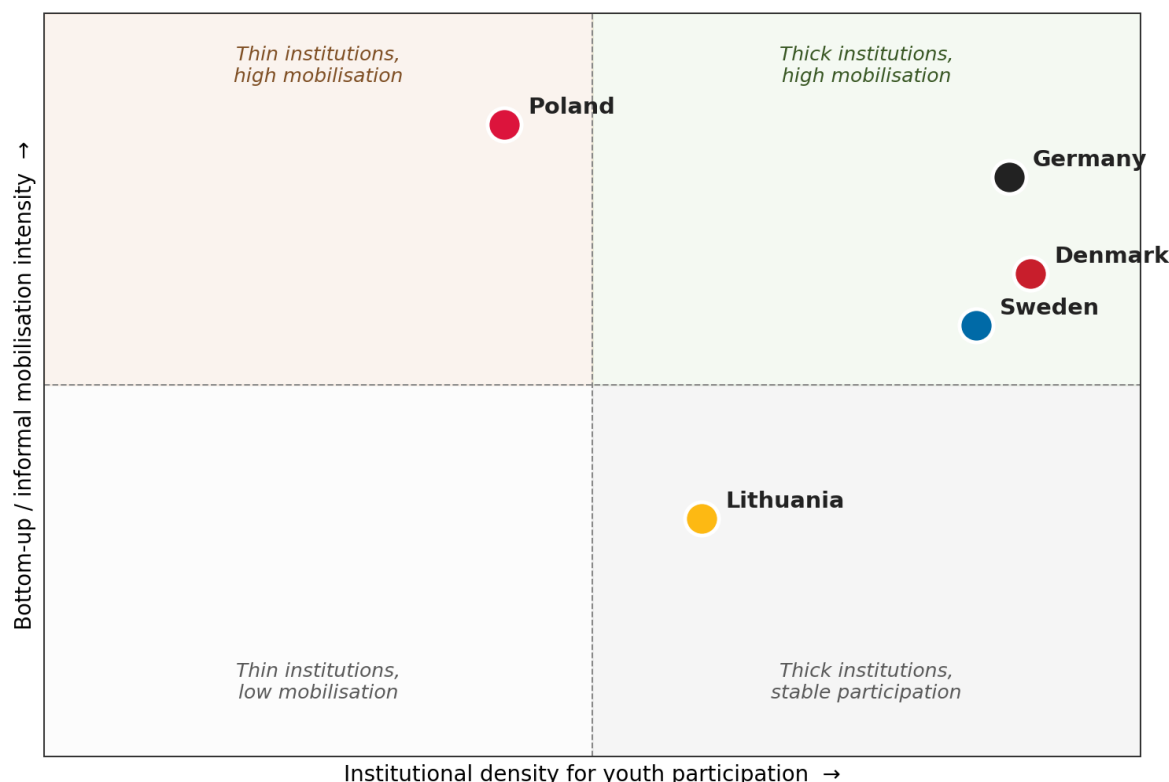
In summary, Denmark offers a strong and practice-oriented model of bottom-up youth participation. Its strengths include mandatory student councils, school elections, a powerful association culture, active youth councils in many municipalities, stable support for youth organisations, the folk high school tradition and the flagship Youth Democratic Festival. These elements give young people repeated opportunities to experience democracy in everyday settings, not only as voters but also as organisers, representatives, association members and participants in public dialogue.

At the same time, the Danish case shows that even strong civic traditions have limits. Participation is weaker among young people outside association life, turnout drops after the first vote, local and European elections receive less youth attention, and young people with migration backgrounds remain less politically included. For Denmark, the central challenge is therefore not the absence of participation structures, but the need to make them more inclusive and to maintain engagement beyond the already active youth population.

3.6 Comparative Analysis and Cross-Border Lessons

The five SBA countries share a commitment to youth democratic engagement, but they occupy markedly different positions on two intersecting dimensions: the density of formal institutional infrastructure for youth participation, and the intensity of informal, bottom-up mobilisation. A simple cross-reading of the evidence summarised in sections 3.1–3.5 suggests four distinct profiles within the SBA.

Four SBA profiles of youth democratic participation



Authors' own synthesis based on data from Sections 3.1–3.5. Positions are indicative, not numerically weighted.

Figure 3. Indicative positioning of the five SBA countries on two axes — institutional density for youth participation and intensity of bottom-up / informal mobilisation. Positions are qualitative, based on the evidence presented in sections 3.1–3.5.

Institutionally thick, participatory-stable (Denmark, Sweden): Both countries combine strong legal frameworks (Folkeskole Act, Government Communication 2021), substantial public funding (DUF's Gambling Act allocation; MUCF grants of more than 22 million euros per year to youth organisations), and high youth turnout (85% of Danish first-time voters in 2022; 82% of Swedish 18–29-year-olds). However, their participatory ecosystems are also showing signs of stress: Sweden's local youth-council coverage fell from 63% of municipalities in 2010 to 47% in 2019, and Danish turnout declines noticeably after the first vote.

Institutionally thick, politically volatile (Germany): Germany combines the NAP, 500+ youth parliaments, the Zukunftspaket programme and a newly lowered EP voting age of 16 with a sharp generational re-alignment: the AfD moved from 5% to 16% among 16–24-year-olds between 2019 and 2024, and the Greens lost 23 percentage points in the same cohort. This profile challenges the intuition that institutional density by itself guarantees liberal-democratic outcomes; it places civic education and media literacy, not participatory scaffolding alone, at the centre of any response.

Institutionally thin, mobilisation-driven (Poland): Poland lacks a Youth Act and has only recently (2021) strengthened the legal basis for regional and county youth councils. Yet youth turnout rose from 46.4% in 2019 to 68.8% in the 2023 parliamentary elections and 76.3% in the 2025 presidential run-off — now exceeding older-voter turnout. This mobilisation has been crisis-driven (the 2020 Women's Strike, the cost-of-living crisis, the cultural backlash against

PiS) and is politically fragmented: young Poles increasingly reject the KO–PiS duopoly in favour of far-right and left-wing outsider candidates. The Polish case shows that civic-society crisis can substitute for institutional density — at least temporarily — but also that commitment to democratic norms may be thinner than turnout figures suggest. The Media Dizajn survey findings (Section 4) add regional texture: in West Pomerania, 24% of respondents are interested in civic engagement but have never participated (the "mobilisable pool"), 85% rate access to civic-engagement information as average or worse, and young people report very low appetite for meeting politicians (12% local, 6% national) compared with civil-society voices (73%).

Institutionally developed, electorally disengaged (Lithuania): Lithuania has LiJOT with more than 200,000 represented young people, a dense system of municipal youth coordinators, and a National Youth Policy Action Plan, yet recorded one of the three lowest EP youth turnouts in 2024 (12% in the 15–24 cohort) and shows a clear decline in civic literacy (ICCS 2022 vs 2016). However, Lithuanian youth are more active than older cohorts in voluntary organisations and e-participation, which suggests that channels other than electoral politics may carry more of the weight of youth engagement.

3.7 Cross-Cutting Patterns

Several patterns cut across these national profiles. First, early formal exposure to democratic procedure appears to correlate with longer-term engagement: Denmark's mandatory student councils from grade 4, Sweden's Skolval, and the Polish Children and Youth Sejm all attempt this, though with sharply different institutional weight. Second, participation by design outperforms consultation after the fact (Vesnic-Alujevic & Stoermer, 2022): youth engagement is most sustainable where young people co-create rather than merely evaluate policy — illustrated by the German Zukunftspaket model and Polish MYCs. Third, crisis-triggered mobilisation can be transformative but is unstable: the Polish experience since 2020 demonstrates how rapidly youth repertoires can shift, while Lithuania shows that institutional infrastructure alone does not produce crisis-level mobilisation. Fourth, local anchoring drives efficacy: the SB YCGN (2020) figure of 40% of respondents reporting tangible local impact is echoed in the OECD (2024b) finding that political agency is the strongest predictor of institutional trust. Fifth, digital platforms are an ambivalent force across the SBA: they have enabled the Polish youthquake and the German Fridays for Future generation, but they also channelled the AfD's 2024 EP breakthrough among 16–24s and the Confederation's appeal to Polish men under 30. Sixth, rural and peripheral youth are consistently underserved across all five countries — in West Pomerania (Poland), in rural Lithuania, in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (Germany), and among young Swedes outside Stockholm and Gothenburg.

For D-EFFECT, four cross-border lessons emerge. First, peer learning between Denmark/Sweden and Poland/Lithuania is likely to be more productive if it is built around local-level practice (student councils, municipal youth councils, school elections, youth coordinators) rather than national-level structures, which are often incommensurable. Second, bottom-up mobilisation in Poland and, to a lesser extent, Lithuania should be captured in its own right, not only compared against Nordic benchmarks: the SBA can learn as much from Szczecin and Vilnius as from Copenhagen and Stockholm. Third, the far-right youth shift

visible in Germany and in parts of Poland should be treated not as a reason to retrench democratic messaging but as a prompt to invest in civic education, participatory co-creation and digital literacy — in line with the European Democracy Shield (European Commission, 2025b). Fourth, the Media Dizajn survey (section 4) is strategically placed to test these patterns in one of the regions — West Pomerania — where formal and informal participation are most visibly in flux.

4. Empirical Insights from the Media Dizajn Youth Survey (Poland)

The empirical component of this report is drawn from a youth survey conducted in Poland by the project partner Media Dizajn, based in Szczecin, as part of Activity 3.6 of the D-EFFECT project (Media Dizajn, 2025). The survey targets young people in Szczecin and the wider West Pomeranian Voivodeship — a region that sits at the intersection of the European SBA, the Polish "youthquake" documented in Section 3.2, and a broader Polish periphery that has historically recorded weaker civic-engagement indicators than the central and southern metropolitan regions (Civic Europe, 2023). The survey results, combined with the desk analysis in Sections 2 and 3, offer a grounded picture of bottom-up participation conditions in one of the SBA's most analytically interesting settings.

4.1 Survey Design and Sample Characteristics

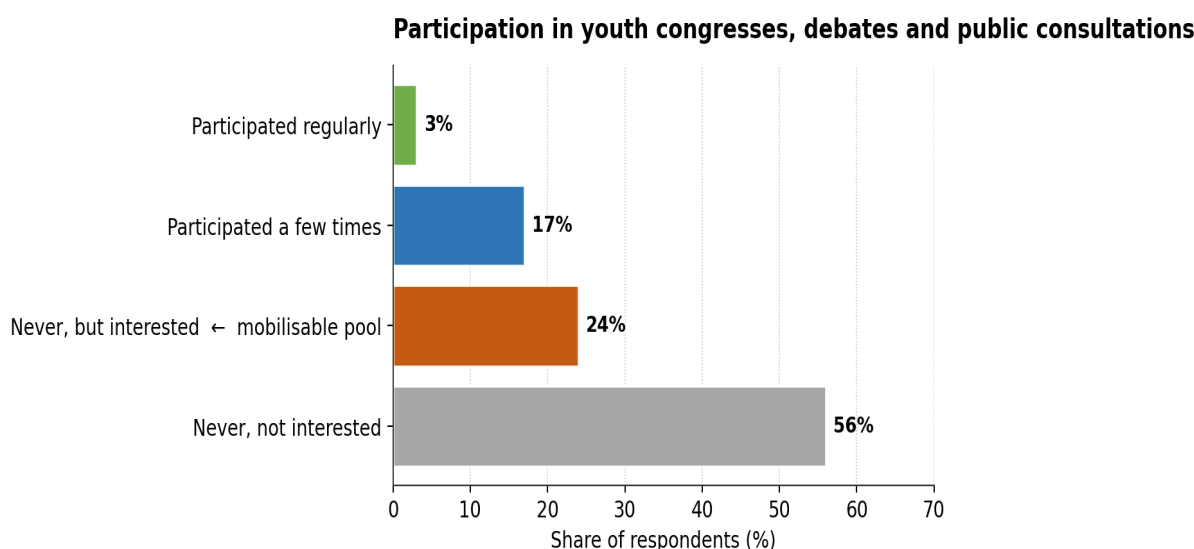
The Media Dizajn survey was administered anonymously in both paper and online formats and achieved a total sample of $N = 1,511$ respondents — a substantial data set for a sub-national youth study. The questionnaire consisted of ten substantive questions on social participation, motivations, event preferences, trusted voices, priority topics and location preferences, followed by five demographic items (age, gender, residence, education/employment status, and organisational membership). Fieldwork reach was extended considerably through the involvement of the Associated Partner, the Sekretariat ds. Młodzieży Województwa Zachodniopomorskiego (Secretariat for Youth of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship), which enabled the survey to reach young respondents both inside and outside organised youth networks.

The sample is dominated by school-aged respondents: 66.3% are aged 18–20, 23.3% are aged 15–17, 6.4% are under 15, and only 4% are aged 21–25. 91.5% are currently in upper-secondary (high school) education, 4.8% in higher education, 1.7% are in work, and 2% are neither working nor studying. 53.6% of respondents identify as female, 35.8% as male, and 10.6% preferred not to disclose. Geographically, the sample spans the full range of settlement types: 31.4% live in villages, 34% in towns of up to 50,000 inhabitants, 6.4% in towns of 50,000–200,000, and 28.2% in cities with over 200,000 inhabitants (principally Szczecin itself). 17.1% report membership of a youth or social organisation. This demographic profile shapes the interpretation that follows: the findings represent young people primarily in upper-secondary education in a mixed urban-rural Polish SBA region, at a specific moment in the broader Polish political cycle discussed in Section 3.2.

4.2 Self-Reported Engagement and the Participation Paradox

The central empirical finding of the survey is a substantial gap between young people's self-reported engagement and their stated willingness to engage. Only 21.1% of respondents rate their own involvement in social activities as high or very high (7.35% very high, 13.77% high), while 54.5% rate it as low or very low (26.87% low, 13.63% very low). The modal category is medium (38.39%). Formal participation rates are correspondingly modest: only 3% have participated regularly in events such as youth congresses, debates or public consultations, and

a further 17% have done so a few times. The remaining 80% have never participated — but 24% of this group say they are interested and only 56% say they are not (Figure 4).



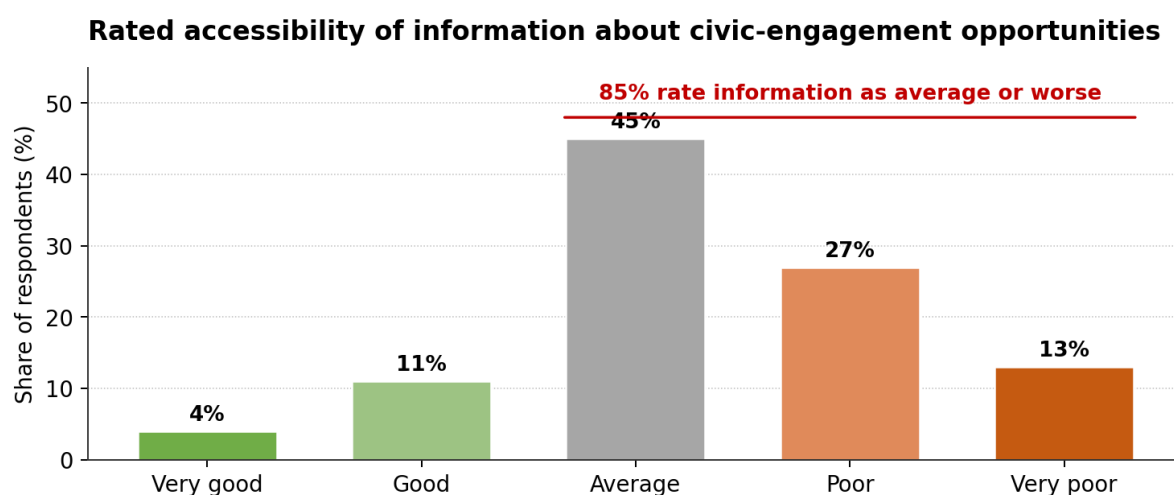
Source: Media Dizajn (2025), D-EFFECT Activity 3.6, N = 1,511 young people, West Pomerania.

Figure 4. Participation in youth congresses, debates and public consultations in West Pomerania. The 24% "never, but interested" group represents the survey's core policy finding: a sizeable mobilisable pool that existing participation channels are not reaching.

This pattern reveals what is, from a policy perspective, the single most important finding of the survey: a large mobilisable pool of young people — roughly a quarter of all respondents, or an estimated 367 individuals in this sample alone — who are interested in civic engagement but have not found a way in. Combined with the 20% who have participated and the 17% who are formal organisational members, the survey suggests that roughly one-third to two-fifths of West Pomeranian youth are either actively engaged or actively interested, and that a further one-quarter are potentially reachable with sufficient outreach and accessible formats. This is consistent with the Civic Efficacy Theory prediction (Section 2.1) that engagement is more sensitive to perceived opportunity than to baseline political interest, and it mirrors, at the regional level, the broader Polish mobilisation pattern documented in Section 3.2.

4.3 The Information and Infrastructure Gap

The survey identifies a clear structural barrier to activating this mobilisable pool: information and infrastructure. 85% of respondents rate the accessibility of information about opportunities for civic engagement in their area as average or worse — 45% "average", 27% "poor", 13% "very poor" — with only 15% rating it as good or very good (Figure 5). A parallel item asks whether there are events in respondents' towns engaging young people in social and political issues: 31.4% say they have never heard of such events, a further 29.6% "don't know", and only 9.6% say yes, regularly. The two items together are striking: in a region where civic-engagement events do take place (as the work of POLITES, the West Pomeranian NGO Federation and municipal youth councils documented in Section 3.2 attests), six in ten young respondents are either unaware of this activity or uncertain about its existence.



Source: Media Dizajn (2025), D-EFFECT Activity 3.6, N = 1,511 young people, West Pomerania.

Figure 5. Rated accessibility of information about civic-engagement opportunities in West Pomerania. Only 15% of respondents rate information access as good or very good.

This information gap echoes the EU-wide finding of the 2024 Flash Eurobarometer that only 46% of young EU citizens are aware of how to engage with the EU (European Commission, 2024a), and it sharpens the policy implication: even where bottom-up infrastructure exists, its visibility and reach to young people — particularly those outside organised youth networks — is the binding constraint. The survey therefore identifies communication, outreach and "findability" of opportunities as the first-order bottleneck in West Pomerania, ahead of more complex issues such as representation, institutional design or funding.

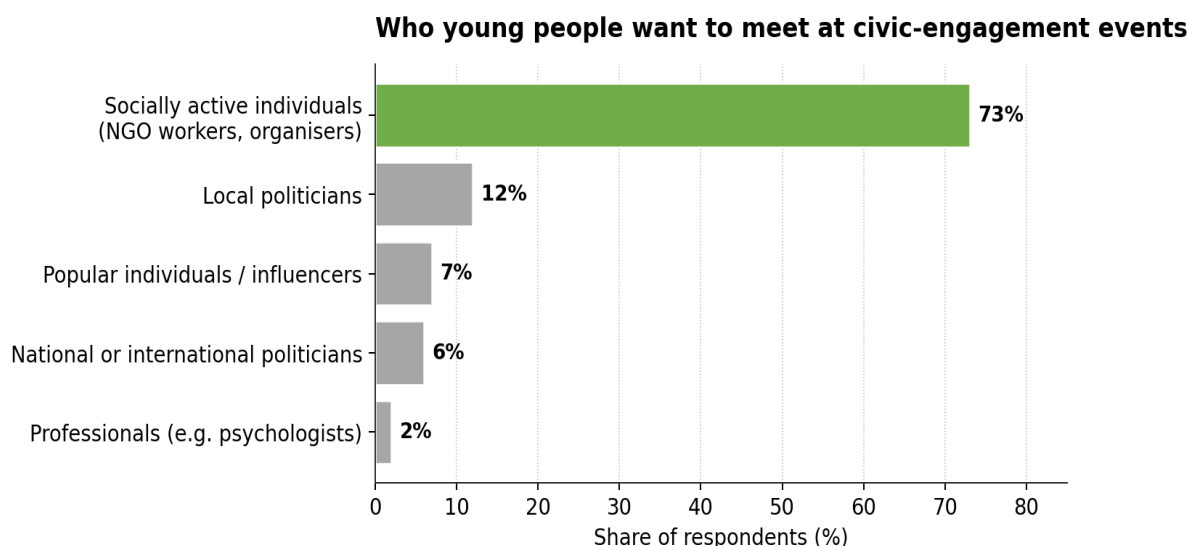
4.4 What Would Mobilise Them: Motivation, Formats and Trusted Voices

When asked what would motivate them to become more involved, respondents' answers cluster tightly around four factors of roughly equal weight: better access to information about events (28%), the opportunity to have a say in local matters (27%), an attractive way of organising events (24%) and meetings with inspiring people (16%). Only 3% cite remuneration as a motivator, and 2% say nothing would move them. The balance of these responses is instructive. Information — the first-order bottleneck just discussed — is the single largest motivator, but it is closely followed by two participation-by-design items: actual influence on local decisions and attractive event design. This combination maps cleanly onto the co-creation logic set out in Section 2.3: young people are not asking for consultation-after-the-fact, they are asking to shape outcomes and to be met in formats they find engaging.

Preferred event formats tell a coherent story. Workshops and training sessions are by far the most attractive (48%), followed by debates and panel discussions (20%), social projects and volunteering (16%) and networking meetings (12%). The dominance of the workshop format — with its implicit promise of skills, agency and tangible output — reinforces the participation-by-design pattern and suggests that D-EFFECT's bottom-up programming should lead with workshop and training formats rather than one-way consultative events.

The question of who should be invited to youth events on social participation produced the survey's most striking single result: 73% of respondents want to meet socially active

individuals, while only 12% mention local politicians, 7% influencers, 6% national or international politicians, and 2% other professionals such as psychologists (Figure 6). This distribution is a direct statement about trust. Young respondents in West Pomerania strongly prefer civic-society actors — NGO workers, community organisers, youth advocates — over elected officials at either level, and notably over the influencers often assumed to drive youth politics in the digital age.



Source: Media Dizajn (2025), D-EFFECT Activity 3.6, N = 1,511 young people, West Pomerania.

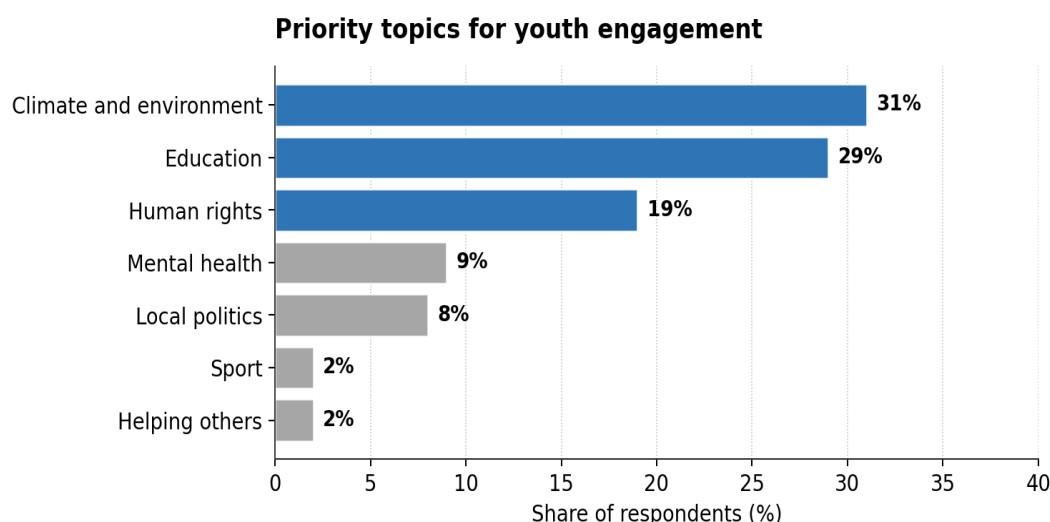
Figure 6. Preferred invitees to youth civic-engagement events in West Pomerania. Socially active individuals (NGO workers, community organisers) dominate decisively, while politicians of any level attract limited interest.

This finding is in the same direction as, but much sharper than, the OECD 2024 Trust Survey pattern in which political agency outranks partisanship as a driver of institutional trust (OECD, 2024b), and it directly informs the design of D-EFFECT events: speaker panels dominated by politicians are unlikely to mobilise this audience. On location, respondents are roughly evenly split between major event halls (40%) and cultural venues such as theatres (39%), with smaller venues like restaurants at 20% and schools at only 1%. The low preference for school settings is a useful signal — it suggests that young respondents distinguish clearly between civic-engagement events and school curricular activity, and would resist formats that blur the two.

4.5 Priorities and Aspirations: Topics and Decision-Making Influence

Asked which topics matter most in the context of youth engagement, respondents pointed to climate and environment (31%), education (29%) and human rights (19%) as the top three, followed by mental health (9%), local politics (8%), and minimal shares for sport (2%) and helping others (2%) (Figure 7). This ordering aligns almost exactly with the 2024 Flash Eurobarometer priorities for young EU citizens — human rights, climate and environment, health and wellbeing, and equal rights (European Commission, 2024a) — and confirms that West Pomeranian youth are fully in the EU-wide mainstream on issue salience, despite their peripheral geographic position. The relatively low priority given to "local politics" as a named topic is worth noting: it does not mean local issues are unimportant (indeed, 27% named

"opportunity to have a say in local matters" as a key motivator in Section 4.4), but that young people frame their concerns in terms of outcomes and themes rather than institutional politics.



Source: Media Dizajn (2025), D-EFFECT Activity 3.6, N = 1,511 young people, West Pomerania. Compare with 2024 Flash Eurobarometer EU-wide priorities.

Figure 7. Priority topics for youth engagement in West Pomerania. The top three — climate, education and human rights — mirror the 2024 Flash Eurobarometer youth priorities at EU level.

Finally, 65% of respondents (32% "definitely yes" + 33% "somewhat yes") say that young people should have a greater influence on decisions made in their region, 24% are unsure, and only 11% disagree. A near two-thirds majority for expanded youth influence, combined with the engagement paradox documented in Section 4.2, defines the political space that D-EFFECT is designed to work in: demand for influence substantially exceeds current channels of influence.

4.6 Integration: West Pomerania in the SBA Comparative Frame

Read through the four-profile framework introduced in Section 3.6, the Media Dizajn findings place West Pomerania firmly in the "institutionally thin, mobilisation-driven" Polish quadrant, but with several specific features that sharpen the national-level picture.

First, the mobilisable pool — the 24% of non-participants who are interested — is substantial and identifiable. This is exactly the audience that the D-EFFECT cross-border youth forum and associated programming should target. Second, the information gap is the primary binding constraint, ahead of institutional design, representation or funding. This is a relatively tractable problem: strengthening the "findability" of existing youth-council, NGO and EU-funded opportunities through the channels young people already use (social media, school networks, civil-society organisations) would unlock a significant share of the pool. Third, trust in political actors is very low relative to trust in civil-society voices — a finding that should shape who is put in front of young audiences at cross-border events. Fourth, the topic agenda is squarely EU-mainstream: climate, education, human rights — which means cross-border cooperation with Nordic, Baltic and German partners is unlikely to encounter misalignment on substance, only on participation culture.

Taken together, the Media Dizajn data give D-EFFECT a clear operational foundation: a sizeable, reachable audience; a diagnosis of what blocks their entry into civic participation; a list of formats and voices that will work; and a topical agenda that connects naturally to the EU-wide youth conversation. These findings feed directly into the design of D-EFFECT's cross-border youth forum and related outputs, and suggest a specific bottom-up programme logic — information-first, workshop-led, civil-society-anchored, and organised around a small number of salient EU-wide themes.

Conclusion

The analysis of youth democratic engagement in the South Baltic Area shows that bottom-up participation is already present in all five countries, but it takes different forms depending on national traditions, institutional structures and civic cultures. Germany offers a dense multi-level participation framework, with strong legal foundations, youth councils, youth organisations and a wide range of grassroots initiatives. Poland demonstrates the power of youth mobilisation, especially after the Women's Strike and recent elections, but also shows the challenges of polarisation, fragmented youth policy and uneven local infrastructure. Lithuania has a comparatively structured youth policy framework and strong youth organisations such as LiJOT, yet continues to face low youth turnout in European elections, civic education gaps and limited youth representation in formal politics. Sweden stands out through high youth electoral participation, school-based democratic learning and evidence-based youth policy, but also faces declining local youth council coverage and a weak pipeline from participation to elected representation. Denmark shows how democratic engagement can be embedded in everyday life through student councils, association culture, folk high schools, school elections and youth democratic events, while still needing stronger outreach to young people outside organised civil society.

Across these different national contexts, several common patterns can be identified. First, young people are not politically passive. They participate in many ways, including voting, volunteering, activism, local initiatives, student representation, digital engagement and issue-based campaigns. Second, formal participation structures are important, but they are not sufficient on their own. Youth councils, consultations and policy strategies become meaningful only when young people see that their contributions are taken seriously and can lead to visible outcomes. Third, access to participation remains unequal. Young people from rural areas, migrant backgrounds, low-income families or those outside established organisations often face additional barriers. Fourth, civic education is most effective when it is connected to practice. Young people need opportunities not only to learn about democracy, but to experience it directly through dialogue, decision-making and shared responsibility.

The bottom-up approach is therefore highly relevant for strengthening youth democratic engagement in the South Baltic Area. It shifts the focus from young people as a target group to young people as co-creators of democratic processes. This requires participation formats that allow young people to set agendas, formulate ideas, design activities and influence outcomes. Such formats may include youth councils, participatory budgeting, local civic projects, school-based democratic learning, volunteering, digital participation, social movements and cross-border youth events. Youth democratic festivals can be one useful example of this broader approach, especially when they are connected to local needs, inclusive outreach and visible follow-up.

Overall, the report shows that democratic values become meaningful for young people when they are linked to everyday realities and practical opportunities for influence. Participation should not remain symbolic or limited to consultation after decisions have already been made.

It should create spaces where young people can discuss, disagree, cooperate, take responsibility and see the results of their engagement. Strengthening bottom-up youth participation in the South Baltic Area therefore means building bridges between institutions and young people's lived experiences, between civic education and real practice, and between national democratic traditions and cross-border European cooperation.

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